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# Reproducing Disaffection

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## Introduction

**T**his article reports on a study on school disaffection captured in the views of a teacher, a Learning Mentor and a group of six young people at a school in south London. The study critically examined how the discourse of disaffection was produced, consumed, simultaneously resisted and reproduced, and analysed the complex set of negotiations that educational practitioners and young people made in their attempts to reconcile contradictions in their narratives about their experiences of teaching and learning.

The adults' explanations for young people's lack of engagement with learning oscillated widely between attributing disaffection to the individual young people themselves, to curriculum relevance and its organisation, as well as to a range of other out of school factors. On the other hand, the young people's narratives pointed to the significance of the influence of peers as a contributory factor in their disconnection from learning but more importantly, the extent of their engagement with curriculum subjects emerged as contingent on the quality of the relationships they had with their teachers.

## Methodology

The primary dataset consisted of a total of nine transcripts, which derived from a focus group as well as semi-structured one to one interviews with six young people, who were chosen on the basis of their referral to the Learning Mentor due to either poor attendance, challenging behaviour or both. All the young people interviewed were male, one was white and five were of African Caribbean descent. They all lived in single parent families, with the parent of two of the respondents being unemployed, while three were in semi-skilled part-time employment and one in domestic full-time employment. They were all on free School Meals.

Additionally, one to one semi-structured interviews were conducted with a teacher and a Learning Mentor, both of whom were chosen due to their extensive experience of working with Key Stage 4 pupils in their respective roles. Additional data was generated through the notes made after each interview and the

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memos written throughout the data gathering process, which proved extremely helpful during subsequent analysis and discussion.

In line with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the analysis of data was conducted in three stages: description, interpretation and explanation. All the interviews were transcribed and excerpts for deeper analysis were selected on the basis of their salience to the research questions. I used Rogers' (2004) approach to the analysis of data. This initially entailed devising a CDA coding chart for identifying elements of discourse in the text. I annotated each transcript with codes, compared and contrasted the responses from each participant to generate common themes. The focus of the analysis of textual features was on ideological representations coded in the vocabulary used and how power and resistance were exercised between teachers and young people through constraints on contents (what was said or done), relations (social relations in discourse) and subjects (the positions that social actors occupied), Fairclough (1989).

### **Intertextuality in the Discourse of Disaffection**

Fairclough (1992) describes as 'intertextuality' in discourse the 'property texts have of being full of snatches of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict or ironically echo' (1992:84). The 'snatches' of texts present in the wider discourse of disaffection are many and varied and include, being 'at risk' and the infamous phrase, 'Not in Education, Employment and Training' (NEET). This results in these labels becoming synonymous with each other. It is interesting how, when reduced to a label such as 'NEET' or 'disaffected', a statement about the socio-economic status of a young person or his/her attitude to schooling acquire and condense several meanings under one category. It is also worth noting that socially constructed categories, such as disaffection, can acquire different labels at different times. The so-called disaffected youth have been labelled variously as 'disengaged', 'disconnected', 'dislocated', 'disappeared' and 'status zero' among a range of other negative labels, often starting with the prefix 'dis', suggesting deficiency of some sort.

What makes discourses of disaffection ambiguous and contradictory, are the multiple perspectives on its causes in academic research, policy debates and education practitioners' narratives. However, far from being objective and neutral, conceptualisations of

disaffection are tied to ideologies about the role of education in society. As Ball suggests 'any discourse concerns itself with certain objects and puts forward certain concepts at the expense of others' (1986:3). It has been argued that policy responses to disaffection are based on a deficit model that represents young people as victims or perpetrators (Jeffs and Smith 1999; Griffin, 1993).

Intertextuality in the shared narratives of the adults in the school resonated with and contradicted dominant policy discourses about the self-exclusion of a large number of young people from black and working class communities. Although both the teacher's and Learning Mentor's narratives suggested that they could not see any justification in 'race' being a useful criterion in profiling a disaffected young person, their descriptions were fraught with stereotypical generalizations about the negative influences that black young men were exposed to. For example, the teacher blamed rap music for the negative influence it had on them due to its glorification of anti-social behaviour. Reference was also made by the Learning Mentor to a conception of education being irrelevant due to a supposed belief amongst young men that social divisions were such that gaining qualifications did not guarantee better career prospects. He attributed this to the influence of disillusioned older members of the black community whose experiences of institutional racism alienated them from social life, confirming research on the cumulative effects of racism on attitudes towards the education system (Sewell, 1998; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Youdell, 2003; Warren, 2005).

The Learning Mentor also made a link between disaffection and criminality by suggesting that some young people were seduced by the immediate gratification that drug dealing provided those who were willing to truant and act as mules on mopeds between drug dealers and their clients. Such sweeping characterisation embodies discourse types that ascribe social identities to young people based on a deficit model and echo the policy makers' discourses on the vulnerabilities of black young men to succumb to deviance, for example, the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment (1998) and Blair's depiction of a 'distinctive black culture' (Wintour and Vikram, 2007) as being the source of the problems of British youth.

It is important to contextualise the political climate within which tackling social exclusion and disaffection became key government priorities from late 1990s onwards. The policy context, within which renewed focus on youth disaffection has taken place, is marked by sweeping social reforms at the beginning of the New Labour Government in 1997. In pursuit of a Third Way approach to policy making, combining, arguably antithetical, Old Labour social intergrationist values with New Right ideologies, Blair counterbalanced toughness on crime and anti-social behaviour with an emphatic pledge to focus on 'Education, Education, Education' and safeguarding the welfare of children through the introduction of a raft of policies and Acts, such as Every Child Matters (2003), Children's Act (2004), Youth Matters (2006) and the Aiming High: Ten Year Strategy (2007). Levitas (1998) has argued that New Labour's approach to social exclusion, moved away from Old Labour's commitments to the redistribution of social resources to a combination of, on one hand a moral underclass discourse (MUD) and on the other, a social integrationist discourse (SID).

The term disaffection was already part of the pedagogic discourse in the mid-80s (Kinder, Wakefield and Wilkin, 1996), however the publication in England of two key reports, Learning to Succeed (1999) and Bridging the Gap (1999) by the Social Exclusion Unit (1998), brought the attention of policy makers to the impact that disconnection from learning has on the long term prospects of employability of large numbers of young people. Evidence presented to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment (1998) estimated that 8 per cent of all 14-16 year olds predominantly male from African Caribbean backgrounds were disaffected. The committee also made an explicit link between disaffected young people of African Caribbean descent and criminality. In this respect Osler and Starkey found that 'Young people from minority ethnic communities, refugees and other newly-arrived students are more likely to be characterised as disaffected and are often poorly served by their schools' (2005: 196). The term 'disaffection' thus became naturalized in discourses relating lack of engagement and underachievement of young people in schools, particularly by working class and black males, to the propensity to commit crime, abuse drugs and to become socially excluded.

The representations implicit in the Teacher's and the Learning Mentor's characterisation of disaffection were centred around descriptions of cognitive and

behavioural deficiencies that the young people who were labelled as disaffected were assumed to have. They cited a range of factors that they believed contributed to young people's disconnection from education, all of which were resonated with the claims made in research on the causes of disaffection. These included family breakdown (Steer, 2000; Reid, 2002; Wilson *et al*, 2008), low self-esteem (Andrews and Andrews, 2003; Reid, 2002; Humphrey *et al*, 2004), drug abuse (Goodman, 1999) to involvement in crime (Martinek, 1997; Reid, 2002; Blanden, Hansen and Machin, 2008). The usefulness of these claims is however contested as they fail to establish the direction of causality between disaffection and its claimed causes, (Piper and Piper, 2000; Hayes, 2004; Osler and Starkey, 2005; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008; Wilson *et al*, 2008).

Whilst dividing disaffected young people into two categories, the 'unable' and the 'unwilling', the Learning Mentor and the Teacher also suggested that the prevalent deficit interpretations of disaffection were reductive in their narrow focus on the individual characteristics of the young people as they did not take into account other factors that characterise the difficult relations that some young people had with education.

Despite a raft of policy interventions aimed at re-engaging black young men in education, eg. Key Stage 3 National Strategy: Ensuring the Attainment of Black Caribbean Boys (DfES, 2004), the Priority Review: Exclusion of Black Pupils 'Getting it. Getting it right' (DfES, 2006) and the Curriculum Review: Diversity and Citizenship (DfES, 2007), only a third of African-Caribbean boys on Free School Meals achieved 5 A\*-C in the GCSE examinations in 2008. This raises questions about the arguments that curriculum reforms can provide adequate solutions to disengagement from education. However, there is evidence that curriculum relevance is a contributory factor to disaffection (Stoll and O'Keefe, 1993; Elliott *et al*, 2002; Morgan, 2003; DfES, 2004; Miller, 2005; Haynes, 2008) and that greater flexibility combining vocational and academic routes can lead to greater participation in employment, training, further and higher education, (Golden *et al*, 2005 and Lynch *et al*, 2010).

### **Curriculum Relevance**

Curriculum relevance has been cited by the young people as one of the factors that prevented their

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engagement with learning. The Teacher argued that much of what was taught in school had little relevance to the world of work. He rejected the prevalent utilitarian view of learning held by some of the young people that chimed with the dominant instrumental ideology in educational policy discourse (Kelly, 2004; Smith, 2004). He contended that the utilitarian view promoted the uncritical adoption of teaching approaches that valorise the acquisition of knowledge and skills to prepare students for the world of work over the development of autonomy and critical inquiry (Ball, 2001; Gerwitz, 2002; McLaren, 2003).

The language of performativity seems to have also extended to the work of the Learning Mentor, whose role involved the improvement of young people's attendance, behaviour and achievement. Focus on tangible outcomes is part of what Ball (2001) calls 'performativity'. Ball states that: 'The performances of individual subjects or organisations serve as a measure of productivity or output, or displays of "quality", or "moments" of promotion or inspection' (2001:143). The Learning Mentor said:

We have to use targets that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound. The reason why we do smart plans is that in the past some mentors used to just throw action plans together. With the smart plans, it is more measurable, (*Excerpt from the transcript, the Learning Mentor*).

On the other hand, the Teacher had a different view on the usefulness of the prevalent utilitarian approach in education. He said:

What we don't have is the beauty of knowledge, that intrinsic idea of knowledge. It seems that knowledge must lead to somewhere, So I say to the kids, 99 per cent of what you learn, you will not use in your world of work, but they still believe that education is all about work, but if, there is not an exam, they see the experience in terms of education as pointless, (*Excerpt from the interview transcript, the Teacher*).

The teacher's beliefs about the curriculum do not cohere well with the Headteacher's determination to raise standards following the poor Ofsted inspection that year, which led to greater focus on attainment targets and the adoption of more didactic teaching approaches. He attributed young people's disconnection from learning to curriculum overload, which he saw as counter-productive as it placed immense pressure on him by multiplying his workload

and attendant targets, with the consequence of limiting his scope to exercise his professional judgement. Curriculum relevance in his view was not the barrier to learning, but what he saw as a major factor in young people's disconnection from education were on one hand, their perception of the curriculum and on the other the structure and organisation of schooling.

The teacher's account of the intrinsic value of knowledge contradicts the prevalent utilitarian view of education, expressed in debates about the relevance of the 14-19 curriculum. The Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform (2004) attributed disaffection and low academic achievement to lack of curriculum relevance and called for greater focus on 'getting the basics right' (2004:4) to ensure that young people are 'equipped with the knowledge, skills and attributes needed to succeed in adult life, further learning and employment' (*ibid*). Among its recommendations was to 'strengthen vocational routes' (*ibid*) through 'identifying a clear role for employers' (*ibid*) in the delivery of the curriculum. Haynes (2008) found some evidence that the broader alternative curriculum for KS4 succeeded in re-engaging young people who were previously identified as disaffected in KS3, with marked improvement in attendance at non-school sites (Haynes, 2008).

However, the descriptions given by the young people for their lack of motivation to engage with curriculum subjects were not limited to lack of relevance of curriculum content. Other barriers to their meaningful engagement with learning were identified as boredom, poor relationships with teachers and the influence of peers. Their views were consistent with numerous reports that have cited boredom as one of the main reasons for disconnection from learning, (Hesketh, 1987; Kinder *et al*, 1996). Other studies identified curriculum relevance as a key factor in learner engagement, particularly in Years 10 and 11 (Stoll and O'Keefe, 1993; DfES, 2004; Elliott *et al*, 2002; Morgan, 2003; DfES, 2004 and Miller, 2005). The importance of respectful relations with teachers was also found to be crucial in how young people experienced schooling, (Elliott *et al*, 2002).

Interestingly, some of the young people represented lack of curriculum relevance in utilitarian terms. They appeared to have internalised the dominant view that the primary aim of learning was the acquisition of skills and competencies that were perceived to be useful to their future careers. For example, Michael

could not see the usefulness of RE to his future employment prospects and James could not see the utility of learning Spanish, owing to the internationalisation of the English language. He saw language in strategic terms, as a means for facilitating interactions rather than for its cultural value. He stated:

I don't see the point of doing Spanish. I don't need to learn it. I have been to Spain loads of times and I have never needed to speak it. Everyone speaks English over there. (*Excerpt from the transcript, James*).

However, James also talked about the curriculum in non-utilitarian terms when he described the good rapport he had with some of his teachers and how this motivated his active involvement in his education. James's account is consistent with the views expressed by other young people in the one to one and focus group interviews, which suggested that the level of their engagement with the curriculum was dependent on the teachers' attitudes towards them and pointed to the detrimental effects of the disrespectful teachers on their academic achievement. The young people's descriptions also resonate with Warren's accounts of how the young men in his study negotiated what he called 'asymmetrical economies of respect' (2005:249) in their relations with teachers whose inconsistent and disproportionate enforcement of discipline led to differential treatments of individual young men by different teachers.

Warren used the concept of 'resilience' to describe young people's adaptation to the 'fluctuations' in teachers' attitudes (2005:250) through style. Warren reconceptualised the idea of 'cool pose' originally used by Majors and Billson (1993), to explain the distinctive style of some young black men as adaptation to racial hostility, and a way of commanding respect. Like the young men in Warren's study, the group of young people I interviewed did not reject the goals of education, but had to use creative ways to adapt to the volatility of its means (Sewell, 1998). The concept of 'Cool pose' speaks to the performances displayed by the young men in my study through the distinctive styles they adopted in opposition to institutional conformity demands, which I discuss later in this article. However, in this section, I want to consider the significance of the economy of respect on the young men's relations with teachers and their level of engagement with education.

## The Economy of Respect

In the focus group and one to one interviews young people used words such as *friendliness, respect, humour and an easy going attitude* to describe the qualities of a 'nice' teacher. On the other hand, disrespect, sarcasm and rudeness were used to describe a teacher who was not considered to be 'nice'. Their descriptions suggested that while subject preference was a motivating factor in their level of enthusiasm for learning, their perception of a 'nice' teacher determined the extent of their participation in classroom activity and their commitment to the completion of in class tasks and homework set by the teacher. Some of the young people pointed out that some teachers were able to make a subject of least interest to them, more interesting. Jonathan said:

I don't like most of my teachers. They are just so dry. If I like a subject and it is taught by a nice teacher I listen. But half the time, the teacher just expects you to listen. It doesn't do it for me. A nice teacher shows respect. Then you respect him back. A nice teacher doesn't shout at you, is not sarcastic in front of your friends. (*Excerpt from the transcript, Jonathan*).

Another young man, Sam, described one of his teachers' disrespectful and confrontational manner of invading his personal space. He said:

If I don't like the teacher, that's it, I just don't do any work. I hate Ms J, she shows no respect whatsoever. She's always having a go at me and she stands so close when she shouts at me. I say to her you are so close I can feel your spit on my face. Then she gives me detention. (*Excerpt from the transcript, Sam*).

The young people's descriptions match the Learning Mentor's views on the significance of respect to fostering positive relations with young people. He said:

young people say, plain and simple, if they don't like the teacher, they don't do the work. As far as young people are concerned, a nice teacher is someone who shows them respect (*Excerpt from the transcript, the Learning Mentor*).

These descriptions are consistent with evidence found in other research, (Elliott *et al*, 2002; Warren, 2005). Respect is tied to power relations between young people and their teachers, mediated through school discourse conventions and expressed in a set of rules that permeate all aspects of teaching and learning. The teachers are involved in regulating and monitoring

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young people's adherence to conventions relating to a wide range of school activities, from assessment to the management of space and young people's presentation and behaviour in school. Black young men are often subjected to 'greater surveillance and control' (Youdell, 2003:97). This engenders a sense of unfairness and creates an atmosphere of disrespect and withdrawal, as a young man, Michael described:

My teachers put me off school. They think they can treat you like a kid. Some of the teachers are alright. But many of them start arguments for nothing. They think they can disrespect you in front of everyone and get away with it. I don't care, I just tell them to get lost, (*Excerpt from the transcript, Michael*).

There was a consensus among the participants in the focus group that being reprimanded in the presence of peers led them to react disproportionately, often leading to their detention and sometimes internal exclusion and the involvement of their parents in formal meetings with the Headteacher. The teachers knew that most of the young people avoided the involvement of their parents at all cost and frequently used threats to contact them as a means of controlling their behaviour. Andrew who described his mother as being 'strict' said that one of his teachers contacted his mother frequently knowing that he would get into trouble at home. He said:

I told Miss K not to phone my mum. She knows that when she does it causes lots of aggro at home. My mum took my phone away once because she called her saying stuff about me that wasn't even true. I came to Miss K and said thanks a lot, I have no phone now, and she just said, you better behave in the future then, (*Excerpt from the transcript, Andrew*).

Whilst he recognised the positive and life enhancing value of education, Andrew rejected the pedagogies employed by some of his teachers. This is consistent with Sewell's typology of the 'Innovators' who 'accepted the goals of education but rejected its means. The origins of their pro-school values are mostly parental', (1998:107). There was evidence in the young people's descriptions of the importance of parental influence on their attempts to adapt to the school means. James said:

I don't always follow my friends. I don't want to get in trouble with my mum, (*Excerpt from the transcript, James*).

Echoing James' desire to appease his mother, Ahmed said:

Some teachers ask you to do homework and, like if my mum forces me to do it at home, some teachers don't ask to see it. So after all the hard work you do, they are not bothered to even look at it, (*Excerpt from the interview transcript, Ahmed*).

When asked how he felt about the teachers' inconsistent approach to marking homework after he had completed it, Ahmed said that he was in fact relieved as he did not wish to be called a 'Neek' by his peers. Ahmed's mother's pro-school values presented him with further challenges to negotiate in order to reconcile between his teachers' expectations as well as those of his peers. On one hand, he was envious of the young people he referred to as 'Neeks' as he also described them as 'smart' and said that they were more likely to get 'the best jobs' in the future. On the other hand, he was trapped by his reluctance to be identified as a 'Neek'. In describing subjection as being simultaneously formative and regulative, Youdell suggested that the 'subcultural privilege of students' black identities may become a discursive trap' (2003:96). Ahmed was trapped in an identity that was defined by his peers in opposition to the characterisation of a 'Neek'. Negotiating the dual identities constituted by his peers' resistance to the school 'means' and his mother's pro-school 'goals' and 'means' placed him in a difficult position. Compliance with his teachers' demands for conformity could jeopardise his status within his peer group and could lead to him being subjected to derision and potentially verbal and physical abuse, while resistance to teachers' expectations was viewed positively by his peers.

At various points during the initial focus group interview, the young people explained that their resistance to teachers' demands for conformity in school was due to their reluctance to be labeled as 'Neek' by peers. Given that references are made to 'Neeks' throughout this article, an explanation of the term 'Neek' is necessary. In the young people's narratives, the descriptions of a 'Neek' stood in opposition to what the teachers described as a 'disaffected' pupil. Some of the definitions of a 'Neek' given by the young people were:

Neeks are those who do everything right basically. They wear long tie, trousers to the waist, shoes, shirt top button done up and stuff like that'. No one likes

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Neeks at school, but they are the ones that will get the best jobs. They are smart (*Extract from transcript, Jonathan*).

Yeah they would like have their trousers high, shirt tucked in, long tie. They always sit in the front, always do their homework. They raise their hands to speak and always want to please the teacher. (*Extract from transcript, James*).

The construction of a Neek thus stands in opposition to how teachers represent a disaffected young person and is a form of indirect peer pressure which results in a re-articulation of the discourse of disaffection by constructing a counter discourse that re-structures the group norms in ways that resist conformity demands. What is deemed to be undesirable by teachers accords status and esteem among peers. This perpetuated a cycle of mutual disrespect between some young people and their teachers and prevented authentic communication from taking place. In the next section, I examine the oppositional performances enacted by young people in the school through the lens of sub-cultural resistance.

### **Oppositional Performances in the Classroom**

Thornton describes subcultures as 'groups of people that have something in common with each other (ie they share a problem, an interest, a practice) which distinguishes them in a significant way from other social groups' (Thornton, 1997:13). The group of young people who took part in this study had many characteristics in common. They were all boys and with the exception of one participant, they were all of African Caribbean descent. They were all referred to the Learning Mentor due to either poor attendance or disruptive behaviour. In theorising 'race' in education through the lens of subcultural theory, I am mindful of the risk of essentialising black young people as a homogenous 'lump of rebellious, phallogocentric underachievers' (Sewell, 1998:103), who are passive victims of institutionalised racism in their schools and in society at large. On the other hand, an analysis of style is an integral part of critical discourse analysis as it semiotically captures how young people interact with the authority of teachers and with the school as an institution.

Subcultures are also said to have distinctive values and norms, (Eadie and Morley, 2003) that are oppositional to the dominant culture. Whilst complex and ambiguous, the values and norms expressed in the pupils' narratives reflect the importance of the

mutuality of respect and solidarity in relationships between pupils and adults. Respect was cited by young people as an important element in their characterization of a good teacher and not only led to reciprocation on their part, it also determined their level of engagement with a subject.

Solidarity was evident in the pupils' adherence to group norms, which deviated from the expectations of the school. Young people who were deemed to be disaffected had a social identity in common that had been ascribed to them by the school, based on their supposed deviance from accepted norms, which not only regulated their conduct, but also placed restrictions on how they presented themselves. For instance, one of the characteristics used by the teacher to describe a disaffected pupil related to the incorrect use of the uniform. The conformity demands placed on pupils were a major source of conflict, usually around the expectation to wear the uniform correctly. However, the pupils' motives for presenting themselves the way they did was not a result of lack of awareness, but could be understood as an expression of their positioning within the school, both by themselves and by others. Indeed, both the Teacher and Learning Mentor recognised that pupils often infringed the uniform policy due to peer pressure. In addition to the strategies used by the pupils to challenge teachers' authority through overt and covert means in class, the uniform offered a visible site of collective resistance. In the focus group interview, there was heated discussion on the issue of the uniform code as it seemed to be a central point of contention between pupils and school staff. The struggle between the teachers and pupils over the correct way to wear the uniform is relentless. The enforcement of the school uniform code begins at the school gate each morning. It is a ritual that involves teachers making pupils take off their trainers, put on their school shoes which are normally kept in the school bag, pull up their trousers and do their ties up to a specification. Hall *et al* (1976) argue that youth oppositional performances embody 'interventions' against cultural domination. The pupils are simultaneously challenging the authority of teachers, whilst exerting pressure on peers to not conform to the school's normative expectations. In this respect, O'Donnell and Sharpe stated that: 'Schools engage in what is sometimes a losing battle to counterbalance the collective influence of the peer group, particularly the male peer group' (2000:89). Both in the focus group and one to one interviews, young people frequently referred to pupils who conform to teachers'

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expectations as 'Neeks'. Neeks were subjected to taunts and bullying, echoing what Collins described as 'derisive comments about teachers and kids who conform to teacher expectations' (Collins, 1998:7). The ascription of the label 'Neek' creates a counter-discourse to the teachers' discourse of disaffection, and represents pupils who comply with school expectations as undesirable.

However, pupils are required to wear school uniforms while at school, but many young people wear the trousers far below the hips 'busting a low batty', as young people describe it, or wear shoes with the laces undone and ties almost undone so that only two stripes are revealed rather than four, as the school uniform code requires them to do. Hebdidge argues that the spectacular oppositional performances displayed by young people are attempts to gain independence from the dominant adult culture. He said that youth subcultures 'represent creative attempts to try to win autonomy or space from dominant cultures' (2005:55). In a similar vein, Willis' (1977) seminal ethnographic study on classroom resistance, developed new perspectives on subcultural resistance as positive opposition against the structures of schooling, the overt and hidden curriculum, which are said to maintain and reproduce social divisions.

Willis's work mainly focused on how white working class 'lads' oppositional behaviour in school represented resistance against cultural domination and mirrored class struggles in the factory and in wider society. Warren (2005) observed that while Willis' theoretical perspective on subcultural resistance has had major influence on much of the earlier research on black resistance in education, its adequacy and usefulness to explain the gendered nature of resistance in education has been critiqued and its application to 'race' is under theorised. Warren (2005) recognised the transformative possibility that resistance theory accords to young people, while pointing out the problems associated with conflating resistance with oppressive masculine performances. Indeed the young people interviewed reported that Neeks were bullied and taunted when they resisted the peer pressure to conform to group norms.

As Warren (2005) pointed out, viewing oppositional performances in schools as the product of subcultural resistance would suggest that they are motivated by 'intentional rationality' or a collective consciousness of structural oppression on the part of the young people and imposes upon them the imperative to challenge the cultural domination they experience in

schools and in society at large. Indeed, none of the young people interviewed rationalised their opposition to school in terms of cultural politics of resistance. The young people's grievances were focused on relationships with teachers, their perceptions of the curriculum being irrelevant and the influences that they, as a group, exerted on each other. The oppositional performances expressed in the way the uniform is worn are ambiguous, but nevertheless, a means of communication with the adults in the school as well as with peers. They communicate style preference as well as opposition to authority. They also provide means of reciprocating the disrespect that the pupils receive from teachers.

### **Conclusions**

This study revealed that disaffection is a complex phenomenon that requires a multi-dimensional investigation to develop a critical understanding of its causes and effects. Not only are studies that attempt to locate explanations to disaffection in pupils' affective, behavioural and cognitive dispositions, incomplete, they also have the effect of constructing deviant identities, with marginalising consequences for young people. As the narratives captured in this study suggest, the teachers and pupils are not merely constituted passive products of macro social orders and dominant discursive practices in institutions, on the contrary, they are actively involved in shaping the orders of discourse through creativity and struggle in the process of re-structuring the discourse of disaffection. The struggles expressed in teachers' attempts to negotiate the competing demands of their employers, the ethical principles of their profession and the inability or unwillingness of pupils to engage with learning, have led to greater flexibility in the curriculum and a recognition that as young people become more independent in late adolescence, they begin to pose a challenge to authority in their demand for greater autonomy and more respect from teachers and the school as an institution.

The pupils' disconnection from learning emerged as a rational response to a perception of the curriculum being irrelevant, but most of all, conflictual relationships with teachers as a result of inequitable power relations in classrooms and in other areas of school life. A perception of disrespectful teachers engenders a mutual culture of disrespect. The pupils' respond through resistance manifested in the construction of 'Neeks' as undesirable pupils who comply with the school demands for conformity.

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