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# Children's Voice or Children's Voices? How Educational Research Can be at the Heart of Schooling

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**ABSTRACT** There are problems with considering children and young people in schools as quite separate individuals, and with considering them as members of a single collectivity. The tension is represented in the use of 'voice' and 'voices' in educational debates. Voices in dialogue, in contrast to 'children's voice', are important and are of more value than can be described in the term 'democracy'. The voices of children and young people are presented, from a study of aloneness in schools. Analysis of the voices suggests they were involved in distinctively hermeneutic work, and an approach to research that generates such hermeneutics might be called a form of 'action philosophy'. This approach to research is surprising, and it can put voicing at the very heart of schooling, within classes.

## **Introduction: children and young people count**

Schools are filled with children and young people, as well as quite a few adults. How do we think of them, individually and as a large number or group? It can be problematic if they are seen as separate, floating individuals, each to be developed to his or her 'full potential'. It can be equally problematic if they are seen as a single mass working towards a single aim. The first of these problems was noted by Marx and Engels, who criticised the individualism implicit in capitalism. This was expressed, they said, in the French revolutionary literature, and came to its purest form in the individualist anarchism of Stirner:

The egotistic individual in civil society may in his non-sensuous imagination and lifeless abstraction inflate himself to the size of an atom, i.e., to an unrelated, self-sufficient, wantless, absolutely full, blessed being. (Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*, in Selsam & Martel, 1963, pp. 310-311)

This might be applied to some approaches to schooling, where each child (or adult) is a mere number or a mere carrier of an amount of 'potential'. There are also many criticisms levelled at the 'single big number' view of politics, including both the politics of democracy and the politics of countries said to have been inspired by the work of Marx and Engels.

We are beginning to see that government by majorities means abandoning all the affairs of the country to the tide-waiters who make up the majorities in the House and in election committees; to those, in a word, who have no opinion of their own.  
(Kropotkin, 1995, p. 39, first published in 1892)

This too might be applied to some approaches to schooling, with the individual subsumed under corporate aims. An approach to schooling that seems to combine both of the problematic views of children and young people in schools – the series of separate individuals, or the single big number – is the recent UK policy drive for what is called 'personalised learning'. In the next quotation, the first sentence – I think – implies a series of separate individuals (in the phrase 'individual progress'), whilst the second sentence implies the single big number (in 'achieve national standards'):

The term 'personalised learning' means maintaining a focus on individual progress, in order to maximise all learners' capacity to learn, achieve and participate. This means supporting and challenging each learner to achieve national standards.  
(Training and Development Agency for Schools, 2008, p. 22)

How do we think of children and young people, then, along the spectrum from the extremes of individualism to the extremes of collectivism? There is a significant amount of work on 'children's voice' in education and in society as a whole, which generally is part of an attempt to recognise some individuality at the same time as recognising societal influences. However, I find it interesting that the phrase 'children's voice' is so often used, in preference to 'children's voices'. 'Voice' can refer to a single voice, but it is not used in this way in the phrase 'children's voice'. There, it is not a *count noun* but a *mass noun*, a singular noun representing so many items that they cannot or need not be counted, an undifferentiated mass like 'snow' or 'advice' or 'evidence' or 'food' or 'rubbish'. A researcher such as Nelson (2014) writes well about the need for radical practice in schools, involving children and young people in school governance. Yet she refers to 'children's voice', a potentially undifferentiated mass. Democratically oriented writers, like Nelson, may be tempted into mass nouns by the very noun 'democracy', rule by 'the people' ('demos', itself a singular noun). I worry. It is as though children and young people have 'a voice', and that they sing in unison. Yet all of us who hear singing – or any kind of music – that is exclusively in unison, will know how limited is that music. Aristotle notes the problem of unison in an excessively unified city-state:

There comes a point when the effect of unification is that the state, if it does not cease to be a state altogether, will certainly be a very much worse one; it is as if one were to reduce harmony to unison or rhythm to a single beat. As we have said before, a city must be a plurality ... (Aristotle, 1962, p. 65)

He rather spoils the effect, at least for my own argument, by finishing the sentence

... a city must be a plurality, depending on education for its common unity. (Aristotle, 1962, p. 65)

Still, it is a good start, and another musically minded writer writes beautifully of the conflict and opposition needed within music – and in life:

Music is always contrapuntal in the philosophical sense of the word. Even when it is linear, there are always opposing elements coexisting, occasionally even in conflict with each other. Music accepts comments from one voice to the other at all times and tolerates subversive accompaniments as a necessary antipode to leading voices. Conflict, denial and commitment coexist at all times in music. (Barenboim, 2008, p. 20)

Voices interest me, therefore, more than voice. Voices are in relationships, in dialogue, even when – especially when – they are opposed to each other. I was therefore gratified to see the change in Unicef from 'Youth Voice' [1], which was 'for young people who want to know more, do more and say more about the world', to 'Voices of Youth' [2], which 'contains content from adolescents and young people from across the world' and which states that '[t]he views reflected in content or links on the Voices of Youth blog are not necessarily those of UNICEF and partners'. The need for voices, rather than just voice, is starting to be recognised by United Nations institutions, and in this way they are catching up with literary critics such as Attridge or Bakhtin. Attridge writes of the importance of singularity in literature, which in turn implies plurality. Each reading of a text, for example, is regarded as a distinct, singular, event (Attridge, 2004, p. 88). Bakhtin, focuses on plurality, describing the novel as the model of many-voiced art, and naming this *heteroglossia*:

[a]uthorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters, are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia ... can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (all more or less dialogized). (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 263)

Bakhtin was a literary critic, but his view of heteroglot dialogue has significance for lived reality, as is brought out by his phrase 'social heteroglossia'. Kozyrev explains this as 'a substantial contribution to the *ontological* understanding of

dialogue as the source for the construction of meanings', as '[l]ife by its very nature is dialogic' (Kozyrev, in Avest et al, 2009, p. 201, with the second quotation from Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*).

### The Fictive School and Classroom Voices

I used Bakhtin's literary approach to the lived reality of dialogue to describe dialogic classrooms in terms of the 'fictive school' (Stern, 2007, p. 41). The many voices within and beyond schools are characteristic of schools as communities, and in particular as learning communities. And the learning – where it is original and effectively shared – is a kind of research. One of the reasons why voices are more important than voice is that each one of a group of voices can remain multiple, whilst voice can so easily be thought to be resolved into a simple massive singularity. That is the distinction made by Wegerif between 'dialogic' and 'dialectic' approaches to education. Dialogue continues, even when unresolved; dialectic may involve disagreement but that is eventually resolved into a synthesis (Wegerif, 2008). Schools are complex learning communities, rich with meanings. They are *fictive*, created by the imagination, even if the imagining is 'imagining the real' (or *Realphantasie*) (Buber, 1998, p. 71). Schools are original, imaginative, creations. As Armstrong says, in an educational climate of standardisation, '[t]here could not be a better moment to reassert the primacy of the imagination in the process of learning and the value of interpretation in the business of teaching' (Armstrong, 2005, p. 71). Schools are imaginative even if they are embodied, and they are also necessarily heteroglot creations, too. Each voice, each language, in the school, as in the novel, 'is revealed in all its distinctiveness only when it is brought into relationship with other languages, entering with them into one single heteroglot unity of societal becoming' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 411).

Schools are fictive, and this happens – I suggest – mostly in classrooms. There is a great deal of good research on 'voice' and 'voices' of children and young people in school. I certainly would not want to give the impression that I am the first to recognise plurality and the danger of assuming that 'voice' is an undifferentiated mass. (I do think that I am relatively original in my theorising of this individuality, but that is not the main purpose of this article.) However, my views on voices are rather more distinctive in being class based. Not socio-economic class based, which was well described by Bernstein in the form of language 'replaying' socio-economic classes within schools (Bernstein, 1975), but classroom and subject based. Writers on voice and voices are – on the whole – attempting to empower children and young people, notwithstanding the power relations external to the school. There are those who focus primarily on voicing as a contribution to separate activity in student councils or broader democratic engagement in organisational issues in and beyond the school. Examples include Courtney (2014), who describes a 'Student Voice' scheme based in Ontario, with the formation of a Student Advisory Council reporting to the Ontario Minister for Education. That scheme does – impressively – try to

'[i]nvolve students meaningfully in articulating what would help to strengthen their belonging in both academic and social learning environments' (Courtney, 2014, p. 80), and '[c]onnect their learning to the real world' (Courtney, 2014, p. 81). Nevertheless, the emphasis is on students' ability 'to participate in decisions' in schools and in the provincial governance of Ontario.

Courtney's work is linked to, and inspired by, the more consciously plural work represented in numerous publications associated with Rudduck (such as Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; and Rudduck et al, 1996):

To talk of student voice is misleading. Some voices (e.g. middle-class girls) seem to be more willing to speak than others, partly because they may feel more at ease with the way teachers speak about students and with the capacity of schools to understand what matters to them in their daily lives. (Fielding, quoted in Flutter & Rudduck, 2004, p. 76)

The writers stress the value of children and young people being variously involved in school, although the emphasis in Rudduck et al (1996), in particular, is on their influence *on* schools, more than their empowerment *within* classrooms. Voices may influence schools in such ways, and there may also be 'voicing' activity with specialist subjects or activities. Examples of the latter include some versions of philosophy for children (Lipman, 2003), circle time (Mosley, 1996; Mosley & Tew, 1999), personal and social education (Watkins, 1994), or citizenship education (Claire, 2004). These are all valuable, although some may end up 'ghettoising' voices and damaging the hoped-for empowerment (Leach & Lewis, 2013). Perhaps the closest to my own approach, in a number of ways, is that of Fielding. He describes various models of schooling, with the final two in his list being 'schools as person-centred learning communities' and 'schools as agents of democratic fellowship' (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 54). Fielding's own preferred option is schools as agents of democratic fellowship, expressed through 'democratic fellowship' and 'democratic living and learning' (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 54). For myself, I would veer more towards person-centred learning communities, as I think that democracy somewhat misses the point of schooling. Empowering children and young people, and giving them an active place within classrooms is, I believe, absolutely vital. The extent to which this needs to *democratic*, that is, the extent to which power is *equalised* across the school, is – for me – less critical. Even in this major study of democratic schooling, Fielding can find very few examples of schools that might reasonably be described as 'democratic', with the much-repeated example being that of Alex Bloom and St George-in-the-East Secondary Modern School in East London in the 1940s and 1950s (Fielding, 2005; Fielding & Moss, 2011, p. 11). Classrooms can be personal, dialogic and surprising (Stern, 2013), without going far along the route to democracy (Stern, 2002). There is much to be said for a battle for greater democracy in schools (as in Fielding, 2005; Jones, 2012), yet an emphasis on democracy can, I believe,

distract educationalists – young and old – from developing schools as thoughtful learning communities.

In the following section, I give some examples of the voices of children and young people, taken from research on aloneness in education. This is followed by a conclusion about the implications for how ‘research’ and ‘practice’ are conceived; that is, how research is practised, and how practice is researched, in the form of action philosophy in the fictive classroom.

### What Do Young People Think?

The voices quoted here are taken from 30 children aged 7-8 (13 female, 17 male) from an English state suburban school for 200 students aged 4-11, and from 38 young people aged 12-13 (20 female, 18 male) from an English state rural comprehensive school for 1150 students aged 11-18. (Another two young people aged 15-16, and 20 adults, also participated in the aloneness research, but their responses are not drawn on for this article.) All the quotations also appear in Stern (2014), along with further details of demographics and research methods, and all were written responses gathered as part of ‘normal’ lessons taught by their regular teachers. The younger children considered and interpreted several paintings chosen as relevant to the topic of portraits: Picasso’s *La Tragedia*, Degas’ *Dansun cafe – L’Absinthe*, Lowry’s *Three Men and a Cat*, and Caspar David Friedrich’s *Woman before the Rising Sun* (also known as *Woman before the Setting Sun*). Those aged 12-13 considered the Hindu–Buddhist idea of ‘enstasy’ (a word describing the virtue of comfort in solitude), explored through the text from the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (Zaehner, 1992), as part of a religious education lesson on worship in different religions. Members of both age groups then wrote about their own experiences of different aspects of both solitude and loneliness, with the older group also completing the UCLA loneliness scale (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008, pp. 5-6). It is worth quoting some examples of what the children and young people wrote in their lessons (with the quotations transcribed as written).

Times of solitude are described positively by all participants. For example, ‘I enjoyed solitude when I went into the forest I liked climbing trees and exploring’ (Leonard, aged 7), and ‘time flies and I am only concentrating on my drawing’ (Oliver, aged 12-13). As Oliver indicates, art can be a source of wordless solitude: ‘In school I feel enstatic when I’m drawing – drawing is my favourite thing and I concentrate on drawing so I forget all of my wants and worries’ (Oliver, aged 12-13). But art can also generate wonderful thinking about solitude and loneliness. The ‘thought bubbles’ added to Picasso’s *La Tragedia* included the following. The woman in the picture was described as ‘sad, lost and cold’ (Cary, aged 8), or as ‘thinking of the past’ (Carol, aged 8). The man was said to be thinking, ‘why are we out here, it’s so lonely?’ (Rian, aged 8), or ‘I am cold and I don’t want to die’ (Annie, aged 7), or ‘I want to live’ (Alfie, aged 8). However, the boy, who appears to be more active (and is closer in age to the children responding), is said to be ‘Trying To xPlane something’

(Jeremy, aged 7), or 'wants to tell the man something' (Kadir, aged 8). He is saying 'please help me papa carry me I am cold' (Amina, aged 7), or 'I don't have a mother could she be our's?' (Ophelia, aged 7). On studying Degas' *Dans un cafe – L'Absinthe*, the children added these thought bubbles: the woman is thinking 'I want to talk to some one', whilst the man is thinking, 'leave me a lone!' (Ollie, aged 8). For Rian (aged 8), the woman is thinking, 'I'm alone and I don't like it' (Rian, aged 8), whilst for Cary (aged 8) it is the man who is asking the existential question, 'Who is alone?'

Lowry was an artist who said, 'Had I not been lonely, none of my works would have happened'.<sup>[3]</sup> His picture *Three Men and a Cat* stimulated distinct thoughts. The man on the left is thinking, 'Why am I all alone on the street?', the man in the centre, 'I ges we have fallen out', the man on the right, 'Why did we fall out?' (Andrew, aged 7). Cary (aged 8) says the man on the left is thinking, 'I am worried', the man in the middle, 'I am lost', the man on the right, 'I am fed up'. A smaller group of children also produced thought bubbles for the cat. 'Why aren't those people talking', says Tanya (aged 8), or 'I have to listen to this every day' (Annie, aged 7), or 'I need company' (Cary, aged 8). Amina (aged 7) says of the cat, 'I wish i found my mum so I can be with my mum all day'.

The fourth and final painting used was Caspar David Friedrich's *Woman before the Rising Sun* (or *Woman before the Setting Sun*).



Figure 1. Caspar David Friedrich *Woman Before the Rising Sun* (or *Woman Before the Setting Sun*) (© Museum Folkwang, Essen). I am grateful to the Museum Folkwang in Essen for giving permission to reproduce this picture.

This elicited some of the most complex responses. 'She is thinking of good things in her life and happy things', says Carol (aged 8), but several others are thinking of her as on the edge of exploration. 'I don't want to stay in a very

small palse of the world I want to expolore the world', says Dominic (aged 7), whilst Tanya (aged 8) attributes to the woman, 'Why am I staying here, I need to explore the world – Sun you see all of the world why can't I'. That last comment is indicative of a set of what might be called more poetic or philosophical responses. 'Sun rise to the sky may I travele by and die and may I fly', says Amina (aged 7). Leonard (aged 7) suggests, 'let the sun risi with the glory of god', whilst Andrew (aged 7) has the woman asking, 'Am I lighting the sun?'

In response to the questions on solitude and loneliness, the children and young people described some of the many different ways in which solitude is enjoyed. The arts are frequently cited: 'when I was in my bedroom reading' (Maya, aged 7), 'listeing to music' (Linda, aged 12-13), and 'I enjoy doing art because you get some me time' (Leigh, aged 8). But the absence of other people annoying them generates just as many responses: 'when my brother didn't bug me, and when there is no-one here to tell me what to do' (Rian, aged 8), 'when I had no one shouting and no one hurting my ears' (Amina, aged 7), and, combining arts and the absence of annoyances, 'I enjoy solitude when I am alone around the house, ... or playing guitar with no-one to tell me to shut up' (Philippa, aged 12-13).

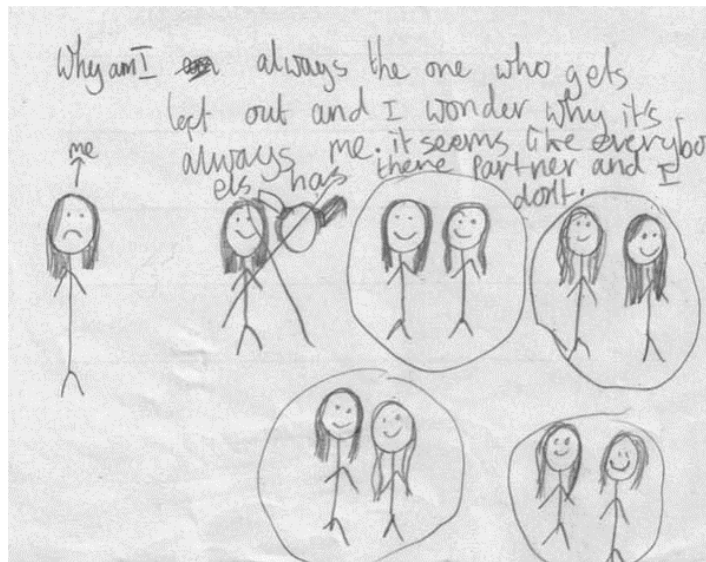


Figure 2. 'Why am I always the one', from Ng (2012, pp. 162-163).

It was surprising to find that, tests were cited by several people as opportunities for healthy solitude. 'When you are doing tests', says Lynda (aged 12-13), as, 'although there are other people around you; you can feel comfort in your own learning, and have time to reflect on how far you've come and your progress'. The opportunity simply to 'be' is acknowledged by several people. Annie (aged



7) says 'I wanted to be alone Because I wanted to have some peace and Be me for 20 minutes and do something I like doing', whilst Keeley (aged 12-13) had difficulty finding this in school: 'I have never enjoyed solitude at school, as it is too bussy and there is never a place to *be* alone and be peace'. However, solitude can be found in unlikely places, even a busy canteen. Danny (aged 7) says 'Sometimes at lunchtime I like to be on my own because I want to eat my lunch without anyone bothering me', and continues, saying, 'My favourite food stops me being lonely', or, to be more specific, 'Pesto pasta makes me feel good inside and that makes me happy'.

Loneliness is described as experienced by all but one of the participants. It was deeply felt. A girl aged 7-8 (from Ng, 2012, pp. 162-163) described loneliness not as the absence of other people, but in terms of the *presence* of other people who are 'partnered' (Figure 2). It is unlikely that the girl would have read *Fear of Flying*, but Jong, similarly, describes how solitude is regarded as 'un-American', and how this particularly affects women, as 'a woman is always presumed to be alone as a result of abandonment, not choice' (Jong, 1973, p. 11). Eliza (aged 12-13) explains further:

I feel lonely when all my friends are being happy and talking about stuff and they exclude me completely. Loneliness feels differant to everything else – it feels sad – like a ton of bricks is blocking you away from the others.

There were many heartfelt responses. Kiera (aged 12-13) says, 'I have felt lonely when my dad died and I felt lonely for a while'. Annie (aged 7) provided one of the most eloquent descriptions of loneliness I have ever read. 'I felt lonely', she wrote, 'when I felt like I didn't exist and I kept messing things up and I felt lost deep, deep deep down inside me and that hurted my feelings a lot'. Each person was asked how they knew that they were lonely, rather than in another state. Dominic (aged 7) said it would be because 'I would feel the guilt of loneliness'.

All were asked about how schools might be designed better to host healthy solitude. There were many suggestions of space for solitude, including 'A whispering only room' (John, aged 12-13), 'a completely silent room' (Kara, aged 12-13), 'a consiling room' (Michael, aged 12-13), and 'an anger room – somewhere to let your anger out safley' (Molly, aged 12-13). Others focused on lessons, as Gill (aged 12-13) explained:

I find that in my favourite lesson (drama) I feel steady and relaxed, because I know that I am good at the lesson, and I also feel relaxed often in RE or citizenship when we talk about life and death. I wish there were more times when we could just relax and take all the stress away from our lives, because sometimes it all gets built up inside me.

Healthy solitude, described in terms of the virtue of *enstasi*, can be difficult to find in school. 'I don't relax at school because I feel I always have to be on my toes', says Linda (aged 12-13), and Robert (aged 12-13) adds, 'I have never felt

enstasy because I am always stressed'. For Donald (aged 12-13), 'there is no where to go and sit some where quiet apart from up a tree pra haps witch is sadly not allowed'. However, there are some opportunities for some people. 'When I am on the last word of my homework', Justin (aged 12-13) says, 'I feel Enstatic', and John (aged 12-13) says, 'I felt like I had enstasy when I had finished a rugby game', and 'I think I felt like this because all the worries and desires of the game were behind me so I had forgotten my desires before the game'. 'Care' is an interesting word, as 'caring for' someone means looking after them, but to have a 'care' can mean to have a worry, as in the phrase 'cares and woes'. Noddings writes of teachers' caring responsibilities, and describes those whose caring 'misfires' – that is, 'virtue carers' who are remembered for saying 'some day you'll thank me for this!' – and contrasts them with 'relational carers', who 'establish caring relations' and 'engage in "caring-for" as described in care ethics' (Noddings, 2012, p. 773). Young people's caring responsibilities are all too rarely recognised, and there appears to be a tension in some between 'care' and solitude or enstasy. Justin (aged 12-13) says, 'I haven't ever had enstasy because I will always want to have something to care for and I wont ever just suddenly stop thinking or caring about my parents and cut everyone off'. Kara (aged 12-13) initially writes positively about enstasy, saying, 'I have felt enstatic when I was happy and I felt that theres no point is wanting over things and just be happy with what you have'. However, she then crosses this out, and writes determinedly, 'I haven't experienced enstasy, because I think if you stopped wanting and caring about everything there would be nothing to live for'. Cares and worries are described by others, if not always with such a dramatic contrast as that of Kara. 'The best time for solitude is after school', says Eliza (aged 12-13), 'as my parents don't get back untill 4ish so I just read and that really helps me forget about my worries!' She adds that 'It might be easier before bed because the calming down hour that I get just makes my mind stop thinking'. Similarly, for Linda (aged 12-13), 'I want to clear my head but I've never been totally happy with it and myself, but I almost find enstasy really late at night because you don't have the haste of the day and you've wovnd down'.

'After' is a time for significant experiences of enstasy. 'I enjoy solehood the day after my birthday in my bedroom', says Harry (aged 7), whilst 'the worst time of the year is on my birthday in my bedroom'. Gerry (aged 12-13) also says, 'I am contented after my Birthday and there was nothing I wanted or needed'. Lynda (aged 12-13) starts with an 'after' time (Boxing Day, the day after Christmas Day), but continues with an account of her younger sister growing up:

I feel enstatic on Boxing Day because you no longer feel the stress and major excitement of Christmas, so you can just sit back and relax with your family and presents. I've felt enstasy the first time my younger sister went out on her own because I suddenly realised how much I cared about her. Although I also felt a bit panicked because she was nervous like me. I felt enstasy because I was proud

that she was growing up and getting independent. (Lynda, aged 12-13)

The life cycle provides both positive and negative experiences of solitude, of course. Kiera (aged 12-13) is asked about enstasy, but writes of a kind of self-imposed calm. 'I have managed to keep myself calm', she says, 'because after my dad dies I had to be calm for my mum'.

### **Conclusion: action philosophy**

The children and young people quoted above were completing their own interpretative work on pictures and texts, and followed this up with work on their own understanding and experience and explanations of solitude and loneliness in and beyond school, with the 12-13-year-olds also working on enstasy. The depth and complexity of the work produced suggests that the interpretive and explanatory work can be called hermeneutic. Hermeneutics has had an interesting history, travelling from philosophy to theology and back through philosophy, anthropology, theories of art, and many other places. It is a rather grand term that is at source simply the Greek equivalent of the Latin 'interpretation'. In much of the twentieth century, those promoting hermeneutic approaches are often seen as attempting to understand people as individuals situated within their own contexts. Lonergan contrasts a 'classicist, conservative, traditional' approach to understanding people (based on ideal types and universals) to a 'liberal, perhaps historicist' approach (Lonergan, 1974, p. 3). For the latter, '[o]ne can begin from people as they are' (Lonergan, 1974, p. 3):

One can note that, apart from times of dreamless sleep, they are performing intentional acts. They are experiencing, imagining, desiring, fearing; they wonder, come to understand, conceive; they reflect, weigh the evidence, judge; they deliberate, decide, act. If dreamless sleep may be compared to death, human living is being awake. (Lonergan, 1974, pp. 3-4)

Hermeneutics in educational settings suggest an attempt to interpret anew, more than simply passing on a 'canon' or a set of facts, more than 'some stock of ideal forms subsistent in some Platonic heaven' (Lonergan, 1974, p. 4). A hermeneutic approach is historically situated, and involves 'the hard-won fruit of man's [*sic*] advancing knowledge of nature, of the gradual evolution of his social forms and of his cultural achievements', an understanding 'known only by the difficult art of acquiring historical perspective, of coming to understand how the patterns of living, the institutions, the common meanings of one place and time differ from those of another' (Lonergan, 1974, p. 4).

Children and young people interpret anew the texts and language and artefacts presented to them, and interpret their own lived experiences. This approach to learning is more than a pedagogic device to enthuse or engage learners; it is an activity that involves children and young people in original

systematic investigation, effectively shared within and beyond the classroom. This echoes a well-established definition of research, as ‘a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared’ (HEFCE, 2011, p. 48), and is the basis for the argument that children and young people, along with teachers, should see themselves as researchers in school (Stern, 2010). What I want to highlight is the character of the work completed in the schools from which the quotations are drawn in the previous section of this article. I describe the work as a form of ‘action philosophy’ (Stern, 2014, pp. 73-74; see also Stern [2007, p. 2], modelled on the description of action research in Bassey [1999, p. 40]), an attempt to understand, where that understanding informs and is informed by action in professional or other practice settings. Some philosophy attempts to understand (as in Wittgenstein’s description of it as an attempt ‘to shew the fly out of the fly-bottle’ [Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 87e]); some philosophy attempts to understand and evaluate (perhaps the early critical philosophies from Kant to Hegel). A third genre of philosophy is carried out in order to understand, evaluate and *change*. This last group includes critical theorists such as Habermas. It builds on Marx’s epitaph (‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways’, it says; ‘the point, however, is to change it’ [4]), to create a form of publicly and politically engaged philosophy. Where the engagement is with professional and practice contexts, and where the researcher is implicated in the context, this can, I suggest, be called action philosophy.

Action philosophy is a way of being, not just a way of ‘doing’ philosophy. It might be called ‘activist philosophy’ as much as ‘action philosophy’, and, to stern (i.e. cut the end off) Marx’s epitaph, ‘the point, however, is to change’. Such an approach to philosophy as an existential position is evident in Weil’s eloquent description of selfhood:

What marks off the ‘self’ is method; it has no other source than ourselves: it is when we really employ method that we really begin to exist. As long as one employs method only on symbols one remains within the limits of a sort of game. In action that has method about it, we ourselves act, since it is we ourselves who found the method; we really act because what is unforeseen presents itself to us. (Weil, 1978, p. 73)

Were the children and young people quoted in this article doing hermeneutics? Were they completing action philosophy? I believe that they were. Each was completing distinct and distinctive work, each initially working alone even though they were sitting alongside classmates. They started in solitude, as individual people, and were in dialogue with pictures and texts – and with themselves. The work was similar to the work completed by adults participating in the project. (It is also similar in many ways to the deeply personal hermeneutic work of Koch [1994], and the work of a number of contributors to Rouner [1998].) One of the differences between the younger and adult participation was that the younger participants completed the work within

recognisable curriculum times and subjects (the 7-8-year-olds in a unit of work on portraits, the 12-13-year-olds in a religious education lesson on worship), whereas the adults completed the work outside lessons, outside school. However, the adults – who were all educationists – were familiar with the idea of ‘education’ as a discipline in itself, and in that sense, all were completing the work within recognised subject disciplines. In terms of understanding the curriculum, it is important to note the significance of the idea of hermeneutic work taking place within conventional school subjects (see Hopkin, 2012). Involving children in action philosophy should be able to happen within the everyday ‘action’ of the curriculum. It does not need to be a separate, distinct, activity. Although ‘philosophy for children’ can be a valuable addition to the curriculum as a distinct subject or topic, I am more interested in the thoughtful philosophy approaches possible within art lessons, religious education lessons, mathematics lessons, science lessons, and lessons in every other subject.

We can see children and young people as researchers, alongside their teachers and other adults in the school. In sharing their findings, and discussing their views, they are participating in the school community. Research is the appropriate characterisation of pedagogy in school; that is, of the activities of young and old involved in learning and teaching (Stern, 2010). To the extent that all those in school are completing original, thoughtful, shared work within the normal activity of the school curriculum, they can be seen as completing action philosophy. Not all research completed in school will be hermeneutic or narrowly philosophical, but it could still be described as distinctively *educational* research, i.e. education-related research set within and as part of the process of education. And to the extent that it is conceptually sophisticated and thoughtful, it can be seen as broadly philosophical. This view is – I believe – a distinct and unusual (and disagreeable) approach to pedagogy, and it is also distinct, unusual and disagreeable in its conception of *childhood*. It is a conception of childhood that promotes children’s voices, *not* simply as a contribution to separate activity in student councils or broader democratic engagement in organisational issues within and beyond the school, *not* simply as a specialist ‘voicing’ activity (as is sometimes said of philosophy for children, or circle time, or personal and social education), and *not* in the form of a singular mass noun as represented in ‘children’s voice’ or ‘youth voice’. Instead it is a view of children’s voices as precisely that which characterises – or should characterise – normal everyday lessons in all school subjects. Such messy, unpredictable activities will impinge on the micropolitics of schooling, and might even count as a form of ‘workplace democracy’ (as in Jones, 2012, p. 212). But I prefer to see it in Buber’s terms. For him, the everyday ‘voiced’ lessons are characterised as ‘real’ lessons: ‘a real lesson ... [is] neither a routine repetition nor a lesson whose findings the teacher knows before he starts, but one which develops in mutual surprises’ (Buber, 2002, p. 241). Educational research, rather than informing schools and policy makers on ‘best practice’ and ‘what works’, can, instead, provide children and young people, and adults, with voices in every part of the school, and especially in the heart of schooling – within classes.

## Notes

- [1] <http://www.unicef.org.uk/youthvoice>, now no longer available
- [2] <http://www.voicesofyouth.org/>
- [3] Formerly available at <http://www.thelowry.com/Is-lowry/his-life-and-work/>
- [4] [highgatecemetery.org/visit/cemetery/east](http://highgatecemetery.org/visit/cemetery/east)

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