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## **TITLE: Post-structuralism and ideas of Gender meet Student Voice and Power**

### **Introduction**

What can a post-structural take on 'gender' bring to considerations of 'Student Voice and Power'? What might post-structuralism and gender add to, and enable us to think, that might not otherwise be self-evident within an Enlightenment construction of Student Voice and Power? What do post-structural ideas of gender, as constitutive of Student Voice and Power, manifest? What more can they do in the field of education?

This entry explores the assertion that post-structural ideas of power and gender can support a re-thinking of the concept of Student Voice and Power in order to problematize some assumptions about taken-for-granted claims of science. These claims can be totalising. They can suggest a self-evident truth of the possibility of the authentic 'student voice' to be made manifest, within the right conditions as long as the student is allowed to be free of power. This entry, therefore, 'troubles' an all-too straightforward reading of one 'truth' about Student Voice to enable meanings of voice to be struggled over, acknowledging power as influenced by patterns of human subjectivity that are multifaceted and contradictory. Power is understood here as to do with unequal relationships between different subjects, including those between teachers and students. It also means *not* assuming ideas of a universal, essential and normative non-gendered student subject: one who operates *beyond* the confines of discourse where 'language and social life' (Dunne, Pryor & Yates, 2005, p.93) govern, and are governed by, social experiences in ways that are performative (Butler, 1988). Drawing on theories of performativity, this entry therefore also explores how the gendered student subject is both the subject and object of discourses of power in ways that can be both confounding and agentic but never outside power.

### **Defining the Concept of Student Voice and Power**

There is an important history to defining the way children and young people find their voice through speaking out, being listened to and taken seriously by those with power over them. This is especially so in the context of western liberal democracies since the end of the Second World War. This can be associated particularly with the legal and political proclamations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, premised upon normative ideas of individuals as citizens possessing moral rights to civil, political, social, economic and cultural protection within regions and states based on binding agreements. These agreements assume that citizens could (and should) be able to assert their individual human rights as part of a contractual relationship with the state that also honours their demonstration of responsibility towards it. Nonetheless, within systems, including those of the home and school, in many areas of the western world in the second half of the twentieth century, citizenship primarily relied upon the idea of the white, two parent nuclear family. This was assumed as the locus for the inculcation of values in which the child or young person took on the subordinate status of listening to those with more power than them, especially their parents in the private sphere, and their teachers in the public. This meant that speaking out was mediated for children and young people through the ideological assumption of the overarching rights and responsibilities of adult figures of authority.

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The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) by many countries across the globe, challenged the dominant idea of the subservience of the voice of the young person within a dominant patriarchal structure. Instead, it acknowledged the idea of children and young peoples' competencies and made a commitment to the resonance of their Student Voice in educational contexts, especially in matters directly concerning them where Articles 12 (the right to be heard) and 13 (the right to freedom of expression) were of particular significance. Ideas of the rights of the child and young person since 1989 have assumed their legitimate identity, voice and a recognition of their difference to adult subjects. Nonetheless, the child and young person of Student Voice is based on the idea of an individuated, universal, normative, non-gendered subject. This is a dynamic of a functional and rational discourse of human-rights that assumes that children and young people as students within education systems can be participative so that their voice is articulated, listened to and taken seriously. The assertion of this voice is read as unproblematic. As long as the ideal of Student Voice is upheld, it is assumed to have power as a dynamic of the relationship between the ideals of democratic citizenship and assertions of rights, as well as, contributing to the functions and purposes of modern institutional education.

### **Problematizing taken-for-granted claims of science for Student Voice**

The legal and political ideals of Student Voice are deeply rooted within totalising conceptualisations of science which reach back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with the advent of the modern era. These conceptualise human progress as not only possible but also as de facto civilising forces for the Good of All (regardless of who the All might be). Modern Enlightenment ideas have their foundations in the empirical analytic of scientific inquiry. These claim that through a process of hypothetical postulation it is possible to know things in the human social sciences, including in the field of educational studies, in the same way that it is possible to know things scientifically, in areas such as physics and mathematics. Many feminist writers, such as Butler (1992), critique the assumptions of what they consider to be masculinist ontologies and epistemologies underpinning the positivist scientific mode. In particular, they question how the positivist scientific paradigm - when applied within the field of education and the spaces in which every day schooling is undertaken - privileges the powerful individualism of the real (and imagined) rational, autonomous student subject, who is white, independent and male. Enlightenment scientific rationality presumes the male subject as he who has the duty to use his reason to overcome, and break free from, his lack of enlightenment and his immaturity in order to discover truth. Becoming empowered and using one's voice as a student is therefore read as straightforward in an enlightened world where it is believed that knowledge can supersede power. In other words, the voice of the student - as long as it is articulated within an educational context of democratic liberalism - can be assumed to be audible to teachers and those in positions of power over the student. The logic of the Enlightenment scientific argument looks beyond the problematic of it being possible for the student to be listened to, taken seriously, and for their wishes to be acted upon regardless of their status in relation to those with more power to determine their futures around them. The logic therefore assumes there is an authentic Student Voice that can be heard and acted upon.

The following section, introduces poststructuralist ideas which suggest different ways of conceptualising how it is possible to think of Student Voice. These ideas speak back to the

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Enlightenment assumption of the separation of knowledge and truth. Many post-structuralists who wish to re-think aspects of institutional life in school, draw on the 20<sup>th</sup> century work of philosopher, Michel Foucault. Foucault challenges the possibility of the separation of knowledge and truth by claiming that, rather than being 'outside power' or 'the reward of free spirits', truth is a 'thing of this world', produced through and within dominant governing ideas, each with their own "'general politics'" of truth' (Foucault, 1984, pp.72-73).

### **Post-structuralism and the possibilities of Student Voice: opening up new questions**

Post-structuralism contests but does not dismiss modern, liberal thought. Rather it works both with humanist ideals and against them to open them up to interrogation. It allows for the consideration of power in unlikely quarters, working against normative and universal ideas. It posits truth as contingent and not fixed. Post-structuralist thought de-constructs the unified voice of science as producing one integral, authentic Student Voice emanating from an assumed essential human subject who can be regarded as 'the same' regardless of the time/space context in which they might be placed. Instead, post-structuralism acknowledges the need to listen out for the many voices that are always mediated by and through power as a dynamic of a socially constructed general politics of truth at any one time. It allows for the ethic of paying attention to the seemingly banal and contradictory, working with difficulty and contrariness, and being comfortable with uncertainty. Post-structuralism is about the way power works both at the level of the institutional of the school ('the macro'); and at the level of the individual human body ('the micro'), to constitute students; and to make sense of them, as they move through, and interact with, the institution of education, and the day-to-day of the school environment. Kenway, Willis, Blackmore and Rennie (1994, p.189) usefully describe post-structuralism as:

*'a term applied to a very loosely connected set of ideas about meaning, the way in which meanings are struggled over and produced, the way it circulates among us, the impact it has on human subjects, and finally the connections between meaning and power...It shifts as different linguistic, institutional, cultural and social factors come together in various ways. Meaning is influenced by and influences shifting patterns of power...it constitutes the human subjectivity which is...regarded as shifting, multi-faceted and contradictory'.*

Post-structuralism therefore challenges the over-simplification of ideas of empowerment that can be assumed within a discourse of children's rights. It takes issue with the automatic agency of the young person, through an assertion of their Student Voice, to contest existing ways of doing things, which affect them. Post-structural thought regards the human subject as not an evidently and easily 'known' entity. Rather it suggests that the subject is constantly produced (and re-produced) through demarcations of difference as well as similarities with other human subjects in the day-to-day. This means that within modern models of schooling, there are always some ways of being, doing, thinking and speaking that are recognised as legitimate by those in positions of power over young people, while others are not, as part of the generalised 'politics of truth' of an over-arching order.

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Post-structuralism is therefore a productive theoretical instrument, enabling the asking of questions about Student Voice and the subject of Student Voice and the limits of both in given contexts. The sorts of questions that can consequently be posited include: Who is the speaking subject? What is the context? What do we know of the dominant power/truth regime? What can be said about the way 'difference' can be accommodated and heard within this regime? What voices of 'difference' might be heard and by whom and in which situations? How might it be possible to act on them? How agentic can they be?

The following section extends the interrogation of post-structuralism to consider the ways in which differently gendered subjects may or may not become visible and audible within a discourse of Student Voice when attention is focused upon ideas of gender difference.

**Post-structuralism and Gender: challenging and troubling the unseen and unheard** For Dunne, Pryor and Yates, there is no exteriority to a power/truth regime where 'language and social-life' are 'mutually constitutive (2005, p.93). This means that the gendered subject of Student Voice is not exempt from a social context in which assumptions already exist about female and male students and about what they say, how and whose voice might be taken most seriously. For Dunne, Pryor and Yates, post-structuralism is a discourse, on both a macro and micro scale that envelopes subjects who speak. It is as much about creating the speaker of the discourse as vice-versa. In this way, gender is not so much a given that can be always known and assumed. Instead, gender is the production and re-production of a part within the social meaning-making milieu and everyday experience of discourse, as a general politics of truth. Gender is something that one is born into and that one becomes variously over time. Gender is not a given (or something that one adapts, or adapts to, progressively through time) as is assumed within the universalizing discourse of western liberalism. In this way, post-structuralism is a challenge to Enlightenment ways of thinking about gender that tend to be ingrained into common-sense ways of reading psychological, cognitive, social and cultural encounters within public life and institutions such as schools. Within post-structural theory, conceptualizing of gender as a 'constituted *social temporality* [italics as in the original]' and as 'internally discontinuous' (Butler, 1988, p. 520) means dispensing with the idea of gender as naturalized, reified or essential. There is no fixed object or subject of 'Student Voice' who can be straightforwardly named, heard and automatically known, and whose voice will remain as a constant through time as conceived through a post-structural lens of gender difference. This does not mean, however, that post-structuralism requires the dismissal of the idea of Student Voice or indeed of the significance of the construction of the object or subject of the liberal discourse of children's rights. Rather, it requires two things: the troubling of an all too straight-forward reading of the gendered subject, and the voice of the subject; and, a deconstruction of the knowledge/truth regime in which the gendered student is known and made visible and audible.

### **Post-structuralism and Gender performativity: towards a re-imagining of Student Voice.**

Having set out the limitations of only ever reading Student Voice through a totalizing notion of science, introducing a post-structural approach to voice enables an interrogation of the gendered

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subject. This subject is never free of power at a macro or micro level as they operate inter- relationally with and between those with different/unequal status as part of social life.. The implication of this is that the voice of the subject may be difficult to articulate and to get heard especially when what that voice may be conveying may well not be straight forward or obviously rational as part of a general politics of truth. Considered like this, Student Voice cannot be said to be an automatic source of empowerment for the gendered subject where the male voice and what it asserts might be assumed to be the norm. This is the case, even when those in positions of power over students (such as teachers), believe in the concept of Student Voice and listening to all students, regardless of their gender.

Butler's ideas of gender performativity, enable a critique of the idea of Student Voice and of the gendered subject of Student Voice, to be extended. The concept of performativity is about the way an individual gendered subject is both acted upon (by all that has passed in the world before they come into it) and acts in the world (as they take part in it). Being acted upon through a knowledge/power discourse, and acting, occur to every gendered subject at the same time continuously and simultaneously according to Butler's theory. Butler suggests that 'gender acts' (1988, p. 520) orchestrate a performance and an apparent authentic gendered identity. This has some seemingly rational logic both for the 'mundane social audience' (all those looking on and listening to the gendered subject) and to the subject them self (ibid). Being acted upon and acting, involve subtle shifts of power between the two. This means that a performative take on gender conceives of the possibilities of Student Voice as complex and nuanced.

Importantly however, Butler's subject derives agency from their acting as they reproduce and contest the power contexts in which they act and move. It assumes that there is *always* the possibility of the Student Voice subject doing things differently to challenge power norms and dominant regimes of truth. Butler calls this a "purposive and significant reconfiguration of cultural and political relations" (Butler, 1992, p. 12). In direct challenge to the individuated subject of the rational enlightenment discourse, Butler's post-structural performativity assumes no sovereign subject, making their own choices free of power (even though the subject may feel that they are acting of their own volition). Butler's performative and embodied subject is always of this social world and utterly dependent upon the structures and infrastructures of them, although never wholly determined by them so that there is the possibility that acting can contest power.

The logic of applying a Butlerian performativity analytic to Student Voice means being wary of simplifying the possibilities of 'hearing' Student Voice in a 'taken-for-granted' fashion. It resonates as a warning to researchers and teachers, for example, against assuming that, because they have said that they value Student Voice, young people can speak up and be heard to change things. It means asking further questions about difference; paying attention to the social construction of the speaking subject and the contexts in which they speak and of the barriers that may be in the way of them being heard; practically, institutionally, and politically. It also means disrupting discursive norms to pay attention to young minority groups and gendered individuals in our institutions so that we get to know them in their variety and complexity in order to listen to them so that they can be agentic and participative, even if this is only in small ways.

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### **Conclusion**

This entry has examined the idea of Student Voice and power viewed through the lens of post-structural challenges to ideas of claims of science emanating from the Enlightenment. This assumes Student Voice as premised on the idea of an essential, universal and non-gendered subject who can be readily known. Its rationale is that every child or student can be heard so long as a human-rights framework is in place and acted upon in schools. Ideas of post-structuralism contest a straight-forward reading of power assumed within an enlightenment reading of Student Voice where those who speak up can always be heard. Instead, post-structuralism works against this rational scientific logic of power to suggest that in a discourse of knowledge/power, some less obvious voices of students have to be sought in unlikely places in order to hear those who do not speak up or who struggle to be heard and who may present contradictory ideas that challenge a normative discourse of Student Voice. Post-structuralism demands attention to the micro power of the everyday of school life where the context of children and students varies depending on a range of social factors. Post-structuralism is especially fit for an interrogation of Student Voice as it troubles the way that some gendered subjects, especially those read as traditionally white, male and middle-class, may be more easily able to articulate their voice and power within its general politics of truth. It therefore allows for researchers and teachers to be cognizant of ways that an unproblematized take on Student Voice and power might disadvantage particular gendered subjects, rendering them more silent and less participative. Using a Butlerian performative post-structural analytic to consider Student Voice and power allows for a further interrogation of gender by a focus on how subjects are acted upon and act in the social world of the school. This means paying attention to the way that gendered subjects may derive some agency from the Student Voice discourse as they both reproduce it through things they do and say, but also find ways and spaces to contest it. Hence, there are opportunities for teachers and researchers to notice challenges to the gendered power norms of the Student Voice discourse to support them. Performativity complicates a too straight-forward reading of Student Voice to enable an appreciation of nuance and a reading of complexity in shifts of power in the social world of the school where differently-gendered subjects seek to speak out and be heard.

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