

**WEST END STORY:
TEACHER PERSPECTIVES AND STUDENT PARTICIPATION
IN A LONDON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL**

By Bruno Selun

Supervised by Dr. Alan Marr
and Dr. Claire John

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LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY**

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Abstract

This small scale project aims to explore teacher perspectives in relation to student participation in a London independent school. Based on 8 interviews of 20 minutes with a varied cohort of teachers, it locates their perspectives in a wider context of research on student participation where teachers' viewpoints are traditionally given little room. The analysis is mainly qualitative, and extensively presents the respondents' perspectives on their school, their own pedagogical practices, and how pupils may or may not influence their teaching. The results suggest that a cycle of enthusiasm is at play, whereby enthusiastic pupils tend to engage and participate more, thereby learning more, which fuels their intrinsic motivation. Based on the interview data, the study suggests that by increasing pupils' sense of ownership and focusing on intrinsic motivation, they may 'break into' this cycle of enthusiasm. The project concludes with contextual recommendations, and calls for more research into what teachers have to say about student participation.

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“When I was at school, learning about democracy
was like reading holiday brochures in prison.”
Derry Hannam

1. Introduction

I heard Derry Hannam declare this for the first time when I was sixteen, at a self-organised international school student seminar in Oslo, Norway. He was explaining to an assembly of European school student activists how his research supported our claim for a stronger student voice in secondary schools across Europe. I found his presentation exhilarating, in that it provided us some grounding, albeit limited, to lobby for our voices to be taken more seriously by our schools and governments, by teachers and policy-makers. This encouraged me to further explore the debate surrounding student participation as a school student activist.

Figure 1 below is authored by the Norwegian Ombudsman for Children, and was also presented at the seminar (Barneombudet, no date).

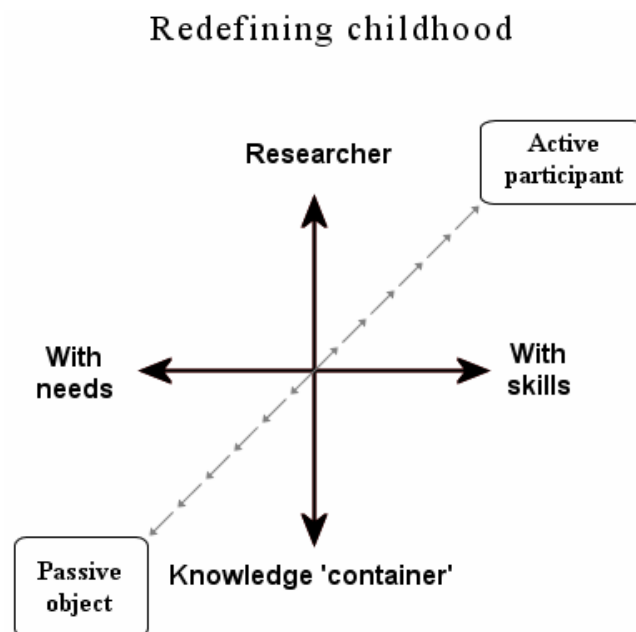


Figure 1 : Redefining childhood

The Ombudsman’s interpretation of childhood summarises the commonly-held view of a spectrum where two conflicting educational visions are located. These traditionally amount to understand students as passive receivers of their education,

or to see them as active learners through the concept of 'voice' (this opposition will be more fully explored in the review of the literature).

A wealth of existing research already suggests strongly that student participation, locating the learner toward the 'Active participant' end of the above diagram, tends to enhance the learning experience (Pope, 2000; Fielding, 2001; Hannam, 2001; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Lodge, 2005; Hannam, 2006). This usually has positive effects for both the learner, who benefits from a strong sense of being trusted, and educators who redefine their relationship with pupils on the basis of a mutually-contributed effort.

However, this latter view is far from widespread in the post-1988 British educational landscape. While some basic participatory aspects such as small amounts of group work or the occasional experiment in Physics are commonplace, students' voices have yet to be widely recognised as worthy of attention (Nieto, 1994; Hannam, 2001; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Lodge, 2005). This is not to say that pupils¹ are never listened to. In Britain, as in most Western pan-European educational systems, some institutional mechanisms such as consultative school councils allow students to voice their own concerns (more or less freely), but almost always consultatively. Student therefore find themselves in the absurd situation whereby their opinions may be asked for, but rarely listened to (and when they are listened to, further enquiry may often reveal that they were limited in what could be said in the first instance).

This study emerges from a need to understand the lack of more genuine participatory approaches in education today, regardless of any particular sector (independent or State-maintained). Although I was tempted to follow the path of asking students how they perceive their schooling, this has been done successfully many times (see Hannam and Rudduck & Flutter's extensive body of work), and would not bring anything new which could efficiently inform educational policy-making. However, notwithstanding further exploration of the literature, the existing body of research leaves little room for teachers' opinions on student participation. I wish to explore what they may contribute to the participation debate, as they are one of the key players in the educational arena.

This project therefore aims to establish a preliminary insight into teachers' perspectives on teaching and learning, and their impact on the participation debate. To do so, I interviewed 8 teachers from West End School, a London-based, partly co-educational, independent secondary school. By looking at a successful school and its teachers' perspectives, I aim to extract some of the positive aspects in this institution, in order to help inform the participation debate. This has already been done by the New Labour government (arguably, in an ameliorable way), which

¹ The words 'students' and 'pupils' are used interchangeably throughout this project.

singled out aspects observed in successful schools or with successful head teachers to integrate them through top-down policies into an already overloaded public educational system, which would supposedly benefit from any and all ‘patches’. Instead, I suggest observing *attitudes* and whole educational settings propitious to effective and enjoyable learning—for the pupils as well as their teachers.

Embedded in a social constructionist understanding, the respondents’ perspectives were gathered and analysed through grounded theory, thereby allowing them to preserve their original meaning as much as possible. The presentation of the findings is preceded by a short review of the literature, which concludes by offering a tentative interdisciplinary summary of the participation debate. This project finishes by presenting a synthetic view of the findings which, along with the reviewed literature, led to recommendations that will be chiefly useful to the respondents and their colleagues, but which may also usefully inform the wider debate on student participation.

The present short study is mostly rooted in the sociology of education, and also draws on late 20th century philosophy, as well as results from educational neurosciences. The findings recently published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), a globally recognised intergovernmental institution, strongly support what has been claimed increasingly loudly during the past three decades: student participation positively enhances the learning experience. I aim to suggest, without falling in excessive behaviourism, that neurosciences back up pedagogical claims previously dismissed as ‘fantasist’.

Finally, it is necessary to remind the reader that as a former school student activist, my personal background may appear to influence my theoretical position. Although I am a loud proponent of student voice, I have made every effort to include contradictory positions into the present study.

In the next section, I start by offering a brief review of relevant literature.

2. Review of the literature

With the present literature review, I aim to present a general picture of the debate on student participation: what were its earlier forms, how it emerged, what place it currently occupies in the post-1988 British educational system, and how various disciplines inform this debate.

I begin by presenting some of the main theoretical underpinnings behind the two educational traditions presented in the introduction. I then present some complementary definitions of ‘student participation’, and explain a range of possible instances of participation—including negative ones. I finish by suggesting a synthetic table, and lay down the implications for the present study.

2.1. *Theoretical background*

The emergence of social constructionism, firstly in psychology and then in the social sciences, is dated back to the early 1970s (Burr, 2003). This particular development of post-modern thought posits that knowledge is socially constructed by individuals or groups in their interaction with each other, as opposed to discovering (literally uncovering, unveiling) features and relationships that describe a pre-existing external world.

Such paradigm shift in Western thinking (Kuhn, 1996) did not occur independently from other disciplines, but in parallel with the emergence of existentialism in philosophy. Both these theoretical developments—possibly the conclusion of a process started by the Enlightenment three centuries ago—have in common a shift of focus from knowledge acquisition to its rational creation and development. The epistemological relationship is therefore redefined, putting the knower before the known (in parallel with existentialism, putting existence before essence).

This important theoretical shift led educationalists to question the fundamentals of a knowledge-centred system, and focus instead on the development of human intelligence and the mechanisms of knowledge acquisition (for instance through Piaget’s works). I would argue that this shift has not yet been entirely echoed in the contemporary British educational system.

2.2. *Two conflicting educational models*

In *Social Construction in Context* (2001), Gergen offers a helpful vision of the two educational conceptions emerging from the theoretical split described above. The exogenic (or ‘outer-centred’) approach follows the empiricist school of thought (*Ibid.*), in which formal education amounts to acquiring knowledge in the hope of knowing the

world better. It is opposed to an endogenic, or 'inner-centred' tradition, focusing on the process of rational reflexion, in the continuity of a rationalist tradition (*Ibid.*).

The former tradition is eloquently characterised by Freire (1985), when he builds on Sartre's criticism of "the notion that 'to know is to eat'" (*Ibid.*: 45), describing a 'nutritionist' model of education. In such a model, the learner's consciousness is "spatialized" (*Ibid.*: 45), and the act of learning is one of filling it with external knowledge about the world. This widespread idea of filling an empty vessel has been used by some recognised theorists in the sociology of education, sometimes vehemently (Dewey, 1966; Illich, 1971; Freire, 1985 and 2000). Such infantilisation is coherent with the view of children and teenagers as "incomplete, vulnerable beings progressing with adult help through stages needed to turn them into mature adults" (Mayall, 1994: 3, quoted in Rudduck and Flutter, 2004: 4)². This construction of young people reinforces belief in their incompleteness, which in turn supports the claim that schooling should aim to 'complete' them. This chiefly consists in making pupils acquire knowledge—presented as universal, but really located in and reproducing institutional habitus (Bourdieu, 1979). It also consists in establishing that young people, as incomplete, can only benefit from more given to them, and certainly not contribute to the organisation of their education themselves. Pope's account of a system that locks pupils in a 'grade trap' is eloquent in showing the excesses such beliefs may lead to, across all classes, genders, and ethnic backgrounds (Pope, 2000). Various attempts to lure pupils into participatory settings³ are still part of an exaggeratedly exogenic system, which can be identified with didacticism.

The endogenic belief, however, rests on the opposite assumption: the mind matters the most, and education does not primarily aim to reproduce knowledge (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), but teaches to think rationally. This shift of focus to the learner lays the foundations to ask the question of the role they play in their own education.

² Lenore Skenazy's editorial in a recent issue of the New York Sun is a telling mainstream example of what protectionist constructions of childhood can lead to (see Skenazy, 2008).

³ A common response is that participation has been effectively integrated in formal education in the post-1988 educational system. Indeed, it has become rare for lessons to rely only on passively transcribed lectures: pupils take part in experiments in Physics, for instance. But this kind of 'participation' is still part of a didactic approach: students are comparable to wagons set on rails, and their experiments are so tightly controlled (by a tiny number of variables, their simplicity, or the teacher watching over the pupils' shoulders) that they can only yield results as original as a textbook.

2.3. Defining 'student participation'

Having defined the scope of views on student participation, I should attempt to settle what 'student participation' means in the context of this project. Leading figures in the field, Rudduck and Flutter's definition of student participation is twofold: firstly, it takes (seriously) into account pupils' views on their experience of learning, and what they identify as good and bad practices. Secondly, it involves finding effective ways to include these views in the process of designing the learning environment and the learning experience, from the classroom to the institutional level (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004). Lodge proposes a more concise definition under the name of dialogic participation, defining it as "young people [being] viewed as active participants in their own learning" (2005: 134). A yet more positively radical conception of student participation is democratic education, whose main advocates include Hannam (2001; 2002; 2006) and Apple and Beane (1999). Educational structure may involve varying degrees of democracy, from school councils with more or less executive power given to students, to fully-democratic schools. This latter model includes some 'rough' schools, schools outside the educational system, or schools particularly welcoming to young drop-outs that rely on democratic structures as a means to empower them, and reconcile them with a system they rejected in the first place (*Ibid.*).

But participation does not need to be located towards the radical end of the spectrum to have positive effects. For instance, Doppelt (2004) has shown that even in non-participatory classroom designs, hands-on activities were regarded as most influential by students. In his study, two different cohort of 150 and 200 pupils in secondary education consistently rated team projects, class discussions and laboratory experiments as more influential in their learning (whereas assessment activities and concept maps were at the bottom of the list).

Other disciplines can also help explain the nature of learner participation. A recent, influential compilation of educational neuroscientific findings from the OECD outline two fundamentally different drives to learn (2007). What educational neurosciences recognise as *extrinsic motivation* is the use of rewards and punishment in educational institutions; it can be likened to the Foucauldian concept of an integrated system of discipline (Foucault, 1977). On the other hand, *intrinsic motivation* is what stems from the human brain's natural drive to learn in order to "fulfil internal needs and desires" (OECD, 2007: 71).

It is, of course, possible to build on both sources of motivation. But according to neuroscientific research, increasing learner participation does not amount to trying

hard to *create* something additional (motivation)⁴, but trying to deconstruct oppressive institutional structures, so that the intrinsic drive to learn is left with greater latitude to motivate the learner (Vallerand, 1992; Ryan and Deci, 2000; OECD, 2007). Paradoxically, it could be less costly, in terms of economic and human efforts, to let one's intrinsic motivation play a greater role in their education, rather than maintain controlling systems leading to boredom and possibly rejection of social structures. But it is only paradoxical insofar as independent learning is desirable (Whitty and Wisby, 2007). Various other parameters, especially political or to do with social control, can make restraining motivation and creativity worthwhile.

The OECD further concludes that one of the most important challenges for modern education is to “find out how to give purpose to learning and how to encourage the internal drive to want to learn” (2007: 73).

The construction of internal vs. external motivation is nothing new to the sociology of education. Vallerand *et al.* (1992) pointed to the finer differences between different types of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and Ryan and Deci (2000) already proposed a re-appraisal of what is meant by the two types of motivation. Their importance in the debate of student participation seems to have been underestimated, and further exploring the link between motivation theories and the policy-oriented debate on student participation may be needed.

While Rudduck and Flutter's evidence also “suggests that a stronger focus on pupil participation [...] can enhance progress in learning” (2004: 11), it may turn out to be detrimental in a limited number of instances, which I set out to explore in the next section.

2.4. Participation as a trend

The post-1988 increased marketisation of the English educational system places a great amount of pressure on schools to deliver educational services to young people and their families (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Lodge and Reed, 2003). More than a knowledge-instilling institution, schools are now required to develop, in the words of a former Minister of State, “activities with the focus on the customer” (DfES, 2004b: 2).

Governmental guidance does comply with the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by the United Kingdom in 1991. Its article

⁴ This usually goes hand-in-hand with a rhetoric impossibility to ‘invest more resources’ into teaching in an educational system already saturated.

12 is cited many times, and its importance should not be downplayed: it states that a child⁵ who can express their own views have

the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting [them, their views] being given due weight in accordance with [their] age and maturity.

UNCRC, Article 12, §1.

Some advocates of student participation mention the importance of complying with international treaties (Hannam, 2001; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; Lodge, 2005), and governmental institutions seem to aim to encourage it (Kirby et al., 2003; DfES, 2004a; DfES, 2004b; HM Government, 2007). Hannam (2001) also reports that the constitution of one of the school councils he studied explicitly referred to article 12 of the UNCRC⁶. But to what extent do governmental agencies *genuinely* encourage participation, valuing it as a resource in itself? Although the Department for Children, Schools and Families provides light guidance through a poster (DfES, 2004a) as well as a nineteen-page guidance booklet (*Ibid.*, 2004b), how realistic are they in assuming that they will be taken up by LEAs, schools, and teachers in the maintained sector? Both publications reaffirm that “Schools must provide the National Curriculum” (*Ibid.*: 16), but how compatible are the two aims, given the size of the curriculum and the related managerial pressure to ‘perform’ in measurable ways⁷? In its *Periodic Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child*, the government sets out to demonstrate that schools are made participatory through “a range of mechanisms, guidance and legal requirements” (HM Government, 2007: 44), although which ones exactly remains unclear. In this demonstration, the government primarily focuses on school councils, especially by supporting specialised non-governmental organisations to help schools set up their own councils. This is a praiseworthy approach and it should be given some credit. Indeed, layers of reports commissioned by the government cover the

⁵ The UNCRC considers as a child “every human being below the age of eighteen years.” (United Nations, 1989: Art. 1)

⁶ He also notes, interestingly, that “the members of the school council who were interviewed did know what Article 12 says. This was clearly not tokenistic in this school.” (Hannam, 2001: 19) This suggests that democratic education brings not only a better learning experience, but also significantly influences *what* is learnt.

⁷ These ‘measurable outputs’ often encompass added value and test results (e.g. in DfES, 2005), rather than pupils’ motivation and personal achievement. This makes sense in an economically-driven educational system.

fact that for instance, the English Secondary Students Association⁸ was only founded as late as 2005, 13 years after the ratification of the UNCRC. And if participation was indeed well-established in Great Britain, why would extensive research and numerous youth advocacy groups still plea for more *effective* participation (Hannam, 2001; Inman, 2002; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Oerlemans and Vidovich, 2005; Lodge, 2005; Hannam, 2006)?

The quantitative issue of how much participation actually occurs is complemented by a serious qualitative issue of effective versus tokenistic participation. Pseudo-participatory methods can indeed play a role in two significant instances. Firstly, student voice can be hijacked for institutional embellishment, with the sole aim to improve the school's image (Lodge, 2005). This can be done either by using students as a marketing resource, as they know the institution and their views can serve to give it a better public image. It can also be by 'selling' the participatory aspect to prospective parents, in a bid to attract mainly middle-class families who value certain characteristics, and can navigate around the market of education (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995).

But effective participation also has intrinsic pitfalls: in *Participation: The new Tyranny?* (2001), Cooke and Kothari warn against the threat brought by participation in a variety of sectors. Bill Cooke's chapter on the limits of participation (2001) proves particularly useful in educational contexts. It warns about the social psychological limits of participation, i.e. the extent to which socio-psychological limitations can hinder the validity of participatory processes and outcomes. The author expands on four particular weaknesses of participatory practices. Firstly, the diffusion of responsibility and varying cultural understandings of risk make group decisions (which are part of participatory processes) usually more risky than average: people are more inclined to take risks when deciding as a group. A second socio-psychological aspect of participation is a tendency for the participants to overlook their own thoughts and feelings, thinking that the rest of the group taking the decision would not approve of them. This can, ultimately, lead to a group agreeing to an action whilst none or very few of its members were in favour. Though the third example of socio-psychological hindrance, 'groupthink', is of little relevance to educational settings, the fourth item is entirely relevant: 'coercive persuasion' is "how group processes can intentionally be shaped to set up specific psycho- and group dynamics to achieve a particular outcome" (*Ibid.*: 116). It is easy to think of instances where student participation is tokenised (Levin, 2000; Fielding, 2001; Hannam, 2001; Inman, 2002; Lodge, 2005; Whitty and Wisby, 2007). Such instances undermine student and staff confidence in their institution, and only manage to serve the ulterior motives they were originally set up for (e.g. publicity).

⁸ ESSA is the only independent (i.e. not school- or institution-bound) national organisation run for young people exclusively by young people.

But a substantial amount of literature establishes the fundamental value of learner participation, even though poorly designed systems of participation (whether intentionally bogus or not) may undermine this assertion. However, student participation still fails to make its way in mainstream classrooms, in spite of independent as well as moderate governmental efforts. In this concert of praise for more participation, one group of stakeholders is remarkable by its absence: teachers.

2.5. The lack of teacher perspectives

A consistent characteristic across all the research examined here is the prominent absence of teacher perspectives. Research on learner involvement mostly falls into its own trap of listening to the students (which is in no way negative in itself), and tends to forget teachers—not to mention parents. Although teachers are seen as “the gatekeepers of change” (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004: 141), their opinions are not used to a satisfying extent.

In truth, there are numerous accounts of teachers satisfied with participatory projects or indeed entire schools. Most research provides some account of teacher views, including Apple and Beane (1999), Hannam’s numerous reports (2001; 2002; 2006), Rudduck and Flutter (2004), Flutter and Rudduck (2004), as well as governmental publications (Kirby et al., 2003; DfES, 2004a; DfES, 2004b). But these teachers have, for an overwhelming majority of them, had the opportunity to be part of a participatory (or even fully democratic) experience, and come out of it enchanted, singing the praise of participation.

Nevertheless, the debate of participation truly lacks extensive views from teachers who only experienced non-participatory schools or settings, and who have not been in contact with these projects or instances of participation. They may well be “the gatekeepers of change”, but the mainstream cohort of teachers is under-represented when it comes to student participation. It is necessary to fill this gap in order to understand how teacher perspectives relate to the wider participation debate.

2.6. Implications and orientations for this study

Although such synthesis may already have been presented, I was not yet able to find a strong interdisciplinary link between philosophical, neuroscientific, sociological and pedagogical theories. *Table 1* tentatively offers a synthetic view of the abovementioned discussions, in order to help locate the student participation debate in a wider context.

Theory	Knowledge-centred model	Learner-centred model
Philosophical traditions	Essence before existence Empiricist	Existence before essence Rationalist
Postmodernism (<i>Gergen, 2001</i>)	Exogenic model	Endogenic model
Educational neurosciences (<i>OECD, 2007</i>)	Extrinsic motivation	Intrinsic motivation
Pedagogy (<i>Lodge, 2005</i>)	Monologic construction	Dialogic construction

Table 1: Tentative interdisciplinary synthesis of the knowledge-centred vs. learner-centred models

Following the postulate that teachers are indeed key in the process of educational change, and seeing that in spite of this their views are not sufficiently represented, we can assume that there is a need for further investigation into what they have to say. I aim to explore how a mainstream cohort of teachers, working in a school with no extensive experience of learner involvement, see student participation. In the next chapter, I present the methodology used to go about this endeavour.

3. Methodology

This chapter explores the methodology used in the study, as well as important issues that came up during its design phase. I start by presenting the theoretical underpinnings, as well as the various strengths and weaknesses of the research design. I then present the final sample used in the study, the ethical aspects considered throughout the project, and conclude by describing how the data was collected and analysed.

3.1. *Theoretical underpinnings: 'mind', 'world', and perspectives*

3.1.1. Research paradigm

A dualistic understanding of our epistemological relationship to the world has characterised Western philosophical traditions until the mid-19th century. I would argue with the post-modern school that it is necessary to extract ourselves from such dichotomy. Indeed, if there is on the one hand the mind, and on the other hand the world, which one should we base research on, if we are to produce informed findings that will advance educational practice and policy-making in the interest of the people affected (educators as well as learners)?

Answering “both”, my approach is rooted in a social constructionist view of the world. I believe with Gergen that “practices of education are usually linked to an assumptive network, [...] a shared discourse about the nature of human beings, their capacities and their relationship with the world and each other” (2001: 115). It is therefore necessary to take into account, not *either* the mind *or* the world it evolves in, but one’s *perspectives*, which are of paramount importance if we are to understand teachers’ position in relation to student participation—and why these are not more widespread.

The present study does not aim to establish irrefutable empirical truths about student participation. I would argue that to investigate teachers’ perspectives will be more informative than to repeat studies of actual participatory practices. Therefore, an interpretative paradigm of research may offer an insight (albeit limited because of the size of the project) into the views of practitioners of education. Rooted in their subjective perspectives, this study is theoretically informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). This implies that the data analysis will emanate mainly from the teachers’ responses, and not a pre-established analytical framework.

3.1.2. Is this a 'case study'?

Since this project explores only one aspect of a school (its teachers' perspectives), it is difficult to label this project a 'case study'. A more complete case study would have relied on methodological, theoretical or data-based triangulation (Janesick, 1994), which was not possible here because of important time and access constraints.

This project is therefore not a case study to generalise from, but what Stake (1994) calls an 'intrinsic' case study: it presents characteristics that are unique and interesting in themselves, with little concern for generalisation. However, I hope to produce findings that could potentially inspire further generalisable research focusing on teacher perspectives. I aim to outline, through the singularities of the school, emerging themes that would help to better understand teacher perspectives on student participation in general.

3.2. *Sample and access*

I carried out 8 semi-structured interviews with teachers at West End School between March and April 2008. 4 interviews took place during a first round in March, and the remaining 4 a month later.

3.2.1. Initial design and subsequent changes

This project was initially due to take place in two schools. Based on the *Families of schools* publication (DfES, 2005), I aimed to enter one high-achieving and high-scoring⁹ school, and one low-achieving and low-scoring school. It was impossible to reach beyond most 'gatekeepers' (Silverman, 2005), whose lack of interest, time, resources, or commitment meant that 17 schools were contacted in vain. I had to abandon this initial approach in order to focus on one independent school. I gained access to West End through personal acquaintances.

Studying an independent school also presents distinct advantages. Firstly, independent schools can be praised for their innovative and often successful tuition and leadership. Such good practices can sometimes be trialled in the maintained sector, in the hope of yielding better results (see Earley and Evans, 2003; The Times, 2008). Rudduck and Flutter (2004) also mention independent schools as possible examples of

⁹ The *Families of Schools* publication locates every State and private secondary school in London on a bi-dimensional scale. It consists of the school's achievement levels (the added value when the incoming pupil cohort is compared to the output cohort), and its scoring compared to national means for achievement at GCSEs. (DfES, 2005: 8)

progressive education, which can potentially pave the way for innovative practices in the State system.

It is worth noting that only an independent school, very friendly to academic research and with important resources, could afford to host such a small project without first knowing the student researcher. Whether or not West End considered this an opportunity to display some of its achievements would be interesting to explore; but I am inclined to think that ulterior motives did not play a role in taking part in this low-profile project.

3.2.2. Purposive sampling

The composition of the sample was first directed by a purposive approach defined by Silverman (2005) and Berg (2007) as a sampling method designed with an intention, and not to represent a wider population. In this case, I started selecting volunteers on the basis of their gender (both had to be represented), their experience, and taught subject (a wide range was desirable to produce varied perspectives). This emanated from a desire to obtain the widest possible range of experiences and perspectives.

8 volunteers originally responded, and 4 were selected; *Table 2* (on page 15 below) shows a balance within the first round of interviewees. However, it became clear after the first round of interviews that I would not be able to conduct research in another school. Therefore I came back to the 4 remaining volunteers, and used this opportunity to ask more focused questions.

3.2.3. Recruitment of volunteers

With the help of one of the interviewed teachers who acted as my point of entry to West End (James), I posted an electronic message on the school's intranet, inviting interested teachers to contact me. 8 teachers responded within 10 days of the announcement.

Importantly, the text advertising the project was entitled "Teacher Perspectives on Learning", and did not mention participation at all. I made this strategic choice in order to compensate for potential pre-existing bias in the volunteers. I feared that advertising a participation-related project would only interest those teachers who *thought* they had something to contribute, and that others would not step forward. I was satisfied that this approach produced the intended results, as the range of interest and opinions on student participation varied greatly.

3.2.4. Final sample

The final sample consisted of the following 8 respondents:

Round	Teacher	Gender	Subject	Years of experience	
				West End	Total
1	Siobhan	F	Geography	½	1 ½
2	Helen	F	English	1 ½	1 ½
1	James	M	Mathematics	3 ½	3 ½
2	Seth	M	Geography	7	9
1	Emma	F	Arts	8*	9*
2	Keith	M	Physics	9	15
1	Bernard	M	French	4	16
2	Jeremy	M	Classics (Head)	23+	23

Table 2: Respondents (by ascending order of overall teaching experience)

*: Part-time.

As shown in *Table 2* above, both genders are represented, taught subjects are varied, and there are different levels of experience.

The main limitation of the sample is by definition its location on a socio-economic scale. Most of the West End community (pupils as much as staff members) conveyed a sense of belonging to an upper-middle social class. Although we could argue with Gereluk (2007) that school uniforms tend to hide the wearer's social class, I did not perceive this to be likely at West End (Jeremy's interview tends to confirm this), which can be considered a rather privileged school in many ways. The sample is, therefore, not balanced in terms of social class, nor does it seem to be balanced in terms of ethnic backgrounds¹⁰.

3.3. Ethical considerations

3.3.1. Voluntary informed consent

The ethical aspect of the present project was chiefly guided by the British Educational Research Association's *Ethical Guidelines* (2004), which entailed that the

¹⁰ I do not wish to make definitive statements about the respondents' ethnic backgrounds, as I was not certain how some of them would identify. Further research might benefit from including this dimension.

participants' voluntary informed consent was collected prior to the research taking place. Additionally, all participants were aware of their right to withdraw at any time, and were given the opportunity to review their contribution. Finally, all the contributions afferent to the project are kept anonymously and in confidentiality.

All the participants were informed of these rights from the earliest stage, and all these rights were repeatedly re-stated, in particular at the beginning of each interview.

3.3.2. Interviewees and bias

The interviewer effect (Denscombe, 2007) appeared to be successfully counterbalanced by a common feeling of belonging to an academic (or at least knowledge-centred) community, and therefore there weren't significant barriers between the interviewees and me. The feeling of belonging to the same community made the question of how to present oneself as a researcher (Fontana and Frey, 1994) less important than in a more disparate field. However, this also brought about the minor drawback of academic interest in the making of this study, and led some participants to enquire about the analysis itself, the theoretical framework of the study, or other information that could have compromised the spontaneity of their response. I encouraged them to wait until the final stage of the project, when they would receive the final version of the study.

Following Denscombe's assertion that "the data [...] are affected by the personal identity of the researcher" (2007: 184), I also suspect that, had I not presented a 'White' middle-class background, establishing an earnest relationship with the interviewees might have required more efforts.

Occasionally, questions were asked in a slightly biased way: I unwittingly influenced the respondents' answer by sometimes providing grounds for them to orientate their response according to what I presented. However, this has happened so rarely and at such minor levels that it does not compromise the reliability of the interview data.

3.3.3. Reliability of the data

To satisfy the imperative of reproducing as faithfully as possible the volunteers' perspectives, audio recording was used to collect the data with their consent. The interviews were then integrally transcribed and included as appendices, relying partly on a conversation analysis transcription system adapted from Silverman (2005). By including gaps, intonations, modes of expression (such as muttering or laughing), and other forms of non-verbal communication, I tried to convey the nuanced meanings

present in conversations¹¹. However, the full transcription apparatus available to conversation analysis seemed too detailed for the purpose of this project¹².

3.4. Data treatment

3.4.1. Interview design and schedule

The first round of interviews was designed to find out mainly about the following key themes:

- The respondents' general opinion of their professional activities;
- The respondents' characterisation of their relationship with their students, and how they viewed them (elaborating on Ellsworth's mode of address theory) (Ellsworth, 1997); and
- The respondents' view on student participation within their practice of teaching.

The interviews consisted of semi-structured open-ended questions, designed to explore the respondents' perspectives with a minimum of theoretical assumptions, while making sure that certain themes were covered.

After the possibility of a second school became unlikely, I was left with only the data gathered from a first round of interviews at West End—an amount of data too restrained for a case study (both qualitatively, in that the questions asked were useful for a comparative study but not a case study; and quantitatively, in that I did not consider the original sample diverse enough to bring out finer nuances in its perspectives). Consequently, I adapted the interview schedule for a second round of interviews including more searching questions, and contacted the 4 teachers I had had to turn away at first, who responded positively.

All the interviews took place at West End, mostly in the respondents' own classrooms.

3.4.2. Data treatment and analysis

After I transcribed their own interviews, the respondents had a chance to review their contributions. More than an ethical imperative, the negotiated accounts also allowed for more accuracy in the transcriptions.

¹¹ *Appendix 7.2*, p. 45 presents the full table of transcription symbols.

¹² For instance, small details such as gaps in tenth of seconds bore little meaning for the understanding of teachers' perspectives in the context of this study.

The analysis itself began by mapping the data; going through the transcripts, I identified emerging themes and arranged them on a theoretical map¹³. This shaped an analysis framework grounded as much as possible in the data, following Dey's recommendation that the categories remain "close to the data" (1993: 101).

Using qualitative analysis software (QSR XSite), I transposed the categories that emerged from the interviews into an analysis framework, which allowed me to code the data by linking specific interview passages with the grounded categories. This offered a clear overview of the overall available data, including a summary of themes by order of frequency¹⁴, which allowed me to reflect the data accurately in the analysis.

A key difficulty inherent to grounded theory lay in deciding how to strictly categorise certain instances. For instance, I needed to establish a rule for all mentions of 'ownership' to be coded as "Instances of participatory practices" under the heading "Pedagogy". Some instances could have been coded in several different ways, but this was kept consistent throughout the coding by establishing strong coding rules early in the process.

Finally, agreeing with Brown and Dowling (1993) who argue that a set of data is best analysed by both qualitative and quantitative approaches, I used both methodologies. Although the analysis is mainly qualitative—it focuses primarily on the respondents' perspectives—, I chose to include some quantitative aspects in order to show important information about the data collected (e.g. the relative importance of teachers' perspectives on the pupils compared to their perspectives on parents).

The next section presents the full analysis of the data.

¹³ The map is reproduced in *Appendix 7.3*. p. 46.

¹⁴ See the raw analysis results reproduced in *Appendix 7.4*. p. 47.

4. Analysis

Bell (2005) reminds first-time researchers of the paramount importance of ‘reliability’ over generalisation. The present findings do not aim to make general claims, but to examine the case at hand as much as resources (time, word limits) allow, and hopefully be useful to those who participated in the project, and their colleagues.

The results are first presented in their entirety, in order to show the relative importance of different themes to West End’s teachers. The key themes are then developed in relation to student participation.

4.1. *Presentation of the results*

The semi-structured interviews produced a wide range of perspectives from the 8 respondents, and three strong themes emerged during the analysis: the role of West End; the importance of pedagogy; and the pupils themselves. Although this seems to fundamentally define West End teachers’ perspectives, other minor themes emerged occasionally: material constraints affecting the teaching (classrooms, time of the week, learning site, etc.); parents and their role; and ‘other schools’ than West End. The main categories are reproduced in Table 3.

Theme	Mentioned by x respondents ($n = 8$)	Occurrences throughout the interviews ($n = 355$)
West End	8	119
Pedagogy	8	105
Pupils	8	100
Material constraints	5	12
Parents	5	11
‘Elsewhere’	5	7

Table 3: Themes emerging from the interviews (by descending number of occurrences)

The difference in frequency between the three most cited themes is negligible at this scale ($\pm 5\%$ of the total). They seem to hold an equally important place for the respondents.

Because of the small nature of this project, I can only explore in details the three main themes and their relation to student participation. Further attention would need to be given to perspectives of lesser importance in a longer study.

4.2. Perspectives on West End

West End as an institution played a crucial role in how respondents articulated their perspectives. The most significant contribution is the ‘West End way of doing things’, which all respondents said existed. Two other important sub-themes were a culture of excellence, and how teachers are treated as employees.

4.2.1. The “West End way of doing things”

A distinctive characteristic of teachers’ perspectives about their school was its sense of identity and uniqueness. As a young teacher, James emphasised the importance of a “West End way of doing things”.

James: if you come here with no pre-conceived ideas, it’s um, much easier to, to, to spot into the (.) West Wend mentality, the West End way of doing things [...] it works well at West End, I’m not sure how well it’d work at other schools.

All the other respondents except one (Bernard) related to the idea of a very distinct “West End way”, for which several characteristics emerged, summarised in Table 4.

Keywords	Mentioned by x respondents ($n = 8$)
Promotes free/independent thinking	7
Informal, untidy, casual	3
Individualistic, competitive	3
Liberal	2
Crazy	1

Table 4: List of keywords linked to the “West End way of doing things” (by descending order of frequency)

The promotion of free and independent thinking undoubtedly constitutes the most important characteristic of West End’s perceived identity. This is always cited positively, and often linked to the students’ intellectual abilities (examined in detail in 4.4.1. below).

Of the other keywords, West End's informality and "untidiness" is eloquently illustrated by the anecdote from Keith asking a student to tuck his shirt¹⁵, and goes hand-in-hand with the paramount importance given to free thinking. This casualness seems to manifest itself, among other things, through pupils' attitude to dress. Emma, Keith and Helen mentioned dress as a typical issue, representative of the dilemma in which West End finds itself: firmly grounded in long-established traditions, yet claiming to be at the "cutting edge" of a liberal ideal (Keith). Overall, teachers appeared to be thankful for this unique mix constituting the core of the "West End way", as much as they recognised it placed considerable demands on them (pedagogically, in their relationships with students, or with their colleagues).

Whilst craziness was only mentioned jokingly once by James, the individualistic and competitive culture of West End emerged as a possible concern for both Helen and Jeremy (respectively most junior and most senior of the respondents, which suggests it's a concern across ranges of professional experience).

Jeremy: We worry about the kind of effect that competition or competitiveness might have on a (.) personality.

Although all the other characteristics lent to the West End way seem to be conducive to student involvement and participation, Jeremy's point confirmed a widespread concern about academic competition in the independent sector, but also suggested that one of the drawbacks of a culture of participation is the *expectation* to participate, and a feeling of inadequacy when participating less than average.

4.2.2. The cult of excellence

Seth and Helen used the same expression:

Seth: um (.) in some other subjects it's really **sink-or-swim** that, they just about keetch up= keep up.

Helen: Um, you are= it's very much a sort of (.) **sink-or-swim** type of place.
Um, so we (.) tend to (.) expect the pupils just to pick things up

Also echoed by Jeremy (although less strongly), there was a concern about the effect of competition and academic demands on some of the pupils. The underlying assumption throughout all the interviews remained that as an independent school West

¹⁵ See *Appendix 7.1*. p. 44.

End was a demanding place to study, and this was not to be extensively questioned. But although the danger of “sinking” remained, it did not shape the respondents’ perspectives significantly. Emma, for instance, simply mentions it matter-of-factly.

Emma: They can be very goal-oriented. They might be really going for an A*, or an A, or at *least* an A, [mumbling: ‘otherwise it’s not worth it’.]

Jeremy added that the importance of distinction was not necessarily manifested academically.

Jeremy: I think that to do well at this school, a child doesn’t necessarily have to be an academic high-flier. Um, but the successful children here will have *something*, it may be [...] talent in acting or sports or art or... music. But it may just be a very strong (.) and attractive personality.

This suggests that what might be termed a ‘cult of excellence’ is pervasively present. It appears to be mainly anchored in academic achievement, but not exclusively.

This was also expressed in relation to the teachers themselves. Some of them may find the staffroom very competitive a times, potentially undermining the way they fit in the professional community of West End—although this appeared to be rare. An interesting variant of a ‘cult of excellence’ occurred during the interviews, when some of the interviewees provided occasional performative answers. Keith, for instance, was prompt to outline the positive aspects of West End, without giving any negative indication. This may be explained by the cult of excellence extending beyond the schoolyard, and applying to the school as an institution.

4.2.3. Being a teacher at West End

West End teachers appeared to enjoy a well-established professional freedom. This mainly entails that they are free to do as they wish in their own classrooms, regardless of their professional experience.

Siobhan: Um (.) you’ve got far more *independence* as a teacher here. I think that’s one of the things that strike me, in that *you* are an individual at the front of that classroom, and you don’t have to conform to a type of teacher. There’s no expectation...

Departmental structures seemed to matter much more than school-wide ones, especially in teachers’ relationship to management. The central management did not

appear to intervene much, and considerable freedom was provided within all departments. This was echoed by Helen as a junior member of the staff, but also by Jeremy as a Head of Department.

Jeremy: well in my department anyway, we have quite a lot of freedom. (.) ~
there are six of us (.) to teach here. And um, I allow them more or less
to choose their own books. As far as possible, to choose the texts that
they read.

This professional freedom was another key element in teachers' perspectives. By being free from managerial and strong curriculum-related pressures, respondents were able to teach how they thought was best. Part of the leadership seemed to be handed to the teachers, at least within their own classroom, but also to influence departmental decisions.

Helen: I would say within my *department*, my opinion is highly valued, and I
would say that um (.) you know in terms of my opinion on courses or
material or whatever we're doing, that my view is as valuable as
anyone else's.

Findings from projects addressing failing schools correlate this point: Harris (2006) and Mulford (2006) reported that the first steps towards positive change for schools in difficulty resided in their leadership—not only their principals, but also a shared leadership distributed among teachers, who were empowered by taking part in decision-making processes.

Along with the above findings, it suggests that teachers' role is a key element in determining the 'health' of a school: the more empowered they are, the better they practice. This counters an example from Whitty and Wisby (2007), where some teachers found that their views had little to no effect compared to the students' that were more decisive in shaping school-wide policies. The West End example, along with Harris and Mulford, suggests that a culture of participation extends to the teachers: they are entrusted to conduct their own lessons, and feel they are invested with a share of the responsibility. This was, ultimately, mentioned as one of the best things about working at West End, and certainly holds potential to be explored by schools looking for positive change.

4.3. Perspectives on pedagogy

4.3.1. Exogenic vs. endogenic pedagogical styles

Pedagogical styles at West End

The first strong theme to have emerged in relation to pedagogy may be linked to the two visions of education presented in *Table 1* on page 15. Based on Gergen's definitions (2001), I compared the respondents' pedagogical styles in order to locate them on a spectrum from didactic (exogenic) to interactive (endogenic). This was not articulated directly by the respondents, but compiled from the interview data.

Pedagogical style	Very strongly didactic	Mostly didactic	Equally both	Mostly interactive	Very strongly interactive
Respondents		James Seth	Jeremy Keith	Helen	Siobhan Bernard Emma

Table 5: Overall pedagogical style of the respondents

Although only two of the most senior respondents (Jeremy and Keith) spontaneously mentioned the opposition between didactic and interactive approaches, this theme came up in all the interviews. Talking about his own schooling experience, Bernard makes the point eloquently in Freirean (1985) terms:

Bernard: you would be like an empty *vessel* and the teachers would pour information into us. And of course it was terribly boring

Bernard's own didactic schooling experience acted as an important reason for him to use mainly interactive methods. On the whole, participants reported using a mixture of both didactic and participative approaches, with a tendency toward interactivity. These results are confirmed by the 2006 ISI (Independent Schools Inspectorate) report¹⁶, which states that

¹⁶ For obvious reasons of anonymity, the full inspection report is not included as an appendix, nor referred to in the Bibliography. However, the Inspectorate has authorised the author to use the 2006 report. Written authorisation is held on record.

in most cases teaching takes the form of an enabling dialogue [...] characterised by clear explanations, very good question-and-answer sessions and lively debate, followed by structured tasks. [...] However, very occasionally, a long teacher-led exposition allows for little involvement of the pupils.

The last remark underlines rare instances of didactic approaches. For James and Seth, the only interactive activities were revision.

Seth: there are many different ways to go about doing revision. So I'll usually run through what I personally would do, but then I'll say 'But you might choose to do, to revise in a different way?

The fact that all the respondents use interactive techniques to some extent seems to be influenced by two factors. Firstly, the general tendency in contemporary education includes some level of interaction with the students. Typical examples of this are experimentations in Physics, supposed to trigger learner curiosity¹⁷. And secondly, West End's culture rests on individual contributions; 7 respondents affirmed that the students had a strong influence on how lessons developed.

James: a lot of the lessons will come more from the students themselves, than necessarily from me. [...] How a lesson develops certainly depends entirely, almost entirely on them.

Bernard: I try to respond to their interests, so I might think we're going to do A, B and C, and we're halfway through A and someone says something very interesting and different, [...] then I'll do that, I don't feel that I have to do what I planned to do necessarily.

However, some teachers mentioned this was nuanced by the pupils' position up and down the school, with older sets tending to show more initiative than their younger peers. This was mainly perceived to be linked with maturity, group sizes¹⁸, and whether the group was co-educational or not¹⁹.

¹⁷ For a recent example, see the Teaching and Development Agency for Schools' adverts (2006).

¹⁸ West End class sizes are up to 20 pupils in the Years 9-11, and between 10 and 12 pupils in the Years 12-13.

¹⁹ Years 9-11 are boys-only, whereas Years 12-13 are co-educational.

Keith: I suppose in terms of the, the, the styles, and the ways in which one teaches I'd say it's year group-dependent, and (.) which is not just to do with their ages but to do with the class sizes and whether there are girls there and that sort of thing really.

Pedagogical styles by subject

A comparison of pedagogical styles according to groups of subjects produced the following results:

	Very strongly didactic	Mostly didactic	Equally both	Mostly interactive	Very strongly interactive
Sciences & Mathematics		James	Keith		
Humanities		Seth	Jeremy		Siobhan
Languages				Helen	Bernard
Art					Emma

Table 6: Pedagogical styles by subjects

Unsurprisingly, although no clear tendency emerges from Table 6, 'soft subjects' such as Languages and Art seem to be more propitious to interactive teaching, and hold more potential for participatory practices than Sciences and Mathematics.

4.3.2. The role of enthusiasm

Teacher enthusiasm

A striking characteristic consistent across all responses was a deep concern for pedagogic quality—as well as a strong apparent enthusiasm for instructing pupils. Although this was perhaps inevitable because of the nature of the research design (responding to the advert on the school intranet already inferred some degree of commitment), the speed at which teachers volunteered (within a week) and the degree of commitment to teaching consistent across all interviews all suggest that this is part of a school-wide culture. The school's selectivity may also have to do with its teachers' attitudes.

Pupil enthusiasm

Pupils' enthusiasm was mentioned as playing a key role in their learning.

Me: {Quoting Siobhan earlier:} 'That, that gathers their interest'. Do you find this makes any difference?

Siobhan: [Enthusiastically: *Definitely!* Hugely so!]

In many instances, teachers actively sought to engage with their students' interests: 6 out of 8 respondents mentioned student enthusiasm and interest as a parameter influencing how their lessons developed²⁰ (and one of them, Bernard, used this as an indicator of his pedagogical success).

In Siobhan's words, "they're like *sponges* for knowledge". The students' interest is perceived to be the greatest drive for learning, which correlates findings in educational neurosciences (Vallerand *et al.*, 1992; Ryan and Deci, 2000; OECD, 2007). Neuroscientific research and West End teachers make a sharp distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Whilst the latter is most often used under the form of Foucauldian systems of control, it is the former which may lead to a state of "flow": "a mental state in which a person is intrinsically motivated to learn" (*Ibid.*: 71, citing Csikszentmihalyi)—very much comparable to Siobhan's "sponges".

Teachers themselves tend to establish the superiority of intrinsic over extrinsic motivation. This calls for another discussion on *why* students are motivated. Expanding on Kohn's work (1969), Bowles and Gintis (1976) might answer that the—mostly privileged—student cohort comes from backgrounds where education and personal initiative were also valued (they have a similar habitus). Their families likely invested in education, they were raised in a knowledge-friendly environment, and their curiosity was likely encouraged (Kohn, 1969), resulting in an inclination to learn before they came to West End. The presence of a 'cycle' can be inferred, whereby enthusiastic pupils tend to learn more, which brings positive academic results, themselves raising the level of enthusiasm. The possibility of such 'cycle' will be explored in the discussion of the findings. Also, while this might be true, another important parameter was teachers' ability to channel students' drive to learn.

4.3.3. Use of the curriculum

The role of the curriculum at West End seemed to be at the root of teachers' success in harnessing student interest.

²⁰ The two remaining teachers still mentioned group work (Helen) and interactivity (Jeremy) as important components of their teaching, but not as capable of affecting lesson plans.

Seth: I think the West End style would, to my eye, would be, um (2) seeing a syllabus as a starting point, and then (.) pers= pushing the pupils along the way beyond that.

Jeremy: I *think* we feel freer than many schools would feel because we have very able students. So we're able to go beyond the syllabus.

The view expressed by Seth and confirmed by Jeremy was echoed by all respondents without exception. All mentioned that they were able to "go off a tangent", to pay attention to the students' interests.

Another confirming stance on the West End curriculum was provided by the latest inspection report, which states that the curriculum is "broad and challenging", and "inspires pupils to think for themselves".

This type of relationship to the curriculum as a starting point, and not an end in itself, is enabled by a set of parameters. Firstly, all the respondents saw their pupils' intelligence²¹ and talent as the most important characteristic about West End (see 4.4.1. below). Additionally, socio-economic parameters such as school resources (financial, material, human), as well as the social background of a majority of its students, allow more time to be spent on what may look like digressions, but about which Keith said:

Keith: although we might have, in inverted commas, 'wasted some time', I know that they're *bright* enough and *willing* enough to make up that lost time.

Although I would identify this as a performative answer, Keith did underline how pupils' intellectual eagerness allowed for curriculum digressions. And lastly, it is certain that the composition of the groups (between 6 and 20 students) positively affected teachers' ability to provide individual attention to their pupils. (According to Emma, "in a regular {State school} classroom, should everybody say one sentence, it would be the end of the lesson.")

Relevance to the wider discussion on student participation will be addressed in the discussion of findings. What is certain is that this was one of the key aspects of

²¹ The term 'intelligence' came up frequently throughout the interviews, and appears to be characteristic of teachers' perspectives. The interview data does not clearly suggest whether it stands for 'formal' intelligence, or a more holistic view of intellectual capabilities. Therefore it is used in the report without any particular connotation.

teaching at West End that made a difference for the respondents—along with their freedom to use participatory practices.

4.3.4. Participatory practices

Examples of participatory practices

Respondents were very pleased with the professional freedom they enjoy at West End. A considerable proportion of teachers (5 out of 8) indicated their use of activities designed specifically around student participation. Noteworthy examples include Siobhan re-enacting the popular television show *The Dragon's Den* in her Geography class, having pupils bid for fictitious urban projects; Helen asking her students to assess drafts of each other's coursework; Keith running a small Physics research group, in which some Year 13 students act as research assistants; or Bernard setting up sessions fully dedicated to pupils' presentations in French, for which they direct the entire 'run of the show'.

All five respondents who mentioned some participatory projects also insisted on their impact on children, which was felt to sustain and increase their drive to learn.

Bernard: parents talk about it at the parents evening. I saw, you know, 'She was working very hard on her presentation', this kind of thing. They keep talking about it at home

Me: So it's entirely their own initiative, and they're=

Siobhan: Yeah, they suggested it yesterday! After the lunch presentation; they were like 'This is great to get people in, we need to do more of this! Can we set up a {Geography} society?

The role of ownership

In their description of participatory activities, Emma, Bernard and Siobhan made a crucial point about ownership, mentioning it as an important aspect in participation.

Emma: why I think it's valuable, is exactly those *big lessons*: taking responsibility, feeling ownership about something, and (.) thinking 'This is, this is something I have achieved!'

Me: So do you find that this makes a great difference, um, a great deal of difference in their own learning? The, these oral classes?

Bernard: Yes I think so. I mean I think (2) well first of all they enjoy the actual fact of doing research in the first place (I think). ~ a sense of ownership, which is terribly important.

Bernard and Emma (along with Siobhan) exemplified what Hannam has gone to great lengths to demonstrate. The cycle of ownership consists in giving students ownership for projects, which gives them a sense of trust, independence and responsibility, which in turn supports a range of skills (e.g. communication, group work, personal work), which in turn lead to better results, both socially and academically, as well as an enhanced self-esteem (2001). This responsabilisation also connects with Freire's work (1985) which, although very subversive by some accounts, emphasises the importance of empowerment in pedagogy.

It is safe to conclude that participatory activities hold a significant role at West End, although it ultimately depends on individual teachers. All those who mentioned participatory activities regarded them as a powerful means to increase the learners' level of involvement, as well as the quality of the learning.

4.4. Perspectives on pupils

Lastly, respondents defined their perspectives in terms of the pupils studying at West End. Although the most important characteristic seems to be their intelligence, their entire relationship to teachers strongly affected the latter's perspectives.

4.4.1. Pupils' intelligence and talent

When asked about the specificity of West End, all 8 respondents started by mentioning pupils' intelligence as something motivating and challenging to work with.

Me: ... how is it like to teach at West End?

Jeremy: Um, it keeps me reading, it keeps me thinking, I'm very challenged by these kids.

Me: ... what makes it West End?

Seth: I think the fact, I think first of all the fact that the pupils are very (.) bright, very able, the fact that they willingly contribute.

But some respondents also mentioned the pupils as extremely challenging, so much so that they could sometimes lead teachers to question their own position.

Bernard: And (.) you know some of the pupils are clearly a lot brighter than I am, ask me very searching questions, how do I answer that? I don't, I don't know, or I'll have to get= somehow I'll have to find out or phone somebody, or (.) ask a colleague how they would answer this.

However, pupils' intelligence was not the only defining characteristic. Their talent, be it musical, artistic, sportive or other, also appeared to play an important role in the competitive West End arena (see Jeremy's quote on page 32). Overall, this was seen as a very positive thing by all respondents. It is worth noting, though, that Helen brought a valuable nuance with her current Year 12 set.

Helen: With my Year 12 this particular year, they've been much happier to be what I= what we would call 'spoon-fed'. [...] Um, my Year 13 are much more interested in, you know, their own personal opinions *far outweighs* any else [*I laugh*]. Whereas my Year 12 are happy for me to tell them what *I* think.

Me: Okay. Is there... do you see a reason for that, or...?

Helen: Lack of confidence.

Me: Okay.

Helen: Yeah, a lack of confidence. And... perh= they're more conscientious, they work harder.

Helen's opinion of this particular set not only shows that there are significant exceptions to the typical West End student image (in this case, at the scale of a whole class). But her final remark also crucially shows that her Year 13 pupils may have adopted voicing their opinion *partly as a strategy to avoid working as hard as they should*²². Jeremy also commented that West End pupils tend to "learn courtesy as a social strategy, rather than just a set of rules". The full implications of this will be discussed in the discussion of the findings.

West End pupils were clearly perceived as above average (in Bernard's words, "well beyond the scope of A at GCSEs"). This is fostered and encouraged by the

²² Seth also commented that West End pupils are not necessarily always working hard, that they may have to be pushed along.

school's culture of participation and free thinking, but it can also mean that students might circle around obstacles rather than confront them—e.g. voicing their own opinion as a means to avoid doing more work. However, this always seems to remain within a widespread model of mutually respectful relationship between pupils and teachers.

4.4.2. The teacher-pupil relationship

For most West End teachers, 'academic respect' seems to be what best characterises their relationship with pupils. However, this is by no means 'blindly' respecting teachers for their seniority.

Jeremy: West End pupils do not respect you simply because you're a teacher or because you're their senior, you know you have to (.) they respect knowledge, or they respect the person who *deserves* it a bit.

Jeremy located the roots of respectful relationships, not in the institution or the teachers themselves, but in knowledge and one's recognised academic abilities. This is what led the student to answer Keith back when he was asked to tuck his shirt by a new teacher (see ¹⁶). This also seems to explain the experience of Helen, a younger member of the team. She described an arrogant and unapologetic attitude to 'forgotten' homework.

Helen: That *arrogance*, that, you know, [sarcastically again: '*So? I was busy!*'], you know. That that's *okay*, that they think that, you know, you couldn't possibly be as busy as they are. That's very irritating. Very undermining. Very, very, very um... stressful for everyone involved.

Jeremy and Keith, two experienced teachers, did mention that West End pupils do not respect teachers for their position, but for their proven academic abilities. Although it is not certain, it looks probable from the interview data that Helen found herself in a 'recognition' period, during which pupils probed her authority as part of an integrative process.

This shows yet another layer of complexity in the West End pupil cohort. As much as they were praised for their intelligence, this also happened to be the source of much more complex interactions to manage for the teachers. But, as Helen concluded:

Helen: It's *easier* to discipline people by frightening them.

Me: Certainly. Absolutely.

Helen: And, but I don't think that's a particularly constructive way of doing it.

Helen pointed out to an omnipresent moral and intellectual liberal culture aiming to encourage individual and critical thinking. This remains the most striking characteristic at West End, and influences its teachers' perspectives significantly—both for 'better' and for 'worse'.

This section presented some of the complex characteristics coming into play in the daily West End life from its teachers' points of view. The next section discusses the broader implications in relation to both student participation and potential school improvement in the independent and maintained sectors.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, I aim to report synthetically on the findings of this short study. The key findings are highlighted. Stemming from the results as well as relevant literature, the recommendations aim to provide useful suggestions; these should be primarily useful to the respondents and their colleagues, but also hopefully to other schools, in both the independent and maintained sectors.

5.1. *Discussion of the findings and recommendations*

5.1.1. The “West End way of doing things”

Findings

➤ The “West End way of doing things”, which mainly consists in **encouraging independent and free thinking**, is what teachers recognised as the most significant characteristic to the school; it provides them with **an established culture in which to anchor their practice**. However, it includes a **strong culture of excellence and distinction**, and some respondents were concerned that it may have a negative impact on some pupils, as well as themselves.

West End’s distinct characteristics place its teachers in a powerful and positive culture of learning, valued individuality, and mutual respect. This culture appears to be shared among most members of the school community, including pupils.

The culture of excellence at West End is rooted in its long record of academic distinction, and has three distinct effects. Firstly, teachers found it has consequences among pupils, who tend to go for the best grades (A*, A) and not satisfy themselves with lower marks. This is confirmed by the school’s outstanding A levels and GCSE results. Secondly, the culture of excellence also encompasses non-academic domains such as drama, sports and art, in which pupils also tend to aim for the best. Finally, the cult of excellence was found to affect teachers as well, who found the staff room could be competitive at times.

Recommendations

Such competitiveness is encouraged by the culture of school performances present nationally, and heightened in the independent sector. Whilst this is one of the two strongest assets of West End (with the pupils’ abilities), and doubtlessly contributes to the education of strong minds and personalities, it was also identified as a potential risk for weaker personalities—pupils as much as teachers. Cooke and Kothari (2001)

already identified the potential threat of a highly participatory environment for those who did not wish to participate (which does not necessarily signify their disengagement).

Recommendations are scarce, as the scope of this study does not allow for definitive claims. But teachers' concern for 'weaker' personalities suffices to indicate that West End seems to pay attention to all of its students. However, some teachers may wish to find a less competitive atmosphere in the staff room at times.

5.1.2. Teachers are free to enable participation

Findings

➤ Teachers also mentioned the **distinct advantage of being trusted**. As a result, **pedagogical practices are varied**, with a tendency to encourage participation and interaction. Both teachers and the latest inspection report present the **syllabus as a starting point**, on which teachers are free to build upon, partly through **innovative and wide-ranging participatory practices**. This is perceived to be one of the most powerful tools to teach at West End.

Teachers are trusted, and have the professional freedom to teach how they feel is best. Being free from managerial and strong curriculum-related pressures leads to a broad range of pedagogical practices, for the benefit of the learners (who enjoy varied approaches) as much as the teachers (who are free to exert their professional expertise as they see fit). Part of the leadership seems to be handed to the teachers, at least within their own classroom, but also within their department. As in the studies reported by Harris (2006) and Mulford (2006), teachers holding a part of the leadership constitute a very strong asset for the school.

West End teachers are free to use innovative participatory practices, and their perspectives echo a number of previous findings in the field (Apple and Beane, 1999; Hannam, 2001; Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Hannam, 2006): it remains well established that teachers who employ participatory methods recognise it as a very powerful approach to teaching and learning. West End teachers' responses seem to suggest that this remains consistent in the independent sector, where participation might be more integrated in school cultures (particularly in liberal schools). In this context, participation is encouraged and enabled by the use of the curriculum as a starting point, and not an end in itself.

Recommendations

A wide-ranging professional freedom for teachers, both inside the classroom and within their departments, seems to constitute a powerful advantage. Unfortunately, consulting teachers and letting them run their own classes independently seems to go against the post-1988 culture of increasingly centralised management and decision-making (at least in the maintained sector).

Being able to go beyond the syllabus at times may help fuel enthusiasm, as do varied participatory practices. Their implementation to some degree remains essential to capture the learners' attention.

5.1.3. The role of enthusiasm and ownership

Findings

➤ Respondents identified **enthusiasm as a strong drive for learning**. However, there can be a cycle of enthusiasm at work prior to entering West End which leads to eagerness to learn, yielding good academic results, which in turn lead to more enthusiasm to learn. Teachers seem to be able to 'break into' this cycle by **providing opportunities for pupils to take ownership of what they do**.

Confirming the findings of Hannam (2001) and Rudduck and Flutter (2004), teachers saw enthusiasm as a keystone for learning. However, critiques may object that the West End cohort of students come from a background that already instilled learning as a positive value. If that was to be the case, schools with a different—perhaps less privileged—cohort of students may object that West End works with unlike pupils, and that 'creating' enthusiasm is difficult in the current pressurised context, fuelled by a demanding National Curriculum and punishing league tables.

Recommendations

This potential cycle of enthusiasm may already be at play with some children and teenagers who are keener to learn—but it may not be with some disengaged youngsters. And in the latter case, the present findings suggest that empowering students to take ownership of what they do makes a strong difference, and allows 'breaking into' the cycle of enthusiasm. This is strongly correlated by OECD findings in educational neurosciences that emphasise intrinsic motivation over external rewards

(2007). We may infer that students finding themselves in what Csikszentmihalyi calls a state of “flow”²³ will very likely lead to an increased motivation to learn.

5.1.4. The potential drawbacks of a participatory culture

Findings

➤ West End pupils are clearly above average in terms of ‘intelligence’, social skills, and understanding of the institutional context. This appears to be linked to their social backgrounds, and whilst teachers mostly identified this as a distinct advantage, it could lead to pupils ‘testing’ teachers openly, and affirming their position strongly—sometimes using strategies to work less.

A possible addition to the drawbacks of participation identified by Cooke and Kothari (2001) could be termed ‘inverted tokenisation’. Indeed, as the findings appear to reveal, the students’ backgrounds and habitus strongly correspond to the school’s ethos. They come from backgrounds that encourage individual thinking, and so does West End. As a result, the students know how to use the system strategically. In the first instance, they “learn courtesy as a social strategy” (Jeremy), which suggests that they may use it with a purpose other than just ‘to be polite’²⁴. In the second instance, Helen suggested that some of her most silent students worked harder than those prone to voicing their opinion. This latter group of students could be taking part in a participatory culture so as to demonstrate that they thought about the issues at hand, and therefore are entitled to work less than expected.

²³ “[...] the state when really engaged in pursuits which afford us fundamental pleasure with no promise of external reward. Of the many triggers that motivate people to learn, including the desire for approval and recognition, one of the most (if not the most) powerful is the illumination which comes from *understanding*. [...] It is the most intense pleasure the brain can experience, at least in a learning context [...] A primary goal of early education should be to ensure that children have this ‘experience’ as early as possible and so become aware of how pleasurable learning can be.” (OECD, 2007: 71-73)

²⁴ Jeremy’s explanation usefully nuances this analysis. He mentioned the pupils “learn courtesy as a social strategy rather than just a set of rules”. This suggests that the ‘social strategy’ is also positive: beyond ‘just’ learning politeness, they *adopt* it and are genuinely courteous—which is a positive thing. But Jeremy’s use of the word ‘strategy’ does communicate a sense of potentially using courtesy with ulterior motives.

This is by no means something essentially negative; it shows that students reflect on their own schooling, and their acute awareness of their educational settings may infer that they can be deemed responsible enough to choose not to work in certain circumstances. This is very similar to institutions using participation tokenistically to emulate a superficial impression of consultation (Fielding, 2001; Lodge, 2005; Whitty and Wisby, 2007). When students themselves start using participation in such a way, this could amount to ‘inverted tokenisation’²⁵. It is a pitfall of participatory settings that has seldom been identified in educational contexts, and which is important to underline.

Recommendations

Agencies and institutions responsible for implementing participatory practices need to be careful as to *how* these are implemented. Using participation as ‘brownie points’ tends to encourage students to participate strategically, in order to receive extrinsic rewards. Whereas the implementation of a cycle of enthusiasm and ownership focusing on intrinsic motivation, as described above, potentially renders inverted tokenisation useless since it is not intrinsically rewarding.

Although this conclusion may appear exceedingly behaviourist, it does not aim to make broad claims about young people and learning processes in general. It should rather be understood as a suggestion to further inform teaching practices, the participation debate, and policy-making aiming to encourage student involvement.

5.2. *Wider implications for student participation*

The findings related to participatory practices tend to confirm that previous results (Ofsted, 2006, cited in Whitty and Wisby, 2007) are consistent in the maintained and independent sectors: participatory practices are a pedagogical asset. They allow for more involvement in the learning process, and may bring a sense of ownership which acts as an entry point into a positive cycle of increasing motivation to learn.

This moves the importance of student participation beyond political agendas of any kind; this includes national agendas using tokenistic participation, but also international treaties on young people’s rights, such as the UNCRC (which, despite its importance, remains part of a UN-based political agenda). It supports findings in educational neurosciences, suggesting that powerful learning is likelier to occur when it is motivated intrinsically, as opposed to stimulated extrinsically by structures of power, control and reward.

²⁵ However, anybody could use consultation as a means to another end than voicing their opinions. Therefore ‘inverted tokenisation’ is not something exclusive to students, but in general to anyone voicing their opinion with ulterior motives than being heard.

As Whitty and Wisby (2007) suggest, this is likely to produce results that may go against governmental agendas. But first, this would only be giving a voice to opinions that *already* exist, regardless of whether or how they are voiced at present. And second, I would argue that it remains our duty—education practitioners, researchers and policy-makers alike—to ensure that mass education aims to form independent minds, free to voice their discontent with policies that may hinder individual freedoms.

5.3. Conclusive comments

This project has explored the important debate of student participation in the contemporary British educational system. Issues around participation have been presented from various points of view (philosophical, sociological, psychological and pedagogical), which informed the study of 8 teachers' perspectives on student participation in a London independent secondary school. The conclusions remain mainly useful in the context of the School, although some of the issues raised may benefit from further research, and hopefully bring some usable elements into the wider debate of student participation.

Importantly, the Department for Children, Schools and Families published very recent guidance on integrating student participation (see DCSF, 2008). Although the document seems to present student participation in more progressive ways than previously, its effects are not immediately identifiable (the publication is dated from May 2008). Continuing official efforts to include student participation in the maintained sector are praiseworthy. However, I would maintain previous comments regarding the extent to which teachers can be expected to follow a stringent National Curriculum at the same time as integrating a variety of additional practices—among which participative methods.

This project also tends to show that when listened to, teacher perspectives unveil stories worthy of attention, which may deepen and nuance our understanding of the participation debate. If teachers are, as Rudduck and Flutter suggest, “the gatekeepers of change” in educational contexts (2004: 141), this calls for more research into their perspectives on student participation.

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7. Appendices

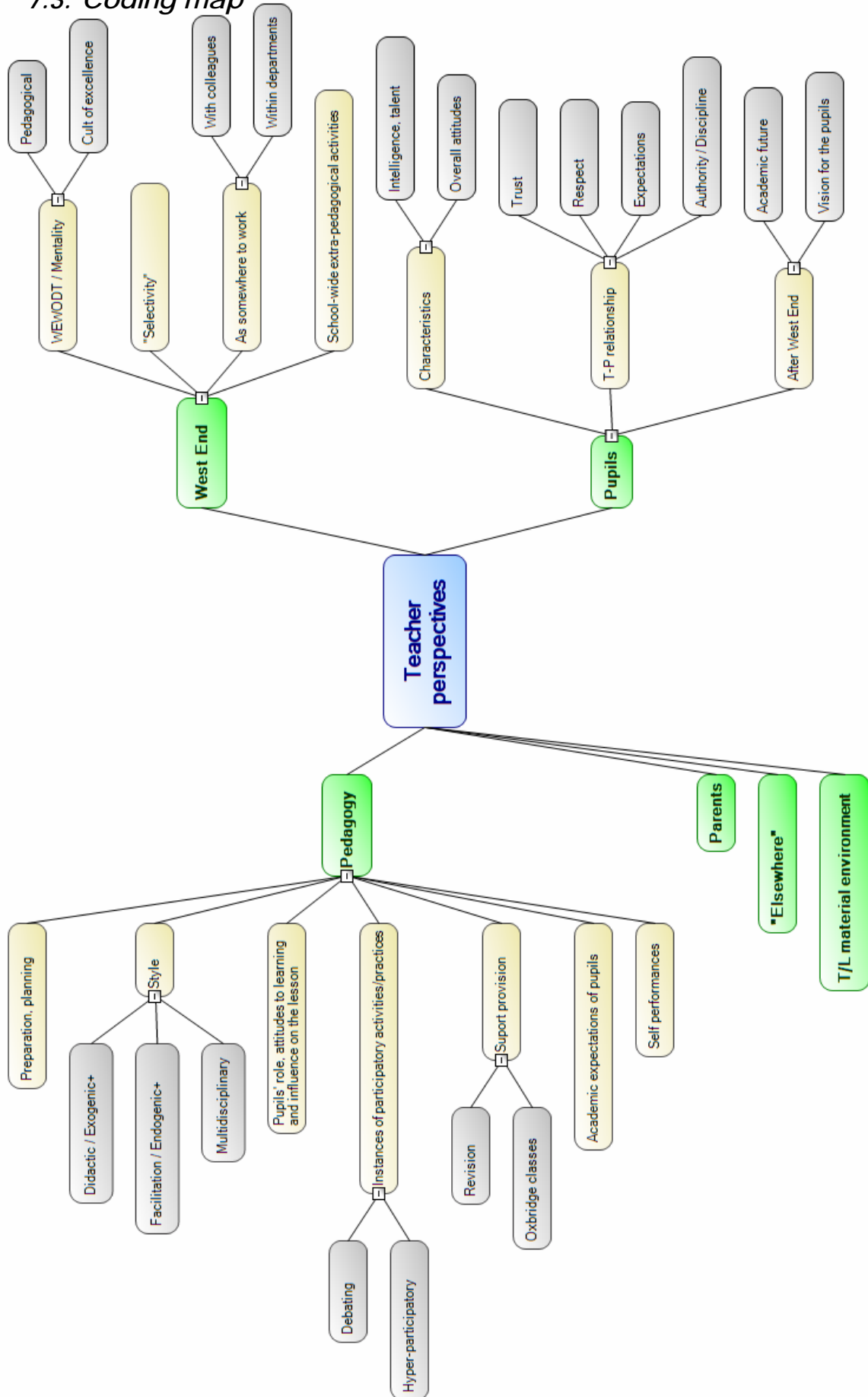
7.1. Extract from Interview 8 (Keith)

- 1 Keith: [...] When I first came, having first taught in {redacted} as I mentioned earlier,
2 that was a school (.) *good* academically, not as [~high-powered] as West End,
3 much longer academic tale. If I were to tell a boy to tuck his shirt in my previous
4 school=
5 Me: To, to, sorry?
6 Keith: To tuck his shirt, because his shirt was un-tucked=
7 Me: Yeah, yeah, mhm.
8 Keith: ... er, the boy would say, invariably, typically, 'Oh, um, sorry about that, yeah,
9 I'll tuck it in now, thanks very much.', you know, and walk off. Now, I kind of
10 *knew* that, as soon as they were around the corner, they would probably un-tuck
11 it again. But nevertheless, the fact that I'd asked them and the fact that they'd
12 responded to that you know, in a nice way, um, everybody was happy with that.
13 My first week at West End, I ask a boy to tuck his shirt in, and he said in, in quite
14 a *strong*, but nevertheless *polite* way: 'Well, I appreciate you Sir', you know,
15 'asking to tuck my shirt in. But you know, don't you, that when I go around the
16 corner I'm going to un-tuck it?' [I laugh frankly] 'So, what is the point of asking
17 me to tuck my shirt?' And I was quite taken aback by that. And my reaction was,
18 instinctively, 'How rude!'. But actually they didn't *mean* to be rude, they were
19 just being upfront, they were being, you know, intellectually honest (.) about that
20 situation. It took me a while to get used to that, but that is (.) *very typical* of the
21 relationship that, that exists I think between pupils and teachers here.

7.2. Transcription conventions

Symbol	Example	Description
(.)	but not (.) in theory	Silence of one second or less
(3)	Um (3) I don't, no.	Silence, in seconds
=	Yes, they= in fact, no	Interruption
<i>word</i>	they are <i>very</i> keen	Speech emphasis
[<i>action</i>]	[<i>giggles</i>]	Side action
[mode: ...]	[mumbles: But anyway.]	Mode of expression
{ clarification }	on them {the students}.	Author clarification
~~~ syllable)	the day they ~ ~ ~	Incomprehensible word (one ~ per syllable)
[~ <b>word</b> ]	[~out of their minds]	Possible hearing

### 7.3. Coding map



### 7.4. Raw analysis result

	Heading/Code	Respondents (n = 8)	Mentions (n = 355)
1	West End	8	105
2	West End\WEWODT / Mentality	7	35
3	West End\WEWODT / Mentality\Pedagogical	4	12
4	West End\WEWODT / Mentality\Cult of excellence	4	7
5	West End\"Selectivity"	2	4
6	West End\As somewhere to work	7	52
7	West End\As somewhere to work\Colleagues	5	17
8	West End\As somewhere to work\Department-wide	5	10
9	West End\School-wide extra-pedagogical activities	3	3
10	Pedagogy	8	119
11	Pedagogy\Preparation, planning	2	4
12	Pedagogy\Style	8	30
13	Pedagogy\Style\Didactic	5	8
14	Pedagogy\Style\Facilitation / Interactivity	6	11
15	Pedagogy\Style\Multidisciplinary	1	1
16	Pedagogy\Pupils' role, attitudes and influence on the lesson	7	35
17	Pedagogy\Instances of participatory practice	5	25
18	Pedagogy\Instances of participatory practice\Debating	1	1
19	Pedagogy\Instances of participatory practice\Hyper-participatory	2	4
20	Pedagogy\Suport provision	5	11
21	Pedagogy\Suport provision\Revision	3	4
22	Pedagogy\Suport provision\Oxbridge classes	1	4
23	Pedagogy\Academic expectations of pupils	1	3
24	Pedagogy\Self performances	3	7
25	Pupils	8	100
26	Pupils\Characteristics	8	55
27	Pupils\Characteristics\Intelligence, talent	7	18
28	Pupils\Characteristics\Overall attitudes	7	32
29	Pupils\T-P relationship	8	40
30	Pupils\T-P relationship\Trust	3	3
31	Pupils\T-P relationship\Respect	2	2
32	Pupils\T-P relationship\Expectations	7	15
33	Pupils\T-P relationship\Authority / Discipline	7	12
34	Pupils\After West End	2	5
35	Pupils\After West End\Academic future	2	2
36	Pupils\After West End\Vision for the pupils	1	3
37	T/L material constraints	5	12
38	Parents	5	11
39	"Elsewhere"	5	7