Counter narratives in 'naughty' students' accounts: challenges for the discourse of behaviour management

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Counter narratives in 'naughty' students' accounts: challenges for the discourse of behaviour management

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The paper is based on a research project that sought to understand schools' behaviour management strategies from the perspective of students who had the most experience of them. It focuses on the contrasting ways in which teacher and student subjectivities are framed and positioned within the discourse. It considers how student accounts were constructed within the framework of the project by engaging with Butler's ideas of how one gives an account of oneself in response to another's call. Also heeding Foucault's call to pay attention to the conditions of truth-telling, the paper looks at how student accounts can be read and put to use. Pupil accounts reveal other selves that encourage a re-thinking of the prior recognition of pupils as (primarily) 'naughty' pupils and pose the question of whether they exhibit an aesthetics of the self that maintains a critical relation to existing norms. By destabilising recognition, they expose the limits of the dominant discourse of behaviour management and encourage a deconstructive stance of 'persistent critique' towards it. Along the way, the paper also touches upon the methodological dilemmas in researching behaviour management.

Keywords: discourse; subjectivation; 'naughty' pupils; behaviour management; accounting for oneself; counter narratives

The close association between a school's reputation, its standards of discipline and leadership lends a fervent intensity to the discussion and practice of behaviour management. Many systems of education across the world recognise behaviour management as an important responsibility of schools and head teachers, with policies and directives being brought to bear upon it (see, for example, Department of Education, 2010a, 2010b; Department of Education, Training and the Arts, 2007a, 2007b). Added to this are the intermittent pressures from media coverage focusing on the 'decline' in standards of behaviour in schools and parents' concerns about the lack of an appropriate learning environment for their children (Minogue, 2009; Ross, 2006; Witt, 2007). Behaviour management, it seems, is destined to be contested territory, offering oppositional positions to the various interests involved.

On the other hand, work influenced by critical post-structuralist thought (cf. Jabal & Riviére, 2007; MacLure, 2003; Popkewitz, 2008; Popkewitz & Brennan, 1997) insists on paying attention to the ways in which normative and regulatory discourses in educational institutions come to 'systematically form the objects of which they

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speak' (Foucault, 1972, p. 54). In particular, the ways in which 'problem' students come to be talked about, recognised and classified in schools has come under critical scrutiny (Holmes, Jones, MacLure, & MacRae, 2008; Hope, 2007; Laws & Davies, 2000; MacLure, Jones, Holmes, & MacRae, 2008). Much of this work suggests that the labelling of pupils as 'naughty' and the reading of their behaviour as illegitimate/improper without taking into consideration the ways and means by which the discourse of schooling/behaviour management itself subjectifies them, is simplistic and inadequate. In this paper I seek to extend these arguments by focusing on how the discourse of behaviour management can offer teachers as well as students distinct, often antagonistic positions to occupy. But by paying attention to the challenges that naughty students pose to the dominant discourse, there can be room to respond differently, i.e., to consciously take up a stance of 'persistent critique' (Spivak, 1996) towards behaviour management discourses which can illuminate the ways in which a stand-off between teachers and 'naughty' students may be preferred by more structuralist understandings of behaviour management processes.

The paper is based on a recently completed research project in the UK that sought to understand schools' behaviour management strategies from the perspective of students who had the most experience of them, i.e., those most easily recognised as 'naughty' pupils. It will illustrate how head teachers constructed accounts of behaviour intervention situations and how 'naughty' students constructed alternative accounts of themselves that challenged the dominant discourse. As the design of the research project and the methodological choices played a significant role in how these accounts came to be constructed, I will begin by briefly outlining the research aims and design. I will then describe the challenges posed by student counter narratives and the ways in which they go beyond the project's original, rather pragmatic perspective of improving behaviour management practices and into the realm of the critique of the discourse of behaviour management itself.

Project aims and design

The project was devised in response to a request from a group of 13 school head teachers from primary, middle and high schools in a town in East Anglia, UK. One of the main aims of the project was to understand how the behaviour management strategies that were practised by these schools were perceived and experienced by pupils. It was hoped that a set of student perspectives would emerge from the research that would aid discussion and inform future practice relating to interventions concerning behaviour. To establish a common understanding of the variety and range of intervention measures being practised by the schools, a workshop was held with the head teachers. Out of these discussions, four behaviour intervention categories that could be recognised across the schools were constructed:

(A) Routine intervention.
(B) Co-ordinated intervention.
(C) Advice by exter/nal agencies.
(D) Intervention on sites beyond school.[1]

These categories were constructed as a structural device to establish common ground amongst the schools. They were to ensure a focus on intervention strategies rather than upon individual pupils' records (though the experiences of individual pupils were relevant to and considered within the study) and were understood as a device around which different elements (intervention strategies, head teachers' involvement, student perceptions and experience) of the study could cohere. This initial categorisation, itself brought about by the wider discourse of behaviour management, as well as the more practical considerations of realising an empirical qualitative research project, inevitably functioned as a system of delineating degrees of poor behaviour.

Heads of schools were then requested to supply brief anonymised cases of interventions that illustrated each of these categories. These were to draw on real-life interventions that they had been involved with. The idea was to cover the range of situations requiring intervention and the full variety of interventions currently being practised. These cases were to describe the following: the pupil, the year, group, the context; the event/issue that required intervention and any history/background about the pupil or event that may be relevant; the steps undertaken and the possible reasoning behind them; the responses of the pupil (and parents and any others involved where appropriate). Again, it was hoped that a focus on these 'intervention cases' would be ethically more sound (than for instance, focusing the research on individual student record of behaviour). No specific length for these stories was recommended although heads were asked to provide as much detail as possible. I present here an example of such a case from a head teacher.

Category A: Routine intervention

By its nature, this could apply to a wide range of students. The particular student who I have in mind is a current Year 11 boy. He has tended to be disorganised and his punctuality to classes has often been poor. In class, he can lack concentration and be off task. As a result teachers have frequently applied our stepped, routine in-class strategies. These are based upon the Bill Rogers model:

- Informal warning.
- Second warning – possible removal from class briefly to resolve the situation.
- Remove to another classroom within the department.
- Fifteen-minute after-school departmental detention on the same day.
- Up to one-hour departmental detention on a later day following discussion with parents.

This student has had poor anger management skills and has been prone to persistent outbursts with staff. He has therefore moved up and beyond this scale frequently. Going beyond this scale usually means that the class teacher would use the school's red card procedure whereby the Head of House or a senior member of staff removes the student from the lesson and places him in the Time Out Room to work in isolation (or in a small group) for an agreed period of time. The matter has now gone

outside the subject department. In this student's case, this meant that he was closely monitored by his Head of House through:

- Attendance and punctuality cards.
- Take Control Booklets – a report system one stage below a Pastoral Support Programme (PSP). The student is given three targets with support strategies and mentoring within the school. The targets are monitored lesson by lesson over several weeks, with fortnightly reviews.

Progress was slow and inconsistent – to the point where the student was excluded from school on a fixed-term basis – but there has been clear improvement in Year 11.

Even a cursory reading of this and other similar intervention cases from head teachers revealed the specifics of the discourse of behaviour management – the institution's language, perspectives and desires; the means of recognising 'poor' behaviour; the technologies for dealing with such behaviour; the consequences for those not responding appropriately to the procedures. These also determine how to see, know and be as 'proper' teachers and students. Like all discourses, behaviour management discourses create social positions (or perspectives) from which people are 'invited' (summoned) to speak, listen, act, read and write, think, feel, believe and value in certain characteristic, historically recognisable ways, in combination with their own individual style and creativity (Bourdieu, 1979/1984, 1991; Foucault, 1980; Gee, 1996).

The array of measures and techniques to order misbehaviour and the appropriate expression of a desire to fashion order out of apparent chaos are an unsurprising, even obligatory part of the subjectivities that modern head teachers are expected to exhibit. Such a discourse also ensures that various other members associated with schooling (class teachers, senior staff/heads of house, parents, students) are all enlisted to view student behaviour and its management in 'characteristic, historically recognisable' ways that render it 'logical' or 'common sense'.

The ways in which the techniques and measures of behaviour intervention are then discussed, upheld and practised also creates subject positions for students as 'good' or 'naughty'. As Laws and Davies point out:

> The consequences and the practices of applying and regulating students help produce what it means to be a child at school – what behaviours are required to get it right at school – what it means to be not a child but a 'student', and preferably a 'good student'. (2000, p. 210)

On the research project, in order to get a sense of students' perspectives regarding various strategies they experienced, the intervention cases from head teachers were re-written in the form of 'fictionalised' vignettes. These vignettes were then deployed as elicitation devices in interviews with students. The idea was to view the same intervention strategies from both the perspective of school/institution and that of the students who experienced them in their practice. I present below an example of how the previous head teacher's account was re-scripted for use in interviews with students.

Fictionalised vignettes scripted by researcher

> I'm in the Time Out Room today. The Head of House came down to take me out of Science, said I'd been rude to the teacher. All I did was have a bit of a chat with Alex next to me, and then Jones told me to be quiet, so I asked 'Why should I?' Gave some backchat. Think I even swore under my breath, but not too quietly. I don't do that sort of thing that often. The teacher had just done the warning thing, but then I got really angry and snapped back. So here I am. Reckon I'll be on report next week.
>
> ...And I just thought I'd been out of trouble lately. Last year I used to be late for lessons and my teachers told me I could do better if only I could concentrate and get my act together. This year is much better – last year I was in a lot more trouble. They kept giving me warnings and sometimes they sent me out to other classrooms. Didn't like that much. Nowadays the Head checks my attendance and sets targets to aim for in each lesson. Then I'm reviewed every two weeks. Like I said, I felt I was finally settling in and then – wham – here I am in Time Out...

It was hoped that these vignettes would have some 'distancing' potential in that pupils with whom discussions were conducted would not feel obliged to refer to their own experiences unless they wished to bring it up. The focus could remain on anonymised instances, events and disciplinary measures. Allowing a degree of abstraction seemed a less painful way of allowing pupils to reflect on discipline, strategies, measures, schooling norms, etc., without direct reference to themselves. We hoped they would also be easy for pupils to read and respond to because of their brevity.

Heads of just three schools in the partnership then identified pupils most likely to have experienced the intervention strategies practised in each of the four behaviour categories for interview purposes: 24 pupils were identified – 12 in High School, eight in Middle School, and four in Primary School. Interviews were conducted with 22 of the identified students (two high school students did not turn up and could not be tracked on the day of the interview) using the fictionalised vignettes. Interviews were partly structured in that pupils were first presented with the vignettes which described their category (plus one other closest to their category), and were asked to consider and respond to them. They thus had the option to choose to comment in the 'third person' about the fictionalised vignettes, but it was hoped that they would be able to make explicit links with their own experiences if they wanted to. In the event, most pupils talked freely about their own experiences following the reading of the vignettes.

Student responses to the vignettes

To a large degree, students seemed to identify in some way with the experiences of the character in the vignettes they read or knew someone with similar experiences. There were very few exceptions to this rule. The range of responses below indicate the different ways in which students positioned themselves in relation to the characters in the vignettes. The following quotes were some of the first words spoken by the pupils upon reading the vignettes:

That's exactly the same as me. (High School (HS) 2)

I like the bit where she says she has difficulties with the teachers 'cause I sometimes have difficulties with the teachers. (Middle School (MS) 1)

I can see where she is coming from 'cause I got asthma too and sometimes you can get out of bed feeling really wheezy ... but you still have to come to school. (MS 5)

That's like me in the story ... Making noise and distracting others in class ... running around ... making teachers chase me ... I think I was angry, I ran out of class, teachers were chasing me ... (MS 5)

It's kind of similar to me. When he or she is talking about having a bad day. But it's a bit different 'cause her mum actually listens to her point of view. My mum doesn't. (HS 4)

That's like my best mate's cousin Vicky – swearing, beating up people ... (HS 2)

It's like my mate. She gets picked on and doesn't deal with that well. (HS 8)

Sounds like X. It's what he used to do at the beginning when it said about abusing the teachers and running around school ... 'cause he's got ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder] ... everyone feels sorry for him. They just let him do whatever he wants. (MS 8)

This is definitely not me. (HS 3)

It seems to be ... she got really bullied. I don't have much in common with the person in this story. No one dares to bully me ... Talking out of turn, shouting, these things are what I get caught for. (HS 9)

It's very different from mine. It's not a common story. Nothing ... (MS 7)

While the students were told only that I was a researcher who was collecting stories (like the ones shared) of students' experiences in school, both good and bad, the vignettes that were shared with them, cleared cued the fact that this was essentially an exercise to do with 'naughtiness', behaviour and discipline. It is not surprising then, that in most of the conversations, from the very start, there was a tone of 'accounting' for themselves by the students. If the head teacher stories arose out the central concerns of the discourse of behaviour management, in response to the role they occupied within this discourse, the student accounts were also a response to the same discourse via the vignettes, but from an alternative perspective.

Accounting for the 'naughty' self

In Judith Butler's (2005) book, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, she makes the point that the subject that rises to account for itself does so because it is called into being/evoked by an other, within specific contexts; and that the terms by which to make oneself intelligible are not of one's own making (language/discourse is implicated in engagements with others, i.e., it does not stand external to the encounter). Thus a post-modern sensibility would suggest that there is no 'I' who is originally, externally, formed but only something born out of the responses to and of others, all set within discursive frameworks/regimes of truth. In qualitative research encounters, this crafting of subject position through conversation has been noted by those working with a communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993; Hecht, Warren, Jung, &

Krieger, 2005; Jung & Hecht, 2004). Here the focus is on the tendency for identities to be fashioned in and through talk, i.e., identities are discursively accomplished through social interaction (Haugh, 2008). However, these social interactions themselves are governed by the regimes that allow them to take place, i.e., the conversations are only intelligible within the discursive framework. On the research project, the device of fictionalised vignettes of 'naughty' students, while it helped ease the conversation between researcher and pupil, also set the tone, determined the space for talk, and shaped the course of the discussion between interviewer and interviewee.

While this speech was invariably concerned with accounting for their own subject position as 'very' naughty or 'borderline' disruptive/disobedient pupil, students also sought/fought for/revealed other positions for themselves that the dominant discourse of behaviour management did not afford them. This search for other subjectivities in conversations throughout the project gave these subjects an elusive, unfixable quality, distinctly at odds with how they were being recognised through the discourse of behaviour management. The elusiveness of the subject that one seeks to know and describe is an issue much discussed by ethnographers (Priyadharshini, 2003; Visweswaran, 1994). They suggest that the accounts of respondents will always be incomplete – works-in-progress – where the full rationale for behaviour or action or 'being' is undiscoverable. The subject to be analysed and exposed can be glimpsed during these occasions when they are called forth or evoked into being by the interlocutor, the one who asks, 'Who are you?' or less explicitly on the project, 'Is this you?'

The elusive subject, the one that resists recognition as 'naughty' then forces a closer look at the possible conditions that give rise to the responses/narratives received, i.e., the task of analysis becomes one of not just looking at the themes in the answers or the content of what is delivered/elicited, but one of attempting to understand the constraints and possibilities that shape research encounters to allow a particular response to arise. This becomes, not an issue of better methodology, of attempting to create the best or most neutral conditions for participants to speak the truth, but a matter of developing an awareness of competing discourses in student lives and thus of developing alternative sensibilities to listening, reading and analysing accounts of selves. The Foucauldian questions regarding the conditions of truth-telling – 'Who is asking this of me? What do they expect? In what language will my answer satisfy? What are the consequences of telling and of not telling the truth about myself to this interlocuter?' (Butler, 2005, p. 124) – are useful to bear in mind in these contexts rather than the researcher's customary preoccupation with the 'truthfulness', 'validity' or 'reliability' of 'data'.

The elusive subject

With this understanding, the student accounts themselves can be heard differently, i.e., not as the 'predictable' excuses of naughty students but as legitimate challenges to the discourse of behaviour management. As pointed out earlier, initially, students identified with the events and figures narrated in the vignettes. This involved a recognition of themselves as being perceived as 'naughty', as often on the 'wrong side of the law'. This also suggests a comprehension of the dominant discourses of

behaviour management – the shoulds and coulds, dos and don'ts that help recognise 'normal' or desired behaviour. For example:

> Well, like the story, I am naughty, I annoy teachers ... I talk back. (MS 3)

> It's kinda like me a lot. Getting in trouble, running around school... (MS 7)

Sometimes, this was expressed through a recognition of how they were trying to be 'good' subjects under the discourse and of just how difficult it was to achieve this:

> They [the teachers] actually gave me a lot of chances and now I am in Year 6, I've actually improved a lot. Ok, I have my ups and downs, but I've improved loads ... In Year 5 I used to be really bad. One time, I even jumped out of a window ... I think I've grown up a bit more ... I am getting somewhere in school now and my teachers say I'm intelligent but I've got to control my anger still ... Hard tasks make me really ... arrrghh ... And I end up lashing out. Sometimes I even cry. It's embarrassing but I do... (MS 2)

> I do find it difficult sometimes, but I do try ... and I do make some progress ... I'm getting somewhere in life but sometimes its difficult... (MS 5)

> I find it really hard to change my behaviour 'cause I've been trying for nearly two years now ... to turn my behaviour around and be good ... I've tried loads of times but I just can't change. It's very difficult... (MS 6)

Their difficulty in having to constantly strive to accomplish the position of 'good' subject within the discourse – a feat impossible to achieve in a just single event or instance – reveals how one's status needs to be 'incessantly reproduced' against the weight of expectation and prior recognition (Laws & Davies, 2000, p. 209). However, such an understanding of the lens through which they were perceived and encouraged to perceive themselves was often followed by counter narratives that challenged this representation. Interestingly, on this project, the penitent subject, the one who shows shame, humility and genuine despair, and thus earns the subjection of the discourse, was curiously absent. Where there were admissions of guilt, these were more often than not in the tone of a defiant confession than a penitent repentant:

> I was the naughtiest in primary ... I'm a bad boy ...'cause I am. The worst thing I did was to get excluded for strangling someone. I get really angry. (MS 3)

> I do admit, I can be quite nasty to teachers when I think ... when I KNOW they think I've done something wrong and I haven't. And they're focusing on me and I really haven't done anything wrong... (HS 3)

> I smashed windows in Year 5. Sounds terrible. Blocked toilets. Wrote on walls – skanky stuff ... Year 9 was bad. My first year in the school. I joked around, was funny. Used to be really naughty, get into loads of trouble ... used to be rude. My attitude ... I used to do such bad things. I haven't actually stopped that much ... I still do kind of behave badly sometimes. I'm quite rude to teachers if I don't get my own way... (HS 4)

This outright refusal of the subjection required by the discourse could pose for authority figures a nightmare of never-ending disorder and chaos, and further entrench the hostility between teachers and defiant pupils. However, such defiance

was also usually followed by an account of justification for their actions, unsettling the clarity with which their insubordination could be judged:

> I have been naughty and excluded once ... I had a fight with this girl because she called me ... because my dad hung himself years back and she started talking about my dad and I haven't got over that yet ... and my sisters and brothers have gone into care and she started talking about that as well ... and I just got really really angry and I just hit her. (MS 1)

> What happened was, Mr X he tried to keep me in for over half an hour, and so I tried to barge past him but he stood there, so I said I'd jump out of the window, and he went, 'no you won't'. So I went, 'watch me' and I just jumped out of the window and I landed in the teachers' bit and I just jumped over a fence and ran home. That was after-school detention. He shouldn't have kept me in for half an hour. (MS 2) [Rules in this school prohibited a detention for longer than half an hour for students of this age.]

> Mum had to come in once when I got excluded ... but like mum was obviously upset. When I was sat in the head teachers' office, she said, 'why have you been excluded?' Obviously she was upset as well ... and I turned around and said, 'At the end of the day, it's not all me, why I've been excluded. Because I retaliate when people bully me and I get caught. But they think it's just me'. (MS 5)

Such responses could easily be dismissed as instances of 'poor excuses', 'spreading the blame' or 'muddying waters' in order to avoid judgment and further punishment. However, read from a discourse perspective, these responses draw us to the curious double work of subjectivation (Butler, 1997): of how one speaks from within the space of the discourse, but at the same time, exceeds its power by drawing on rationale that points to the limits and limitations of it; of being simultaneously subjectified and exceeding the required subject position, thus once more proving elusive. This was rather painfully illustrated when in the course of an interview, a student happened to glance at my list of interviewees which I had carelessly left exposed. Gasping with horror, he recoiled at the thought of being included on that list:

> these people are well bad! ... you should talk to other students ... why am I on this list? ... who gave you these names? (MS 2)

The terms of recognition were understood and accepted in their generality but refuted categorically in their specificity to oneself.

On other occasions, students justified themselves by drawing on medical or psychological discourses that were available to them:

> In Year 6, I got into a lot of trouble. It was my first year ... my report was really bad ... I was really good in Year 5. In Year 6, I found I had ADHD as well ... I had it since I was 6. I was unsettled but I never got into much trouble ... I just have medication. (MS 6)

> Well, I can't say this ... I'm supposed to be ... 'dys-lex-ic'? It might be that and I need to get tested. I can't get hold of what they're teaching and because I don't get it, I play up. And it's hard. 'I told you, I can't'. And they just don't listen to you. (HS 3)

> ...from when my sister was born, I became naughty then ... 'cause I think it was jealousy. So from 0 to 6, I had all my mum's attention for myself. And all that changed

when my sister arrived. That's when I got ADHD ... I was naughty and restless from about age 7 ... I've been excluded four times from school in middle school. (MS 6)

In primary, I didn't have ADHD. Now I am diagnosed with it. I was good in primary in Year 5. Year 6 was fun but bad. I had fun in a way, like playing 10-pin bowling with the stools and things like that ... that wasn't very popular with the school ... (MS 7)

The critique of the subjectifying powers of the medical/psychological discourse has already been well documented (Burman, 1994; Elkind, 1998; Laws & Davies, 2000) but what is of interest here are the ways in which such discourses are appropriated by students to question the terms by which the 'naughty' label was conferred on them. Behaviour management, by and large, relies on the illusion of 'choice' by the student (Laws & Davies, 2000); one is believed to choose to be good or naughty. However, the use of the medical/psychological discourse undercuts this illusion by pointing to factors outside one's 'choice' that affect behaviour. Doing so, effectively places authority figures in a double-bind: one cannot be definitive about recognising the student as being deliberately, as a matter of choice, naughty without doubting the lack of agency inherent in the medical/psychological discourse or at the very least, questioning the (mis)use of the discourse.

While these instances are examples of the elusive subject that challenges the discourse, there were also other examples of a more open critique of it. These were evident in the strong counter narratives that students produced in their accounts: counter narratives of pride in self, of holding responsible roles/positions and of an openly quizzical self that questioned the logic and rationale of the discourse.

Student counter narratives

Certain lessons are really good. Maths is normally good. It's the maths teacher who is really grumpy to us ... at the start the year, I was bad ... and he don't like me. So they put me in a different class 'cause they thought I was really bad but the teacher's started liking me. Maths is my favourite. Only 'cause I can beat the teacher at some questions ... they put me in the bottom group because I didn't do the exams, to choose what class you'd be in ... so they put me in the bottom set. They said they'd put me near the top group now ... Maths has really good people in it. But you're not allowed to talk to them ... and they give really easy questions like 12 times 14 ... When I did five sums of long division and the class only was starting ... every one was like 'Oh J, why do you have to finish fast, why do you have to be such a geek?' (HS 5)

Here is an instance of 'they got me so wrong'. Another student talked proudly of his role in setting up the school's baseball club:

I started my own baseball club at school and I do that at lunch times ... I watched Channel 5 at one o'clock in the morning and it was on. And I though, hmm ... this is good! Then next week when I went back to school I asked everyone – head teacher, school council, deputy head, head of year, PE department, PTA [Parent–Teacher Association] – and I got permission to run my own baseball club. There is enough interest to run a team from here. As soon as I watched the game, the first couple of sessions, I picked up the rules, just like that. I'm planning on getting a little league together, like for ... when I move up to high school. That's for the whole [county] and that's going to be massive. The only baseball clubs in East Anglia are the ones in US airbases like Mildenhall ... for grown ups. When we get a little league together, I'm

going to ask them for support, so . . . It was long process cause nothing runs smoothly. But I didn't give up and yeah, I got £400 to spend on equipment. I've already started to order stuff but my time here is coming to an end so, better get that done quick but the school has said that I am allowed to come back as soon as I'm finished, in the summer to play a bit more, give rewards out, trophies and stuff. (MS 7)

This description of his drive, enterprise and passion was in stark contrast to his categorisation as someone at risk of exclusion. He also casually pointed out his role of being a 'young carer' for his family, as someone who fulfilled roles of filial loyalty and responsibility:

I come to school so my mum don't get arrested. If I don't come to school, mum goes to jail . . . Tonight I am going to the Young Carers Project thingy. One of my sisters is in a special needs school. And my brother he has got special needs too but he's 18 now. (MS 7)

If behaving poorly was a matter of choice, these students pointed to occasions when they were being responsible, agentic subjects. Yet another respondent quizzed me and the discourse that kept recognising him as 'naughty', something he could not see himself:

They said I might get moved to another school if I don't sort it out. But I've never [even] been excluded so how can I get permanent exclusion? I really don't know . . . I don't think I'm that bad. I'm late to my lessons and I know that . . . They wanted a meeting [with parents] . . . I don't know . . . Miss S is saying that she is getting fed up with teachers coming up to her and saying that I have been playing up and stuff like that . . . maybe they want me to think that they're on my case! . . . sometimes I tell my mum and she's like, we'll they obviously pick on you . . . and I say, 'People are getting excluded everyday. They come back, they get excluded and then, why do they focus on me?' . . . 'cause I'm here every lesson! That's the annoying thing . . . And they're focusing on me and I really haven't done anything wrong . . . Mrs P. shouldn't say things like, 'There's a space in X High School' . . . for me . . . She rang them up to see if there was a space! That's what she said . . . that really annoyed me. I know I'm late and that does their head in every day but that's not a major thing for me to get excluded . . . and people get into fights and stuff . . . Why do they focus on me? . . . Is this getting to home, this meeting? . . . Well, I think my mum should know how I feel. She does listen, a lot. But she doesn't really know what's going on at school. They think, 'This is what the teachers have told me, so this is obviously true'. Well, it's not . . . cause the teachers aren't always right but you've always got to go by their word, haven't you? . . . [I'd like to] go into my dad's business . . . plastics, building and stuff . . . it's getting out with the sun on you and in the fresh air and stuff . . . couple of weeks ago, I did some work with him and got 40 pounds and I really liked that work . . . Obviously I need some grades and stuff. But I don't know if he'll even want me if I'm going to be how he thinks I am at school . . . he thinks I'm really naughty. But if he comes into school, he'll think I'm a good person, won't he? If he comes into school, there are so many people so much naughtier than me and I just don't see it. . . (HS 3)

For the duration of the interview and later, this respondent's puzzlement and anguish posed a direct challenge to the design and conduct of the study, especially on the issue of 'prior recognition' – a presumed knowledge and definition of the other before one encounters or even 'sees' him/her (Ahmed, 2000; Butler, 2005). This student and the others who took part in the study were defined by their non-conformity with the norms of the discourse of behaviour management, emphasised

by the framing of the enquiry, and by a research design which required head teachers to identify and categorise them as naughty enough to be 'eligible' for an interview. But their accounts cast doubt over this prior recognition – by being elusive subjects, by producing counter narratives emphasising their sense of other selves and subjectivities, the students effectively cast doubts over the unspoken charges against them that seemed to hang in the air. If the elusive subject avoided capture, the naughty or misbehaving subject seemed to dissipate altogether amongst the accounts that were narrated, calling into question the (mis)recognition with which the research began. Butler suggests that on these occasions, we ought to begin with the humbling realisation that recognition itself presupposes structures that cover over the singularity of the other we are trying to 'see' and that while such prior recognition is inescapable, it *is* constantly revisable (Butler, 2005). In these cases it seems that listening differently to the student accounts themselves forces a revision or at least, a questioning of the ways by which prior recognition is conferred on them.

Challenges to the technologies of behaviour management

On the project, the challenging of recognition was also tied to the exposure of the limits of the discourse that produced the subject positions. The critique of the discourse was most obvious in pupils' description and experience of the behaviour intervention strategies themselves. The vast array of measures to maintain discipline (the PSP; the clear days system; being sent to another class; being sent to the Time Out Room; various types of exclusion – internal, external, temporary, long term; red cards; informing parents; detentions – during school, after school; consequence slips and warnings) were either not understood or were seen as designed to exercise power over pupils and, in the process, make life more difficult for them, as a 'wind up'. The example most often offered was that of the PSP system which required naughty students to acquire the signature and/or comments from the teacher after every lesson. Students on the PSP felt that this often delayed them from getting to the next lesson on time. At other times, they misplaced the book, forgot to pick it up, or the teacher simply forgot to sign it and the student did not always check if the teacher had signed it. All of this meant they were in even more trouble because of the book, which led a few to believe that the system was designed to allow teachers a way of exercising power rather than to help students improve their behaviour:

> There is constant pressure with the monitoring ... It's a chance ... a device for teachers to have a go at you. The teacher in charge sets targets. If you meet one, you get a point, if not, zero ... Targets are like – attend lessons on time, concentrate fully on producing work, treat others with respect – if you don't meet your targets, they don't really do nothing. You get review meetings – they'll praise you if you're alright and then take you off. You are meant to take the PSP to your teacher at the end of every lesson but I don't always. You get teachers who just wait about and then afterwards ... they just don't sign it. You sometimes stay on, they do everyone else's book and just leave yours. It happens all the time ... It's just that everyone throws their books on the table and she takes it. My book is nearly always at the back! (HS 1)

Other examples of problems in behaviour management interventions were to do with the use of detentions and consequence slips. Students with experience of detention

often did not understand why they had to write lines or even, in one case, what they were being asked to write:

> All I did was sit and write, 'Poor punctuality causes poor . . . 'prospective?' or something like that – 50 times, five of us, sitting in a row and scribbling it! (HS 2)

Not many students seemed to understand the 'consequence' of getting a consequence slip:

> If you're not in class, if you're naughty, you get this yellow slip and you tick what you've done wrong in the lesson – being rude, didn't bring correct equipment, uniform, etc. They give one to your tutor and one to Head of House . . . But nothing's happened when I've got many . . . I think . . . it goes down on your report as well? . . . I'm worried about that. I'm not too sure of that. . . (HS 4)

The place of warnings in the behaviour management system was also not very clear to many students and one claimed that it was just a ploy, an empty threat to keep them on the straight and narrow. The questions they raised about the efficacy of the various measures and their inability in remembering or comprehending the rationale for them or indeed their consequences effectively underscore the gap between the faith invested by authorities in behaviour management systems and the lack of rationality perceived by pupils. Here is one student's attempt at explaining how he saw interventions working in his school:

> They've got two time outs here. One of them you just go if you get red carded. And that's like nothing . . . 'cause everyone likes it and the time goes really quickly and there's other people in there as well. But the new one, the internal exclusion room is like proper boring. This is opened this year. It's one of those things that no one wants to do – you have to come in at half nine and go home at half four, a whole day . . . and you spend your break and lunch in there. There can be up to four students in there. There's normally one teacher . . . We just get given work sheets, like if we are doing an English lesson, it'll be English work . . . I've been there a couple of times and it makes you not want to get into trouble again . . . because it is so boring. You've got a couple of bits of wood on either side of you which means you can't see each other . . . you are not supposed to talk to each other . . . but everyone does. And the teacher doesn't really care anyway . . . does his own work. This gets decided earlier, like the day before . . . Dreadful! (HS 7)

While some of the student responses allow for pragmatic changes to be made to the system – to make it more workable, trustworthy, logical, comprehensible, etc., alongside this runs the deeper critique of the discourse of behaviour management itself. What also emerges are the ways in which the discourse and its subjectivation processes work to delineate and divide the groups that populate school – authorities/ heads/teachers from the students. Most students who had experienced the behaviour management interventions expressed emotions of distrust or hatred of some sections of the teaching staff. One student who felt he was being picked on unfairly by the teachers felt that the PSP book actually showed his true record – that he was 'alright' and that it was the teachers who were getting it wrong:

> What gets to me is when teachers write home and say I've been bad and stuff like that. But as soon as they put me on report, PSP and stuff like that, it always comes out good.

And it's not because I'm acting any differently it's because I'm alright. I don't act any different. And the teachers can't accept that they are getting it wrong. But they are. So in this way, the PSP is actually good... (HS 7)

Some stories suggested that the pursuit of 'order' or 'good behaviour' in school came at some considerable cost to students:

I also lost two uncles in less than a month and that's why I had trouble in Year 8 – one in Feb and one in Mar – one killed himself and one just naturally died ... and my grandad's got cancer as well ... He had bowel, lung, lymph node ... he is 52. I've got to try and support my mum 'cause it's her dad. And she lost her brother and her uncle, so I'm trying hard for my family ... once, just after my uncle who killed himself died, I got told off for crying ... the one who tells you off ..., he said, 'Stop crying, you shouldn't cry'. I said, 'I've lost one of my favourite uncles...' [*Starts crying during the interview.*] When I was crying, I got told, they were 'crocodile tears'. (MS 6)

I think it's mainly just school. The school kind of ... when someone gets into trouble, the school don't help by making it worse by shouting and everything and giving you detentions ... I mean that don't help anything ... I can't wait to get out of here. (MS 7)

Can't wait to get out of this rubbish place – it's like you are in a little block ... in a little room and there's no way out ... no windows, no doors, everything's blocked. (HS 2)

Recognising such unhelpful relations, one student suggested, in a manner reminiscent of a union-management negotiator, 'teachers and students should get in a room and talk and settle things...'. Recurrent comments of teachers 'ganging up' on students or 'taking advantage of their powers' further highlighted the strained divisions that characterise everyday life at school for 'naughty' students (and their teachers). The implementation of the behaviour management interventions themselves seemed to discourage what common ground could be found between these groups – common ground that usually emerged in private or 'unguarded' conversations with many teachers and heads. Head teachers, for instance, remarked on the inefficiency of various intervention strategies to improve student behaviour and on the curious fact that it was those who needed support most who could be denied through the ways the system functioned. It may be in the spaces created by the acknowledgement of the imperfections, if not failures, of the discourse of behaviour management that the counter narratives of naughty pupils can be heard and used most effectively.

Conclusion

While not ignoring the considerable efforts of many teachers, head teachers and other staff to create a congenial learning atmosphere in schools, the counter narratives of 'naughty' students, by pointing to their existence as those who 'do not fit the mould', reveal the limits of the dominant norms of discipline and punishment. Rather than dismiss student accounts as 'biased' or 'untruthful', a discourse perspective calls into question the regimes that govern subjectivation, which is also to call into question one's ability to tell the truth about oneself. As Butler reminds us, 'to tell the truth about oneself involves us in quarrels about the formation of the self and the social status of truth' (2005, p. 132).

Second, the counter narratives of 'naughty' pupils exhibit 'an aesthetics of the self that maintains a critical relation to existing norms' (Butler, 2005, p. 17). Within this project, sometimes, the critique addressed directly, in the manner of a conversation during which the speaker/questioner is trying to make sense of a situation – Why is this so? Does this make sense to you? Can you explain why I am in so much trouble? At other times, by pointing out the absurdities and inconsistencies of the behaviour management measures, they cannily questioned the rationality of the system. At yet other times, they wondered if behaviour management measures were not really meant to reform 'naughty' pupils but to give schools and teachers power, purpose, and a role to perform. By posing these questions of the discourse, counter narratives from 'naughty' pupils encourage a deconstructive stance – 'a persistent critique of what one cannot not want', and, a constant and persistent look at how 'truths' are produced (Spivak, 1996, p. 9).

This deconstructive attitude is therefore not a negative, nihilistic one that opposes all order or discipline. Rather, it focuses our attention on the desire of those labelled as 'naughty' to be recognised differently, i.e., not as 'good' pupils, but rather as 'being naughty' as itself a logical, even rational response to the discourses of behaviour management. However, this desire to be recognised differently is precisely one that can currently find no satisfaction, and it is this unsatisfiability that allows 'a critical point of departure for the interrogation of available norms' (Butler, 2008, p. 31).

It is probably true that 'unanticipated forms of recognition allow for new norms to come into being' (Butler, 2008, p. 31), which may in turn allow more fruitful relationships in schooling to be sought and established. But allowing for these 'unanticipated forms of recognition' is a big ask. It requires a radically different response to hearing and reading student accounts. It requires researchers and school authorities to recognise the subjectivation potential of the discourse of behaviour management and then act against their subjectivation in knowing ways. A discourse perspective may go a long way in allowing us to 'see' the operation of discourses, and may focus our attention on the subject positions they offer teachers and pupils, and on the conditions of narration of accounts. Whether this recognition can, in itself, offer an opening for new norms to come into being is questionable, given the intransigence of the antagonistic 'teacher' and 'student' subject positions in schooling. However, as a starting point to reconceptualise such tenacious relations, it is invaluable.

Note

1. (A) *Routine intervention*: This would contain everyday, classroom-level intervention that falls within the school's behaviour plan. May involve informal liaison with parent/s, or teaching assistant's involvement, or following a pastoral support programme, or action in line with individual educational plan. (B) *Co-ordinated intervention*: May involve more serious (unpredictable or 'explosive') situations and require co-ordinated action. For example, action involving Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO), Head of House, or devising alternative curriculum for pupil, action in line with the 'nurture programme', formal letters to parents, internal exclusions, etc. (C) *Advised by external agencies*: Situations that call for specialist advice from outside the school. Exclusions/suspensions requiring sanction/input of local authority, or involving consultations with medical authorities (to eliminate or diagnose autism, dyslexia, ADHD, etc.), serious situations calling for police involvement, etc. (D) *Intervention on sites beyond school*: Intervention here relates to extreme and chronic situations and is predominantly carried

out beyond the school premises, including the involvement of Pupil Referral Units, the police, child protection agencies, social services, mental health specialists, etc.

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