‘It’s like they’ve given up on us’

Patrick Yarker

Misunderstood, Misinterpreted and Mismanaged: Voices of Students Marginalised in a Secondary School

Lucy Wenham, London: Peter Lang, 2021
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This book offers the fruits of Lucy Wenham’s doctoral research with young people who attend an on-site withdrawal unit in a London secondary school. Such students are aware that their voices go unheard in a system steered by policies whose implementation, Wenham argues, inevitably gives rise to the marginalisation these students experience, and which they vividly describe and reflect on here. More students are being marginalised, and Wenham wants them listened to:

> [M]arginalised students themselves are in a unique position to shed light on the possible sources of marginalisation… [T]heir stories and narratives will enable a better understanding of disengagement and disaffection and hopefully point to some effective interventions. This is the reason for my placing the students at the heart of this work, and for selecting an ethnographic approach, to give them a voice. (p43)

Wenham has interviewed a dozen students, eliciting accounts of their school experiences and associated reflections. She presents extensive extracts from these interviews, and, by situating what students have to say against what other researchers have found, shows how the young people’s testimony bears witness to what has long been known about the experience of students whose pattern of attendance, engagement and compliance in school causes concern. In listening to the young people tell their stories, I recalled particular students I myself once taught whom I deeply angered or felt it necessary to exclude briefly from my classroom, or who were removed from it for longer spans of time. Certain testimony Wenham presents brings home, by contrast, just how significant for such students a good relationship with a teacher can be. The route to a more enabling future may be closed off when a teacher with whom a marginalised student has gradually built a constructive relationship leaves the school.

Wenham taught in secondary schools for fifteen years. During that time a market-driven approach favoured by governments of all stripes has, she argues, intensified choice and competition between schools and further fragmented the education system. The top-down imposition of a regime of summative high stakes examinations geared to an increasingly inappropriate curriculum has restricted what schools can do to

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help all their students flourish. Academisation, selection and grouping by so-called 'ability', datafication, and the hyper-accountability framework of targets and league tables, all play their part in ensuring certain students cannot but experience long-term disadvantage across their schooling, culminating in various forms of exclusion.

A particularly fraught moment in anyone's educational history is likely to be the period of transition from primary to secondary school. Wenham explores this. Upon entry to 'big' school, each student is, as it were, given a fresh face and becomes newly known by staff. There is a risk of being misrecognised now, perhaps because of the prevalence among staff at the new institution of fixed 'ability' thinking, or their acquiescence to conceptions of students based on perceived deficits. Misrecognition may stem from inadequate consideration of information passed on from the previous school. It may even be prompted by the reputation which accompanies an older family member. For the students Wenham talked with, being misrecognised, and hence fundamentally misunderstood by the school system, remains a major source of frustration and resentment.

Misrecognition of students is likely to breed erroneous assumptions or expectations on the part of staff dealing with them, and all too easily a self-fulfilling process gets under way. Across a series of chapters Wenham shows how such a process can be reinforced. For example, by the ways in which students are grouped – notably in so-called 'ability' sets – and steered along particular pathways; by pedagogical decisions which make it harder for all young people to learn, as for example with the requirement for a 'silent' classroom; and by the ways in which particular family and social contexts create additional barriers to learning in school. The system's logic exemplifies not-learning, it works to confirm and re-confirm the validity of the original misrecognition, rather than to hold it up for scrutiny and revision. A final chapter puts forward arguments and practical suggestions to improve the educational experience of those at risk of being marginalised. Wenham urges re-constituting compulsory state education as a comprehensive system grounded in Freirean critical pedagogy, with full attention paid to 'the social' and 'the affective', as against the current myopic focus on 'the cognitive-intellectual'.

Her book bears hallmarks of its genesis as a doctoral thesis. The second chapter, for example, describes and justifies Wenham's research-method, and considers practical questions of 'insider' research. This may be of particular interest to the many teachers who embark these days on postgraduate level study. In her preface, Wenham reminds readers that they can choose their own pathway through her text: it doesn't have to be read in the standard linear fashion. The discussion of methodology could be passed over, she suggests, or, in the several chapters which draw on what she found out, a reader might concentrate more on what the young people say and how this is discussed, and less on the ways in which Wenham situates their words with and against recent

academic literature.

In debates about how best to address the issue of student marginalisation, it is still possible to hear assertions that some young people simply don't want to learn or are incapable of doing so. Wenham has no time for such counsel of despair. The young people in her study make clear their own desire to succeed at learning and speak pointedly about how they can best be helped to do so. They describe the inadequate support offered them in a too-inflexible system, or detail how, so far as they can tell, they went entirely unsupported in particular classrooms. Feelings of bewilderment and abandonment further afflict students already weighed down by the demands of coping with family breakdown, physical and mental illness, and the general day-to-day pressures our society places on particularly impoverished members of the working class.

In the second half of the book, where the young people are given more sustained space to speak for themselves, it becomes evident that what would enable them to learn is what best enables all young people to do so: respectful recognition in class; care, forethought and skill on the part of teachers to ensure curriculum content is both accessible and worth working at; the chance to negotiate tasks in the classroom and talk through ideas and approaches with peers (and especially with friends) as well as with teachers and other education workers; the constant availability of one-to-one help, even if that help isn't asked for; encouragement, trust and fairness in the way everyone is dealt with; confidence that each person will be listened to and properly 'seen' by staff who have demonstrated that everyone's education matters, without exception. Wenham writes:

> It is noteworthy that what the students outline is a counsel of good teaching – not just for them. It is significant that these students – moreover these marginalised students – are clearly able to see the same factors that the professionals and the researchers find. This would indicate a clear grasp of their own learning environment, needs and preferences and certainly does not fit within a deficit narrative, where ignorance, disinterest and lack of awareness are some of the characteristics most commonly assigned to marginalised students at the fringes of the educational mainstream. It is worth underlining that the students here are identifying features of good teaching and enjoyable lessons, which more often arise in the research literature and in 'official' documents and the training and development of professionals and practitioners. Little if any of this draws from a student voice perspective. (p215)

By offering a platform for young people to talk in depth about aspects of their marginalisation, and by taking their words seriously and amplifying them through publication, Lucy Wenham offers an important and valuable resource for those working to change the system for the better. Her book is well-informed about the ways in which

these young people's individual experiences – particular in relation to the conditions which enable them best to learn – chime with academic theory and research. It is alert to the ways in which chronic under-funding and lack of capacity restrain and undermine what schools can do.

Perhaps inevitably, in foregrounding the voices of the marginalised young people she has worked with, Lucy Wenham bends the stick now and then in ways which may generate a degree of resistance. I believe that many school staff go to extraordinary lengths in order to try to make compulsory education work for students, and in particular for those deemed 'vulnerable'. So I wanted to hear the other side of the story in relation to certain events or decisions the young people talk about. Occasional vagueness on their part, or partiality, seemed to need balancing against a fuller or more exact account or a wider view. At times I was taken aback by the apparent inadequacy of perception or understanding demonstrated by students in respect of crucial school matters of direct concern to them: the nature of the group to which they found themselves assigned; the reasons why they were sent to the withdrawal unit. Such moments exemplify the difficulties for all concerned in coming to a shared understanding, as Lucy Wenham acknowledges. I also wanted to know more about the nature of the educational offer being made in the withdrawal centre itself, and whether the school policy was to restore young people to mainstream classes or to provide a permanent haven beyond these.

Lucy Wenham identifies 'ability' grouping as one of two 'structural mechanisms of educational inequality' (p20). Her consideration of research into this issue would have been further strengthened, in my view, by engaging with the work of a number of academics into existing anti-determinist pedagogy (for example, Susan Hart, Mandy Swann and Hilary Povey). In a sustained discussion in chapter 4 of the notion of 'setting by behaviour' which young people she spoke with had recourse to, Wenham looks at how this notion relates to teacher stereotyping by 'background characteristics' (p. 139), 'pro and anti-school subcultures' (p140) and policies to do with 'Behaviour for Learning' (p142). Yet decisions around setting are predicated at root not on responses to student behaviour but on the discourse of fixed innate 'ability', perhaps the most fundamental way in which all students go misrecognised. An education system committed to the comprehensive ideal can have no truck with any form of 'ability' thinking, labelling or grouping.

As well as resourcing them, this book will inspire those who believe in the urgent need to establish such a system with all which that entails for curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and student voices – if young people are not to continue to find themselves misrecognised, misunderstood, marginalised, and hence miseducated.

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