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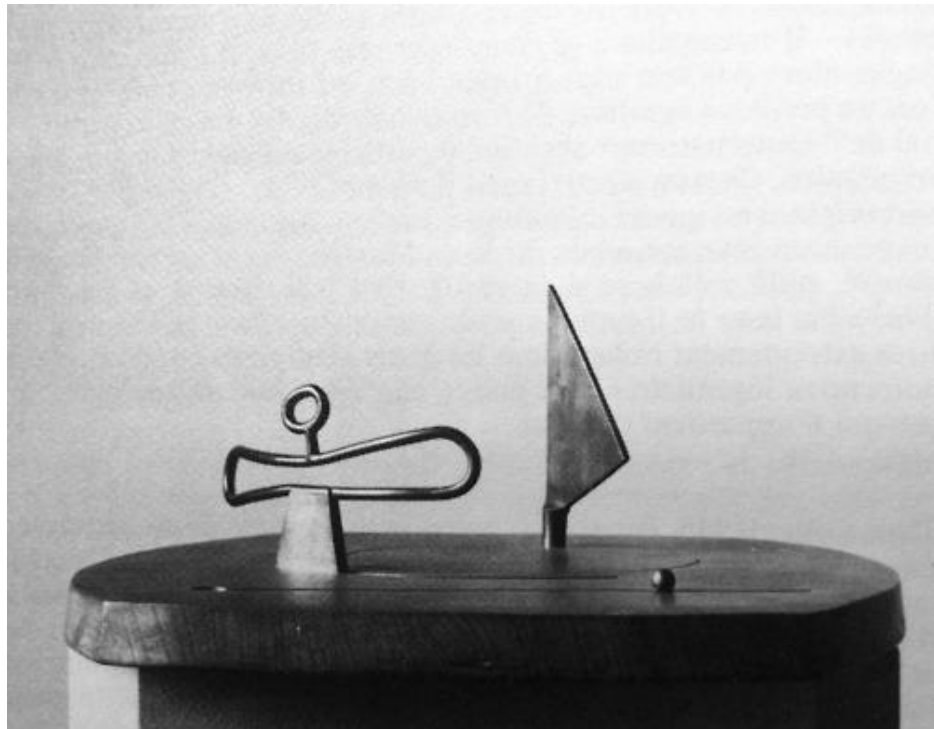
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ProgressWay

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How the light gets in: an exploration of children's agency in the primary school classroom



Homme, femme, enfant (Giacometti, wood and metal, 1931)

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Perpetua Kirby

Thesis submitted for PhD examination, the University of Sussex

August 2018

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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‘There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in’

(Leonard Cohen, *Anthem*, 1992)

Acknowledgements

I am hugely grateful to the children, parents and school staff who welcomed me into your classrooms and homes, giving time to show and talk with me about what helps us to learn. Your humour, play, thoughts and ideas made the research as enjoyable as it was interesting.

Later in the thesis, I describe how my supervisors, Dr. Sevasti-Melissa Nolas and Prof. Colleen McLaughlin, have taught me so much; I want to add my deep gratitude for your wonderful support, including staying the course when you both moved on from Sussex. I am also grateful to Prof. Rachel Thomson who first encouraged me to apply to do the doctorate — you were right, it has changed me — and for recently taking on an internal supervisory role at Sussex. I would like to give a special mention to Mary Jane Drummond, an academic and former teacher of ‘the Plowden generation’, for volunteering hours of time to share your invaluable insights on primary education, my research and how to write. Thank you also to Prof. Alvin Birdi for your statistical support. My fellow students and other faculty members, with whom I laughed, cried, hugged, cooked, collaborated, walked and talked, are very much a part of this thesis, including Elsie, Fawzia, Louise, Magda and Rebecca. As are teacher friends, Ruth, Phil, Rafela and Gillian: I spent happy days writing in your rural retreats.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) generously funded this research, together with a collaborative partner, ProgressWay, and The Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace (GHFP). ProgressWay brought the valuable opportunity for greater dialogue and reflection. I would like to thank James Park (ProgressWay) and Dr. Scherto Gill (GHFP) for the many productive discussions on the research and broader educational concerns, as well as the ProgressWay advisory group of educational professionals: Dr. Marilyn Tew, Dr. Sue Roffey, Dr. Susan Hart, Avril Newman and Prof. Robin Banerjee. Many thanks for your suggestions and comments on early drafts. I am also grateful to Prof. Michael Fielding and Dr. Sophie Laws, former mentors, for supporting my ESRC application.

Finally, thank you Rosa, Luka and Anton, the ‘light’ of my life, for encouraging and tolerating this doctorate, as well as Angela, Elinor and Milton; without all your love, support and many cups of tea I would still be staring at a blank page.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines where and how children achieve agency in the primary classroom, identifying the conditions that extend and limit the scope and scale of their agency, to understand more of the details of a phenomenon viewed as central to education but often glossed over in research. The study draws on a multimodal ethnography of a Year One classroom, within an ordinary English primary school, including an in-depth focus on the experience of a few carefully selected children. In addition, a week was spent undertaking a ‘rapid’ ethnography in a Year One class in an ‘outstanding’ teaching school.

The research details the conditions of the ‘on-task’ modern primary classroom, a performance-focused environment centred on delivering a knowledge-based national curriculum. There is an emphasis on children’s conformity, including a moral and bodily discipline, with children expected to learn only what the teacher knows. Practices designed to promote agency (e.g. setting by current ability, and promoting learning behaviours such as resilience and aiming high) can promote pupil anxiety and re-inforce existing hierarchies.

The thesis explores what children’s agency looks like in the on-task classroom, drawing on a relational conceptualisation of agency, where children act purposively to achieve outcomes of educational relevance. This includes a focus on children’s agency ‘orientations’ – their cultural, social and emotional experiences and outlooks – as well as discourses, practices and the materiality of classrooms. The thesis identifies children’s competence in understanding what is expected of them, and agency in performing the ‘good’ and ‘clever’ child subject positions, helping to make classroom life more liveable, although this form of agency is limited and unhelpful for dealing with the new and unexpected. Children also deviate, becoming the ‘desiring’ child, finding moments to pursue desires and ways of knowing not provided for within the on-task classroom. Here, children’s many practices, which include to laugh, move, speak, create, collaborate, as well as to sit and listen, offer embodied ways to think about, understand, re-imagine and transform the world. The children’s desires offer a critique of the on-task classroom, with its narrow focus on gaining knowledge and skills, and socialisation in moral rectitude, insinuating a desire to be educated through the transformation of the subject and existing social orders. All children pursue their desires

in the classroom, but the middle class, male and oldest children have the greatest scope to deviate.

Through tracing lines of desire, acting with the presumption of equality, I suggest children become political subjects, engaged in the act of ‘dissensus’ through the redistribution of what is understood as ‘sensible’ within the classroom. They also raise a ‘common concern’ about the need for a different type of classroom. The thesis concludes with teacher dilemmas emerging from the research highlighting the inherent complexity in deciding which of the different purposes of education to foreground at any point. It identifies the need for future research on pedagogical spaces that allow for children’s transformation as well as their conformity, and the mental health implications of the on-task classroom.

The thesis draws on post-structuralist perspectives, together with new materialism (e.g. Gert Biesta, Michel de Certeau, Karin Murris, Saba Mahmood, Sevasti-Melissa Nolas, Jo Moran-Ellis, Jacques Rancière).

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

A few months after starting primary school, my son developed a fear of stairs. This became particularly acute when he moved to his first floor, Year One class, named Mountain. The day we removed him from the school was the first time in 18 months that he ran up a flight of stairs without hesitation or adult help. He felt pressured to do as expected in class, 'I can't ask my friends for help, because they [teachers] want to know it's my work', becoming increasingly resistant to have a go at things that challenged him, but was re-enthused when able to input more into how and what he learns. This image of the stairs stays with me when writing about children's agency in the modern primary classroom. It is a context with a linear understanding of knowledge construction, built one step at a time, and where children are aware of their position in the hierarchy. My daughter, also at primary school, tells me, 'I want to be better than everybody at everything'. Aiming high is infused with affect, where her efforts to manage conflicts of demands prevent her from seeking assistance, 'I'm good at maths, so it's embarrassing to say if I don't understand; they'll think I'm not any good'. Looking up can be frightening: for my daughter, moving from the infant to the juniors feels like 'one hundred steps'.

Seeing my children stop short in their education is a key impetus for undertaking this exploration of children's agency in the modern primary classroom. I am struck, also, by the greater value placed on children as agents at home compared to at schools. As a former researcher specialising in children's participation, working across different sectors (including education), my interest in children's agency was also prompted by the unresolved tension between valuing children's participation and protection. This study sets out to explore where children act purposefully to achieve outcomes of educational relevance, and to identify the classroom conditions that extend or limit the possibility to do so. In this chapter, I explain what I mean by 'agency' and why it is an important area of study, and how I have focused my research on this phenomenon within the Year One classroom. In addition, I reflect on how being a doctoral student reveals a gap in my previous education, which has left me vulnerable to not knowing, and what helps me to move forward. Lastly, I provide an overview of the thesis chapters.

1.1 Agency and why it matters

Children's agency in their everyday lives has been widely illustrated, within childhood studies and beyond, but often their agency is 'glossed over, taken to be an essential, virtually unmediated characteristic of humans that does not require much explanation' (Prout, 2005, p.64-5). This thesis emphasises agency as a phenomenon (or set of phenomena) to be 'described, understood and explained' (Biesta and Teddler, 2006, p.9), rather than posed as an explanatory theory for human action, or seen in terms of a structure-agency duality. It takes those areas previously viewed as binaries and probes the 'messy and complex' in-between spaces, in which 'material, social, psychological and cultural elements of everyday life come together' (Nolas, 2014a, p.130), as children and adults work to co-construct their educational environment.

This study explores what children's agency looks like in the classroom, drawing on a relational conceptualisation of 'agency' as distributed across an entanglement of elements. Children are members of this entanglement, but so too are other things: discourses, practices and the materiality of classrooms. The research aims to deepen understanding about what produces and extends, as well as hinders, the opportunities for children to act purposively in the classroom, by exploring children's 'agentic orientations' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Biesta and Tedder, 2006). These capture an individual's cultural, social and emotional experiences and outlooks, for example their beliefs, histories, desires and aspirations that determine how they respond within the classroom. The focus is on children's agentic orientations, as well as the discourses, practices and materials through which these orientations emerge and shift. Agency is understood here as purposeful action that achieves an outcome (Moran-Ellis, 2013), through transaction with the environment, rather than something individually possessed (Biesta and Tedder, 2006). Agency can be both creative and destructive, and the focus in this thesis is the extent to which agency is supportive of educational outcomes.

Recent policies have done little to emphasise children's agency in English schools, instead prioritising a standards agenda dominated by proving performance within a tightly defined curriculum; a model underpinned by values of individualism and competition. Under New Labour, a concern with listening to children informed policies and discourses, for example in the Children Act 2004, which extended into the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition, with its emphasis on 'Big Society' and civic

participation. This was quickly replaced, however, by a Conservative Party austerity agenda that translated into an educational focus on teacher authority, including imparting knowledge and ensuring pupil discipline (Kirby and Webb, forthcoming), a context that forms the backdrop to this study. In the past couple of decades there has been an emerging public (Nolas, 2015) around the area of student agency, with various non-government actors working in this area (e.g. 'PROGRESS', ProgressWay; 'Learning Futures', Paul Hamlyn Foundation; Human Scale Education; 'Rights Respecting Schools', Unicef; School Councils U.K.), although the changing political and economic landscape has created limits to this work.

This is seen in the case of ProgressWay, a small charity aiming to ensure schools provide all young people with supportive opportunities to learn and grow, that disbanded in 2017. They were my partner under the ESRC Collaborative Studentship grant funding this doctorate, an initiative aimed at facilitating greater knowledge exchange and partnership between academia and other sectors to drive innovation and growth. ProgressWay's approach was to encourage school enquiry, utilising an on-line diagnostic tool completed by children and staff, to examine how aspects of school culture (including participation) enable children to learn. It grew out of Antidote, which was established in the late 1990s, aimed at making 'the capacity to handle the complexities of our emotional lives as commonplace as the ability to read, write and do arithmetic'. Their mission was taken up by schools keen to challenge the 'standards' agenda, and the organisation prospered under New Labour's Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) funding initiative. The change in government and withdrawal of funding on social and emotional aspects of education led to new branding and a focus on promoting the links between school culture and attainment, but their services were no longer a priority for schools, seen to want more direct routes to improving test scores.

Despite the current English political and educational terrain, there remains a broader concern with student agency. Internationally, a conference visioning education within 2030, hosted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), identified student agency as a 'driving concept' (Mehisto, 2017, n.p.). Beyond a 'solid foundation' in literacy and numeracy, student agency is seen also to require a 'personalised learning environment that supports and motivates each student to nurture his or her passions, make connections between different learning experiences

and opportunities, and design their own learning projects and processes in collaboration with others' (OECD, 2018, p.4). Children's agency is seen by some commentators as core to the purposes of education, which includes transforming what it is possible to do and be (Biesta, 2010a) which is integral to UNESCO's four pillars of learning: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together (Delors, 2006, p.37). Agency is also central to a range of learning theory (e.g. Bandura, 2006; Bruner, 2006; Wenger, 1998; Vygotsky, 1968; Freire, 1970; Dewey, 1963). Examining the concept of learning, Hodgkinson and colleagues (2008) draw together the importance in analysing both the learning culture that 'will permit, promote, inhibit or rule out certain kinds of learning', and human agency, where 'Each participant in a learning culture contributes to the reconstruction of that Culture' (p.37). Looking at primary schooling specifically, The Cambridge Primary Education Review emphasise the importance of learner engagement, empowerment, autonomy and dialogue (Alexander, 2010).

This study aims to understand further the often glossed over area of children's agency. It applies a relational theory of agency to young children in an English primary school context, where their agency is central to educational purposes and theories, at a time when pupil agency is not prioritised at government level. Year one is chosen as the focus because it represents a liminal year, with its marked change from a balance of child-initiated and adult-led activities to the beginning of formal schooling, and there is an absence of studies on children's agency in this setting. Specifically, I address the following questions:

1. Where and how do children achieve agency in the classroom?
2. What conditions support and limit children's agency in the classroom?

1.2 Researching agency in the Year One classroom

A range of empirical studies have identified practices important for supporting children's agency in the classroom (discussed in Chapter Two), but research in this area frequently focuses on pedagogy, classroom discourses and practices, and is sometimes at the level of rhetoric; far less attention is given to children's own understanding and experience of their agency. The currently dominant methodological approaches used within education rely on surveys and experiments, including big outcome data (e.g. the International Student Assessment, PISA), mixed methods (e.g. Green and Preston,

2005) and psychological research (e.g. Dweck, 2000). These have a valuable role to play in showing supportive factors and the predictive capacity of the explored concepts, as well as population trends. However, such approaches offer a limited order of theory with little analysis of shared meaning making or children's positioning. When it comes to unpacking the complexity of children's everyday lives, the 'processes' and 'mechanisms' of being and becoming, the typologies that attempt to offer a degree of predictability and universalism are limited for understanding the historically situated contexts of children's lived experience. Research in these traditions recognises that the individual operates in interaction with others, but the analysis rests on an agency/structure duality in which society is seen as 'out there', with reference to the resources or constraints only as the context within which children develop (Prout, 2005). This leads to limited exploration of culturally situated meaning making; the role of economic, social and cultural capital for the achievement of agency is also rarely addressed (Gaddis, 2013).

My own work is situated within a critical research perspective exploring what agency looks like within processes that are unfolding, messy, dynamic and relational, rather than measuring agency as an education outcome. The research integrates post-structural theory together with a new materialist focus on how things are entangled with everyday discourses and practices. Ethnography allows for a rich description of a temporal, situational and relational understanding of agency; capturing practices as they unfold in time within classroom entanglements. The focus is children's lived experience, including the meaning making that shape children's agency orientations, actions, and interactions. I integrate a wide view on the whole classroom, with an in-depth focus on the experience of a few carefully selected children.

The ethnography takes place over an academic year in one Year One class, within Daleview Primary, an ordinary state school, rated 'good' by Ofsted. I also spent one week undertaking a 'rapid' ethnography at Clifftop Primary, a well-respected 'outstanding' school. The names of both schools have been changed to protect their identity. This research is not about good teaching or good schools. Whilst it focuses on one class of children, it is not about one teacher or one school. Together, I observe 21 adults working with the children and interview 10 staff. The schools' similarities struck me more than their differences; under the pressures of a performance and accountability

managerialism, the children and staff are expected to be focused on the curriculum and what the teacher already knows; knowledge is not understood as emergent.

In this thesis, I refer to the performance-focused classroom to mean a focus on outcomes, efficiency and accountability. Secondly, I utilise an understanding of performativity as ‘the reiteration of norms which recede, constrain and exceed the performer’ (Butler, 1993, p. 234). This is where norms are what ‘makes each and every body meaningful and recognisable’ (Brady and Schirato, 2011, p.12) and where subjectivities and social action are produced through the repetition of circulating discourses, without there being any hard-wired traits determining who the child is or can be (Oswell, 2013). Through examining children’s lived experiences in the micro practices of the school day, I trace the social regularities through which children’s subject positions are produced and children’s complex negotiation of such positions; foregrounding how ‘children must learn forms and styles of behaviour appropriate for being a ‘child’ and for themselves, as particular children’ within this particular on-task setting (James, 1999, p.100). This is where there are no singular identities and subject positions are always in process, never fixed. Taking up these subject positions offers different affordances and foreclosures to achieve agency. I explore the possibility for children’s agency in this modern primary classroom culture, whether emerging by accident or with planning, that allow them to create something new (Prout, 2005). I also look beyond simple forms of resistance against dominant discourses, to how agency is made possible through the enhancement of the body’s capacity to act, feel and think.

Early in my analysis, I re-discover a moment on the second day of my fieldwork, when five-year-old Jan shows me a crisp packet wrapped around a little weed, its green leaves showing and the packet pulled tight in his hand, holding a bouquet. It evokes pathos and joy; drawing my attention to the tarmacked playground, I am surprised he finds even a crisp packet and the weed must have been discovered in a crevice. During my year in the field, children show me they are skilled at exploring cracks in the school day, with its emphasis on discipline and a knowledge based curriculum, to transform their educational landscape and to let the light in.

1.3 Looking back at a doctoral student’s education

A doctoral student delves deep into the unknown, pursuing something of personal interest, with the possibility for a high degree of agency. I have come to recognise how

my previous education did not set me up well for this endeavour, in which I remain highly vulnerable to not knowing. I was prompted by a maternal interest to research agency in the classroom, as well having a background in childhood studies, spending 20 years researching with children and young people, largely on issues related to agency (e.g. participation and student voice) across different sectors including education. I have loved being a student, pursuing something in-depth that has personal as well as broader social value. Experienced in fieldwork and writing up small-scale research findings, my learning curve has been felt most steeply working deeply with data supported by theory; underpinned by a grappling with not knowing and learning to accept that I do not always understand.

As a young student, I experienced extremes. I was a more advantaged pupil in the local village school and less advantaged in the urban independent school. Born on the first day of September, I was initially in the year above, so I was the youngest and felt permanently behind my peers; then, at ten, I was put into the correct year, becoming the oldest and academically strong. At secondary school, I was at the bottom of the top achieving sets; on a precipice, I felt my height but was aware I might fall at any moment. As an undergraduate, I was a high achieving student, but neither liked my subject nor felt much respect for it at the time, and during my masters I continued to avoid some topics that were of interest but also difficult.

Being a mature student, researching children's education, I have become more acutely aware of my academic vulnerability and extremes, including a sensitivity to criticism but also praise. In my head, I return repeatedly to a good word said to me, getting what I come to recognise as a momentary joy to mask deeper doubts. I sense my supervisors have cottoned on to this, in their wisdom, when after my first year mini-viva, still basking in the positive feedback of my research proposal, they do not say 'well done' but ask 'what did you learn?', helping to ground me. I listen to the voices in the department announcing who is 'brilliant' and the whispers that say who is not. When an academic lends me a book, twice telling me 'it is *hard*', I cannot shake off that word, feeling what it says about my capacity to know. I am too easily nudged off balance, reading another thesis that integrates Rancière's concept of 'dissensus' so seamlessly I slip into saying I cannot reach such heights, and retreat early to bed. When my brother recently asks what I plan to do after completing the doctorate, I hear myself saying 'I'm not clever enough to be an academic'. On occasion, in seminars, my fear of not knowing

leaves me lost, my heart thumping so that I no longer follow what others say or know what I think. Similar to the ‘emergency’ feelings experienced by five-year-old Alfie (discussed in Chapter Six), and the evident anxiety experienced by those I teach, my doctoral peers, and the ‘despair’ (Strathern, n.d.) and palpitating hearts (Back, 2007, p.153) experienced by some of the most experienced academics.

At one point, I experience a darker descent, crying for three days and thrown off course when an early draft chapter is critiqued for my lack of redemption for the research school, being bamboozled by theory and not speaking with my own voice. Shamed, provoked by my display of ignorance, made worse perhaps given my research experience, I feel an imposter in the academy, my ‘body saying that it cannot fit in although it desperately wants to’ (Probyn, 2004, p.345). Coming at a moment when I am also struggling in my home life (supporting an ill child and out of work partner), my supervisors’ words are felt more fully as an ‘unwanted interruption’ (Biesta, 2017a, p.20). My decision then to code using a qualitative software programme, which takes almost three months, gives me the temporal distance to accept their authority and to work through the difficulties in my writing (and at home).

During a writing retreat in Maine, I dip into a copy of *Moby Dick*. There I discover the Catskill eagle, ‘that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces’ (Melville, 2002, p.328). This is a metaphor for those who can rise and profit from moments of suffering, rather than avoiding them as most of us so frequently do, ‘even if he for ever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar’ (*ibid.*). Even shame, in all its misery, ‘spectacularly shows the self in its essential vulnerability – its everyday dependence on the proximities of others, of place, of routine, of biography and history’ (Probyn, 2004, p.329). My partner’s family are from South Africa, where ‘Shame!’ is colloquially used to imply ‘cuteness’ and to demonstrate sympathy, as in ‘you poor thing’, but overused it whitewashes affect. My shame becomes a wrenching out of myself; demanding a more ethical sensibility, alerting me to the extremes of my own education, and an anger at my children’s school experiences, evident when I stand and write knowingly at a distance, when ‘I see without being seen’ (Clifford, 1986, p.12), rather than inclining, sensing and revealing my proximity to the research participants. My supervisors have taught me to look more closely at my data, and therefore myself,

in the pursuit of the kind of listening that recognises ‘the importance of doubts in the service of understanding’ (Back, 2007, p.15), rather than certainties. So that I stop spinning around in my own world. I am heard more clearly in my writing now, as I ‘shuttle across the boundary’ between the research participants and myself, aiming to avoid narcissism, but to unearth likenesses and contrasts (*ibid*, p.159). I hear my supervisors’ voices (and others) in my work too and am in awe of what they know and what they can see. At times, this exposes my vulnerability; my ignorance experienced as an ‘incapacity’ (Rancière, 2010, p.3). At others, I recognise what we all bring and that ‘we never write on a blank page, but always on one that has already been written on’ (de Certeau, 1984, p.43).

I learn from the Year One children how wondrous attention can foreground the most salient and surprising possibilities of any scene. They understand the expectation to travel rapidly the shortest route mapped out by the curriculum, but their alert bodies also meander and immerse themselves in minutiae, so fleetingly sometimes that it can be easily missed, or else dismissed, but in these moments they engage in making meaning. In Maine, where I have time to pause, the experience of being immersed in my data overflows into an overwhelming child-like wonder for the place. Thrilled spotting the distinctive orange of chanterelle mushrooms, deer grazing nervously, or a bald eagle circling above. This attention in turn extends into my work, as I am drawn more deeply into my data, to see what it is that children do in the classroom; illustrating the ways in which ‘the affect created the practices, and the practices created the affect’ (Youdell, 2011, p.108). Recreation here is not simply a ‘distraction’, as Malinowski (2014, p.35) suggests, but offers time to consolidate and reflect: this passage was first written in my head, whilst walking beside a lake.

My job has been to excavate the moments where children’s agency reveals itself, as in Jan’s creation of the bouquet. My challenge has been to make such moments theoretically intelligible, whilst resisting a heavy-handed grasp, including an initial tendency to litter my writing with citations, being the ‘clever student’, without fully explicating these works and engaging them with the data. My focus has been on learning to think with theory to sensitise me to emergent concepts, removing the ‘straight jacket’ of too much theory (Nilsen, 2017, n.p.), which has been both painful and liberating. This thesis is me speaking through the academy, having been taught ‘One must begin to speak. Don’t say you can’t’ (Rancière, 1991, p.23-4); to accept my

vulnerability as ‘a way of being related to what is not me and not fully masterable’ (Butler, 2016, p.25). Coming to terms with the knowledge that, at its best, my writing about the social will inevitably fall short, my best hope being ‘degrees of failure’ (Back, 2007, p.155), I am heartened by the words of Giacometti (n.d.), the artist, ‘it’s still all wrong, but I’m getting a little nearer’.

1.4 Thesis structure: emphasising children’s equality

The bedrock of the thesis is a Rancièrian (1991) logic of the equality of intelligence between all people, including adults and children, to see what might follow from this assumption. Rancière’s presence is felt, even when not cited, through the application of his assumption, which guides how the research is designed, analysed and represented. The thesis emphasises children’s inventive power, and how they construct themselves in relation to categories laid on and demanded of them within an explicative classroom order, and identifies moments in which children act under the presumption of equality. The thesis is itself a Rancièrian (1999) act of politics as aesthetics, ‘in that it makes visible what had been excluded from a perceptual field, and in that it makes audible what used to be inaudible’ (p.36). Within the crisis of representation, choices must be made in producing a research text; the goal of this account is not to achieve a better representation of children’s lives, but to ‘be accountable to people’s struggles for self-representation and self-determination’ (Lather, 2007, p.40) (discussed further in Chapter Two). I use a literary lens to support the reader to live and breathe the life of the primary classroom. The aim is to enrich an understanding of children’s lived experiences, and to deepen the understanding of the sociological, educational and philosophical issues salient to this ethnographic endeavour. Ethnography is my chosen engagement with children, and in line with the conventions of this tradition, the empirical data drives the work. The literary text is the representation of the engagement, and I integrate the work of different theorists, those working with post-structuralism and new materialism but from across different disciplines, where they can illuminate and explain how I have ‘accounted for what has been observed’ (Miller, 2017, p.29). The intention is not to brace my data in line with a specific theory (discussed further in Chapter Three). Following Rancière’s (1991) lead, the thesis tells a story and invites the reader to ponder what they see and make of it. It is an ‘intervention’ rather than a ‘class’ on children’s agency (or specific theorists) and it is for readers to render their own translation and to tell their own story in return (Bingham and Biesta, 2010, p.156).

Rancière's work is introduced in Chapter Two and while his presence is felt throughout, he comes to the fore in the final empirical chapter (Seven), in which I demonstrate how children resist the conditions imposed on them. Also, in the final discussion chapter (Eight) where I put him to work alongside other theorists to produce a coherent understanding of children's agency in the modern primary classroom. The first empirical chapter (four) is a description of the modern primary classroom and is theoretically light. The following empirical chapters (five to seven) focus on children's agency within this context and integrate, primarily in their concluding sections, theorists that help to interrogate an understanding of children's agentic orientations (Biesta, Emirbayer and Mische, and Mahmood). In Chapter Eight, I broaden the discussion of children's agency to include its scope and scale (eg Moran-Ellis), politics (eg Nolas, Oswell, Rancière), and its relation to the purposes of education (eg Biesta, Ingold). The work of these and other theorists are introduced in Chapter Two, in which I detail the different theorisations of agency that inform the study.

In Chapter Two, I also draw on the wider scholarship to situate the modern classroom within its broad educational landscape. I outline what is already known about agency in the primary classroom and identify gaps and sensitising themes of importance for this study. Chapter Three traces my research approach through the Year One classroom using a multimodal ethnographic study, detailing its post-structural and new-materialist epistemological framing. In Chapter Four, I introduce the idea of the 'on-task' classroom in setting out the conditions of the modern primary classroom, including different mechanisms for enforcing learning behaviours considered appropriate to being on-task. This is a longer chapter than the following analytical chapters, because it provides a detailed account of the classroom in which my subsequent analysis is grounded; it takes a wide-angle view, incorporating my data from all the children in the class at Daleview, as well as those at Clifftop. The next three chapters zoom in mostly onto the six core children that I shadowed at Daleview, exploring the different subject positions they occupy, as well as the affordances and foreclosures these offer for achieving agency. I examine how children are highly competent at knowing what is expected of them and perform the 'good' (Chapter Five) or 'clever' (Chapter Six) pupil position (similar to my own children above), which I suggest is a form of agency demanding effort in their navigation of available norms. Chapter Seven examines how children achieve agency performing the 'desiring' child, playfully and creatively

pursuing transformation rather than simply conformity. There follows, in Chapter Eight, a discussion of the findings; thinking with a number of key authors, I pull together my analysis of where children achieve agency in the classroom, the conditions that support and limit their agency as well as the role of the broader educational landscape in creating these conditions. The concluding chapter specifies the contribution of this thesis to knowledge, and the implications for the future of education, including teaching dilemmas that emerge from the thesis.

CHAPTER TWO: Situating the Modern Primary Classroom

This chapter examines what existing scholarship has revealed about children's agency in the classroom. It begins by exploring the wider educational landscape, which delineates the possibilities for children's agency, including governing policy structures and messages, delivered within wider discourses and educational legacies. Secondly, I detail existing empirical work on practices supporting agency in the classroom, useful for framing my study. The penultimate section outlines theorisations of agency, including the dialogical nature of agency and its political implications. The term 'agency' is often used within the wider scholarship and children's agency is accepted to be important for their education. It remains, however, a phenomenon rarely empirically interrogated, particularly with reference to children's understandings and experiences of agency. This study applies a relational theory of agency into a new area, the modern Year One primary classroom, with the aim of observing the details of the phenomenon, including the scope and scale of children's agency. The chapter concludes by setting out the research focus, including the research questions and a summary of key themes drawn from the literature that sensitise me to areas of importance within this study.

2.1 The modern educational landscape

There are a number of key historical legacies underpinning the English modern classroom, which I touch on briefly in this section before exploring in more detail the contemporary neoliberal and neoconservative context, which delineate the possibilities of children's agency in the contemporary classroom. I introduce the current Year One curriculum and discuss how it is at odds with emergent theories of knowledge, raising questions about whose knowledge is valued in the classroom. Finally, I examine different understandings of the purposes of education, drawing out their relevance for a consideration of children's agency in education.

2.1.1 Educational legacies

Schooling has developed in a time of modernity, with its concern for progress, reason and order, where intentionality and the will to power are seen to direct the life course of the modern self, emphasising 'self-perfectability' (Lather, 2007, p.5). Immanuel Kant, for example, stresses the principle of autonomy, 'obsessed by an autistic model of a self that legislates from itself and upon itself – a straight and self-balanced self takes its place in a straight line alongside every other self' (Cavarero, 2016, p.30).

Schooling itself is rooted within the development of bureaucratic administration and a disciplinary pedagogy that sought to ensure the ‘pacification, discipline and training’ considered necessary for the political and social capabilities of modern citizens (Hunter, 1994, p.60). It is also indebted to a former pastoral pedagogy with a spiritual discipline equipping individuals to ‘comport themselves as reflective subjects’ (p. 60), concerned with their own conduct, shaped through ‘ethical labour’ (*ibid*, p. 56). Hunter outlines the legacy of Pietism within modern schools, including formal training for teachers, standardisation of what is taught, pupils raising hands to ask questions, and being taught collectively rather than individually. Similarly, much of the basic Victorian elementary system, that prioritised low cost and a minimalist curriculum, also remains today (Alexander, 2009). This includes the early age for starting school, divisions between infants and juniors, the generalist teacher working with age-based classes across the curriculum, and the domination of the curriculum by the ‘basics’ (reading, writing, maths) with other areas of education and pedagogy marginalised. Characteristic of the Victorian educational system and its legacy is a lack of concern for ‘the immense cognitive and cultural power of talk or the rooting of truly civilised human relations in the capacity to imagine, create and empathise’ (*ibid.*, n.p.).

A shift in values towards what is known as progressive education began to hold increasing sway in the decades leading up to and including the 1970s. These questioned, for example, a reliance on the transmission from teacher to child of knowledge understood as established truth and recognised children driven to learn by curiosity not extrinsic reward (Fielding and Moss, 2011). A particularly defining moment in the shifting educational landscape was the publication of what became known as *The Plowden Report*, an extensive examination into primary education (Central Advisory Committee for England, 1967). The report incorporates elements of the above progressive values, and saw play as the ‘principle means of learning’ (p.193) for young children. The report became known as *the* progressive tract and initially raised the prestige of English primary education (Blyth, 1998). Despite being ‘cautious and conservative’ (Alexander, 2010, p.23), including a warning against the dangers of ‘child-centred education’ (Central Advisory Committee for England, 1967, p.190), with time it was understood not simply by what was ‘published’, but by what was ‘sanctified’, ‘mythologised’ and ‘demonised’ (Alexander, 2009, n.p.). The 1970s increasingly became viewed as having an archly ‘progressive’ style of education,

promoted by strong critiques, notably in the ‘Black Papers’; a series of pamphlets suggesting ‘anarchy is becoming fashionable’ within education (Cox and Dyson, 1969, p.3). Government research at the time however identified a small minority of primary classrooms as fully ‘exploratory’, with the majority classed as ‘didactic’, whilst also raising concerns about inconsistency in curriculum and teaching quality (H.M. Inspectorate of Schools, 1978). By the 1980s, binary discourses were prevalent, and the ‘Great Debate’ about future education reforms had begun. In a search for improved academic results, there was a renewed call for the dominance of the earlier transmission model of education and a call for greater central control (Blyth, 1998, p.6). This resulted in The Education Reform Act of 1988, introducing a national curriculum, which began the shift to increasing government powers and limiting those of Local Education Authorities. The establishment of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in 1992 further challenged teachers’ professional autonomy. A root problem was ‘Plowdenism’ (rather than the report), argues Alexander (2009), with ‘demonisers’ requiring ‘nothing less than a full-blooded progressive revolution against which they could mount their back-to-basics counter-revolution’ (n.p.).

By the early 1990s, there was the move to more whole-class teaching, with studies showing the importance for children to receive teacher attention and focus on learning (e.g. Galton, 1981). Researchers engaged in systematic observations of English primary classrooms in the 1970s, returning to replicate the study in 1997, concluded that teaching in upper primary had become more like lower secondary, with teachers giving more information and children experiencing ‘less agency in how to do their work’ (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2011, p.252).

2.1.2 Neoliberal self ‘value’

More recent radical educational changes have occurred against a dominant neoliberal political-economic setting. Here the emphasis is on market-based arrangements, including competition, efficiency, instrumentalism, managerialism, extrinsic rewards, and the pursuit of a consumer society (Fielding and Moss, 2011). Schools cannot replicate economic markets so have had to reproduce their form in different ways, seen in an emergent performativity culture, including tightly defined educational attainment outcomes and accountability managerialism. With increased school inspection, the measurement and ranking of schools, and an emphasis on the individual as the primary unit of value, what has emerged is competition between schools and between pupils,

side lining wider social or collective values in education (Miller, 2017). In a modern economy therefore, education becomes functional, with persons now constructed as if they are enterprises; studying is not about following passions, but adding value and investing in the future (Brown, 2015). Schools, then, ‘are becoming primary sites for not only the acquisition of essential academic knowledge and skills, but also for the development of the sort of self that has market value in the contemporary neoliberal world’ (Demerath and Mattheis, 2015, p.201). Through the capillary power of governmentality, tactics of governing at a distance taken up in the conduct and mentality of the subject (Foucault, 2007), students and staff come to internalise neoliberal values and regulate themselves, valuing the symbolic power of the quantifiable and monitorised (Morley, 2016). This includes SAT (Standard Assessment Test) scores, Ofsted ratings, school league tables and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) scores.

Ironically, Goodson and Rudd (2016) show those countries that deviate most from neoliberalism come highest on PISA scoring, and those who are the most compliant with neoliberalism come lowest. They relate Finland’s high PISA scoring to a commitment to ‘trust the professionals’, compared with the UK’s ‘targets, test and tables’ (n.p.). An analysis of how big data is used within English secondary schools finds teachers’ performance entwined with that of their students, which makes them vulnerable and limits possibilities for an ethic of care (Finn, 2016). This is a context where staff become technical mediators of skill acquisition, disrupting the teacher-pupil ‘empathetic bond’ where ‘care gives way to individualised learning programmes and strictly adhered to forms of educational development’ (Thomson and Kehily, 2011, p.236). Teacher subjectivity is said more recently to include an instrumental outlook, focusing on standards, performance and quality control, compared with the former Plowden informed values of humanism (holistic, person-centred, caring relationships) and vocationalism (Woods and Jeffrey, 2002).

What we see within neoliberalism is an emphasis on the obligation of citizen self-care and self-responsibility, and within education specifically a rhetoric of parental and student choice. This represents a depoliticalisation of education masking the reality that choices are limited. With increasing privatisation (including academy trusts and private consultancies) education has become a means of generating profit (Fielding and Moss, 2010). Morley (2016) suggests competition reduces the possibility of solidarity and

resistance, and even those who do not believe in the ‘game’ are forced to comply or else lose out. For schools, this includes the risk of a poor Ofsted inspection and academy trust takeover, and for students, possible punishment, exclusion or exam failure reducing future possibilities. This governing through unhappiness becomes a ‘virility test’, but what is not measured is pastoral care and emotional labour (*ibid.*, n.p.).

Ofsted has a requirement to include a focus on ‘personal development, behaviour and well-being’, but an analysis of Ofsted reports by the Institute of Public Policy Research, submitted to House of Commons’ (2016) select committees, identified only a third made explicit reference to pupils’ mental health and well-being. The committees heard evidence that ‘a rigid focus on academic attainment is squeezing out subjects such as music and time for physical activity which help develop life-long skills to improve well-being’ and that parents and young people are ‘concerned about the stress the current education system is currently creating’ (p.8). There has been an increasing professionalisation of children’s emotional and mental health services in education (e.g. school counselling), with the marginalisation of emotions in the classroom to Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) lessons, and circle time in some schools. In the pre-war years, there was an explicit focus on children’s emotional lives in elementary schools, to compensate for a perceived deficit of working-class homes, with little attention given to academic attainment, whereas now the shift is to attainment, with emotions and wellbeing no longer seen as falling within teacher expertise (Banerjee and Barron, 2017). This singular concern with attainment ignores how classroom affect influences children’s engagement, interactions, performance, interpretations of feedback, etc., (Jackson, 2015).

Within the U.K., a former New Labour initiative for schools, SEAL, offered a therapeutic model individualising developmental or psychological causes of wellbeing (Gillies, 2016). This focus on the softer skills of emotional literacy are now hardening into taught skills of masculinity: grit (*ibid.*); although not essentially male, with Duckworth (2017) advocating passion and resilience in her book, *Grit*, and Sandberg (2015) suggesting we *Lean In*. Responsibilisation here stresses individual cognitive restructuring, with resilience and grit the ‘new imperatives of our time’ (Gill and Orgad, 2016, n.p.). In current precarious times, Bracke (2016) suggests, ‘resilience is the new security’ (p.57), turning us away from vulnerability and dependency, so that ‘a resilient

subject is one who can absorb the impact of austerity measures and continue to be productive’ (p.61).

A current national focus on character education was taken up by the government in 2014, when Nicky Morgan introduced a £5 million fund available for schools to ‘instil character in pupils’, including ‘grit’ or resilience, seen as supporting academic attainment (Department for Education, 2014a, n.p.). She wanted children to ‘bounce back from setbacks’ (*ibid.*, n.p.), reflecting a common individualistic misunderstanding of resilience as perseverance in response to minor setbacks, ignoring the wider structural conditions, educational policy and classroom practices for understanding pupil capacity. The word resilience is rooted in the Latin, *resilire*, meaning to rebound, but in the academic literature the concept is used to stress the capacity to adapt successfully to *serious* risks, that ‘threaten system function’ (Masten, 2014, p. 6). It is largely understood not as a fixed individual attribute, but as an interaction between the individual and their social and cultural context that results in relatively positive psychological outcomes despite serious risk experiences (Rutter, 2006). Resilience has become characterised, Bracke (2016) suggests, as ‘the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused by compressive stress’ (p.54). Research has focused on the psychological dimensions of resilience but also highlighted its social ecology with a focus on ‘how key resources in the social, economic, cultural, or political environment influence individual-level or family-level resilience’ (Southwick *et al.*, 2014, n.p.¹).

2.1.3 Neoconservative body discipline

The re-emergence of character education, also prevalent in Victorian England when the Empire was ‘viewed as the embodiment of British “character”’ (Gillies, 2016, p.12), comes on a wider tide of neoconservatism (McCulloch, 2016), including the rise of patriotism and British Values. Within education, neoconservatism is marked by a return to a 1950/60s grammar school curriculum, dominated by knowledge acquisition, including: Teresa May floating the idea of a return to grammar schools (herself a beneficiary of such schooling), smartening up school uniforms, and an increased focus on student discipline. Morgan (2015) talks of ‘British grit in the face of adversity’, linked to the Battle of Waterloo, ‘A defining chapter in our history and a moment that helped make our nation great’ (n.p.). This reference echoes a return to a more

¹ This comment is made specifically by the co-author Catherine Panter-Brick.

‘traditional’ (pre-1970s) school history curriculum since the late 1980s, particularly Gove’s recent emphasis on ‘British’ successes aimed at fostering patriotism (Hady, 2012).

Another extension of the character focus has been a renewed body discipline, driven initially by Gove, and taken up further by Ofsted under the leadership of Michael Wilshaw (a former grammar school student and secondary school head), from 2012 to 2016, when behaviour became an important focus of inspections. This includes a separate ‘written judgement about behaviour’ (Ofsted, 2015, p.52). The inspection handbook lays out exacting standards for the behaviour and safety of pupils, with ‘outstanding’, for example, requiring: ‘Pupils consistently display a thirst for knowledge and understanding and a love of learning’, ‘Incidences of low-level disruption in lessons are extremely rare’, and ‘Pupils’ behaviour outside lessons is impeccable. Pupils’ pride in the school is shown by their excellent conduct, manners and punctuality’ (*ibid.*, p.55). Government appointed Behaviour Tsars have offered greater specificity about what teachers should do to promote desired behaviour in classrooms (Bennett, 2015; Taylor, 2011). A renewed focus on classroom behaviour also reflects concerns identified in teacher surveys (e.g. National Federation of Education Research, NFER, 2008; Hady, 2007), although more at secondary than primary level. A Department for Education (2012) summary of this research recognises defining poor behaviour as ‘not straightforward’ (p.i) and draws almost exclusively on teacher rather than student perceptions. An exception is Bradshaw and colleagues’ (2010) finding that 31 per cent of English pupils feel ‘in most or all lessons’ that ‘there is noise and disorder’, conflating noise with disorder; less emphasis is placed on how just 14 per cent feel they ‘cannot work well’ (p.40).

There has emerged a normalisation of school surveillance technologies (Hope, 2015). An ethnography of a secondary academy identifies a strong disciplinary focus (Kulz, 2017), similar to those secondary heads advocating student silence and eyes tracking teachers at all times (Duobly, 2017; Birbalsingh, 2016); schools visited and praised by Conservative politicians Nick Gibb, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove. The latter emphasises students’ silence for knowledge acquisition, citing Lyndon Johnson, ‘you aren’t learning anything when you’re talking’ (Gove, 2013, n.p.). Research has identified that working-class students are more subject to discipline (Kulz, 2017), and

experience a narrowing of the curriculum and teaching to the test (Reay, 2017), compared with middle class peers.

Ethnographic research in nine primary schools identifies that ‘Behaviour . . . is constantly monitored’ (Bragg, 2018, p.125). Another ethnographic study identifies children in Reception must sit still for long periods, demanding an ‘extreme body discipline’, with ‘Good listening’ valued ‘not only because it indicates engagement with learning, but also because it signals compliance and discipline of the body. . . . [within a whole class pedagogy] successful participation is generally not just a matter of knowing the right answer, but of waiting to be chosen, and of adopting the appropriate posture’ (Maclure *et al.*, 2012, p. 460). Earlier ethnographies have identified how young children competently understand such unwritten rules, negotiating the complexity of rule-governed interactions. They know that to ‘make it’ in kindergarten, is ‘to follow the path of unnoticeability’, being like others ‘to achieve a kind of anonymity and safety from discipline’ (Waksler, 1991, p.110). In Reception, children learn classroom rules that you can only speak when the teacher says you can, and ‘finding out what the teacher wants, and doing it, constitutes the primary duty of a pupil’ (Willes, 1983, p.138).

2.1.4 Year One curriculum

There is a marked change in the pedagogy and curriculum between the Reception class, at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), and Year One at the start of Key Stage One. This can prove a difficult transition with a shift to being work and subject based, static, teacher directed, and emphasising listening and writing (Sharp *et al.*, 2006). A national Year Two SATs test adds pressure to Year One, which already has a controversial end of year phonics test.

A new primary National Curriculum, introduced in September 2014, sets ‘high expectations for what teachers should teach’ (Department for Education, 2014b, p.4), for example, the introduction of fractions and reading words with contractions in Year One. The curriculum offers a narrow focus on maths and English, with content beyond those subjects, including science, humanities and the arts slimmed down. This continues the shift across primary schooling, in which ‘The decade of creativity . . . terminated abruptly’ with the arrival of the 2010 Conservative led coalition’s new curriculum focus (Craft *et al.*, 2013, p.18). The concern now is with the measureable, in maths but also English, with an increase in the technical aspects of writing, including spelling and

grammar, less so creative compositions. A government review of assessment in England specifically mentioned the benefit of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ measurability within English, lending itself ‘to externally-marked testing’ (Bew, 2011, p.60). There is no longer the emphasis on children telling stories (real and imagined), drama has shifted from children also performing their own stories to performing those of other texts, and there is less mention of group discussion compared with the former curriculum. A review of research on the contribution of grammar to English teaching concludes there is a pronounced mismatch between English curriculum policy and existing evidence in primary schooling (Wyse and Torgerson, 2017).

Children in the Year One English classroom are five and six years old; in many other countries children of this age are not in formal schooling. In only a handful of countries, including those in the United Kingdom, children start school at four (Northern Ireland) or five years (England, Wales, Scotland plus four others); in most European countries formal compulsory primary schooling does not begin until six (24 countries) or seven (eight) (Eurydice, 2016). ‘Early years’ education is variably understood across different countries, and the role of play, imagination and child-initiated learning varies for young children. In Finland, for example, children do not start formal schooling until seven although many attend non-compulsory early years education and ‘pre-primary’ class at six. In the latter, rather than prioritising maths and literacy, and school readiness, the emphasis is on ‘the development of thinking in relation to language and communication, mathematics, ethics and religion, environmental issues, physical development, and arts and culture’ with a view to promoting humane individuals with a sense of their ethically responsibility (Sahlberg, 2015, p.52). Early years education in Reggio Emilia, Italy, similarly extends up to six years, and foregrounds its ‘pedagogy of relationships and listening’ and ‘relational creativity’ as core to bringing about innovation and change (Rinaldi, 2006, p.113). Here the child is viewed as ‘rich’; intelligently engaged in meaning making of the world (*ibid.*, p. 13).

In England, there is a very different framing of the ‘child’ within the EYFS compared with ‘pupils’ in subsequent primary school years. The former emphasises learning through ‘play’ (mentioned nine times in the EYFS curriculum) but this word becomes noticeably absent in Key Stage One (in the English curriculum only ‘role-play’ is mentioned). Barely evident is the EYFS focus on expressive arts, design, and exploration; with ‘unique’ children learning in ‘different ways’ and at ‘different rates’;

together with responsive, caring and supportive staff (Department for Education, 2017, p.6).

Despite the constraints of the new National Curriculum content, it aims for a greater degree of teacher ‘freedom to decide how to teach’ (Department for Education, 2014b, p.4). Priestley and colleagues (2015) find older and experienced teachers to be more richly resourced, having experienced other ways of teaching, and this supports their agency, compared with younger and less experienced teachers influenced more by current policy discourses.

2.1.5 Emergent theories of knowledge

The question of *whose* representations of knowledge are available to children is raised by the tightly and centrally designed curriculum, which is currently ‘traditional’ and can include corporate input, seen with business involvement in academies. It offers a curriculum that does not begin with any systematic consideration of what knowledge children need for education. Historically, knowledge production of pedagogical texts (including curricular) has taken place within the scientific community, but ‘*not* among children’ (Dahlberg and Moss, 2009, p.xvii; original emphasis), with schools utilising and reproducing, but not producing knowledge.

A curriculum, in which knowledge is understood as objective and must simply be learned, is ‘out of step with new understandings of learning and knowledge’ (Fielding and Moss, 2010, p. 25). Characteristic of post-structural ontologies — as found in the work of Peter Moss and others, such as Chesworth (2016), Ringrose (2011), Murriss (2016) — is the understanding of multiple truths, where knowledge is no longer understood to exist in our heads, as if constructed by standing apart and independently verifying the world. Knowledge construction is viewed instead as a social practice, involving perceiving, thinking and acting (Dahlberg and Moss, 2009). This is an understanding of knowledge as embodied, constructed through direct engagement with the world, where ‘knowing, being and doing are inseparable’ (Barad, 2007, p.369). It is where knowledge of our surroundings is ‘forged in the very course of our moving through them, in the passage from place to place and the changing horizons along the way’ (Ingold, 2016, p.91).

Post-structural theorists offer a stark contrast to modernist linear or arboreal representations commonly existing within education, ‘like a staircase, where you have

to take the first step before you move onto and reach the next' (Dahlberg and Moss, 2009, p.xx); representations in which knowledge is assembled by joining up a series of dotted lines (Ingold, 2016). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) offer an alternative description of thought to be like a rhizome, where the many lines of the root have no end or beginning, they move in many directions and establish diverse connections; where ruptures occur it may start again along new or existing lines, rather than progressing along a set course. The rhizome offers a similar image to Malaguzzi's (n.d.) metaphor of learning as an 'entanglement of spaghetti' (cited in Dahlberg, 2003, p.279), which underpins Reggio Emilia's educational emphasises on knowledge as 'created through relationships, theory building, listening and making connections' (Fielding and Moss, 2010, p.26). This demands the suspension of prejudice and, instead, being open to divergent thinking and new ways of being (Rinaldi, 2006). It is an image also invoked within Ingold's (2016) description of the creative entanglements of place making 'wayfaring lines' (p.78) that potentially afford growth and movement.

Drawing on theories in thermodynamics Osberg and Biesta (2007) outline a similar understanding of knowledge as emergent, the result of engagement with the present, producing something 'radically new' (p.40) and 'even inconceivable or unimaginable' (p.33), and incalculable from what came before. They raise epistemological concerns about presenting or representing a real or pre-existing world to students, one already past, arguing instead for allowing 'undecidability to exist in the classroom' (p.48). This includes choices about curricula content, ensuring its sensitivity to the contingency of the present, 'Who is to say what the curricular content should be, particularly in today's climate of multiculturalism?' (p.48).

2.1.6 Purposes of education

The dominance of current neoliberalism and neoconservatism within education is illustrated by ministerial understandings of the purposes of education as 'the engine of our economy', the 'foundation of culture' and 'preparation for adult life' (Gibb, 2015, n.p.; a former grammar school student). This includes 'securing a good job and a fulfilling career', as well as having 'resilience and moral character' to deal with 'challenges' (*ibid.*). This vision of education fits with one etymology of the word, taken from the Latin *educare*, meaning 'to rear or to bring up, to instil a pattern of approved conduct and the knowledge that supports it' (Ingold, 2015, p. 135). Ingold also traces education to another variant, *educere*, from *ex* (out) and *ducere* (to lead), so that

‘education is a matter of leading novices *out* into the world rather than – as it is conventionally taken to be today – instilling knowledge *in* to their minds’ (p. 135; original emphasis). Biesta (2013; 2010a; 2010b) proposes three domains for the purpose of education; two supporting individuals to operate within the existing socio-political configurations and settings, and the third orientating individuals towards other ways of doing and being:

- **Qualification:** becoming qualified to do certain things, through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values and dispositions for future life (including employment);
- **Socialisation:** becoming part of existing social, political, professional, and other ‘orders’, and creating a subjectivity through identification with such orders.
- **Subjectification:** coming into presence as individuals; independent subjects of action and responsibility; agents shaping society, changing what it is possible to do and be.

Biesta (2016) asks whether learning as a form of adaptation is all that we might expect from education. He illustrates with the example of a robot vacuum cleaner that ‘can adapt — intelligently — to the particular room in which they have to perform their task . . . while such systems can learn, they cannot be taught’ (p. 378). A concern with learning as adaptability is not the same as taking up the responsibility to being educated. It does not allow the space for transformation, to open up other ways for students to be in the world (Biesta, 2015). I return to this discussion later in the chapter.

Amanda Spielman (2017), Ofsted’s Chief Inspector, sees a good curriculum leading ‘to good results’ as the purpose of education, but warns that results alone do not guarantee pupils receive ‘rich and full knowledge from the curriculum’ (n.p.). She reports head teacher and parental concern, within an Ofsted consultation, about a narrowing curriculum focus due to testing. Spielman is critical of ‘teaching to the test’ but omits the role of organisations such as her own in creating this culture; one that was identified by an OECD (2013) review of assessment practices in 28 countries: ‘if teachers are judged largely on results from standardised student tests, they may “teach to the test” . . . giving less attention to students’ wider developmental and educational needs’ (p.2-3).

Biesta (2009) contends the preoccupation with test results is problematic because any evaluations of schools must firstly engage in values about what is desirable for

education, and secondly there is a question about the validity of measures; measuring what it is easy to measure, rather than what is valued, we value what is measured.

2.2 Classroom conditions

In this section, I sensitise my own research to the factors that afford or constrain children's agency in the classroom, examining empirical research within different disciplines, identifying practices of relevance: positive school relationships; classroom dialogue; goal setting and feedback; student choice; non 'ability' labelling; play and creativity. These move away from traditional/progressive binaries, each potentially possible to mobilise in either political camp, offering a more nuanced contribution to teaching and learning.

2.3.1 Positive school relationships

There is consistent evidence of the centrality of relationships with teachers (as well as other children), including children being listened to and cared for, to ensure the quality of student lives in the classroom and extend their competency through dialogue, scaffolding and challenge (Gray *et al.*, 2011; Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007; Alexander, 2008a). Multidisciplinary evidence links positive teacher-student relationships with effort in learning (Niemic and Ryan, 2009), student confidence to learn something new, take risks and exert agency (Fattore *et al.*, 2007), learning outcomes (Hattie, 2009) and subjective well-being (Rees *et al.*, 2012). Psychological research identifies teachers as more controlling when greater external pressures are placed on them (Niemic and Ryan, 2009), and qualitative research identifies traditions of staff participation and a school culture of staff enquiry and learning help to maintain confidence to engage with pupils in relationships of greater equality (Fielding and Bragg, 2003). A focus on relationships includes understanding the extent to which agency promotes students' individual choice and advancement or fosters social integration (Fielding and Kirby, 2006). A meta-analysis of education research relates peer learning to higher learning effects compared with competitive and individualistic learning (Hattie, 2009), and yet observational research shows that English classrooms are viewed as a collection of individuals, resulting in individualised (e.g. reading and writing) rather than collective and communicative (e.g. talking and listening) tasks (Alexander, 2000).

2.3.2 Classroom dialogue

While diverse forms of teacher talk has been identified as valuable for pupil learning, observational research shows there remains an over-emphasis on rote and recitation and an absence of authentic dialogue, with teacher questioning ‘designed to funnel pupils’ response towards a required answer’, rarely ‘to assist pupils to more complete or elaborated ideas’ (Alexander, 2008b, p. 107). Beyond having greater opportunities for dialogue, it has been identified that students need to improve the quality of interactions, and to ‘develop a metacognitive awareness of the learning functions of talk’ so that group activities are valued by pupils (Mercer and Howe, 2012, p.18).

2.3.3 Goal setting and feedback

The types of goals emphasised in class have been found to be important for how students engage in learning activities. Psychological studies suggest performance goals foster a greater helplessness response in students, whereas setting learning goals with sufficient challenge helps to ensure greater effort (Dweck, 2000). The benefit of observing others (especially peers) modelling attitudes, strategies and the value of overcoming difficulties is seen as beneficial (Assor, 2012). A review of education research shows feedback on goal achievement is also important, for student effort alone is insufficient; they also need appropriate strategies and help, including appropriate feedback asking, ‘Where am I going? How am I going? and Where to next?’ (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p.88). Student to teacher feedback has been identified to be ‘among the most powerful influences on achievement’ (Hattie, 2009, p.173), for teachers to understand what students know and need to advance. Feedback is frequently in the form of rewards and punishments, however, underpinned by behaviourist theory; experimental research demonstrates minimising these controls is important to ensure conformity is not seen as necessary for affirmation (Assor, 2012). Children are highly attuned to messages about the self: focusing praise on the whole child or traits (e.g. ‘good’ or ‘intelligent’), while enjoyed and courted by children, creates vulnerability when encountering future challenges (Dweck, 2000) and is less effective for learning (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). Both experimental and classroom observational research identifies higher achieving girls, who attract praise for being better behaved and self-regulated than young boys, might be constrained in their later choices as they seek to do well and to avoid challenging activities or active participation (Marks, 2012; Dweck, 2000); reproducing social order and creating social conformity.

2.3.4 Student choice

Having options from which to choose is a component of agency, and yet school-based research shows English students have limited input about the direction of their own learning (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Ethnographic research in nine primary schools concludes that ‘Student choice seems to be a danger spot, seen as problematic and requiring control’ (Bragg, 2018, p.125), while case study research shows that students have opportunities to make meaningful choices within classrooms that use creative pedagogies (Thomson *et al.*, 2012). A study of child and adult initiated activity, in an early years setting, found children’s level of persistence was similar in both but levels of engagement were lower in adult initiated activities (Robson, 2014). Other research demonstrates student choice and initiation, while important, are less relevant if students are already engaged (Assor, 2012).

Choice does not equate with improved educational outcomes. A review of child-centred pedagogy, emphasising choice and following children’s interests, concludes it can rest on teacher ‘intuitions’ and ‘ad hoc judgements’, resulting in unequal education provision (Burma, 2007, p.265). Earlier, Sharp and Green’s ethnography (1975) showed the thinly veiled adult control within a ‘progressive’ school, in which freely-choosing-children were kept busy to free up teachers. The dilemma for teachers, Alexander (2000) suggests, is in part the balance of teacher-child control, for a negotiated pedagogy is still controlled by the teacher (*ibid.*). He stresses outpacing development, derived from Vygotsky (1968), which includes the reduction of freedom in some tasks so children can concentrate on acquiring difficult skills; a teacher that responds to observed student engagement, interest and understanding is engaging in a form of negotiation. In a primary school study, researchers find older children want less choice than those in key stage one; valuing opportunities for choice but believing teacher control would ensure they work hard in least popular subjects (Robinson and Fielding, 2010). Arnot and Reay (2006) show working class children can be disadvantaged within pedagogies emphasising agency, ‘unable to deliver the elaborated messages about ‘I the learner’ expected of independent learning’ (p. 89-90). Hart (1996) illustrates the delicate balance between collaboration and choice, finding a writing workshop extends one child’s confidence and writing, although the creative quality of her writing is higher when topics are chosen by the teacher.

2.3.5 Non ‘ability’ labelling

Research has repeatedly identified that the notion of inherent differences in ‘ability’ or potential that cannot be changed, has subtle and unintended effects on teachers’ and students’ thinking and practices (Hart *et al.*, 2004). Such an assumption fixes a limit on the overall attainment that can be achieved, and children develop methods to avoid looking unknowing in front of others, engage in an on-going quest to find the correct answer, with the good student constructed as pleasing the teacher. A review of the practice of setting and streaming by ‘ability’ suggests negative outcomes (Blatchford *et al.*, 2010), and yet there is an increasing use of such grouping within English primary schools (Hallam and Parsons, 2013).

Dweck’s (2000) experimental research, for example, suggests that how someone approaches the challenges inherent to learning is related to whether they hold an ‘entity’ (‘fixed’) or ‘incremental’ (‘growth’) self-theory of intelligence (mindset). The former believe intelligence cannot be changed and avoid effort, difficulty or high-performing peers, or else experience a sense of helplessness. The latter believe intelligence can be cultivated through effort, embracing and engaging in challenge as an opportunity for greater mastery. Self-theories are said to remain stable over time but can be manipulated experimentally, where a context is presented either as an opportunity to improve skills or to test ability. Dweck identifies high achieving girls are prone to having an entity mindset through receiving greater levels of attention for being better behaved, whereas less well behaved boys are rewarded for effort and the use of multiple strategies.

In recent decades there has been an emphasis on differentiating learning activities by varying levels of difficulty to meet the needs of different students. There is a growing move to mastery approaches to learning, particularly in maths (Gibb, 2016). These approaches, taught to the whole class, prioritise a deeper conceptual understanding, and expect all pupils to achieve the same standard; currently high-attaining students are extended through more in-depth work, not accelerated on to new content. Evidence on mastery approaches for improving attainment is mixed, but attainment is higher when peers support each other’s progress (Educational Endowment Fund, 2018).

2.3.6 Play and creativity

A dominant understanding of play, and a legacy of Piaget’s (1973) staged understanding of development, is that it is an important freedom, but one to be observed, normalised and regulated (Chesworth, 2016; Walkerdine, 1984). Others show the transformative

possibilities of play and creativity. Reggio Emilia understands creativity as ‘the ability to construct new connections between thoughts and objects that bring about innovation and change, taking known elements and creating new connections’ (Rinaldi, 2006, p.117). This approach utilises what Malguzzi (n.d.) called children’s ‘one hundred languages’, including visual arts, movement, digital technologies. Play and imagination, Armstrong (1980) concludes from his research of a primary classroom, are ‘as rich as the real and vital to any satisfying engagement with the real’ (p. 74). Similarly, Paley (1981) shows from her practice with five- and six-year olds that the ‘magic’ of storytelling erases ‘the experiential differences between children’, helping to conquer the English language by making ‘the difficult simple and the simple rewarding’ (p.126). A literature review of school factors supporting creative skills development (including creative thought processes, problem-solving, thinking and learning) identifies the importance of play, humour and enjoyment; flexible time use allowing for immersion and working at children’s own pace without pressure; regularly practiced dialogue; peer work; and using environments beyond the school (Davies *et al.*, 2013). Similarly, case studies of primary and secondary schools identifies arts-related practices differ from the ‘default pedagogy’ (p.5) operating under a standards agenda, with importance placed on choice and agency, greater movement and engagement with the outside world, time-flexibility, playfulness and humour, and children’s lived experiences (Thomson *et al.*, 2012).

2.3 Children’s agency

I turn to look now at conceptualisations of agency, drawing on different disciplines (education, childhood studies, sociology, anthropology) and in particular authors taking a more post-structural approach (e.g. Biesta, Mahmood, Moran-Ellis, Nolas, Oswell). In this section, I discuss theorisations of agency, its orientations and dialogical nature, as well as its political relevance.

2.3.1 Social theories of agency

Understandings of childhood were previously rooted in a pedagogical focus on children’s ‘becoming’, a psychological focus on development, and a sociological understanding of socialisation (Moran-Ellis, 2013). From the 1990s, there emerged a new interdisciplinary field of knowledge of childhood studies, with an understanding of children as social actors, allowing for the possibility of their agency, with children seen

as active meaning-makers in the construction of their social lives (James and Prout, 1990). There developed an understanding of children both as social beings *and* becomings. There has been a move away from an understanding of agency rooted in modernist discourses of personhood, with concerns for authenticity and voice, to one in line with post-modern thinking and a distributed understanding of agency (Oswell, 2015).

Instead, agency is understood to be the articulation of children's reflective perspective and experiences, within the context of structural inequalities, where children can reflect upon and act to achieve their intentions (*ibid.*); agency is understood as the capacity to do things, whether 'physical, cognitive, emotional or other' (Oswell, 2013, p. 42). Moran-Ellis (2013) stresses agency is *not* an internal capacity, but instead a purposive action that achieves some change. This is similar to Biesta and Tedder's (2006) understanding of agency as an outcome, 'where individuals are able to exert control over and give direction to the course of their lives' (p.9). Moran-Ellis (2013) makes the important distinction between *social competence* or the capacity to act strategically for particular ends and *agency*, which is the achievement of desired results: 'an accomplishment, achieved through interaction not a property possessed by the individual' (p.332). This is where capacity is understood to be 'a product of the interplay between individual desires and the exercise of power and authority by other actors, including institutional actors' (*ibid.*, p.331). She illustrates, using Lam and Pollard's (2006) research, the competency of young children who draw on available resources to simulate and avoid a teacher-prescribed literacy activity. The children, Moran-Ellis (2013) suggests, both take account of 'the formal pedagogical order of the setting', and 'what the teacher-desired action looked like on the surface' (p.331). Accounts given to children about their behaviour are important for how they understand themselves as social actors. Within the classroom this includes 'the dominance of intergenerational relationships which position them as developmental actors and hence reposition their actions as material for learning and correcting' (*ibid.*, 2013, p.335) and even the language of 'learner' itself implies a deficit (Biesta, 2010b).

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) are rare in theorising agency on its own, moving beyond traditional structure versus agency debates, while recognising the role of 'structure' and contexts for the achievement of agency. Accordingly, human agency is understood as the dynamic interplay of three temporal elements (iterational/habit,

projectivity/imagination, practical-evaluative/judgement); recognising agency as entailing different ways of experiencing the world through interactions with different contexts. This temporal-relational view was extended by Biesta and Tedder (2006), and applied to research on life-long learning (*ibid.*) and teacher agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2015), providing a useful framework with which to explore children's orientations within the classroom. I outline each element in turn.

The first element, 'the iterational orientation', relates how the past, through pre-reflexive habit and repetition, becomes a stabilising influence that shapes effort, allowing us to sustain subjectivities, meanings, and interactions over time. An example is readily illustrated by Bourdieu's (1977) theory of habitus, which brings into play common wisdoms and sayings; forming the dispositions that direct everyday interactions, including mastery engagement that requires a feel for the 'game' (Bourdieu, 1990). This element is not devoid of agency, requiring for example: selective attention, recognition of types, expectations maintenance, cultural competence and creative reproduction.

Mahmood's (2005) theory of agency, embedded within a submission to existing norms, is an example of an iterational orientation. This is an author I came to later in my analysis, because she addresses a gap within the existing education and childhood studies literature. Mahmood takes up Foucault's (1988) later work on ethical formation, in which individuals self-govern their behaviour against societal codes and ethics, within her study of the modern women's Muslim piety movement in Egypt, which includes a focus on practices associated with patriarchal norms about women's submission to male authority. She explores how agency might be embedded within a submission to relations of subordination, rather than simply as resistance to norms. In developing a theory of agency, Mahmood (2005) draws on the original meaning of 'docility' as the willingness and aptness to be taught, implying 'struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement' (p.29); giving the example of how novice musicians and apprentices must submit themselves to a regime of disciplinary practice to achieve mastery, and subsequent agency in their field. Rather than the docility as passivity suggested by Foucault's (1977) earlier work on disciplinary power, including in schools, Mahmood is suggesting 'other modalities of agency whose meaning and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms

of discourse' (p. 153). She positions her work as moving away from Butler's (1993) dualism of doing and undoing the power of regulating norms; where the subject is constituted performatively by reiterating norms, and agency is achieved through the possibility that iterations may fail, become reappropriated or resignified, for purposes other than consolidating norms. Instead, Mahmood (2005) is interested in the diversity of how 'norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated' (p.23).

The second orientation, 'projectivity', is an imaginative engagement with the future, distancing oneself from schemas/habits/traditions. Research identifies young people in a pupil referral unit as less able to generate a positive 'possible self' than those in mainstream school, and to say how a future self might be achieved or to identify difficulties in doing so (Mainwaring and Hallam, 2010, p.153). Imagination has also been stressed as key for secondary educational practice as a means of mapping possible aspirational transformations and supporting these, where 'the imagined landscape of the new is as important and significant as the material landscape of one's location' (Walkerline, 2013, p.757).

The 'Practical-evaluative' is the third orientation, which refers to situationally based judgments; in which 'actors bring their past experiences and future orientations to bear on the present situation' (Biesta and Tedder, 2006, p. 15), in ways that may challenge received patterns of action and contexts. These are the 'daily difficult decisions', facing compromise and a conflict with aspirations, dealing within the constraints of power and resources (Priestley *et al.*, 2015, p.33). For example, Sharma (2007) illustrates how rural Indian children subtly probe their science teacher so they can more safely tap into the main electricity grid; while previously they had rarely influenced lessons, they leverage their out of school discourse and experiential knowledge of electricity, together with a concern for safety, 'to make their agentic action possible' (p.314). The different temporal elements are integral to Ingold's (2015) (anthropological) perspective on education as exposure, rather than attunement to pre-defined knowledge:

Rather than a commanding mind that already knows its will trailing a subservient body in its wake, out in front is an aspirant imagination that feels its way forward, improving a passage through an as yet unformed world, while bringing up the rear is a prehensive perception already accustomed to the ways of the world and skilled in observing and responding to its affordances . . .

without imagination – without the capacity to run ahead of ourselves – human life would be impossible. (p. 140-141)

2.3.2 Shifting agentic orientations

Agency can enhance classroom learning while mastering new skills and situations can in turn foster agency (Watkins, 2014). Though recognising that a student's shift in agentic orientation may reside in the individual, the processes leading to change may be predominantly social or intersubjective. Agency orientations (may) change within contexts that are themselves changing, explaining why an individual can be agentic in one context but not another (Biesta and Tedder, 2006). This idea of motion, something not fixed in time or space, echoes Bennet's (2010) metaphor of movement and travel when she says how we respond in an assemblage is like riding a bike: 'One can throw one's weight this way or that, inflect the bike in one direction or toward one trajectory of motion. But the rider is but one actant operative in the moving whole' (p.38).

Shifting orientation draws attention to the specific situations that “trigger” or “facilitate” different ways of being – and more specifically: different ways of being agentic’, which ‘locates the learning involved in agency in reflection upon one's agentic orientations’ (Biesta and Tedder, 2006, p.21). This includes the potential for habitual responses to be altered in the context of new structures or practices, which may cause self-questioning so that ‘habitus begins to operate at the level of consciousness and the person develops new facets of the self’ (Reay, 2004, p.427-8). Hodgkinson and colleagues (2008) conceive of learning as becoming, where individuals develop ‘their own partly idiosyncratic and partly shared understanding’ of existing knowledge, so that ‘learning can change and/or reinforce that which is learned, and can change and/or reinforce the habitus of the learner’ (p.41). The complexity of learning, learning cultures and of the relationship between the two, they argue, highlights the futility and risk of unintended consequences in the search for universal approaches to improve learning and/or teaching for all learners in all contexts.

Learning here is understood as embodied, involving the integration of the mental, physical, practical, and emotional. It arises where ‘we do not as yet know or are as yet unable to achieve what we aim to do. It thus invariably involves uncertainty, some degree of frustration and disappointment. This experience is a painful one’ (Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1983, p.54). Ethnographic work has drawn attention to the intensity of affectivities that ‘flow through the bodies’ of the school community, bringing ‘bodies

into collision and submission' (Youdell, 2011, p.112), and how teachers' classroom practices contribute 'to students embodying a desire to learn', as well as the capacity to do so (Watkins, 2006, p.270).

Within a school context, 'learner-driven learning' has been described as children being helped to take greater notice of their experience of learning and to become more in charge of it; which might be evident, for example, when pupils collaborate to make meaning, actively generate inquiries, organise their learning processes, review their learning and understand more about themselves as learners (Watkins, 2010, p.6). Alexander's (2001) caution against simple polarisations of 'teacher-centred' or 'child-centred' practice is important here, stressing the need to unpick the range of classroom pedagogical concepts, discourse and practice. A binary emphasis on either children or teachers ignores the role both play in education. Biesta (2016) critiques a constructivist learner-centred theory of learning, with teachers positioned as facilitators, reasserting also the role of teaching in education. The problem, he asserts, with learner-centred approaches in which learners 'construct their own understanding and build their own skills' (p.378), as much as with teaching as a form of control, is that both demand pupils adapt and adjust to their changing environments. In this way, students always remain an object, and never appear as a subject: 'the self — and perhaps we should say the adjusting self or the hermeneutical self — can never out of its own generate a criterion with which to evaluate that which it is adjusting to. It is thus 'caught', as an object, in that which it is adjusting to' (p.388); simply surviving in a changing world, similar to the robot vacuum cleaner mentioned earlier. The subject is not constituted from the 'inside', Biesta continues, but is 'called into being from outside'; and it is teaching that draws us out of ourselves; introducing the question 'whether what we desire is actually desirable, both for ourselves and for the life we live with what and who is other' (p. 388).

2.3.3 Dialogical nature of agency

Schools shine a spotlight on the complex interplay between children's agency and education, requiring an analysis of the dialogical nature of their agency, which can be both creative and destructive. Understanding agency simply as the capacity to 'act otherwise' through intention, Wilmott (1999) suggests, fails to account for the structural barriers and costs faced by individuals to achieving their goals, particularly if challenging dominant conditions. Where it is not possible to overcome structural forces,

because teachers may lose their jobs or children will become excluded, agency may only be seen in resistance rather than making a difference to schooling conditions. The apparently freely chosen oppositional culture of Willis' (1977) working class 'lads' reinforced a working class place in life, but it is not education that young people resist, concludes McFadden (1996) from a review of resistance research, it is a form of disempowering schooling, applied equally to those across social class, gender and ethnicity. Learning is not always the 'rationale' response and children employ a range of defensive strategies, including leaving, withholding, exaggerating, tensing and remaining silent (Moran-Ellis, 2013; Brown and Rodriguez, 2009; Alexander, 2000; Silverman *et al.*, 1998). Fear is also frequently experienced and guides pupils' responses (Hargreaves, 2015; Holt, 1982).

These are forms of human action, but where they are self-destructive, or beyond the control to act otherwise, they draw attention to the 'paradoxes . . . of self-destructive agency' (Gigengack, 2008, p. 14). Focusing simply on children's agency can detract from a consideration of some 'adult-imposed limits' that may 'be beneficial to the health and happiness of children' (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012, p.789). The above-mentioned defensive strategies suggest a low degree of human agency, where at least in part, the agentic dimension is not the act but the degree to which we have control over the ways we respond to a situation (Caston, 2011; Biesta and Tedder, 2006). Priestley and colleagues (2015) extend agency beyond the potential to take action, stipulating opportunities to judge from different available options for action; without the latter agency is not present, and routinised patterns of behaviour follow, with no consideration of alternatives (p. 141). As well as personally or morally destructive, 'bad' agency may be constructed as that which acts against policy intentions, but to consider all such unwanted acts as bad would reduce constructive agency to an adherence of policy dictates (*ibid.*). Understanding whether teacher or pupil agency is 'good' or 'bad' is instead a question of its relation to educational purpose (*ibid.*).

2.3.4 Children's politics

Childhood studies researchers concerned with children's agency have recently begun to recognise such agency as being political. Kallio and Häkli (2011) identify one strand in the literature that builds on the understanding of children as competent and having rights, emphasising their participation in policy-making and organisational administration, but focusing on 'adultist' arenas and agendas, mirroring representative

political structures demanding certain ways of acting and excluding certain children. Student voice initiatives may, for example, allow for the inclusion of some children, but exclude others (Taylor and Robinson, 2006). Children's rights discourses are framed in terms of entitlement and self-determination. Participation discourses seldom refer to civil and political rights which are also enshrined within the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), beyond a depoliticised 'voice' in decisions affecting the child (Nolas, 2015). Kallio and Häkli (2011) draw attention to how children's lives are mostly absent from political theory, concluding that their 'everyday environments and agencies are yet to be fully analysed as politics' (p.25). With the personal, private and public now all understood as political, the authors recommend asking '*how* things are political' (*ibid.*, p. 27, original emphasis), arguing politics be understood as an empirical matter rather than an ontological given, and where children and adults' political worlds are entwined. This includes examining children's 'potential to adopt and negotiate the subject positions that are offered to them' (*ibid.*, p.28), including the tactics they use to avoid available subjectivities. In other words, researching the processes of subjectification and socialisation, as 'the formation of children's politics both as beings and becomings' (*ibid.*, p.29). Nolas and colleagues (2017) similarly stress the importance of identifying 'political activism in mundane activities as well as in banal spaces' (p.7), challenging the idea that 'activism is always something spectacular and remarkable' (p.9). They are interested in values-based approaches to understanding political activism, viewed as 'an assemblage of meanings and practices that express relationships of concern to the world' (*ibid.*, p.4-5), and propose focusing on children's 'common concerns' (p.1) as a way to think about their current and possible connections to activism.

Rancière (1991) writes of the emancipatory possibilities of education. His critique is of the 'stultifying' explicative classroom order that imparts knowledge and explanation, rooted in the belief of students' inferiority of intelligence, where a child who is explained to grieves, understanding that 'he doesn't understand unless he is explained to' (p. 8). Rancière does not shun knowledge and recognises the value of teachers sharing what they know, so students can acquire 'an additional intelligence — that of the master's explications' (Biesta, 2010b, p.548), but this is not the 'way of emancipation' (Biesta, 2017a, p.67). Rancière (1991) recounts an alternative 'ignorant schoolmaster', who acts on a premise of equality of all beings, demanding students pay

attention to what one sees and says; similar to a young child learning to speak, which involves observing, comparing, speaking and verifying (Bingham and Biesta, 2010, p.6). The ignorant schoolmaster asks the questions, ‘what do you see? What do you think about it? What do you make of it?’ (Rancière, 1991, p.23). It becomes more important that students speak than study, where speech is ‘the manifestation of an intelligence that wasn’t aware of itself or had given up’ (*ibid.*, p.29).

Rancière’s distinction is not concerned with pedagogy, whether using progressive or traditional teaching approaches: for example, ‘The principle of inequality . . . stultifies no matter what one does’ (*ibid.*, p.28). The concern is with liberty and emancipation, as a means of generating new political subjectivities. This is where speaking is not a matter of identification with existing social orders, but subjectification. It is aimed more at students’ attitude than knowledge: for those who claim ‘they are unable to think and act for themselves’, who ‘deny or refuse their possibility for being a subject and prefer to be or remain an object’ of others desires and directions (Biesta, 2017a, p.67). This is not emancipation in the Freirean (1970) sense, where only after the child is taught will she be able to speak; children ‘already speak politics’ (Bingham and Biesta, 2010, p.70). Rancière’s (1991) concern is ‘what an intelligence can do when it considers itself equal to any other and considers any other equal to it’ (p.39). ‘Dissensus’ emerges as a challenge to the consensus of the ‘police’ order, one that dictates the division between what is visible and sayable, with the logic of equality. This is done by redistributing ‘the demarcations between “noise” and “voice,” . . . on the basis of the “simple” claim that one is producing “voice” rather than “noise”’ (Bingham and Biesta, 2010, p.87).

2.4 Focusing the research study

In this final section, I detail how the above literature has informed this study, including my conceptualisation of agency, the research questions and the sensitising themes and ideas that guide the focus of the research. Prout (2005) outlines childhood as a ‘heterogeneous, complex and emergent’ phenomena, filtered through available material means (biological, social, cultural, technological, etc.), and suggests such complexity requires a broad, interdisciplinary, open-minded approach. This should, he suggests, also retain a specialist focus: one that places children at the centre of social policy (Devine and Luttrell, 2013). To think through an understanding of agency, I bring

together authors from childhood studies (e.g. Prout, Moran-Ellis, Oswell, Nolas), anthropology (e.g. Ingold, Mahmood) and education (e.g. Biesta).

2.4.1 Conceptualising agency

Given the intellectual trajectory of thinking about ‘agency’ discussed above, my own position is situated within a relational theory of agency. I use a conception of agency as distributed across an ‘entanglement of things’, a term borrowed from Ingold (2010) to describe a ‘meshwork of interwoven lines of growth and movement’ (p.3; see also Barad, 2007). This offers a robust theoretical basis from which to analyse the diverse and complex spaces that constrain and enable children to achieve agency within their everyday lives. It brings an approach to examining how childhood is constructed through structures and practices within children’s different spheres of life, including schools and families, while also recognising the role of technologies, inanimate objects and the biological level (Prout, 2005). Agency is no longer restricted to human individual or group capacity but ‘becomes distributed across an ontological heterogeneous field’ (Bennett, 2010, p.21).

Using the concept of an entanglement shifts attention away from the idea of individual entities towards zones of processes that are unfolding, dynamic and relational. Human striving, choice and responsibility, for pupils and teachers, are available through considerations of which entanglement to align oneself, or the responses and paths pursued within a given entanglement. The focus becomes one of exploring ‘how children’s agency might be assembled’, within an educational infrastructure, and across diverse materialities, technologies and other bodies (Oswell, 2015, n.p.). A focus on entanglements draws attention to materiality, which is of particular value for a study of children’s agency, where objects are integral to children’s everyday lives (Prout, 2005; Oglivie-White, 2004). Materiality tells us about the relationships that might otherwise be hidden, where power relations might be mobilised within the entanglement of objects and bodies (Taylor, 2013, p. 688). Within classrooms we recognise the ‘pervasive power of the clock’ (Alexander, 2000, p.393); how textbooks can ‘align curricular across space and time’ and limit ‘the teacher’s academic freedom’ (Fenwick and Edwards, 2010, p. 7); the agentic role of abstract concepts: ‘I *just* don’t *trust* them, numbers . . . They’ve got a mind of their own’ (Boylan, 2004, p.164, original emphasis), and how classroom computers construct an emergent child-computer assemblage (Prout, 2005) offering the possibility of enhanced agency in learning (Bandura, 2006).

Limited studies have explored the everyday ways in which different entanglements extend or decrease the scope and scale of children's agency (Moran-Ellis, 2017; Prout, 2005). This requires understanding children's competencies in their everyday lives and widening the focus to agency as an *outcome* of purposive action (Moran-Ellis, 2013; Biesta and Tedder, 2006), which in the school context becomes outcomes related to educational purposes. What becomes important therefore is the 'quality of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts of action' (p.18). This calls for a form of analysis that recognises the psychological is not distinct from the social context but is instead the 'flows of affect' enmeshed with the variety of social, cultural, economic and historical processes (Nolas, 2014a, p.130). One in which the case is always of 'actors-in-transaction-with-context, actors acting by-means-of-an-environment rather than simply *in* an environment' (Biesta and Tedder, 2006, p.19). This involves an analysis that offers a nuanced understanding of agency that extends beyond simple framings of resistance as opposed to conformity, where, for example, the effort and exertion involved in inhabiting norms might also become a form of agency (Mahmood, 2005). It aims to show different modalities of children's agency, including the productive enhancement of new bodily capacities to act, feel and think (Alldred and Fox, 2017).

2.4.2 Lines of inquiry

This study sets out to apply a relational theory of agency to a new area of study, the Year One classroom, to understand more details of this phenomenon, including the scope and scale of children's agency in this context. Agency is viewed as central to education but often glossed over in research and not prioritised in current educational policy. There have been previous studies exploring young children's social competence (e.g. Willes, 1983; Lam and Pollard, 1986; Waksler, 1991) in early years settings, but an absence of research exploring agency in the more formal Year One. The study focuses on the following questions:

1. Where and how do children achieve agency in the classroom?
2. What conditions support and limit children's agency in the classroom?

The classroom is taken here to be a site of education, and the research focuses on children's learning — in the form of qualifications (knowledge and skills) and socialisation — as well as 'subjectification'. During fieldwork the concept of the 'on-

task' classroom emerged as central to the research (discussed in Chapter 4), so the study becomes framed as exploring the limitations and possibilities for children's agency in an on-task classroom culture.

The literature identifies key sensitising themes and ideas to guide the research focus (see Table 2.1 below), but other areas emerge during the fieldwork and analysis, such as sounds in the classroom.

Table 2.1 Sensitising themes for the research focus.

Educational Landscape (Organisation, discourses, values)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical legacies (modernity, discipline, piety, traditional/progressive binary, whole class teaching) • Neoliberal context (competition, accountability, measurability, self-value) • Neoconservatism (behaviour; 'character') • Curriculum and representations of knowledge • Governance, teacher agency and support, school policies, resources • Teacher values and understandings of purpose of education 	
Classroom conditions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive school relationships (e.g. respect and care; promoting individualism or social integration) • Classroom dialogue (e.g. types and purpose of classroom talk) • Goal setting and feedback (e.g. performance and learning goals; rewards and discipline; opportunities for reflection) • Student choice (e.g. opportunities for choice and challenge) • Non 'ability' labelling (e.g. groupings; mindsets; differentiation/mastery) • Play and creativity • Classroom materiality (e.g. technology, learning resources) 	
Agency	
<p>Orientations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Habits, experiences, beliefs, submission • Projections, motivations, imagination, desires • Practical-evaluations, decisions, action <p>Range</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources; social competencies; achievements • Scope and scale; creative and destructive • Political: common concerns; negotiating subject positions; dissensus 	

In the research, I attend to children's agency orientations and what classroom conditions support shifts in orientation. What is important is understanding the interplay between the orientations and conditions that support and constrain agency, viewing them as analytically not ontologically different, with an understanding 'that both actor and environment are affected by the 'engagement'' (Biesta and Tedder, 2006, p.18). The study examines differences in the scope and scale of children's agency (Moran-Ellis, 2015; 2013), underpinned by an understanding of children's capacity for action as a product of the situational and ideological settings in which children are located. This is limited in some contexts more than others, so it is important to understand the 'interactional power relations and institutional power relations in which any act is embedded' (*ibid.*, p.332).

The analysis focuses on children's social competencies that enable purposive action, the strategies different children employ, and the opportunities afforded. As well as their access to resources, including cultural, economic and social capital. Research has often focused on cultural capital to explain differences in social class educational achievement, but Lareau (2011) highlights the mediating role of habitus; with middle class parents cultivating a set of orientations (e.g. challenging authority) yielding greater cultural capital (e.g. negotiating access to educational resources). A component of the study is to ensure sufficient data collection and analysis builds a portrait of each key participant's ecological niche (Singh, 2011), tracing the hybrid actants that 'flow in and between' (Prout, 2005, p.82) home and school. This includes information on cultural background to help situate the habitual schematic elements (habitus) of their agency orientation, as well as access to different resources. Children operate under multiple positions, of age, class, gender, race, as well as labels of 'ability', and 'popularity' (e.g. Reay, 2006; Brown and Gilligan, 1992), so attention is given to issues of subjectivity in how the children are differently positioned.

The literature informs the direction of my gaze on the discourses and practices that bear on aspects of the classroom conditions. In particular, school relationships; classroom dialogue; goal setting and feedback; student choice; non 'ability' labelling; play and creativity. Alexander (2000) identifies classroom interaction as tied to teachers' cultural and historical values, and stresses any analysis should include conflicts in values in classroom practice including at the level of the school and the education system. There is a need to acknowledge the wider social, economic, political and ideological

relationships, that translate for example into curricular prescription, compulsory assessments, and pedagogical constraints, and define the availability of organisational resources, as well as the individual and group access to resources (Biesta and Tedder, 2006).

Any analysis of agency must be situated within an exploration of the prevailing and competing discourses in schools: those that intend to promote agency (e.g. independent learner, resilience, mindsets), and the diverse means of bringing power into play through discipline, conformity and control (e.g. performance focus, behaviour management, ability focus). Of interest is the forms of agency that are produced and foreclosed, and specifically how children actively and creatively negotiate the positions and discourses available to them (Wilkins, 2012), so that they might also change the discourses through which they are being constituted, resulting in new positionings. Power here is conceived as productive of the knowledges, meanings, values and practices, making available different positions for children to take up; in which discourses are evident through their adopted practices and meanings rather than seen as something independent (Holloway, 1984; Walkerdine, 1984). This calls for an exploration of the ‘processes of power as situated, endlessly negotiated, and (re)constructed, and, at the same time, as open to contestation and change’ (Taylor and Robinson, 2006, p.170). The research focuses on where children *do* politics, ‘speaking’ different discourses and negotiating different subject positions; desiring different ways to be and become. It also identifies children’s common concerns.

An exploration of children’s agency in the classroom must integrate an understanding of the wider and situated context through which children are schooled. Other research examining structural inequalities in learning outcomes tends to focus on the context but not also learner agency (Hodkinson *et al.*, 2008). Education funding, Pellettier (2009) suggests, is often founded on ‘knowledge of inequality, and ignorance of how to reduce it’, continually in the pursuit of finding ways to verify inequality, classifying children’s ability, so as to identify solutions to counter their exclusion (p. 280). This reflects a circular logic where ‘The success of knowledge that reduces inequality works through a knowledge of inequality’ (Bingham and Biesta 2010, p. 4). This thesis also pursues an alternative, Rancièrian, approach; to ‘become ignorant of domination and offer knowledge of equality’, not to dismiss material inequality, but to consider what needs to

be ignored in order to challenge inequality between those who know and those who are ignorant (Pelletier, 2009, p.273). My aim, therefore, is to act as if equality were true and ‘to see what follows from it’ (Biesta, 2017a, p.64).

CHAPTER THREE: Ethnographic Meandering in the Year One Classroom

Following a long line of school-based ethnographies, this research study sets out to describe and analyse aspects of everyday life through a period of intense participation in the primary classroom. I take the time to meander both in the classroom and my analysis. I incline and look carefully; following paths of interest, while keeping in sight the wide view. Exploring one classroom to emphasise a depth of understanding of meanings can illustrate ‘a great deal about the education system and indeed the country of which it is part’ (Alexander, 2000, p. 266), particularly in the English context with its limited variance in pedagogy and tightly defined national curriculum. This chapter details how I trace a path through the classroom, beginning with a rationale for the use of the multimodal ethnography, followed by a description of the research design and analysis, and my reflections on the design, including its challenges and limitations. I conclude with an exploration of the ethical considerations and researcher positionality.

3.1 Ethnographic approach

My previous research experience has taught me that if you want to understand a service *for* children it is also important to listen to how *they* experience that service. This principle evolved into a multimodal ethnography (Dicks *et al.*, 2006) of the Year One classroom. Ethnography is aimed at learning about a culture, a ‘process of learning about people by learning from them’ (Roper and Shapira, 2000, p.1). It requires spending time in a naturalistic setting, using ‘participant observation’; a form of intense engagement, with the immersion of the ‘whole self physically and in every other way’ into other life worlds (McLeod and Thomson, 2009, p. 42), as well conducting open-ended interviews, and often documentary analysis (Hammersley, 2006).

My study focuses primarily on a Year One class at Daleview, over the course of an academic year. I take a wide perspective, observing and interviewing all the children in the class, and narrow my focus, shadowing further six core child informants. In addition, I conduct a one-week ‘rapid’ ethnography at Clifftop, integrating an extreme case, by focusing on an ‘outstanding’ school with a publically expressed commitment to children’s agency. The research design took time to develop as I grappled with developing an understanding of what is agency, given its large literature. I initially clung to using a method familiar to me, participatory qualitative interviews, while

making tentative steps into the unknown area of secondary analysis, exploring a national data set that I thought might offer some ‘measure’ of agency in the classroom. As my understanding of the phenomenon grew, I appreciated that agency is not so big, nor so measurable, and became less concerned with testing theories than with exploring agency in the minutiae of everyday practices of the classroom culture. This is so I can develop an in-depth understanding of where and how children achieve agency in the classroom, and the conditions that support or limit their agency.

Ethnography emerged as a particularly appropriate method given a recognition of the temporal-situational nature of agency, which is not fixed: an understanding that requires a methodological lens including a focus on time. While life history interviews have been used with adults (Biesta and Tedder, 2006), this seemed inappropriate given my participants’ age. I needed an approach that can capture practices as they unfold in real time, and over time, to explore shifts in agentic orientations and the conditions of possibility. Ethnographic inquiry is well suited to this endeavour, embedded as it is ‘in understandings about the relationship of the past to the present, and with how memories of the past inform the ethnographic present’ (McLeod and Thomson, 2009, p.81). The sustained engagement with participants also gives them (and me) time to reflect on the abstract concepts explored in this research. The combination of observation and interviewing suits a phenomena, agency (or agentic orientations), not easily observed directly or quantifiable (Hodkinson and Macleod, 2010). With the prevailing model of the developing child positioned as vulnerable and incompetent, ethnography also plays a particularly important role in showing the issues children themselves find important or particular to their social lives (James, 1999). It helps to identify the diverse and messy spaces that constrain and enable children to achieve agency in their everyday school environment.

My work is informed by ethnographic studies across different disciplines and drawing specifically on a body of research within childhood studies to address the epistemological challenges posed by the ontological principles of a relational view of agency. For example:

- *Moving beyond simple binaries*: Forsey (2000) argues that it is important to move past ‘the romance of resistance’ (p.217), dichotomising students into the rebellious resistant and compliant youth, towards thicker descriptions and

theories of postmodern social spaces. In Alldred and Fox's (2017) research on the micropolitics of young people's actions and encounters in the transgressive pro-anorexic movement, resistance is not understood as a 'negative' reaction to power, but an 'enhancement of body capacities to act or feel', opening up 'possibilities for action and subjectivity' (p. 10).

- *Exploring the personal as political:* A focus on 'personalising publics' in the tracing of children's journeys between their public and private lives, 'allows us to consider the intersections between the affective and the political dimensions of personal suffering' (Nolas, 2015; p.162). Nolas and colleagues (2016) identify emotions pervading the auto/biographies of activist childhoods, suggesting 'an affective engagement and analysis of children's emotional lives and what matters to them', to establish their 'common concerns' as a means to reflect on children's current and possible connections to activism (p.261).
- *Attending to the material:* Understanding agency as distributed, rather than residing in the individual, calls attention to how power relations might be mobilised in the complex choreographies of objects and bodies. Taylor (2013) explores how mundane materialities in a secondary classroom, including a male teacher sitting on a freely-moving chair with wheels, do performative work in enacting gendered power, where 'some bodies (and some chairs!) matter more than others' (p. 695).
- *Following pathways between school and home:* A relational approach looks beyond contained locales of childhood, to the flow of heterogeneous materials across boundaries, including the school gates (Prout, 2005). For example, an ethnographic study of a Reception class explores how children's play is associated with a desire to connect with and reconstruct meaning, utilising knowledge amassed from their everyday engagement at home, school and beyond (Chesworth, 2016).

Epistemologically, the research integrates post-structural theory together with a new materialist focus on how things (including bodies and classroom resources) are entangled with everyday discourses and practices. It examines the lived experience of the classroom, including the qualitatively different ways of acting and performing, and how participants make sense of their experiences: an interpretive focus on the acts of meaning making that shape children's orientations, actions, and interactions. The aim is

not simply to understand what something means to children and teachers, as if there were a truth to be known, but to probe a breadth of understanding, acknowledging ‘the way in which meanings are struggled over and produced’ and related to ‘shifting patterns of power’ (Kenway *et al.*, 1994, p.189). The research also examines the affects different entanglements produce, and what they foreclose.

The concept of entanglement offers the opportunity for rich descriptions of children’s agency — understood to be situational, temporal and relational — reflecting how many things come together within different configurations. This emphasises the need to ponder the significance of everyday classroom micro practices, focusing on the mundane, what people do regularly, and which can ‘come and go in a twinkling’ (Jackson, 1968, p.177); understanding how and why such practices are ‘conceived, produced and patterned’ (Thomson and Hall, 2017, p. 97), and helping to de-trivialise the trivial (Hostaker, 2014). I also keep focused on the ‘stretched out relations’ in which children, staff and the curriculum are ‘engaged in flows and interactions’ beyond the school and its neighbourhood; paying attention to how practices correspond to external processes, including how individuals and schools adjust to such framing (Thomson and Hall, 2017, p.17).

In this study, children, as key members of the classroom entanglement, are important informants (as are staff and parents) but the concept de-centres pupils and demands a focus on interactions, or ‘in-betweens’. There is an emphasis on the complexity and interrelatedness of individuals in their school community, including the interplay between children’s agentic orientations and factors that position children as being able to act or not. Close attention is given to different discourses, practices and materials that assemble sites of agency; and how different meanings and forms of power are negotiated and worked out in the everyday. This includes how available discursive resources offer affordances or constraints for pupils; how discourses are ‘talked into action’ (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003, p.239) rather than dictating action; and how inconsistencies and ruptures reveal ‘seen but unnoticed’ (*ibid.*, p.227) assumptions around children’s agency. For example, children are positioned as competent and resourced to exercise agency and/or lacking in ability, interest and opportunity. My focus on the power of context and discourse to structure children’s orientations, as well as their subjective creativity and unpredictability, calls for an ethnographic account that

‘can allow a degree of the activity, creativity and human agency within the object of study to come through into the analysis and the reader’s experience’ (Willis, 1977, p. 3).

During my fieldwork, I focus on one Year One class at both Daleview and Clifftop, spending time primarily in the classroom, but also elsewhere in the school and at home, and using creative interview methods, with the aim of making their school world visible. The research schools are both in the south-east of England, where I am a resident, so in this respect I am an insider. Also, as a former school pupil, a parent of children in primary schooling, and a former research professional with experience of working in schools, I bring partial knowledge of the English education system, past and present. At the same time, I am very clearly an outsider, being neither a teacher nor a child, and my classroom experience is limited and mostly with older children and young people. On entering the field, many practices strike me as strange, as much as others feel familiar. Below, I ‘foreground the impossibility of unmediated representation’ by analyzing how my positionality is entangled with the researched and the research process (Pomerantz, 2008, p. 25). Not experienced in participant observation however, I was slow to understand how reflexivity could be analytically productive (discussed in Chapter One).

3.2 Research design

This section explains the focus on the Year One classroom and details the different phases of the research design in the two schools (See Figure 3.1 below). (See Appendix One for a detailed fieldwork timetable).

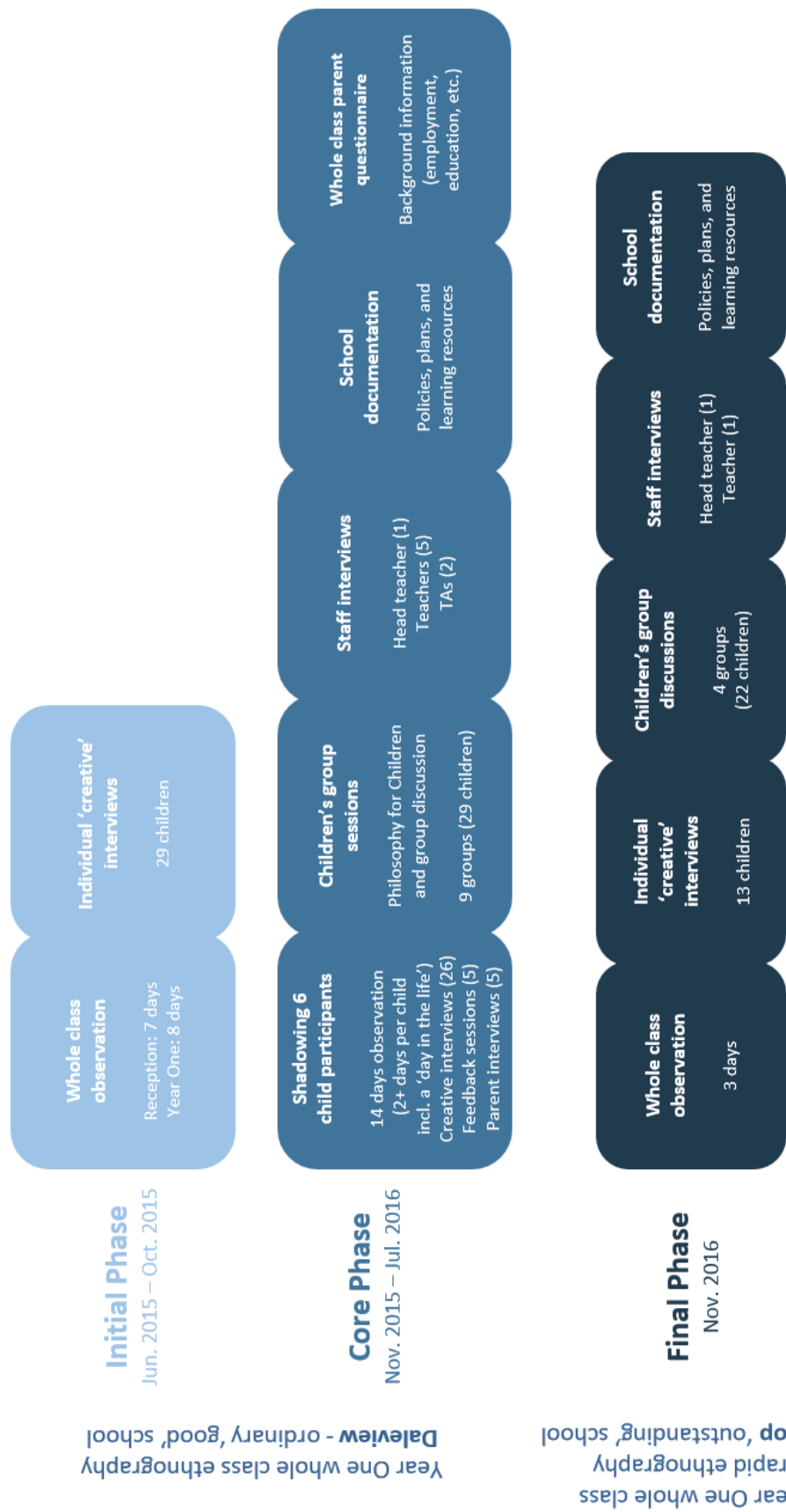


Figure 3.1 Research Phases

3.2.1 Year One case study

The ethnography is primarily a case study of a single Year One classroom at Daleview, a state-funded primary school in a large town in the south-east of England. My main criteria was to select a nothing-out-of-the-ordinary school, of average size and a ‘good’ Ofsted judgement. While I ‘cold-called’ several schools by email, only one responded and declined to participate. With schools under pressure to perform and under public and government scrutiny, the practice of selection perhaps inevitably comes down to convenience sampling; I gain access to the research school through a staff member I had known socially 20 years previously, while taking care to ensure this is an ‘ordinary’ school. It is medium sized and rated by Ofsted as ‘good’ overall, similar to over 80 per cent of schools in the local authority. Most teaching is rated as highly effective, and the proportion of pupils achieving expected standards in core subjects at the end of key stage one are broadly in line with the national average. The school is situated in a central urban area with a catchment that is predominantly middle-class (my questionnaire identifies three-quarters of the research class have one or both parents educated to degree level) and white, with some ethnic diversity; below average pupils are supported by the pupil premium.

The choice to focus on the Year One class was to explore the in-between-ness of this first year group, as children move from early years into formal schooling. As discussed in Chapter Two, this year represents a marked step up from Reception. It is a time that children will come to grips with the more formal aspects of school life; developing adaptive strategies, many of which may remain if the conditions of subsequent classrooms do not differ greatly (Jackson, 1968, p.vii). Research suggests children’s orientations to learning are identifiable from a young age (Dweck, 2000). A couple of teaching staff comment that the research classroom at Daleview is a ‘class of extremes’, with the children being less ‘malleable’ and harder to teach than some others; such a class perhaps helps to expose the classroom discourses and practices that operate to establish malleability.

3.2.2 Methods emphasising children’s agency

The research focus draws attention to using activities that emphasise children’s competency and agency, recognising how children’s agency in research, as elsewhere, is ‘assembled and infrastructured within and across a range of devices, materialities,

technologies and other sentient bodies' (Oswell, 2015, n.p.). The following principles are applied:

- *Children are key informants:* Activities are designed for the children's ideas and thoughts to emerge, in contrast to some classroom research that excludes children's perspectives, including on agency (e.g. Watkin, 2006). Staff and parental views are also included.
- *Open research methods:* Researching in schools, where children are tested and primed to identify the 'right' response, it is important to move away from using pre-determined categories or prompts (Katsiaficas *et al.*, 2011). Open methods allow for children's ideas and thoughts to emerge.
- *Explore multisensoriality of experience:* Focusing on the children's (as well as my) sensory engagement requires multiple ways of knowing, beyond what can simply be observed or accessed in interview (Pink, 2009). 'Creative interviewing' (Mason, n.d.) activities structure my interactions with the children, using a range of multimodal methods (including drawing, photography, walking, talking, crafting, feeling-faces), to help them recall, bring to consciousness, articulate and reflect on their beliefs, decisions and actions, recognising the 'more sensory or embodied dimensions of experience' (n.p.).
- *Explore emotions:* The research focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life (Wetherall, 2012), and I specifically ask children what they feel about their classroom experiences. Children often express negative emotions, but it is not that their experiences are all negative, or that I am the confidant they confess this 'truth' to, rather my research/presence creates a space for more difficult emotions to be aired in the prevailing school culture.
- *Children inform activities and discussions:* This happens both through the opportunity for children to express a degree of choice about what they want to do and talk about, and through my growing understanding of what activities might be of personal interest and relevance to their experiences of the classroom.
- *Inclusion:* The research focuses in-depth on a diverse group of six core children, but includes on-going processes of involvement for the whole class.

3.2.3 Three research phases

The primary research is divided into an Initial Phase and Core Phase at Daleview, plus a Final Phase at Clifftop.

Initial Phase: getting to know the class

This phase has the primary aim of developing relationships with the children and staff at Daleview, deepening their understanding of the research process and my understanding of the classroom routines and expectations, so together we find a way of me being in the classroom. I also get to know the children and explore their different agency orientations in order to identify whom to focus on in more depth in the core phase.

During this phase, I use the following research activities:

Participant observation

I conduct whole class observations over four weeks. Initially, I introduce myself and the research, asking the children to help me and my teddy bear to find out ‘what helps us to learn’, having piloted my introduction in another school which I know well. Through discussion and a sensitivity to the staff’s reaction to my presence, I begin to find a way of being least disruptive, while close enough to the action to observe and hear what is happening. This involves sitting to the back or side of the carpet during whole class teaching and on a chair set slightly back when children work at tables. This becomes a form of ethnographic participation where I ‘watch things being done, and ‘help’ occasionally’ (Delamont, 2012, p.343), but as I do not have a specific teaching or support role in the classroom, I am more ‘observer-as-participant’ than ‘participant-as-observer’ (Gold, 1958, p.217). My focus is on the interactions between children and staff (I observe 17 staff in total over the year), between children themselves, and their entanglement with the material environment.

I spend seven days in the children’s Reception class towards the end of the summer term, to develop an understanding of their transition to the more formal Year One class. This time proves invaluable for developing relationships with the children as the less structured environment means we have greater opportunities to interact, including using informal and creative activities in the class with individuals or small groups, than is possible in Year One. This includes hand printing consent cards for each child to use during the research (a red hand for ‘stop’ and green for ‘go’), providing an opportunity to discuss and practice consent, in a context where children are told ‘it’s never okay to

say no to teachers' (teacher) (discussed in Chapter Five). In Year One, I spend eight days observing in the classroom between September and early November, beginning to learn the routines and expectations of the Year One classroom. In both Reception and Year One, there are two main (job share) class teachers, but I also observe other teachers working with the children.

Whole class individual interviews

During October, I interview 29 children individually, with interviews lasting between 16 and 56 minutes (mean: 40 minutes). One child did not want to be interviewed, and I omitted to ask another child (discussed in Chapter Five). The aim was to help identify which children to include in the next in-depth phase and to get a broader understanding of children's experiences in the classroom. The interviews are audio-recorded, except where one child did not give consent, and transcribed. In these interviews, children engage in the following activities:

- *Learning*: Discuss what is meant by 'learning'.
- *Feelings*: Draw the classroom and place feeling pebbles on their picture to show how they experience different aspects of the classroom.
- *Challenge*: Using an activity loosely inspired by Smiley and Dweck (1994), to explore orientations to challenge, the children help the teddy bear undertake a castle puzzle. They choose from three levels of difficulty and indicate how the bear is feeling at different stages using a five point Likert scale of feeling-faces.

Core Phase: in-depth focus in the class

This phase focuses on six core participants at Daleview, but includes group activities with the whole class and interviews with staff.

Selection of core participants

Careful consideration is given to the selection of six core informants to ensure a diverse mix of gender, social and ethnic background, current academic achievement, and birth order, using school records. Not until the end of the fieldwork (discussed below) do I survey parents to identify their social class (using Office for National Statistics occupational and educational classifications), so at the time of selection the class teachers share what they know. The selection also considers children's agentic orientations: as observed through their response to challenge, and how much they speak

out, challenge authority and communicate emotion in the class setting. The aim was to seek emblematic cases that are information rich, offering ‘the optimal, rather than the average, experience’ (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007, p.234). I exclude one potential child because he raises a safeguarding issue in the initial interview, which we share with his teacher, thus shifting and adding complexity to our relationship. The mothers of two boys decline, via the class teacher, to give consent for their children to be core participants; one says it ‘feels too much’, but the other reason is unknown. The selection criteria and sample for the final group are shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Summarising the composition of the core informants

Gender	Female 3 Male 3
Ethnicity	White British 5 Minority ethnic group 1
Social class	Middle class 3 Working class 2; Mixed 1 (middle class parent occupation; neither parents educated to degree level)
Birth season	One child receives pupil premium funding, aimed at raising attainment of disadvantaged pupils Autumn 2 Spring 3 Summer 1
Current level of achievement (current maths & English sets)	Highest 2 Middle 2 Lowest 2
Tackles challenge	Yes 1 No 3 Mixed/ambiguous 2
Talkative	Yes 2 No 2 Mixed 3
Expresses a range of emotions	Yes 2 No 3 Mixed/ambiguous 1
Challenges authority	Yes 2 No 2 Mixed/ambiguous 2

When sharing with the class the names of the core participants, I am sensitive to feelings of exclusion and emphasise the practical necessity to focus on a few while stressing everyone's input is valued. I explain the selection in neutral terms — gender, age and children who say different things helps us to learn — being careful to avoid labels or judgments.

Shadowing key participants

I 'shadow' the core participants, offering a 'micro-experience' not commonly undertaken in schools (Thomson and Hall, 2017, p.129-130), spending a minimum of two whole days with each child (14 days altogether), with at least one day in the autumn term and one in the spring or summer term. I usually spend a whole day with a child at a time, including a 'day in the life' (Gillen et al., 2007) with five of the children (the sixth parent did not give consent), undertaken to situate their school experiences within an understanding of their wider life. On these days, typically I arrive at the child's home at 8am; go to school with them, and return home, staying somewhere until 7.00pm. At their homes, I usually find an opportunity to conduct a semi-structured interview with a parent, while the child is in another room watching television or playing with others, otherwise I later conduct a telephone interview. For each child, I interview one parent (one father, five mothers), and speak informally to another four parents (one mother, three fathers). I had initially planned to spend more days shadowing children; the time it takes to write up (including transcribing) for each day in the field, between two and four days (up to 36,000 words of typed notes for a full 'day in the life'), making it difficult to continue with more fieldwork within available time. My biggest challenge at this stage is feeling I have to record everything I notice, not quite knowing what 'agency' looks like in the classroom. Though demanding, this detail proves productive. Multimodal data (750,000 words; 2,700 images) generated across the different methods makes further collection less necessary as I reach saturation, where observations confirm rather than challenge my emergent theory.

Shadowing is also demanding on the researcher — I take only one or two short breaks in the day — but helpful for exploring the temporal/spatial arrangements in school as children move around the classroom and beyond (e.g. dinner hall, playground, assembly hall), as well as prevailing discourses, and children's narratives of their experiences throughout the school day and at home. Between one and three times a day, I invite the child to spend some time with me in a nearby room for an informal interview, usually

when they have completed their learning activity; often children want these interviews to extend into their playtime. I conduct 26 such interviews, ranging in length from seven to 75 minutes (mean: 20 minutes), and they are mostly audio recorded. They are what Kvale (1995) calls ‘conversations with a purpose’, but usually undertaken informally while immersed in crafting or playful activities, in what I come to call ‘talk and play’ with the children. There emerges an entanglement of research encounters, more than a prescribed set of methods. I bring along a ‘toolbox’ of resources and possible activities for the children to access and with which they can play. Together we explore which of these act to support them to reflect on their classroom experiences. Sometimes methods are made up on the spot, recognising the need to be creative when probing for what I want to know and responding to children’s interests. Relationship building also underpins an ethic of reciprocity, and I am careful when selecting resources to choose those that offer possibilities for multisensory engagement, creativity and playfulness, in part to demonstrate my interest in the children by inviting them to engage in something of interest to them. The activities we use the most include:

- *Crafting*: Children draw or craft something, often of their choice, while they chat to me about aspects of their day. I provide high quality thick paper and attractive sets of pens and pencils, purple glue, and a range of other materials (e.g. stickers, fabrics and coloured card), which capture children’s attention. Creating while talking about sensitive issues avoids the need to maintain eye contact.
- *Speaking for the Teddy Bear*: A useful resource is the teddy bear. I ask children to explain to the bear what life is like or how she or he might feel in the classroom — I purposefully do not bring the bear into the classroom — helping to distance difficult feelings or opinions. (See Chapter Five for an example).
- *Feeling-faces*: These are particularly helpful for exploring the emotional resonance of children’s classroom experiences. I use a variety of feeling-face resources to ensure novelty and maintain children’s interest. This includes pebbles, lovely to hold and clunk; bear masks that children hold up to their own or the teddy bear’s face; manipulable Lego figures; and the children draw faces or make their own feeling-face masks. (See Chapter Five).
- *Walking and talking*: In break times, when the classroom is empty, I walk around with a child, asking them to show and tell me about where they ‘feel

good about learning’ and where they ‘feel less/not good about learning’.

Sometimes other children join in this activity. One of us takes photographs.

- *Story telling*: I provide a set of small teddy bears, and invite some children to use these to play schools. On occasion, children spontaneously role-play an aspect of schooling with friends. I also read stories to the children (or they read to me) to begin conversations, and I show children images of characters from Mr. Men/Little Miss stories² (e.g. Mr Clever, Mr Quiet, Little Miss Brainy, Little Miss Chatterbox), asking them to choose which describe them as learners.

The temporal and spatial locations of the research encounter are important for children, enabling them to talk about how they feel; affect unfolds through materiality, time and space. The creative methods ‘deploy and intensify’ (Abel, 2008, n.p.) the affective moment; their material properties influencing what can be expressed. It takes time to build trust, through reassurance and acceptance, for children to explore their experiences of the classroom; also, meeting in different spaces (in and outside the classroom, including home) and at different times of the day (sometimes children appear less engaged after lunch) and year. For example, James, one of the core children, says little in the initial interview about how he feels but subsequently expresses a breadth of emotion.

I have a final review session with five of the core children (the sixth having left the school unexpectedly). I feed back what I have learned from them, saying ‘I may have got it wrong or you may feel differently now. I’d really like to know. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers. This is your life, it’s what’s right for you’. As I feedback and probe for their comments, I invite the children to stick photographs, taken during the fieldwork, into a blank book, and to decorate it with stickers, drawings, writing. This is for them to keep and provides something for children to share about the research process, if desired; bringing our encounters to a close. What they choose to include or exclude also provides some insight into the document of the self (Thomson and Holland, 2005).

² Published by Egmont, London (<https://www.egmont.co.uk/books/category/brands/mr-men-and-little-miss/393>).

Whole class activities

I include group activities to ensure the whole class have further opportunities to participate in the research, and for me to discuss emergent research themes. These sessions also highlight dynamics through how children talk together and with me (discussed below). I employ two group methods with the whole class, with between five and ten children in each group:

- *Philosophy for children (P4C)*: I run two different P4C sessions (each with three groups of children, making a total of six groups) having attended P4C training. This is an approach aimed at reaching greater ‘understanding, meaning, truth and values supported by reasons’ in which ‘children’s questions get deeper and more thoughtful’ (The P4C Co-operative, n.d.). My intention was not to search for a particular truth about the classroom, but to create a space for not-knowing together (Biesta, 2011) and I introduce the sessions as a space where ‘we think about questions, we discuss them, and we think about what things mean’.
- *Group discussions*: At the end of the academic year, I run a group discussion (with three groups) exploring emergent themes, using three main techniques:
 - *Sounds in the classroom*: Children draw the sounds they hear in the classroom (Proctor and Hackett, 2016), and make sounds using materials (e.g. brass pot and lid, pebbles, coins, feathers, bubble wrap, wool).
 - *Objects of reference*: Children discuss classroom posters (e.g. whole body listening poster; pictures illustrating different maths/English groups).
 - *Mapping*: Children draw a map of the classroom together; using stickers, they show and discuss where they play and make things.

Staff Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with staff members, including two main class teachers (interviewed on four occasions), other teachers (three), head teacher, and teaching assistants (two). Themes explored include their professional background; school governance and support; education, teaching, learning; learning behaviours; praise/rewards and behaviour rules; and the classroom environment (see Appendix Two for example questions). Informal conversations also occur regularly with teachers and teaching assistants. Semi-structured interviews are audio-recorded (with agreement) and

the transcripts shared with staff to make corrections or comment (just one checks a comment will not be reported because it potentially identifies a child).

Whole class parental questionnaire

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I recognise a lack of background information on the children makes my analysis less rich; I ask parents to complete a questionnaire and all do so. This asks for both parents/guardians' current employment status and occupation, highest educational qualification, age, partnership status, the number of other children in the family, and if parents live together or apart (see Appendix Three).

School documentation

I regularly take photographs of learning resources and wall displays in the classroom and other areas of the school, and work produced by the children during lessons (as well as in interviews). I count things that I notice and seem important; a recognised approach in participant observation (Delamont, 2012). It is possible to measure some things 'objectively', such as numbers of stickers; the difficulty in using quantitative approaches arises for more complex subjective phenomenon, such as agency, because of issues of validity when designing measures.

I collect copies of the school's written policies and development plan, to see what is revealed about school discourses and practices: both in terms of what they say and what they do as agents (Prior, 2003).

Final Phase: rapid look at another school

A 'rapid ethnography' (Reeves *et al.*, 2013, p.1372) was undertaken at Clifftop, adopting an 'ethnographic' fieldwork approach, but for a much shorter duration of just one week. This allowed me to integrate an extreme (negative) case, by focusing on an 'outstanding' school with a publically expressed commitment to children's agency, to see whether this might challenge or enrich the emergent theory (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). The school avoids 'ability' labelling (seen to limit children's engagement in learning) and promotes 'growth mindsets' and student voice. This second school was initially also included to help me re-see the original school, particularly as a non-teacher I wanted time in a different setting to separate how much of what I observe at Daleview is down to its specific context. I found that Clifftop was in many ways more similar than different to Daleview, both operating in the school performance culture (discussed in Chapter Four). This element of the fieldwork went above and beyond what is expected

of doctoral research (ignoring the wisdom to keep it manageable), but widening my gaze brings additional insight into conditions that support or limit agency, while my analysis of where children achieve agency remains primarily in the core phase.

Clifftop is a small, highly respected, teaching school, visited by government Ministers and rated ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted. I had previously known the head teacher professionally, enabling my access. The school is situated in the same geographical area of England as Daleview. I collect no information on social background from the parents, but the catchment is predominantly white, middle income, middle-class families, with some ethnic diversity; the class teacher provides background information for some children. There is a below average number of children supported by pupil premium. I spend three days observing the whole class, interview 13 children individually (selected to ensure a broad sample) and conduct four group discussions with 22 children (selected by asking for volunteers); using similar methods to those used at Daleview. My analysis rests mostly on detailed notes written during the interviews, but I check audio recordings of the interviews where necessary. I observe the class taught by a class teacher and trainee teacher. I also interview the head and the main class teacher. My analysis is based on observation of six adults (teachers, trainee teacher, teaching assistants and a volunteer) working with the children during the week. Similar consent procedures were used with all participants to those in Daleview; parents were asked to opt-out if they did not consent for their child to participate (none did so).

My gaze here, informed by research at Daleview, focuses on detailing the following aspects of the classroom and children’s responses:

- *Timetable/Learning activities*: core curriculum, creative/inquiry based activities, choice.
- *Sonic environment*: silence, shouting, singing, pupil talk/dialogue.
- *Behaviour management*: rules (bodies silent and still), rewards, praise, penalties.
- *Learning discourse*: listening, learning behaviours (e.g. aiming high, mindsets).
- *Classroom materiality*: learning resources and other materiality (e.g. carpet).

3.3 Analysis

This section walks through the data analysis process, including the ways in which I spend time meandering and shifting focus, to integrate a nuanced analysis of children's agency.

3.3.1 Meandering analysis

I move away from key texts and theoretical figures in the analytical stage. Instead, I use de Certeau and colleagues' (1998; 1984) work on 'everyday practices' as an epistemological framework, which I find is productive for walking through the data (Nolas and Varvantakis, forthcoming) and for thinking about children's agency by 'bringing into light . . . the inventiveness of the everyday' (Highmore, 2002, p.63). This includes documenting classroom practices, including the 'unsuspected resources hidden among ordinary people for creating an intelligible way of being in the world (Giard, 1998a, p.xxi). This tracing of the 'winding paths' of ordinary practices (*ibid.*, p.xviii) demands the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility to the wonders and minutiae of daily life. In the thesis, I aim to put the reader in the classroom, with an emphasis on the sensory and affective through a multimodal sensibility in my analysis. I focus on observable behaviour and participants' voices, interpreting possible symbolic benefits where participants may never be fully aware of them, through an understanding of the school cultural context (Giard, 1998b) and the forces that produce and condition different practices and feelings (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012, p.789). Through my analysis I identify different subject positions taken up by children; where practices are 'decisive for the identity of a dweller or group' allowing them 'to take up a position in a network of social relations inscribed in the environment' (*ibid.*, p.9); from where 'ordinary people speak knowledgeably about their worlds' (Webb, 2014, p.11). A concern with embodied practices emphasises that the world is not simply discursive, and so the research draws attention to the materiality of the classroom, including children's bodies, as well as affect.

My analysis includes both what children say, but also their silences. Mazzai (2009) argues that errant and silent voices demand an attentiveness and openness and calls on us to 'purposefully elicit those silent narratives inhabiting the shadows that we fail to notice' (p.54). If we only listen for the easily understood, translatable and heard voices then what we hear is the normative voice, 'one that is shared and designed for whoever must and can understand it' (*ibid.*, p.49). Highmore (2006) suggests that the real can

never be heard in full, only glimpsed in the silences. Hearing the silent and unsayable offers an opportunity to look beyond surface meanings, possibly telling us more than what children actually say (Spyrou, 2011), going beyond, for example, Roma's assertion that she sits still to be noticed (discussed in Chapter Five). This approach to analysis demands a familiarity with the discourses that inform what children can say. Mazzai (2009) cautions however, that we do not 'fill the silences with another voice of our own desire' (p.50).

When in the classroom and with children, I record in my field notes as much as possible of what I observe, and include verbatim dialogue. That evening and following days, I type up the notes, adding details from memory. The moment in the classroom is transformed by being 'freeze-framed' in my typed notes and transcriptions, 'extracted as an object to be regarded, observed and analysed at leisure in another time, in another mood' and it is through this freeze-framing that the nuances of social life become foregrounded and new understandings gained 'away from the heat of the moment' (James, 1999, p.116). Analysis 'is always on-going . . . intra-acting and shaping future research encounters' (Ringrose and Renold, 2014, p.776), and for me, undertaken through different body configurations: ideas come through pre-sleep drowsiness lying at night, when upright walking, as well as sitting. The analysis is also informed by wide cultural references: listening to an episode of Michael Bond's *Paddington*, entitled 'Aiming High', gives me a new cut on a school initiative of the same name. There is an insertion of memory, feeling and imagination, that Nolas and Varvantakis (forthcoming) talk of as 'time travelling' (n.p.), within the analysis of sensory and affective multimodal methods and data artefacts that evoke 'the corporeality of practising 'analysis'' (n.p.). They draw on different metaphors, including a process of 'composing', staying with the uncertainty of the process and addressing the unknown; inventive 'play' with and between media in searching for connections; and a 'plundering' the data to produce a work that illuminates the reader (n.p.). There is no quick, straight path through this analysis, but instead a 'meandering' across the data, working 'backwards deciphering signs and traces of the practices and intersubjective moments we experienced in the field in order to tell a story bigger than those moments' (*ibid.*). I pursue paths that narrow to nothing, and those that widen enough for light to get in.

I began by thematically coding the children's individual interviews in an Excel spreadsheet, but the volume of data meant I decided to code the rest in the qualitative data analysis software NVivo (see Appendix Four for codes). I analyse the core children as cases, giving me a depth of understanding about each child, but also undertake a thematic analysis across the children. The software program more easily allows me to examine the breadth of my data through retrieving the many segmented examples of text that are similarly coded, while not excluding me from intensifying my gaze and 'mining for meaning' where I see a 'glow', and again zooming out to make connections to the wider data (Maclure, 2010, p.282). This is an affective as well as an intellectual process in which the 'shifting speeds and intensities . . . generate sensations resonating in the body as well as the brain' (*ibid.*, p.282). The approach requires trust in emergent research interests and 'pursuing niggling feelings of uncertainty' (Back, 2007, p. 173). It is the meandering analysis in the pursuit of 'desire lines across the data archive and the terrain of the imagination' (Nolas and Varvantakis, forthcoming). With representations crafted, rather than the revelation of the authentic child (or teacher), the ethnographic text provides 'a rendering of what childhood might be like' (James, 1999, p.101).

I also undertake a Kruskal Wallis statistical test, using a software program, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), to explore mean differences in the numbers of learning behaviour stickers received (see Chapter Six). This is a nonparametric test suitable for small samples, which measures means across independent samples.

Potentially controversial findings need a demonstrably forensic analysis. I sense a degree of defensiveness/anger from a few teachers in response to early presentations of my work, which touch on issues of concerns for teachers but is not sufficiently developed. This alerts me to the need to be confident in my analysis and to ensure I demonstrate care and thoughtfulness. This in part drives my decision to use NVivo. The thesis presents a detailed impressionist analytical process, while recognising that ethnography includes the confessional as well as the realist, the latter being evident through my use of counting (Van Maanen, 1988). I have endeavoured 'to pay truth the courtesy of serious effort without reducing the enigmatic and shifting nature of social existence to caricature and stereotype' (Back, 2007, p.153).

When I feed back the interim findings to the children, a year after leaving the field, when they are in Year Two, I ask questions to fill gaps identified during the analysis. This includes drawing on a picture of a body where they feel when enjoying learning and an adult is angry or shouts; and writing adjectives to describe how a butterfly feels when learning to fly.

3.3.2 Highlighting inter-connections

Initially, I struggle to know with whom lie my allegiances, given children are in many ways less powerful than adults in the classroom. In my former career, supporting children to be heard in different sectors, my emphasise was on relationship building and dialogue, rather than elevating children. In the ethnography, while the focus is very clearly on children, I aim to situate the staff practice in the classroom entanglement, within an understanding of how power circulates and is not unidirectional, as well as to avoid hiding behind a dangerous rhetoric of *doing good* for children and forgetting the lives of the (mostly) female teachers. This requires the kind of listening that ‘must admit polyphonic interpretations of what is taking place’ (Dahlberg and Moss, 2009, p.xxv). The staff are highly committed professionals, working hard to support the children and to deliver on expected curricular outcomes. Bennet (2010) highlights the ethical dimension to integrating the concept of an assemblage in which agency and therefore blame (and I would add ‘credit’) is distributed, so that ‘to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself’ (p.13). The research does not seek to point fingers at teachers nor to suggest that all children need is ‘a bit more grit’. Instead, I aim to highlight the interconnectedness of elements in children’s education, integrating a vision of multiple-causality as emergent of a whole entanglement. So that ‘it (sometimes) becomes possible to say whether it is governmental discourses, technologies or everyday practices that hold most explanatory power in a given situation’ (Krafft, 2013, p.5). Where the research may sound critical of teachers, their agency is not understood simply as an individual capacity, but as distributed and entangled with different structural, cultural and material influences (Priestley *et al.*, 2015). Rather than asking ‘what’s wrong here?’ I ask ‘Why is this school like this? How did it get to be this way? What is life like for people who are here?’ (Thomson and Hall, 2017, p.45). The analysis aims then to disrupt the ‘bleeding obvious’ of the everyday, and to help get under the skin of the taken for granted, and the everyday assumptions in which banalities are produced (Maclure, 2010, p.277).

The research foregrounds the ‘disagreements, ambiguities, uncertainties, contradictions, and incoherencies’ (Lather, 2007, p.70) of children’s agency in the classroom, and an acceptance of the messiness in the stories produced (Spyrou, 2011). With the aim of relating ‘the troubles contained in the smallest story to a larger, more wordly scale’ (Back, 2007, p.22). This requires an awareness of how I am located in the work and draws upon my own experience in the construction of knowledge, recognising ‘that objectivity is a matter of responsibility and not a matter of distancing’ (Barad, 2012, p. 57). I have tried to work harder at following Back’s (2007) advice, which is to think of our interlocutors ‘next to us as we write’ as a ‘corrective to the liberties we sociologists are prone to take with their lives’ (p.152). This has included a concern with the effect that reading this thesis would have for the children and their families, as well as staff, following Lareau’s (2011) study which focused on 12 families, half of whom were ‘deeply troubled’ (p.317) by how they had been represented.

The analysis is primarily data-driven, with theoretical concepts sensitising the data collection and its subsequent analysis: suggesting ‘directions along which to look’, as opposed to ‘what to see’ (Blumer, 1954, p.7). Participants’ understandings of their experiences contributes to theory building in the search for the most effective explanations. For example, I ask the children about their feelings but I was not expecting affect to come out so strongly in the research, in particular how teacher’s anger stays with the children (discussed in Chapter Four). Similarly, while I am sensitised to bodies through theoretical reading on materiality, I was struck by how still children’s bodies are expected to be, and this is hard to shake off, so I begin counting time spent sitting (also discussed in Chapter Four). Initially, I succumb to a current anthropological ‘fetishism’, worrying if the thesis has ‘enough theory’ (Miller, 2017, p.29). I have come to understand how sensitising concepts work to help explain the world, rather than to exploit my data for the sake of theory (*ibid.*).

3.4 Reviewing the research design

During the ethnographic research, I work to situate myself epistemologically as ‘curious and unknowing’ (Lather, 2007, p.9) and to contain the anxiety provoked by this lack of certainty. This includes learning to incline rather than stand at a distance when tailoring the methods to each child, as well as in the analysis and in my writing (discussed in Chapter One). With time, I enjoy and value the possibilities offered to be creative and

become more confident in the value of knowledge generated by pursuing paths of emerging interest, and watching myself engage with what is produced. This is a growing acceptance of ‘getting lost as a way of knowing’ (*ibid.*, p.4), rather than simply following a mapped out research plan. In this section, I detail how this was of benefit, the tensions raised and some inevitable dead ends.

The study includes only two schools, and one briefly, and focuses in-depth on just six children. While there are limits about what can be generalised from this research, the inclusion of the additional school enriches my theory; widening my gaze, particularly to a respected school, I can talk more confidently about school culture within modern primary schooling and the conditions for children’s agency. The ethnographic approach and range of multimodal data supports an in-depth analysis of identified forms of agency in the classroom, while recognising additional research may also reveal others.

When working with the children, no one research activity dominates and instead ‘meaning is produced through the inter-relationship between and among’ (Dicks *et al.*, 2006, p.78) different visual and creative methods. While I had previous experience of using creative methods, the challenge here is to find those that tap into the abstract phenomena under study. Some activities undertaken with the children are clearly more productive than others, but I never know in advance those that will get me closer to an understanding of agency with any child. The research activities are emergent, with methods evolving in response to what I observe. In the final group discussions, for example, I ask about the sounds children hear, because I have become aware of children’s silence in the classroom. Earlier, as I became aware of how the classroom offers limited sensory engagement (discussed in Chapter Seven), I take additional care with my own ‘interview’ space and create a comfortable corner with a rug and cushions. This, together with resources that look, sound and feel good, creates an inviting and comfortable space (see Figure 3.2 below). Children volunteer how much they like it; Alice says she wants to spend the whole day here, ‘because it would be really comfortable . . . because I keep getting wedgies when I sit on the [classroom] carpet’.



Figure 3.2 Research interview space for children.

Some methods raise specific ethical concerns. On a few occasions, I use film elicitation, in which I film children in the class, and soon afterwards show them excerpts for their commentary (Robson, 2014). I find it disruptive, however, to ask for consent if children are already engaged in a classroom activity, and too intrusive not to get consent each time. When using the castle puzzle in the initial children's interviews, the intention is to identify how they respond to challenge, and yet I feel uncomfortable when children show signs of unease at not being able to complete a puzzle, and the activity frequently feels too much like a test. I attempt to implement this activity identically across all children, similar to the psychological experimental approach from which it came; allowing children to explore the puzzle before introducing challenges would have helped to make the activity more playful and less pressured. This is how the subsequent children's interviews unfold, as I become increasingly confident that I will learn by attending to the different routes travelled with the children in their interviews rather than seeking uniformity. Using a 'toolbox' of creative methods, rather than expecting to ensure objectivity by using each method identically with each child, ensures a better fit between the method and the child, helping to ensure their engagement and understanding of the explored concepts. For example, a younger child adores a set of small cuddly bears, whereas another, who is older, feels they are too 'baby' like.

One particular challenge in designing the children's interviews is how to access their projective agency orientations in guiding their present action. I sometimes ask why they acted in a certain way, but usually I ask open questions about their experience (e.g. 'tell

me about the maths lesson', 'what would bear have done/felt in maths'). Only in the very broadest sense do I ask about their futures, including what job they want to do when an adult and 'what will you be like . . . in Year Two/further up the school?' The children sometimes struggle to answer these questions. It might have been useful to ask about their hopes and dreams (Nilsen, 2017). Of course, children are not always looking toward some goal, and I come to understand their projective orientations as integral to their pursuit of desires in the classroom (discussed in Chapter Seven): 'very often they do not walk with the purpose of getting ahead . . . It seems as if children's walking is more a question of exploring rhythm' (Olsson, 2009, p.5).

Some methods prove less productive for the research purposes, particularly P4C. In the first session, we discuss the children's preferences, using examples from a picture book, *Would you rather . . .* (e.g. have supper in a castle, breakfast in a balloon or tea on the river) (Burningham, 1999). I extend the discussion to the classroom (e.g. 'would you prefer Golden Time every day, a sticker for everything you do or eat your pudding first at lunch'). This highlights something about what children value but, as a method, it relies too much on reasoning and argument. The second session focuses on another picture book, *Michael* (Bradman and Ross, 2009), about a 'different' pupil, who likes reading/numbers/art/science, but he does not 'listen' and does not like school learning activities. Discussions about the book highlight binary understandings of good/naughty and is more successful at evoking the children's imagination, emotion and desire (Murriss, 2016). For example, one child frequently in trouble loves the book and wants me to read it again. During the group sessions, however, the children tend to respond individually to me rather than discuss issues as a group, and sessions do not progress to the P4C stages of children generating questions, voting and discussing one as a group. It feels the children will need far more support to develop their group work skills for this method to prove productive, so I abandon it in favour of group discussions.

My research approach is one of respect and reflexivity, informed by feminism in which 'the process of research is as important as its outcomes' (Liamputtong, 2007, p. 10). This is a deployment of ethnography that extends beyond an original anthropological colonial method to one of liberatory strategy (Skeggs, 2001), focusing here on agency. My research stance aims for 'curiosity without condescension, openness without voyeurism, and participation without domination' (Charmaz, 2003, p.280). I opt for a gentle tone and a respectful acceptance of children's choices and responses,

acknowledging what they tell me, aiming to avoid praise (e.g. ‘good’; ‘good boy/girl’), so as not to signal or pressure children to give a ‘correct’ response. Praise is used widely in the classroom (discussed in Chapters Four and Six) and I start to wonder how its comparative absence in the interviews is experienced by children. Perhaps my failure to signal what I expect or think of their performance paradoxically creates additional pressure so that some children cannot give me a response when I ask for their opinion (discussed in Chapter Five).

The ethnographic method is intense, and a primary condition of the traditional anthropological approach includes ‘cutting oneself off from the company’ of one’s own community (Malinowski, 2014, p.35); it has even been suggested the reason people become anthropologists is driven by ‘some kind of generalized dissatisfaction with one’s home’ (Gow, 1991, p.43). Van Maanen (1988) highlights how sociologists more than anthropologists prefer to stay ‘close to home’ (p.21) and I would add, parents too. Even using ‘partial immersion’ (Delamont, 2012, p. 343), where the researcher lives at home, the demands of fieldwork can still be both mentally and physically strenuous, with long hours keeping focused while observing, listening and note taking, followed by further hours of writing up, transcribing, organising research documentation, before returning into the field. Beyond this, there is the intellectual absorption that transgresses the field boundary; something I notice when saying goodnight to my child, while thinking of another I observed that day. My daughter is wary of my attention on others close to her age; I canvas her support through piloting activities and asking her perspective on emergent themes. I become frustrated and resentful of the competing pulls on my attention, repeatedly dragged out of my reverie in the research and in parenting. To what extent, I wonder, can ethnography be a feminist methodology given the demands on the (female/parent) ethnographer? There are similar competing pressures felt by teachers who are mothers, ‘When I have a family and I’m also the main carer, it’s horrendous. I’m running everything in my family and I’m doing this; it’s breaking me’. My solution, during the writing of the thesis, is to seek out my own ‘Malinowski Moments’, by staying away from home for a week or two, so I can inhabit the classroom.

3.5 Ethical and positionality considerations

In this section, I explore some of the wider ethical issues of doing this research and my positionality.

3.5.1 Transparency, consent and reporting

Participating children, family members and staff are informed of the research purpose and process (see Appendix Five to Ten for copies of the letters and consent forms for different research participants). Opt-in consent is sought from key participants' parents and opt-out consent for the rest of the class, to allow for greater inclusion of diverse groups (Boddy, 2013). I explain the research first in letters to the parents and children and then in person, finding a time to meet with each parent and child, to explain the complex process and potential outcomes, before signing the consent forms. When one parent instructs their child to write their name on the form, I later take time to explain again when alone with the child. The practice of 'process consent' (Heath *et al.*, 2009; p. 25) is understood as ongoing and I adopt hand printed visuals to communicate consent and withdrawal (discussed above), similar to types of methods employed by others (Thompson n.d.), although children competently dissent in many other ways through their bodies and verbally (discussed in Chapter Five). I also make an illustrated booklet explaining the research process and how the findings will be disseminated, that I show each time I meet with the children and they come to know well. My own children have also given their consent to be included in this thesis.

One of the most striking ethical concerns for me is managing the needs and expectations of the adults around children, especially their vulnerability in how they (and I) might be judged in the research. This concern with judgement also silences children in the on-task classroom (discussed in Chapter Four). I am so heavily focused on ensuring children and their families are supported to give informed consent, but wonder whether it is harder for 'good', untroublesome, staff to say 'no'. One Reception teacher was not told the school had given permission for me to research in her classroom. None of the teachers explicitly dissent, but one volunteer never returns a form, another repeatedly tells me there is nothing of interest for me to see in the class so that I feel unwelcome and stop observing her; she repeatedly postpones our interview, while giving plausible reasons each time, leaving me unclear whether she wants to participate or not. I communicate to all participants that views are valued, respected and treated as equally valid, and utilise the application of 'methodological empathy' (Mills and Morton, 2013,

p. 14), as the art of ‘wilful ingenuousness and the momentary suspension of disbelief’, with the aim of understanding ‘alternative and contradictory truths’ (Mills, 2003, p.82). I monitor my presence in the classroom and check in with staff where I feel there is a sign of irritation or anxiety, also regularly expressing my appreciation. I sense and discuss with staff the challenge of having another adult in the classroom, particularly if a lesson is going less well, and on occasion I purposefully look elsewhere, leave the room, or afterwards acknowledge how ‘difficult’ a situation must have been.

The staff generously give me almost a free reign of the classroom and school, and do what they can to help with the research. My reciprocity feels limited, offered through the opportunity for reflective engagement and sharing research findings. As well as an ‘extra pair of hands’ to be called on when needed, although only occasionally am I asked to help (for example, to be responsible for a group of children during sports day, accompany a class trip to the library, help children change for PE, or fetch something from another room). In the same way that I show my thanks to the children with small termly gifts (e.g. wooden bear shaped figures to decorate, plus the books of photographs for the core children), I give plants to the main teachers and teaching assistants.

I repeatedly have to explain to children why I am spending more time with the core group, as many (some repeatedly) ask to spend time with me. There is one child, Margot, who is clearly angry, conveyed through looks and her vivid words ‘you stink in a hot bubbly poo bath with poo’. I speak with all children informally, including in the playground, but in response to their requests, particularly as I had abandoned P4C, I introduce a group craft session for the class at the end of the spring term.

Careful consideration is needed of how research interactions with a school and its stakeholders has the capacity to disrupt their on-going trajectories – or lines of becoming – in ways that are productive or counter-productive (Thomson and Hall, 2017). The research process is not only a way of exploring children’s agency but potentially caught up in the process of constructing children’s subjectivity. It offers a reflexive process of engagement for teachers and children, through the use of on-going dialogue and reflection, visual recall methods, group discussions, review and feedback. I find no obvious sign that the process is a transformative one for the children, but a mother reports that the level of attention and opportunity for dialogue has been highly beneficial for her child, helping them to address the lack of such opportunities in the

classroom, and its absence is felt in Year Two. A main class teacher at Daleview says she finds it valuable to be able to reflect in the successive interviews. When I present interim research findings to staff a year after leaving the field (as well as to parents and children), I am struck by their interest and openness to engage with the sometimes difficult feedback, which I present as dilemmas experienced by all teachers (see Chapter Nine for extended versions of these dilemmas).

On completion of the thesis, I have promised to send an accessible summary and full copy to the participating schools, plus summaries to all participating children and parents, with the offer to provide a full copy to anyone who wants it. Given the small sample size and limited research sites, I have disguised all traceable data (e.g. location, school, class), as well as identifiable data, by using pseudonyms. I stressed to the parents and children that those who know the children well may be able to identify them, but I have worked to hide their identities, by changing details about some individuals (such as gender) and contexts. At times, I do not mention pseudonyms to prevent a picture of someone's identity being built across vignettes. I have done the same with staff and parents.

Anonymity and the confines of confidentiality are explained to the children and reasonable procedures are undertaken to safeguard participants, this includes me being checked by the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). I follow the school's safeguarding protocol, but first speak to a university supervisor about whether to inform the school following an ambiguous safeguarding issue. When undertaking home visits, I contact a designated person both before and after the visits. In children's homes, I spend time alone with children in their bedrooms as they show me around and those things that interest them, but always with the door open and never for long as the children spend most time in the living spaces or outside.

3.5.2 Positionality: researcher, student, mother

As a non-teaching professional, I occupy multiple positionalities in the school context, offering tensions and affordances for constructing meaning. This includes my experience as a student, both past and present; my doctoral experience connecting me to the quickly shifting highs and lows of my 'clever' student performance (discussed in Chapter One). Returning to university after years of working, I am acutely conscious of my new status, including how I am positioned through discourse: am I a doctoral

student or researcher? At first, I struggle with this apparent demotion, but begin to embrace the liberatory possibilities afforded by not having to be one who knows.

I approach the research as a professional with an understanding of the practice of children's participation and what it means to put a child at the centre of inquiry or practice; both to engage with their point-of-view and its implications (e.g. Lancaster and Kirby, 2013; Kirby *et al.*, 2003). My research experience and non-teacher role enables me to concentrate more on classroom interactions, to 'make the familiar strange' (Delamont *et al.*, 2010, p.3), rather than the effectiveness of teaching practices for achieving specific curriculum goals. That I am not a teacher makes me less threatening and, as a student, I genuinely present myself as someone wanting to learn, from and with participants. A teacher appears relieved, saying 'that's easier', when I tell her I am not a teacher.

To the children I am, on occasion, a mother. Nikita, for example, introduces me to another child, telling her 'she's a mummy'. My role as a parent is a key motivator in undertaking the research (outlined in Chapter One). I am a feminist middle-class mother, a perspective that is rarely named in childhood and education studies, but one that begs the question about what I might notice from this standpoint. I am drawn to the children's affective experiences in the classroom, and at times respond affectively, feeling shock and concern, as well as joy and laughter; disrupting the boundary between what counts out of school (children's experiences, both negative and positive) with what counts in school (children's discipline and attainment). Similarly, a teacher links her critique of sticker charts used in the classroom (see Chapter Six) to her child's experience of a similar reward system, 'from my parent, parental head, my daughter thinks she's rubbish, because she's not got as many [stickers] as others', but is noticeably more emotional about this than other things, 'I absolutely hate, underlined, capital letters . . . I can't bear it'. Research with teachers who become parents has identified how 'Seeing your own child through your teacher eyes can be challenging, exposing the contradictions between a disciplinary gaze and an unconditional maternal perspective' (Thomson and Kehily, 2011, p.241), where the apparent similarities between teaching and mothering can be experienced in tension and competition.

With the children, I initially aim to position myself as 'least adult' and 'least teacher' (Dunne *et al.*, 2005, p.62), and so, for example, from the start I use my first name and

sit with the children on the carpet, carefully resisting teachers' initial suggestions that I use my surname and sit on a chair. I make no attempt to act as if I am a child (I do not line up with them, for example), considering this disingenuous and serving no clear purpose (Atkinson, 2016), nor does participant observation traditionally require the researcher to participate in everything participants do (Delamont, 2012). When children ask me (as they frequently do) if they can go to the toilet, I use the opportunity to emphasise 'I'm not a teacher' and not in a position of authority. My aim is to emphasise to the children that they can say things to me that they would not be allowed to say to a teacher. Of course, I can choose when to be 'least' or 'most' adult, so as the fieldwork progresses I become increasingly fed up with sitting on the uncomfortable floor, and sit on a chair, giving myself the excuse that my body is old, before guiltily forcing myself back down onto the carpet.

It is unreasonable to expect the children to unlearn my adult role (*ibid.*) and I remain a 'sort of adult' (James, 1999, p.103). An unusual one for school, who asks children's views and has time to respond to requests for help and hear stories and complaints, plays games and offer creative activities, laugh at (even scatological) jokes, and rarely reprimand and never chastise. In the school context, I am also positioned as a kind of teacher. At the end of the fieldwork, a child tells me, 'I like my mum a little more than you. You for a teacher . . . it's just because you've never like shouted at anyone'. I come to understand my position as the 'adult who least knows', having introduced myself as a 'learner', showing the children pictures of 'my teachers' (supervisors) and the university, and explaining I am interested in 'what helps us to learn'. Throughout my time in the classroom, children sometimes ask me for help. When this is to do with the rules or expectations of the classroom, generally I explain I am also unsure, asking 'what do we do when we don't know?' I do respond to requests for help in reading, writing and calculation, but I must tread a delicate line: being careful not simply to provide an answer, knowing the expectation is that children independently find out, while also wanting to avoid sounding too much like a teacher by telling them to work it out for themselves. I must also align with staff by discouraging children from being distracted by my presence during class time.

During the school research interviews, I also tread a narrow path between encouraging the children's engagement with the research agenda and ensuring their on-going consent; staying with some discomfort while watching closely for signs where children

need to move on to another topic or want to stop talking. I am firstly a researcher, guided by an ethic of on-going consent as well as minimising harm and making sure activities are not too difficult, but also, and particularly in a school context, I am in part pedagogue: demanding effort when inviting the children to make meaning of their classroom experiences: ‘Meaning is the work of the will. This is the secret of universal teaching’ (Rancière, 1991, p.56). This is not always comfortable, as discussed above with respect to the castle activity.

When I visit children in their homes (discussed below), I spend time engaged in conversation and play (see Nolas and Varvantakis, forthcoming), but do not introduce any specific research activities, whereas, when ‘interviewing’ in the school environment, this allows for a more directive/authoritative researcher role, one that fits more with how adult/child relationships and activities are framed in this context. During individual interviews, mostly we find an easy balance between engaging in the research agenda and having time to play and talk about other things. Although not with James, one of the core children, who is clear he wants to spend time with me (rather than in the classroom), but only to play and not answer my questions, and he repeatedly challenges my authority. For example, by continuing to draw on my cushion when I tell him to stop, in a way he rarely behaves with the teachers. I am often left questioning whether ‘I’ve done a good enough job’ (field notes) after these interviews. James’s ambivalence towards the research is troubling, as I do not want to force him to do anything that he does not want to do. I wonder whether to let the play evolve and see how this might be productive, while feeling I owe it to the research, with its specific focus, and the other children who would like to be included in the core group, to stress we cannot only play. I am also working under structural constraints that limit when and for how long I can take a child out of the class, so I want to ensure our time together includes a clear focus on the research agenda.

In a school context my interview activities are what Bernstein (1996) would call weakly framed, resulting in an ‘invisible pedagogic practice’ (p.28). The instructional discourse is implicit, as I ask James to reconstruct rather than reproduce knowledge, and I use an ambiguous regulative discourse, telling him what I would like him to do/talk about (adult directed) while suggesting he has choices (child directed). I sense James is trying to work out the rules; so I aim to clarify and try to negotiate a ‘deal’ where we can both ‘talk and play’, one that needs repeated reiteration as he continues to resist the talking

part, ‘why does it has to always talk?’ When he tells me ‘I want to work with you all day’, I say ‘but I ask you lots of questions’; his response is telling, ‘yeah, and I listen’. His words here are a creative form of resistance, he is agreeing with me rather than pushing back, signalling *I’m playing your game*, following the rules to a degree. The focused attention of an interview is unusual in a school context, and James does not fully appreciate it is me who wants to listen to him. He recognises me as an adult, but also somehow different from others in school and he does not know how to be with me. These interviews require a more intense on-going reflection than with other children, and they foreground how I and children conduct ourselves and how power is invoked in this research relationship, with us both working to give and get something in return. Many children often draw in my field notebook, and I am pleased, one November day, when James turns to the back of my book, saying ‘this is my page’, as it suggests he is signalling his allegiance to the research. He then adds ‘my book, take it home’, before quickly changing his tone and message, ‘can I use it now?’ James employs a charm that can turn a situation, which often makes me smile, one he also employs with children. In the playground one day, he hits Stuart hard on the head, rather than tapping him as a game requires, but is instantly apologetic making it all okay.

The process of reflexivity continues after leaving the field, with the growing appreciation of how my ‘interview’ sessions offer the children a large crack in which to deviate from sitting quietly, as expected in class. In the group sessions, my expectation that children sit, listen to each other, take turns, etc., is resisted by the children, and at times the sessions become chaotic: children hide behind chairs, sit on each other, argue, play with toys from shelves, write on the whiteboard, make repeated irritating noises, ‘doob, doob, doob’, and speak secretly into the microphone. Experienced at running focus groups, both in and outside schools, I am frustrated and lost as to why these sessions are so difficult, but this becomes interesting of itself; ‘who I am’ and ‘how I am’ becomes a part of story of understanding the classroom (Lather, 2007). Whereas in the past I am usually a little or unknown researcher, in this ‘interview’ setting I become positioned as a type of play worker with a ‘low personal rule frame’ (Pollard, 1985, p.173), and so the children do not see my sessions as a place to be on-task. In the initial interviews, we talk and draw and do puzzles, and in contrast to the classroom, children do not just sit, but walk, lie, crouch, stand, touch, hug, dance and sing. Subsequently, everyone has seen me working with the core children where again we talk and play

using toy bears, Lego, drawing, making, photography and stories. After an initial P4C session, I ask Amelie for feedback and she tells me it was a bit boring, and she would like to do more colouring in and games. No wonder then, during another early group, there is a sudden mass exodus of children as they discover they can do colouring with a teaching assistant in the neighbouring room.

At Daleview, children's definition of learning never includes mention of movement or talking, and few (five out of 26) refer to any form of art (drawing and colouring), and just one includes play. Similarly, at Clifftop, not one of the 11 children defining learning mentions movement, talking or play, and just one mentions drawing and another construction. Unused to sounding playfully in the classroom, my expectation that the children do so while also keeping focused on the research agenda is confusing. These children are also unpracticed in discussing their opinions as a group, a skill that is usefully taught (Mercer and Howe, 2012), and so frequently give their own opinion, sometimes talking over others, although still there are times when they explore together the impact of how everyone does or might live together in the classroom (Biesta, 2017a).

Children, I discover, are competent participants in the school culture. I have an ambivalent relationship to it; I am what Lave and Wenger (1991) call a 'legitimate peripheral participant'. Legitimate in the sense of wanting a stake in it, so that the children participate in my group sessions and do not draw staff attention to my inability at keeping the children quiet and focused. While also peripheral, not wanting anything to do with it and in particular not to jeopardise my relationship with the children. When James continually fails to follow the ground rules we had agreed as a group, proving disruptive and getting into conflict with Alfie, gently but firmly I tell him he can go back to the classroom if he feels unable to follow the rules today. When he becomes visibly upset at this idea, I find myself backing down; worried his apparent sadness and anger will compromise a research relationship I have spent time building, while also feeling I am failing the group: Alfie later confirms his anger that James remained. I feel stuck in this 'liminal space' where 'the implicit order that structures normal conduct does not apply' (Motzkau and Clinch, 2017, p.271), seeing no way to get this right. This affects me emotionally and undermines my sense of efficacy and professionalism. Similar to police officers interviewing children about alleged abuse who are caught

between the expectation to be child-centred and requirements for hard evidence gathering (*ibid.*). Perhaps this is similar too to those teachers at Daleview who tell me they aspire to work in alternative school settings (including Montessori, Steiner and International schools), while currently having to deliver on what is expected of mainstream school.

I have to become part of the school culture, and work out how to communicate without creating anarchy in what children powerfully and competently identify as a large crack in the dominant culture. This necessarily makes me work harder to develop engaging playful activities, and to ensure there is sufficient flexibility for children to introduce their own methods. For example, in one group the children spontaneously dramatise what they think of the school's rules. The sessions become 'good enough' for the research purposes; if not always my best, they are my best effort within the complexity of the research encounters, where there is always more 'one could worry about; there is always another fine *mess* one could get into...' (Horton, 2008, p.378; original emphasis).

A note on the analysis

In the subsequent analysis chapters, the primary focus is on Daleview. Where I also bring in an analysis perspectives from Clifftop this is explicitly mentioned in the text.

CHAPTER FOUR: The ‘On-task’ Modern Primary Classroom

I think the thing is the children are, automatically they want to touch things, move things, get up, get down, that’s how they learn, because they don’t just learn passively . . . So they need to move, they need to find out, they need to explore, they need to touch, they need to be able to move things, see all round them, all different ways round, crawl around the floor, look up at things from up, you know, it’s, it’s how you learn. (Mr. Stuart, head teacher, Clifftop)

In Year One, you sit down. (Year One child)

In the performance-focused classroom, discourses and practices emphasise a normative ‘on-task’ pupil body as silent and still. The message to children is heard in the teacher’s instruction: ‘Remember good sitting and listening means good learning’ (Ms. Fletcher). This is echoed by pupils themselves, like Alice who tells the teacher she has worked out the correct answer: ‘because I did really good listening’, and Jan who, when asked what is the ‘special word’ (algorithm) for describing instructions on a computer, says, ‘it’s when you listen to the teacher’. Similarly, at Clifftop, around a third of the children (seven out of 22) tell me the most important thing in their classroom is listening and not talking: ‘You listen and you sit quietly . . . if you don’t listen you don’t know what you’re doing’ (Sam); ‘We stand there and we be quiet’ (Yaz).

In this chapter, I explore the origin and meaning of what I come to understand as the ‘on-task’ classroom. I illustrate the different strategies staff use to promote learning behaviours considered appropriate for being on-task. This includes controlling children’s bodies, their physical and sonic environment, and the use of rewards and sanctions. I demonstrate that children understand what is expected of them, and are competent in performing ‘being on-task’.

4.1 The ‘on-task’ classroom

It is nearly half past two on a Wednesday afternoon, in the second week of September at Daleview Primary. I am sitting at a table with a group of children at the start of another literacy-based lesson; Gill is playing with a toy monkey until Ms. Peach, a teacher, asks her to put it away, then she and Lucy tell me about the frogs in their garden. Some minutes into the lesson Gill asks what they are supposed to be doing and it becomes clear that all the children at the table are unsure. I explain the worksheet instruction to

‘draw something you like doing outside’ and to ‘label’ their picture. The children look around, still unclear, and Lucy asks me to tell her what ‘label’ means. Gill has her head on the table. Everyone seems tired. Kitty draws a picture of a game, grandmother’s footsteps, adding no labels. After the activity, we sit on the carpet with the rest of the class. Ms. Peach is unhappy that some of the children were playing when they should have been ‘doing book time’ activities. She lists those children who listened, adding ‘Some children have not been good at listening’ and explaining, ‘I know it’s different in Year One to Reception, when a teacher asks you to do something or any adult, you need to do it. When we do book activities you don’t do dressing up’. A child yawns. ‘The reason is to help you to do these activities, help your learning, and you can’t do that if you have lots of chat. Now you’re big Year Ones’.

There is an explicit assumption here that age and size are significant aspects of being a learner. Children entering Year One are rapidly expected to be focused on adult directed activities, working at a faster rate than in Reception, where children spent much of their day pursuing their interests, choosing from play-based activities, interspersed with time on the carpet and in groups working on maths and English activities with the teacher. Now formal curriculum activities extend throughout the morning and afternoon: there are 19 maths and English related weekly lessons, plus one lesson each for art, geography or history, PSHE, singing, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and two physical education (PE) sessions, as well as two awards assemblies and one Golden ‘play’ Time (see Figure 4.1 below). Other subjects, such as history, can also become literacy focused, as children are frequently required to write as well as draw what they learn. When I interview the children early in the academic year, they already understand what is most valued is the core curriculum. They tell me that numbers, letters, writing and associated learning resources are the most important things in the classroom. Dominic adds that learning to swim is different to learning at school ‘because you don’t do any writing’. When I ask the children what comes into their head when I mention the word ‘learning’, half refer to maths and/or English: ‘It’s sort of like writing with your pen . . . or reading work’ (Willa); ‘Maths, and activities, work, and colouring in, and paper work, and sentences, and, uhh, and, um, working together’ (Amelie). A similar proportion of children (six out of 11) at Clifftop mention mathematics and English.

DAY	1 st session (9.00 – 10.20)		2 nd session (10.45-11.10) (11.10-12.00)		3 rd Session (1.00-2.00)		Last session (2.15-3.10)	
Monday	Maths 1	Assembly	Phonics	Eng. 1	Art		Book time (literacy)	
Tuesday	Maths 2		Phonics	Eng. 2	PE		Book time (literacy)	
Wednesday	English 3	Assembly	Phonics	PE	ICT		Book time (literacy)	
Thursday	Assembly	Maths 3	Phonics	Eng.4	Geography		Book time (literacy)	
Friday	Assembly	PSHE	Phonics	Maths 4	Book time (literacy)		Catch up time	Golden Time
10.25 – 10.40 PLAYTIME								
12.00 – 1.00 LUNCH TIME								
2.00 – 2.15 PLAYTIME								

Figure 4.1 Weekly timetable (Daleview).

There is a lot to get through in the Year One curriculum and, as highlighted in Chapter Two, Ofsted judges educational outcomes on children's academic attainment *and* children's learning behaviour. In the absence of the possibility for any meaningful indicators for 'thirst for knowledge', 'love of learning' or even 'low level disruption' (Ofsted, 2015, p.55), school staff must translate the range of government and other behaviour guidance to interpret how the standards might be assessed in their schools. The head explains how she thinks Ofsted judges children's behaviour:

Everybody on-task . . . and if they were not on-task, that it's being managed properly and there weren't any, the learning didn't stop because of the behaviour of one or two . . . I think initially when they brought out this attitudes to learning behaviour everybody thought that if a child just happened to look out the window for a second you'd fail, but I don't think it's quite, it's not that extreme . . . but they do expect children to be on-task. (Ms. Rudland, head teacher, Daleview)

'On-task' is a term used by staff in both schools, and broadly in the wider education and research literature. The Sutton Trust's report, *What Makes Great Teaching?*, recommends teachers track students' on-task engagement, citing Brophy and Good's (1986) research that argues 'the relationship between 'academic engaged time' and student achievement as one of the 'most consistently replicated findings' in the literature'' (Coe *et al.*, 2014, p.48). Children glancing out of the window does not seem exaggerated in this literature. Amato-zech and colleagues (2006) use a scale with on-task behaviour defined as 'the student actively or passively attending to instruction or assigned work and the absence of off-task behaviour'. Off-task behaviours are said to include 'any motoric movement that occurred that was not associated with the academic task at hand (e.g., randomly flipping pages in a textbook or out of seat)' or 'passive disengagement for a period of at least 3 consecutive seconds' (p.213).

The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of the word 'task' emphasises its imposition: 'A piece of work imposed, exacted, or undertaken as a duty', and more specifically in education as 'A portion of study imposed by a teacher; a lesson to be learned or prepared' (Simpson and Weiner, 1989, p. 655-656). It is rooted in the Latin *taxare*, meaning 'to rate, estimate, value' (*ibid*, p. 655). The word evokes compulsion and judgement, not 'thirst' or 'love' for learning. Some children entwine their understanding of the language of learning with its imposition, where learning means: 'Working, if you work you *have to* work. If you're doing good working the teacher will

give you a star' (Nikita); 'Writing, and *having to do* what the teacher says' (Dominic); 'Thinking and doing what you're *supposed to do* in your head' (Roma) (emphasis added).

In the modern primary classroom, with its imposed outcomes and accountability systems, teachers must also be on-task. In both schools, teachers believe children can achieve the expected educational attainment in the new curriculum. At Clifftop, the head teacher, Mr. Stuart, believes they are 'freer' to deliver it in ways they want. Whereas staff at Daleview talk of feeling the force of the curriculum in the classroom: 'I think it's sad when the children see learning as maths and writing . . . the only thing that's really cared about is maths and reading and writing, so then that's all that, you know, you teach' (Ms. Fletcher, teacher). Reception staff are also tasked with meeting the expectations for Year One; during my time at Daleview they increase the amount of 'regular phonics, regular numbers, counting, regular teacher focused to get them writing . . . it's not forcing them to, it's guiding them they have to do it because it's such a leap then into Year One' (Ms. Heath, teacher).

Within Year One children are expected to become increasingly 'independent' learners, and staff must 'balance' a concern for play-based learning, with the on-task demands that children sit and listen. This on-task culture, a regime not imposed by teachers themselves, produces 'a consciousness of what teaching means' (Walkerdine, 1990, p.36), and subsequently an assessment of the children but also teachers' own practice. This assessment is as much emotional as it is pedagogical:

Unlike reception where they are a lot freer, there are times where we [the children] have to listen, we [the children] work on activities that help us with our learning and then you might have time to choose around the environment . . . Which in a way kind of makes me feel sad . . . Trying to balance the two, I guess, and also making sure the behaviour is ready for learning as well. So, there is more time spent sitting on the carpet, and they have to be able to listen . . . I've probably (laughing) come across as horrible and harsh this term, and I think (pause) it doesn't feel very natural for me as a teacher to kind of be strict but at the time, as my experience has grown over the last four years I feel like if you don't sort of set those expectations in the first term then it doesn't get any easier for the rest of it. (Ms. Fletcher, teacher)

Staff in both schools recount tales of Ofsted and other inspectors' judgements of children's 'inappropriate learning behaviour' in their classrooms. A reception teacher tells me of a mathematics lesson on shapes marked down from an 'outstanding' to a

‘good’ because a four-year-old child excitedly called out ‘I’ve found a triangular prism’. She was told he should not have raised his voice or interrupted her while working with another group of children. She adds ‘We do feel judged a lot’. The head teacher at Clifftop, Mr. Stuart, similarly rails against an inspector’s criticisms of a Year One child who sat on a chair with his leg bent up beneath him: ‘It’s ridiculous! But we all get very scared about these things. (Pause) It’s kind of no wonder that people treat children like they’re robots because you get treated like you’re going to be sacked if you even (?) . . . Where does this crap come from? It’s all about compliance’.

Teachers take seriously their responsibility to support behaviours and learning habits to prepare children for school. A new positive behaviour management system, researched and developed by their own Behavioural Team, is introduced into Daleview. This includes school-wide rules, emphasising a range of learning and moral behaviours, such as listening, being calm and working hard. The rules are introduced in class and assembly, displayed on classroom and hall walls, and frequently referred to by staff. Children who demonstrate the rules may be rewarded with a marble, collected towards a class treat. Children have thirty minutes ‘Golden Time’ on Friday afternoon, choosing different clubs to attend — mostly play, craft or sports based — that can be lost in increments of five minutes if children do not follow the rules after two warnings. Teachers feel the system works well, believing it ensures children learn to make ‘responsible decisions and wise choices’ (school document) by understanding their behaviour has consequences. In the classroom, the language of ‘choice’ is heard most when staff exert children to ‘make the sensible choice’. A primary interest, explains the head teacher, Ms. Rudland, is that the system helps to improve behaviour for learning: ‘it’s about having children having good behaviour so they can make progress’.

At Clifftop, the behaviour policy includes a verbal warning system with more immediate sanctions: staff let children know that disruptive behaviour is unacceptable, giving a warning if it continues, which might include ‘time out’, for example, having to work in a different area of the classroom. Children who correct their disruptive behavior are praised and allowed to return to the class. They also have a class reward system; children collect marbles for a class treat, although the rules are not explicit about how to earn a marble.

4.2 Marshmallow claps and frozen children

Rising expectations for Year One children means they must both sit and quieten down. This section explores the extent to which children must be still and silent, and the sounds that are heard in this environment.

4.2.1 Children's still and silent bodies

Current dominant teaching practice emphasise whole class teaching, where children sit on the carpet facing the teacher at the front. At Daleview, children sit in neat rows within lines marked on the floor using masking tape to ensure bodies are positioned in their own space (see Figure 4.2). For the same purpose, a shop bought carpet marked with squares is used in a Reception class at Clifftop, but not in Year One.

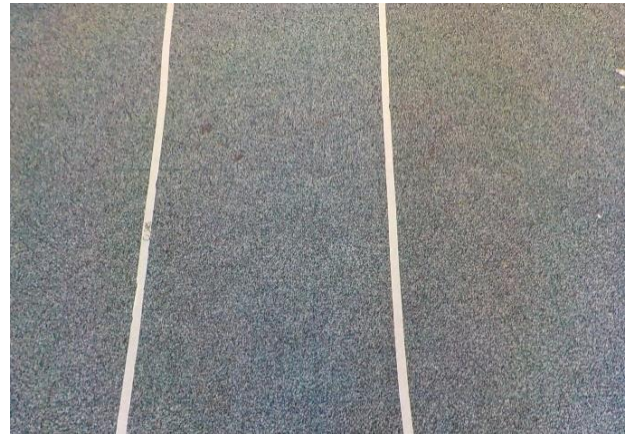


Figure 4.2 Lines on the carpet, marking where children sit (Daleview).

In both schools, between whole class teaching, children work seated at tables situated behind the carpet and, during assemblies, children sit on the wooden floor. At Daleview, children typically spend half the morning class time sitting on the floor, primarily listening to staff talk. On a day when there is an awards assembly they can spend as much as 108 minutes of the morning sitting on the floor (around 70 per cent of the class time), between 70 and 90 minutes on other days, down to 48 minutes on the morning when they have PE (see Table 4.1 below). The children can spend similar proportions of the afternoon sitting. This is in contrast to infants classes, as reported in *The Plowden Report*, that had lessons blocked into 15 or 20 minute periods: ‘which was as long as little children could tolerate when most of the instruction was oral’ (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, p.190).

Table 4.1 Examples of minutes spent by children on different activities during a three-hour morning and two-hour afternoon (Daleview and Clifftop).

Monday, November, Whole class observation		Wednesday, January, Core child observation		Monday, November, whole class observation	
Daleview [minutes]		Daleview [minutes]		Clifftop [minutes]	
9.07 Carpet: Registration/lunch [16]		9.06 Carpet: registration/lunch choices;		9.00 Carpet: registration/lunch/PK intro. [25]	
9.23 Carpet: Maths (Talk Partners) [18]		(?) Carpet: maths [29]		9.25 Carpet: Maths [25]	
9.41 Table activity: Maths [23]		9.35 Tables: maths [31]		9.50 Tables: Maths [37]	
10.04 Tidying up		10.06 Choices		9.27 Free drawing [3]	
10.05 Carpet [7]		(?) Tidy up & lining up		10.30 Tidy up time [5]	
10.12 Line up [5]		10.23 Break: Outside playtime [30]		10.35 Break: Outdoor play [18]	
10.17 Floor: assembly [23]		11.53 Carpet: Phonics [20]		10.53 Carpet: visitor reads story [17]	
10.33 Line up [2]		11.13 Carpet: English [21]		11.10 Carpet: English [20]	
10.35 Break: Outside playtime [25]		11.34 Table: English [20]		11.30 Carpet: English circle time [8]	
11.00 Carpet: Phonics [15]		11.54 Tidying up		11.38 Tables: English [17]	
11.15 Move [1]		(?) Lining up		11.55 Tidy up [1]	
11.16 Carpet: English (T.P.) [29]		12.02 Break: Lunch + outside play		11.56 Carpet: travel badges [4]	
11.40 Move [2]		1.09 Carpet: registration [6]		12.00 Break: Lunch + outdoor play	
11.42 Table Activity: English [15]		1.15 Changing for PE [4]		1.06 Carpet: register (children answer & go) [4]	
11.58 Line up [4]		1.19 Lining up for PE		1.11 Tables - English [4]	
12.02 Break: Lunch		1.07 PE [37]		1.15 Free drawing [4]	
		2.03 Children return to class		1.19 Tidy up [4]	
		2.05 Change from PE [5]		1.23 Move [2]	
		2.10 Break: Outside Playtime [17]		1.25 Carpet: English/phonics [20sec Talk Partner] [33]	
		2.27 Carpet: Golden Time choices [5]		1.58 Free choice/play [42]	
		2.32 Carpet: English [13]		2.40 Tidy up time [10]	
		2.45 Tables: English [18]		2.50 Carpet [5]	
		3.03 Carpet: Star of the Day [10]		2.55 Outdoor playtime [10]	
		3.13 Children leave		3.05 Carpet (keep coats on): Christmas songs [12]	
				3.17 Home	
Class time 150m	Morning (% of class time)	Class time 146+107m	Morning Afternoon	Class time 146+107m	Morning Afternoon
Carpet/Floor time	108 minutes (72%)	Carpet time	70 (48%) 32 (30%)	Carpet time	91 (62%) 64 (60%)
Table activity	36 (24%)	Table activity	51 (35%) 18 (17%)	Table activity	54 (34%) 4 (4%)
Talk Partner time	3 minutes 46 seconds	P.E.	0 37 (35%)	Circle time	8 (5%) 0
		Choice: draw/play	17 (12%) 0	Choice: draw/play	3 (2%) 48 (45%)
+ Break	25	+ Break	30 17	+ Break	18 10

There is a clear demarcation between work and play in Year One. As children sit on the carpet, the teaching assistant, Ms. French, tells them, ‘We’re not here to touch books or play, we’re here to show Ms. Peach [teacher] we’re listening’. Whole class carpet time is primarily used for teacher explication and giving instructions, and testing understanding. Children answer test questions, and sometimes come up to the screen to demonstrate knowledge. In phonics lessons, children write letter sounds and words on their whiteboards and, in maths, they make calculations while sitting on the floor, sometimes using counting aids (e.g. a cord threaded with beads). Clifftop recently increased the time children spend on the carpet, following a staff visit to Shanghai, to reinforce and promote deeper pupil understanding working through additional group examples; teachers provide children with more resources than at Daleview during whole class mathematics lessons (e.g. whiteboards and laminated number squares). At both schools, carpet time is also used for undertaking daily administrative tasks (e.g. the register, lunch choices), and children must sit on the carpet while they wait to be selected to line up for lunch/play/home/etc., or assigned to table activities.

After receiving some teacher input on the carpet, children move to the tables, to undertake further learning activities, often completing a worksheet or writing in an exercise book. At Daleview, in English children illustrate written work or do a literacy activity such as matching word and picture cards. In maths, children use different resources for making calculations, such as small colour coded bricks (Numicon) or plastic money. When children finish a table activity they usually have some free-choice time: the only time the children access the designated role play corner, temporally and spatially marginalized. Alternatively, they can draw, look at books, or engage in the ‘challenge table’ activities aimed at developing motor skills. The amount of choosing time varies from lesson to lesson and how soon children complete their work. In addition, children have the weekly half hour Golden Time. At Clifftop, children who have completed their work may sit at their desks drawing; they have two timetabled free-choice sessions in the week where they get to play with toys, dress up and use computers. Between lessons, in both schools, children move around the classroom helping to tidy things away.

The expectation that children sit extends into PE lessons. I became interested in how little children’s bodies move in the classroom, which led me to time how much individual children move in PE lessons. Table 4.2 below illustrates that physical

exercise is minimal, with children allowed to move for a mean of 7 minutes and 45 seconds at Daleview and a similar time at Clifftop, due to explication, demonstration and on-going teacher enforcement of children being still and quiet. This is not necessarily aerobic exercise as the time includes slow movement (e.g. warming up and beam work), and children do not necessarily move for all of the allotted time, if making a posture or opting out. The time taken for children to change in and out of PE clothes takes an additional 17 to 37 minutes. These observations are of three different staff teaching PE at Daleview and a specialist PE teacher at Clifftop. The two schools recently introduced daily runs around the playground, but at both staff find these hard to ‘fit in’ and do them less frequently than they feel they should (none happened during my week at Clifftop). Ms. Fletcher, at Daleview, suggests it takes some children too long to make the transition out and back on-task, so that a five minute run can turn into 30 minutes out of the day. Interestingly, children are not expected to change for the running activity.

Table 4.2 Amount of time (minutes and seconds) individual children are allowed to move in PE lessons (Daleview and Clifftop).

Name of child	Time allowed to move (minutes and seconds)	Time of lesson (minutes)	Time spent changing in/out of PE clothing (minutes)
Alice (Daleview)	5m 55s	24m	17 m
Julia (Daleview)	11m 0s*	35m	37 m
Tamas (Daleview)	11m 40s	26m	31 m
Clark (Daleview)	2m 28s	33m	20 m
Leah (Clifftop)	7m 20s	35m	27 m

* Note: This is 3m 20s longer than other children in the class, as Julia is chosen to demonstrate an activity.

Reflecting the Ofsted expectation for ‘impeccable’ behaviour outside of lessons, the on-task culture of silence and stillness is pursued beyond curriculum learning into different temporal and spatial locations in the school. This includes silence when lining up and changing for PE, and in the dinner hall and corridor: coming in from play, Ms. Peach says ‘Shhh, walk quietly; calm and quiet’. A particularly memorable image is of a young Reception child wandering the corridor back to his class, without a teacher in sight, with his upright finger stuck to his lip. During break, one day, I observe a staff member telling a child doing a few star jumps as she waits in an empty corridor, to sit down. At Clifftop, at the end of the day, Ms. Day notices two boys remaining on the carpet and asks lightly, ‘How come you’re out of your carpet spaces until I call you, do

I need special super glue to glue you until I call you?’ The boys, reading her humour, understand they are no longer expected to be on-task, say ‘No’ and stand up.

The demand for stillness and silence emphasises a cerebral/body binary obligation to be a good student: bodies get in the way of learning. Rather than discovering this place called school through their bodies, children discover their place through a submission of the body (Youdell, 2011). For Roma, learning is ‘thinking and doing what you’re supposed to do in your head’, as if divorced from the rest of her body. In the classroom, Roma is chosen to be book monitor because she is ‘sitting properly’ and when Clark calls out ‘I didn’t get to do it’, the teacher responds ‘That’s because you’re always shouting out and not sitting on your bottom, I choose children sitting properly’.



Figure 4.3 Julia draws a sad face, showing how she feels sitting on the carpet in Reception, ‘It’s annoying, you have to listen . . . you’re not allowed to talk, you have to sit down quietly and straight’.

These are very clearly feeling bodies. In the initial interviews, just under a third (nine out of 29) of the children volunteer that they dislike sitting on the carpet. In the in-depth phase, four of the six core children talk of this, and another dislikes sitting in assembly. Pichon (2012) similarly found the majority of 6 to 8 year olds consulted did not like sitting on classroom carpets.

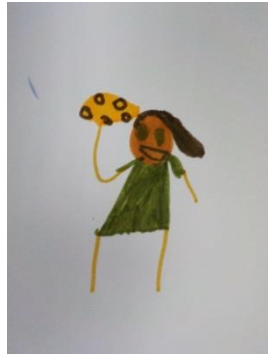
Children feel both physically and emotionally uncomfortable (see Figure 4.3): ‘You have to sit down for so long, maybe listening to things that you always know . . . so that just makes me sit on the carpet for nothing’ (Gabriel); ‘Not sad but miserable [on the] hard carpet . . . you just have to sit down being bored’ (Alfie); ‘Worried . . . didn’t know what to do’ (Neve); ‘Worried . . . I’m going to get told off’ (James). At Clifftop, four out of 13 interviewed children volunteer that they do not like sitting on the carpet, including sitting for long periods, having to listen, feeling sad, cross and tired: ‘I don’t like it when I have to sit on the carpet and learn things . . . because we have to sit down and do that [crosses legs] all the time, and all you do is listen and listen’ (Roberto). Each day, at Daleview, teachers select two children randomly to be class helpers who have the privilege of sitting on a padded colourful seat; the improved comfort for those with heightened status implies an understanding of how uncomfortable it is sitting on the carpet.

4.2.2 Children's sonic environment

The majority of the time that children are engaged in classroom activities they do not talk. While some children will answer or ask questions during carpet time — often their names are selected at random from a pot — many others remain silent. There is a clear and repeated message that children must not call out, and children know this rule even if they transgress it. At table activities, some children may talk while others say only a handful of words, mostly engaged in individual rather than collaborative activities. Each week children are paired with a different 'talk partner', who they sit next to on the carpet. On half of the days when I observe for all or most of the day (nine out of 18 days) children are asked to talk with their partners during a carpet lesson, given 10 to 95 seconds to talk. Children do not always use this opportunity to speak; on six out the 13 occasions when I observe for talk, partners do not converse: 'Stuart turns and says something briefly to Alice but she turns away; she seems in another world' (field note). There are brief moments in the day when children may raise their own questions and share experiences (discussed in Chapter Seven), but the only formalised weekly space is 'show and tell', an unprotected space that can be postponed if too little time is available. At Clifftop, the class is sometimes split into two circle groups in a lesson, one supported by a teaching assistant, when each child has a turn to respond to the adult's question; they also have a weekly whole class school governance meeting.

There are opportunities for children to engage creatively with music in the class time: for example, the weekly singing assembly, an occasional greeting song (discussed in Chapter Five) and rehearsing Christmas songs. At other times, music emphasises children's conforming bodies: a daily chant for the teacher's chosen 'star of the day', a regular lining up song, 'I'm standing straight and tall, my eyes are looking straight ahead . . .', and the teachers' melodic chant for silence: '[name of class] listening' to which the children respond by singing 'listening'. Staff use a number of other sounds to call for children's silence and stillness: rhythmic clapping (clap, clap, clap-clap, clap), whistles, bells, tambourines and rainmakers. These are used alongside a common call, '5,4,3,2,1, freeze', so that children stop what they are doing. Observations in nine primary schools (Bragg, 2018) identifies similar practices and a pervasiveness of time and concern with efficiency similar to my own research: 'Time is also made to count, insistently, relentlessly, by bells, by minutes and seconds – 'Five more minutes', 'One minute left', '20 seconds to clear up!'' (p.125).

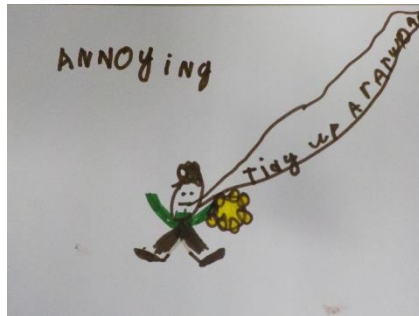
Driven by an interest in the requirement to be silent, I ask children in the final group discussions what sounds they hear in the classroom: they tell me of teachers shouting (eight) (discussed below), children making loud noise (four), the school bell (two), and other examples only mentioned once each (six). The (joint) most frequently mentioned sound (mentioned eight times out of 28 suggestions) is those associated with the teacher telling them to stop moving: clapping, shaking the tambourine or being told to ‘freeze’ (see Figure 4.4). To the children, these sounds are ‘loud’ and ‘noisy’, signaling they ‘have to be quiet’ and must stop whatever they are doing, regardless of whether they are finished or ready. Behaviours that are desirable and rewarded at other times (e.g. working, talking with partners, tidying up), become instantly disallowed, even if in the middle of writing a word. Sometimes there is some warning, but frequently everything must stop now. Children feel these sounds in their bodies: ‘like some jelly in my tummy’, making Willa jump, jolted out of her absorption in learning. The sonic practices that enable staff to manage the transition from one activity to another make it difficult for children to remain on-task, their reverie in learning being disrupted, leaving them feeling ‘annoyed’, ‘bad’, ‘mad’, ‘angry’, and ‘stupid’. The children echo the words of four-year-old Sonny, frustrated by a loud bell for playtime: ‘That don’t make no sense . . . I just got to the interesting bit, I don’t care about the time, that’s plain stupid . . . time’s as long as it takes’ (Cousins, 1999, p.36).



'Tamborine . . . it always makes me jump . . . it feels a bit like I've got some jelly in my tummy.' (Willa)



'It's the teacher clapping, bang, bang, bang.' (Clark)



'Tamborine . . . [it feels] annoying . . . when you're in the middle of a word.' (Alfie)



'Clapping . . . [feels] bad.' (Jono)

Figure 4.4 Children's drawings of sounds they hear in the classroom (Daleview).

At Clifftop, the noise of the teacher's clap, whistle or bell, is similarly the most frequently mentioned sound: mentioned by seven out of 11 children. Children recognise these sounds as part of the on-task culture. They competently perform silence while knowing also they occasionally violate this requirement: 'You hear it when you're being naughty' or 'When we're not being quiet, when we're talking too much'. Just one child mentions a sound enjoyed beyond any association with adult control: a tambourine used in singing assembly, which she draws beautifully (Figure 4.5), where it is possible, momentarily, to be off-task and diverge from the normative pupil position as silent and still. At both schools, children's bodies sway and tap,



Figure 4.5 Ann's drawing of a sound heard in the classroom: a tambourine used in singing assembly (Clifftop).

louder voices sing and laugh, and instruments are experienced as musically pleasurable. This is allowed to go only so far, with on-task practices remaining in play; children must remain seated while singing, or when, at Clifftop only, they sometimes stand, they must sit between songs.

In assembly, children are invited to applaud those who have received awards or demonstrated a skill, but the sound of celebration is not encouraged in the classroom; silenced using marshmallow claps (a clapping action where the hands do not make contact or sound), literal pats on one's own back, and silent cheers (a raised arm action, but no sound). At Clifftop, when a winning child calls out 'Bingo!' she is challenged: 'Year one, how should we say bingo? We say it once, in a quiet voice, we don't need to shout' (Ms. Lazarus, teacher). The head teacher at Clifftop, Mr. Stuart, mentions he would hope to see Year One children saying "Yes!" You know, being excited about things', but on the occasions when children let out an enthusiastic group whoop, it is sounded quietly, not shouted. I hear such excitement eight times during my year at Daleview, and two times during my week at Clifftop, mostly in response to being told they will engage in activities involving sound and movement, including playtime, games, singing and PE. For example, when a Daleview teacher tells the children 'We've got PE now', Dominic exclaims, 'PE! We like PE' The other times children show such enthusiasm is when 'winning' against peers (five times in Daleview) during a game activity: 'Yes! I win again', and when receiving a class reward for attendance.

The pervasive messages and practices of silence and stillness can leave children suspended, as became apparent to me when the Daleview Year One class had just finished watching a captivating dance display in the hall, and despite the adults applauding loudly, there is no invitation to the children to clap and they remain mostly silent. Thomas, sitting next to me, is clapping but so gently that I hear no noise. The adults' clapping continues with great enthusiasm and slowly a few more children join in, but still the majority do not. A quick scan suggests this is true of other classes as well. It seems so unbelievable that I keep checking that I have observed correctly.

In the classroom, one of the moments when we see children's bodies most engaged is when they listen to stories, or sometimes when watching films on the screen. At Clifftop, children become teachers for the day and the class are captured by Gus's clear passion for Victorian history, although less so when William mimics a testing

pedagogy, asking children to name different chess pieces. Stories offer a reprieve from the on-going demands for the children to be silent and still; there is no need to quieten, 'shh', chastise or penalise.

4.3 Shining 'star-tastic' children

'Good listening' for learning can become confused with listening to be good. I begin to appreciate the importance of this distinction when observing rewards and praise liberally sprinkled over silent and seated children, often without a clear rationale for the desired behaviour. Sitting still is understood to be synonymous with good listening: a poster has a drawing of a seated child and yellow stars, telling us children 'shine' when they 'sit up straight, hands folded, in your own space, no noise, eyes on the speaker'. Singing assembly is the time in the week when I am most struck by the continued requirement for children to be seated; when in my personal, albeit limited, experience of singing in choirs, I have always stood to sing. Beyond a simple call for 'singing voices', which in this context suggests louder voices, there is an absence of developing children's bodies to be ready to sing and move to rhythm.

Assemblies are a time when children are more overtly watched, both by staff and selected pupils, who give out stars. A teaching assistant tells the children 'I'm going to be watching as I've got my special golden stars, and they're very heavy (laugh) . . . I need to get rid of them, but only to good', here she pauses and corrects herself, 'behaved children'. Using a pantomime style that evokes for me the child catcher in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, she offers a parody of her sovereign power in deciding who to reward, emphasising the children's relative powerlessness. With so many other children to compete for a handful of stars, the ideal sitting position becomes raised to 'sitting beautifully'.

The school's behaviour modification practices rest upon behaviourist learning theory, which stipulates a need for constant positive feedback of desired behaviours (stimulus), without which the desired behaviour modification (response) cannot be achieved (Skinner, 1958). Praise and rewards must be frequently utilised to reinforce desired behaviours and be equally available to every child in the class. I observe sixteen ways in

which staff positively acknowledge eight child behaviours (see Table 4.3)³. Behaviours promoting collaboration and positive social relationships are recognised, but do not attract the degree of attention as do on-task behaviours: sitting, silence, and attendance. Silence and listening attract the most diverse range of feedback (13). Mostly with a simple ‘good’ or ‘well done’, but also with stars, marbles, stickers, certificates, points, and being Star of the Day. Leila is Star of the Day for ‘making sure she does really good listening today, and works hard and having a lovely smile on her face’ (Ms. Fletcher); Willa says being Star of the Day is when ‘you can be star-tastic’.

Staff more frequently emphasise sitting still by using superlatives, signalling ‘shining’ behaviour is highly valued. On rare occasions, staff communicate their love for those children exhibiting desired behaviours, establishing a link not just between their conformity and teacher affirmation, but also with teacher affection. Staff say little to the children about the benefits of sitting silently beyond the simple assertion that they like (or love) children doing it and it is important for ‘learning’. It therefore becomes a small step to translate good listening into listening to be good. James tells me that in ‘good works’ assembly ‘you have to um get a certificate to win’, ‘sit down beautifully’ and be ‘good’, and that here the teddy bear would like ‘being a good boy’. When children do as instructed (e.g. sitting down), feedback is commonly about the self as a good person (‘good boy/girl’).

³ Note: This table does not reflect all classroom feedback as it relies both on what I observe and I am to able record. N values equal more than the sum of the numbers in each row, as a behaviour could receive more than one type of feedback.

TABLE 4.3 The range and frequency of staff positive feedback responding to different types of children's behaviour (Daleview).

Types of staff feedback		Acknowledgement			Praise						Reward						
		Non-verbal (smile, thumbs up)	Acknowledge behaviour (e.g. that is kind)	Child thanked	Good / lovely / well done	Superlative (e.g. brilliant, beautiful)	About the self: good boy / girl	Adult says they love / like / happy with the behaviour / child	Highlighted as good example to their peers	Peers instructed to applaud / praise	Star / marble (collected towards class treat)	Sticker	Certificate	Group points	Star of the day	Privilege gained	Attendance cup
Types of child behaviour		Polite/manners (N=9)		2			1	1			1	2	1				
		Kind/gentle/ helpful (N=20)	1	1	3	4		3	1	1		4	2		2		
		Looking after property/tidy (N=8)		1	1	1	2				1	4	1				
		Sitting / calm / still (N=49)	2	2	3	8	12	4		3		4	3				13
Silent & Still	Quiet/listening (N=46)		2	1	12	4	1	2	2		5	2	1	Daily	1	2	
Compulsion	Compulsory participation (N=4)				1		1		1			Weekly	2				Weekly
	Doing as instructed (N=12)	1			4		7	1	1								
Affect	Communicating positive feelings (N=7)				3	1								2	1		

Key	None	1-6	7-13	Daily+
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Rewarding children for their participation in compulsory activities sends a message that their compliance is valued. Children are given stickers for participating, for example, in assisted reading with volunteers, sports day, and an oracy support group. There is rarely feedback about why they receive the stickers or else the message is the same for everyone (e.g. 'I'm good at sport'). Possibly stickers are viewed as an added bonus, acknowledgement or celebration, but in a school context, where they are also used to reward internally attributed learning behaviours, such as resilience (see Chapter Six), and behaviour modification, it would be an easy assumption for children to attribute stickers to personal achievement. Children are also rewarded for school attendance; the most prestigious looking reward, a silver trophy, is given to the class with the highest weekly attendance, something dictated by their health and parents. This is acknowledged by the head teacher, Ms. Rudland, during a winter assembly: 'It's that time of year; we know you can't help it if you're really poorly, we don't want you to come if you're poorly, but every day you can come we want you to come'. The children understand that they are morally responsible for the expectation that the on-task culture crosses into their home life. When discussing what it means to be naughty, they tell me, 'if you feel well and you stay at home' this is 'breaking the law' and 'very naughty', and children must work when unwell, 'If you're sick you can stay at home and you can do home school'.

Celebrating behavior that cannot be internally attributed severs the basic tenet of the stimulus/response relationship in behaviourist theory. Only one person, a parent, raises concern about behaviourist approaches, wishing she could 'get away from constantly threatening and um rewarding children, and get them to have intrinsic motivation to do things for themselves'. There is little opportunity to reflect and discuss alternative behaviour modification approaches outside of the school's Behaviour Team, with no formal staff consultation on what works and a lack of staff meeting time. In the absence of support or alternative approaches to draw on, staff resort to more of the same when trying to manage children's behaviour. Still, there is a limit to how much staff time and focus can be spent on acknowledging children's behavior; most of the time, children are not rewarded for following school rules.

The feedback children receive on their progress towards learning objectives is discussed in Chapter Six.

4.4 Enforcing sensible choices

It is not easy to ensure young children sit still and quiet for long periods, despite the many mechanisms for reinforcing positive behaviour, so the school day is peppered with staff reprimanding children for being off-task. Staff at Daleview use the behaviour modification warning system (described above), but also fourteen other types of reprimands and penalties (see Table 4.4)⁴. The majority of the negative feedback focuses on children not being quiet, and secondly not being still, with staff using 15 types of feedback to reprimand these behaviours.

Only occasionally do I hear staff shout at children at Daleview, and on the four occasions when I observe the behaviour that prompt this response, teachers are cross with how children have moved and sounded. On one rare day I see the same teacher shout twice, but I can already spot the strain, as she struggles to push a child in a wheelchair up a ramp, and others are pushing in and a boy interrupts her; later she says ‘sorry’ to me and I acknowledge how much she has to juggle. There is not much give in the on-task classroom; one child in a wheelchair or another who repeatedly interrupts can sometimes be enough to tip the balance, like the teacher in Pollard’s (1985) ethnography who says he ‘didn’t mean to blow up, but sometimes it gets too much’ (p.178). A primary teacher survey identifies shouting is not uncommon, while 42 per cent report they ‘never’ shout at misbehaving pupils, 55 per cent do so ‘sometimes’ and two per cent ‘often’ (NFER, 2012). It is more frequent at secondary school (*ibid.*): Kulz’s (2017) secondary academy ethnography identifies shouting as common except on the day of a ministerial visit when teachers were told not to shout. I ask my daughter what she likes that is unique about her current teacher and she tells me ‘she doesn’t shout’.

⁴ Note: This table does not reflect all classroom feedback as it relies both on what I observe and I am able to record. N values equal more than the sum of the numbers in each row, as a behaviour could receive more than one type of reprimand.

Table 4.4 The range and frequency of staff negative feedback responding to different types of children's behaviour (Daleview).

Types of staff reprimand	Attention drawn to behaviour										Penalty				
	Shows displeasure nonverbally (e.g. crossed arms)	Child's name said sternly	Behaviour questioned (e.g. is that sitting sensibly?)	Told No / cannot do behaviour	Told what is acceptable behaviour (e.g. Sit down!)	Feedback (e.g. that is rude, you are taking too long, I am sad)	Private talk with teacher	Told to apologise to other child / class	Compared to better behaved child/class	Child physically moved (i.e. by staff)	Point given in Book Time (reducing chance of prize)	Official warning (potentially leading to lost Golden Time)	Other warning (e.g. will lose play or access to privilege)	Privilege lost (e.g. must wait, sit on carpet, miss some play)	Parents informed
Types of child/ren's behaviour															
Bodies not quiet (N=125) (e.g. not listening, calling out, talking, 'silly' laughter/noises)	0	6	11	22	24	43	3	0	2	0	1	18	16	8	1
Bodies not still (N=94) (e.g. delayed sitting, moving on carpet, touching peers/things, getting drink)	2	6	15	18	32	17	1	3	0	2	0	13	10	0	1
Peer Conflict (N=16)	0	0	5	4	4	7	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	1	1
Curriculum work inadequate (N=4) (i.e. not completed work or followed instructions)	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	0
Other (N=18) (e.g. poor tidying up, crying, no P.E. kit, changing slowly)	1	1	4	5	3	6	0	1	0	0	0	1	5	2	0

Key	None	1-10	11-20	21+
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Despite the apparent infrequency of shouting at Daleview, the children repeatedly stress teachers' shouting. James, playing teachers, shouts 'Right, sit in your carpet space, chop, chop', quickly getting frustrated when Luke, his pupil, lies down, 'Nooo, sit, you have to sit properly, because we're playing teachers'. Staff shouting is the joint most frequently mentioned sound by children at Daleview (eight out of 28 suggestions), identified by children in two of the three group discussions (see Figure 4.6). Just before one of the groups, a teacher shouts at a child and this noise dominates their discussion, but is frequently mentioned in the other group as well. They tell me teachers shout when children are off-task: 'being naughty because the teacher told them to be quiet but they were still talking'. They feel 'scared' or 'sad' when staff shout. Kitty tells me, during her individual interview, teachers 'feel really strict because they shout really strictly . . . [strict] means kind of shout really loud and it's really scary. . . like bears' roar are really scary'. When I ask Rudi how it feels, he starts stabbing his picture of the teacher shouting – repeatedly making grey flecks – and mimics the angry teacher: this feels particularly marked because Rudi seems a generally mild child. Research has found older primary school children also fear teachers shouting (Hargreaves, 2015).

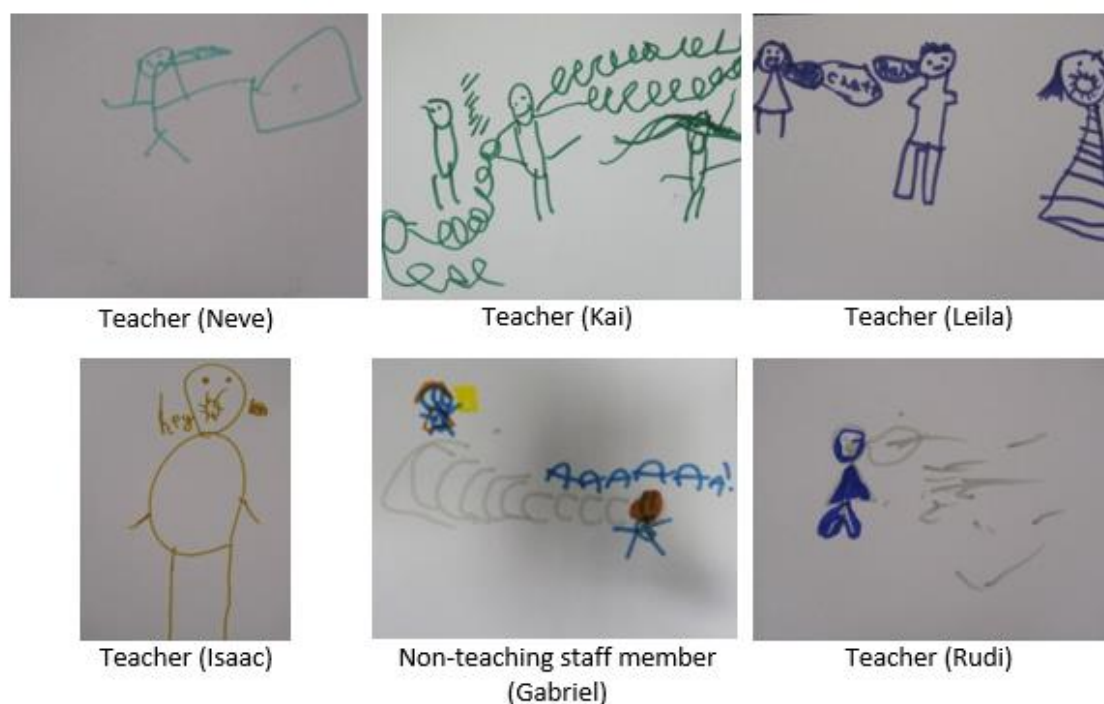


Figure 4.6 Children's drawings of sounds heard in the classroom: staff shouting (Daleview).

The children, it seems, remain in contact with adult's anger well after the moment has passed. I know from my daughter, who tells me to stop shouting when I am annoyed but not raising my voice, that emotional intensity is measured as much in tone and meaning as decibels. Cross voices enter children's bodies via the beat on the eardrum, reverberating through the central nervous system, so that 'seeing something or hearing something is to be in contact with that something' (Taussig, 1994, p. 206). The children easily name where in their bodies they feel teachers' anger and shouting: 'brain shock' (Alfie); 'it gets into my arms and makes me angry' (name not recorded). In the initial interviews, children nearly always mention teachers with reference to their disciplinary authority: teachers being happy when children do as required and chastising those who do not. One says he feels happy 'next to the teacher' (Stuart), and another mentions their caring role, including their authority as those who know, 'because she's a good teacher, she knows everything and she looks after us' (Julia).

I do not hear shouting at Clifftop, but children are frequently reprimanded for being off-task, have time out from lessons or are moved to another space, next to an adult or alone at the table. They are also threatened that if their behavior continues they will miss playtime, a parent will be telephoned, PE equipment put away, or they will not be 'trusted' to participate in a fun event. When I ask Winnie to draw a class teacher, I am shocked how she instantly draws a face with a large angry mouth, saying 'normally my teachers get really cross', adding a drawing of a teaching assistant: 'she's the one I know best, she's a very nice girl and she doesn't really tell people off much' (see Figure 4.7). I begin to ask other children to select feeling-faces to show me their teachers' face/s. They tell me teachers are 'cross', 'mad' or 'sad' when children do not stop talking or listen. Without hesitation, Andy asks me 'Which one's really angry? . . . because she gets really cross in class, if you talk on the carpet she says "No, get off my carpet"'. Equally, the children tell me that teachers are happy when the children are 'good'; this word echoed to mean listening, being quiet and doing good work: the teacher is 'happy when we've done



Figure 4.7 Winnie's drawing of the 'cross' teacher (left) and 'very nice' teaching assistant (right) (Clifftop).

a lot good', meaning 'when you listen to them' (Shelley). Arun only mentions his learning achievements when I probe further what makes the teacher happy with learning: 'One time I did so good writing and I did two papers and I got to show them to Reception'.

Classroom practices, underpinned by the logics of behaviourism, require pupils to engage cognitively and behaviourally, but also demand their political passivity by not allowing them to influence or challenge desired behaviours. The children in Daleview are not involved in deciding their own class rules (at Clifftop they are) and I do not observe staff and children reflecting together upon desired behaviours or appropriate recognition or sanction. I only once see a child ask for a reward: at the end of a phonics lesson, the teacher assistant gives each child a sticker, telling the group 'You've worked so hard I'm happy', so that Gabriel takes this opportunity to ask for a higher reward, a marble, but is told 'I'm not that happy!' (Ms. Drake). Similarly, staff retain control at Clifftop on when to reward children and explicitly discourage them from asking for rewards: when two boys ask a teacher if they can have a marble for tidying up well, she says, 'not now you've asked, it's if we've spotted you' (Ms. Lazarus).

There are competing discourses in the class about who is responsible for children's desired behaviour. Using behaviourism, teachers modify behaviour through rewards and sanctions, which assumes that any limits to the children learning (response) must be the fault of teachers' practices (stimulus), rather than the student. At the same time, teachers hold children accountable and responsible for their behaviour. Where choice is questioned, it is through a call to make a 'sensible' choice, decided by the teacher, emphasising children's lack of choice but also, paradoxically, their responsibility: 'You can sit wherever you like: is it sensible to sit with friends and have a chat, or with someone who you'll work hard with? Make those sensible choices' (Ms. Fletcher).

This is a responsibility that children take up. One lunchtime I speak with a child repeatedly chastised for speaking and moving, who is struggling to make sense of being told off. Initially, he tells me everything that morning was 'fun', but then adds that bear would have to get used to 'being shouted at all the time, because my teacher always shouts at me when I do things she doesn't like, which is pretty never, it isn't me she shouts at, it's children who are being naughty'. He chooses a worried looking pebble for being shouted at and a happy one for realising it is other children being shouted at: 'Is

she shouting at me? . . . Kai, Dominic, oh it's not me', conveying a palpable relief on discovering that someone else is in trouble. There is an internalisation of the impetus behind the shouting, 'being naughty', that the child takes up as his own; in order to preserve a positive sense of self he quickly turns it around and says 'being always shouted at makes you like being shouted at'.

The 'confused terrain' (Biesta, 2015, p. 47) of competing classroom discourses underpinning the on-task classroom is examined in detail in the extract below, including children's competence at understanding what is expected of them. It is just after lunch and a class teacher at Clifftop has returned, having been out all morning: she has heard from staff that the children have not behaved well. When the children have returned from playtime, the teacher, clearly cross, sternly tells them: 'Get in places as quickly as possible and sensibly as possible; in case no one has noticed I'm not in a good mood'. The children are silent except to answer the teacher as she quickly and unsmiling goes down the register. The teacher then praises the class for sitting 'perfectly', but remains unsmiling:

Teacher: You sat respectfully and I did not have to speak to anyone, why have you done that?

Child⁵: *We learned to be quiet* on the carpet.

[The teacher indicates she is expecting another answer]

Child: *You told us to be quiet.*

[Again, the teacher indicates she wants something else]

Child: We knew you were coming back in and *decided to be quiet* and listen.

Teacher: What *made you do the right thing*?

Child: Put coats on.

Teacher: No, I said something that *made you be quiet*.

Child: Hang your coats up.

Child: Be sensible.

Teacher: I said something.

Bess: Feeling sad.

Teacher: I said I'm not in a very good mood. *As soon as I said that you did the right thing*. I'm sad I had to get to that stage. Then you all did the right thing perfectly. What does it tell me?

[The children don't know]

Teacher: It tells me you can do it. I heard that you have not been behaving in a way I or [name of other staff] expect. Some children I have heard good things about so I'm sorry if you have been doing the right

⁵ Note: some children are referred to by their names and others simply as 'child', because I did not always know who was speaking and, not knowing the children well, did not always know their names.

thing and have to listen to me moaning. But some have not been listening, have been silly and even rude.

Teacher: *If you have been [doing the right thing], I'd have been happy and been in a good mood.*

Child: And get a marble. (Field notes, Clifftop; emphasis added)

The children's ability at moments when the teacher is away to disrupt so severely the on-task culture might be read as an achievement of agency (see Chapter Seven). Here I want to examine the emerging tensions in this extract. When the teacher repeatedly probes why the children sat so 'perfectly' and 'respectfully' they offer competing reasons: they have 'learned to be quiet on the carpet', they were 'told to be quiet', and children 'decided to be quiet and listen'. The children are clearly competent participants in the on-task school culture, for their answers indicate an understanding of the multiple factors involved in their sitting quietly: they are expected to be quiet, teachers repeatedly communicate this expectation and children have some role in deciding to be quiet (or not). Clearly not having found the right answer, the children continue to offer suggestions that at first glance appear to be unrelated: 'put coats on', 'hang your coats up', 'be sensible', but these are behaviours known to be approved of by adults. They are demonstrating further their understanding of the rules, as well as the expectation that they identify the correct response. The teacher, having exhausted the script of eliciting the correct answer, and now forced to articulate her point, emphasises the importance of sitting and the need to listen, as well as not being rude. She is careful to acknowledge that not all the children have behaved inappropriately, but indicates that others are responsible for her bad mood. Simultaneously, she minimises the children's active role in behaving appropriately, asserting instead that it was herself that 'made you be quiet'. Children therefore become responsible for the teacher's bad mood and she becomes responsible for their good behaviour.

In an on-task culture, having one's class behave badly with other adults present is exposing; and the teacher's anger – which seems genuine here – is a human moment of tension. Another time, when the children laugh with a trainee teacher, she steps in declaring 'You're being rude and I'm not proud of you being my class now, I expect you to be silent'. This vulnerability is one I come to recognise. While initially struck by how much children are expected to sit and line up quietly, it does not take long for this to become normalised and I begin to emphasise that children be quiet as I lead them through the corridor in sight or earshot of adults. My fear at being recognised as an

anarchic force and the school saying I can no longer undertake the research in part drives my conformity, but also a concern with my professional competence; wanting to demonstrate my ability to keep children engaged and focused in this culture. When the initial P4C sessions do not go well, I hear myself stress my expertise to others: ‘I have run many focus groups in schools before and none were like this’ and it took many months for me to transcribe these sessions, sensing it will be painful (as it was). I move closer to the centre, away from my legitimate peripheral position, as discussed in Chapter Three. Off-task children make adults vulnerable, and within the available repertoire of responses to the teacher, none is beyond personal responsibility and blame; this is not a culture of collaborative problematisation. The children have ruined the ‘good’ (or in this case, ‘outstanding’) teacher’s performance and momentarily she is off-task, exhibiting anger but also engaging in discussion with the children, allowing herself time to regain her on-task self. The excerpt continues with the teacher continuing to reprimand the children.

Teacher: You should be trying your best all the time.

Charlie: *And then get a marble.*

Teacher: Better to do the right thing first time, and not wait for someone to get fed up.

Roberto: We keep on not listening, and being noisy.

[Max walks up to me, giving me a gentle hug, taking me by surprise; we both smile and he goes to hang up his coat].

Child: If you’re good you get a marble.

Teacher: *You don’t only be good for a reward. It feels good inside and helps with learning.* I can teach much more if you’re ready for learning, and respectful and kind.

[She reminds the class they made the class rules and encourages them to apologise to friends or teachers if they have not tried their hardest].

Teacher: But I’m going to snap out of my bad mood and have a good afternoon. Can we promise to try our best?

Children: Yes.

[The teacher asks the children to shake hands with the person next to them to demonstrate their promise]

Arun: If you’re really bad in year (?) get sent to the office.

Teacher: Huh, but that won’t happen in Year One.

Child: Sent to jail.

Teacher: No, not jail. We work as a team and will be fantastic. I said we’ll forget that happened this morning. It’s erased from my memory and don’t let it ruin the rest of the day.

Child: We’re almost at the line of the marble jar.

Teacher: Yes, but *we’re not motivated by marbles*, but just to be good.

Bess: *If it’s nice to be good anyway, could take the marble jar away.*

Teacher: Yes, but it's nice if you have a treat. . . There's not going to be a marble this afternoon. Because we want to be good because it feels good inside.

[The children then all begin to tidy up together, on the teacher's instruction]

Teacher: See, look how fantastic we can be when we work as a team. It looks like a classroom where I can learn a lot, not stuff everywhere, not children being mean and pushing each other, all set up so I can learn as much as I can. (Field notes, Clifftop; emphasis added)

Despite the teacher's resistance to rewarding the children, they continue to focus on getting a marble. The teacher uses this moment to stress that she wants the children to be motivated because 'it feels good inside' and helps learning, rather than motivated by rewards. It is a moment where the teacher attempts to question whether what children want is desirable. It is Bess who takes up this invitation, but she instantly identifies the inherent contradiction in offering extrinsic rewards for something meant to be intrinsically motivated, when she suggests taking away the marbles 'if it's nice to be good'; using the dominant classroom language of 'being' rather than 'feeling' good. The teacher's defense, that it is also 'nice if you have a treat', highlights her dilemma in using these behaviour modification techniques. Seemingly unconvinced, children pursue their requests for a reward, performing the dominant logic of the classroom.

This is the only extended discussion I observe during my time in both schools. It is unsurprising it happens at Clifftop, where staff include children's voice within their understanding of the purposes of education (discussed in Chapter Eight), and have an inclusive student voice governance-structure using circle time in all classes. Staff demonstrate a concern with how individuals can be independent subjects of action and responsibility, but no reference is made beyond voice contributing to existing orders. Still, these moments open up possibilities for children like Bess to question, albeit briefly, the existing classroom order.

Also revealed in the above discussion are children's anxieties about techniques that rest on rewards and punishment. Arun raises the frightening prospect of being sent to the office or jail, which the teacher responds to kindly, aiming to allay and reassure his anxiety. His concerns echo that of Tamas, at Daleview, who believes the ultimate school sanction would mean 'you miss your Friday' and get sent home alone. Above, Max chooses a difficult moment to hug me, at the point when the teacher has communicated her anger and is talking of adults being 'fed up' and Roberto takes up the children's

failure to listen. The teacher is working hard to change the mood to one that is more positive, forgiving, and collaborative, and aims to clarify children's misunderstandings. Her comment that they are 'fantastic' when working as a team attempts to show the children she is now pleased, not cross, while also continuing to reinforce the basic on-task conditions needed to work together as a class. Rarely do I observe children (in both schools) called upon to collaborate as much as when they tidy up.

I write this extract on a Friday and stop when my daughter returns from school, upset because yet again she has not received the class certificate awarded each week to one child. She is increasingly aware that it is nearing the end of the spring term and the majority of the class have already had a certificate; trying to work out why she has been unsuccessful, even where she has tried hard to do well in her work and to be helpful. Her understanding of the reward includes discourses of listening for learning and rewards for conformity, but no mention of her achievements.

PK: What are the most important things you have to do in a week to get a certificate?

Daughter: Listening.

PK: Why is listening the most important?

Daughter: So you can learn.

PK: Do you have to listen to learn?

Daughter: Yes, because otherwise you won't hear what the teacher tells you to do.

4.5 Conclusion

It does feel like there is a sort of pressure at the moment, yeah, that children are just seen as data and numbers, and I think I have to really step back sometimes and think, why am I so worried that the children aren't all going to meet this target, when I know that children don't all learn in a linear way . . . But I think sometimes . . . if Ofsted came in and they weren't all on-task, every single person at the same time (laughs). Then you think actually they're five and they're six, and they're not always going to want to be on-task all the time, they don't always want to sit still on the carpet, they're not always going to be this thing. (Ms. Fletcher, teacher)

There is a lot to get through in Year One, and children are called upon to be on-task nearly all the time in the classroom. With the staff working hard to perform the on-task culture, the children quickly become active participants and contributors. They are competent members, performing being on-task, understanding what they need to do and

demonstrating their learning, where learning is ‘an “act” of comprehension’ (Biesta, 2015, p.239). Behaviour is ‘good’ (Daleview Ofsted report), although all children are off-task at times, and a few children clearly more so than others. Of course, it is challenging and frustrating for teachers in this classroom culture when children continue to move and speak, delaying the core business of the classroom and potentially exposing. This is a frustration shared by parents; telling me, as they do, for example, about the challenge of getting children to school on time, understood as ‘difficult for everyone’. A pull for children is their own interests, in which they become absorbed, whereas part of the adult role is to ensure children do what else is needed: to be on-task. Children know when they have violated the norms of the school culture, something they do as competent participants. Sometimes they do this on purpose, and sometimes because the culture counters children’s diverse practices, which includes to think, act, feel through movement and sound (discussed further in Chapter Seven).

Teachers cannot stop children from listening and watching when there is something worth attending to, as we see when they listen to stories, films and a peer’s infectious passion for history. Here the teacher is released from the role as explicator, signaling an equality of intelligences, and children’s bodies are captured by the stories: ‘The very act of storytelling, an act that presumes in its interlocutor an equality of intelligence rather than an inequality of knowledge, posits equality, just as the act of explication posits inequality’ (Ross, 1991, p. xxii). The children’s still bodies are a clear demonstration here that sitting listening does not equate with passive absorption: ‘a lot of things are actually happening on the side of the students — they may of course feel bored, alienated or ignored, but they may also feel challenged, fascinated and inspired. Who knows?’ (Biesta, 2016, p.375). Equally, a ‘noisy classroom’, Alexander (2015) reminds us, ‘may indicate lack of student concentration but it doesn’t conclusively prove it, still less measure the precise balance of student attention and inattention’ (n.p.; cited in Alexander, 2016). Jackson (1968) suggests ‘all eyes on the teacher does not necessarily mean all thoughts on the topic’ (p.102), and highlights the importance of ‘relevant attention’ (p.103) instead. This can vary from listening enough to get the facts, to a more engaged intellectual activity, that can include relating and evaluating what is being learned; becoming so immersed that children may even stop listening for a time.

During a whole class maths lesson, at Clifftop, two girls lean forward, towards each other, resting their forearms on the carpet as they write answers on their whiteboards

placed upon the floor, when suddenly the teacher calls ‘Roz and Yaz, you’re not at home, you should not be lying down’. The logic of the instruction that children should be sitting rather than inclining in this on-task culture extends beyond learning in any simple pedagogical sense. We hear the ‘moral admonition’ that echoes ‘the old-time pedagogues [who] used to say “Stand up straight!”’ (Cavarero, 2016, p. 62). Something children understand. Arun, also at Clifftop, explains he likes sitting on the carpet to learn ‘because then you can become a good grown-up . . . someone who’s good, not bad’, adding that good grown-ups ‘don’t steal’; listening, he thinks, helps to achieve this end: ‘Maybe if you listened when you were learning, maybe that would do it’. This is a schooling in rectitude and citizenship; becoming upright members of society, who do not dissent.

When sitting on the carpet, if children chance to look out of the Daleview classroom windows, they will see only sky: a canvass on which to imagine. As the children return from break one day, there is a perfect rainbow, creating much lively interest: the children and teacher pause and chat about it, before coming in to sit on the carpet. Rudi declares ‘It’s a rainbow day’. Roma lingers at the door, longer than the rest, and when she pulls herself away, she comes to tell me a ‘fact’ about sun and rain, talking fast, so caught up in what she understands of the science of light diffraction, that I find it hard to follow what she says. This is the most I have heard Roma speak.

The modern ‘on task’ primary classroom rests on the assumption that the role of the teacher is to impart knowledge to children, and the expectation is therefore that children must primarily sit and listen for long periods of the school day. Children understand this expectation but such demanding conditions of rectitude do not ensure children’s absorption in class and staff employ an array of punishments and rewards to enforce compliance. In the next chapter, I demonstrate children’s agency in performing ‘good’ subjectivities, but also the educational limits to this form of agency.

CHAPTER FIVE: Agency in Conformity - The Good Child

Being ‘good’ in the on-task classroom involves both effort and resistance. In this chapter, I show how children demonstrate their cultural competency by working hard to know and perform what adults expect. This includes actively attracting adult attention, and delivering on the moral conduct and emotions that it is possible and appropriate to have in the classroom. I suggest such navigation of the classroom is a form of agency and is illustrative of the iterative element of agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Drawing on Mahmood (2005), I show how relations of subordination enable a capacity for action. I also explore the limits to children’s agency under such controlling classroom conditions, seen in an avoidance of challenge.

5.1 Getting noticed

Performing the ‘good child’ is a way of getting noticed in the on-task classroom. One January afternoon, five children must stay in at playtime to complete their work. Ms. Peach instructs them to ‘sit on the carpet until I get back’, while she takes the others out to play. When she leaves, all the children get up to play with marbles, except Clark who queries ‘Did you ask if you could play?’, whereupon Roma joins him on the carpet, sitting cross-legged. Clark informs the others ‘I’m going to tell on you’, but the children, who are now busy playing with animal masks, ignore him. Kai looks outside, announcing ‘she’s not coming back for an hour I guess’. When Clark again says he is going to ‘tell’, Amelie sits down. A little later, someone suggests the teacher may be on duty, so they all look at the timetable, except Roma who remains rooted to the carpet. Amelie then briefly sits again, saying ‘now I’m going to tell on you’, but gets up to look when the teacher’s name has been found on the timetable. Ms. Peach returns at this point, six minutes after leaving: ‘Sorry, no one was on duty, well done Roma for sitting sensibly’.

Roma is one of two girls most often seen sitting upright and silent, frequently with her finger on her lips, even here, out of the teacher’s gaze. The teacher tells me she expects unattended children to remain seated on the carpet and ‘not move (laugh)’ if in ‘trouble’. If they are just catching up on work and use ‘something in the classroom’ while the teacher is absent, she is ‘relaxed’ and not ‘too disappointed’. The subtleties of whether this group can or cannot move has not been explained: they understand they should remain on the carpet, with the power of peer surveillance circulating between

children. In school assemblies, a child is sometimes tasked with rewarding those ‘sitting nicely’, but at other times children are more likely to be ignored than thanked for informing on peers; given its ambiguous value, Roma does not threaten to tell on others. In this off-task moment, with the teacher out the classroom, most of the children can release themselves from the expectation to be sitting quietly, and become playful beings. Roma too, briefly, until she is reminded of her transgression from the ‘good’ child script, and becomes frozen on the carpet; when the teacher returns she notices and praises her efforts alone, unaware and unquestioning of how others have worked together.

Roma tells me ‘I try to get noticed . . . just by sitting still’. She acknowledges that she slouches sometimes, but like others (only more than most), she sits upright when she knows teachers are watching and there is the possibility of some symbolic reward. She performs the ‘good’ child, in its adjectival meaning, demonstrating the qualities required for the role of the on-task pupil.

‘Let me see who’s brilliant, 3,2,1’ says Ms. Rudland, the head teacher, and children snap into straight backs, like soldiers, many with fingers to their mouths; not all sit so perfectly but there’s a sudden change in alertness, a noticeably shift from the more relaxed postures and gentle ripple of movement. (Field notes, assembly)

There are gendered variations in being the good child: sitting upright is typically a feminised way of being the good student. In assemblies, I count more girls than boys sitting upright with fingers on their lips. Anna is the other child who so frequently sits upright, and she is highly popular: ‘she’s the nicest girl in my class . . . she’s kind, not funny, everyone loves Anna’ (Julia). Similarly, Roma is described by staff as ‘adorable’, ‘gentle, kind’, ‘good natured’, and a ‘gorgeous . . . easy child’. It is Roma and Anna who volunteer to stay in one playtime to help tidy up mess created by other children, and Roma likes to tell the teacher when she has helpfully ‘done a good job’ (teacher). Roma’s parents similarly view her as a ‘good’ child, who ‘doesn’t make a fuss’. There is a sticker chart in Roma’s bedroom and she tells me she gets stickers for being ‘good’. When playing schools with her siblings and friends, she takes on the role of head teacher so she can ‘watch what you’re doing and make sure you’re good’, although it is the other children who dictate this game.

Making sure she is seen to be good is what Roma does well. One summer's morning, during an English lesson, Roma must write answers to questions about her chosen animal, a snake. She asks Alfie if she can copy his work, also about snakes, but is told 'No'. Roma has had trouble using the electronic tablet and Alfie now has it. So Roma sits shifting her paper, making a small mark on her worksheet, an attempt at producing an 'overt working impression' (Pollard, 1985, p.181), but Ms. Peach comes over saying 'you told me Roma, they live in the desert, so do you want to write desert?' and so she begins to write checking her spelling with me. Ms. Peach returns saying snakes are 'a carnivore' and tells Roma to 'write that it eats meat', also highlighting an 'interesting fact that snakes have eye lashes', and says write that too. Roma writes 'meet', then spends over five minutes shuffling papers and looking around the room, before asking me what the next box says on her worksheet: 'Other interesting facts'. She goes to speak with the teacher then returns telling Alfie she has said he must help. Reluctantly Alfie reads a sentence from the book, telling Roma 'you can write that'. Instead, Roma reads, 'Snakes have a perfect way of hiding', checking with Alfie she can write that before beginning to copy the sentence. She writes the first word, pauses to rub out a misplaced comma, when the teacher announces there is one minute left. Roma has written three words in 20 minutes and speedily writes a final three words in the last minute, leaving her sentence unfinished. She sits on the carpet with her finger on her mouth and is one of the first selected to get up for lunch.

Roma is in the third current English achievement group. She is diligent in this writing task, careful with spelling and punctuation, but clearly reticent, set back in part by her lack of understanding. She asks for help but can wait a long time to do so, thinking instead, she later tells me 'what I'm supposed to do'. She does little more than try to copy or write what the teacher dictates, although she resists suggestions when choosing her own interesting fact. Her last minute haste is something I see in other children, including some currently high achievers; they are aware the good pupil needs to produce a sufficient amount of work to avoid chastisement or loss of playtime. Roma gets through, rather than inhabits this task, performing being on-task rather than doing much work. Like the snake, Roma has perfected a way of hiding her on-task avoidance and is promptly noticed for being 'good' on the carpet.

5.2 Distancing ‘bad’ feelings

In the classroom, staff and children distance difficult emotions, what Alfie calls ‘the bad ones’. Emotions are touched upon, as in this welcoming song, sometimes played at the start of the day.

The Hello Song

Hello, how are you? Hello, how are you? Hello, how are you?
 I’m great, I’m fine, I’m okay, I’m happy, I’m wonderful today.
 Hello, how are you? Hello, how are you? Hello, how are you?
 I’m tired, I’m bored, I’m okay, I’m angry, I’m very sad today.
 Hello, how are you? Hello, how are you? Hello, how are you?
 I’m great, I’m fine, I’m okay, I’m happy, I’m wonderful today.
 Hello, how are you? Hello, how are you? Hello, how are you?
 I’m very well today.⁶

The children are sitting within lines on the carpet listening to the song played on the whiteboard; watching three identical cartoon penguins standing stationary, side by side, with opening mouths, while a gentle male voice is heard singing the cheerful melodic song. During a musical refrain, rows of penguins move in a uniformly rhythmic motion, pivoting from side to side. The children are looking up at the screen: most quietly singing, some gently moving in time, while others sit still. Ms. Fletcher sits on her chair, facing the children, quietly singing along. Leila arrives, unsmiling, with tear-stained cheeks, holding hands with her pregnant mother who, unusually for a parent, comes far into the class; bringing Leila to where Ms. French, the teaching assistant, is sitting at the edge of the carpet with Mark on her knee. She invites Leila to sit on a chair next to her, while the mother makes a quick exit, and Leila sits looking down. Ms. French instantly says, in a jolly voice, ‘We’re not sad’, and continues singing and swaying to the song, then says to Mark ‘You’re not sad, are you?’

The gently moving penguins, soothing male voice, lines on the carpet, teacher watching the children (not the film), all configure the children as calm and seated pupils, easing their transition into the school day. The song acknowledges a diverse range of feelings that children might experience at this moment, including ‘boredom’, ‘anger’ and

⁶ ‘Hello Song’ by Peter Weatherall, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcTZ9Km7kCQ> (accessed 1 February 2018)

‘sadness’, safely sandwiched between the repeated cheerful refrain. This is a rare moment in the classroom when such difficult emotions are named, albeit fleetingly. The staff see their role as supporting the children’s separation from parents or carers, commonly using distraction, encouraging children to leave difficult feelings behind them. The teaching assistant echoes the song and the upbeat classroom emphasis on feeling good.

In the on-task classroom, there is little space to examine difficult emotions. Roma explains that to be clever ‘you have to learn . . . you have to listen . . . and do your work . . . and never be rude . . . and never be sad’. When adults shout in the classroom, Stuart is careful not to show he feels it in his head, ‘sometime I grit my teeth but close my mouth so no one can see’. A teacher shows me photographs of children in another class, describing each one, ‘gorgeous’, ‘great’, ‘lovely’, sometimes highlighting something specific, ‘the most gorgeous child, I’ve never seen her grumpy’. Julia tells me ‘we’re not allowed to say’ lessons are boring, and when a child makes such a complaint, he is told ‘Learning’s not boring’. Similarly, at Clifftop, when a child says ‘Oh, I hate speed writing’, the teacher responds, ‘I didn’t ask for your opinions’.

Children’s distress is acknowledged and teaching assistants will support an upset child so that lessons can continue. Children’s playground conflicts are expected to be kept outside, with occasional out of class meetings held with particular peer groups to discuss specific concerns. Anger is specifically discouraged in the classroom. After the children have spoken with their talk partners during a lesson, Alice begins crying loudly, distressed that ‘Margot wouldn’t let me say my thing, what am I going to say?’ The teacher reiterates the importance of working well together, ‘Remember each have to be good talk partners, listen, take turns’, but Alice’s worry turns to clear anger, telling Margot ‘Now I’ll have to start doing it again, it’s all your fault’, which is quickly dismissed by the teacher, ‘No thank you! We don’t blame others, get a drink and calm down’. The teaching assistant takes Alice out the room, adding ‘we don’t cry’. Children are not expected to respond to an adult’s judgement when there is conflict, being told ‘don’t argue with me’.

Exhibiting difficult emotions can become signs of a medical condition or personally flawed disposition. One child’s frequency of crying becomes a cause of concern for the teachers, particularly after an episode, at the end of Reception, where she is fearful of

flooding from an outside dripping tap, becoming inconsolable, herself flooded. The playground staff explain to her that all is okay but do not spend much time with her so that she wanders around the playground crying; a passing teacher tells me ‘that one’s on the spectrum’. The child’s emotions are read as a sign of a more enduring condition, whereas at other times her crying is the sign of a manipulative disposition: ‘I don’t know if you’ve hurt yourself because you cry quite often: it’s okay if you’ve hurt yourself, but if things don’t go your way, that’s not the same’ (teaching assistant). Her mother counters these narratives: ‘I always try and say to her you’re no more a worrier than anyone else, it’s normal to’.

There are three boys, all currently highly achieving, who are frequently in trouble for not being on-task including for moving and talking on the carpet: at Daleview, a middle class white child and a middle class immigrant black child, and at Clifftop a working class white child. The working class boy had an exemplary reception assessment, where he was said to ‘settle well’, but in the first term of Year One his troublesome behaviour is attributed to peer dynamics and when his mother wants an assessment for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) staff do not consider the decision unwise. Similarly, at Daleview, staff believe the black child may have ADHD. The behaviour of the middle class white child is attributed to peer dynamics and the effects of living with separated parents, and there are complaints that his mother makes unreasonable demands and justifications for his behaviour. Attributing behaviours to a flawed black or working class body or to white middle class parents avoids focusing on how these children experience the classroom and does little to help them. The middle class family has the classed resources to approach a class teacher to seek solutions from the school. Lareau’s (2011) U.S. research shows middle class families (from across racial differences) draw on a multitude of subtle skills to ensure their advantage in elementary schooling; in ways working class (and in my study, recent immigrant) families do not, feeling unentitled, unconfident and constrained in institutional settings.

When I ask children where they experience different emotions, using feeling-face pebbles placed on their drawings of the classroom, around a third explicitly deny experiencing anger, sadness, worry, boredom. Moses only acknowledges sadness, marginalised to the playground where ‘people hurt me sometimes’; similarly, Kai only identifies anger, when peers will not play. Both further distance difficult feelings by physically removing these pebbles from their drawings of the classroom (see Figures

5.1 and 5.2 below). Isaac chooses only the happiest pebble for his picture, turning over all other faces (Figures 5.3 and 5.4). I ask children how the teddy bear might experience the classroom and this helps some boys and girls to distance emotions:

Rudi: So I'm cross, when am I cross? I'm never cross.

PK: You're never cross. If bear came to your classroom, where might he feel cross?

Rudi: Ah, on the carpet.

PK: Why would he feel cross on the carpet?

Rudi: Because he wouldn't want to go on the carpet . . . because he might not want to be quiet. (Interview transcript)



Figure 5.1 'These are the ones I don't ever feel.' (Moses)



Figure 5.2 'I want to put this one here because I'm angry . . . where people are not going to play with me.' (Kai)



Figure 5.3 'I feel happy here, here, here, here, here . . . I'll put it [pebble] like in the middle of the classroom.' (Isaac)



Figure 5.4 'I don't feel sad anywhere in the classroom . . . I don't feel angry anywhere.' (Isaac)

Gendered variations in the 'good' child are evident with girls emphasising the moral virtues of being 'nice' and 'kind'. Three girls (no boys) tell me the school rules are the most important thing in the classroom: 'being kind and stuff' (Amelie). When Julia says she finds sitting on the carpet boring and tiring, she draws a picture of herself sitting

smiling: 'I'm going to do smiling, as it's nicer when people smile'. Nikita insists there is no room for anger or sadness in the Year One classroom, echoing school rules: 'I was happy every day in the classroom . . . I be nice and gentle. I don't feel angry every day . . . I wasn't sad in the classroom, I'm just sad at home, because sad is if you grew that means you're not allowed to cry . . . if you grow you'll be in Year One'.

Discursive constraints extend beyond the classroom. As I collect my daughter from primary school, I notice how we parents ask 'Did you have a good day?', and how invested I am in her being happy at school. Rarely allowed to enter the classroom, parents have no possibility to observe what happens in school: understanding of children's experiences is limited to what children and teachers discuss, and what it is possible to say. A mother tells me her daughter 'loves school and everything about school', and while she clearly enjoys her friendships and is currently highly achieving, during the school day the daughter expresses boredom and anxiety about learning. At the breakfast table this child asks 'Is there school?', and when her mother confirms there is, quietly but clearly the girl adds 'Oh, boring'; the mother does not respond and I am unsure if she missed it. After school, the mother probes about the school day, but the child is absorbed in taking photographs, so responds minimally, saying 'Yes', when asked if it was good but ignores a question asking if anything was not good.

5.3 Negotiating dissent

In a context where children's attendance is compulsory, staff do not seek children's consent about their participation in school activities. When I tell a teacher how I plan to explain consent to the children, she instantly responds: 'In this school we teach the children it's never okay to say no to teachers'. When a child does not want his artwork to be displayed at an out of school public event, he is told 'Well, it's a lucky dip, so we'll see'. Staff later comment how it is 'good to learn at an early age that by taking part you have more fun; there are adults I know like that and they're not happy . . . you can't go round life thinking you're better than others'. Frequently, children are told they must wear coats outside so cannot dissent to what happens to their active bodies that may not feel cold; one child's solution is to avoid wearing a coat to school.

There is a visual timetable in the classroom, letting children know what activities are to follow, but children are not always informed of changes. One December morning, a member of staff comes into the class announcing that some children are to have some

‘special medicine’, listing the names of around a third of the class who must line up, giving no further explanation. The teacher, Ms. Fletcher, asks openly ‘is it oral?’, wondering if there will be ‘tears’. As are the remaining children, who have many questions, ‘is it scary?’, ‘will it hurt?’, and so the teacher explains about the flu vaccine. She draws the questions to a close explaining she wanted to ‘provide an opportunity to talk about it so that the children do not get distracted’, which is said for my benefit I think, before pressing on, ‘we need to take off our nurse brains and put on our science brains’.

Children eating school (but not packed) lunch must ask staff before they can eat their pudding; towards the end of the year they are allowed to make this decision themselves. Some children seek permission even if they have eaten their main course, whilst others feel able to proceed if they have eaten all or most of their main course. One September lunchtime, Nikita seeks adult permission to proceed with each stage of her meal, but four different staff members respond each time, giving contradictory instructions. After Nikita has been giving permission to leave her potato and begin her pudding, she is then told to eat more potato. She does not question what adults tell her to do; by the time she has finished and can leave, it is the end of lunch break.

Children understand that they must do as adults say. At Clifftop, I thank a group of children for coming along to a group discussion, and Kate tells me ‘I always do what people ask’; when I explain she does not have to, she replies ‘I like to (pause) sometimes’. When I go into the assembly hall to invite another girl to be interviewed, she agrees to come with me, until a teacher tells me she is not in the research class! Afterwards, I express my embarrassment to the teacher who laughingly voices my concern: ‘I’m glad we teach them so well about talking to strangers, “yeah, I’ll come along”.’

Kitzinger and Frith (1999) examine the complexity of dissent within conversational interactions; how ‘refusals are awkward to perform, and that (polite) rejections are often done inexplicitly’ (p.298). Most of the children demonstrate an implicit understanding of these norms, by not saying no in class and in their interviews with me. Initially, with my encouragement, the children use the stop/go cards (discussed in Chapter Three) to indicate dissent to being interviewed or observed. Once in an interview, they tend not to use the cards, indicating their dissent in other ways: they become distracted, look away,

or during a castle puzzle they may begin to deviate from the rules, playfully making characters fly and tell me the puzzle is complete when it is not. It can be hard to read their signals, with some children continuing to puzzle with the castle beyond ten minutes, without sign of dissent, but clearly relieved when I ask whether the teddy bear would like to stop. One child, Kitty, terminates the interview, nearing its completion she suddenly announces 'Well, I really want to go back to the classroom'. She does not say she wants to stop, adopting instead a more culturally sensitive and normative approach. Kitzinger and Frith show strategies for dissent used by adults and young people: delays in response to questions using pauses and fillers (e.g. 'uh', 'well'), palliatives (e.g. token agreements) and accounts (i.e. explanations/excuses). Alfie illustrates young children's expertise in each of these:

Pause, palliative and account

PK: We haven't got a lot of time, would you, are you going to want to do the castle puzzle or not?

Alfie: Mm, I might in a little bit, I'm just going to write my name and then I might.

Palliative and account

PK: I was going to ask you, would you draw your classroom?

Alfie: Yes.

PK: That would be great.

Alfie: (I want to draw?)

PK: Can you draw your classroom, there's pencils as well (?)

Alfie: I want to draw a picture of the beach. (Interview transcript)

Having observed Nikita seeking adult assent in the dining hall, I am surprised when in the interview she suddenly announces 'That's enough'. English is Nikita's second language, so perhaps she has not yet fully understood the culturally normative avoidance of refusals in the classroom and has more easily accepted my assurance that it is okay to say no. In addition, she feels unconfident in these activities, when I suggest doing the castle puzzle she is clear: 'No, I can't do it' and says she cannot draw the classroom because 'it's too big'. Nearly all those who say they do not want to do an interview activity are currently less highly achieving pupils; for all, avoidance appears, at least in part, fuelled by anxiety. Moses is tentative about drawing the classroom, preferring to draw things he can manage, including a star, adding 'I don't have to draw a star if I don't want to', sounding unsure, so that I confirm my unusual suggestion, for the school, that he can dissent. The two children who challenge my authority most,

Margot and James, are both currently low achieving and working class (discussed in Chapter Three), James regularly refuses to do what I ask, I suggest in part because the interviews are weakly framed, so that I try to clarify the rules. When James comes up to me asking ‘Can I work with you?’ and I tell him we will be working together tomorrow, he asserts, ‘No, today’; now used to his demands I repeat the message, keeping it simple and clear, ‘Tomorrow’, and again he asserts ‘No, today’. I smile and he does not ask again.

The children must traverse the crossing between school and home. I hear all the core children at home, except Roma, say ‘No’ and dissent to parents. When Julia’s mother suggests who might come to play Julia is quick to say ‘No, it’s my choice’. Alice similarly asserts ‘No’ she does not want to wear boots, resisting advice, until the mother acknowledges, ‘that’s what you want’. Only after school, does Alice hint at her motivation, saying the shoes she wore were easier to change at PE.

In both schools, only the boys diagnosed with autism repeatedly say ‘No’ in the class. At Clifftop, when a teaching assistant tells Preston, ‘Now you’ve got me, isn’t that nice?’, he says, ‘No’, prompting the woman’s response, ‘I’m going to be upset now’. She is signalling the cultural unacceptance of being honest when it might offend, although confusingly staff say honesty is good; she is also communicating it is unacceptable to disagree with staff. At Daleview, Mark will dissent when he does not want to do something, and is told, ‘Don’t say no’ and ‘It’s not what you want’. He sometimes sits on a chair or on a staff member’s lap, because (like Preston) he will resist sitting on the carpet, but one day in Reception, the teacher, Ms. Carver, insists he sit on the floor, telling the teaching assistant, Ms. Dee, to just pick him up and bring him over. She tries but Mark moves to another table to play with a car. Ms. Carver, annoyed, insists again and warns him: ‘You will have to go out and do some work’. Ms. Dee tries to lift Mark, but he wraps his foot around the chair and it moves with him, causing children to laugh until they are told firmly, ‘It is not funny’. Ms. Bird, another teaching assistant, picks Mark up and carries, or more accurately drags, his resistant body to a chair, where she tries to manoeuvre him, but still Mark will not sit.

The carpet marks the space of the on-task classroom and Mark’s refusal constitutes him as an off-task special needs child who has yet to learn to bend to adult authority. After this event, staff agree not to physically restrain Mark and Year One staff receive

specialist support to encourage him to sit; he spends increasing amounts of time on the carpet, but sometimes on chairs. We see how the on-task classroom attempts to ‘corrall and contain’ (Kenway and Youdell, 2011, p.132) emotions. The other child allowed to sit on a chair is the boy assumed to have ADHD, his larger than average body finds it difficult to sit on the carpet without moving, and so distracting and touching others. The chairs that these two boys sit on separate their feeling bodies, containing them from the *normal* educational carpet space (*ibid*). As we saw in Chapter Four, many children struggle to sit on the classroom carpet, but most say nothing; what is special about these boys is they express what they feel.

5.4 Camouflaging avoidance

Being the ‘good’ child can act as a camouflage to avoid challenge, both as a way to avoid work and to avoid expressing an opinion. During my fieldwork, on occasion I unintentionally exclude certain children, alerting me to how being good is more than simply a way of getting noticed, it also achieves ‘unnoticeability’ (Waksler, 1991, p.110) and is a way of absenting themselves from the on-task culture. The primary reason I select Roma as one of the core children is I do not notice her until the second week of fieldwork:

I’m sitting in the Reception classroom and overhear the teacher talking to a girl named Roma. Roma? I have spent over a week in this classroom and never have I heard anyone refer to Roma; I look at her face, but have no memory of her at all. Later, I ask a teacher if she was ill last week, and she assures me she has been here all the time. (Field notes)

I continue to misplace Roma. Sometimes I cannot easily spot her in the class, or I repeatedly mention her last when listing names of children. As I become aware of doing this, I try not to let it happen but fail: when inviting the six core children to an individual feedback session I leave Roma to last and, much later, I find myself wanting to put off writing this chapter about ‘good’ children. It feels I am not alone in keeping Roma at the margins. A woman serving in the dinner hall initially misses Roma as she stands waiting for her food. A teacher who works with her regularly is ‘not quite sure how I would describe her as a learner at the moment . . . [I’m] still getting to know her, I think’, and another, who has not worked with her for a few months, cannot remember her name: ‘I can’t even remember the quiet ones now’.

Several months after leaving the field, when I am finishing off transcribing, I realise I failed to invite Anna to an individual interview. I cannot easily explain how this happened, as I had a list of the names of all the children that I checked against, and yet, knowing how I misplace Roma, I am unsurprised the child I exclude is Anna. Anna and Roma's upright bodies present a silent invitation to be acknowledged; one I repeatedly fail to respond to positively, being such an unfamiliar position in any context beyond the on-task primary classroom. When asking children to sort photographs of activities they like doing outside school, I include one of a child sitting upright with a finger on her mouth; Clark pauses at this picture, checking it is not taken at school and asks 'But why are they doing that?' In the classroom, more overt tactics attract my attention: arms waving high or voices repeatedly asking for a turn. I am painfully conscious that Rudi, the last child I interview in the class, is quiet and undemanding.

The other child I become aware of excluding is a black child, but for very different reasons. When he arrives late for a group discussion I send him back to the classroom, believing him to be in the wrong place, and do not hear other children telling me he is supposed to be in this group until later, to my horror, when listening to the recording. At the time, I do not know him well, but observe staff finding him challenging; I enlist in the narrative of troublemaker, responding to that script, not giving him and the other children the time to explain, anxious instead to get back on-task with the group discussion that is proving difficult (discussed in Chapter Two). Despite my intention to support children's participation, similar to the research schools' proud inclusion of diverse groups of pupils, the lived experience can be different. Inclusion demands a focus on the mechanisms by which we listen to children, including an awareness of children's silence (Lewis, 2010) and how we silence or distort their voices.

While Roma and Anna's silent and still bodies capture the positive attention of staff, my own and others' averted gaze draws attention to what might be gained and lost by being 'good'. For Roma, it serves to camouflage her limited understanding and engagement in challenging school activities, as we saw above when, following her limited writing about snakes, she attracts praise for sitting well. This is similar to nursery children found purposefully to avoid a pre-writing activity while pretending to do it (Lam and Pollard, 2006). As well as older children abbreviating responses (Alexander, 2000) or encouraging teacher talk by remaining silent: 'by no means is the silent child not a competent child' (Silverman *et al.*, 1998, p.239). Roma is 'worried of learning', telling

me, 'I don't like the stupid learning; I like to go home to play', although she can also feel 'happy with easy learning and learning that I like'. In the individual interviews, Roma is the only child to pick only easy castle puzzles, without trying a harder one. This reluctance 'to have a go' is identified by staff; by the end of Year One they feel she works more independently but avoids asking for help: 'She's so good all the time . . . I think sometimes she's worried about asking for help, because she doesn't want to look like she hasn't listened or (laugh) or understood . . . I think she associates not understanding with kind of, you know, not being good' (Ms. Peach, teacher).

Unlike Roma, Anna submits herself to the on-task classroom to advance her curricula learning, rather than to avoid activities. What she avoids is expressing something of herself beyond being 'good' and 'clever'. She works diligently and quietly at the tables. The sound she draws in the classroom is the teacher 'telling us what to do', because 'I like work' (see Figure 5.4). For 'show and tell', Anna brings in something she typed at home, explaining, 'It's a bit like my own little school at home . . . because I practice my handwriting'. Anna is aware of her achievements: 'I know quite a lot about fairy tales and I'm in Giants [the currently highest achieving English group]'. When I also ask the children to make a sound they hear in the classroom, using voices or an array of objects, Anna makes a breathing sound; promoting a sense of stillness and quiet, so that other children stop talking and my voice lowers:

PK: It's like a heavy breathing noise. Tell us about that noise Anna.

Anna: Children breathing.

PK: Children breathing. So tell me, when do you hear that?

Anna: On the carpet.

PK: Okay.

Anna: All the time.

PK: And what does it feel like hearing that noise?

Anna: Breathing.

[A child imitates heavy breathing noises]

PK: Breathing. And is there any other noise when children are breathing on the carpet?

[Anna shakes her head. One child breathes loudly and makes a dying sound.]

(Group interview transcript)

I am struck how Anna is unwilling to expand on her views, and similarly when I ask what it feels like sitting in assembly she tells me ‘I don’t know’. Anna is a calm ‘good’ child throughout the group discussion, never humorous or playful like the others. As Julia describes her (above), ‘not funny’, in a context where laughter is off-task. Some children can use breathing spaces, such as this group away from the classroom, to question, subvert or make fun of the on-task culture (discussed further in Chapters Three and Seven). Others, like Anna, are unable to breathe so freely and to come into presence (Biesta, 2010b, p.547). Later, I ask the group for their views on a ‘whole body’ listening poster displayed in the classroom (see Figure 5.5) and Anna again evokes her ‘good’ position in the classroom:

- Ben: It’s stupid.
 PK: Why’s it stupid?
 Ben: Because I don’t like it . . .
 Child: It’s creepy . . .
 PK: Anyone else, Anna what do you think about it?
 Anna: Um. I think of a whole body being still.
 PK: Mm mm. And what do you think about that? . . . [Pause. No response.]
 PK: Not sure. Gabriel, what do you think about it?
 Gabriel: Um.
 PK: Alfie!
 Gabriel: I don’t think anything about it.
 (Group interview transcript)



Figure 5.5 ‘Whole body listening’ classroom poster: wide forward facing eyes, listening ear, closed mouth, clasped hands, forward facing feet, upright body, active brain and heart.

Gabriel, another ‘good’ and currently high achieving child, also does not express an opinion. Within the repertoire of the good child, there is no language for vulnerability; whereas some may use humour, others say nothing. Anna and Gabriel’s reticence to express a view plays it safe; a quiet caniness that helps keep them out of trouble when there are no clues to answer my questions. This resonates with other research that concludes children perceived as high ability do not question teacher’s definition of knowledge, or make sense of it in their own terms, contributing ‘in large measure to their educational achievement’ (Keddie, 1971, p.156).

In the same way that being the good pupil does not equate with working hard, being distracted does not equate with avoiding work. Children know they are expected to listen, but can also multitask to endure time on the carpet. I observe Alice looking

distant and distracted as the teacher explains the activities that will follow, so am surprised when she then gets up and does what the teacher has instructed. Soon after, she tells me she had been ‘watching TV in her head’, caught in the reverie of her own imagination, but she is still able to take in the necessary information: silent and transgressive activity maintaining her ‘reserve in private and without the knowledge of the “masters”’ (de Certeau, 1984, p.172).

Roma’s parents are understandably thankful that Roma was uncomplaining during a recent hospitalisation. They noted however that when Roma arrived at hospital she stopped crying and screaming, and they wondered how she coped with the pain, and why ‘was she just withdrawing into herself?’ Talking about the need to promote independent learning, a teacher cautions: ‘Obviously you don’t want them ending up like Roma and not be asking for any help at all’. On her return to school, Roma appears to have a renewed confidence that adults notice, also becoming more vocal and humorous in my interviews. In the playground, she poses for another child, lying on the floor looking comically inert, asking ‘Do you want to take a photo of me dead?’ Roma is possibly taught something by her infirmity (as I am by my shame, discussed in Chapter One), alerted to a desire for avoidance, interrupting an egocentrism and freeing her to exist rather than simply survive (Biesta, 2016).

5.5 Conclusion

In the on-task classroom, good pupils are expected to sit upright and to suppress their feelings. The breadth of emotions are unrecognised, but children and teachers (and researchers) of course feel; emotions always present, flow through the classroom. Primary school children must learn, through adult feedback, to discriminate which feelings are appropriate and inappropriate, a ‘moulding of children’s feelings, sensations and dispositions into a repertoire of discrete emotions’ that Maclure and colleagues (2012) calls the ‘orthopaedics of affect’ (p.462). A ‘malleable’ child is ‘easier for me to teach’, says one teacher at Daleview, who sees the purpose of schooling as learning ‘things that are dictated for you to learn, to learn to become a good citizen, to learn to become a good person in a social situation, to learn rules, but to learn conformity’ (discussed further in Chapter Eight).

In school, emotions are seen to reside within individuals, and must be controlled. Those who cannot distinguish what is inappropriate are seen to be personally lacking, having

either a medical condition, a flawed disposition or family background. There are no opportunities to explore emotional responses, or to register and narrate ‘the larger forces’ surrounding personal experiences of affect (Abel, 2008, n.p.), including biology, social hierarchies and economic conditions. Gender, ethnicity, class and current academic ability are embodied, and they mediate power relations in the research classroom (Gillies, 2011). For the girls, the more commonly associated feminised position of the good student as nice and kind competes with what else they might know or say. Boys work to marginalise the more traditionally masculinised emotions of anger, as well as the more feminised ‘sadness’. The range of embodied emotions are devalued in the everyday fabric of school life. Jackson’s (1968) exploration of the classroom identifies patience as the quintessential virtue, where children must ‘learn to suffer in silence’ and ‘bear with equanimity’ the ‘continued delay, denial, and interruption of their personal wishes and desires’ (p.18), pleasing the teacher by vocalising satisfactions and ‘keeping silent about many of the discomforts engendered by classroom life’ (p.66). He concludes that student attitudes to classroom activities are ‘more complex’ (p.61) than might be gleaned by asking children whether they like school, given an acceptance that school is doing good, and ‘many who like school also worry about it’ (p.58).

We see children’s competence in understanding the demanded moral rectitude, and the effort it takes to create a good impression. There is a strong iterational dimension of agency here, shaping the children’s effort. In Mahmood’s study of the Egyptian women’s piety movement, she argues that women’s practices, such as wearing the veil, constitute pious subjectivities. This demands spiritual effort, and even resistance; standing up to husbands who challenge their wives’ extreme religious practices. I suggest that in a classroom where being ‘good’ is associated with *appearing* on-task, children’s compliant practices — including being silent and still, marginalising difficult emotions, avoiding saying ‘no’ and expressing opinions — constitute ‘good child’ subjectivities. There are different kinds of agency and they afford different courses of action, under different circumstances. Here the children’s agency, while limited, is evident in the practices demanding ethical labour; navigating the different ways to perform, inhabit and experience the norms of the good child. This includes emotional and bodily effort, optimising situations to attract and avert the adult gaze; helping to avoid challenge. There is a separation of the ‘good child’ from the ‘good student’ in the on-task classroom. Practices to conform can also include resistance to effort in learning,

by pretending to engage. This reveals a practical-evaluative dimension to children's agency, as they judge how to deal with the conflict of being both 'good' and having an interest in being off-task. Preston, a boy at Clifftop diagnosed with autism, tells me he likes 'playing trains' in the classroom, but not 'playing at doing work'; such pretence is perhaps needed more where there is the possibility of failure in learning activities. Currently high achievers, like Anna and Gabriel, can submit themselves to the discipline of work, but avoid expressing an opinion, an action that allows them to remain 'good' but also to avoid challenge. This supports previous research showing that high achievers can avoid challenge (Marks, 2012; Dweck, 2000). For children at different current academic attainment, the 'good' child acts as a camouflage for the challenge of new and unexpected contexts. This leaves children less able to breathe life into their day and to come into presence.

The concern with children's behaviour extends beyond the school gates with its implicit on-task advertisement aimed at Ofsted; in turn marketing schools to parents (McLeod and Yates, 2006). The good school, like the good pupil and teacher, is untroublesome: diligently performing the qualities demanded of its role by government. At Clifftop, there is a self-conscious good ('outstanding') school identity, with its high rating and profile: when I ask the children to draw their classroom, three of the 13 draw the school building with its logo and/or name, whereas none of the 29 children at Daleview takes this external perspective⁷. Being 'outstanding' here becomes synonymous with the high achieving 'clever' school. In the next chapter, *The Clever Child*, I examine the good pupil (and school) as one who does well within the expectations laid out in the national curriculum. I highlight further tensions between different understandings of being good as both untroublesome and high achieving: Julia, for example, is not praised for calling out correct answers.

Children take up the school requirement to behave in ways dictated as important for learning, which includes sitting quietly, keeping difficult emotions to oneself and avoiding saying 'no' to adults. In this chapter, I have shown how they achieve a limited agency by navigating demands for such moral conformity, and how this includes resistance: being 'good' can disguise a lack of effort in the face of challenge. In the next

⁷ A Clifftop class teacher cannot identify any recent learning activity that might explain this different perspective.

chapter, I highlight how performing the ‘clever’ child, in which children work hard to demonstrate how much they know, their agency is similarly limited.

CHAPTER SIX: Agency in Conformity – The Clever Child

Children understand that in the on-task classroom they must demonstrate what they know. In this chapter, I examine the tensions within classroom initiatives that contribute to the performance-focus of the classroom. This includes those that emphasise children's 'ability', and learning behaviours aimed at promoting children's agency, where children have to be resilient, aim high and challenge themselves all the time. Performing 'cleverness' in this context, I suggest, is a form of agency, drawing on Mahmood (2005) again, with children trying to work out and deliver on what is expected. I explore how this only gets children so far when faced with the unexpected: leaving them to deal alone with the difficult feelings of not knowing.

6.1 'Giants' and 'beanstalks': labelling ability

School practices and discourses promote a judgement of children based on their assumed 'ability', a highly contested concept discussed in Chapter Two (e.g. Hart *et al.*, 2004), that emphasises hierarchies infused with anxiety. One December morning, Julia is discussing with me the maths lesson she has just finished. She is currently in high achieving maths and English sets, and is keen to let others know she is 'good' at these subjects, while also demonstrating an unease with the trickiness of learning. Julia tells me that during the previous whole class maths lesson the teddy bear would have felt 'A bit nervous, because he doesn't know what he's going to do, and a bit cross because he had to wait for ages when there are things he already knows'. The table activity, she says, was 'Okay, but . . . [the teacher] always does the boringest things with us because they're the trickiest'. On the other side of the room a woman is reading with a child and Julia goes to let them know she is on the 'green' reading book level, returning to tell me, 'I'm one of the cleverest in school, so I'm on the green'. I ask what being clever means. She says 'It's tricky to explain it, I can't explain it, I don't know how', adding 'crossing my legs is tricky to do', as she draws a picture of herself sitting. She shows me her picture, asking, 'Do you think this is good?' adding, 'I'm really good at things, at maths, at English. The books were a bit tricky, we made alien books, some are out in the hallway, mine isn't, I didn't want it to be, I didn't want anyone to see it. I didn't think it was good'. We see here the kind of gendered vulnerability mentioned by Dweck (2000), where children, but girls in particular, court praise about their ability, but are vulnerable when faced with challenges.

In everyday life there is a language of ability, in which adjectives such as ‘clever’, ‘smart’ and ‘bright’ are used to comment and praise throughout the life course, although it seems more so in childhood. This language is used by staff at Daleview, as well as by external staff who meet the children on visits. Clifftop aims to avoid labelling children in this way, but the language creeps in when the teacher reassures children that the ‘elves are very clever’ if names have been left off letters to Father Christmas. Though I am acutely aware of trying to avoid this language, three times I hear myself tell Clark what he does is ‘clever’ or ‘brilliant’.

The language of ‘cleverness’ is used in different ways in Daleview. Primarily, it is associated with academic performance, knowing the correct answer and demonstrating achievement: ‘Who’s been a clever clogs?’; ‘No fooling you, you’re too clever for me’; ‘He’s been very clever and used a word that uses both sounds’. A teacher tells a Reception child, ‘You’re a genius’ for spelling ‘bed’ and she plans to ‘tell mummy how super clever you are’. Staff recognise children currently in the highest achievement sets are also the oldest, but still they are the ones most frequently told they are ‘clever’; just one staff member is overheard telling currently lower achieving children they are clever (see the extract below). On occasion, cleverness is equated with conformity: ‘If you were really clever, you’d be like Alice, Leila and Thomas who are already on the carpet’. Cleverness is also associated with out of school knowledge or skill, such as speaking several languages or being able to use chopsticks. The word is used just once for the originality of an idea, ‘clever way of thinking’, once for refining work (discussed further below), and once for working hard:

James: You’re clever with it [reading].

Ms. Fletcher: I’ve practised hard, you’re more clever for you as you’re having to work hard.

James: It’s easy for me.

Ms. Fletcher: I think sometimes it’s tricky, it’s okay to say it’s tricky, but it’s important to keep trying, that’s resilient. (Field notes)

At Clifftop, three children select a Mr Clever character (from a choice of Mr/Miss characters) to tell me how they see themselves as a learner. They understand cleverness to mean how much they know: ‘I know lots of dinosaurs and stuff; I know herbivores and carnivores’ (Winnie). Or else being ‘quite good at something’ (Arun); ‘I don’t need any help when I do English or maths or phonics; no way phonics, it’s so easy, just read, I write the word’ (Andy). Just one child, Max, associates cleverness with improving

work, reflecting the school's incremental understanding of ability: 'I'm very clever at drawing stuff because when I got better and better I try my hardest to do it again, when I make a mistake I cross it out and do it next to it'.

The language of 'cleverness' and self-identification is classed, with the parents of the core group of children at Daleview all using the language of 'clever', but only the four parents with middle class occupations (three of whom are also educated to degree level) speak of their children being 'clever' or 'bright'. The working class parents do not. Reay (2017) similarly identifies 254 references to 'being bright' in 250 interviews with middle-class parents (p.142). Of the core children, it is middle class children currently achieving highly who clearly assert themselves as 'really clever' and the 'cleverest' and say they have been told they are clever ('Everyone says I'm clever'; 'I have a bit of a reputation'). The other children, all currently in lower sets, also mention they are clever, but more tentatively or only once: 'I'm a bit clever because I'm still learning'; 'I was trying to write something but I was too smart because I am too smart to concentrate'; 'I'm very clever and I've got long legs'. A working class boy in a lower set is described by a teacher as a 'slow processor' and 'a real plodder . . . I think he always will be'. Another teacher stresses the need to have higher expectations for pupils 'within their abilities'. A context where intelligence is understood as biologically fixed, limits the scope for teachers 'to change the speed' of children's minds (Murrells, 2016, p.1; Hart *et al.*, 2004).

The head teacher at Daleview feels that grouping children by their current 'ability' is less than ideal, because 'children are really aware of where they are' in the hierarchy but, being on-task, it is 'often how we need to work because of the pressures'. Maths is grouped in sets all year round, and it varies for English, but in the summer term, with assessments approaching the focus is on 'trying to get certain children to that . . . push that last bit to get up to the right levels; it made more sense to have them in ability groups' (Ms. Peach, teacher). Grouping by current 'ability' reinforces hierarchies in the classroom, with some children aware of their place in the rankings. Staff do not name the level of each group, but other cues signal their order. For example, the class teachers name the highest achieving maths group Rectangle because they understand it to be the most complex shape, followed by Square, then Triangle which has less sides, and Circle with no sides. The highest English set is represented by a towering Giant, followed by a Castle, then a smaller Wolf, and finally the lowest achieving group is Beanstalk, which

has to be climbed to get high. When I show the different group names to my daughter, aged eight at the time, she can place them in their correct hierarchical order with no additional clues. The force of these names is particularly striking given most parents of children in the beanstalks group (five out of seven) are educated below degree level, compared with only one (out of 10) in Castles. Also, in the two lowest maths sets the majority are girls (seven girls and five boys), whereas in the two highest sets the majority are boys (three girls and twelve boys). Staff announce to the whole class what activities these different groups will do, making the differentiation clear: ‘Wolves and Beanstalks are to work on their introduction . . . Giants and Castles are told they’ve already done that so they’re going to be working on their instructions, using time words and bossy verbs’. The children in the currently lower achievement groups do not speak of an awareness of how groups are decided, but those in the currently highest maths group clearly state their superiority:

Clark: [Rectangles] is the smartest group . . .

Gabriel: Rectangles don’t need any help, I mean I don’t need any help . . .

Boy⁸: The Circles is the worst. (Group discussion transcript)

The majority of feedback to children on their learning activities reflects a classroom pedagogy emphasising a behaviourist approach to convergent assessment. Here the intention is to teach or assess the next predetermined thing, rather than a divergent assessment where it is important ‘to discover *what* the child knows, understands, or can do’ found more in classrooms using open tasks (Pryor and Torrance, 1998, p.153; original emphasis). Feedback is plentiful and it is not possible to note down its every occurrence, but I do where possible (see Appendix Eleven for examples). Much feedback confirms, for example with a ‘good/well done’ and some information is given on how the child is progressing towards goals and how to proceed, but less so different strategies for extending the work. At Daleview, when children complete the task they are not usually expected to continue to a harder challenge until the next lesson, whereas at Clifftop children are given the choice of challenge levels and can be encouraged to work on a higher challenge. A Daleview staff team worked on how to develop feedback, promoting the importance of practice and refinement for mastery, so that children have a practice page in their writing book and are told ‘The more you practice the better you get’. Twice termly, the teachers engage the children in peer feedback on how to improve

⁸ Identity not clear from the recording.

a piece of work: here their persistence in improving their work is not something the children must be, but something they do together with peers and teacher. Otherwise, I do not observe probing of depth of understanding or discussion about different meanings, with students and teachers together seeking answers to the questions, ‘where am I going?’ ‘how am I going?’ and ‘where to next?’ (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p.88).

6.2 ‘Learning hard’: resilience and aiming high

Learning behaviours and mastery approaches promoted by the schools, aimed at developing children’s agency in learning, are rife with tensions and can pressure children. Along with a national concern that children develop character and grit for learning (discussed in Chapter Two), Daleview promotes learning behaviours, including resilience, aiming high and curiosity. These are introduced and kept prominent through stories and posters, highlighted in lesson planning, and displayed alongside lesson objectives. ‘Right, I’m going to see lots of resilience today’, says Ms. Fletcher, the teacher, explaining a handout with three rockets to cut out: ‘We might not get it right the first time, we might accidentally snip through it, so we can practice again and again’.

Learning behaviours fit with the school’s emphasis on supporting future careers as one of the purposes of education: ‘We don’t know the jobs they’ll be doing in the future . . . so it’s about giving them the learning skills’ (Ms. Rudland, head teacher). They are also driven by a critique of the strong performance focus currently within education, hoping to foster children’s greater independence in their learning:

There is pressure on schools to deliver in very narrow test driven way, which has meant over time. . . children are increasingly being spoon-fed . . . We went on training . . . What struck me was the finding that a five-year-old comes to learn whereas an eight-year-old comes to hear the teacher teach. So we decided, we thought we’d go with learning behaviours . . . Helping children to stand on their own two feet, to want to learn for themselves, and to get help when they need it rather than that being the first point of call. (Ms. Yates, teacher)

The school is committed to promoting children’s agency, but there are inherent tensions with this initial intention and the ways Daleview promotes the learning behaviours. Firstly, learning behaviours, occasionally referred to as ‘learning powers’, are seen to reside within children, and yet it is staff with the power and, by assumption, the ability, to assess whether a learning behaviour has been used. Teacher-led control, exerted

externally, operates against the supposed internally-held learning power (Maclure *et al.*, 2012). Staff have given some thought to children assessing their own learning behaviours, but this is seen as a ‘big undertaking’ (Ms. Yates). Staff will reward a child for demonstrating learning behaviours with stickers, but children are only recognised as participating in their learning within ‘institutionally defined moments’ (Nolas, 2015, p. 5) that align themselves with the on-task culture, anything else is regarded as without value or as failure. It is not okay to be curious and ask questions when expected to be sitting silently on the carpet.

The efficacy of the rewards is limited further by children not always understanding the language of the learning behaviours. In award assemblies, children receive certificates for demonstrating these behaviours, but the wording is often complex, targeted perhaps more at older children, parents and Ofsted. Kai receives a curiosity certificate ‘for asking questions and extending his understanding’; clearly pleased, he shows me, but when I ask what it is for his not knowing is emphasised: ‘I’m not so good at reading words’.

There is confusion about the learning behaviour concepts. The original meaning of ‘resilience’ as something limited, contextual, and dynamic, a response to adversity (Rutter, 2006), is misappropriated in the classroom as an endless capacity to go on and on, where children ‘don’t give up’ and ‘even if finding it tricky, they keep having a go’, and ‘keep practicing’ (Ms. Fletcher, teacher). When Julia tells a teacher, Ms. Fielding, that she did not know at first how to put on a badge, she is told, ‘But you did it, that’s good resilience’; a summation of resilience as something static and possessed, rather than the response to challenge. Staff also call on children to ‘aim high’, to increase their effort and challenge themselves, to ‘try hard’ or ‘try their best’, relative to what they are already ‘capable of’ (Ms. Peach). The phrase aiming high is vague and needs translating, whereas the word ‘try’ communicates better the dynamic process and a practice, that the school is (trying) to encourage, as in ‘If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again’.

The slipperiness of the concepts resilience and aiming high is seen in how staff sometimes use them interchangeably. Effort can become confused with attainment, so that the quality of children’s outputs, such as beautifully presented cursive script, can be used to judge whether children have done a ‘good job’ and aimed high; seen as easier to

assess than resilience, believed to be internal effort. On occasion, children are told they have aimed high for knowing the correct answer, such as Anna when she reads out numbers with no apparent difficulty. The language reflects the Ofsted (2015) inspection criteria that ‘teachers and other staff have consistently high expectations of what each pupil can achieve, including most able and disadvantaged pupils’ (p.49), which is both impossible to expect and inspect (Richards, 2015). Instead, it signals further pressure on students to be right. I find myself picking up on this sticky discourse one evening, when I feel my ten-year-old son could do better in his homework, saying I have high expectations of what he can do; he responds, ‘Oh no, that means you expect me to get things right’. This is similar to my daughter’s understanding of what on-task means in her school: ‘doing what you’re told and doing things right’.

The continual on-task demand to be improving can pressure children. At Clifftop, staff talk of ‘aiming high’ and ‘growth mindsets’ rather than resilience. Underpinned by high expectations for every child, there is a commitment to avoid setting children and a self-conscious avoidance of the language of ability: ‘I just keep calling them levels, they’re not levels: zero means that they’ve got no understanding of that concept at all yet, one is emerging, two is securing, three is secure, and four is mastery, so they can use that skill beyond what they’re expected to do and they can apply it in different contexts and situations’ (Ms. Day, teacher). Children choose from a range of different challenges in English and maths lessons, for example, choosing to write words or sentences. The call on children to exert themselves can encourage them to try harder, like Elona, when drawing a star one break, says to herself, ‘That’s not how you draw a star, I’m going to try my best’, and improves on her drawing.

This framing of challenge as choice can also become a method of compliance. There is the call to constantly challenge oneself at Clifftop and to be achieving: ‘You can challenge yourselves, so don’t stop, write more and more’; ‘You should be trying your best all the time’ (Ms. Day, teacher). When Charlie has had to stay in to do handwriting with the teacher one lunchtime, she tells him firmly, ‘Challenge yourself!’ An instrumental mindset suggests no boundaries and no containment of anxiety, which can itself become a pressure. During a literacy class at Clifftop, Ms. Lazarus tells the children, ‘Don’t show me your work if you’ve finished, you can always write more, go and write more’. Winnie, who has already written five sentences about a turnip, goes back to her table, looking weighed down; she thinks for a moment, then adds, ‘It feels

hard' (see Figure 6.1). Winnie is echoed by children at Daleview, where Amelie calls resilience 'learning hard', explaining this means 'trying again, again and again', explaining you cannot leave out the difficult bits 'because you have to try harder when, you have to aim high'. The language of resilience and aiming high demands that children concentrate for long periods and constantly challenge themselves, and when they cannot (for how could they?), they are to blame.

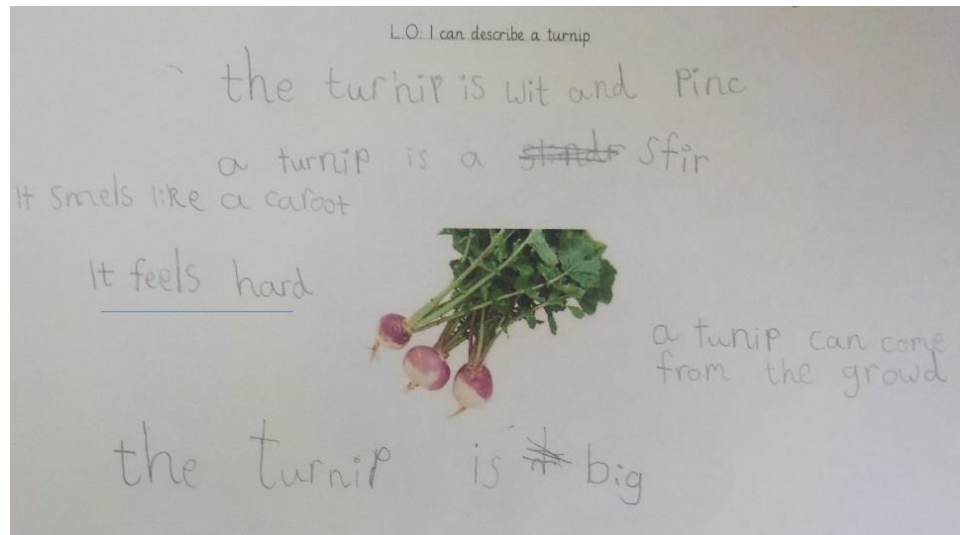


Figure 6.1 Winnie's writing about a turnip, 'it feels hard.' (Clifftop)

The pressure of accountability in the on-task classroom is felt in the perpetual call to challenge oneself. Knowing James is soon to be independently assessed, and aware that he can find it difficult working with someone he does not know well, a teacher tells him 'You've got to show people all the time that you can read these words properly otherwise they'll think you can't do it, I know you can do it, who else knows you can do it?' He replies, 'Me'. Staff aim for children to build their independent 'skills' in their learning, so they can undertake tasks with less need to be told or to ask for help. In part, children's independence saves time by ensuring they are more quickly on-task. I am always impressed when the children come in from play, how quickly they collect their whiteboards and pens and sit down ready to begin their phonics lesson. It helps to increase children's competence at working out solutions, for example finding out how to spell a word using phonics cards. It also enables the teacher to focus her attention on a handful of children at any given point. The primary aim here, however, is encouraging children's conformity as independent *learners*, but not *thinkers*.

6.3 ‘Who’s winning?’

Rewarding children for exhibiting learning behaviours strengthens the performance focus of the classroom, emphasising competition and hierarchies, and promoting children’s anxiety. Children receive stickers for learning behaviours, displayed on individual charts on the classroom wall. The intention is for these charts to encourage children to extend these behaviours, helping them to see which they ‘use the most and which ones you need to work on’, so that ‘hopefully next time they’re doing a similar skill they’ll think “Oh yeah, I can be resilient now”’ (Ms. Fletcher, teacher). The intention is not to reward the children, but staff cannot shake off the rationale of this entrenched practice: ‘We kind of reward it by saying, and I mean it’s not so much supposed to be a reward as more of a “oo, I can see that I’m really resilient” . . . so it’s more of a tool for them. But at the same time, because it’s a sticker (laugh), they get excited’.

There is a tension in offering stickers and wanting children to self-assess their learning behaviours. One teacher stresses that learning behaviours avoid judgement of children’s performance, by ‘not just saying you were good at this or good at that’, whereas another believes displaying the charts reinforces who is ‘doing incredibly well and making those children who don’t have many stickers feel dreadful about themselves’. This tension is felt when a parent looks at the charts, commenting on how few stickers her child has got, reflecting that ‘She’s not very good’ at a particular learning behaviour; Ms. Peach attempts to counters this judgement, ‘Well, ooh sometimes we don’t always notice these things, it’s not that she’s not very good at it’. Roma is aware that stickers are dependent on what teachers observe, ‘you might not get one if the teacher doesn’t see you’, while assessing which leaning behaviour she finds hardest by the number of stickers, ‘I think it’s that one, because I’ve only got one’.

The displayed charts invoke children to conduct themselves as competitive subjects, set within the wider competitiveness of the individualising classroom, where children stress their competence and draw attention to their comparable achievements, both to adults, ‘Don’t be amazed by her, look at this’, and to peers: ‘Have you finished . . . I have?’ asks Isaac of a child still busy working. Children can easily see and count the displayed learning power stickers (they receive between eight and 20 in the first two terms). James may not yet have developed a full understanding of the learning behaviour concepts, but

he knows ‘You have to get a [learning behaviour] certificate to win’ and a new boy looks at the charts asking, ‘Who’s winning, who’s got the most?’ The ambiguity of the teacher’s response, that it is ‘not *really* a race’ (emphasis added), does not clarify the dividing practice of these charts. Something Alice understands when she explains the charts ‘tells you how many learning points you get’, and quickly adds ‘but Anna had more’.

Children in the highest maths set receive more learning power stickers than those in other sets. Starting with the highest, the mean numbers of stickers for each set are 12.75 (range 9 to 20), 11.87 (range 9 to 15), 10.29 (range 6 to 16), 9.92 (range 9 to 10), but the sample size is too small to examine for significant differences between all these groups. The difference between the first set (12.75) and the other three sets pooled together (mean 10.26) is statistically different at the 10% level (Kruskal Wallis test, $p=0.058$), but the sample is very small and these results should be taken as suggestive rather than statistically conclusive. The numbers of aiming high stickers are small (total mean 3.22; range 1 to 6), but the means suggest higher numbers of stickers are received by children in the highest maths set (4.12; range 2 to 6) than in other sets (2.89; range 1 to 6), although again statistically different at the 10% level (Kruskal Wallis test, $p=0.075$). Children in the currently highest maths set are older, three-quarters (six out of eight) are autumn born, and middle class, all have one or more parent with a degree⁹. Six of the seven children whose parents are educated below degree level are in the third and fourth sets; one is in the second set.

The on-task classroom asks everyone to aim high without any explicit differentiation on things that children cannot change (birth order) which makes a difference (at this age), and yet the message is that it is the currently highest achieving ‘clever’ pupils who can aim high. In a phonics lesson, children are told to draw a word and ‘If you feel extra clever and want to aim high you can write the word underneath’ (Ms. Pitts, teacher). Another teacher says ‘You can write in capitals or you can be really clever and write with (little letters)’ (Ms. Heath). Currently highly achieving children can be singled out to aim high, Ms. Peach says ‘If you know you can write a story, add describing words, we’re all different, confident at different things. Clark you can add your describing words, aim high, stretching yourself further and add some describing words’,

⁹ Information on parental education is unavailable for two of the children.

whereupon the teaching assistant, Ms. Drake, adds ‘You’re good at describing things Gabriel’. Another teacher assistant, Ms. Bird, introduces the story character, a collie dog, as one of the ‘cleverest dogs, they are really clever, they do tricks, aim high and are resilient’.

Some children more than others ask staff for stickers. Ms. Fletcher believes the currently higher achieving children ‘have that ability to think about it a little bit more and remind the teacher’, like Alfie who has the most stickers, described as ‘very keen to fill his chart up with stickers, so never lets me forget if he has done something’. Being the ‘clever’ pupil perhaps also fosters a sense of entitlement. He tells me he ‘loves’ getting the stickers as recognition of his effort, ‘It means I’ve worked really, really hard’, and he believes it ‘unfair’ if others get more stickers. Alfie views the head teacher — the most powerful adult in the school — as having the most stickers: ‘If you get a 100 you’d be the head teacher’. This is an interesting perception of leadership; a quantitative rather than a qualitative view (e.g. caring or thoughtful) about what makes a good head teacher.

Learning behaviours, intended to promote agency, bring power into play by emphasising children’s conformity, a confusion seen when a teaching assistant gives a learning behaviour sticker for ‘listening’. A parent asks her children, ‘Are you being resilient?’, as ‘a stick to beat them with (laugh)’. Roma understands that to ‘be really good means you do learning powers’, and James thinks to aim high and be resilient you have to ‘be good’. Acts of collaboration or ‘kindness’ can also serve to reinforce children’s heightened status; when James is playing bowls with Mark, the boy diagnosed with autism, he takes care to hold his hand, praise him, bending down, ‘Good boy, you’re good at bowling’. A patronising tone also adopted by other children in the class, serving to emphasise their status in the ability hierarchy as well as rehearsing and demonstrating required character virtues (Maclure *et al.*, 2012). During the interview with Julia, she shepherds Mark back into the classroom, returning to tell me ‘I got him back in, I’m really good in the class’, and then, without pause, she shows me her drawing and asks ‘do you think this is good?’, her ‘good’ here demonstrates the required virtues of kindness and helpfulness *and* achieving well in art. Children, conscious of their place in the hierarchy of intelligence, can be moved by the ‘ignorance’ of others and ‘come down to their level’ (Rancière, 1991, p.22). Being high separates children and is not always comfortable. One currently highly achieving child

wishes he were ‘the dumbest’, or at least ‘quite low on the list’ and ‘a young one, because all my friends are younger than me’, adding others would be older, taller and naughtier ‘that I can hide behind’. Similarly, another achieving child would prefer not to be ‘too clever’ as ‘everyone comes and surrounds me, asking questions’.

Individualising understanding of how children achieve ignores wider structural factors. A class teacher sees the classroom winners as those children who aim high and demonstrate resilience: ‘Children are good at different things, but I guess the children who are more resilient and aim high are normally the children who win at things, who do well, come first’. This analysis pays no attention to the broader factors that enable some to ‘win’ more than others. My observations suggest a need to de-centre the pupil and examine the broader social, political and material conditions that set them back, more than simply inciting individuals to keep on trying and aim high.

The term ‘aim high’ is used broadly within formal and informal education for promoting student social mobility (e.g. Aimhigher, an organisation disbanded in 2010 aimed at widening participation in universities; Big Society Capital, 2016; H.M. Treasury and Department for Education and Skills, 2007). It emerged under New Labour but remains given the continued emphasis on social mobility, as well as fitting well with the current dominance of resilience and growth mindsets. In 2007, Gordon Brown encouraged schools to use ‘aim high’ and similar mottos as ‘a declaration of faith in the future’, to ‘make it possible for young people to bridge the gap between what they are and what they have the wherewithal to become’ (n.p.). He demanded the education sector rise to this challenge, and to do so competitively, emphasising the United Kingdom ‘move to the top of the global education league . . . to say not just that we will aim high but that we can no longer tolerate failure, that it will no longer be acceptable for any child to fall behind’ (n.p.). I discuss below the lack of focus in the classroom on *tolerating* failure, an inevitable part of learning. Here, I suggest that where it is those already succeeding that are encouraged to aim high, this will do little to bridge the gap. I ask Clark if others in the class can become clever like the children in his group, and he says ‘not really, because they will try but we’re learning all the time, so they’ll never catch up’. Education can be a route to social mobility, but focusing on developing learning behaviours ignores structural barriers to education, ‘rather than tinker with individual-level capacities to cope, we must change the society-level odds stacked against individuals that block their opportunities to achieve a better future’

(Southwick *et al.*, 2014, n.p.¹⁰). It is unproductive for children (and schools or countries) to be, or to aim to be, higher than others.

6.4 Cleverness as performative

I suggest that performing ‘cleverness’ is a form of agency in the on-task classroom. I illustrate this point with Alice, when she experiences not knowing one spring morning. She is sitting at a table with others in her English group and the teacher, where she must write instructions for planting beans. The activity links nicely to the class Fairy Tale learning journey and the children planted beans the previous day; each now neatly displayed in identical bags along the classroom wall. Alice has been instructed to first write a list of the items needed and she gets straight into the activity. The worksheet

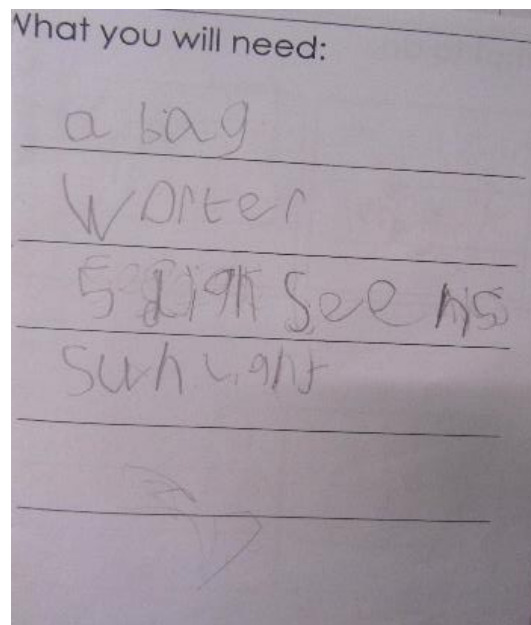


Figure 6.2 Alice's list of items needed to plant a bean.

specifies what and where to write. Alice writes a bag, water, seed and sunlight (see Figure 6.2), but then there is an expectant fifth line at which Alice stumbles; she pauses and appears to ponder, finger on mouth, saying ‘Hmm’ repeatedly. She sits back, looks up into the air, at nowhere, fingers on mouth, taking on a more glazed look. She faces me, saying ‘Hmm’; I wonder if she is calling for my help.

Alice’s response to not knowing is to maintain a quiet conforming pupil position, often associated with femininity. She does not question or verbally seek support. Later, watching a film of herself at this moment, she tells me ‘I was thinking hard, that’s why I look smart’. She is thinking and working hard: working out what is expected by that line. Similar to Kai, who defines learning as ‘finding answers’. Finally, without adding anything more she shows her work to the teacher who simply tells Alice to add ‘five’ and ‘dry’ to describe her seeds.

¹⁰ This comment was made specifically by the co-author, Catherine Panter-Brick.

Alice is highly focused on completing the task in this activity: the only words she initiates speaking to her teacher are ‘Done’, ‘Now I’ve done it’, ‘Now I’m done’. An underlying unease perhaps propels Alice ‘to grasp for quick solutions or demand answers from the teacher so as to be able to put an end to such anxieties’ (Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1983, p.57). She is engaged in what de Certeau (1984) might call a ‘tactical’ (p.30) (not learning) behaviour in order to free up time to be elsewhere and engage in play, for being ‘done’ also often results in highly desirable ‘free-choice’ time — ‘free because unproductive’ (Pelletier, 2009, p.275) — rather than the opportunity to engage with a higher challenge. ‘Done’ is a word that echoes throughout the school day. At Clifftop, when Roberto draws and tells me about his classroom, he looks and sees the class engaged in free-choice time, so adds ‘have choosing, I learn about birds, inclamation mark; when you finish you can breath and it’s called inclamation mark [drawing what looks like an question mark]. I’m done’.

Above we see Alice forming her subjectivity by repeatedly performing norms of intelligence which include a focus on task completion and an avoidance of challenge, which help to consolidate an impression of ‘being intelligent’. Alice repeatedly tells me she is clever; she likes to be ‘high up’, in places with a good view below. For her intelligence is associated with knowing, grownups are clever and to become clever you need to listen to the teacher, as well as with mastery, she feels cleverer as she learns to read trickier books. She also thinks children can be clever if they have lots of ideas. She signals her possible vulnerability to the discourse of ability and failure, so she must repeatedly perform intelligence. She shifts quickly from my questions about what smart means to demonstrating her competence at counting in 10s. This is similar to Julia, seen at the beginning of the chapter, who demonstrates both what she knows and an anxiety at not knowing. In this context of competing discourses and practices, children exhibit contradictory subjectivities. Julia tells me it is better to do things she will learn a lot from than try to look clever, and it is possible to become clever by trying harder, suggesting an ‘incremental’ theory of intelligence, while also exhibiting anxiety about her ability typical of those understood to have an ‘entity’ theory (Dweck, 2000). Repeatedly calling out ‘I know the answer’ and seeking affirmation helps to demonstrate what Julia can do, a conventionally considered ‘masculine’ self-promotion, while she is critical of ‘boys’ who ‘like getting everything right’ and ‘telling people the answers’.

I want to suggest that performing intelligence, which children are mastering and want to show, serves them in the classroom, and as such is a form of agency, a way of ‘making do’ (de Certeau, 1984, p.29) and working within the discursive constraints of the classroom in order to ‘be’. Despite a government concern with character education, the children already demonstrate agency daily in navigating a system that emphasises their lack of knowledge and their inequality. Taking the original understanding of resilience, ‘defined as the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development’ (Masten, 2014, p. 6), children demonstrate resilience by finding ways to adapt to the performance focused classroom. Alice’s resilience is embodied in her uncertain pause as she tries to deliver on what is expected, her assertion of intelligence, and in being ‘done’ as quickly as possible.

With Alice, we see the relations that matter through the line on the worksheet that physically disrupts the invisible relationships between people, making them more visible. Here her performance of intelligence is halted; highlighting the limits of this form of agency in the context of something novel and unscripted. The switch can appear so subtle but the little line is folded into the rigid structure of the national curriculum and accountability frameworks, and back into Alice herself. Alice is not a seeker of meaning, but of what is expected, echoing Willes’ (1983) classroom research finding that the child’s primary duty is to find out and do what the teacher wants. For Rancière (1999), to understand the rules, and that they must be obeyed, suggests ‘you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you’ (p.16).

6.5 ‘Emergency’ feelings of failure

The on-task classroom is a constant space of knowing, where the staff know the answer and children are trying to work it out. In this space, children exhibit ‘emergency’ feelings about not knowing/failure, and are unsupported to deal with the range of feelings of learning.

The emotionality of learning, as with emotionality generally (see Chapter Five), is undiscussed in the on-task classroom: ‘You forget the anxiety children feel when they’re learning. Sometimes I go home and think they found that really difficult . . . I could have taken three of them to the side, in an ideal world, but you don’t have the time with all we’ve got to do’ (Ms. Drake, teaching assistant). When mentioned, the focus is on withholding emotion: a class teacher gives children resilience stickers,

telling them, 'It's the first time we've read an orange book . . . no one got upset, when you got to a tricky word you tried and read it'. Children recognise a range of emotions involved in learning, highlighted by the descriptions they give me of how a butterfly feels when learning to fly, including: nervous, mad, frustrated, annoyed, scared, afraid, as well as happy, beautiful, kind, magical, precious, good. Bracketing all difficult emotions as 'upset' suppresses and potentially perpetuates their experience.

A poster used in both schools designed to help children self-assess instead signals deeper anxiety. It displays a happy face alongside the message 'I can do it', a neutral face for 'I'm getting there', and a sad face for 'I need help' (see Figure 6.3). It implies not knowing is inherently negative, emphasised at Daleview by the addition of the red in an upside down traffic light. James understands red to signal threat and anger: after being given a warning by a teacher he tells me he 'hates' his classroom and dislikes teachers because 'they tell me off', and picks up a red card telling me it is 'the warning RED', saying the word loudly. This is recognised in both schools where staff do not use red pens for feedback because 'we're not too keen on red' (Ms. Lazarus, teacher, Clifftop), similar to other school research where 'Red ink was also out, seen as too severe and disheartening and replaced by green ink' (Zeitlyn, 2010, p. 312). When Rudi and Kitty explain the traffic light poster, knowing is 'good' and not knowing is 'bad'. Neither green nor red are inherently either, of course, but in the on-task classroom red signifies 'failure' (as well as threat), which is not tolerated; it takes more to change a culture than the colour of a poster or pen.

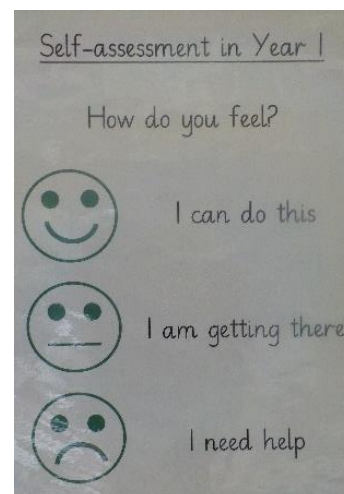


Figure 6.3 Self-assessment poster in Daleview (top) and Clifftop (bottom)

Rudi: If Kai could do a green, which means you're really good at *Beat That Maths*, and Stuart would be yellow which he was sort of good, and Leila was a red because . . . she was so bad . . . the orange is like if you're sort of good at it and sort of it not . . . and this one [red], I need help . . . means you always need help. . . .

Kitty: I think, the green one is if you've been good, I think the yellow one is if you've been a tiny bit good, and I think the red one is if you've been really bad. (Group discussion transcript)

At Clifftop, where the poster is discussed regularly, children offer similar explanations to those above, ‘about being happy’ (Gillian), and being ‘good at’ something (Lila). Angie’s explanation is the one that fits best with the teachers’ mastery focus, ‘getting better at stuff, if you make a mistake you get better at it and you try harder and you try harder’. There is an emphasis on valuing mistakes, in both schools; at Daleview James understands that making a mistake is ‘very good and it helps you learn’. Mistakes are seen as a route to achieving the correct answer: ‘Does it matter if we make a mistake? . . . No, but as long as we spot mistakes and *correct it*’ (Ms. Fletcher, teacher; emphasis added). When Gabriel says ‘I’m not very good at capital Ds’, the teaching assistant, Ms. Drake, tries to reassure but implies shame in not knowing: ‘I’ll tell you a secret Gabriel, I’m not very good at them too’.

There is no space in the on-task classroom for children and staff to explore not knowing together, instead staff only feign not knowing. In both schools, teachers purposefully make mistakes for children to detect: ‘I think I might have made some mistakes, so let me know if you see something’ (Ms. Peach, teacher). When Sindi tells Ms. Lazarus, at Clifftop, that ‘You made a mistake’ on the whiteboard, she responds with exaggerated innocence, ‘Did I?’ These are the mistakes where one person knows and the other must work it out, ‘the pedagogue who feigns ignorance in order to provoke knowledge’, but under such ‘guise of creating a capacity’, they demonstrate the incapacity of children ‘not lead by the teacher down the right path’ (Biesta and Bingham, 2010, p.2). James purposefully leaves mistakes in his homework for his parents to spot, playing with errors to emphasise what he knows. Of course, spotting mistakes can be enjoyable; the children’s book editor, Ursula Nordstrom, wrote to E. B. White about another author who gave an octopus seven tentacles so that children would have the ‘pleasure’ of calling adults attention to it (Marcus, 1998, p.302). Similar to James, this reverses the hierarchy so the child becomes the one who knows, but also emphasises a tolerance of failure. The only time I see a staff member in a space where they do not know, is when James invites a teacher to play a game of bowls: she shows a moment of doubt, looking slightly embarrassed, saying ‘Oh no, I don’t know, can I? Do you think I’ll be able to get any down? . . . it’s trickier than it looks . . . isn’t it?’ This reminds me of my own moment of vulnerability when I briefly wonder if I might lose scrabble to a child.

I see many examples of children feeling anxious about not knowing the correct response and the possibility of failure. When I ask children where they feel different emotions in the classroom, seven out of the 28 children volunteer something positive about learning, sometimes naming specific activities, such as writing poems, phonics or maths, and eight children volunteer something negative about learning. In subsequent interviews, the core children describe in more depth a mix of emotions. Not knowing what or how to do their work is the most frequently expressed anxiety when talking about learning: a deeply embodied, sometimes fearful, experience that they wrestle to contain. It is one shared by boys and girls at all levels of current academic attainment, but in the initial interviews, four of the seven to raise this are amongst the currently highest achieving boys. Thomas, for example, tells me I ‘always feel bit scared’, unless the work is ‘exciting’, such as making a clock which he really enjoyed, adding that bear would feel worried when he was ‘not sure he can do it’.

Alfie, also currently achieving highly, is ‘always shocked’ when working at the tables, ‘Well, just because it looks hard, but it’s always just, it’s always not, except when it gets really tough, except when it gets really struggly’. He

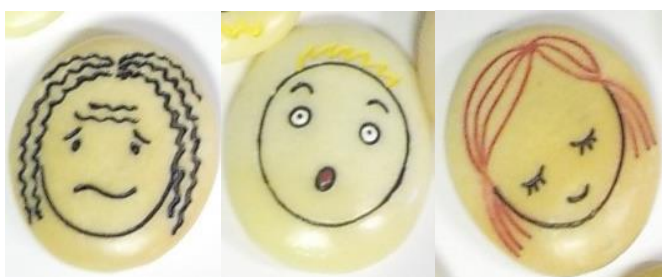


Figure 6.4 Alfie’s feelings when work is ‘really tough’ (left and centre) and when not hard (right).

picks three pebbles (Figure 6.4), telling me ‘They are happening in my body, that means there’s an emergency in me, and I really do not like it. . . . I just have emergencies . . . I just try those things, like try and try not to have that feeling . . . all of them make me cry’. He explains that he gets the calmer looking feeling when ‘it looks hard but it turns out it’s not’. Neve, a later learner, feels the teddy bear would be ‘worried because he didn’t know what to do . . . all of our classroom is just maths; he would feel sad because he would miss out all the fun, because everything is be not fun anymore’.

Not knowing is also the most expressed anxiety at Clifftop. Seven out of the 13 children mention they like something about core curriculum learning; four feel positive about work that is easy, they are confident and feel good at. Eight mention difficult feelings about work that is hard or incorrect, feeling unconfident, confused, and unsure. Winnie, for example, likes maths when she finds it easy, but not when it is more challenging: ‘In maths it kind of takes a long time, sometimes in maths I don’t really like it but when I

do adding I do, adding is really easy and I feel I can do this'. Both Arun and Andy feel angry when work is difficult: 'It makes me really angry, I don't want to do my work, I just want to play, I don't want to do anything else' (Andy). Presenting work as a choice between challenge levels is not emotionally neutral: Lila tells me that the first level challenges are 'easy to smile', the second level 'is not really easy to be upset', and the third level 'is not really easy to be, um, it's really easy to be surprised' whereas 'really cross is the extra challenge'. Five children express anger, tiredness and boredom at working so much: 'Cross when it's learning time because we have to do lots of listening and learning' (Yaz). Five specifically mention missing their mothers: 'Bit worried on the carpet because when you start to learn you feel a bit sad to learn and sometimes you want your mum' (Max). All but one child volunteer they feel positive about creative and playful activities, including games, drawing, singings, stories, free-choice and playtime.

An anxiety about not knowing can leave children immobilised when faced with something they do not understand. Later in the afternoon, on the same spring day discussed above, Alice is engaged in another literacy activity that she cannot do. She sits at a table where the children have cards instructing them to write words in different ways, for example in upper and lowercase letters, in colours or in cursive script. Those at her table either cannot read or else do not clearly understand the instruction cards, which do not relate to any meaningful activity. Again, Alice does not ask for help. Instead, she explores the material properties of her workbook paper, discovering its transparency, so that by the end of this 29 minute activity she has written nothing. Alice engages in a form of silent defensive resistance to her vulnerability at this point. Stuart, sitting next to Alice, is unable to resist. He tries to work at the activity and begins writing but soon rubs out his work and becomes unsure and visibly distressed by not knowing what to do. Despite the prompting by his peers and me, he can no longer access what he already knows, he will not even write in different colours, apparently frozen by his not knowing. He will not go to the teacher fearful of her anger; his body silenced, barely able to speak through inconsolable tears.

Time acts on these young children's bodies. When the teacher announces there is only a few minutes left, aware that he has not done enough, Stuart's distress increases. Alice was already yawning in the morning but by the afternoon she is looking really tired, and Stuart's tears suggest he is too; making this constant space of knowing more difficult to bear. The children meet with the incomprehensibility of the instruction cards, which fail

to build on what they already know and emphasise their ignorance and inequality. The cards act upon Alice and Stuart's tired bodies, identifying them as so utterly unable that they can no longer perform the intelligent student: Alice's performance is ruined, with no possibility to 'try her best', as she likes to do, or to be 'done'. Alice instead 'can divert time owed to the institution' (de Certeau, 1984, p.28); she succeeds in achieving a 'quasi-invisibility . . . the art of using the products imposed on itself' (*ibid.*, p.31) by quietly exploring the wonder of paper, so that she might appear on-task. Not knowing what to do is sometimes chastised by teachers as not listening, and not completing work is similarly reprimanded, so while Stuart cannot help but express his distress at not knowing, there is no language or space in the classroom to acknowledge his vulnerability at this moment.

There is one child in the classroom who talks about learning in a very different way to the other children. Ben recently moved from a Reggio Emilia school and his description of learning is of an embodied openness to not knowing, with an emphasis on trying (not completing) and the utilisation of different senses: listening, seeing, speaking, and feeling.

It's about seeing other things . . . trying to make things, and listen . . . It feels good when you do new stuff that you didn't know before . . . Learning is about just feeling and touching and saying. (Ben, interview transcript)

6.6 Conclusion

There are numerous tensions in the on-task classroom with its practices and discourses that aim to develop children's agency in learning. Resilience, aiming high and growth mindsets create an on-going pressure on children to improve and acquire more knowledge, but do not demand greater attention to think with and question what they know. Rewarding children for exhibiting learning behaviours fits the performance-focus of the on-task classroom; where children's (as well as staff) effort and work levels are continually monitored, controlled, and the expectation is to conform. The displayed charts present further 'data' that act as a powerful identity label, another way of recognising children beyond assessment results, that accelerate some pupils but decelerate others. While aiming to raise expectations and narrow the gap between lower and higher achieving children, 'ability' labelling and learning behaviours are rooted in an individualising understanding of how children achieve, ignoring broader structural factors of what limits success, and ultimately re-enforce hierarchies in social class, age

and gender. The minutiae of schooling life here frames who these children can be as well as their educational possibilities.

Learning powers promote a form of self-regulation, a practice of the self in the formation of an ethical subject (Foucault, 1988). Drawing on Mahmood (2005) again, we see children's iterative agency orientation in how they conduct themselves, in ways that fulfil an understanding of repeatedly and continuously working out how to succeed. Again, similar to the previous chapter, this is a limited form of agency, but we see children's willingness and the effort they put into determining and delivering on what is expected; performing cleverness by finding the correct answer. The effort is particularly strenuous, because it involves negotiating alone emotions of not knowing what is expected and failure, which can feel frightening, including for those currently at the top. Children must endure the on-task classroom, where they are incited to challenge themselves, aim high, be resilient, keep pushing on, to be the best they can. Being 'clever' is never enough, there is always more that a child is expected to do; there is no space to be 'good enough' or even to fail. Discussed in Chapter Eight, is how staff at Clifftop similarly struggle with their 'outstanding' position.

The classroom mastery approach is aimed at achieving command and certainty, leaving little room for children and staff to be curious and unknowing; an ambition that promotes anxiety, ignoring as it does the need to be able to deal with ambiguity. Performing cleverness can exert children to apply themselves, but this type of agency is again limited in the face of new challenges where there is no clue to the correct answer. It is unsurprising therefore, that children navigate the performance-focused classroom demonstrating contradictory subjectivities, articulating how they are clever and embrace challenge, but also fearing and avoiding not knowing. This mirrors research with older primary school children, who have been found to 'develop a continuous performativity identity that, for most of them, sways back and forth between self congratulation and self denigration' (Jeffrey and Troman, 2012, p.194). These are the highs and lows that continue to doctorate level, discussed in Chapter One.

In Reception, children have more 'freedom to kind of try something out and then go off in a different direction if it's not easy', whereas 'the main challenge at the beginning of Year One is that kind of sticking power and not just wondering off to play in the sandpit if they can't do it . . . to understand the more you stick at it, the more you practice, the

better you'll get' (Ms. Fletcher). Einstein's son explained his father took a different approach, 'whenever he felt that he had come to the end of the road or into a difficult situation in his work, he would take refuge in music, and that would usually resolve all his difficulties' (quoted in Clark, 1971, p.106). Reminding me of one of my own strategies and the Latin expression, *Solvitur Ambulando*, 'It is solved by walking'. In the next chapter, we see how children wander from the on-task path, tracing their own lines of desire.

Why, I continue to ponder, do I only tell Clark he is 'clever'? It is not because he is articulate and gets things correct, although he frequently does. Bouchard (2013, p.267) outlines three forms of resilience from shock: resisting stress and returning to a prior state; adapting through adjustment, negotiation and compromise; thirdly, creatively responding to challenge. Clark, like other children but more publically than most, demonstrates resistance to the adverse circumstances of the classroom, in line with Rutter's (2006) original understanding of resilience, and does so probingly and creatively. Despite being told off more than other children, 44 out of the 255 staff reprimands I record are targeted at Clark, he continues to deviate, pursuing his own 'lines of desire'. This is striking early in my fieldwork, when I give Clark his pseudonym, after Superman.

Children take up the school requirement to demonstrate their success through how much they know, as well as to behave in ways dictated as important for such learning. They achieve agency by navigating the demands for rational certainty. Under these conditions however, children are emotionally vulnerable to not knowing and so again we see resistance within their conformity, as they work to avoid effort where the answer is unclear, in order to make classroom life more liveable. In the next chapter, I examine the moments when children achieve a greater scale of agency, by responding with something new and disrupting assumptions of rectitude.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Agency in Transformation - The Desiring Child

A voice that whispers through the cracks and fissures with its siren call is this unconventional voice worthy of our hearing. A silent voice that is both irrelevant and impossibly full. (Mazzai, 2009, p.50)

Children deviate from being on-task in the everyday classroom, pursuing their desires. This includes the desire to laugh, move, speak, create and collaborate, to utilise their ordinary ways of operating, to make meaning using many languages. In this chapter, we follow what I call their lines of desire. A term adopted from Moore's (2017) 'desiring lines', originally used by town planners to describe the paths that appear where people walk away from designated routes, and adopted by Nolas and Varvantakis (forthcoming) to describe a multimodal analysis (discussed in Chapter Two) as well as children's city cartography. I suggest that children's desire lines are not simply a form of resistance, but are productive in their pursuit of interests and desires not provided for in the on-task classroom; incorporating the projective element of agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Their lines roam briefly into the unknown, beyond the narrow confines of the explicative on-task order.

In this chapter, I examine how children find spaces to communicate and represent their interests, feelings and critiques of the on-task classroom; how children's bodies cannot help but move and touch, even though expected to sit still; and how they desire to support and befriend, while in a context that promotes competition more than collaboration. In the classroom, children demonstrate ingenuity in finding the cracks to trace their lines, and where they do, in moments both irrelevant and full, we hear their:

- capacity for critique,
- avoidance of being defined,
- care not to disturb,
- appropriation of spaces,
- impatience to learn,
- search for sensory engagement,
- curiosity and intellectual search,
- capacity for wonder,
- courage to express critique,
- power of observation,

- purposeful artistry,
- artistic integrity,
- use of imagination,
- optical adventures,
- affective generosity.

Each of the above are highlighted when discussed in the chapter.

7.1 The desire to laugh

Children laugh, albeit silently, offering a subtle critique of the on-task classroom. It is not long into the spring term, and Ms. Peach is teaching doubling during a whole class maths lesson. She is asking for double four, selecting a child who gives the correct answer. Clark calls out ‘Or we can add five plus three’ but Ms. Peach is initially dismissive, ‘Well, that wouldn’t be double’, taking a moment to acknowledge ‘You get the same answer’. Now she is asking for double one. Clark says ‘Peace’ holding up and waving two fingers gesturing victory. Ms. Peach ignores him, focusing her attention on those for whom this task is more challenging, picking James and Jan. Clark turns around, and lies on his stomach, watching the two boys give their answer behind him. Soon after the children are asked to calculate double nine with their talk partners, and after a while Ms. Peach calls out ‘5,4,3,2,1’ for the children to be silent. Clark quickly places his finger on his lips, ready to be selected. Ms. Peach chooses Moses and as she hears his answer, Clark continues to sit upright looking as if his finger were placed on his lip, but it is straight up his nose. He keeps it there for more than ten seconds. Then eats his bogey.

Clark is one of the children most visibly and vocally challenging of the teacher’s authority in the class. In this maths activity, which is insufficiently demanding for Clark, his response to waiting might be read as at once creative and critical, exploring the semantic potential of words/signs. His fingered gestures are a silent ‘up yours’ to sitting quietly, evoking the language of peace and quiet, and his momentary victory. Briefly, Clark lies on his stomach, passing it off as simultaneously performing ‘listening’. Clark’s silent but visible gestures are working within the limitations of his context, using the language and concepts that already exist. The juxtaposing of signs and context produces the comic effect. Similarly, at Clifftop, when the children are told

to ‘freeze’, Roberto continues to run for longer than others and then stills his body with exaggerated rigidity.

Clark’s humour highlights the absurdity of the bodily demands on his body and the constraints on his intellect in the on-task classroom. It is a wit, in de Certeau’s words (1984), that ‘boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order suddenly to produce a flash shedding a different light on the language of a place and to strike at the hearer’ (p.37-38). In the classroom, where the modern self must marginalise emotion, Clark’s use of irony might be seen as an ‘enacted detachment and disinvestment’ (Abel, 2008, n.p.) from the demands for his constant attention and consumption of the on-task curriculum. He draws on his competence in understanding the demands to be silent and still; one he plays on, demonstrating a **capacity for critique**. His actions are not just what he is against but what he is for: Clark may be resisting playing the game of the on-task classroom, but so too is he playing with this time, with his body, with numbers and meanings. Clark often plays with the comic possibilities of language, providing a space to breathe more freely. In a phonics lesson, a teaching assistant tells the children ‘It doesn’t matter if you get it wrong, I just want to see what you can do, you can sound the word out, no one will laugh at you. I do it’. Clark responds, sounding serious, ‘So laughing at people helps’; his dry humour highlights the underlying difficulty of this testing culture, without appearing confrontational, funnier still that his mocking is not heard, ‘No, you’re not listening Clark, I’d sound the word out, crab, c, r, a, b’. Similarly, when a teaching assistant makes a slip telling children ‘If you didn’t spell it correctly can you correctly, no one’s going to say anything’, the irony of the explicator’s error is unmissed by Clark, who asks of his writing, ‘Are mine correctly?’

Humour as critique and avoidance can be infused with emotion. James likes to make people laugh, and on different occasions he tells me he lives in Spain, has a swimming pool, went in a pond with a king and queen, and comes to school in a helicopter. Here the narrated history, ‘moves away from the “real” – or rather it pretends to escape the present circumstances: “once upon a time there was . . .”’ (de Certeau, 1984, p.79), in a context where James, a working class child is in the currently lowest achieving groups. During a group session supporting ‘language-delayed’ children, the teaching assistant describes at length the time she saw a fox in her garden, and James adds that in his he saw a ‘stinky old pig’; his timing emphasising the adult’s rather dull story. James’s humour can leave me feeling uncomfortable however, given the apparent seriousness

with which he often speaks, so I am not always clear he is joking. It seems less about using humour to create a sense of community and conviviality, than an **avoidance of being defined** or pinned-down, a blurring that I find uncomfortable, perhaps because everything else is so tightly defined. During an individual support session, when James is reading a book aloud, he pauses to ask me if I would ‘go on’ the dinosaur in an illustration. I say ‘No’ and the teacher adds ‘I would only if he was buried in the mud’; James tells her ‘I’d put you in the mud and bury you’.

7.2 The desire to move and explore

While expected to sit still, children’s bodies cannot help but move and touch the materiality of the classroom, both human and inanimate. Children look around, stretch arms and legs, twiddle fingers, rub limbs, pick scabs and noses, hold hands and move up close, braid hair and fiddle with clothing, run a hand along the smooth box of books or stroke the soft lion at the edge of the carpet, repeatedly replace a sticker, jiggle a leg or bounce a hair band. Bodies occasionally find a way to squat, kneel, lie down or even stand when expected to be seated (see Figure 7.1). Asking to go to the toilet or to get a drink can also be a tactic to have time away. These children are looking after themselves, wrestling with their bodies, generally **careful not to disturb the class** or attract the attention of the teacher (Korczak, 1967). All children move, some more than others, demanding a ‘wisdom’ noted in a 1930s Polish classroom, to manage their ‘energy by venting it bit by bit without annoying the teacher’ (*ibid.*, p. 35-6).

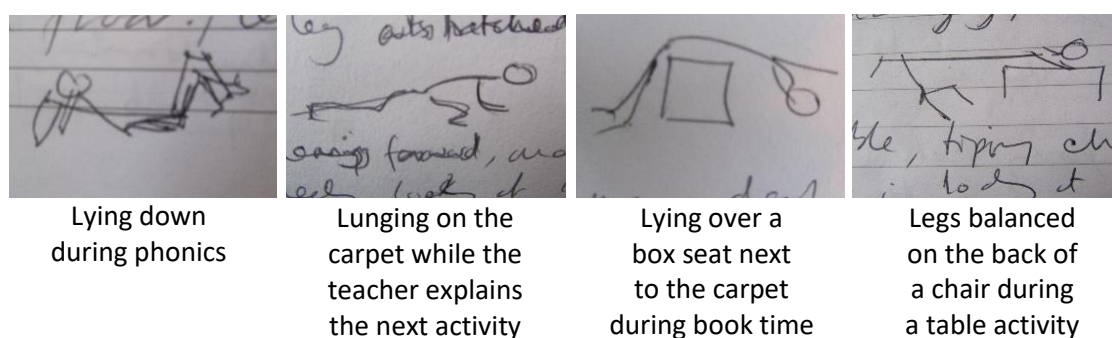


Figure 7.1 Field note drawings of Julia moving when expected to be sitting.

With few opportunities and resources to engage sensorially, children find ways to **appropriate spaces** to touch and playfully manipulate available materiality. They particularly optimise the liminal spaces, including the playground, queues and corridors, that afford their bodies greater release. Bragg (2018) noticed something similar, researching children at home and school: ‘Unstructured time appears to provoke anxiety

that it may be unproductive time. It is perhaps little wonder that spaces in-between feel like ‘release’ – such as playtime, in the playground, in the car on the way home . . . [and] time spent with screens’ (p.126). In the playground, children can move and sound with the greatest freedom; although there is a newly designed area where children are not allowed to run and they cannot put their hands in the fishpond. Kai tells me ‘You can make as much more noise as you want’ in the playground, whereas in the classroom, putting his finger to his lips, ‘you can’t make any noise at all’.

Children usually find moments to sound and interact with peers in the many queues they wait in during the day. Clark tells me he prefers queuing in PE than using the apparatus, because he can fiddle with equipment and ‘chat’. In the dining hall, the unpoliced queue for lunch is a wavier line that ripples with movement and sound, as children talk, laugh, touch, hug and dance. The children depart the classroom or assembly in a reasonably straight and silent line but when they enter the corridor bodies quickly become more energised, as if spring loaded. There is quiet chatter and freer movements, sometimes a jump, skip or a clap, hands touching the coats hung on pegs. Children appropriate this space, so that the school infrastructure becomes transformed by their practices: the corridor, meant simply to connect various on-task spaces (Calhoun *et al.*, 2013), becomes a space to move and sound.

One January morning, Clark’s maths group are measuring in a long corridor, a rare opportunity to work on a larger and ‘real life’ scale beyond the normal confines of the classroom. The children first measure the distance, using footsteps, to the neighbouring classroom, which Clark completes in under 30 seconds, and must wait for the others. Next, the children are to measure the length of the corridor using meter rulers, but there are too few to go round so some children, including Clark, must wait and watch. Clark, **impatient to learn**, takes a ruler from another child; told to wait, he stomps around with his hands in his pockets. At one point, two boys raise their rulers for combat until admonished ‘they’re not light sabres’. Clark is now low, moving slowly along the corridor floor, hiding behind coats on pegs, tracking others as they measure. Ms. White, the teaching assistant, tells him to get up or else he will go back to the classroom. Finally, nineteen minutes after the lesson began, it is Clark’s turn to measure the dinner hall, but before he does, he is sent back to the classroom for an infringement.

Later, Clark tells me he had felt happy at the start of the maths lesson, ‘Because I just wanted to learn’, but the initial activity offers limited challenge and the subsequent waiting challenges his patience: resulting in ‘boredom’, ‘grumpiness’, ‘anger’, ‘annoyance’ (see Figure 7.2 below). By the time he hides, he does not want to work: ‘I thought the footsteps were quite boring and I just knew it wasn’t going (?) . . . I knew it would be like that’. He tries to ‘cheer up’, and feels ‘silly’. Clark plays with this time and other children take a moment to turn rulers into swords. This financially strained school has limited budgets for learning resources so children must wait their turn, and teaching assistant redundancies mean someone unknown to the children must step in when their usual teaching assistant is away. Children’s tactical manoeuvres ‘accept the chance offerings of the moment’ (de Certeau, 1984, p.37), including the large scale and out-of-classroom location and working with a teaching assistant clearly unconfident in not knowing, ‘Bear with me’, she tells the group, ‘I’m normally with Year 5 and I don’t know any of your names . . . I don’t know what you do or normally learn’. The strain of the on-task classroom shows in the cracks that children traverse; as in nature, these ‘result from the fracture of brittle surfaces caused by stress, collision or wear and tear’ (Ingold, 2016, p. 46).



Figure 7.2 Clark’s feelings in the maths measuring lesson.

Staff are concerned with making the learning resources on tables ‘inviting’ to children, but do not express a concern with wider effects (e.g. social) or affects through the design and materiality of the learning spaces (c.f. Kraftl, 2015). The focus is on ensuring children have the resources they need to meet curriculum goals: ‘even if it’s something as simple as using the sound and letter maps to put out in front of them’ (teacher). As well as ensuring children become quickly on-task, ‘Putting their book in

their space . . . probably makes it easier for them to kind of start work straight away', or become more independent, 'your book's in the middle of the table and you need to find your book and open it up to the right page'. Most resources offer the wipe down ease of plastic: paper based materials are usually laminated (e.g. phonics cards; a picture of a purse), and plastic manufactured resources (e.g. number cubes, money, pots) rarely offer weight, smell, sound, texture or non-primary colours. Occasionally, toys are used. The



Figure 7.3 Examples of resources used in maths (left) and English (right).

photographs below (Figure 7.3) were taken just before lessons begin; only afterwards did I notice the contrast, with the child's hand reaching for the toy, drawn to its novelty and imaginary possibility, whereas the maths resources remain untouched.

When a group of children are engaged in a maths lesson, linked to their fairy tale learning journey, they are to measure dry porridge using recycled plastic food pots, to see which has the largest capacity. Each child must wait their turn to scoop out the porridge from a large grey washing up bowl, and to create a bar chart of the results on a whiteboard. This is another rare opportunity to engage with something real and textual. James cannot resist the desire to put his hand in the bowl, but is stopped, so rocks his chair, touches my camera and Nikita's pen, talks with his pen in his mouth, and eats some spilled grains. His body is in **search for sensory engagement**, just like Goldilocks: 'to experience the coarseness of matter, to know its grain intimately' (de Certeau *et al.*, 1998, p. 186). Finally, James receives a warning for repeatedly trying to tidy up porridge grains, told 'You need to listen and not be playing with the porridge'. This measuring activity offers the potential for adults and children to 'not know' together, as they cannot know without measuring, but there is no opportunity for the children to play and inquire with the resources, only to measure as instructed. Without

time and a more enriching material environment, the children do not practice porridge making, and the teacher, busy being on-task, does not reimagine how to use available resources. The value of real life maths for children's understanding compared with school maths has previously been highlighted (Desforges and Cockburn, 1987). The narrow focus of this activity is scripted by the curriculum that requires 'pupils should be taught to: measure and begin to record . . . capacity and volume' (Department for Education, 2013, p.9), working with 'concrete objects and measuring tools' (p.5). The on-task classroom does not recognise cooking, a more traditionally feminine pursuit, for its numerous social, cognitive and imaginative possibilities (to calculate, evaluate, improvise, remember, and match) (de Certeau *et al.*, 1998).

7.3 The desire to speak and be heard

Children have many things to say and questions to ask, including in the interviews with me, demonstrating a **curiosity and intense 'intellectual search'** (Tizard and Hughes, 1984, p.114). Their questions convey so much about their preoccupations, primarily a desire to work out the rules (see Table 7.1 below). They also tell us something of the subject positions children occupy at school. For example, it is unsurprising that Julia, who often speaks out in class, asks me many questions (36); she demonstrates an interest in others, including me, but displays anxiety by wanting to know about other children's performance in the interviews (discussed in Chapter Six). Roma asks just two questions; hinting at a concern with being 'good' (discussed in Chapter Five), her attention is drawn to the photograph of a seated child, 'That's whole body listening, isn't it?'.

Table 7.1 Type and frequency of questions asked by core children in the initial interview.

Types of question	Example Questions	Frequency of questions (N=128)
Clarification	Is it cheating if you go like that? Where does the princess go?	51
Request	Can I take it home? How about we do something else?	20
Research equipment	Can it stand up? Can I listen to it?	14
Colours	Is this brown? Where's the white?	10
PK (researcher)	Is that what you're thinking? Which one's your favourite?	10
Question to self/bear	Now what do I need? A roof. Which one would you like to do bear?	10
Other children's participation	Was Willa good at it? Which ones did James pick?	7
Confirmation	I'm quite small, aren't I? Do you like my house?	3
Thematic	Why is the princess always the high one? Why are they [pencils] all in order?	3

In the classroom, children's curiosity is expected to remain on-task, so they must find spaces to speak of personal interests. There are moments, lasting a minute or so, usually at the start of a session, when children appear to know without being told, that they may go off topic and ask a broader question or share something about themselves. They use these opportunities to clarify when things appear out of place ('What is the plant for?'), or ask something personal of a teacher (e.g. 'Did you have a lovely night?'). They speak of bodies and thoughts that occupy them: a cat scratch, sore tummy, bad night's sleep, lost coat or forgotten advent calendar. They recount unusual experiences, seeing Saturn; new achievements, 'I got dressed all by myself today'; and offer practical advice, the importance of wearing a hood when it rains. They speak of people that matter and a visit to a friend's house. Several of these examples come from one occasion, when a teacher allowed longer for children to speak. Adults acknowledge what children say, sometimes responding with a comment, 'Oh dear'; 'I love it when you're really proud of something', but rarely pursue topics introduced by children with a follow up question and do not open it up for discussion with the other children. Alice's request to tell a 'funny joke' is always postponed to another time.

One autumn morning, Gill tells Ms. Fletcher 'It was like a pond in my street', who confirms the cause, 'There was a lot of rain', before continuing to make an example of

Gill's behaviour. She notes that every time Gill wants to say something she puts up her hand, giving her a sticker and telling everyone 'I really love children who make the class calm and quiet'. The teacher's shift in focus shuts down Gill's **capacity for wonder** and the potential to explore the literary possibilities offered by her poetic simile. Children's contributions are not viewed as a rich resource for learning or assessment, but as a distraction from being on-task. As a teacher, Ms. Fletcher, explains, 'My initial reaction's like "Are you *listening* to what I'm saying?" (laugh)', while accepting 'Maybe that's what's really important to them right now and unless they've said it or got it off their mind they probably won't be able to engage with their learning'. Children's curiosity, she continues, must remain on-task.

I'd always encourage children to be curious but sometimes you have to remind them of appropriate things to wonder . . . I guess channelling their curiosity in to something that will help them with their learning. So, for example, earlier on I gave Luke a curiosity sticker . . . we were reading a poem and one of the words in the poem was 'meek' and straight away he said 'what does meek mean?' and that was actually one of the questions in my planning I was going to pose to them. (Ms. Fletcher, teacher)

This reflects the behaviourist approach to convergent assessment that dominates in the classroom (discussed in Chapter Six). There is no attempt here to understand what lies behind the children's questions and ideas, where 'the intention to produce questions and search for answers . . . is one of the most extraordinary aspects of creativity' (Rinaldi, 2006, p.113).

During on-task activities, children rarely speak more than to provide answers or ask for further clarification, and personal interjections are dismissed even if related to the task. In a group support session aimed at 'language-delayed' children, the teaching assistant, Ms. French, probes for interesting adjectives to describe a small plastic elephant. She ignores James when he holds up his shoe to demonstrate that, like elephants, 'My dad's got giant feet'. Such interjections must wait until the space between lessons, where pockets of more personal discussion can take place with staff. Activities also verge off-task during free play, Golden Time or when making things in class, and here children may chat more informally with staff and peers.

Children are not invited to give feedback and so it takes **courage to express clear verbal critique**. Alexis is one child who will say what he thinks. One summer's morning children are calling out to get the teacher's attention, who responds by telling

Alexis ‘I’ve noticed you’ve been a bit loud and disrupting’. She probes to identify the places in school where they must be clam and quiet. The children’s suggestions highlight the lack of spaces, beyond the playground, where they might be anything but calm and quiet. Alexis’s interjection at this point, ‘What do I like? Let’s see what I like? I like nothing’, insinuates a critique of the limits he is finding hard to obey. The teacher responds to the expectation that she too must not display feelings, even in response to judgement, quietly calming the murmur that follows by pointing out those children ‘doing excellent listening’.

7.4 The desire to create

In the classroom, children demonstrate a desire to represent and express their thinking, through the creative acts of poetry, writing and art.

7.4.1 Story telling

Staff read a story to the class on less than half the days I spend in the Year One classroom at Daleview (but every day at Clifftop). When I read a story in the P4C groups, the children are keen to listen, all except two, both receiving daily individual literacy support. During a rare venture beyond the school gates on a rushed trip to the local library, there is just enough time for each child to choose a book (although this must be checked with adults ‘because they’ll be very clever to know if it’s a good book to choose’), and for the librarian to read one story. There is no time to take in the autumnal afternoon that might provoke unexpected adjectives, as heard in Tamas’s description when moulding the clay for a puppet head: ‘it feels like a play dough not, a dough with a rock in it . . . a hard texture, a moon dough’. He illustrates what Rinaldi (2006) emphasises as young children’s high level of perceptual sensitivity and competence, recognised also by Charles Dickens (2004): ‘I believe the **power of observation** in numbers of very young children to be quite wonderful for its closeness and accuracy. Indeed, I think that most grown men who are remarkable in this respect, may with greater propriety be said not to have lost the faculty, than to have acquired it’ (p.13).

English lessons focus on grammatical constructs at the expense of such wonder, artistry and personal meaning. During a Year One English lesson, the question, displayed on the whiteboard, is ‘can I write a winter poem?’ with the instruction to use adjectives and to ‘put your ideas in a sentence’, and the teacher has probed the class to use more ‘exciting

describing words'. Alice has chosen and decorated a worksheet picture of a Christmas present, drawn a picture of a dog and written some adjectives in preparation to write a poem about the present. The teaching assistant, Ms. French, tells her she is to use the adjectives in a sentence. Alice appears not to understand, saying only 'beautiful, pretty', and is told to think 'How can we use beautiful in the middle? The beautiful?', but Alice says only 'Present'. As Ms. French's attention is drawn away to other children, Alice writes 'the beautiful dog is nice when she wags her tail'. She reads this to Ms. French who tells her 'This is an amazing sentence, and you've used some lovely describing words, but she's wrapped in the present, we're not talking about what's inside, but the present. Let's think about what we could write'. She probes 'The beautiful present is?', so that Alice rubs out her original work and writes 'the beautiful present' while Ms. French talks to another couple of children. Returning to Alice she asks 'Where is your beautiful present?' and Alice writes 'the big table', leaving two disjointed phrases that later Ms. French completes to make a sentence. Now finished, Alice goes into the play corner where she sits under a table, writing her name on its underside, which I am surprised to see her do.

Away from the adult gaze and the constraints of the task, Alice writes her own composition: she incorporates adjectives and writes about what is *in* the Christmas present; the typical concern with presents. Her sentence is coherent and meaningful, particularly to Alice, who really likes dogs. If anything, it is constrained by the ambiguous addition of the adjectives, which suggest there is another, less beautiful dog who is not nice when it wags its tail, and that the dog is only nice when it wags its tail. Adjectives do more than provide information; they shift meaning. Alice's creation erased, she must describe the Christmas present itself, or more specifically where it is, a subtle distinction. Here Alice produces disjointed phrases, 'the beautiful present' and 'the big table'; the meaning lost, so that the teaching assistant completes the work. Even in these two short phrases, Alice manages to include intrigue about this present, inviting the reader to wonder why the present is under the table and not a Christmas tree. Still, the answer to the teacher's initial question 'Can I write a winter poem?' becomes no. Alice has not managed to fit her work, and therefore herself, to the grammatical and thematic constraints imposed in the on-task classroom. For writing 'is oneself on paper', a reminder of success or failure (Sassoon, 2000, p.103). Here writing has become rules

to master rather than something of personal significance that Alice can inhabit: a case of the proverbial tail wagging the beautiful dog.

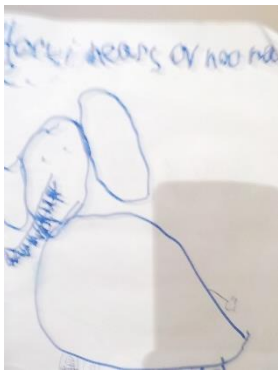
The teaching assistant's dismissal of Alice's first attempts at writing as off-task, though done with care, cites Alice as unable to understand without the intervention and explication of staff. This is seen both in the tight prescription of what must be written and in directing Alice to keep on-task: 'to explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself' (Rancière, 1991, p. 6). What is stultifying here is the assumption in the communication that 'explanation is *indispensable*' (Biesta, 2010b, p.542, original emphasis); that Alice is unable to understand and write without such an explanation. After the literacy task, Alice sits herself under a table, out of place just like the present in her sentence. Writing on property transgresses school rules.

James similarly marks a reading book with a black pen when he repeatedly fails to spot phonemes: asked to find the 'ai' sound, he spots 'said' and the teacher says it is wrong without explaining why he has failed or acknowledging his sophistication in spotting this word. Such scribbling on books, de Certeau (1984) suggests, makes a wild transitory mark that denies the child's docility in executing orders; it 'alters a place (it disturbs), but it does not establish a place' (*ibid*, p.155). When Alice signs her name under the table, it is an assertion of who she is, authorising herself as a writer, if only to herself. Children often write their names in my field notebook and Julia explains this is 'so that other people know who they are'.

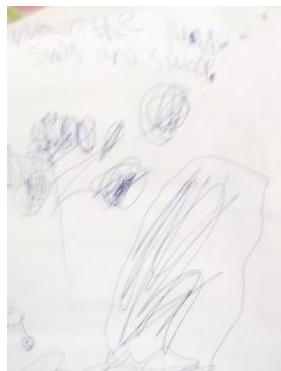
In the spring term, during free-choice time, children enjoy writing and drawing in books made themselves out of folded paper. Similarly, at home, Alice loves writing and illustrating her work; delighted by her own funny songs and stories. She invents her own version of the Dr Seuss (1954) book, *Horton Hears Hears A Who!*, interpreting and selecting, as a means of 'transforming' and 'reconfiguring' her world (Rancière, 2007, p. 277). There is an absence of adjectives in Alice's story (see Figure 7.4 below) and she would benefit from being supported to move her work forward, including on matters such as spelling and punctuation as well as to respond to topics set by teachers (Featherstone, 2017), to move towards greater exactitude in her writing (Calvino, 1988). Yet, we see Alice writes meaningful sentences, and demonstrates an understanding of text and illustration within narrative development. She can sustain ideas across a long, rather than 'short narratives' expected by the curriculum (Department for Education,

2013, p.24), and her writing conveys humorous drama, revealing a ‘**purposeful artistry**’ (Featherstone, 2017, p.24).

In Alice’s story, we see the propensity of the imagination to improve and roam rather than simply following grammatical steps towards a predetermined goal. Moving beyond a simple application of knowledge, she is engaged in the practice of story writing which includes ‘the desire to close the door on the everyday world and step into another’, ‘to meet new [mythical] people’, and ‘to create a story by reading it, to co-author it, along with the original author’ (Rich *et al.*, p.65). In the original story, the ‘whole world was saved by the Smallest of All’ (Seuss, 1954, n.p.), when the youngest child shouts loudly, helping Horton the elephant to protect tiny inhabitants from the threatening animals; in Alice’s version Horton alone fights off the threat, two cross and sad looking humans, and no small voices are heard.



Horton hears a who number 2 (Title page).



When the (bird?) (swipe) and swoop.



Horton see it



In the morning Horton see footprints



Horten follows the footprints



(text unclear)



The hunters see Horton



Horton has a volcano plan



HMMMMMM

(The illustration shows Horton spraying the hunters)

Figure 7.4 *Horton Hears A Who Number 2*, written and illustrated by Alice at home.¹¹

The on-task assumption is that creativity follows literacy knowledge and skills: a teacher is confident in her ability to teach the latter, but believes she is limited in what she can do to teach creativity:

I can inspire children, but I can't teach them to be creative, whereas I can teach them how to use a connective word in a sentence and how to use a full stop. So actually, I feel that my job as a teacher in terms of the curriculum is to teach them those skills but my wider job as a teacher is to inspire children to hopefully use those skills in a creative, imaginary way. (Ms. Peach, teacher).

This linear logic echoes the words of Gove (2013), the architect of the current curriculum: 'Only after building fluency in scales can musicians play a great sonata or concerto; only after learning how letters on the page correspond to sounds and words can children discover the magic and mystery of English literature' (n.p.). This is very different to Armstrong's (2006) pedagogy of imagination, which emphasises creativity as central, rather than following technical development. He cites Vygotsky (1968) to support his case: 'The situation recalls the development of a technical skill such as piano-playing: the pupil develops finger dexterity and learns to strike the keys while reading music, but he is in no way involved in the essence of music itself' (p.105).

The on-task demands of the classroom cross the boundary into the home, where worksheets dictate what children write for homework, and parents offer support but also intervene. When one child is doing his homework, he must write a sentence including words listed on a worksheet; he offers 'Me tried' and 'The people lied', and his father is positive but says these are too short, suggesting another longer sentence. The boy agrees

¹¹ Note: A technical fault with the camera resulted in low quality photographs.

and, as he writes, the father offers praise and encouragement, as well as 14 interjections to improve the quality of the 10-word sentence.

In the case of Alice, as well as doing her written homework she makes me a thank you card (Figure 7.5), asking me how to spell my name. Her father is in another room, but soon reappears and attempts to correct Alice's spelling; Alice ignores the advice, making no corrections, which is quickly accepted by the adult. Both understand the writing of this card to be off-task and, as such, off limits to uninvited adult intervention. It has a real life purpose, like Alice's stories, although unlike her schoolwork, it is something she has wanted to write since she got back from school. She protects the work, maintaining an **artistic integrity**, so that it represents her own efforts and meaning, rather than her father's, for it is Alice's gift. I am reminded of Armstrong's (2006) pupil: 'I kept on making suggestions, hoping I might be helping. Eventually, Simon turned to me and said, in a gentle, matter of fact tone, "I can think better if somebody's not helping me"' (p. 30).

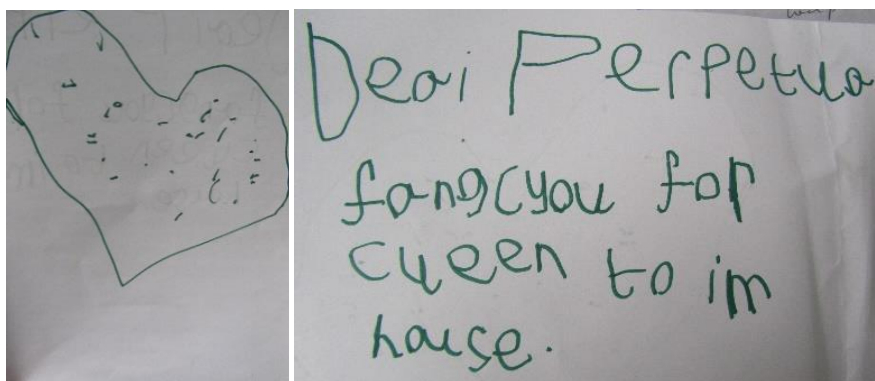


Figure 7.5 Alice's card, 'Dear Perpetua Thank you for coming to my house'.

Children's imaginary worlds offer a space to engage with fears, not accommodated for in the on-task classroom. Tamas plays school with a collection of small bears narrating a long story of maths lessons, class parties with 'fun and sweets' where children can 'do anything you want' and are hugged by a teacher, and sleep at school. There are frequent dark shifts including fearful scenes of ghosts, using duct tape to keep 'creepy dolls' from getting in, and a race to the hospital to save a dead bear. Tamas integrates personal experience, as well as what he knows from school, television, films and fairy tales and, no doubt, other cultural sources. At moments, we pause and I learn that he has watched

a horror film with an older sibling and is leaving the school (before the school is informed). It might be school offers a place of retreat from some of the difficulties in Tamas's life, in which his parents work long hours, but his creative world also offers a place to imagine fun and explore fears that end 'happily every after'. Staff understand Tamas very differently, one teacher describes him as 'one of the most resilient children I ever worked with', and another suggests he has 'learned helplessness'; no one mentions his **use of imagination**.

7.4.2 Visual art

Children draw most days, illustrating their written work; mostly on worksheets or in exercise books, on topics decided by the staff. Otherwise, there are few formal opportunities to practice as visual artists. Even in Reception, the teacher no longer has time to teach painting, leaving this to the teaching assistant. The junk modelling table that the children enjoyed so much in



Figure 7.6 Wall display of children's painted planets.

Reception has now gone. During projects, children engage in a creative activity: studying fairy tales they make puppets with clay heads and sewn clothing, and create dappled planets when learning about space, making simple choices such as the size, shape, colour and character. Beautifully completed works are displayed, but not emergent works in progress (Figure 7.6 above). With everyone making the same thing, art practices promote conformity, encouraging children to



Figure 7.7 Mixing colours worksheets.

keep inside the line, rather than 'building understandings of difference' and possibilities of becoming (Pratt, 2009, p.62). Frequently, children are given pictures to colour in rather than paper to draw on, which Julia prefers 'because you've already got an outline on it and it will be better because I haven't drawn it, because kids can't draw'. I only observe painting once, when children are learning to mix colours, in squares on a

worksheet, evocative of a mathematical exercise (see Figure 7.7), as Julia explains: ‘Sometimes we use art as in maths’. Some children, particularly the girls, keep their paint mostly inside the lines; responding to constraints of the task rather than the possibilities offered by the gloopy paint.

I occasionally see children draw on their whiteboards during lessons, when they are supposed to be writing phonemes, letters or words. Their drawings mostly play with the

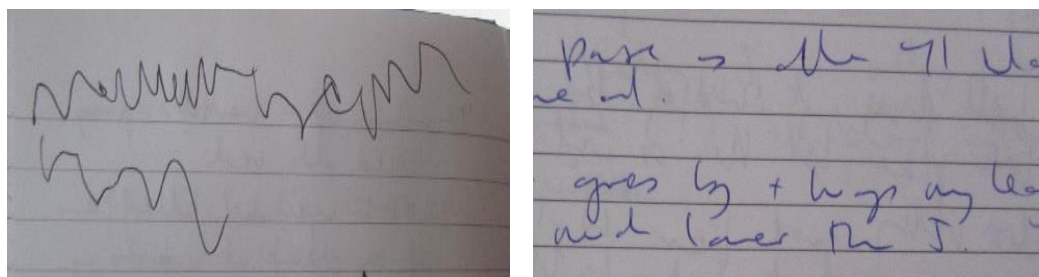


Figure 7.8 Writing in my field notebook, by James (left) and myself (right).

form of letters, the tail of a ‘y’ extended into a large cursive loop or the circular dot of an ‘i’ coloured in, or pens repeat a pattern, figures of eight extending across the board. They are exploring literacy through movement along meandering lines, playing with direction and scale, using the straight and curved lines found in writing. Similar to the way some alternative educational approaches teach letters through movement, including form drawing and walking their shapes (Kraftl, 2015). James’s makes what looks like squiggles in my field notebook, telling me ‘That’s how you write’ (see Figure 7.8), evoking Paul Klee’s (1953) famous description of drawing as ‘An active line on a walk, moving freely, without goal. A walk for a walk's sake’ (p.16), in which ‘Man uses his ability to move freely in space to create for himself **optical adventures**’ (p.10).

These are adventures that are infused with texture, emotion and poetry, as seen in children’s freely chosen drawings. Rather than draw the classroom, Gill chooses to illustrate the day her Reception class went to a farm because there ‘we could feed the animals’ (Figure 7.9). She talks of her happiness at seeing a rainbow, how Lucy was ‘worried’ because she wanted to ‘stomp in puddles’ but had no wellies, and ‘the sun liked rainbows’. Gill uses comparative adjectives to describe the ‘little’, ‘bigger’ and



Figure 7.9 Gill’s drawing of a Reception farm trip, with a sun, rainbow, rain clouds with rain, and six puddles.

‘biggest’ puddles; and evokes the ‘fluffiness’ of the ‘rain cloud . . . making all the puddles’. Colours are chosen carefully, including a lighter brown to highlight puddles ‘drying up’. As Gill draws, she breathes deeply and sighs.

7.5 The desire to support and befriend

Staff tell children that working together is important, but in a context where staff must assess individual attainment, joint work is evident more in non-core curricular subjects, such as PE and ICT, and nearly always with a partner rather than a group. There is strong competition in the classroom (discussed in Chapter Six) but children put great importance on friendships and also support each other. They check their work with others (e.g. asking if a number sentence makes sense), uses each other’s fingers for counting, offer to help those who appear stuck (‘Guys, do you need any help?’), and praise others’ work (‘Alice’s looks amazing’). The children demonstrate an **affective generosity**, making each other laugh, agreeing not to ‘tell’, helping those falling behind and reaching out to those who are upset. After Ms. Fletcher, a teacher, had been cross with how the children lined up, two of the youngest, Lucy and Mark, hug each other at the back of the queue, until told to let go; Lucy then gently replaces her hand on Mark’s back, until stopped once more. During a literacy activity, Jan is struggling to complete his work and Clark tells him he needs to stop drawing: ‘You can’t do that; you’re supposed to be writing describing words already’. When Ms. Fletcher announces there are only ‘two minutes left, you should have at least three words’, the sense of urgency is heightened in the group, with Leila announcing ‘we need to do it quickly’, and Clark telling Jan to ‘rush’. Jan remains unclear, asking ‘What do you need to do then?’, so Margot points to his sheet instructing ‘Do describing words’, but the children have become too caught up in their own haste, so cannot help further. Where each child is judged on their own output but not their support for others, these ‘young students . . . must learn how to be alone in a crowd’ (Jackson, 1968, p.16).

Children know that collaboration can be read as cheating. Roma tells me, smiling, that she chooses to sit away from staff: ‘I get people to help me, but a teacher doesn’t know’. When Mark is upset because he has been told he must complete his clay puppet head before he can leave the classroom, James covertly does much of it for him. Leafgren (2009) highlights the tension between that of the ‘child-reflective’ and ‘institutional-customary’ morality, illustrating how young children’s deviation can be

purposeful, using the example of Julian, chastised for coming out of line to help his friend, Reuben, who has fallen over. Like my own son, mentioned in Chapter One, who tries to make sense of why he is not allowed to ask his friends for help with his work, given ‘teachers talk about being kind and helping each other’.

7.6 Conclusion

Children deviate from being on-task by pursuing desiring lines that are frequently frustrating for staff. For me too, when children are unfocused on my research agenda (see Chapter Three), and for parents when children will not get ready for school (see Chapter Four). Attending to children’s many lines of desire suggests, however, that they offer moments of resistance that are not simply a ‘negative’ reaction to power. Gillies’ (2011) school research identifies students’ divergent behaviour as ‘breathing life into their day’, possibly as ‘a way of diffusing difficult feelings and creating social bonds between peers’ (p.200). I do not disagree, but suggest the children’s lines of desire go beyond a social and psychological dimension; offering more than a moment’s retreat, say by capturing what they lack or has been lost of their earlier childhood and outside-school lives. Actions such as ‘doodling, gazing out the window and chatting’, Claxton (1990) writes, ‘are often the outward face of learning strategies that are valuable in their own right’ (p.157). I suggest lines of desire have an educational dimension and are a way of knowing. They highlight a desire to experiment with the unknown, engage with and inhabit their world, pursuing different paths of understanding. One parent implied that my research has arrived at the rather obvious conclusion that children prefer to play than sit and work on the carpet. Rather, I am suggesting that the on-task classroom counters children’s different practices, which are to laugh, move, speak, create and collaborate, as well as to sit and listen. It is in doing *all* these that they can think about, understand, re-imagine and transform the world.

The on-task classroom views learning as taking place in the brain. When I visit the class in Year Two, twenty months after I interviewed the children individually and Ben gave an eloquent description of learning as embodied (see Chapter Six), he now tells me he feels good learning in his ‘brain’, for ‘it sends messages to your head when you learned more’. The staff promote this understanding, with Ms. Dart, a teacher, asking the children in singing assembly to suggest ‘your favourite song in your brain’. She understands the mind confined within a skull, whereas children show us the mind

‘mingles with the body and the world’ (Ingold, 2010, p.12); where knowing is ‘a physical practice of engagement’ (Barad, 2007, p.342), rather than knowingly standing at an objective distance. The children’s inner being, body and outside materiality are entangled in becoming the desiring child (Pratt, 2009). This is evidenced in a finger up a nose while sitting on the carpet; modelling clay evoking adjectives; a story omitting the youngest voices; a hand moulding a distressed friend’s clay; a drawing of happy days.

Being on-task, there is little space for staff to work with a ‘rich’ Year One child’s capacity for critique, care, appropriation, impatience, search for sensorial engagement, intellectual curiosity, wonder, courage, power of observation, purposeful artistry, integrity, imagination, optical adventures and affective generosity. At both schools, staff stress the importance of play in Year One as a means to practice and pursue curriculum goals in ways that are less pressured, offering the opportunity ‘to tap into the children’s interests and their natural excitement about things’ (teacher, Clifftop). Teachers mention the social benefit of play, but stress the value of children’s free-choice as an opportunity to engage in core curriculum goals by practicing writing; recognising the ease with which they do so when there is ‘less pressure to be right’ (teacher, Daleview). At Clifftop, David, described as a ‘daydreamer’ who ‘isn’t that focused in his writing’ will write the names of other children when pretending to be a teacher. Play is understood as usefully supporting children’s convergence, in the pursuit of literacy and social skills, but not for enabling divergence through the ‘reorganisation of elements’ (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 117). A teacher at Daleview sees a lack of focus on children’s creativity as problematic, and suggests broadening the assessment criteria; reflecting a wider preoccupation with measurement and certainty, one that is hard to combine with an interest in the revelatory possibilities of children’s imaginative work (Featherstone, 2017).

It’s sad that the curriculum . . . doesn’t allow you to mark children on their creativity and instead seems to be much more focused on what they can do. So you could have a very creative writer who you know is going to be successful doing some kind of amazing thing in life but their grades don’t look very good because they’re not using particular sentence types in their writing. (Ms. Peach, teacher)

Children demonstrate agency by skilfully ensuring time off from doing what the teacher demands, purposively and successfully deviating from the straight and narrow to pursue meandering lines of desire. These are similar to the ‘strategies’ identified in Pollard’s

(1985) ethnography, ‘the way that each participant seeks to cope in the classroom’, contributing to a balance of staff and child interests, without which both ‘are likely to feel a great sense of personal vulnerability’ (p. 179). I suggest the children’s gestures demonstrate a reflective intelligence seen in their show of ‘imaginative distancing’ of the habitual patterns of engagement demanded by the on-task classroom; an imagining that is integral to Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998, p.971) projective element of agency, with children distancing themselves from being either ‘good’ or ‘clever’. The practical-evaluative dimension of agency is seen here in the ‘daily difficult decisions’ (Priestley *et al.*, 2015, p.33) in the modern classroom, with children mostly carefully pursuing subterranean lines out of the gaze of the teachers, while appearing to remain on-task at the surface. The children know what is expected and choose not to confront the staff head on; too frightening for most. Children’s scope to deviate overtly is determined in part by their gender, class and access to cultural capital, discussed further in the next chapter. We have seen the effort it takes ‘to create a good impression’ (Chapters Five and Six) but, Jackson (1968) adds ‘it also requires work to avoid creating a bad one’ (p.33). Children ‘vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers’ (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37); tracing desire lines often in liminal on/off-task spaces. This includes specific locations (e.g. corridors, research interviews, art lessons) and times (e.g. between lessons), and in material spaces that mobilise children through things (e.g. pens, clay, porridge, toys); that ‘interrupts the linear narrative’ inviting the child into an in-between space to pursue other desires (Pratt, 2009, p.54).

The on-task classroom requires only children’s conformity, learning what the teacher already knows and to be forever good and clever subjects. Children’s meandering paths demonstrate their desire to engage in ways that are meaningful and purposeful to them; pursuing their transformation alone, without a teacher, the desiring child remains largely self-educated.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Possibilities for Children's Agency in the on-task classroom

Not to find one's way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance – nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – this calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, and bars must speak to the wanderer like a twig snapping under his feet in the forest, like the startling call of a bittern in the distance, like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its centre. Paris taught me this art of straying; it fulfilled a dream that had shown its first traces in the labyrinths on the blotting pages of my school exercise books. (Walter Benjamin, 1999, p. 598)

While children's agency is diminished in the on-task classroom, it is not extinguished. In this chapter, I examine the affordances and limitations for achieving agency in taking up the 'good', 'clever' and 'desiring' subject positions in the modern Year One primary classroom, and argue that children's action is political. I explore structural factors and classroom conditions that relate to the children's scope and scale to act, situated in a final discussion of how the classroom is located in the broader educational landscape. The chapter refers back to the themes introduced in Chapter Two — children's educational landscape, classroom conditions and agency — but in reverse order, beginning with agency as the main focus of the study.

8.1 Children's agency

When I began the research, I was unsure what children's agency would look like. I thought I might see it in a reverie for learning, until I came to understand that this is only one imagined form of agency (and mostly absent when children are on-task). There are different kinds of agency, affording different courses of action, under different circumstances; this includes different gestures, utterances and purposeful expressions that establish, at the very least, a space to be, and preferably a place to thrive and flourish. This section explores how children achieve a limited agency by navigating conformity, and how the scale of their agency is greater when pursuing lines of desire that offer the possibility to be (self) educated. I explore the differences in scope and scale of agency for children occupying different structural positions, and finally I suggest children's lines of desire are political, both by redistributing what is understood as 'sensible' in the classroom and highlighting common concerns about having to be always on-task.

8.1.1 Agency in navigating conformity

Children adopt different subject positions in the on-task classroom, purposefully navigating their conformity to make the classroom more liveable, but ultimately these do not support them to tackle new and unexpected challenges.

This thesis adds to studies of young children undertaken in early years settings, including that of Willes (1983) and Waksler (1991) in documenting their competence in understanding the classroom, and also Lam and Pollard's (2006) study of children purposively acting to avoid learning activities, while appearing to remain on-task. Through their understanding of what is expected of them, the children suggest an intelligence equal to those who demand their compliance (Rancière, 1991). Utilising what they know, the children work hard to take up their subordination within 'good' and 'clever' subject positions, achieving successful performances of the required norms. We see the ethical labour involved in the children's complex accomplishments. For example, the thesis extends the work of Kitzinger and Frith's (1999) research with young women to show how young children also find alternative ways to dissent without saying 'no'. In the classroom, being on-task is framed as a choice; implying human agency as individual responsibility, but one that is so tightly bounded by moral, as well as hierarchical academic and social structures, it becomes a demand for conformity.

Children's endurance of the on-task classroom is not docility, the antithesis of agency, but a means by which they navigate their situation to make it liveable (Mahmood, 2005). Their agency here incorporates an 'iterational orientation' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), with children forming subjectivities through performing norms, which demand their personal investment, including bodily and emotional struggle. The practical-evaluative dimension of their agency is seen in the different strategies they utilise in the present moment. This includes those used to *attract* positive staff attention, by sitting quietly and drawing attention to achievements, as well as how children *avert* the adult gaze, being so silent and still to absent themselves, for example. Performing conformity acts as a camouflage here: children pretend to engage in order to resist effort in learning. Where conformity exerts children to submit to the discipline of work, it can camouflage an avoidance of the unknown. This is seen when children do not express an opinion. The seemingly conforming child therefore engages in a form of negotiation, one that can include resistance.

Let me illustrate further. Walking to school one morning with a father and child, the father says he wants to talk to the class teacher because the week before the child lost ten minutes off Golden Time. He feels his child is ‘too enthusiastic’, with ‘too much to say’ and ‘a bit naughty too’, telling the child ‘You need to sit on your hands and bite your tongue’, which the child does, right there on the pavement. Both smile and discuss what ‘not literally’ means. Later in the day, after the talk with the teacher, the father challenges the child not to miss any Golden Time the following week. That week staff mention a change in behaviour and the child reports the teachers are being nice and succeeds the challenge. The following week, staff say behaviour has returned to normal, if not ‘worse’; concluding, ‘challenges can be good, but it feels like they’ve done the challenge, and almost pushing more on Monday’. The child’s compliance is a demonstration of agency; one where, like others, they tread carefully between what is demanded, lost or gained, and endurable. It is not a literal compliance, given such farcically unreasonable demands. Some, like this child, can more easily shift into different agentic orientations (discussed below), so conformity here is limited.

For there are limits to an agency pursuing compliance. Taking up the ‘good’ subject position leaves some children breathless for a space to exist more fully in the world. Being ‘clever’ (something the ‘outstanding’ school also enacts) reflects a neoliberal concern with value and the symbolic power of the quantifiable, evidenced in the on-task classroom by the numbers of stickers, reading book colours, English and maths sets, phonics test scores. This concern gets children only so far in their learning. The research highlights how it does not serve children well when having to tackle new and unexpected challenges for which there is no clear answer. Aiming high and flying high are frightening for children (and staff, discussed below), where the constant pressure to succeed, and the possibility of falling, can create ‘emergency’ feelings (see Chapter Six). Being positioned as ‘clever’ creates divisions, where even acts of collaboration or ‘kindness’ can serve to emphasise children’s status in the ability hierarchy: ‘The more intelligent he becomes, the more he can peer down from on high at those he has surpassed’ (Rancière, 1991, p.22).

8.1.2 Agency in desiring transformation

Children’s ‘lines of desire’, paths they trace that deviate from being on-task, are identified in this thesis as a productive agency in their pursuit of interests and desires not provided for in the on-task classroom; to engage in ways that are meaningful and

purposeful to them, and to pursue transformation rather than simply conformity. This is where the projective element of their agency is evident.

The word ‘school’ derives from the Greek *skholē*, meaning ‘free time’ (Simpson and Weiner, 1989, p.631), and the children are highly competent at finding the spaces to pursue time that is free from being on-task. They engage in surprising and imaginative ways, mining available cracks in the school day, even a finger up a nose. Children utilise their bodies and many languages to feel, think about and understand the world. The children already know, because these are human practices of knowing, that engagement with the real, sensory, imaginary worlds, utilising diverse cultural references, is not separate from intellectual engagement. As explained by the writer, Italo Calvino (1988):

Let’s say that various elements come together to form the visual part of the literary imagination: direct observation of the real world; phantasmal and oneiric transfiguration; the figurative world as transmitted by the culture at various levels; and a process of abstraction, condensation, and interiorization of sensory experience, which is as crucial for visualization as it is for verbalizing thought. (p.116)

Children’s lines of desire are where children enter the labyrinth, similar to Walter Benjamin’s pursuits in his schoolbooks (cited above), what Ingold called ‘wayfaring lines’. His illustration (Figure 8.1 below) evokes the children’s own orbits: Alice skirting assigned literacy tasks with her own writing, the ironic circles Clark runs around staff, and children linking hands on the carpet. This is a place where children can maintain the desire to make meaning and connections, and most importantly, ‘the desire to go on learning’, more important, says Dewey, than the spelling lesson (Dewey, 1963, p.48). Children are keen to participate in what is meaningful and engaging, when things are worth listening to and there is something purposeful to pursue. Here the children embody a desire for being educated; children playfully and creatively explore ideas, objects and spaces, and their agencies are ‘shaped through these encounters’ (Blazek, 2016, p. 203). Bodies are stilled by stories; hands and feet become entangled with similes and adjectives; and hearts are put into writing something of personal significance. Children experience the wonder of what is being explored and the wisdom of experience: ‘To think is rather to take a deep breath, to draw strength and inspiration

from your surroundings, to wonder, to recollect, to gather, to marshal. *It is to attend.*' (Ingold, 2015, p. 139; original emphasis).

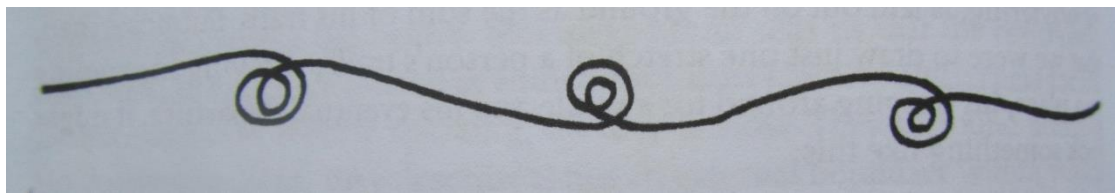


Figure 8.1 'Wayfaring . . . is neither placeless nor place-bound, but place making. It could be described as a flowing line proceeding through a succession of places.' (Ingold, 2016, p.104)

When tracing lines of desire there is an evident intensity and satisfaction in the children's capacities to act, they breathe and engage in a creativity that 'belongs to being alive' (Winnicott, 2005, p.92). Children's divergence from being on-task is unwelcomed by staff, which children understand, so while some may pursue surface lines, frequently lines are subterranean with children subtly and skilfully organising whatever is available (whiteboards, bodies, etc.) to appear on-task. In this way, they are similar to Ingold's (2016) 'ghostly traveller', achieving movement only within the 'cracks and crevices' of the school day (p.57). The measure of the 'unsatisfactoriness' of any environment, for Winnicott, is the extent to which children's creativity is 'being hidden, its lack of enrichment through living experience' (*ibid.*, p.92).

Children are not simply wasting time by resisting learning (although sometimes they may be), instead we see children's agency in the pursuit of desiring lines offering productive paths of acting, feeling and thinking. As such, their actions insinuate a critique of the on-task classroom. While deviating from being on-task, children are fulfilling an understanding of education that is about both 'being' and 'becoming'. *Being* children, competently participating bodily, emotionally, creatively and intellectually in something that is meaningful to them now. *Becoming*, enhancing capacities in ways that are embodied and transformative. These remain unrecognised in the on-task classroom, which emphasises children only as becoming competent, when silent and, paradoxically, still.

Two boys, one at Clifftop and one at Daleview, are often intensely curious, embracing the challenge of not knowing; for example, during a table maths activity one takes his worksheet to a quiet corner, saying 'I could do this forever'. Despite their enthusiasm, both are repeatedly in trouble for moving or speaking. Being off-task is viewed in need of correction in the on-task classroom, but whether such deviations from the straight

and narrow are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ agency, Priestly and colleagues (2015) remind us, must be judged on their relation to educational purpose. The on-task classroom is rooted in an education taken from the Latin *educare*, instilling knowledge, whereas children’s lines of desire fit within an understanding of education from *educere*, to lead out into the world. The latter, wayfaring education, is about exposure: ‘the exploratory wandering of the child, on his way to school’, rather than the ‘disciplined march of the crocodile’ (Ingold, 2015, p.137) to a fixed destination or fixed point of view, that leaves little room for transformative imaginary possibilities. As such, lines of desire go beyond the mere accumulation of knowledge (‘qualifications’ and ‘socialisation’), to ‘preserve and promote creativity in the use of knowledge’ (Armstrong, 2006, p.25). Deviating from being on-task insinuates a desire to be educated: allowing for the transformation of the subject and existing social orders (subjectification).

8.1.3 Scope and scale of agency across different groups

The scope of children’s agency is constrained by their place in the generational order (Moran-Ellis, 2017) and at school, by their lack of power to counter the school’s on-task culture and behavioural mechanisms. Children work with what is available to perform the good and clever student, and where possible to pursue lines of desire. The scale of their deviation is limited, both temporally, evident only in short bursts, and spatially, frequently found in the spaces between being on and off task, such as the corridor, or else hidden. The constraints of the classroom conditions and the wider educational landscape for children’s agency are discussed below; here I explore how wider social structures are entangled with children’s lines of desire.

As a middle-class, autumn-born male, who is performing well academically, Clark does not take up an anti-authoritarian counter-culture, like those boys identified in other ethnographies who are also under-performing at school (Youdell, 2011; Willis, 1977). He is on the one hand weak, but on the other, his self-identification is of one who can and will succeed. Early in the year, he tells me ‘I do think of the consequences . . . but I don’t really care getting in trouble . . . it doesn’t matter . . . as long as I have a good brain I’ll get a good job.’ He sees his future as fitting into the demands of the marketplace, and for him his success is determined by his biological positioning. His privileged body can circumnavigate the gendered (female staff) and classed (teaching assistants) attempts to keep Clark in his place and space. As seen in Chapter Six, the misdemeanours of middle class children are read very differently to the children who

are working class or from ethnic minorities, whose flawed bodies — ‘slow’ brains and ADHD — are blamed. Possessing the cultural capital demanded by school, Clark is further privileged to pursue lines of desire more openly. He is frequently in trouble and increasingly unsatisfied. At the end of Year One, Clark tells me that higher up the school he will ‘hate school all the time’ and ‘be naughty’; his parents later report he is unhappy in Year Two.

James and Tamas, whose parents did not go to university, engage in different tactics, following subterranean lines of desire out of the gaze of staff, surfacing only occasionally. These boys more commonly utilise spaces that blur the boundaries between off and on-task, including corridors and queues (and for James, during his time with me); avoiding on-task learning by missing out pages to be ‘done’ quickly to gain free time; performing listening while drawing on whiteboards. James uses a less overt humour that rarely incurs reprimand.

The on-task demand that children be silent and still is not the mode of operation practiced by any of the families I observe. There are differences at home in how much the children discuss and negotiate, or direct their activities, but all talk, create and play, including with parents; where there has been a greater democratisation within families (Oswell, 2009). This lack of synchronicity between the logic of their embodied home experiences (*habitus*) and that of the on-task classroom is evident in the children’s productive pursuit of lines of desire. Some children are more out-of-synch than others, with some of the middle class children more clearly encouraged to discuss and negotiate solutions with parents, and to pursue intellectual and creative interests. Deeply embodied structures of belief are seen in Clark’s, Julia’s and Alex’s repeated calling out in class. Lareau (2011) identifies such interruptions of adult professionals as ‘a display of entitlement’ (p.125); one that clearly irritates some staff at school. When there is a school council meeting, both Clark and Julia are elected by their peers for their ideas on how to improve the playground. I did not observe the discussion or vote, but it is likely they are amongst the most vocal, and very possibly, given their oracy skills, they articulate their ideas clearly. I wonder, also, if they are selected because these two children so visibly and audibly frequently *speak* in the classroom as if they are the equals of adults and have a right to more than one life there. They achieve a bigger scale of agency than the position they are located in as Year One children.

The scope to pursue lines of desire is also wider for the more advantaged children. This study extends to primary schools the former research finding that the secondary school system currently rewards some children with greater ‘flexibility and autonomy’, and punishes others with ‘tighter control/less autonomy and responsibility’ (Thomson and Hall, 2010, p.644). The currently highest attaining phonics group is facilitated by a teaching assistant emphasising ‘fun’ for children to ‘absorb’ learning; so this group engage in more dialogue, games, humour and sound more loudly. At Clifftop, a child explains to me that those who have completed the ‘extra challenge sheet’ can then draw; those who have not, or cannot, must continue working. At Daleview, it is the working class children receiving additional literacy support who have daily homework, which is weekly for others. It is the middle class parents of children already succeeding who are ‘not really into the idea of them having homework at this age’ (mother), instead being more interested in them following their ‘own interests at home and being creative’ (mother), who free up more off-task time for their children. So that even amongst the youngest children, similarly to those in secondary school (Kulz, 2017; Reay, 2017), a stricter work ethic is demanded from those of working class backgrounds compared with their middle class counterparts. What is considered unnecessary (and perhaps unliveable) for the middle class child (and perhaps unbearable for their parents), is viewed as adequate and necessary for the working class child. That there are teachers advocating the importance of this distinction (Birbalsingh, 2016; see also Kulz, 2017), believing they reflect children’s best interest, is an honest beginning for further dialogue.

Subject to the ideological constraint that they ought not to be agentic, girls work hard to be ‘nice and kind’. Alice and Julia, both middle class, also counter these expectations, pursuing both surface and subterranean lines of desire, whereas Roma only once publically does so, when she joins the other children coughing in assembly, ensuring safety in numbers. Alice self-identifies as partly masculine, ‘I’m a bit boyish’, and at the end of the school year she tells me that in Year Two, she will be ‘like a bit grown up . . . like tough, like I don’t care’, said in a *so there* tone. Alice expresses herself, sometimes forcibly when fearful or upset, but otherwise quietly pursues her vivid imagination, watching TV in her head, making and writing creatively where she can. Julia similarly asserts contradictory subjectivity positions; shouting out she is ‘clever’ and ‘good’.

The jobs the children want to do when they grow up, while classed and gendered, share some common concern for exploration through movement. All the boys want to do sports jobs, but Clark also desires to explore nature and the world, delving into the unknown, whereas Tamas prioritises stability, wanting to remain close to his parents whom currently work long hours away from home. James does not see himself as a teacher if it means going to university. Of the girls, only Alice is clear what she wants to do: to dance in the street ‘in front of everybody . . . I just love dancing’.

Children’s lines of desire manifest in different ways and at different times. While sometimes class and gender is evident in their paths, their lines also offer the opportunity to experiment with subjectivity; the lines pursued cannot be predicted, escaping the reifying conditions put on to children (good/bad, normal/special, clever/plodder, middle/working class, male/female, etc.). Explored below, is what unites these children, as in the nineteenth century French proletarian workers, described by Rancière (1989), and considered unable to think, speak or write, at night wrote poems, produced newspapers and joined groups. In the same way, the children demonstrate their ‘desire to rebel; the courage needed to do so; the necessity to use intelligence, imagination and eloquence in order to implement the reversal of fortune’ (Deranty, 2010, p. 22-23).

8.1.4 Children’s politics

Tracing lines of desire, children pursue a different kind of everyday; one I suggest in this section is a way of emancipation, a momentary liberation from the demanding rigidity of the current education system. I highlight how the children’s entangled lines of desire signal common concerns about the on-task classroom. For de Certeau (1984), desiring lines are the ‘wandering lines’ of everyday ‘tactics’, seeking opportunities, that ‘insinuates itself into the other’s place’, where such ‘victories of the “weak” over the “strong” are short-lived’ and ‘whatever it wins, it does not keep’ (p.xviii-xix). Such an analysis suggests a validation of the dominant hierarchy between action and inaction, emphasising the children’s inequality and inevitable alienation. I cannot see a way through here to my destination focused on children’s education. I lay a different trail with Rancière, amongst others, to think through the political implication of children’s lines of desire, for whom such a hierarchical order is untenable, because actors are always and already equal.

Children's equality

The point of politics, after all, is about the *reconfiguration* of the space 'where parties, parts, or lack of parts have been defined' (Rancière, 1999, p.30).

Political activity 'makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only a place for noise.' (Biesta and Bingham, 2010, p.83)

There are some gains for the children to take up the subject positions of the 'good' and 'clever' child, discussed above, but in both cases 'the existing distribution of sensible remains unaffected' (*ibid.*, p.85). The desiring child, however, challenges the perceptual and epistemic order of the on-task classroom. The pursuit to think and understand, using humour, movement, sound, artistry and collaboration, offer sporadic moments of democracy, exposing limitations in the distribution of what is understood as sensible within the existing on-task 'police' order, in Rancièrian terms. The current order favours children learn without imagination, movement or speech. The children's emancipation is 'seized' by the children themselves, 'when one teachers oneself', not given by teaches, and is inevitably fleeting (Rancière, 1991, p.99). The practices of the children are not a plea to be included in the existing social order, but instead highlight its democratic deficit, in which they, and their many languages, are viewed unequally.

In this way, the children's lines of desire, that incorporate one hundred languages, are 'political', with the presumption of equality seen in these momentary practices. The children do not subordinate their intelligence to another, but instead validate the existing equality of their intelligence. Dissensus here is an act of subjectification, and as such, it is a 'coming into presence'; 'a way of being that had no place and no part in the existing order of things' (Biesta, 2010, p.547). It is not necessary that the children consciously presuppose their equality, nor that they succeed in the moment but fail to change the conditions of the classroom; their practices remain democratic (May, 2010). An important distinction is the children's emancipation rests with themselves, acting as equals, rather than in demanding to be equal; in the latter, their emancipation would lie with the adults (*ibid.*). When children move and talk as the teacher tells them to freeze, they act as if equal to adults to move at will. Their equality here is 'the performative enactment of a lack of specific identity' (Pelletier, 2009, p. 286), where they have something to contribute beyond their conformity (being 'good'), including academic efforts and attainment (being 'clever'). Their resilience here is a mobilisation of vulnerability as a form of resistance (Butler, 2016). When children seek out the

moments to draw, joke and create in ways that are not dictated or recognised as productive by staff, they are acting with a presupposed equality, as ‘though they were *already* equal’, and as such, their actions bring ‘the social order into order with that presupposition’ (May, 2010, p.72). They are highlighting that they, the children, are equal members of society.

Children’s common concerns

Rarely is the children’s dissensus in the school a collective action; a notable exception is when they briefly cough in unison one assembly, before being told how ‘silly’ they are. Instead, children engage in disparate and fragmented practices. What Bayat (2010), in his work with Middle Eastern women and young people, calls ‘collective presence’ rather than a movement, the power of which lies in ‘the ability to assert collective will in spite of all odds, by circumnavigating constraints, utilizing what exists, and discovering new spaces of freedom to make oneself heard, seen, felt, and realized’ (p.112). While I suggest lines of desire are a democratic form of engagement in Rancièrian ‘politics’, their lack of collective organisation does not make them a movement. Nolas and colleague’s (2017) notion of children’s ‘common concerns’ (p.1) is useful here as a means to think about children’s current and possible connections to activism. The entanglement of children’s lines of desire trace relationships of concern, with children building the story of what they collectively see as important. This includes the desire for transformation rather than simply conformity, and areas of relevance and interest to their lives, as well as the methods and relationships with which to pursue these. It is not that everything children do is political (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012), but here we see an example of children’s common concerns related to the constraints of the on-task classroom.

The children are not demanding better school conditions, but their actions offer a critique of current educational policies and practices. Their actions pursue desires rather than simply passively reflect the school conditions of today. Conditions in which the demand for bodily conformity, the awareness of one’s placing in the hierarchy, the lonely anxiety of identifying the correct response and the requirement to grit one’s teeth and keep on trying, are not the effects of the on-task classroom, but the means through which children are educated (Oswell, 2009). It is these conditions, to which I now turn, where children are part of their classroom context, connected to the actions of staff and wider educational policies.

8.2 Children's classroom conditions: limiting possibilities for agency

The conditions of the modern Year One classroom allow for a degree of agency; children navigate their conformity by meeting the demands of the classroom, and find moments to pursue their desires. In this section, I highlight how the modern primary classroom limits the scope for children's agency, showing the factors that cut across schools, and are not about differences between 'good' or 'outstanding' teachers. While there are some variations in practice and emphasis between the two classrooms studied, more commonalities are observed, both being on-task. Below I discuss four conditions of the on-task classroom: making haste in an explicative pedagogy; inherent tensions within strategies promoting agency; denying the emotionality of the classroom; and insufficient consideration of the materiality of the classroom. In addition, I highlight a limited engagement with past research on supportive factors for children's agency.

8.2.1 Making haste in an explicative pedagogy

There is a small sign, placed so that it is barely noticeable in a corridor of Clifftop, citing Shakespeare, 'There's no clock in the forest' (*As You Like It*, Act 3, Scene 2). In the on-task modern primary classroom, the power of the clock is felt very deeply. There is a lot to get through in the new national curriculum; efficiency and speed is emphasised to ensure children learn the acquired knowledge. The focus is on literacy and numeracy, 'I'm a meany pants because I'm making you do more writing' (Reception teacher, Daleview), and the children are learning a lot. Staff work hard to ensure coverage and children make expected progress, as well as document outcomes. They demonstrate everyone is on the same route; a staged construction of joining the dots, to be transported as quickly as possible to a series of destinations, beginning with the Year One phonics test, then Year Two SATs and beyond.

The primary pedagogy emphasises the teacher as the one who knows and the primary responsibility of the child is to identify the 'correct' answer. When children pause at the line and instructions on their worksheets, they are working out what is expected, their attention directed to existing knowledge to be instilled. It is as if children must study a plan to work out the destination and the quickest way towards it, occupied with achieving mastery, but not inhabiting what they do (Ingold, 2016). So that children work hard to be 'done' and move on to pursue other desires.

Learning activities are aimed at meeting narrow objectives, offering an impoverished environment for children to inhabit their classroom. Literacy, for example, is broken down into discrete entities — letters, words, sentences — so that reading and writing become a process of navigation and cognition; exercises in performing phonics and grammar. Here, *learning* is reduced to a stimulus-response relation, with the ‘stimulus’ being the *task* and the ‘response’ being *work*; the latter defined in the dictionary as ‘tasks’ that are ‘to be done’ and an ‘action involving effort or exertion *directed to a definite end*’ (Simpson and Weiner, 1989, p.536; emphasis added). The required outcome here is advancing children’s numeracy and literacy, removed from any real world context of working towards something of clear use or value to the child. For example, children do not *do* porridge making, and rarely storytelling, dramatising, dancing, building, making, experimenting, or discussing. There is little evidence that many of the on-tasks activities stimulate children’s interest and there is a lack of absorbed engagement. Without something meaningful and creative to pursue, children lack opportunities to breathe life into their day.

It is not easy to ensure children are endlessly on-task, so multiple practices are used to enforce their compliance, including the expectation that children are still and silent for large proportions of the day. This thesis provides an in depth example of what Bragg (2018) described as the ‘techniquified’ primary school processes that ensure both the day and bodies are ‘micro-managed to extract value from every moment’ (p.126). It adds how behaviourism is misappropriated, in an attempt to enforce compliance using multiple symbolic rewards, chastisements and punishments, with no clear link between the stimulus and response.

Working under such pressured constraints limits what staff can do. There is currently a lack of emphasis on developing the six elements already highlighted in the existing research literature (discussed in Chapter Two) as important for contributing to children’s agency. This is more the case at Daleview, but major gaps are also observed during my short time at the ‘outstanding’ Clifftop. In summary:

- *Positive school relationships*: Children typically emphasise teachers as figures of discipline, who respond to children as being ‘good’ or not, and while children may mention they like specific teachers there is little mention of relationships of care and being listened to with respect.

- *Classroom dialogue:* There are minimum opportunities for children to talk in the classroom. While they may have a minute or so to speak with ‘talk partners’, rarely are there opportunities to engage in discussion about curriculum topics or broader areas of interest together with a teacher, and using creative or participatory methods. At Clifftop, there are more opportunities for discussion (e.g. circle time), although these remain limited.
- *Goal setting/feedback:* Discourses and practices aim to promote positive learning behaviours, but there are no opportunities to explore the emotional challenges of learning. In both schools, learning goals (e.g. effort, practice) are stressed, but in Daleview other practices emphasise performance goals (e.g. charts, setting), and praise frequently focuses on the whole child (e.g. ‘good’, ‘clever’). In both schools, off-task behaviour is punished with loss of play, and Daleview rewards children’s engagement in learning activities (e.g. stickers and certificates).
- *Student choice:* Adults decide curriculum goals and learning activities, and children make very simple choices in the classroom, such as the fairy tale character to write about and draw. At Clifftop, children choose which challenge level worksheet they do. Otherwise, children make few choices in either classrooms. They decide lunch options, and at Daleview, Golden Time activities, but with little information or time with which to make choices. When they have completed their work, children may have some choice about what activities to play; in Clifftop, children may draw at their table, whereas in Daleview children can usually play with different resources around the classroom. Children are not allowed to say ‘no’ to adults, something core to any supportive relationship and integral to safeguarding children. At Daleview, children’s consent is not sought on a wide range of issues extending beyond their participation in learning activities, including on issues related to their own bodies. In both schools, children are involved in school governance processes, one that is more inclusive at Clifftop (using whole class circle time) than at Daleview (representational school council). In both classrooms, the language of ‘choice’ is commonly framed around making the ‘sensible’ behaviour choice; children are not asked to consider with staff why they may engage in behaviours that offend. This thesis

provides an in depth example of what Nolas (2015) described as ‘institutionally defined moments’ of participation (p.161).

- *Non ‘ability’ labelling:* There are strong ‘ability’ labelling practices (e.g. setting, using the language of ‘clever’) in Daleview, with setting related to the pressure of the summer term assessments. Clifftop works hard to avoid such practices, with children choosing their own challenges, but these too can exert pressure on children.
- *Play and creativity:* Play is marginalised to specific times and spaces; it is something that is earned by ‘choosing’ to be on-task, otherwise lost. There is limited integration of play into everyday learning activities. Other creative activities are similarly restricted with little time for children to make and imagine, and almost never in ways beyond those prescribed in teacher-led activities. As shown in Jeffrey and Woods’ (2012) ethnographic work with older primary children, there is an absence of the discourses of ‘exploration, investigation, innovation, argument, discussion, collaboration’ (p.183) connected to creative learning.

8.2.2 Inherent tensions in strategies promoting agency

A range of school strategies aimed at promoting children’s agency in their learning are rife with tensions. Where children are encouraged to be ‘independent learners’, this is so they more quickly and correctly grasp teachers’ understandings, not their own. The demand for moral conformity individualises responsibility for learning, and yet staff use multiple techniques to ensure compliance (symbolic rewards, chastisements and punishments), raising questions about who is responsible. The individualising of responsibility can lead to further silencing rather than enhanced agency. Girls in particular take up a more feminised position of the good student as ‘nice and kind’, and boys marginalise their more masculinised emotions; both limit what they might know or say. Brown and Gilligan (1992) show pre-pubescent girls speaking freely of feeling angry and expressing disagreement, but approaching adolescence they ‘cannot say or feel or know what they have experienced’ (p. 4), so that ‘not speaking turned into not knowing’ (p.217). This thesis shows how censorship can begin much earlier for both some girls and some boys.

Classroom micro-practices promote children’s individualism and competition. At Daleview this is done through the labelling of children’s assumed ‘ability’ and

rewarding learning behaviours; practices that reinstate power and entrench existing hierarchies in the classroom, based on gender, age and class. At both schools, the promotion of resilience, and at Clifftop an incremental self-theory, through the constant demand to challenge oneself and do one's best, can exert children to apply themselves but also serve to pressure children. Attempts to promote high expectations and encourage children to aim high serve those already doing well: mostly the oldest, male and middle-class children. The focus on continuously trying and doing one's best squeezes out other concepts of effort, such as 'good enough' and failure. The latter is hugely problematic in educational settings as it marks the difference between making the grade or not, as well as missing opportunities for learning through failure. We cannot succeed at everything all of the time, of course, and by extension sometimes we will fail.

Children form subjectivities by performing the norms of the 'clever' child, while also betraying an inherent anxiety, that they are not 'clever' enough, requiring the repetition of norms. Contrary to Dweck's (2000) experimental research, which identifies clear divisions between those with an entity or incremental self-theories, this ethnography contributes a more nuanced picture of achievement beliefs in a classroom with competing discourses and practices. So while children echo the pervasive messages of developing an 'incremental' self-theory (the need for practice, effort, etc.), they also demonstrate anxiety and avoidance strategies associated with an 'entity' self-theory. This study reiterates qualitative research with older students concluding 'achievement beliefs are anything but two-dimensional; they are rich and complex' (Quihuis *et al.*, 2002, p.98). The learning behaviours approach, developed from training with an educational consultancy, offers a commodified product and quick-fix solution to complex educational challenges. Slogans and stickers cannot plaster over the contradictory terrain of the on-task classroom.

Those children who cannot or will not buckle to the demands of the on-task classroom become viewed as biologically or socially flawed; staff utilise 'pathologising' discourses previously identified in reception classes (Maclure *et al.*, 2012, p.449), ignoring the society-level factors that block their opportunities to achieve. This thesis challenges the current positioning of children as lacking in resilience, with schools not recognising they are already resiliently navigating (including resisting) the on-task

classroom that denies them the opportunity to speak and explore different understandings of the world.

8.2.3 Denying the emotionality of the classroom

Emotionality is at the core of education, but this remains unrecognised in the on-task classroom. Children are seen as objects of concern, requiring adult intervention and knowledge; less attention is given to how the on-task classroom increases their vulnerability. This includes how high-level government policies extend down into the line of a worksheet or onto the classroom carpet, exerting pressure on children to identify the correct answer, sit still and silent for long periods, and be jerked out of their reverie and chastised. Experiences with difficult emotional resonance are discouraged from being voiced, as are joy and excitement, including those that cross the boundary from home to school. Everything is expected to be nice and calm, so children are directed by a goal outside of themselves: emotional bracing.

New Labour previously tenuously associated ‘enjoy and achieve’ as a well-being outcome in the Children Act 2004, whereas current educational policy prioritises achievement at the expense of enjoyment. Biesta (2009) offers a critique of an educational emphasis on personal qualities and capacities, ‘more concerned with the emotional well-being of pupils and students than with their emancipation’, asserting education is inherently ‘difficult and challenging’ not just a smooth process of meeting ‘the supposed ‘needs’ of the learner’ (p.39). Making visible the emotional, as well as the cognitive, experiences of children does not have to be about satisfying individual desires, but increases ‘consciousness of what it means to be that particular embodied child in the particular context’ (Kjørholt *et al.*, 2005, p. 184). The emotionality of challenge is central to education, where ‘Real learning and discovery can only take place when a state of not knowing can be borne long enough to enable all the data gathered by the senses to be taken in and explored until some meaningful pattern emerges’ (Salzberger-Wittenberg, 1983, p. 58). This is where vulnerability is foregrounded in the acceptance of ‘not knowing’ and resistance through a willingness to undergo what is for Rancière (1991) ‘the trial of intellectual uncertainty’ (Bingham and Biesta, 2010, p.19). It requires teachers take the time to ‘arouse a desire’ in the student to encounter, stay with and work through not knowing (Biesta, 2017b, p.19).

Where mistakes are valued in the classroom, they are seen as a route to the correct answer; there are no formal spaces to explore the breadth of emotional responses to not knowing and failure, nor to question adult authority. Children are having to bear this uncertainty, which becomes a source of anxiety and can overwhelm the senses: humour becomes tinged with critique; anger and shame snatch children's pens as they mark others' property; and children experience 'emergency' feelings in the classroom. The conclusions of Jeffrey and Troman's (2012) ethnographic research with older primary year groups, I show, extends to Year One:

Performative identities are a continuous mixture of developing confidence, having it shattered, feeling successful and confident to experiencing panic and anxiety, from being assigned high status to feelings of rejection but all the time knowing that both self worth (*sic*) and social identities are based on striving for better and continuous improvement. (p.195)

Such anxiety remains beyond Year One; Jackson's (2015) interviews with secondary students find 'the vast majority . . . are anxious about academic 'failure'' (p.6), and I experience this at times as a doctoral student.

The original understanding of resilience is a response to adversity, and is inherently about dealing with suffering, whereas the classroom leaves limited space for anyone to expose vulnerability and dependency, both being shameful to the autonomous, rational, resilient modern and neoliberal subject (Bracke, 2016). Jeffrey and Troman (2012) argue the discourse of putting in one's best effort as problematic when this is still identified as failure, where children 'live the contradictions of a capitalist life' (p.181). In which 'people do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction' (Mills, 1970, p.1-2). Instead, responsibility is shifted to the individual, where a 'key dimension of the politics of learning is the increasing tendency to turn political problems into learning problems' (Biesta, 2013, p.8).

8.2.4 Insufficient consideration of classroom materiality

The thesis highlights insufficient consideration of the effect, and affect, of the material environment in the on-task classroom. This includes the learning resources and physical environment, the sonic environment and children's bodies themselves. This contributes to children feeling physically and emotionally uncomfortable, limiting their engagement, as well as the possibilities for wonder and imagination.

Children are contained within their own spot on the carpet, a series of dotted parallel lines; their still and silent bodies invoked in the process of on-task learning. When the children watch a phonics film, *Alphablocks*, they sit so silently that a teacher praises, ‘I didn’t know there were children here, it’s so quiet’. Children are neither seen nor heard, making an empty building sound like the ideal school. Danish pedagogues, watching a film of an English early years setting, comment ‘the [child] body has been reduced to a head’ (Jensen, 2011, p.150). The on-task primary classroom is ‘less aimed at whole individuals than at the eyes and ears . . . lined up with tools and objects that facilitate writing and desks and benches that permit the orchestration of bodies in lines’ (Oswell, 2013, p.120), but rarely mouths. The sonic environment is limited, with little emphasis on children sounding; instead, fingers are on lips, celebrations muted, and adult-made sounds jar children out of their reverie.

The behaviour tsar, Tom Bennett, describes the need for punitive detentions involving ‘discomfort’ where children ‘have to sit in silence or they miss time playing with their friends’ (2015, n.p.; cited in Espinoza, 2015). What he ignores, and what this thesis emphasises, is how even the youngest children already experience such discomfort for much of their school day. The intensity of their affectivities are heard in the children’s accounts of what it is like to sit on the hard rough carpet, sometimes in an over-heated room, listening to the teacher for long periods, about aspects of knowledge they do not understand or else they know already; views they keep to themselves in the classroom. Here we see the relationality to things and others, to ‘the affects and intensities that far exceed the individual to whom they are attributed and who takes them up as his or her own’ (Youdell, 2011, p. 114). An intensity of childlike experience is that of being in time (Murris, 2016) and, in the absence of embodied clock time, sitting on the carpet becomes amplified for children. When photographing where they feel less good learning, children zoom in, drawing my attention to the ‘dots’ of the ‘hurty’ carpet (Figure 8.2). The child with a camera reveals what was previously unseen and rules their classroom lives.



Figure 8.2 Child's photograph of the classroom carpet.

The on-task classroom environment is predominantly sanitised, hard, angular, and hermetically sealed from the outside or everyday ‘real’ world. Softness is marginalised,

like the small cushions and a cuddly toy at the edge of the carpet, which children highlight as areas they like, ‘when I’m bored I relax on them’. In the 1950s and 60s, carpets were originally introduced into classrooms as part of the ‘progressive’ teaching movement to create more domestic, comfortable and cheerful environments, rather than an institutional atmosphere. The Plowden Report, for example, states that ‘Upright chairs, upholstered chairs, rocking chairs, stools, window seats and boxes can all find a place in the school’ (Central Advisory Committee for England, 1967, p.395). Although a 1967 Department of Education and Science publication talks of a new technology for hardening carpet fibers that ‘may just have the effect of removing an excessive sense of softness and luxury which may, in some circumstances, seem inappropriate’ (cited in Cunningham, 1988; p.141). Like the lines on the carpet that prohibit touch, there is an implicit denial of children’s sensuality and sexuality.

8.3 Children’s educational landscape: wider limitations for agency

Children’s everyday micro classroom practices connect to the wider educational landscape. This section discusses how children’s agency is limited by current understandings of the purposes of education, and a denial that children already have speech, in a sector unprepared to embrace risk and with insufficient teacher agency.

8.3.1 Narrow understanding of the purposes of education

There is a dominant historical legacy of conformity remaining in the modern primary classroom. Being constantly on-task is a concern with linearity understood as straightness, ‘a connection between two points that has length but no breadth’, dating back to Euclidian geometry (Ingold, 2016, p.4). This reflects the pursuit of social order and conformity, rather than the possibility of pursuing other ways of doing and being. Varvantakis (2016) beautifully illustrates this in his photo essay of a school in Bangalore that includes rows of desks, and children lining up and standing in parallel at morning assemblies. He concludes that ‘Straightness represents development. If bodies can be put in order, thoughts can be put in order and eventually a whole society can’ (p.250). This understanding is evident in the on-task English curriculum with its stepped trajectory for learning and children schooled in identifying the ‘correct’ answer. It is seen in the primary concern with the measurability and rationality of maths, named ‘the fantasy of a discourse and practice in which the world becomes what is wanted: regular,

ordered, controllable (Walkerdine, 1990, p.188), as well as in English grammar and spelling. This concern with order is heard in Ms. Day's praise for children controlling an impulse to talk before their turn, 'I'm very impressed how Roz and Claire are waiting their turn: control yourself, remember one of our [class rules] is listening' (teacher, Clifftop). Kant refers to the 'crooked timber of humankind': without a moral education, a child becomes 'unfitted for society', whereas 'if disciplined early, he grows up straight' (1997, p.498). During his time, Cavarero (2016) explains, the science of orthopaedics was invented, taken from the Greek *orthos* meaning straight and *pais* meaning child, 'In young children, as with young trees, the earlier the intervention, the more effectively the straightening' (*ibid.*, p. 62). The form of ethical labour demonstrated by the 'good' child in the classroom is also evocative of pious subjectivities in a pastoral pedagogy, core to the English education (Hunter, 1994). A discourse of moral conformity casts a long shadow over the modern on-task classroom, allowing few opportunities for children to speak out and express something different. It is a context underpinned by an assumption of passivity in pupils, with a denial of their intelligence and a lack of respect for each child as unique and irreplaceable (Biesta, 2014).

Year One teaching staff emphasise qualifications and socialisation as the purposes of education, both important for promoting existing socio-political configurations (Biesta, 2013). Mostly they mention becoming better qualified, similar to a study of Scottish teachers (Priestley *et al.*, 2015), including developing learning behaviours and dispositions (e.g. curiosity, confidence), and echoing a policy discourse requiring 'a love of learning' and 'thirst for knowledge', seen as necessary for uncertain future careers. Their concern for socialisation prioritises inclusion, social skills, 'happy lives' and, at Daleview, conforming citizenship, 'to learn to become a good citizen . . . to learn conformity'. The parents prioritise socialising (making friends), as well as socialisation (learning to fit in), with some mention of enjoyment, but very little emphasis on learning core curriculum subjects (qualifications) in Year One. One parent explores whether teacher authority and 'programming' of children is a good thing, having become an atheist after a religious education, but staff do not engage in these questions. Staff at Clifftop, and a teaching assistant at Daleview, both mention student voice as a purpose of education (e.g. 'explicit encouragement to verbalise thought'), demonstrating a concern with how individuals can be independent subjects of action and responsibility,

but no reference is made beyond voice contributing to existing orders. Children's competence in the on-task culture demonstrates their adaptability to the classroom order, but a concern with learning only as adaptability does not allow for transformation:

the question is not whether or not we need order, but when and where we need what kind of order and for what purposes . . . the problem with the idea of teaching as control is that in such a relationship the student can never appear as a subject, but remains an object. In a world that is not interested in the subjectness of the human being this is, of course, not a problem. The question is whether this is a world we should desire. (Biesta, 2016; p.387)

Jackson (1968) similarly reminds us that 'the goal of attention for attention's sake is somewhat antithetical to the broader goals of education' (p.103), and what is needed, beyond maintaining order, is curricular decisions to ensure a fit between students and the material being studied; emphasising both the children's current interest *and* their future development. Qualifications and socialisation are an important current focus of schooling; children need knowledge and skills, in order to become part of and identify with existing social orders, as well as needing protection, guidance and maturation (Murriss, 2016). The children's lines of desire suggest there is currently too narrow a focus in education, which must broaden to allow for the possibility of subjectification. This thesis supports Webb and Crossouard's (2015) conclusion, based on an ethnography with older primary school children, that 'the moments of dissensus rather than consensus are those that hold the more fertile possibilities of education action, for the disruption of the taken-for-granted, the 'bleeding obvious', and the coming into being of new subjectivities' (p.9).

The principle model of the on-task classroom is one of the teacher as explicator, who leads children to what they need to know to become citizens, bringing the promise of some choice into the children's uncertain futures. This is an understanding of education enabling 'individuals to become authors of their own life story' (Gove, 2009, n.p.). In Rancièrian terms, this offers a construction of citizenship and the subject as 'merely the consensual, reductive 'closed gap' that stultifies the emergence of the citizen', one that cannot be political (Webb, 2014, p.162). The policy aim to narrow the gap between disadvantaged and other pupils, by improving qualifications for all groups of children, has achieved some success (Department for Education, 2014c). What the statistics ignore is that a stricter work ethic is demanded more of working-class than middle-class

children, and the cracks for children to become independent subjects of action, capable of changing what it is possible to do and be, remain wider for more advantaged middle-class children. A narrow focus on qualifications, with its promise of the ‘meritocratic dream of social mobility’ (Mirza, 2017, p.vii), plasters over many deep-rooted divisions in today’s society.

8.3.2 Children denied speech

The current explicative understanding of education is stultifying because it does not recognise young children can already speak. Gove (2013) articulates this belief when he expresses a need for teachers only to ‘actively pass on knowledge’ and ‘to introduce children to precisely those areas of human thought and achievement which they are most unlikely to discover or understand on their own. Children naturally learn to talk; they do not naturally learn to read, or to play the violin, or to carry out long division’ (n.p.). He assumes learning the mother tongue to be natural, not the ‘most difficult’ act of learning, in which ‘The child must force his or her will onto another in order to be understood in a way that reconfigures the distribution of the sensible’ (Biesta and Bingham, 2010, p.59). Gove suggests children arrive at school without speech, necessitating a reliance on the teacher explicator to understand the knowledge taught.

In both the research schools, teaching staff challenge the children and exert them to be attentive, but the expectation is they attend to being on-task; so children are working hard to understand what the teacher expects and to get answers right. Clifftop in some ways represents a better ‘police’ order (for there is always a police order) than Daleview, given it does not subscribe to fixed understandings of ability and provides more spaces for children’s voices. Nevertheless, teachers in both schools dictate what children must know, in what order and in what ways, to inculcate how to understand the world. This education, concerned only with adaptation, is flawed in its assumptions about children, denying them the possibility to express something of themselves, with expectations that are too narrow, rather than ambitious:

Just to say that our students should study is not yet enough. There is, after all, a critical distinction to be made between those who become students of the explications of others — and the world is full of such explications — and those who follow their own ‘orbits’ . . . What matters, therefore, is not so much that students study but that they *speak*. (Biesta, 2010b, p.548-9)

These are the orbits of opinion, where ‘each one of us describes our parabola around the truth’ (Rancière, 1991, p. 59). Sachs (2006) illustrates how ancient is the dialogue of listening *and* speaking, ‘Praying, we speak. Studying [the Torah], we listen’ (p.xxi). Through children’s lines of desire, they *speak*; discovering ‘there are a thousand paths in intellectual space open to his will’ (Rancière, 1991, p.59). This is not to suggest false distinctions between meandering lines of ‘play’ and straight lines of ‘work’, for children are making meaning when on- and off-task.

Emancipation is not given, but ‘seized’ when children act with ‘the assumption of equality’ (Biesta, 2013, p.140), taking up that with which the teacher begins. Such events are beyond the control of teachers, but still educators can create conditions that are more fertile for their occurrence. This begins with assuming ‘all students can *already* speak’ (Biesta, 2010b, p.549, original emphasis). Rancière’s (1991) ignorant schoolmaster demands not the correct answer, but ‘an absolute attention for seeing and seeing again, saying and repeating. Don’t try to fool me or yourself. Is that really what you saw? What do you think about it?’ where ‘The route the student will take is unknown. But we know what he cannot escape: the exercise of his liberty’ (p.23). Here the educator becomes ‘a catalyst of beginnings’ (Ingold, 2015, p.146), demonstrating an interest in what is newly created or transformed by the pupil, rather than beginning from what a child lacks and must become.

Modernity has been characterised as an experience of distraction, where ‘We become deaf not just to each other but also the sounds all around us’ (Back, 2007, p. 7). In the on-task classroom, children’s voices, the sounds they attend to, and their silences, remain unheard. Following many other education ethnographies, this thesis reiterates the value of listening to children in the classroom. Not to evaluate or interpret, and not to confirm what we already know, but to listen for ‘the effects of difference’ (Murris, 2016, p.144). The children’s lines of desire, similar to the ‘counter space’ identified in ethnographic research with secondary students, highlights what might be achieved if schools and staff were positioned ‘to engage in conversation, to build relationships, and to create a pedagogical dialogue about what is worth learning, why and how’ (Thomson *et al.*, 2010, p.652). This requires the commitment of time for relationship building and playfulness in supporting children’s different languages, as well as the recognition that adults can also learn from children.

The children's concern for a transformative pedagogy, signalled by entangled lines of desire, demands their currently private troubles, in which 'values cherished by an individual are felt by her to be threatened', now become a public issue (Mills, 1970, p.15). Young children are unable to do this alone, but must rely on the support of adults able to hear their concerns. Oswell (2009) argues that the noise, disturbance and babble of children's voices 'become political speech only through the alliances and networks with others', itself 'dependent on the architectonics of audible spaces' (p.14). He invites us to imagine the kinds of physical, cultural and architectural space, room, parliamentary assembly, on which this would depend. An improved 'societal acoustic', possible of transmitting children's sound (or lack of), demands firstly an end to the 'denial' that they have nothing of concern to say, and secondly the formation of 'creative and productive solidarities' (Nolas, 2014b, n.p.); something children already demonstrate with befriending and supporting peers. In schools, this must be underpinned by a commitment to supportive relationships aimed at tackling inequality.

Pursuing lines of desire children inhabit their world, including relationships with people and things: cognitively, sensorially, emotionally and imaginatively. They are pursuing what Armstrong (2006) called a 'pedagogy of the imagination' (p.176), a term borrowed from Italo Calvino (1988), where children are 'the poets and artists of their own lives, as well as creators of richly imagined alternative existences' (Featherstone, 2017, p.24). The children engage themselves in ways reflected in early years and primary school settings that support children's movement and experimentation in learning and subjectivity (e.g. Sahlberg, 2015, Kraftl, 2015; Rinaldi, 2006; Armstrong, 1980; 2006; Paley, 1981). For example, ethnographic research identifies examples of inclusive arts-based practices that seek out, make visible and value young children's diverse knowledges (Thomson and Hall, 2015). Reggio Emilia is another approach where teachers observe for the 'desires children already are caught up in and try to latch on to these together with the children and give space for lines of flight to be created' (Olsson, 2009, p.179). The intention is not simply to follow children's interests for teachers also propose knowledge. Pearl (1997) similarly advocates a transformative pedagogy emphasising equal encouragement, rather than pupil deficits, by reorganising classrooms to allow all children to pursue shared desires. This includes the desire for security, comfort, competence, belonging, meaning, hope and also the desire for excitement, 'where students are encouraged to participate in activities where they

generate knowledge and make important decisions’, and creativity, ‘where all students are encouraged to be constructively creative and to use creativity in community building’ (p.259-234).

8.3.3 Avoidance of risk

This study highlights how the primary education system is currently fraught with an avoidance of risk. This includes a curriculum underpinned by a certainty of what is knowable and measurable, minimising the possibilities for children to speak and move, teachers mimicking mistakes rather than making genuine forays into the unknown together with children, children camouflaging their avoidance of effort or expressing an opinion. Claims to an explicative understanding of truth and knowledge ‘has been held up to fend off the emotional, the affective, and fantasy’ (Oswell, 2013, p.134), seen when children’s difficult emotions are marginalised, their joy muted and possibilities for imagining limited.

An inherent contradiction in a heavily controlled and planned classroom is the limited possibility of risk, of the unknown or unexpected; a necessary condition of education. Overemphasising performance goals can mean students ‘pass up valuable learning opportunities if they involve any risk of errors’, argues Dweck (2000, p.16), who stresses instead the importance of learning goals and challenging tasks ‘that involve displaying ignorance and risking periods of confusion and errors’. Sahlberg (2012) argues the pursuit of attainment in ways which ‘minimizes experimentation, reduces use of alternative pedagogical approaches, and limits risk-taking in schools and classrooms’ (n.p.) is integral to a standardised global education movement that also includes a focus on core subjects, test based accountability policies, and corporate models of management. A movement, he suggests, that compares poorly with Finland where teachers and students are encouraged to try out new ideas and approaches: ‘to put curiosity, imagination and creativity at the heart of learning’ (*ibid.*, n.p.). A classroom with risk potentially exposes teachers’ vulnerability; confronting children’s ‘impersonal and singular becomings’ is often ‘difficult for us to bear’ (Dahlberg and Moss, 2009, p. xxvi). Biesta (2013) eloquently illustrates however, that ‘without risk nothing will happen’, and doubt rather than certainty is key to transformation, without which students are prevented from ‘becoming subjects in their own right’ (p.24).

This is similar to the ethnographer's pursuit, 'where we are not so sure of ourselves and where we see this not knowing as our best chance for a different sort of doing' (Lather, 2007, p.76). Biesta (2011) advocates inquiry 'not focused on knowing and the improvement of knowledge', but instead 'an orientation towards not-knowing . . . to a situation in which we can not (*sic*) rely on existing knowledge, patterns, structures and traditions so that it is up to us to invent a unique response and thus to invent ourselves uniquely in and through this response' (p.318). Children, he suggests, need the opportunity to engage deeply with curriculum content to respond responsibly to it, which includes making choices and taking a position, including on curricular content (Osberg and Biesta, 2007, p.48).

Children in Year One pursue paths where the destination is unknown, but only in brief moments, in time carved out by themselves, when they are off-task, alone spinning 'around in their own universe' (Biesta, 2017a, p.79). This is not how children's transformation is best achieved: a teacher is necessary, to ensure 'judgement about what and who comes into the world' (Biesta 2011, p.313), although only after the event. Without the role of the teacher:

The freedom of signification thus appears as a kind of neo-liberal freedom, where everyone is free to articulate their own 'story', rather than a political let alone a democratic freedom where there would always be a question about how the different 'poems' would impact on the ways in which we live our lives together-in-equality, rather than each of us being enclosed in our own story. (Biesta, 2017b, p.69)

8.3.4 Limited teacher agency

The teachers' haste to meet the narrow confines of the current curriculum is driven by a neoliberal concern for performance and accountability, so that staff work hard to meet government directives rather than exploring alternative possibilities. Resilience demands that the neoliberal subject focuses on bouncing back, and this includes staff who are judged on their adaptability, rather than reducing precarity or working with vulnerability across schools. When Daleview staff discuss new government initiatives, they acknowledged 'we have to do what . . . we are told to do', while trying to 'work it, so it will fit with us' (Ms. Rudland, head teacher). They feel an 'increase in anxiety', with 'pressure' on children and the need to 'manage it really, really carefully . . . [it's] at a real crisis stage for schools, because I think the expectations keep going up and up and

it's having an impact on children's experience and . . . we're becoming like exam factories and test factories' (Ms. Rudland). Children's 'ability' becomes a defining feature here, 'if you have children maybe who haven't had sort of, aren't as academically able and you (go under?), you become very vulnerable as a school', with the school response being to build 'the resilience of the staff'. While the Daleview head teacher tries to make government directives 'fit' the school, it is the head at Clifftop, with its 'outstanding' status, who asserts a greater confidence to diverge, delaying the expectation to do phonics in Reception, for example. The scope for movement is greatest amongst the already succeeding school (similar to the most advantaged pupils), but remains limited.

The predominantly female staff in both schools must be at once flexible and pliable, while undemanding, but also tough and unyielding (Bracke, 2016). There is an affective toll on teachers across schools under such pressure, with an 'outstanding' teacher at Clifftop never having cried so much in a job, feeling she has not risen sufficiently to the challenge, 'I don't feel I'm doing enough, and it's always I don't feel I'm doing the best I can for the children'. The pressure of being 'judged' while having a reduction in staffing support and other resources, is stressed by a teacher at Daleview, describing the situation as 'the Great British Bake Off'¹² when, at a time of economic austerity, 'you're given less and less ingredients but you've got to make something better and better'. This reflects a vulnerability that must be hidden and a submission of the body similar to that demanded of the children. When a teacher tells the class that some children are unwell, Gabriel says 'I'm feeling a bit poorly', and he is told 'well done for being resilient and coming to school', before being asked 'why are you poorly?' The staff, like the children, are coaxed to take on the mantle of resilience, some advocating alternative educational settings but not imagining transformative possibilities for the state sector.

Pursuing educational change cannot be isolated from the need for greater teacher agency (and beyond to other educational professionals). Priestley and colleagues' (2015) research in this area recommends the need for a greater engagement with the different purposes of education; guidance on the parameters for school-based curriculum development, without being overly prescriptive or focused on outcomes; local authorities offering a supportive role rather than a culture of quality assurance and

¹² *The Great British Bake Off* is a televised baking competition.

inspection; fostering supportive relationships across staff teams. Where agency incorporates an orientation to what has come before as well as a projective distancing, the authors show that older and more experienced teachers utilise their greater knowledge to negotiate current complexities. To imagine a different future of education, we must look back and learn from, but not rely upon, what went before (Osberg and Biesta, 2007). Politicians who only look back, ideologically committed to some golden age of grammar schooling, and cannot envisage something more transformative to meet the complex demands of the modern day, are paradoxically those with power, but limited agency.

8.5 Conclusion

The modern primary classroom expects children to become *learned* — demonstrating knowledge defined in the curriculum and being morally upright — but not more broadly *educated*. Children and staff are resiliently navigating the current education system, defined by historical legacies and current educational policies, but children are telling us daily they want a schooling that allows greater scope for their agency. It is time to listen and to risk creating a different education fit for the modern world.

CHAPTER NINE: Conclusion

It is Giacometti, who captures what I have come to understand of children's agency in the modern on-task primary classroom in his sculpture, *Homme, femme, enfant*, seen on the front cover of the thesis. Here is the upright masculine figure of modernity: inhabiting a moral rectitude, lone and independent, pointing in the direction of rational knowledge and certainty. This encircled figure marks its domination of the current worldview, capitalised in the straight lines of the letter H. The teacher, so frequently female, is outside the circle, offering some protection and possibility in her more flexible form and scope to move along her own line, only her outstretched arms incline towards the male figure but not the child. The small ball must sit in its place, the grooved out spot that demands it silently focus on the existing order, seen through the teacher as explicator. The child understands what is expected and competently navigates conformity, being 'good' and 'clever', but their agency here is limited. The hope comes in the child's spherical form, because a child cannot help but move; even in the on-task classroom. Out of the gaze of the teacher, pursuing their own line of desire, the child is purposefully seeking new understandings, challenging the taken-for-granted: transforming rather than simply conforming to the world. This is the crack where the light gets in, where the child feels, breathes and lives more fully.

In this concluding chapter, I retrace my steps along the path taken through the Year One classroom, looking back to how I arrived at this understanding of children's agency and ahead to where it might lead. I begin with the rationale for exploring agency, how I researched the phenomenon, and the study's contribution to knowledge, before examining the implication of the findings for the future of education.

9.1 Researching agency: re-tracing a path through Year One

Children's agency has been little examined as a phenomenon and this study set out to show where and how children achieve agency in the Year One primary classroom; a school year marking the start of formal schooling with its work-based curriculum. Agency is understood as central to learning theory and the purposes of education, although not currently prioritised within education policy. I adopt a relational theory of agency, understood as children acting purposively to achieve outcomes of educational relevance, and include a focus on children's agency orientations. The study integrates post-structural theory together with a new materialist focus. I have sought to understand

how the entanglement of diverse elements of the classroom conditions together support or limit children's agency, including practices, discourses and the materiality of the classroom.

I undertook an ethnography focusing on a Year One classroom in an ordinary school, with a 'good' Ofsted rating. This includes a wide-angle view of the whole classroom, as well as narrowing my gaze by shadowing six children. In addition, I conducted a 'rapid' ethnography for one week in an 'outstanding' teaching school, in a different town, where I focused on the whole class. This design supported an in-depth analysis of agency in the classroom. While the study only focuses on two quite different schools, what is striking is the similarities between them, both being on-task, responding to a prescriptive curriculum and common accountability criteria and mechanisms used to judge all English schools. This study cannot claim to generalise beyond these contexts, but the similarities between the two schools suggest English primary classrooms are more broadly on-task and this is supported by cited research. Focusing on six children allows for an in-depth understanding of their agency, whilst increasing the sample size of children and schools in future studies, to allow for greater heterogeneity, may identify additional examples of pupil agency. Similarly, conducting the study in a less homogeneous part of the country may also identify additional examples of pupil agency. The study contributes methodologically to the research literature, including rare examples of asking children to identify sounds they hear by drawing and making sounds, and using P4C as a research method in schools. It also offers an illustration of the tension for researchers (including those who are mothers) engaging in a form of transformative practice in a context emphasising conformity.

9.2 Year One: limited environment for children's agency

The study's primary contribution to knowledge is a detailed example of different forms of children's agency in the primary classroom; moving beyond simple binaries of good/conforming/on-task and bad/resisting/off-task students. The thesis illustrates that navigating conformity is a form of agency, which is nevertheless limited when confronted with new and unexpected challenges: children resist learning and expressing opinions. Instead, pursuing desires off-task offers children the possibility to inhabit what they do in the classroom and to be (self) educated, demonstrating that children want to engage in ways that are meaningful and purposeful to them, both playfully and creatively, pursuing transformation, rather than simple conformity. I argue the

children's divergent actions highlight a democratic deficit in which they, and their one hundred languages, are viewed unequally, and the thesis offers an in-depth example of children's common concerns, signaling what they collectively feel is important for their education. This includes the desire for transformation (educational purpose), areas of relevance and interest to their lives (curriculum content), as well as engaging methods and supportive relationships with which to pursue these (pedagogy). Whilst all children pursue desires, the study supports secondary school research suggesting it is the most advantaged children, including those who are middle-class and male, who have the greatest opportunities to act independently and change what it is possible to do and be.

The conditions of the modern primary classroom relate to the broader educational landscape, and the thesis contributes a detailed illustration of how the pressures of the current performance and accountability managerialism contribute to the creation of an on-task Year One classroom. I initially set out to show what classroom conditions support, as well as limit, children's agency, but discover how a focus on being on-task offers an impoverished classroom environment to stimulate children's interest and for them to inhabit their learning. What supports children's agency in this context is their competency in understanding what is expected of them and in navigating the classroom. The strength of this thesis's contribution, beyond the different examples of agency, is its detailed illustration of how the current on-task classroom limits the scope for young children to be agentic and, specifically, how:

- Children are expected to be still and silent for long periods of the day, with staff using multiple rewards and punishments to ensure compliance.
- Insufficient consideration of the material classroom environment contributes to children feeling physically and emotionally uncomfortable.
- Children are vulnerable to difficult emotional experiences, particularly when not knowing what is expected, pulled out of their reverie and experiencing adult anger.
- There are limited opportunities for children to be playful and creative, and to 'not know' together with teaching staff.
- In a context of competing discourses and practices, children develop more complex achievement beliefs than is suggested by previous experimental research: they experience anxiety even if able to articulate the benefits of effort.

- Individualising responsibility for learning, particularly the call to be resilient and aim high, can pressure children and re-emphasise hierarchies of age and class.
- Children's participation occurs within institutionally defined moments, their consent is rarely sought, and 'choices' are mostly limited to engaging in 'sensible' behaviour.

This thesis on children's agency reaches a similar conclusion to Priestley and colleagues' (2015) work on teacher agency, which is that the education system is itself unintelligent because it is unable to engage meaningfully and purposefully with the complexities and uniqueness of classroom contexts. In the current system, children are told what to write about, when to write, what words to use, how much to write and where, and even in what way: sitting silently. They become interchangeable with any other student, only allowed to speak and act in ways that are recognised as 'sensible' within the existing school order; rendering children, like some teachers, 'unable to respond in a meaningful way to new and unique situations' (*ibid.*, p.148). Children learn curriculum knowledge, but without a thirst for such learning. They are learning as much the art of camouflage: how to blend in and avoid challenge, and to identify the cracks to pursue desires. Mahmood (2005) describes the 'struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement' involved in discipline for mastery. In the on-task classroom, children 'struggle', both with physical discomfort and with not knowing what is expected, put in 'effort' to deliver on what is expected, and 'exert' themselves to pursue their own paths. The on-task curriculum content and pedagogy fails to engage children sufficiently, limiting what they can 'achieve'. Similar to secondary school research (Thomson *et al.*, 2010), this study identifies how the Year One classroom does not connect with the children's everyday concerns; sometimes activities are too challenging for some children or not challenging enough for others. They do not sufficiently advance what they know and do not use what they know to create something unique.

The importance of pupil agency for promoting children and young people's psychosocial well-being has been raised as a pressing concern, set against the context of long-term increases in young people's mental health problems (McLaughlin, forthcoming). A recent green paper (Department of Health and Department of Education, 2017) focuses on mental health services for children and young people, but not on schools' contribution to well-being. The level of anxiety experienced by children when not knowing what is expected suggests there is value in further researching the

mental health implications of the on-task classroom, and in particular, the limited spaces where no one knows the answer, and young children have to deal alone with difficult emotions. This could include a comparative element, looking at educational contexts that integrate spaces for not knowing and engage with emotionality, as well as a focus on older children and young people. Research could usefully explore further the scope and scale of children's agency in pedagogical spaces pursuing transformation, including which groups of children do (and do not) have access to such spaces. This could include initiatives in state schools, where some work has already been done on creative pedagogies (Thomson *et al.*, 2012), but also other contexts, such as alternative and private schooling, and after school clubs/activities; comparisons with other countries would be valuable here. More in-depth research is also needed to provide further examples of what agency looks like in different sectors, beyond education: for example, in what ways does a looked after child achieve agency in social care services, and how does a chronically ill child achieve agency in their health care?

9.2 Children's agency: pressing concern for education

My son, now 13 years old, recently spent several weeks creating a card game based on the periodic table, navigating a path dissolving binaries between play and work, bringing together his passions for gaming and science. My daughter, aged 10, still believes competition is 'great', but as a committed feminist, she is also treading her own path at school; this currently involves undertaking a petition to encourage boys and girls to play more together without the fear of being mocked. When I was 15 years old, I was part of a student campaign to change the school uniform to allow girls to wear black as well as grey tights; a moderate request, supported by many students and parents, but refused by the head teacher. It struck me forcefully at the time, as a lesson in the misuse of power and contributed to a lasting commitment to social justice and children's participation. Similarly, one of the interviewed teachers remembers feeling 'outrage' when asked to help in her secondary school canteen but not allowed to handle cash, thinking 'oh, so you want us to be your slaves, but you don't trust us'. Not liking school was what made her want to teach. A lack of possibilities for agency does not stop children from desiring and acting, and it may become the catalyst that drives aspects of students' future lives, but it is an inadequate foundation for modern schooling. This is particularly the case when it remains the more advantaged children with the greatest scope to pursue transformation.

The controlling conditions of the current on-task classroom, that treat students as objects and denies they exist as subjects, does not serve society well. Jackson (1968) identifies the tension between children's curiosity, which is integral to scholarship, and the demands of conformity in the classroom. Intellectual mastery, he suggests, 'calls for sublimated forms of aggression', including the types of probing, poking, exploring, questioning and challenging of authority seen in children's lines of desire, one that is 'almost antithetical to the attitude of passive conformist' (p.36). Fifty years later, it remains 'unfortunate that few if any school people are giving the matter serious thought' (*ibid.*, p.36). There are pressing challenges and conflicts in today's society; we need those who can imagine and create solutions to issues of personal, social and global importance. In the UK, there is political talk of ensuring children meet the demands of the future economy, but less on how they can participate in transforming society into one that is more sustainable, tolerant and inclusive. The youngest children are already busy imagining, but mostly alone in their 'free' time. Children need a teacher (rather than a researcher) to ask how they want to exist in the world, and whether what they desire is desirable, both for their own lives and how we live together with others on a planet with 'limited capacity for fulfilling all the desires projected on to it' (Biesta, 2017a, p.4).

Children are learning a lot of curriculum knowledge, but what is more difficult is the problem of how to use the information to deal with the complex problems where the solution is unknown or perhaps there are no real solutions and constant re-thinking is required. The OECD (2018b) has also developed a global competence framework for preparing young people for an inclusive and sustainable world, which includes the importance of agency and responsibility, and emphasises not knowing rather than certainty.

The Globally-minded individuals exercise agency and voice with a critical awareness of the fact that other people might have a different vision of what humanity needs, and are open to reflecting on and changing their vision as they learn about these different perspectives. Rather than believing that all differences can be eliminated, globally-minded people strive to create space for different ways of living with dignity. (*ibid.*, p.17)

As much as looking ahead to the future, children's lived experiences of the classroom are important to ensure they now live with dignity. Given how much time children spend in school, it is 'as much a 'childhood' as an 'education' issue', with 'profound

implications for the construction and experience of childhood, children's everyday lives, learning, children's rights and well-being in modern times' (Devine and Luttrell, 2013, p.241).

Travelling this path of not knowing in the classroom has been uncomfortable at times. I have needed my supervisors and others to share what they know, but also to help me accept when I am less certain and must look, and look again. This includes an avoidance of performing cleverness through demonstrating how much I know. With this in mind, the recommendation that follows from this research is primarily the need for further dialogue. The research highlights the complexity of the classroom, operating under many competing discourses and assumptions about what is and can be achieved, raising the need for a closer look at how different purposes of education can be integrated into the school day. Teachers are currently bearing the emotional burden of doing their best but feeling it is not enough. There are tensions between ensuring children's conformity and enabling their transformation that are currently unaired; instead, effort is put into further controlling children with more rewards and punishments. The findings in this thesis specifically suggests the need to re-engage with the following long-standing teaching dilemmas¹³:

Teacher dilemma one: It is important that children sit and listen, and be nice and kind; all are good for teaching and learning, and the social order in the classroom. On the other hand, children need to talk, to assist them to complete or elaborate their ideas, as well as to enhance oracy and social skills. Children's understanding and meanings also develop through their material environment, senses, movement, manipulation, cognition, imagination and range of emotions.

Teacher dilemma two: It is important to encourage children to persist when work is difficult and to improve their standard of work over time, but also to maintain a non-pressured atmosphere in the classroom. One where children persist, not to conform, but because they have a thirst for understanding and meaning making, co-constructed between adults, children and the material environment; and so that children can inhabit their world. This requires an

¹³ Inspiration and examples of dilemmas came from Cooper *et al.*, 2000.

environment that supports children to retain the desire to pursue the unknown, working through moments of resistance and tolerating failure.

Teacher dilemma three: Teachers have a responsibility to the whole class and must ensure lessons are not interrupted too frequently by disruption and managing behaviour, but there are also reasons why pupils engage in behaviours that offend. It is important to hear what children speak through these actions, and to create the conditions for children to bring something new to the world.

These dilemmas highlight a need to take a position that is both/and, not either/or within education, rather than take sides and advocate, say, for improved qualifications/socialisation at the expense of subjectification, or to argue simply for more ‘progressive’ or ‘traditional’ approaches. How to deliver on these dilemmas demands we look back to what came before, look ahead to what more we might imagine, with ‘wise situated judgements’ about that which is educationally desirable (Biesta, 2014, p.140). This includes teachers deciding when, for example, to foreground different purposes in a lesson or school day, and navigating the inherent tensions in pursuing different purposes. There are currently a lack of spaces for staff to reflect on such dilemmas, as well as an absence of language to acknowledge vulnerability in not knowing and failure. The ethnography demonstrates the potential value to staff in having the opportunity to engage with their own observational data and children’s voices. The importance of which was understood by Jackson (1968), who warned we ‘must not fail to ponder . . . the things that come and go in a twinkling — things like a student’s yawn or a teacher’s frown’ (p.177). Further research could usefully examine the types of reflective spaces that might support staff to explore such dilemmas.

Time is not on our side, given both the threats to the planet and the ‘emergency’ pitch of children’s feelings in the classroom. We would do well to take a lead from Italo Calvino (1988), an advocate of the quickness of shorter literary terms, preferring not to remain long in the labyrinth: keeping focused on an image of what can be achieved, whilst patiently identifying appropriate arrangements (*‘mot juste’*) for its implementation. His preferred motto seems appropriate for the Year One classroom: *festina lente*, make haste slowly (p.57).

The burden of responsibility for educational change lies not with the teachers, who are already working hard and feeling the strain of the many constraints of being forever on-

task. It lies instead with the education managers defining the educational landscape that creates the conditions of the classroom. There is a need to open up discussion about the purposes of education, curriculum design, pedagogy, as well as assessment and accountability structures. The path to knowledge is more productive where we are inclined to collaborate, rather than pursue a straight autonomous path. The importance of strong staff collegiality has been shown to be important for teacher agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2015) and this thesis reiterates the value of listening to children in the classroom, not simply to evaluate or interpret, and not to confirm what we already know, but to listen for difference. Any movement on the above dilemmas requires a commitment to supportive discussions, including with central policy makers and administrators, local authority and school advisers, school leaders, teachers, non-teaching staff, academics, parents and, equally, all children.

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APPENDICES

Appendix One: Fieldwork Timetable

Key: R – Reception class; Y1 – Year one class; Ch. - children; Ob. – observation; P4C – Philosophy for Children.

[illegible]

Appendix Two: Example interview questions for teaching staff

Professional background

- Background career in education (time in school, previous jobs, etc.)

Education, teaching, learning

I'm going to write on the purposes/expectations of education, and how the school fits into these.

- How would you describe the purpose of education?
- How have you seen the purpose/expectations change over your career?
- How would you describe the role of the school in delivering on these purposes/expectations?
- How would you describe your own approach to education? How would you describe the school's approach to education? Similarities/differences. When is there most overlap? Can you give me an example?
- What most enables you to teach as you would like? What inhibits your teaching practice?
- What is the emotional experience of teaching in this context?

Year One Pupils

- What words or images or sounds would you use to describe a Year One child at the beginning and then at the end of the year? What are the key things you do to achieve this change?
- Can you describe your ideal Year One pupil?
- How does this Year One class of 2015/2016 compare to last years' Year One class or a previous Year One class that particularly sticks in your mind?
- How does this class compare to other/previous Year One classes?

Year One Teaching

- What are the dilemmas/what's hard about teaching Year Ones?
- How much scope is there within the new curriculum to go beyond what's in the curriculum and do things differently?
- What is the role for 'play' in the Year One classroom?
- Are there any winners and losers within the classroom of 2015/16?
- What's driving the Year One classroom of 2015/16? What do you feel you'll be judged on as a head/teacher/teaching assistant with respect to Year One?
- Imagine you could design your ideal year 1 classroom – from bricks and mortar, to educational practices, to which children in the class, everything – what would that classroom look like?
- Can you describe your ideal Year One teacher?

Learning behaviours

I've been exploring how these are used within the school – within lessons, wall displays, learning wheels, etc. - and how children appropriate the language and understanding of these concepts.

- What do you see as the key aspects of how the school approached learning behaviours this year?
- How much do you feel the children appropriate them, and in what ways most/least?
- Are there any challenges in developing learning behaviours?

This includes children's understanding of themselves as a learner (eg 'resilient', 'clever', 'not/good' at something) and when this varies. Also, how children respond when learning is felt to be challenging ('tricky').

- How do you feel children view themselves as learners at the start of Year One? What would you like to develop? Change?

Praise/rewards and behaviour rules

I have been looking at how children respond to these in the classroom and in their understanding of themselves as learners.

- What was driving these new initiatives?
- How do you feel the school rules have gone this year?
- How do you feel the children respond to these reward/warning systems?

Child-initiated learning

I've been looking at when and what do children initiate: what questions/comments/discussion do they initiate (eg do they clarify if they do not understand something, do they introduce something 'off topic') and what types of choices do they make.

- Can you give me any examples of children initiating their learning in Year One?
- What would you say that the school learns from Year One children? And how about you professionally and personally, what do you learn from Year One children?

Classroom environment

I've been looking at how children respond to and use their environment for learning e.g. worksheets, learning aids, toys, whiteboard, table/chairs, carpet. Also, how children use their bodies when they learn: whether they are sitting/standing, moving all or parts of their body, as well as whether they are silent, talking or vocalising in other ways (eg singing, humming, laughing).

- I wonder whether you have any thoughts about what 'things' best support children's learning?' By things I mean materials, objects, things that are tangible.

With whole class teaching children must spend a considerable amount of time sitting and listening to teachers.

- How can whole class teaching best support the children's learning?
- How important is movement and talking for children's learning? When do you think are the most appropriate times for this?

Staff support

- how much do you have a say in the school?
- how much are you supported by senior managers?

Stories of your own education

- Can you tell me a story about your own primary education? Secondary?

Appendix Three: Parent/guardian questionnaire, Daleview



University of Sussex



LEARNING STUDY – PARENT/GUARDIAN BACKGROUND SURVEY

Hello, my name is Perpetua Kirby. I am a doctoral researcher from the University of Sussex and I have been doing a study in your child's Beech Class, researching *how* young children engage in learning and what *supports* them to do so. I have nearly completed my work in the classroom but realise that I have some information missing. I would be very grateful if you would complete this final survey to provide some background information about you. Also, about your child's other main parent/guardian if this is appropriate to your child. This information will help me to identify how representative Beech Class is compared to the rest of Brighton. Also, I'm interested in how different backgrounds impact learning.

I ask for your child's name because at the moment I don't know anything about the family backgrounds of the children in the class and this is important information for a thoughtful analysis of learning to take place. It will help me to contextualise my observations in the class. All information is confidential and only I will have access to this information. I will never use you or your child's real name in any written or oral presentations of the research. It's fine if you do not want to give your child's name.

Please write your child's <u>first</u> name in <u>Beech</u> class: (optional)		
	Parent/Guardian 1	Parent/Guardian 2 (if appropriate)
Gender	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say
Age: Tick as appropriate	<input type="checkbox"/> Under 18 <input type="checkbox"/> 18-25 years <input type="checkbox"/> 26-35 years <input type="checkbox"/> 36-45 years <input type="checkbox"/> 46-55 years <input type="checkbox"/> 56-65 years <input type="checkbox"/> 65+ years <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say	<input type="checkbox"/> Under 18 <input type="checkbox"/> 18-25 years <input type="checkbox"/> 26-35 years <input type="checkbox"/> 36-45 years <input type="checkbox"/> 46-55 years <input type="checkbox"/> 56-65 years <input type="checkbox"/> 65+ years <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say
How many children do you have? Tick as appropriate	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> more than 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> more than 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say
Partnership status Tick as appropriate	<input type="checkbox"/> married <input type="checkbox"/> civil partnership <input type="checkbox"/> separated <input type="checkbox"/> divorced <input type="checkbox"/> co-habiting <input type="checkbox"/> single <input type="checkbox"/> widowed <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say	<input type="checkbox"/> married <input type="checkbox"/> civil partnership <input type="checkbox"/> separated <input type="checkbox"/> divorced <input type="checkbox"/> co-habiting <input type="checkbox"/> single <input type="checkbox"/> widowed <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say
Occupational group Which of the following categories best describes what you do for a living? (Tick as appropriate)	<input type="checkbox"/> Administrative <input type="checkbox"/> Director <input type="checkbox"/> Skilled Trader <input type="checkbox"/> Professional <input type="checkbox"/> Associate Professional <input type="checkbox"/> Sales <input type="checkbox"/> Leisure <input type="checkbox"/> Technical <input type="checkbox"/> Caring (eg full-time mum) <input type="checkbox"/> Senior official <input type="checkbox"/> Secretarial <input type="checkbox"/> Customer service <input type="checkbox"/> Manager <input type="checkbox"/> Personal services <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please state) _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Administrative <input type="checkbox"/> Director <input type="checkbox"/> Skilled Trader <input type="checkbox"/> Professional <input type="checkbox"/> Associate Professional <input type="checkbox"/> Sales <input type="checkbox"/> Leisure <input type="checkbox"/> Technical <input type="checkbox"/> Caring (eg full-time mum) <input type="checkbox"/> Senior official <input type="checkbox"/> Secretarial <input type="checkbox"/> Customer service <input type="checkbox"/> Manager <input type="checkbox"/> Personal services <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please state) _____

<p>Employment status</p> <p>Which of the following categories best describes your employment status at this point in time? (Tick as appropriate)</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> Employed (full-time) <input type="checkbox"/> Employed (part-time) <input type="checkbox"/> Self-employed (full-time) <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time carer <input type="checkbox"/> Employed, on maternity leave/ paternity leave/career break (circle as appropriate) <input type="checkbox"/> Student <input type="checkbox"/> Retired <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say	<input type="checkbox"/> Employed (full-time) <input type="checkbox"/> Employed (part-time) <input type="checkbox"/> Self-employed (full-time) <input type="checkbox"/> Unemployed <input type="checkbox"/> Full-time carer <input type="checkbox"/> Employed, on maternity leave/ paternity leave/career break (circle as appropriate) <input type="checkbox"/> Student <input type="checkbox"/> Retired <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say
<p>Qualifications</p> <p>Tick every box that applies if you have any of the qualifications listed.</p> <p>If your UK qualification is not listed, tick the box that contains its nearest equivalent.</p> <p>If you have qualifications gained outside the UK, tick the 'Foreign qualifications' box and the nearest UK equivalents (if known).</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 - 4 O levels /CSEs /GCSEs (any grades), Entry Level, Foundation Diploma <input type="checkbox"/> NVQ Level1, Foundation GNVQ, Basic Skills <input type="checkbox"/> 5+ O levels (passes) /CSEs (grade 1) /GCSEs (grades A*-C), School Certificate, 1 A level / 2 -3 AS levels /VCEs, Higher Diploma <input type="checkbox"/> NVQ Level 2, Intermediate GNVQ, City and Guilds Craft, BTEC First /General Diploma, RSA Diploma <input type="checkbox"/> Apprenticeship <input type="checkbox"/> 2+ A levels /VCEs, 4+ AS levels, Higher School Certificate, Progression /Advanced Diploma <input type="checkbox"/> NVQ Level 3, Advanced GNVQ, City and Guilds Advanced Craft, ONC, OND, BTEC National, RSA Advanced Diploma <input type="checkbox"/> Degree (for example BA, BSc), Higher degree (for example MA, PhD, PGCE) <input type="checkbox"/> NVQ Level 4 -5, HNC, HND, RSA Higher Diploma, BTEC Higher Level <input type="checkbox"/> Professional qualifications (for example teaching, nursing, accountancy) <input type="checkbox"/> Other vocational /work-related qualifications <input type="checkbox"/> Foreign qualifications <input type="checkbox"/> No qualifications <input type="checkbox"/> Do not know <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 - 4 O levels /CSEs /GCSEs (any grades), Entry Level, Foundation Diploma <input type="checkbox"/> NVQ Level1, Foundation GNVQ, Basic Skills <input type="checkbox"/> 5+ O levels (passes) /CSEs (grade 1) /GCSEs (grades A*-C), School Certificate, 1 A level / 2 -3 AS levels /VCEs, Higher Diploma <input type="checkbox"/> NVQ Level 2, Intermediate GNVQ, City and Guilds Craft, BTEC First /General Diploma, RSA Diploma <input type="checkbox"/> Apprenticeship <input type="checkbox"/> 2+ A levels /VCEs, 4+ AS levels, Higher School Certificate, Progression /Advanced Diploma <input type="checkbox"/> NVQ Level 3, Advanced GNVQ, City and Guilds Advanced Craft, ONC, OND, BTEC National, RSA Advanced Diploma <input type="checkbox"/> Degree (for example BA, BSc), Higher degree (for example MA, PhD, PGCE) <input type="checkbox"/> NVQ Level 4 -5, HNC, HND, RSA Higher Diploma, BTEC Higher Level <input type="checkbox"/> Professional qualifications (for example teaching, nursing, accountancy) <input type="checkbox"/> Other vocational /work-related qualifications <input type="checkbox"/> Foreign qualifications <input type="checkbox"/> No qualifications <input type="checkbox"/> Do not know <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say
<p>Your household: Do your child's parents/guardians both live together or apart? (Tick as appropriate)</p>		<input type="checkbox"/> live together <input type="checkbox"/> live apart

Thank you for your help. For more information phone me [mobile number] or email me: [email address], OR my supervisor Dr. Sevasti-Melissa Nolas: [email address]

Appendix Four: Code names in NVivo (nodes)

Note: These broad codes were developed from an emergent analysis in the field, through reading the field notes and as I analysed in NVIVO, and some were theoretical codes informed by the broader literature e.g. materiality (discussed in Chapter Two). Subsequent sub-codes were developed on further analysis of these codes.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Affect <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Affect – children ● Affect – parents ● Affect – PK ● Affect – staff ● Bodies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bodies – children ● Bodies – parents ● Bodies – PK ● Bodies – staff ● Bodies – rules/expectations ● Bodies – silence and listening ● Bodies – sitting ● Bodies – sounds ● Child-initiated <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Saying ‘no’/commanding ● Choice / inquiry / exploration ● Consent ● Independence ● Show and tell ● Child-subject positions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Good ● Clever ● Desiring ● Comment on core child by another ● Feedback <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Behaviour ● Learning ● Knowing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learning ● Learning behaviour ● Mimicking ● Mistakes ● Not knowing ● Material environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Methodology ● Parent subject positions (good/clever) ● Parents and outside school <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● After school clubs ● Family relations ● Home learning relations ● Learn from children ● Family relations ● Neighbourhood ● Parent employment/education ● Parent view on classroom ● Parents in school ● Family home ● Staff as parent ● Peers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collaboration ● Relations ● Talk partners ● Performance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ability Challenge Difficult Easy ● Attainment and assessment ● Task completion / ‘done’ ● Special needs ● Staff <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Class size ● Interest/knowledge of child ● Learn from Year One children ● Employment/education ● Priorities/purposes of education/schooling ● Relationships and support ● Subject positions (good/clever/desiring) ● Tidying up ● Time/pressure/work load
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Appendix Five: Opt-out letters to children, Daleview



ALL ABOUT THE LEARNING STUDY

My name is Perpetua Kirby. I am a research student at the University of Sussex.

I am interested in what helps children to learn. Over the next year I will be spending time in your classroom. I will be looking, listening and talking to children, teachers and some parents.

I would like to invite you to explore with me 'what helps us to learn?'



What would you like to talk about?

I would like to know about the things that help you to learn. I want to know when learning is good and what makes it harder to learn.

Why am I being asked?

You will be in [name of teachers] class after the summer, and I will be spending time in her classroom.

What will I have to do?

- ❖ We will have some chats together about learning.
- ❖ Together we will talk about pictures, do some drawing and puzzles.
- ❖ Together we will answer some questions on a school computer about your learning and the school.
- ❖ We will take part in group discussions with other children in your class.
- ❖ I will spend time in your class watching what you do. Such as drawing, writing, making things, reading, playing, maths. Sometimes we will talk about what you are doing.
- ❖ Occasionally, I will watch you outside the classroom. Such as in the dinner hall, the playground, assemblies or school clubs, to see what learning happens there. Sometimes we will talk about what you are doing.
- ❖ Occasionally, I will ask to photograph, film or record what you say and do, so that I can remember what was happening and talk about it with you later.

When will you be in the classroom and for how long?

I will spend a two weeks in your Reception class this term. During all your time in Year One I will spend a few days each week in your classroom.

Do I have to take part?

No. You do not have to talk to me if you don't want to. You can also change your mind at any time. It is okay to say if you don't want to talk to me or want me to watch what you are doing. It is okay to say you do not want me to film you or record what you say. No one will mind or be cross. I will check with you each day that you still want to take part.

Will others be able to tell it was me who said something?

No. I will write and talk about the things that you tell me but **I will not use your real name**. I will not tell your teachers what you say. Sometimes others may be able to recognise you from what you say or draw but I will not share things that you don't want others seeing.

I store everything on a computer. Your name will not be included on the computer. I lock your drawings and other papers in a cupboard. No one else will see or listen to any of the video films or sound recordings, and I will delete them when I have finished using them to remember what happened.

When we talk in a group it is best only to say what you are happy for others to know, as I cannot be sure other children will not also tell other people.

The only time I need to tell others what you tell or show me, is if you or others are in danger. Then we will need to speak to another adult so they can make sure you are safe.

Could anything bad happen because of talking to you?

It's very unlikely that anything bad will happen. Sometimes children can get upset when they talk about difficult things. But if that happens, there will always be an adult to help you. Other adults who work with children have checked this research project to make sure it is safe for you to take part.

Will anything good happen because of talking to you?

I hope that you will enjoy taking part. You may find out more about how you learn and what helps you to feel comfortable to learn. The things you share with me will help schools, teachers and other adults to work well with children.

How to contact Perpetua

Please let me know if you have any questions or if you do not want to take part. I will be in the classroom to meet with children and your parents/carers at home time on Thursday 25th and in the morning before school on Friday 26th June. Or you can talk to [name of class teachers and name of head teacher] at school.

You can ask an adult to help you telephone me on: [mobile number], email me: [email address], or write to: Perpetua Kirby, Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY), University of Sussex, Sussex House, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RH.

Appendix Six: Opt-In letters to parents, Daleview



LEARNING STUDY – PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMATION SHEET

Hello, my name is Perpetua Kirby. I am a doctoral researcher from the University of Sussex and I would like to tell you about a study that I am doing in your child's class at [name of school].

I will be spending time each week in your child's class over the next year researching *how* young children engage in learning and what *supports* them to do so. I am interested in children's own beliefs, experiences and aspirations, and how they see themselves as learners. Also, how classroom activities and relationships support and change how children engage in learning. I am interested in what helps children to own their learning and to feel able to have a go even when things get difficult.

There is a lack of understanding about young children's daily experience of learning in the classroom. This study has been funded to address this knowledge gap by undertaking an in-depth study of one classroom. [Name of head teacher] has agreed to this study taking place in [name of school].

I will be inviting all the children in the class to participate in an investigation of 'what helps us to learn?' After thinking about the information below, if you agree for your child to take part in this study, I hope to be able to get to know your son/daughter over the next year. The study involves a series of activities which I hope will be fun and interesting. I will also be asking for your son/daughter's input to make these activities the best they can be.

What would I expect if my son/daughter takes part in the Learning Study?

If you agree for your son/daughter to take part in the Learning Study I hope that they would be involved in the following activities:

- A one-to-one conversation (informal 'interview'): this conversation would take place in the first six weeks of next Autumn term. It would be an opportunity for your child and me to get to know each other. It would also focus on what helps your son/daughter to learn and what makes it harder to learn. They will be asked to draw and talk about pictures of when they feel good and less good learning. Together we will do some puzzles and talk about what it feels like when doing easier and harder puzzles.
- Observations: I will observe your son/daughter working and playing alongside other children in the classroom. Occasionally, I will observe them outside the classroom, for example in the dining hall, playground, assembly and clubs, to see what learning happens in these other places.
- Occasional informal chats about their learning as they engage in their day to day classroom or out of class activities.
- Occasional group discussions and activities with other children in the class. This will involve introducing a scenario or theme related to the study for children to discuss together. I will also use Philosophy for Children, which is an approach encouraging children to explore a theme to generate their deeper understanding. Again, a topic is introduced to them, the children come up with some questions that they want to

discuss around this theme, then vote on the one of most interest to them and discuss it in the knowledge that there may be no right answer.

I am working with the school who will also provide background information about the class of children.

When would it take place and for how long?

The study starts in June 2015 and ends in July 2016. I will be spending a few days in the class during the last weeks in the Reception class to help me understand their transition from Reception to Year One. Then I will spend a few days each week in their Year One class, from September until July 2016.

Can my son/daughter leave the study at any time?

Your son/daughter can change his/her mind about being involved in the study at any time and withdraw their participation. You can also decide that you would like your child to cease participating at any time. Leaving the study will have no consequence to your child or you. I will continue to check with your child at each research activity and over the year if they are happy to remain involved. You can also contact me or their class teachers until the end of the research (December 2016) to tell me that you no longer wish your son/daughter to be involved and to have their recordings withdrawn from the research.

What will happen to the information your son/daughter gives me?

Over the course of the research we will make a range of recordings. These might include:

- Audio recordings of our conversations or group discussions.
- Photographic or film recordings of their classroom activities.
- Visual records: such as drawings by your child.
- Written records of my observations of the classroom and other school activities, and written records of research activities.

These recordings will be stored safely encrypted on a password protected laptop. Only I will be able to access what your son/daughter tells me and show me. These records will be analysed by myself. Some anonymous information provided by your child may be shown and discussed with my research supervisors and an advisory group of educational professionals (not those at your child's school) who are advising the research to develop the analysis. This will focus on the things that engage children like your son/daughter in education.

Examples from the recordings will be used in policy briefings, journal articles, books, and presentations. I will work with your son/daughter to check if they don't want anything included.

Any video, audio or photographic recordings will be erased when I have finished analysing the research information. These will not be included in write up or presentations of the research.

I will provide you and you son/daughter with a summary research report in the autumn term of 2016 (ie when they are Year Two). I will offer you both an opportunity to discuss the report. In the meantime, if you would like to know how the research is going please do get in touch with me or their class teachers.

Who will have access to my son/daughter's information and will others be able to tell it's my child?

Your child's participation in the study is anonymous. I will not use your child's real name in any written or oral presentations of the research. Only I will have access to your son/daughter's

information. I will keep their personal details (name, contact telephone number, email address) separate to the recordings made above. I will destroy the codes I use to identify your son/daughter on the project at the end of the study.

What they tell me during the study is confidential. This means that what they say stays between me and your son/daughter and I won't tell you, their siblings, teachers, friends or significant others what they've said to me. The only time I would need to break this confidentiality is if they tell me that they are in danger. I would then need to approach an adult (yourself or someone else in authority) who would be able to help them, but I would try to do this with their permission.

What does your son/daughter get out of it and are there any risks?

The research aims to understand how children like your son/daughter engage in learning. I hope that this information can be used by teachers and other professionals working with children. By taking part in the study they will have an opportunity to reflect on themselves as learners and how they learn, and I hope this will be of some benefit to them. I hope too that they will enjoy taking part in the various activities and they will learn something about research as we undertake our class investigation into 'what helps us to learn?'.

During the autumn term I will ask up to 6 children to be involved in the study in more depth, and will get in touch with their families at that time to see if they are happy to be more involved. This would include asking these children to develop a learning portfolio, taking part in regular conversations about their learning, and visiting them at home. Due to a lack of resources I will not be able to include more than a few children in these activities, and it might be that classmates become jealous of these children. I will explain to the class that there will continue to be opportunities for all children to be involved in the research throughout the year. This includes taking part in group discussions and that any child can talk with me about things they think are important to their learning.

I will work with the classroom teacher to ensure that the research does not take up too much of your child's classroom time or is detrimental to their school work.

Who is the researcher and who funds me?

I am a doctoral research student doing my PhD at the University of Sussex, within the Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY). You can find out about CIRCY at www.sussex.ac.uk/esw/circy. I have 20 years research experience in working with children and young people, finding out about their lives, including in schools.

I am supervised by Professor Colleen Mclaughlin, Tel. [Tel. No.], Email: [email address] and Dr Servasti-Melissa Nolas, Tel. [Tel. No.], Email: [email address]. The research is also being supported by an advisory group of educational professionals, and I can provide their names if you would like to know more about this group.

The study is being government funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (www.esrc.ac.uk). It is also part funded by a charity called Progressway (www.progressway.eu) that aims to ensure schools provide all young people with supportive opportunities to learn and grow.

The research has been approved by the University of Sussex's Social Sciences & Arts Cross-School Research Ethics Committee (C-REC). The Chair of this committee is Prof. Janet Boddy ([email address])

What happens next?

Please do get in touch with me if you want to find out more about this research. I will be in the classroom to speak with parents and children immediately after school next Thursday 26th June and just before school on Friday 27th June. Or you can contact me on: Phone: [phone number], Email: [email address]. Address: Perpetua Kirby, Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY), University of Sussex, Sussex House, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RH.

If you are happy for your son/daughter to take part in this study you do NOT need to do anything more.

If you would not like your son/daughter to take part in the Learning Study then please complete the form below and return to me or to your class teachers. Or you phone or email myself or the school to let us know ([name of school phone number and email. Your child will not be disadvantaged in any way for not participating in the study.

IF YOU DO NOT WANT YOUR CHILDREN TO PARTICIPATE IN THE LEARNING STUDY:

I do NOT agree for my child, _____ [Name of child], to participate in the Learning Study. I do not want the researcher, Perpetua Kirby, to interview or engage my child in the research activities. I understand this will not disadvantage my child in any way.

Name of parent/carers: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please return this form to [name of teacher] or the researcher, Perpetua Kirby.

Appendix Seven: Opt-out letter and consent form to core children, Daleview



Would you like to do more in the Learning Study?

My name is Perpetua Kirby. I am a research student at the University of Sussex. I have been spending time in your class finding out what helps children to learn. I have been looking, listening and talking to you, other children and teachers. I will continue to spend a few days every week in your class. Would you be happy to spend more time with me exploring your learning?



What would we explore?

I would like to continue looking, listening and asking what helps you to learn. Together we would explore when is learning good and what makes it harder to learn?

Why am I being asked?

I am talking to everyone in the class but I only have enough time to talk a lot with six children. So I have tried to include six children with different experiences. Including boys and girls, younger and older children in the class, and children with different ideas about what helps us to learn.

What will I have to do?

I will invite you to take part in group chats with other children in the class, but I would also like to spend about a day with you every two weeks to do some extra things:

- I will spend some time watching what you do in the classroom, and sometimes outside the class. Such as writing, playing, maths, making things, talking with your friends and the teacher, lunch times, assemblies. Sometimes we will talk about what you are doing and thinking.
- We will have chats together about your learning.
- We will collect things that are important to you about your learning. Together we will decide how best to do this. For example we could use drawing, writing, making things, photographs, singing, or dressing up and acting.
- Sometimes I will photograph, film or sound record what you are doing or saying, so we can remember and talk about it later.
- I would like to spend a whole day with you. From the morning at home, on your way to school, during your school day, and after school until the early evening at home.
- I would like to interview your parent or grownup about your learning and family.

When will you be in the classroom and for how long?

I will spend a few days each week in your Year One class until the end of the summer term. I would like to spend about one day every two weeks focusing on you and your learning.

Do I have to take part?

No. You do not have to talk to me if you don't want to. If you do say 'Yes', you can change your mind at any time. It is okay to say if you don't want to talk to me or don't want me to watch what you are doing. It is okay to say you do not want me to film or record what you say. No one will mind or be cross. I will check with you that you still want to take part.

Will others be able to tell it was me who said something?

No. I will write and talk about the things that you tell me **but I will not use your real name**. I will not tell your teachers what you say. Sometimes others may be able to recognise you from what you say or draw, but I will not share things that you don't want others seeing.

I store everything on a computer. Your name will not be included on the computer. I lock your drawings and other papers in a cupboard. No one else will see or listen to any of the video films or sound recordings, and I will delete them when I have finished.

When we talk in a group it is best only to say what you are happy for others to know, as I cannot be sure other children will not also tell other people.

The only time I need to tell others what you tell or show me, is if you or others are in danger. Then we will need to speak to another adult so they can make sure you are safe.

Could anything bad happen because of talking to you?

It's very unlikely that anything bad will happen. Sometimes children can get upset when they talk about difficult things. But if that happens, there will always be an adult to help you. Other adults who work with children have checked this research project to make sure it is safe for you.

Will anything good happen because of talking to you?

I hope that you will enjoy taking part. You may find out more about how you learn and what helps you learn. The things you share with me will help schools, teachers and other adults to work well with children.

How to contact Perpetua

If you are happy to talk with me to find out more, I will arrange a meeting with you and your parent/grownup. You can tell me if you do or don't want to take part, or your parent/grownup can let me know. Or you can tell [name of teacher].

You can ask an adult to help you telephone me: [phone number], email me: [email address] , or write to me at: Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY), University of Sussex, Sussex House, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RH.

The Learning Study is being paid for by the government (Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC) and a charity working with schools (Progressway).

I have read and talked about the 'What helps us to learn?' research study with someone.

I am happy . . . (please tick if you agree):

☐ To have chats with Perpetua during my time in Year One.



☐ To collect things that are important to me about my learning, together with Perpetua



☐ For Perpetua to sound record what I say when chatting with her and when I'm learning



☐ For Perpetua to film me learning



☐ For Perpetua to take photographs of me learning

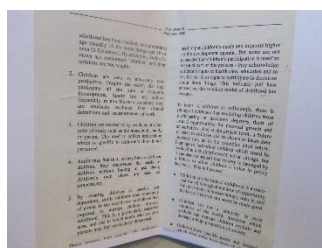


☐ For Perpetua to spend a whole school day with me, including at home in the morning and after school



I understand . . .

Perpetua will write about what I say and show her in books, and she will talk about it with other adults who work with children.



But my name will not be used.

Perpetua will only tell someone what I say or show if I or others are in danger. Then she will need to tell an adult to help keep me safe.



I can choose to stop talking with Perpetua whenever I want. No one will mind or be cross with me.



NAME OF CHILD: _____

SIGNATURE: _____

DATE: _____

Please give this form to Perpetua Kirby, Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY), University of Sussex, Sussex House, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RH.

Or to [name of teacher] at [name of school].

Appendix Eight: Opt-out letter and consent form for parents of core children, Daleview



Hello. I am doctoral research student at the University of Sussex and you may remember that I wrote to you in the summer term about a study that I am doing in your child's class at school.

I am researching *how* young children engage in learning and what *supports* them to do so. I am interested in children's own beliefs, experiences and aspirations, and how they see themselves as learners. Also, how classroom activities and relationships support and change how children engage in learning. I am interested in what helps children to own their learning and to have a go even when things get difficult.

There is a lack of understanding about young children's daily experience of learning in the classroom. This study has been funded to address this knowledge gap by undertaking an in-depth study of one classroom. [Name of head] has agreed to this study taking place in [name of school].

I have been spending time each week in your child's class since the end of Reception. I have been observing and talking with all the children in the class about 'what helps us to learn?' In this second phase of the study I am asking six children to work with me in more depth, and I would like to invite your child to be part of this second phase.

After thinking about the information below, if you agree for your child to take part in this more in-depth part of the study, I hope to be able to get to know your son/daughter more over the rest of the academic year. The study involves a series of activities which I have tried to make fun and interesting. I will also be asking for your son/daughter's input to make these activities the best they can be.

What would I expect if my son/daughter takes part in the Learning Project?

I have already had a conversation with your child about their learning and observed them in the classroom. If you agree for your son/daughter to take part in this in-depth phase of the Learning Project I hope they would be involved in the following additional activities:

- Observations: I will regularly spend some time observing your son/daughter working and playing alongside other children in the classroom. Occasionally, I will observe them outside the classroom, for example in the dining hall, playground, assembly and clubs, to see what learning happens in these other places. Sometimes I will film or sound record what they are doing or saying, so that we can remember and talk about it later and I don't have to interrupt them when they are busy.

- **Regular informal chats:** I will chat to your child about their learning as they engage in their day to day classroom or out of class activities. This will include asking them to talk about what they are doing and what they are thinking while doing activities. This will be to explore how they approach learning activities and what makes it easier or harder.
- **Creating a 'learning portfolio':** we will collect materials identified by your son/daughter that say something about their learning. With my support they will identify the creative tools (e.g. photography, drawing, writing, modelling, drama) they want to use to show what is important to them in their learning.
- **A day in the life:** during the spring term I would like to spend a whole day with your child. From the morning at home, on their journey to school, during their school day, and accompanying them after school until the early evening at home.
- **Occasional group discussions and activities with other children in the class:** This will involve introducing a scenario or theme related to the study for children to discuss together. I will also use an approach called Philosophy for Children (see www.p4c.com), which encourages children to explore a theme to generate their deeper understanding. Again, a topic is introduced to them, the children come up with their own questions around this theme, then vote on the one of most interest to them and discuss it knowing there may be no right or wrong answer.

I am working with the school who will also provide background information about the class of children.

When would it take place and for how long?

This in-depth part of the study would begin after you and your child consent to taking part. It would continue until the end of Year One in July 2016.

Can my son/daughter leave the study at any time?

Your son/daughter can change his/her mind about being involved in the study at any time and withdraw their participation. You can also decide that you would like your child to cease participating at any time. Leaving the study will have no consequence to your child or you. I will continue to check with your child at each research activity and over the year if they are happy to remain involved. You can also contact me until the end of the research (December 2016) to tell me that you no longer wish your son/daughter to be involved and to have their recordings withdrawn from the research.

What will happen to the information your son/daughter gives?

Over the course of the research we will make a range of recordings. These might include:

- Audio recordings of our conversations or group discussions.
- Photographic or film recordings of your child's classroom activities.
- Visual records: such as drawings by your child.

- Written records of my observations of the classroom and other school activities, and written records of research activities.

These recordings will be stored safely encrypted on a password protected laptop. Only I will be able to access what your son/daughter tells and shows me. These records will be analysed by myself. Some anonymous information provided by your child may be shown and discussed with my research supervisors and an advisory group of educational professionals (not those at your child's school) who are advising the research to develop the analysis. This will focus on the things that engage children like your son/daughter in education.

Information from the recordings will be used in policy briefings, journal articles, books, and presentations. I will work with your son/daughter to check about anything that they tell me that they don't want used in any policy briefings, journal articles, books, and presentations.

I will provide you and you son/daughter with a summary research report in the autumn term of 2016 (i.e. when they are in Year Two) and I will invite you both to discuss the report with me. In the meantime, if you would like to know how the research is going you can get in touch at any time.

Who will have access to my son/daughter's information and will others be able to tell it's my child?

Your child's participation in the study is anonymous. I will not use your child's real name in any written or oral presentations of the research.

Only I will have access to your son/daughter's information. I will keep their personal details (name, contact telephone number, email address) separate to the recordings made above. I will destroy the codes I use to identify your son/daughter on the project at the end of the study. I will also destroy the personal contact information, unless you tell me you want me to send you details of future publications resulting from the research.

What they tell me during the study is confidential. This means that what they say stays between me and your son/daughter and I won't tell you, their siblings, teachers, friends or significant others what they've said to me. The only time I would need to break this confidentiality is if they tell me that they are in danger. I would then need to approach an adult (yourself or someone else in authority) who would be able to help them, but I would try to do this with their permission.

Audio recordings will be erased when I have finished analysing the research information. Some video stills or photographic images may be kept and used in the research write up or presentations.

Because of the type of activities being used (including photography) and that I am looking at your son/daughter's life in detail, over a year, it might be that those who know them already will recognise them in my reports. This means that I cannot

guarantee 100% anonymity. However, within the activities I am doing with your child I will be working to get your son/daughter's views about what they are comfortable with being made public.

I aim to make sure that what is public is respectful, positive and does not reveal information that is too personal or private. I do this by focusing the study on what your son/daughter does rather than who you are, avoiding photographs of faces, and involving them in the analysis process, which means that they will have a say in what things they and others have said can be communicated to those beyond the immediate study context.

Why was my son/daughter selected to be included within the in-depth part of the study?

All children in the class are being invited to be part of the Learning Study, but I only have the resources to explore learning in depth with up to six children. I want to include children with different views and experiences at this stage of the research. I have therefore selected six children that includes both boys and girls, those born at different times of the year (i.e. older and younger children), and those who identify different things about what helps them to learn.

What does your son/daughter get out of it and are there any risks?

The research aims to understand how children like your son/daughter engage in learning. I hope that this information can be used by teachers and other professionals working with children. By participating in this part of the study they will have an opportunity to reflect on themselves as learners and how they learn in some depth. Having the opportunity to reflect on learning has been found to be positive for children's learning; it is envisaged that the research may offer your daughter/son such benefits. I hope too that they will enjoy taking part in the various activities and they will learn something about research as we continue our investigation into 'what helps us to learn?'. As only a few children have been selected to participate in the more in-depth part of the study it might be that their classmates become jealous of the activities they are doing. So I am making sure there are opportunities for all children to be involved in research activities during the year. I will work with the classroom teacher to ensure that the research does not take up too much of your child's classroom time and is not detrimental to their school work.

What does my son/daughter's participation in the Learning Study mean for me as a parent/guardian?

I would like to spend a whole school day with your son/daughter, to help me understand how their school day fits within the rest of their daily life. This would mean coming to your home at around 8 in the morning, then accompanying your child on their journey to school, during their school day, and then after school into the early evening at home. I would also like to interview you to hear your views about your child's learning both at school and at home, plus some background information about you and your family. This includes your views and experiences of schooling, and

information about the ages and schooling of any other children in your family. I would audio record this interview, if you are happy for me to do so, and/or I would make notes of our conversation in notebooks. I would use the transcript and my notes of our conversation as another source of information to better understand children's experiences. I would treat this conversation anonymously and confidentially in the same way I treat the information your son/daughter gives me. The same limits of anonymity and confidentiality that apply to your son/daughter would also apply to you. The information would be stored and treated in the same way as that information provided by your son/daughter.

Who is the researcher and who is funding the research?

I am a doctoral research student doing my PhD at the University of Sussex, within the Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY). You can find out about CIRCY at www.sussex.ac.uk/esw/circy. I have 20 years research experience in working with children and young people, finding out about their lives, including in schools. I have returned to university as a student to do a doctoral research degree (Phd). I can provide my CV if you would like to know more about my research background.

I am supervised by Professor Colleen Mclaughlin, Tel. [Tel. No.], Email: [email address] and Dr Servasti-Melissa Nolas, Tel. [Tel. No.], Email: [email address]. The research is also being supported by an advisory group of educational professionals, and I can provide their names if you would like to know more about this group.

The study is being government funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (www.esrc.ac.uk). It is also part funded by a charity called Progressway (www.progressway.eu) that aims to ensure schools provide all children and young people with supportive opportunities to learn and grow.

The research has been approved by the University of Sussex's Social Sciences & Arts Cross-School Research Ethics Committee (C-REC). Project Approval Reference: ER/PK44/1. The Chair of this committee is Prof. Janet Boddy ([email address])

What happens next?

If you think you and your son/daughter would like to participate in the in-depth part of the Learning Study then I would like to arrange a time to discuss this with you. You will need to consent to your child's involvement in the study as they are under the age of 16. Once you and they have agreed to take part I will begin to involve your son/daughter in the classroom research activities.

If you or your son/daughter does not want to participate in this more in-depth part of the research then please let me know or tell the class teachers, [names of class teachers], at [name of school]. Your child will not be disadvantaged in any way for not participating in the study.

I will try to meet you at drop off or pick up time to arrange a time to meet with you. Or else you can contact me on: Phone: [mobile number], Email: [email address]. Address:

Perpetua Kirby, Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth (CIRCY),
University of Sussex, Sussex House, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RH.



I agree for my son/daughter to take part in the above University of Sussex study. I, and my son/daughter, have had the project explained to us, and I have read and understood the Information Sheet which I may keep for my records, and I have asked questions which have been answered to my satisfaction.

1) I understand that agreeing to take part means that I am willing for my son/daughter to (please tick):

- ☐ Be interviewed by the researcher
- ☐ Be observed during school activities
- ☐ Allow the interview and observations to be audio recorded
- ☐ Allow the observations of school activities to be filmed
- ☐ Allow the observations of school activities to be photographed
- ☐ Take part in research activities to develop a learning portfolio with the researcher
- ☐ Be visited for a school day, including at home from morning to the early event.

2) I understand that what I and my son/daughter say and show will be included in written articles, reports, books and presentations. The aim is to help professionals and families understand more about what supports children to engage in learning.

3) I understand that my son/daughter will participate in the research using a pseudonym (not their real name).

4) I understand that because of the nature of the activities that my son/daughter will be involved in (especially photography) it will not always be possible for the study team to entirely hide my son/daughter's identity and people who already know my child may recognise them.

5) I understand that the research team will work with my son/daughter to make sure that they are comfortable and happy with anything that is made public about them. I understand that their personal information (e.g. name and contact details) will never be connected to what they say and shown with their photographs.

6) I understand that anything that my son/daughter tells the researcher is confidential unless they reveal that they are in danger in which case the researcher will need to get in touch with me or give my child's information to another adult in authority who might be able to help them.

7) I understand that my son/daughter's participation is voluntary and that I and they can choose to withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.

8) I consent to the processing of my son/daughter's personal information for the purposes of this study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the UK Data Protection Act 1998 and relevant EU legislation.

9) I agree to be interviewed for the purposes of the study and that my information will be treated in the same way as my child's information, as above.

10) I agree/disagree* for my interview to be audio recorded. (* Please amend as appropriate)

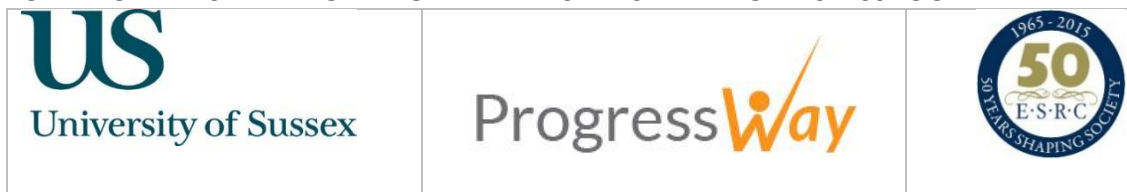
NAME OF CHILD: _____

NAME OF PARENT/GUARDIAN: _____

SIGNATURE: _____ DATE: _____

Appendix Nine: Teacher consent form, Daleview

Supporting Information (ER/PK44/1): REVISED INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM FOR ALL STAFF WORKING IN THE RESEARCH YEAR ONE CLASSROOM.



YEAR ONE LEARNING STUDY - STAFF INFORMATION SHEET & CONSENT FORM

My name is Perpetua Kirby and I am a doctoral research student at the University of Sussex. I am undertaking a year-long research project in [name of teachers] Year One class.

The aims of the research

I am researching *how* young children engage in learning and what *supports* them to do so. I am interested in children's own beliefs, experiences and aspirations, and how they see themselves as learners. Also, how classroom activities and relationships support and change how children engage in learning. I am interested in what helps children to own their learning and to have a go even when things get difficult. There is a lack of understanding about young children's daily experience of learning in the classroom. This study has been funded to address this knowledge gap by undertaking an in-depth study of one classroom. [Name of head teacher] has agreed to this study taking place in [name of school].

The aim is to offer an opportunity for the children to reflect on what supports them to learn, through engaging and collaborative research activities. Also, to explore this theme with the staff working with the Year One classroom. The research findings will be reported back and discussed with school staff, as well as with the participating children/parents. Also, to benefit children and schools nationally (and even internationally) the learning will be disseminated through articles and conference presentations. The children, staff and school will be anonymised in any reports.

Brief description of research procedure:

a) Whole Year One class:

I am spending time in [name of teachers] class during the weeks of June 29th and July 13th. From September, I will be spending a few days each week in [name of teachers] class until July 2016. I am observing and talking with all the children in the class about 'what helps us to learn'. This includes an informal interview and group discussions. Parents/carers for the whole class have been sent an information letter with details of the study and a form to be signed and returned if they do not wish for their child(ren) to participate in the study. Before beginning I stress to the children that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions; rather, I am simply interested in their views. Children are asked if they would like to take part in the study, and given the option to withdraw from the study at any point. They are told that they can skip any research activities or any questions they do not wish to answer.

Six selected children: In the autumn six children will be invited to participate in the study in more depth. The children and their parents/carers will be asked for their consent to be involved more within the research. They can withdraw at any time. The research activities with these children include more informal interviewing plus developing their own learning portfolio, using creative methods to be decided with the children. This may include audio recording, photographing and filming them at work. The children will be visited at home and their parents/carers interviewed.

Staff working in the Reception and Year One classrooms: As well as observing in the classroom, as part of the study I would also like to interview staff working with the Reception and Year One classrooms. This includes the class teacher, teaching assistants, supply teachers, other specialist staff as well as the Head of Year and the Head Teacher. Themes for the interview include:

- Information about your role/s at school and teaching career.
- What supports and hinders children's engagement in learning
- School support for staff
- National and school policies and guidance for pupil engagement
- Views on school and education.

All staff will be invited to answer an on-line questionnaire about the supportive culture of the school.¹⁴

Consent and recording of interviews

As a staff member you do not have to participate in the interviews. You can also withdraw from the study at any time or skip research questions. I may ask to audio record the interview but it is fine if you'd prefer me to write notes instead. I will show you either the transcripts or a summary of my notes for you to check and comment on. What you say will be confidential and anonymised in subsequent reports. It may be that you are still identifiable from what you say but I will check if you are uncomfortable with others seeing.

Storage of information

I store everything from the project on a computer using passwords, and no names will be included on the computer. I lock any papers related to the research in a cupboard. I will discuss anonymised samples of data with my university supervisors and an advisory group of educational professionals to help with the analysis. The on-line survey information is stored in an encrypted form on the Progressway server.

Feedback

A summary research report will be provided at the end of 2016 and the researcher will offer the staff and participation children/families the opportunity to discuss the findings. During the research phase the researcher will at termly intervals share generic anonymised feedback about the research with the pupils and staff but not information about individual children, families or staff.

¹⁴ Note: This was a ProgressWay questionnaire that was offered to the school but not implemented.

Publications

The research data will be used within the researcher's PhD thesis and also in other journal papers, articles, books and presentations. The research outputs will be disseminated nationally and internationally, by the researcher, and through the university, funder and other research and professional networks. The school will/not be named and acknowledged/anonymised.

More about the researcher

I have 20 years research experience working with children and young people, including in schools. I have primarily focused on how children are involved in organisations, both in their own care and in governance. I have returned to university to do a doctoral research degree (Phd) within the Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth at the University of Sussex ([email address]). Having watched my own children start school I am interested in what engages young children in their learning. I can provide my CV if you would like to know more about my research background.

I am supervised by Professor Colleen Mclaughlin, Tel. [tel. no.], Email: [address], who is the Head of the Education Department, and Dr Servasti-Melissa Nolas, Tel. [Tel. no.], Email: [address]. The research is also being supported by an advisory group of educational professionals, and I can provide their names if you would like to know more about this group.

Who funds the research?

The study is being government funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (www.esrc.ac.uk). It is also part funded by a charity called Progressway (www.progressway.eu) that aims to assist schools to provide all young people with supportive opportunities to learn and grow. The research has been approved by the University of Sussex's Social Sciences & Arts Cross-School Research Ethics Committee (C-REC). The Chair of this committee is Prof. Janet Boddy ([email address])

Consent Form

I agree to participate in the Learning Study undertaken by Perpetua Kirby:

(Please tick)

- I agree to be observed working with children in the school
- I agree to being interviewed by the researcher
- I agree to having my interview/s audio recorded
- I understand my information will be reported anonymously in reports and presentations.

Name of School: _____

Name of Staff Member: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix Ten: Head teacher consent form, Daleview

I am required, by the university to inform you that the research project has been approved by the University of Sussex's Social Sciences & Arts Cross-School Research Ethics Committee (C-REC). The Chair of this committee is Prof. Janet Boddy ([email address]) I am required to abide by ethical guidelines when working in your school, which covers topics such as gaining appropriate consent, permitting children to withdraw from the study, and keeping data confidential. For your information, I have detailed below an overview of the study and how I plan to ensure I meet with ethical requirements. I'd be really grateful if you would let me know that you're happy with the project, as outlined. Anything you want to discuss or amend, please let me know.

Brief description of procedure: As discussed, I will be researching from now until to July 2016. I will begin this research in the last weeks' of the children's time in Reception (the weeks of June 29th and July 13th), so that I can contextualise their transition to Year One. I will then continue the research in September 2015 until July 2016, attending the Year One class several days weekly. I will be focusing on the whole [name of Year One class], but also researching in more detail with up to six children. And I will be interviewing staff. Here are some more details:

- a) **Whole Year One class:** I will introduce myself and present what the research is about when I first start working in the classroom. Children will have plenty of opportunities to ask me questions. Research activities will include observing the children in their class and occasionally in other parts of the school (eg assemblies, dinner hall, playground, clubs). Early in the autumn term I will invite each child for a one-to-one conversation (informal 'interview') which would be an opportunity for each child and me to get to know each other and to discuss what makes them feel comfortable to learn; they will be asked to draw and talk about pictures of when they feel good and less good learning. Together we will do some puzzles and talk about what it feels like when doing easier and harder puzzles. We will also do a short on-line survey about learning and the school.

Throughout the year we will have occasional informal chats about their learning as they engage in their day to day classroom or out of class activities and group discussions and activities. The latter will involve introducing a scenario or theme related to the study for children to discuss together. I will also use Philosophy for Children, which is an approach encouraging children to explore a theme to generate their deeper understanding. Again, a topic is introduced to them, the children come up with some questions that they want to discuss around this theme, then vote on the one of most interest to them and discuss it in the knowledge that there may be no right answer.

The school will be asked to provide background information on each children in the class (e.g. ethnicity, free school meals and academic attainment).

Whole class consent procedure: Parents/carers for the whole class were given the information letter that I emailed previously, which detailed the study and a form to be signed and returned if they do not wish for their child(ren) to participate in the study. An information sheet was also provided for the children. Parents/carers were given two weeks to read and respond to this letter. They were informed that I will be around at drop off/pick up on two days last week to meet and discuss the research with those who'd like to do so.

They were asked to inform either myself or the school if they do not wish for their child to be asked to participate in the study. They can do this using the form, by phone, email or in person. Children will also be asked for verbal consent to participate in the study after receiving an initial briefing from me in their classroom on the nature of the study and the procedures involved. Please note, no parent has indicated their refusal at this point

Before beginning any data collection session, I will stress to the children that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions; rather, I am just interested in their views. Children will be asked if they would like to take part in the study, and given the option to withdraw from the study at any point. They will be told that they can skip any research activities or any questions they do not wish to answer. I will ask the class teacher to check in occasionally with the children, when I am not present in the classroom, to find out if anyone would prefer not to be involved in the research. In discussion with the class teacher those children who choose (or whose parents choose) not to participate will be provided with an alternative activity of equivalent 'value' so that they do not feel punished or hardship.

b) Six selected children: A few weeks into the autumn term six children will be invited to participate in the study in more depth. Research activities will include more regular observation of these children in their class and occasionally in other parts of the school, plus regular informal interviewing with the children. Also, I will work with them to develop their own learning portfolio using creative methods to be decided with the children. This may include audio recording, photographing and filming them at work. I will also visit these children at home and interview their parents/carers.

Six selected children consent procedure: Their parents/carers will be sent an additional information letter with further details of how their child is being asked to participate in the study and a permission slip to be signed and returned in order for their child to participate in the study. An information sheet will also be provided for the children. Parents/carers will be given two weeks to read and respond to this letter. They must return the permission form in order for their child to be asked to participate in the study (unless there are literacy or cultural issues which act as a barrier to providing written consent, in which case oral consent will be sufficient). They will be invited together with their child to meet with the researcher to discuss the research and ask any

questions. Children will also be asked for verbal consent and, if they feel comfortable doing so to give their written consent, to participate in the study after receiving an initial briefing on the nature of the study and the procedures involved. Parents/children can return the form to myself or to the school. Before beginning any data collection session, the researchers will again stress to the children that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions; rather, I am interested in their views. Children will be asked if they would like to take part in the study, and given the option to withdraw from the study at any point. They will be told that they can skip over any research activities or questions that they do not wish to answer. I will also maintain contact with parents – at the school gate – and regularly check in with them whether they and their child are happy to continue. I will ask them to check with their child.

(Letter and opt-in consent forms for parents/carers and children will be shown to you nearer the time).

- c) **Staff working in the Year One classroom:** As part of the study the researcher would ask staff working with the specified Year One classroom to be interviewed on one or more occasion on what supports children's engagement in learning. This includes the class teacher, teaching assistants, supply teachers, other specialist staff as well as the Head of Year and the Head Teacher. Staff would be given an information sheet and be asked to sign a consent form agreeing to participate in the research. It will be made clear that they do not have to participate and that they can withdraw from the study or skip a question. Staff will be asked if the researcher can audio record their interviews, and they will be shown the transcripts for their comments. If not recorded, they will be shown a summary of the notes. What they say will be confidential and anonymised in subsequent reports. In addition, I would like to invite all school staff will to complete an on-line anonymous questionnaire, managed by the research partner Progressway (www.progressway.eu), about the supportive culture of the school, again this is completely voluntary¹⁵. I will show you a copy of this questionnaire in advance, to ensure you are happy with it or want to add/amend any questions.

Information Storage

All digital research information is stored on a computer using passwords, and no names will be included on the computer. Any papers related to the research are stored in a locked cupboard. Consent forms and any sensitive material are kept in my supervisor's University locked office (or else consent forms can be locked at the school). I will discuss anonymised samples of data with my university supervisors and an advisory group of educational professionals to help with the analysis. The on-line survey information is stored in an encrypted form on the Progressway server.

¹⁵ Note: This ProgressWay questionnaire was offered to the school but not implemented.

Feedback

A summary research report will be provided at the end of 2016 and the researcher will offer the staff and participation children/families the opportunity to discuss the findings. During the research phase the researcher will at termly intervals share generic anonymised feedback about the research with the pupils and staff but not information about individual children, families or staff.

Publications

The research data will be used within the researcher's PhD thesis and also in other journal papers, articles, books and presentations. The research outputs will be disseminated nationally and internationally, by the researcher, and through the university, funder and other research and professional networks. The school will/not be named and acknowledged/anonymised (unless agreed otherwise at some future date).

Further contact information

If you have any other future queries, my supervisors' names, telephone numbers and email addresses: Prof. Colleen Mclaughlin, Head of Education, Education Department, University of Sussex, Tel. [Tel. No.], Email: [email address], and Dr Servasti-Melissa Nolas Tel. [Tel. No.], Email: [email address].

The study is being government funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (www.esrc.ac.uk). It is also part funded by a charity, Progressway (www.progressway.eu), that aims to ensure schools provide all young people with supportive opportunities to learn and grow. The research is also being supported by an advisory group of educational professionals (names can be provided upon request).

If you have any queries about the research do let me know. If you are happy with what you have read please could you let me know that you:

- understand the requirements of children who take part in the research
- understand the requirements of the staff who take part in the research
- have received detailed descriptions of the methods and materials to be used
- understand the research findings will be published and disseminated
- understand photographic images of materials/environments within the school (but not including children), that do not identify the name/location of the school, may be used in presentations/written outputs.
- give approval for the research to take place at your school.

Name:

Signed:

Date:

Appendix Eleven: Examples of staff feedback to children, Daleview

Categories adapted from Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Mercer (2005).

Where am I going? Confirmation Response is correct/adequate Rejected Response is incorrect/inadequate	○ Simple confirmation: 'Good', 'well done'
	○ Superlative: 'Well done, that's looking fantastic' (Ms. Peach)
	○ Nonverbal communication: Ms. Heath asks for everyone to say their names with a 'y' sound, one child adds 'Ms. Yeath' which gets a high five.
	○ Feedback about the self as a person: 'good girl/boy' or 'clever'
	○ Signal incorrect/unsuitable without feedback on how to improve it: 'Ooh, not quite'
	○ Rejected as incorrect/unsuitable by questioning the response: 'Is that a sentence?'
	○ Rejected by ignoring wrong answers: mostly when shouted out.
	○ Identified as incorrect/unsuitable and encourages child/ren to have another go: When Tamas counts '10, 20, 13, 14' Ms. Peach explains that 'one thing is not quite right' and asks all the children if they can 'spot it'.
	○ Cued elicitation: Ms. Carver probes for the name of where information is searched on the computer, 'the int?' and someone offers 'internet.'
	○ Clarify child's response: 'What do you mean you can't double it, do you measure it or double it?'
How am I going? Information on progress and how to proceed	○ Reward: A teaching assistant, Ms. French, is probing for a word that means the same as 'giant', Dominic says 'a giant, giant, giant tummy', and then 'giant legs' and is given a sticker (whilst not having identified another word).
	○ Provide the solution: Ms. Carver wants Gill to say a sentence about ice cream, but when she does not say anything, the teacher offers 'My favourite ice-cream is strawberry', telling Gill that this is a sentence. Gill still cannot say more than 'cone'. Ms. carver says 'how about I like eating cones', is that okay?', 'Yes' says gill. 'Brilliant' says Ms. Carver.
	○ Identify what the child has been done well: Julia shows a self-portrait (which has a hole in the paper) to Ms. Fielding, 'did you know the pupil in the eyes is actually a hole. So your portrait is very scientifically accurate. [there is hole in one eye]. And you've got blue eyes and rosy red cheeks. Beautiful hair. Excellent.'
	○ Feedback on directions to acquire more, different, or correct information That's a 'boring' adjective, 'only thing I don't want to see is capital letter in the middle of words'.
	○ Feedback on child's learning progress In PE, Ms. Fletcher says 'you have improved so much. Your position got stronger and your arms stronger'.
Where to next?	○ Extrinsic rewards: work completed resulting in free-choice time, stickers, marbles, certificate, applause and marshmallow clap, pat on the back
	○ Enhanced challenge: Frequently used in Clifftop.
	○ Feedback about self-regulation: 'it's the first time we've read an orange book . . . no one got upset, when you got to a tricky word you tried and read it' (Ms. Peach)
	○ More information about what is/not understood: Ms. Fletcher says Kai has not finished his sentence and they're talking about describing words but he hasn't used any. Other children are asked to offer suggestions.
	○ Indicating the future value of the work: Ms. Sands says knowing how to give instructions will be important as 'you go up the school, to programme'.