Seeking educational inclusion and engagement with girls with experiences of disaffection and exclusion: The impact of voice


Georgie Boorman, Melanie Nind & Gill Clarke, University of Southampton, UK

Abstract

Interest in student voice has come to the fore in recent years, stimulated by political concern for the rights of children and young people as well as recognition of them as consumers. Moreover, children and young people are increasingly understood as people with something interesting and worthwhile to say - competent to have an opinion on their lives, learning, participation and engagement (Tangen 2008). For those young people who excluded from (mainstream) education or with a label of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD), this issue of student voice takes on particular relevance in negotiating access to learning. However, the voice of girls labelled with BESD, and those with experiences of disaffection with, and exclusion from, mainstream learning provision are often hidden, going unheard both in education, and educational research (Osler & Vincent 2003). In this paper, we address the issue of giving voice to girls excluded from mainstream education attending special, girl-only provision. We report on our exploration of finding ways, using digital technologies, to listen as part of formal gathering of the views of stakeholders in the school and in ongoing, informal ways of engaging the girls in curriculum and school development. We particularly attend to how the girls perceive their educational inclusion and exclusion and what they feel works for them. We reflect on the affordances of visual and digital methods and on the core messages of belonging and not belonging through concerns of identity, identification and the relational self enabled via attachments and demonstrated through interaction that we heard in the girls’ accounts.
Background: The importance of voice

Interest in pupil voice has been mainstreamed. It is now inherently connected with concepts of all children as people with rights and with concepts of children as consumers. Increased concern with hearing the voice of children has partly resulted from their re-conceptualisation - as being, not just becoming (James & James 2004) – with increased recognition of their competence to have a worthwhile opinion now, rather than as developers of skills and maturity to express an opinion later in adulthood (Tangen 2008). Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) led to a plethora of initiatives to hear children’s view on matters concerning them (Lewis & Porter 2007). This desire to hear children’s voices had already been well rehearsed in the arena of disabled children’s lives, where professional and medical voices have been dominant. Lack of voice has been highlighted in a history of lack of say in decisions made about them. This has been turned around in self-advocacy movements of (learning) disabled people in which an awareness of the power of voice and particularly, collective voice, is central. Disabled people’s movements translated issues of voice into calls for participatory and emancipatory research long before such approaches became fashionable.

The background of realising the power of voice has been different in the field of BESD where there is no equivalent advocacy or self-advocacy movement. Academics have raised the importance of voice for this group given the increased likelihood of their receiving punitive discipline (Jull 2008), obligations in special educational needs legislation and policy, the potential of hearing the views of challenging young people in developing ways of managing the challenges they present, and their necessity in assessing the efficacy of interventions with them (Cooper 1993). Much of this, however, is about using the voice of young people to help in realising the agenda of professionals. Doing more than this can be perceived as dangerous for, as Corbett (1998) has noted, children and young people with moderate learning difficulties and emotional and behavioural difficulties are the most ‘feared’ and the least likely to be listened to with respect.

Girls with BESD and their voices present real challenges. It is easier not to hear than to hear these voices because their communication is frequently unconventional and their social status marginal (Corbett 1998). The challenge of understanding appropriate responses is likewise represented in the interactions and communication patterns selected by the girls. ‘Choosing’ to communicate in ways that don’t conform
to schools rules can lead professionals to further their labelling of them, in effect expanding their deficits and reducing the capacity (Lloyd 2005); their disadvantage may increase again once they are disengaged and excluded from schooling and not accessing their school-based rights to speak or be listened to.

Labelling and not listening to girls is a particular issue as girls transgress and resist and are too insightful and knowing for comfort (Allan, 1999). Girls transgress both social and gender norms (Lloyd 2005) in a surrounding culture where ‘girls are regarded as the new emblem of educational success’ (McLeod & Allard, 2001, p.1), making them doubly dangerous. Such girls represent a challenge in that they are ‘known, yet not known’, characterised as ‘difficult and also in difficulty; as dangerous, and also being in danger’ (McLeod & Allard, 2001, p1). Further, their voices can be negated by medicalisation of them (as having ADHD for instance, Lloyd 2006) and (as the girls themselves recognised in Cruddas & Haddock’s (2005) study), by putting their anger down ‘to periods or hormones’ (p.165).

We have argued elsewhere (Boorman, Clarke & Nind 2009) that voice is not a panacea, that enabling voice is insufficient for the young person to be an active and effective participant in decisions which concern them without their voice being accompanied by space, influence and audience (Lundy 2007). That girls with BESD have largely been silenced is uncomfortable for us; we have regarded hearing the girls’ voices as essential to our project of working in collaboration with their school to develop a robust, holistic curriculum. We are aware of the potential dangers of selectively hearing from a professional or research perspective, and of further damaging the girls’ identities by failing to respond as listeners to what we hear (Alcoff 1991-2). Yet engaging with the girls’ views and stories is what helps to make this research with them and not on them; it is a project that is political rather than charitable or romantic. Our desire to engage with the girls’ voices reflects Fielding’s (2004) dialogic model in which neither adult nor young person are silenced or dominant, but in which we seek a partnership enabling us to speak with rather than for the young people.

**Methods: How to listen**

Tangen (2008, p.159) emphasises ‘how to listen’ in her conceptualisation of listening ‘as an active process of exchange of meanings’ involving hearing, reading, interpreting and constructing meanings using more than the spoken or written word. Methods supportive of listening to research participants with marginal status are
methods that facilitate meaningful participation using the communication styles they prefer. In this study this meant less emphasis on what Corbett (1998) refers to as ‘conventional communication resources’ and more emphasis on ‘imaginative listening’ and activity-based processes that reduced dependence on verbal and written literacy (Hill et al. 1996). Shevlin & Rose (2008) note that UNCRC’s Article 12 states, ‘Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child’ (their emphasis) and call us to challenge notions of capability to ‘ensure that all pupils gain a full right to participation’ (p.429). The emotional immaturity of the girls is used by professionals to bring their capabilities into question. Viewing competence as located in the interaction, however, we wanted to provide the kinds and level of support, the mode of communication, and the balance of guiding but not leading that would be enabling, plus, in recognition of the different media preferred by the young person, media choice availability (Article 13, UNCRC). Choice in this context represented offering a variety of ways of utilising digital technologies, making the communication methods less adult-centric (Holland et al. 2008).

Digital technologies offered a positive way forward by functioning as an ‘active accommodator’ in supporting self-expression. They offered a medium for ‘imaginative listening’ (Corbett 1998) that had been found to be a motivating, engaging, and enjoyable communication tool for students with a label of BESD (BECTA 2003) and that reflected youth culture (Walker 2008). The technologies supported a focus on visual methods, identified by Kaplan (2008, p.177) as ‘methods of choice’ with children and young people, based on affordance of capacity and capability (Thomson 2008), with greater accessibility than textual forms. Visual methods could disrupt traditional relational, interactional or communicative patterns by providing alternative spaces (Noyes 2008). Via the digital medium visual narrative methods offered a way of understanding (non-)participation in education from the perspective of the student (see Carrington et al. 2007) and of enabling ‘unknowns’ to emerge and enhance understanding (Noyes 2008, p.132).

While a variety of methods were available for students, in this paper we discuss three visual methods specifically: photo elicitation, ‘educational journeys’ constructed in comic strip format, and video diaries. Photo elicitation uses photographs to prompt a narrative and a ‘conscious reflection on previously taken-for-granted assumptions’ in which the narrator learns to ‘unpack their thinking and scaffold their own thought processes in order to explain the narrative behind each photo’ (Carrington et al.
2007, p.9). The girls were asked to do some advanced planning and then photograph what represented for them the five 'best bits' of the school and five recommendations for 'improvements'. Using a digital camera meant they could accept, remove or replace their images and have immediate results, enabling these images to be accessed privately and as temporary records first, before increasing permanency, or sharing more publicly.

We selected comic strips as an interesting visual format with associated communication benefits (Gray, 1994) following comments from a member of school staff that to engage students the activity and output needs 'to be fun and it needs to look good'. Designing a comic strip depicting their journey through education used adaptable and flexible comic strip formats (ComicLife Magic software, Mac), into which both texts and images could be inserted with the result resembling an annotated on-screen photo album. The programme was one with which the girls were familiar from lessons and they sought help if unable to independently manipulate for the desired effect. The aim was to create a space to enable the girls to trace through their previous experiences of education in schools giving them and us some perspective on these.

In addition, video diary methods offered the most potential for the girls to 'play' with identity through their interactions with the camera (Noyes 2008, pp.140-142), exploring with performance and a different sense of audience. Talking to a video camera enables capture of body language and facial expression, not just for the researchers, but for the participants who can self-reflect through the 'media-mirror' (Bloustein 1998, p.115). The girls were introduced to video diaries through the link with the reality television with which they were familiar, and particular links with the show 'Big Brother'. They enthusiastically engaged in creating their own Big Brother diary room in the school, where they could share their personal thoughts, individually or collectively, via the video camera.

**Findings**

Findings from the study highlight the affordances of visual methods for providing alternative ways for young people who may be disaffected to give their views. As the methods are so central to the paper we tell the story of and from, each method before presenting a thematic overview. Three girls participated in photo elicitation: Cassie in her final year of compulsory schooling, described by staff as an engaged student, the first to take GCSEs, and whose self-description articulates her identity as
transformed from ‘quiet’ to ‘mad’ and ‘outgoing’ in her 19 months at the school; Heidi, who had been at the school only 2 months, was seen as energetic, enthusiastic, giving theatrical performances and used to orchestrating responses; and Keira whose attendance in 4 months at the school had gone from 17% previously to 98% as she formed relationships and who described benefiting from community belonging for the first time in an educational setting. Cassie approached the task methodically, engaging at her own pace. Heidi approached eagerly, flitting rapidly between tasks, thoughts, spaces, choosing where possible movement over stillness. Keira’s momentum gathered as the activity proceeded, her perceptions presented definitely and succinctly.

Cassie looked at the ‘best bits’ first, identifying seven, including the school’s policy, caring ethos, positive alternatives to restraint and exclusion, comparatively relaxed rules about jewellery and make-up where she was ‘allowed to be girly’, relationships within the school – ‘we all look out for each other’, staff ‘understand us more’ and listen), and choice of meals. For Cassie, identifying areas for improvement required more consideration, but she saw the long journey to school as a challenge and suggested a mid-journey cigarette break on the way to school (though not a smoker herself). She also identified access to pass keys to eliminate the space restrictions in school, changing the rules limiting chocolate consumption; excessive hand gestures by teachers (an irritation dating back to other schools); and a lack of understanding of the STAR (progress record) books.

Heidi’s responses related to people/relationships and places/spaces. Her best bits were the teachers, some of the staff who weren’t actually teachers were photographed at work and attributed with this label (described as ‘kind, helpful, funny and annoying (in a nice way)’); ‘the girls’ (attributed the same qualities in description as staff); the classrooms (‘always neat and tidy’), the hub [the school’s social hub for eating and gathering] (‘big’, ‘fits everyone in’, ‘warm’ and ‘comfortable’); and the R&R (rest and relaxation) rooms (somewhere to ‘sit and chill out. If you’re angry, calm down. If upset, sit there. If distracted, concentrate’. Her improvements were inspired by walking around that school beginning to photograph. She ended up with more cameras; bigger car park for the taxis; ‘pictures of everybody, even [school director’s young child] on the [notice] boards’; staff coat hangers; and ‘bigger toasters so everyone can have toast at the same time’.
For Keira, the best bits were those that contrasted with her own mainstream school and previous alternative education experiences (typified by opposition, confrontation, disengagement). These included the school size (‘small, little’ with ‘less people’ and ‘not much staff’, easy to ‘know everyone’s names’), short lessons, and the school’s director (‘she’s been through what we’ve been through’). Regarding improvements Keira said she would keep the school as it was, ‘nothing different’.

In the comic strip activity Kiera chose a photo for the front in which her appearance is heavily managed, with a complex hair design and heavy eye make-up. She documented her attendance at four schools and articulated some difficulty in remembering, or communicating about these previous educational placements. Kiera’s first school was described positively as ‘good’ and ‘fun’, and another placement verbally described negatively as unworkable was given similar positive annotation. Beside a photo of one member of staff, she recorded in a text box, ‘becos she excluded me I don’t like her’, verbally describing her as a ‘Bitch’. In this method of collecting data and giving voice the verbal account accompanying the visual task provided rich data, with stronger language and examples hidden from the visual account. Kiera’s representation of her current school included many pictures of staff and students from the catalogue she had built up. Individuals with whom she has made strong attachments featured heavily. Annotations included, ‘I love you lil sisi’, by her friend, and ‘The school I go to now is the Kahlo I love it so much and I love all my friends and the staff. XX’

Megan, also did the comic strip activity. Megan is popular having formed strong attachments with various members of staff and students in her year at the school. As she worked on her Educational Journey she moved about the classroom and worked collaboratively with a Learning Support Assistant. Her memories were supported by images accessed by internet search. A school she liked was described as the one in which ‘I felt listened to and given a chance’. Experiences of being listened to and the associated responses of staff to her playful behaviour (such as hiding) were central in her account of feeling understood. This was contrasted with other schools where she identified not having been listened to as a key barrier to learning and engagement.

Turning to the diary room data we focus here on three unstructured video diary interviews. In the latter Bella (who in her final year and about to sit GCSEs had attended Kahlo for about a year and was well liked by staff, as “a pleasure” to teach) began as interviewer behind the camera, later giving this role to the researcher (GB)
and moving in front of the camera. Her interaction with Sandra (welfare staff) was warm, informal and playful. She spoke of what was different about the school and important to her, “when you speak to my mum, like you kind of tell me what you’re going to say before you say it. D’you get what I mean, so that’s good. ‘Cos kids don’t like it when you talk about them and they don’t know what you are saying”. In her old school things were different: “My headteacher hated me, And so did the deputy. And basically, all the teachers hated me, which you know, wasn’t very nice. So I didn’t go to school… And I didn’t have a tutor because no one wanted me” (said with a half-hearted laugh).

Bella: It was sad but never mind…
Sandra: We want you Bella
GB: What about at Kahlo?
Bella: What?
GB: What about at Kahlo?
Bella: Oh they all love me here. I think – I hope so Sandra
Sandra: Yeah, we do Bella
GB: How do you know that?
Bella: Because it’s like a big deranged family [Sandra laughs] that’s the deranged one
GB: Could you tell Big Brother a bit more about that?
Bella: Well, you know, you’ve got the weird ones, and the funny ones, and the best ones [points to self], and … it’s like … it’s not a school. … It’s not like a school because like, we don’t do school things, well we do maths and science and shit like that, but you don’t, do, things like as mainstream school does, because it’s more closer, and you talk more, and you get to know everybody, if you get what I’m saying.

Later, Bella stresses relationships and communication once again when asked what the aim of schools should be, ‘It should be to interact with the kids, and to see how they learn, and work with them to achieve what they want’. In a moment of self-reflection she adds, ‘Fuck me I’m good ain’t I!’ Talking about her peer group she like…, but some of them you can’t stand … But you try and make an effort, because everyone’s different, and everyone has their different issues’. Proximity for Bella is seen to enhance knowing, and knowing prompts motivation to include. Bella’s recognition of her status in the school as valued is important to her attendance. Beyond that, her attachment to the school signals her as different from her peers in her home location, commenting that “round my area, that’s a bit.. you know..”, thus this attachment locates her within an unspoken identity, a label which could potentially impact her relationship beyond the school.
Sam and Nina had been at the school for over a year, and when asked to engage in the video diary, Nina slightly reticently asked that Sam join her for the interview. Both were articulate in their description of their educational experiences, identifying what helped or hindered their engagement, the importance of relationships and interactions within the school, of knowing others and feeling known. When asked to recount their journeys through education, Sam opens with “Well, I first got kicked out of school...”, leaning to one side as she does so, indicating a potentially long account, and the need to get comfortable. Her journey continues to identify a strong association with exclusions, with Sam describing attendance at least six educational placements (many of which she can no longer remember the names of) punctuated by periods without placement. The lack of coherence in her journey is narrated in a matter-of-fact manner, removed from any emotion. A second theme running through Sam’s narrative, entangled with exclusion, is that of relationships with staff. Her reflections of her past experiences reveal the inter-relationship between these two key themes, identifying the embedding of her attitudes and behaviours with the actions, or reactions of staff, central in shaping her dis/engagement:

‘And when you’re sat there with you hand up for 20 minutes, and get fucked off with it, so then you go and, you just start doing something different because you can’t do the work, and then they think you’re just doing it to be a pain in the arse. Well, NO! You’re the one that didn’t come to me when I asked for help, so in actual fact, you brought it on yourself really.’

Sam identified being labelled as having influenced school staff before they had had the opportunity to get to know her directly. She commented on how responses were formed on the basis of a file of reports and assessments, observing “None of the teachers ever liked me anyway, because, they all read my file and stuff, then basically they thought, she’s a pain in the arse from the get-go. So that’s what they thought of me, and that’s how they treated me”. The topic of the file is further addressed by Nina and Sam later in the interview, differentiating her experience of assessment at Kahlo: “Yeah, I don’t, I don’t think Angie and Kath [teachers] really read my file. I think they got to know me for me”.

While Sam’s focus is primarily on the engagement and teaching styles of staff, Nina introduces a new dimension, commenting on the importance of peer relationships, identifying these as limited in mainstream, inhibited by large class sizes without the connections being made that are made at Kahlo:
‘there’s girls here that understand like, each other’s situations, ‘cos we’ve all like, some of us have been in care, some of us haven’t, some of us haven’t got our mum’s with us, some of ‘em have …But you don’t know them, but here, you know…”

The third video diary interview involved Keira and Sadie following an incident in which Sadie’s behaviour had unbalanced the dynamics in the school.

Keira: I’m wicked man
GB: And why are you feeling so –
Sadie: Sweet
GB: Why do you think you’re feeling so super-duper relaxed today?
Sadie: Because we’ve made up best friend – we’ve made up friends again
GB: Ahh
Sadie: And, if we didn’t make up friends, Keira would have been like – and not talked to me, so –
Keira: Be like yeah, you bitch, get out of my school! [laughs]

The consequences to the repair of friendship in terms of the performance of their ongoing relationship is expressed by both girls through the anticipated words and/or behaviour of Kiera, with body language central in establishing relational division.

The girls discuss the role of staff (Kath and Angie) in the repair:

Kiera: So how did you feel.. how did you feel like, when me and Angie, like, no when Angie and Kath said like me to come downstairs and give you a cuddle? How did you feel?
Sadie: Alright
Kiera: You did?
Sadie: Yeah, ‘cos all I needed as I say is someone to give me a cuddle, you know what I mean.. ‘Cos I said to my Mum all I want to do, yeah, so I goes, I want to have a baby before you die.. And I’m not being funny, yeah, my brothers have got kids- my cousins have got kids, the only person I’ve really got is school.. and I said to my Mum, I goes all I want it someone to love, she goes ‘I love you’, I was like yeah but ‘Mum, not in that way, like you say to me that.. you love me but you hate me.’

Here, Sadie succinctly emphasises her response to Kiera’s expression of inclusion. For Sadie, a cuddle, as a physical expression of attachment is the requirement in situations high in expressed emotion. Identifying further why, Sadie indicates the sense of belonging as central, locating her site of belonging as within the school, until she has children of her own.

However, Sadie describes an attachment to the school which goes beyond the relationships within it, to the opportunities afforded by it, commenting on its importance in creating a new script for her life, in enabling her to “go to college, get a
good career, and then change my whole life around so people think, what a different
girl you are Sadie.” Kiera likewise indicates the importance of relationships (within
the school) in her own transformation:

Kiera: Angie means a lot to me
GB: Mm
Kiera: She’s changed my life so much
GB: Mm
Kiera: Because I could be dead by now if Angie wasn’t here

Here Kiera’s identification with Angie is highly significant, she describes the
internalisation of her expectation, moral code, and discourse - her perspective. As
Kiera indicates the transition from “bad girl”, she adopts a feature of this former
identity, imitating a bad girl swagger as her head sways from side to side, indicating
retention of this identity script.

The different methods gave different opportunities for the girls to express themselves
through various communication modalities. Given the bi-directionality of influence
between identity and communication (Wolfe 2001), different methods had the
potential to result in different expressions of identity. For example the content shared
was often shaped and extended according to the supports available (staff, peers, the
researcher, or technologies such as editing capacities and internet search engines),
which varied between the tasks. Image management and self-presentation likewise
varied with a greater capacity for the management of tasks involving still images. In
the moving images of the video diaries, maintaining this level of self-management
was difficult. Perhaps this less-managed quality resulted in richer data from the
video-diaries; despite niggling doubts about superficial appearance these were the
products in which the girls reported greatest pride and identification and showed
desire to share with others at school.

Differences were also noted in the process of emotional regulation between the
different tasks as related to the method of communication. In recalling educational
experiences, awareness of associated affect was always a consideration, and
sensitive management of such was evidenced in the video diaries through
interactions between the students and their peers, staff, and the researcher where
content and intonation of verbal communication were monitored, and the
conversation moved on to support appropriate regulation or reframing (noticeably
evident between Bella and Sandra). The focus of the photo elicitation task seemed
less associated with emotional affect, located as it was in the present and future rather than focused on the past where emotions ran high.

The photo-elicitation became more about words and less about visual images because of the scaffolding of the planning stages that the staff requested in order to prevent the girls focusing on whatever was nearest. This, and particularly any attempt to record ideas on paper, interfered somewhat with the visual emphasis and constrained spontaneity. It meant that the explanation led and the picture followed rather than the other way around. Heidi’s photographs were sometimes symbols rather than carefully selected or framed; the poses adopted by the people in them often spoke more of their relationship with the camera, and intended image for external consumption, than with the girl behind it. Cassie’s photographs including the people’s activities, expressions and artefacts, were more purposefully directed to communicate the issue of concern, though this was sometimes linked to over-helping by staff. Images of the school areas, shared spaces of informality yet orderliness, tell of much more than the girls articulated in their verbal accounts. Thinking about improvements to the school was often challenging as the girls were not experienced in solution-focused thinking.

Using a process of thematic analysis of the data meta-narratives arise about the importance of belonging, inclusion and listening, each of which is about location and interaction.

Identity

Observing the girls as they engage with tasks we saw the time and care taken in the construction of their identities. The girls express the need to be known, not for the identities constructed for them according to ‘files’, but through direct experience, (Sam) connecting their identity of student with their social context beyond school (Nina). The opportunity to enter into dialogue (described by Megan as being ‘listened to’) with school staff was linked with being ‘given a chance’ to contribute to the identity they assumed within the school. Often instead indirect knowledge from previous professionals had been privileged in defining the girls identities for them, with consequential impact on their later interactions and behaviours (Sam). On this point, discursive empowerment is stressed, not simply through the opportunity for the girls to attribute their own identity labels, but also to resist previous labels attributed to them.
The opportunity of the new placement at Kahlo, and of the alternative experience offered through the research has made it possible for the girls to ‘creatively respond to the shifting circumstances and relationships of life: they try out and test their new ways of presenting themselves and accounting for what befalls them, and new negotiated realities are accomplished’ (Musgrove 1977, p.3). Cassie identifies her identity as transformed via language which articulates this transformation in social-communication areas (from ‘quiet’ to ‘outgoing’). Meanwhile Kiera’s identity is redefined as she is now a school attender, with education no longer a site for opposition, but attachment. Sam accounts for a reconstructed identity, not as known by herself, but as experienced by others, and which through that experience encourages a different behavioural pattern (also noted by Kiera). The alternative situation, and possibilities associated with such have enabled changes, alternative scripts, options. These enable the girls to differentiate between identities past and present, as well as enabling ‘new stories for … future lives’ (Beattie 2007, p.4).

*Relationships*

Attachments are described to individuals within the school, as expressed through photos of key attachment figures and also to the process of education in the opportunities it affords for further education and employment. Thus the girls’ accounts collectively identify the necessary features of attachment to education, identified by Cooper (2008, after Smith, 2006) as attachment to school staff and an identification of the school as a foundation for future success.

The importance of people and relationships are identified by the girls across different contexts. Stressed in Heidi’s ‘best bits’, reinforced by Megan’s accounts of rule breaking behaviours and in Kiera’s identification of staff embodying exclusion, the girls’ accounts support Gergen’s (2001, pp.156-7) assertion that ‘one’s potentials are only realised because there are others to support and sustain them; one has an identity only because it is permitted by the social rituals of which one is part’. The scope of identity is limited to relational interactions, labelled and regulated by them. The importance of the enabling, or constraints as experiences by the girls is expressed throughout the accounts and intersects the different methods, as staff are depicted as a physical barrier to learning (Cassie), responsibility for the disengagement which ultimately leads to exclusions is located as within interactions with staff, and staff themselves (Sam and Kiera), and positive mood is linked with relational repair among peers (Kiera and Sadie). Likewise, Bella stresses inclusion
within her current placement as located within her interactions within the ‘deranged family’ of the school, and the value assigned to her own identity as a result of such, as she transfers from the extremes of ‘hated’ to ‘loved’ in the different environments.

**Belonging**

The girls’ accounts of the construction and negotiation of identity, the transformative impact of interaction, and the benefits of community integrate the themes of self and other, and the need to be grounded in an enhancing relational identity - to belong. From the girls’ accounts, it is clear that belonging encompasses the desire for some sort of attachment, be it, in terms of relationships with people and spaces (in this case it may be that the only person I have is school), and which stress the physical expression of such via a ‘cuddle’). We recognise that this is no easy or stable process, especially in consideration with the interactive and relational dynamics of belonging, but one that is conducted within regulated limits, dependent on audiences, and fraught with challenges behaviourally, emotionally and socially. Thus belonging and ‘the creation of an identity is always a work in progress that takes place in the context of the past, present and future of the individual’s life, not in isolation from others, but in a relational and contextual way’ (Beattie, 2007, p.2).

**Discussion**

Voice can be a potential source of empowerment and a challenge to the hegemony of accounts that privilege certain voices over others. We involved the girls, as stakeholders or key informants, in giving evidence on what has worked to include or exclude them at Kahlo and previous schools. This collaborative engagement respected them as valid contributors in the generation of knowledge only if we avoided being tokenistic and they could have real influence. We also needed to avoid treating their voices as authentic in the sense of being independent of the discourses around them that will have contributed to a knowledge of themselves that is situated within ‘a complex mixture of professional, theoretical and personal perspectives’ (Lloyd 2006, p.219). Like the labels used to describe the girls, their discourses ‘are not objectively constituted but are relational, they depend on assumed ideas of normality’ (Lloyd 2006, p.219). They have been educated amidst the gendered, classed and racialised disciplinary processes of schools (Wright et al. 2000) and have adopted strongly gendered and sometimes medicalised and deficit identities.
Being wanted, heard and respected was important to the girls as they spoke of not belonging in their previous schools but now belonging in a community that they recognised as strange in many ways, but nonetheless, theirs.

For a population frequently characterised by defiant and oppositional interactions with staff, and in educational settings, the girls identify the need for staff and environment to differentiate themselves from previous educational experiences to enable engagement. The disruption of traditional roles and relationships, as evidenced in the communication patterns between staff and students indicate the need for roles to retain some boundaries, but within a flattened hierarchy. Time, respect and understanding were considered central in achieving this, alongside humour, and engagement with the girls as people, not simply students. For students, being situated in their varied social contexts and networks outwith the school enhanced their sense of belonging within it, as they were enabled space to negotiate self-definition, and therefore known; ‘for them’. That ‘cultural practices can offer new forms of identity and agency and serve as ways of subverting and negotiating dominant forms of identity’ (Weedon 2004, p. 158) is evident in the data. The alternative ‘cultural practices’ offered by the alternative media for voice may function to disrupt the identities held by the girls themselves (as in Bella’s expressions of pride and success in her responses in the Diary Room) as well as disrupt the traditional lens through which the girls are viewed, and the roles they are allowed.

The girls spoke eloquently of what had gone wrong for them in education and articulated how and where they were making real connections now – to each other, the staff. Beattie (2007, p.2) has argued that ‘the creation of an identity is always a work-in-progress that takes place in the context of the past, present, and future of the individual’s life, not in isolation from others, but in a relational and contextual way.’ Focusing on the concept of belonging and the girls’ desire to be part of something, allows us to look at the (inter)connections between the stories they tell of themselves and others-, the social structure (and in particular the institutional structure of the school) and cultural and historical processes. Belonging is as we have shown about being and becoming … about knowing and better understanding the self (and our relationships with ‘others’) and being able to tell a coherent or cohering story of the self. Given that we make sense of our social worlds and constitute our identities through narratives then the case for studying and engaging with the girls’ voices is a strong one, insofar as it is evident that stories and narratives are ‘an ontological condition of social life’ (Somers, 1994 p.614).
Conclusion

The girls in this study had histories of communicating through physical and verbal behaviours which had culminated in their exclusion from mainstream education and sometimes from family networks. The visual and narrative methods opened up opportunities for them to explore a range of new ways of communicating aspects of their home and educational experiences. The social philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1985, p.216) in *After virtue. A study in moral theory* writes 'Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.' Our ongoing research seeks to avoid these girls being anxious stutterers recognising that they have interesting and worthwhile things to say about their lives and educational inclusion. In response to attentive listening, the girls often chose to articulate about belonging and not belonging; situating academic learning in the context of relationship with self and others, and expressed a preference for an educational system which hears, values and respects them as people and as learners.

References


Boorman, G., Clarke, G. & Nind, M. (24-27 March 2009) In their own words: the missing voices of girls with behavioural, social and emotional difficulties, Gender and Education Association 7th International Conference, Institute of Education, London.


*This document was added to the Education-line collection on 20 October 2009*