

DRAFT

The Happiest Years of Our Lives? Pupils Experience of Teachers

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The criticism of teachers has a long history. Perhaps because of the atavistic fear of being beholden to anybody. There is a deep-seated tradition of depicting teachers as those who 'cannot do' anything worthwhile. From the portrayal of 'the schoolmasters' in Our Mutual Friend to the more formalised disparagement by government ministers, teachers, for all their deduction and untraceable influence, are an easy target for attack. They devote themselves to the success of others. They give away their knowledge freely. Their actions are driven essentially by missionary instincts. In this mercenary age, formed by a culture of selfishness and instant self-gratification, teachers are easy to despise.

There is something about the role of teachers that has always attracted criticism. Their need to impose control on recalcitrant pupils giving them the kind of forced authority that leads little dignity to their actions. I need to be proud of being able to impose my will on severely unruly disaffected boys in the slums of London. Reflecting on this, I realise that the task that I was carrying out was more than faintly absurd. Knowing how to control such anger and opposition might have been heroic and certainly took some moral courage, but the absurdity of being in such a position still weighs on me. This is at the heart of the dilemma of being a teacher. When pupils wish to learn then teaching is a joy; and yet it is an act associated with opposition, with reluctance and even with hate.

I touch on a personal note of my own experience in order to declare not only my understanding of what it is like to be a teacher but my admiration for, as well as sympathy, for the tasks they carry out. What follows, from the experience of pupils, is largely critical, since this is the deepest effect that they recall. Of course there are many exceptions. There is not one pupil, however disaffected, who does not remember individual teachers with affection. (Cullingford 1999) Yet there is an underlying relationship with the role of teachers that is negative, dispiriting and disappointing.

It is essential to acknowledge the distinction between the role and the personality. We are here analysing the 'teachers' not as a particular individual associated with a subject, but as someone in authority over a class and someone who is, with his or her colleagues, is seen as the central *raison-d'être* of the school. Some pupils find it very hard to dissociate the necessary role of the teacher is imposing discipline from the personal animosity that singles out the individual. This is why the phrase 'picked on' is so important. For all children, however, it is the role of the teacher, the generalised anonymous actions that they understand, that is oppressive. Whilst acknowledging that each school is different and that there are many examples of harmonious well being, usually in the less socially and economically deprived areas, there is something about the role of the teacher that is distinctive and generalised.

Whilst the job of the teacher is far more difficult in certain places than others, and at certain times than others, that note of disparagement about the very idea of the role, that sense of superciliousness in which it is held, given back a long way certainly since the introduction of a universal state education, and, again judging by writers like Dickens, a long time before that. Whilst individuals can always remember their favourite teacher and some outstanding lessons, the general sense of teachers in a school is that of imposed will, often arbitrary judgements and of presenting information on which pupils will be tested. The essential relationship is that a group of young people trying to work out what the teacher

wants them to do. The critical testing of teachers is part of the strategy of guessing (Pollard 1986). All questions in school are interpreted as 'closed' (Barnes -) even if the teacher is genuinely attempting to elicit information. The art, from the pupils point of view, is to anticipate whatever it is the teacher wants.

This point of view of pupils is well researched and has been in place a long time. This needs to be saved because we live at a time that is particularly difficult for teachers in most of the anglo-phonc world (Alexander 2000). Teachers are constantly criticised by the very politicians and civil servants who are trying to recruit them. They are notoriously 'named and shamed' in reports, and public statements by the Office for Standards in Education. This is inevitable not just in a particular cultural climate but in a system of measuring school effectiveness against targets (Mortimore 1998 see School Effectiveness). The school improvement industry, triggered by the research of Rutter and his colleagues in 1979 (Fifteen thousand Hours) is based not only on the assumption that there are measurable outcomes that can detect signs of weakness and strength, from Standard Attainment test results to incidences of truancy, but that these outcomes are the responsibility of teachers.

The result of critical inspections and accountability is that teachers are exposed to scrutiny, not only from outside but from their own pupils. This is often forgotten. That teachers are disillusioned and demoralised is well documented (Jeffrey & Woods 1998 Elliot Ellis J. 1997). The demands placed upon them, the constant inspection and the deprofessionalisation in the task to teaching all play their part. The central problem is their changing emphasis on their role as 'delivering' someone else's curriculum in a way that is also dictated from outside. They no longer have the freedom to teach what they think best and in a way that they feel is most conducive to learning. Pupils detect this, when they see teaching cajoling them into working harder they assume that this is happening because the teachers are afraid of what inspectors would say if the results are not good enough (Cullingford & Oliver 2001). The culture of blame and criticism imposed by inspection is naturally shared by pupils (Slee et al 1998 *ibid.*).

The task of teaching has always been difficult partly because of the way in which society sees them and partly because of the nature of schools and their organisation. There are many pupils who find schools oppressive and alienating partly because of the imposition of certain kinds of language and expectation. (Literature extensive: from Hargreaved, Willis, Barker and Gintis). Given the reluctance of many pupils to learn teachers are very easy to undermine. They have always cherished sensitive support and a school ethos marched to pupils needs (Charlton et al 1989). They find these less and less available. Inspection and the way in which the National Curriculum works puts particular pressure on teachers that are widely recognised as undermining (Campbell, Croll and Hartnip, 1996. Nias e.g.). Teachers are supposed to do a 'job' rather than have a 'way of life'. They are 'mechanical' rather than artists. If the pupils are also critical of teachers and their motivations, this is an additional result of the public abuse that teachers receive. Pupils' dissatisfactions, however, go deeper than this. Certain aspects of the teachers' role have not changed. When the oracle project was first reported, based on more literal and open primary schools, it was discovered how much of the time was spent by teachers talking and expounding (Galton et al 1980). When the research was later replicated it was seen that teaching is still a matter of teachers talking and children listening (Galton et al 1999). The National Curriculum might have made this far more necessary and widespread, since the task of 'getting through' the material is so incessant (Chandler et al: in Cullingford & Oliver) but there has always been an assumption that school is like this.

This role of delivering the curriculum come what may is assumed by pupils to affect all teachers. For all the individual differences there are certain things that all teachers do. The very fact that pupils miss the opportunity to get to know teachers personally, and that they

cherish those very few occasions when they can strike up a more intimate, friendly relationship, underlines how much of the time teachers are simply carrying out their role. Teachers also feel torn by the tensions between the demands of their job and the potential of closer more complex relationships with pupils (Butroyd/Cronk). The daily routine of a school, shuffling numbers of pupils from place to place and racing through the syllabus makes any escape from the role of discipline keeper both difficult and potentially dangerous.

Both pupils and teachers are oppressed by the ambivalence between the needs of personal relationships and the demand of the professional role. Pupils respect those who keep discipline and receipt strictness. They accept the need for order and the imposition of it in an impersonal, disinterested and fair way. At some time they look for cracks in the façade of authority, a sense of humour, a shared observation. Some teachers are clearly more respected, and rated more highly than others, depending both on their ability to order the classroom as a whole, and their prowess at 'explaining' the subjects (Cullingford 1991). Clarity of exposition is a personal matter that affects pupils' individually; it is to that extent a personal matter. This is why teachers are so closely associated with subjects and why some subjects are liked because of the personality of the teacher. Teachers are seen both as 'masters' of their subjects, full of knowledge, and constrained by the syllabus, prevented from making the most of their experience.

Pupils spend a large amount of time in school simply observing teachers. They not only need to understand what is expected of them, but what many of the hidden signals mean. Pupils are in the power of teachers. On the one hand they can find them simply boring or incomprehensible, going through the subject matter too fast or too slow. On the other hand they can experience them in terms of personal animosity, through being humiliated or by being ignored. The complaint that teachers ignore bullying is echoed in the sense that teachers in the classroom ignore individual differences. In the constraints of school how could it be otherwise?

Research Methods

The essential technique of the research can be briefly described but it is important to acknowledge the context in which the interviews took place. The original theme of the research was to explore the transition between school and employability, between the experience of school and subsequent careers. The tone was positive to the extent of finding out who had influenced them, what they had most usefully learned and what were those skills that they most valued. It is important in semi-structured interviews to have some kind of placebo – or at least no clear indications in the opening questions of what would be of particular interest to the researcher. Once the interviewee guesses what gains the greatest response he or she will try to fit into that, will try to please. It is equally important during the interviews not to give leading questions, and not to provide clues or definitions.

The literature on semi-structured interviews is extensive, and the ground rule simple to describe if far the more sophisticated to put into practice. The importance of the interviewees not being aware of what information is being sought and why cannot be over-emphasised, but raises the question of informed consent which is an issue which is often misunderstood (Cullingford 2001). All we need stress here is the importance of confidentiality, anonymity and the respect for the views of the informants. Pupils need to want to talk, are even relieved at last to have a chance to do so. They need to have an appreciative if neutral interviewer who respects what they say. It is the duty of the researcher to make sure that all pupils have a chance to cover the same topics – for the sake of validity and reliability – and to make sure that all answers are appropriately probed for reasons or extensions, and to ascertain that there are no contradictions.

Given the right conditions there are no reasons to doubt the honesty of what the pupils were saying. It would be a far-fetched conspiracy to suppose that they could create such consistency. There were 195 lengthy interviews in all from pupils equally divided in terms of Years 10 and 11 (15 and 16 year olds for the most part) and in terms of gender. The pupils represented five different socio-economic areas according to the standard DfEE definitions, from the privileged to the deprived, and include a higher than representative number of minority ethnic groups. There were no significant differences according to any of these variables.

The fact that the same negative views were presented by those whose expectations were of a university career (one who even aspired to be a professor) and those who felt they had no particular prospects, is significant, and was surprising. The analysis of the transcripts is a very important and lengthy process, and as delicate as the conduct of the interviews themselves. It is important, as in good anthropological research, not to impose a pre-set theory, but let the insights emerge from the empirical evidence. The transcripts were analysed several times as the true nature of the findings emerged. Looking at first for attitudes to industry or employment, the actual experience of school, in its profound effect on the thinking of pupils, were slowly and painfully made apparent. The neutral analyst should allow himself to be surprised, and to keep challenging his own assumptions. Every transcript was meticulously recorded for consistencies, or for variations, so that any conclusion that was general could be trustworthy.

Findings and Discussion

Whatever our sympathy with the lot of teachers, pupils' attitudes towards them, and their general status, is bleak. Whatever the individual exceptions, and the fact that they are exceptional and prized as such is significant, the experience of teachers is likened to an oppressive regime. Of course the picture that emerges is complex as well as consistent, since there are so many influences that teachers bring to be, but there are some clear indications about the way in which teachers, in their power, are central to the experiences of school. When teachers cannot be tolerated the only escape is exclusions or truancy (Courses of Exclusion). Teachers are there to help. They are also there to be obeyed.

"Now the teachers say that we should have respect for them teaching us and we should be listening to them. I don't really like that idea, because sometimes I thought the teachers don't be really nice to us and they usually boss us around and when we do ask for help they don't tend to give you the help that you need. I mean if I go to assemblies now every day...you always say a teacher 'we're here to help you'. But when we go there and ask for help they don't seem to have time for you and even though you do ask for help they only give a small amount of help. So I don't like that concept.

Just the way they are. They say that we're going to be the next generation, they always seem to say that to us. But when it comes down they tend to help us, they just say 'when you go out in the whole world, you'll be alone'. That's all they say, I know it by heart". (F.11)

Teachers obviously mean well. Their intentions are never in doubt. The fact that they are not delivered is the fault of the system in which they operate. This causes tensions for pupils and teachers. The rhetoric does not match the reality. The fact that, like stress, such inability to deliver what is needed is imposed on teachers by managerial demands might be understood by pupils, but it does not alleviate their dissatisfaction.

Teachers wish to have 'respect', which, when they use this term, mean obedience. The roles observed here are quite clear; we 'should be listening to them'. This leads to being bossed around, so that 'respect' is only a one-way process rather than a mutual understanding. The most disappointing part of the mismatch between rhetoric and reality is between the desire of individual help and the inability to give it. 'Teachers say' one thing but when the help is offered is asked for they don't tend to give you what you need. It is a matter of 'not having time'. But it that is a fact of life, it is 'the way they are'. Pupils assume that there is a culture of indifference, that really they should not be expected to ask for help. They interpret this not only as indifference but a deliberate stance, since "you are on your own". Like the rallying cry of 'get on with your work' the message is understood as indifference.

The most worrying concern of pupils is that all oppression, or lack of support stems from other feeling that teachers are indifferent, that they do not care, personally, whether they wish to or not.

"I can understand the point of view that they can't be bothered with it any more because like I say most of the people were just turning up at school because they had to, they didn't have to do any work when they were there. Teachers basically weren't there to teach them, they were just to look after them basically. Its rather pointless of you are doing this...other teachers just give up. It was a lost cause." (M.aet.18)

The root of the problem for such a pupil is the shared indifference to learning. Once the main purpose of the school is lost, as is so often, then all that is left is the need for oppression, for discipline, for the insistence on obedience. This is one reason why schools are so often likened to prisons. It is a statutory duty of parents to send their children to school, and one of the measurements of the success or failure of a school is its ability to keep them incarcerated. The teachers role descends into 'looking after' pupils rather than anything more creative, struggling to control rather than teach.

If teachers are resented for their control, they are even more resented when they cannot be 'bothered' to do so. The expectation of the disciplinary powers of teachers is extraordinarily high, as if pupils assumed that the onus for order is entirely on the teachers and that the duty of pupils is virtually to test their capacity. Those teachers who cannot cope are despised.

"I wish the teachers were better. Some of them can't even control the class and you know...one teacher was actually frightened of this boy. Yes he was. The teacher just like...'alright, do whatever you want" (F.11)

This is part of the curious culture of some schools that it is unsurprising if some pupils do not wish to learn, or wish to 'mess about'.

"I think the majority of them realise its getting a lot more difficult to teach here because they just riot during lessons and its harder to learn to be honest because the kids just do what they want". (F.11)

The absurdity of the circumstances is clear, but it is a result of the estrangement of pupils from schools. Schools are such collective places that all are affected by the actions of the few. The difficulties of teaching centre more and more on discipline, on 'coping strategies' than on the intricacies of the subject matter on the complexities of pedagogy.

"If there is people messing about we have to be cruel, in other schools there aren't any teachers like them. I can only find 4 or 5 teachers who are...if people mess about they tell them off. But I have seen many teachers just sitting and let them mess about. One teacher that I think is really good is Mr -. They don't mess about with people, if you mess about they chuck you out. They are like relaxed you just have to relax with them. But other teachers you just sit down and can't do anything else, listen to other boys who mess about. That's it". (M.11)

Some teachers, who are respected for it, are able to deal with difficult pupils. One can understand, why others simply cease to be engaged in that battle of wills. Those who have mastered the art of discipline can they 'relax' since not only their reputation but their very manner excludes that confidence of command and pupils like Cornwall recognising King hear, can see as once if they cannot get away with 'messing about'. At the same time pupils do not respect some of the weapons that teachers resort to in order to keep discipline.

Pupils like strictness, and general rules but not being singled out. They do not like the personalisation of discipline.

"I still do all the works but I don't like the teachers. Sometimes I get sent out. Mr - sends you out for no reason whatsoever. If you walk in he just tells you to get out. It happens to most people. It's just that he thinks he knows everything but he doesn't". (M.10)

Some of the relationships with teachers are constantly troubled.

"I don't like the teachers and she doesn't like me...I don't get on with the teachers. It's from the past when my Dad was in the school. My Dad had a go at her and she doesn't like that". (F.10)

There are all kinds of judgements that are formed, from previous experience, that means that certain pupils are singled out, or sent out in anticipation that something might happen. Discipline then becomes a personnel matter.

"Mr – because he's one of those types that say if you say something he sends you out, or sends you on call...if you get sent out on call for two times you get sent home...Mr – sending people out mostly all the time and if you come late he makes you stand outside". (M.10)

One of the problems for Schools is that individual teachers have their own standards of discipline. There is little consistency observed. Some teachers have 'given up' and have become indifferent. Others will not tolerate even the hint of disobedience.

"The teacher. Just too strict. You can't really talk socially to your friends in class. You can't even talk really, he just makes you do your work. He tells you to shut up". (M.10)

"They're always shouting and going on about stuff. They send you owt for nowt". (M.10)

The teachers might well have their reasons, but each one is different and another layer of subservience to the whims of individuals is learning their particular expectations. Being 'picked on' without reason, 'for nowt', is a by-product of the failure initially to adapt to a new

classroom. The variable approaches of teachers makes pupils learn how to control their behaviour and vary it. This is part of their learning about 'relationships'.

Some pupils are, particularly vulnerable to the strict demands of teachers, especially when under the influence of their peers.

"She always gets me done for anything I don't do...He moved me around all the classroom and I didn't do owt. Well, there's this guy who sits next to me, he's always like getting me done and I'm always moving and getting into trouble". (M.10)

We have already witnesses the ability of fellow pupils to cause problems, but a particular satisfaction seems to be derived from placing people in the part of the least patient and most angry of teachers. Being 'picked on' is often the result of a previous reputation on the relationship with peers as with deserved response to bad behaviour. Each class is different, and teachers are observed to treat pupils differently.

Unfairness is resented, even when it arises out of good intentions.

"People used to get picked on all the time...Supposedly people do a good piece of work and they get a commendation slip which is sort of like...I don't know how to say it, commends them for their work...but lately people have just been going into lesson behaving for say nine of them and disrupting the rest of the year and because they have behaved for those nine the teachers see it as a surprise and they commend them with commendation slips". (M.10)

The rejoicing over 'one sinner that repenteth' does not necessarily appeal to the others. Those who draw attention to themselves might receive a great deal of punishment but they also have their rewards. Any system of rewards and punishment cannot always be seen to be fair. Positive discrimination can also be resented.

"Some kids are cheeky and what I really don't like about school is once we were in French and half her class were misbehaving and all of us got detention apart from a disabled person and a deaf person. All of us even though half of us weren't doing anything.

He did report it to the Headmaster and he didn't do anything about it. That happens often. We had some exams and the disabled person got much longer than what we did and it's all meant to be equal and stuff. In wheelchairs and stuff like that you know they haven't got writing problems or ** problems but they still get longer". (F.10)

Unfairness is one of the central concerns in the social world of school. Sometimes it is made into a policy, like discriminating in favour of some, or rewarding others. The arbitrariness of punishments, metered out to those who have the misfortune to be caught rather than those who are more responsible, is also resented. The unevenness of expectations and classroom routines is, however, evident. Teachers vary in their demands and in their ability to be interesting. They have different standards of behaviour and ability. Some lessons are felt to be particularly oppressive compared to the others.

"I hate German. I don't like him. The teacher. He's just arrogant. You have to work in silence for a whole hour and ten minutes and I can't shut up. I'm

always getting into trouble. We still get told to shut up and get on with it".
(F10)

It is very easy to feel oppressed in some lessons when they are allowed to talk in others: variations of style lend some lessons (and some teachers therefore) to be associated with being bored: "She just keeps on talking and talking you don't do work. It's just so boring in there" (F.10)

Teachers vary in their approach to discipline: they are also felt to be indifferent to the individual needs of pupils. Often the two are associated. Whilst all pupils can reflect on particular moments of pleasure, they all share a sense of the majority of lessons being both "boring and pointless". The two go together. Anything will be dull if it has no sensible purpose. This has a great deal to do with the teaching style.

"Depends which teachers as well. Some teachers don't cater the needs for all students...he don't cater for the needs for me; he finds and moves on to the special, which I don't really like.

The teaching method I think is too boring. It doesn't get you involved. It's just like here's your work, do it and people do it, they might get it but it doesn't catch your interest. It makes you lose interest, that doesn't encourage people to work...there isn't so much teaching methods. I'm not blaming the school but that's the way it is, and if you're like me I get bored really quickly so I don't really like it". (M.11)

Every teacher knows the difficulty of catering for the needs of a wide variety of pupils, differentiated by their attitudes and learning styles as well as their abilities. Pupils also feel they are not catered for, especially those who are above or below the mean levels of performance since they are the ones that stand out. We have a sense of teachers delivering the curriculum, of handing out tasks, of helping pupils occupied, even if their motivation is to reach the higher standards.

Pupils can learn by themselves rather than through listening to the teachers talking but what they seek is not only clear explanations but a motivation to learn. Boredom derives from losing all sense of purpose in a subject.

"I think it were History because it just bored me. Really did bore me...And I weren't that good at Maths either. It were like...I can add up and I'm not stupid bit it were just doing sums and stuff like that, that I couldn't do. And it were like the teacher just did us, they didn't seem to teach it, like it, like it were just 'sit down, get on with it'. They couldn't be bothered, we couldn't be bothered". (F act 16)

We see the loss of confidence in the teacher. The recurring phrase is about 'not bothering', or putting the onus on the pupils to learn without showing them how. 'It's up to you', like see commands and exhortations without support. As in any poorly run organisation there is an imbalance balance between responsibility and the means to fulfil it.

Teachers have a lot of subtle power. They can discriminate between pupils. They can 'pick out' some and ignore others.

"I don't like how they teach. When you ask them questions and they go to someone else and they just ignore you". (M.10)

It is very easy for pupils to feel, in such a large crowd of them, ignored and even humiliated.

"Sometimes if they're busy then they won't help you until they're free...it's really difficult for me because I used to have hearing problems in the first year and I couldn't understand nothing of it and I lost track and I still can't understand a lot of it". (M.10)

Falling behind the expectations and the pace of the class can be an effective way of learning to dislike a particular subject.

"Well, the teacher, she was...she went at the pace of like the better ones in the group. She didn't slow down for the less able ones...and that makes you dislike the subject". (F.act.15)

The slower pupils are always cautious of themselves and can easily be humiliated.

"Cos my teacher was horrid to me. He used to embarrass me in front of the class. He thought he was really funny but nobody else did. He used to make me stand there and he used to laugh at my homework 'cos it wasn't right".

(F act 17)

Unfortunately, stories of being exposed as 'stupid' are many, although there are many more inadvertent incidents than ones in which the teacher derives some malicious satisfaction from hurting the pride of individuals. It is also part of being 'picked on', or being exposed for what the teachers see as deviancy.

The power that teachers have is clear; even if it is not absolute. Some of this power is directed towards discipline, where teachers make, and more ambivalently, interpret the rules (See Butroyd). It is, however, based on the facts that they are there to enforce learning: the real power lies in what they do in the classroom. When dealing with discipline, they can punish and seek out offenders; they might equally well be indifferent to acts of bullying and there are many instances when they choose not to assert their authority. Even when indiscipline affects their own teaching they can be indifferent to it. There are those who create a regime that pupils find oppressive: this is based on the demands being made. Some pupils react against the ambition of teachers.

"I don't like any teachers because she pushes you too hard. She's alright but she says that if you get under this certain mark you get detention even if you're not really brainy. She like punishes you even if you've tried your best. It makes you not want to do anything. It makes me feel I used to like it at first, but now I just don't want to do anymore. I have to though". (F.10)

There are few choices in school, in action or in thought, at least on the surface. You 'have to' go to school and 'have to' learn. Teachers are observed as desiring high standards of output and of application. This is considered worthy but it is oppressive if assumed to be a sign of their own success. It can feel oppressive as part of the unintentional discipline system of the school. Work is often seen as punishment. Indeed, every week, extra homework is commonly used as punishment. Making learning something leads to being forced to do more of it. 'Doing your best' is not good enough. There are targets and tests. The results often is that pupils do not 'want to do anything'; all the pleasures of motivation are lost. Homework becomes a chore and all work an oppression.

"I don't like the teacher either...she explains things pretty well but she's too strict. You know in normal classrooms you're you can lean over to your mate and go alright and all this and talk to them. But its got to be total silence in her classroom". (M.10)

The sense of oppression associated with teachers is not just a matter of discipline, of being over strict. It is a question of demands, of attention to the details of work as well as behaviour. It is important for pupils to feel comfortable with learning but there are many classrooms where there is a sense of unease. The pupils are being forced to learn, as if they had not natural desire to do so. They are scrutinised for signs of misbehaviour as if without such a watch chaos would ensue. The unease can be created in a number of ways. One is a sense of disagreeing with the teacher, but being made to feel there is no right in doing so.

"It's the teacher. I don't like the teacher. She's a bit overpowering. I don't know. She doesn't buy lottery tickets and things. She's I'm not against being with your religion like but she's like, its just her opinion counts. I can't say anything else. She doesn't want anybody else to buy lottery tickets and things. She thinks it's gambling and things like that". (F.10)

A teacher's opinion 'counts' in such a way that is allows not arguments. The teacher deals in correct facts, in certainties. It is, therefore 'overpowering' if the same certainly is applied to matters on which the pupils also have ideas.

Teachers are assumed to have the power of what they teach. They demand that pupils pay attention to them as the controllers and organisers of the curriculum, even if they, in their turn, are controlled by others. This makes the ability to ** and subject the more important. Conversely, such necessary reliance on teaches can lead to problems.

"Maths is just so difficult. I've had three teachers now and I don't understand none of them. I mean they just sit there and they give you all these equations and you know you just look at them and you can't figure them out and the difficult part is all three of the teachers explain it in a different way. I mean you can't understand it. I mean you get into an exam and you know I don't understand what they are saying. I'm going to get an 'E' in Maths anyway. I've failed Maths I know. So I just said after we sit in now we went to like a course work type, so I don't have to sit the exam because its too difficult. I've tried the paper and I've failed bad ways. You know Mr - ? He came in, right and scared the daylight out of me". (F.11)

This might be a student impossible to teach or deemed enumerate. It could also be that every attempt to explain meets the deep seated lack of self belief that prevent any cerebral movement. But the sense of failure is palpable and the sense of a lack of self-belief very undermining. It is a real feeling and are shared at some movement or other, in at least one subject, by all. From the learning of reading onwards there are moments when something is presented that has no obvious meaning at all (Cullingford 2001).

In this experience of school, often kept private, the need for a teacher to understand, let alone explain is paramount. When it does not happen it can be for lack of time, lack of noticing or lack of concern. It could also be a deliberate methodology.

"The teacher that we've got he's an alright person but he's got unusual teaching method which he doesn't actually teach. He expects you to find out from books. He's given you a book and that and I'm not really good at that kind of learning just from a textbook and I've done quite badly in it. Like he

sends you off at the beginning...right you go to him you say 'can I have a pass to go to the I.T room or the library and he just gives it you and then I used to end up in the library just talking about doing work". (M.11)

The variations in approaches to teaching are characterised not just by the particular extremes of method, but, from the pupils' point of view, by contrasts of expectation. Research on teachers in the classroom looks as the way they dominate lessons by talking on the way they set work for pupils to do by themselves, or as the use of groups, and the layout of the classroom (e.g. Oracle). From the point of view of pupils the variation between teachers are significant at a different level. It is the intensity, or the quality of the relationship that matters, however they go about teaching. When an 'unusual' teaching method is introduced, like sending pupils off to find out for themselves the real question is whether this is being done in the pupil's interests or for the convenience of the teacher.

When teachers appear not to be carrying out their duties this can be a matter of their indifference or inability.

"He knows a lot about the subject. He's a good teacher but he just doesn't know the way to teach people just like when he's talking about something they just start making noises and he doesn't like it whey they mess around but people just mess around in that certain lesson. In other lessons they're alright". (M.11)

There is a note of sadness here. Even the 'good teachers' erudite and probably interesting, is in turn oppressed by the difficulty in handling pupils who detect weakness. Just as pupils are often humiliated for their lack of understanding so teachers are humiliated by the difficulty in maintaining order. It is an absurd situation. Some teachers spend all their time in matters of discipline, when little academic work is done, and others have their discipline undermined when even less is achieved. Either way the pupils rely heavily on the teachers. They look to them for the lead. They and not what is learned, is the central concern.

The fact that teachers have such power is a matter of concern, especially for the teachers. The 'power' is not a question of automatic command but of centrality, of being seen as the mainstay of learning. They replace the subject as a centre of attention. They create or destroy different subjects through their relationship with the pupils.

"I find their subjects pretty hard and the teachers don't get it across so much and it just seems so difficult. Just mainly teachers. It's like I'm not really bothered about what I'm doing it's just different teachers I have. Like History. I enjoyed that in the first and second years but when I got a different teacher I didn't like it 'cos like I didn't like the teacher at all.

But I'd like to have a good teacher but in the long run I would prefer a hard teacher because she gets you, it gets you working. In the end she's giving you a detention and then you do the work. But I had French and she was so easy you just didn't have to work all lesson and then I got really low grades". (M.11)

The central experience of school is relationships, with teachers as well as peers. This fact is often misunderstood, as if schools were academics devoted wholly to the gaining of knowledge. Subjects are not important for their own sake, for the requisition of wisdom on the pursuit of knowledge but for the experiences they give, through teachers, and the preparation for tests.

The concentration on the social relationships of school means that all kinds of understandings and opinions about the world are being acquired at a level far beyond the ostensible hierarchies of learning. The distinction between the subject and the way it is taught is fully understood. The ability to make people do things is a way they might not wish to, the bullying and the indifference and the constant battle for power all give insights into a society "red in tooth and claw". Schools give opportunities for the sense of unfairness.

"I'm not too keen on the teachers; he always picks on people. I used to have another teacher but they put us in to top sets and bottom sets. I'm in the top set now and the teacher just picks on people and he expects too much of you". (F.10)

Being 'picked on' is a reflection of demand, if cajoling as well as bullying. In the crowded and impersonal world of the mass, the most terrifying as well as the most satisfying moments are those of being recognised. Most pupils strive for anonymity and most attain it (Pye). It is most convenient that way, for all involved. And yet one cannot help questioning if such an ethos is really what schools should be trying to achieve. Are not the states aims the fulfilment of the individual? Most pupils feel the schools are about conformity, about not being 'different' whether in behaviour or standards.

The experience of school is focused on teachers. This sounds both bland and obvious. Teachers do what they need to do; they convey knowledge. The way it is reinterpreted by pupils, however, suggests something different. They feel disenfranchised. The very means of organising their learning and the very acceptance of their recalcitrance means that they feel marginalised. The fact that teachers themselves are under pressure and demoralised makes this worse. There is something strange that takes place in schools.

The surprising fact that we must end on is that all these profound problems and difficulties are mostly overcome. Despite all, there are achievements and successes. Pupils scrutinise teachers closely and are generally critical. They see the deficiencies, the variability of expectations and the indifference. These limitations also reveal what the possibilities could be, the shared learning, the clear explanations and time for a real personal relationship. Teachers are also appreciated: whilst those who stand out are individual particular and exceptional, their virtues are as generalised as the problem.

"Some of my relationships with some of the teachers and they generally go out of their way for you. They help you with your work: if you're not sure on something you can stay behind and they'll help you. They seem to enjoy teaching; not all of them, but some of them". (F.11)

'Going out of their way to help' is a pursuit of a personal understanding. It suggests a curiosity in the pupils and their development. It takes up time. But it is centrally linked to that insight into the effective teacher 'They seem to enjoy teaching'. Even if some might think that is against the law, it is still the crucial point.

Good teaching should not be a matter of command but a matter of response.

"You can just go to a teacher and just ask them what you want and when you want and when you want and nobody's going to say 'No I can't deal with it at the moment; just go away'. And whoever you go to just find time for, even if its for a few seconds, they just find time and ask you what's wrong". (M.11)

There is no need to dwell on the centrality of civilised courtesy and on its effects. The relationship symbolised here are quite different from the

managerial concerns with command structures and measurable outcomes. The conditions in which teachers work make such responsiveness difficult, but even in the circumstances of schooling, it is this shared vision of learning that makes a difference to the pupils lives. Social relationships are at the centre. If they are right then all else follows.