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Helen Fisher

'It would help if the teacher helps you a bit more…instead of going to the brainiest who don't need a lot of help': exploring the perspectives of dissatisfied girls on the periphery of primary classroom life'

This study explores the perspectives of three girls, identified through progressive sampling, from an original study of over 100 children's behaviour in, and feelings towards, literacy and, in the latter stages, all subjects, across one academic year. Through observational and semi-structured interview data, the girls' dissatisfaction, veiled behind compliant behaviour (Fisher, 2011), emerged, but also revealed their peripheral classroom position (Francis, 2005), relative to the more central position of masculine pupils and/or those 'working above the expected level'. This article argues for an emphasis on the classroom ecology, both within policy and practice, so that in our desire to raise standards, we do not neglect the values which the teacher inspires and encourages, both in the classroom and throughout the school day, values so often witnessed, anonymously and silently, by children. Through the identification of these values, and the ecologies which they encourage, it is argued that a peripheral position can be exposed and challenged.

Introduction

We have been aware for some time of the invisibility (Pye, 1985; Collins, 1996; Jones, 2005) and anonymity (Oakley, 1999) of some children in the classroom, where compliant behaviour does not necessarily imply active engagement (Collins, 1996, 1998) or, indeed, satisfaction (Fisher, 2011), with evidence that children are 'truanting in their mind' (Collins, 1998) and controlling their behaviour to avoid a reprimand or having to actively contribute (Fisher, 2011).

However, if we are to acknowledge that children can control or even camouflage (Pye, 1985) their behaviour, we also need to acknowledge the power and control which a teacher possesses within a classroom (for example, Furlong, 1991; Lynch & Baker, 2005). There is

evidence that they can, potentially, encourage children to veil their dissatisfaction behind compliance (Fisher, 2011) and can actually reinforce a pupil's peripheral (Francis, 2005) position, a position where a child does not contribute, does not seek or gain adult help, and remains physically on the margins of the classroom (Collins, 1996).

There is also evidence to suggest that this profile is more closely associated with girls: Francis (2005), in reviewing the literature, suggests that girls are quieter in the classroom and are often concentrated at the back of classrooms; Collins and Johnston-Wilder (2005) comment on a higher number of girls spending whole days not participating in activities and conversations.

Therefore, this article explores this peripheral position, as discussed by Francis (2005), through the perspective of three girls: Chloe, Danielle and Melissa, within one classroom, across one academic year, to reflect upon how they can be encouraged to inhabit a more central position in their classroom.

Background to the study

The year-long study (Fisher, 2011) involved over 100 Year 6 children and their teachers across four primary schools, with the aim of exploring the children's perspectives of literacy and the broader curriculum. The researcher was independent of the schools and selected them to demonstrate relatively varied socio-economic catchment areas and national test results.

The study revealed that many of the children were dissatisfied, with both satisfaction and dissatisfaction focused on an over-arching theme: an appreciation of, and desire for, greater autonomy in their learning. This evolved from four sub-themes— an appreciation of, and desire for, greater: (1) creative opportunities; (2) flexibility; (3) breadth; (4) support, leading towards greater independence in their learning. Through these, it became evident that the delivery and organisation of lessons was more important to children than individual content or subject area (Fisher, 2011).

Yet, with the exception of one child, the dissatisfaction was veiled behind compliance, with continued adherence to the ground rules of the classroom, thus avoiding teacher reprimand. Therefore, this was explored further, through progressive sampling. It was through this more detailed exploration of 20 children (five selected from each class: one satisfied and compliant child; three dissatisfied and compliant children, to explore this profile in greater detail; and one randomly sampled child) that some children's 'dissatisfaction behind a veil of compliance' (Fisher, 2011) and sidelined positioning in the classroom emerged. This sidelined position was both physical, with a peripheral seat/position within the classroom, together with being social, with evidence that they were 'bossed' and/or marginalised by other children, were reluctant or refused to contribute (as also discussed by Collins, 1996), and had little or no direct contact with their teacher during the lesson (see Collins, 1996).

In addition to presenting as shy and reticent in classroom observations, these children revealed more loquacious personalities in interview and in friendship groups, which they acknowledged. They were all described by their teacher as motivated, but working 'below or in line with the national average'. Such a profile was particularly prevalent in Class 3, relative to the other three classes within the study, where only two girls in two of the other

classes shared this profile, whereas in Class 3, the profile appeared to fit a larger group of girls, of which Chloe, Melissa and Danielle were a part. Therefore, these three girls were selected out of this larger group, to enable their narrative to be heard in sufficient depth.

It should also be noted that there were no recognised examples of boys who were recipients of this profile, although one boy, in another class, did identify the peer intimidation which he felt, when pressurised to answer a question, although did not reveal any further examples. This would support the evidence in the literature (for example, Collins & Johnston-Wilder, 2005). However, the study did differ in the sense that there was no evidence to suggest that girls were more likely to internalise or conceal their lack of engagement with the academic side of school (Collins & Johnson-Wilder, 2005), with both sexes veiling their compliance, and only one boy revealing it through non-compliance (Fisher, 2011). Therefore, the only noticeable difference between the sexes was in the sidelined positioning of some girls in Class 3 and the dominance of some boys, who intimidated these girls through their comments, as also found by Francis (2005). Therefore, gender will only be discussed within this context.

Literature review

Introduction

The study viewed children and childhood from a sociological perspective, as discussed elsewhere (Fisher, 2011), where children, themselves, were viewed as 'social agents', contributing 'to the reproduction of childhood and society' (Corsaro, 2005, p. 44), with the research process reflecting 'a direct concern to capture children's voices, perspectives,

interests, and rights as citizens' (Corsaro, 2005, p. 45). This also supports the 2004 Children Act, which established a legal requirement to consult children on their physical, emotional and educational needs (Greig et al., 2007), and reflects the views of Collins, who acknowledges that children who do not have a voice in the classroom might be educationally disadvantaged (2006).

This article is also influenced by aspects of the socio-ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), aiming to explore the girls' reticent and shy personality within a social context, rather than as an individual pathology (Siann et al., 1993), as Siann et al. suggest with regard to bullying. Therefore, the selected girls' peripheral positioning can be viewed as an interaction between the individual and his or her peer group, school or family (Swearer & Doll, 2001), with the focus on the interaction between the girls and their classroom ecology (Doll et al., 2011), and the teacher's contribution towards it (Holt et al., 2011). Although acknowledging the many spheres of influence on children, it will view the classroom ecology as a sphere which we have the potential to control (Horne et al., 2011) and, therefore, potentially, to improve.

Therefore, this requires an exploration of the research surrounding children (and girls, where appropriate) on the periphery of classroom life, and also in how this manifests itself in the classroom, for example, through invisibility (Collins, 1996; Jones, 2005). It also demands an exploration of the role of the teacher within this classroom context, including discourse and power relationships, and how these can potentially influence and impact upon the development of a classroom ecology which encourages a more central position for these children.

Quiet children in the classroom

Quiet children are discussed within the literature (for example, Thompson & Bell, 2011) and, as Collins and Johnston-Wilder (2005) acknowledge, quiet behaviour in certain parts of the school day are expected and even rewarded; however, they also reflect on the corpus of research which would support contexts and situations where a more participatory role is required for learning (for example, von Glasersfeld, 1996; Floyd, 1982). In addition, drawing on the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1996), they argue that 'meaningful and effective learning requires the allocation of active roles to learners' (Collins & Johnston-Wilder, 2005, p. 150). They continue by reporting on the 'number of children (especially girls) who have spent whole days in school not participating in the activities and conversations that their teachers see as so central to learning' (2005, p. 148). Although the specificities of their research are not discussed, it provides a useful starting point for further exploration.

Collins (1996), in her research on quiet children, does provide further information.The research was undertaken as case studies with 12 children in a school where Collins had previously worked as a teacher. The author acknowledges the challenges with regard to objectivity which this brought, which need to be considered when scrutinising the results, together with the size of the sample and the age of the research. However, it is based in a middle school (Year 8; ages 12–13), which was relevant to the age of the children within this article's study (Year 6; ages 10–11), and the richness of the data exposes four types of withdrawal, which are useful to consider: (1) 'being invisible', where a child has no direct contact with their teacher during the lesson; (2) 'refusing to participate', where a child is invited to participate in a discussion or activity but refuses; (3) 'hesitation', where

participation is minimal, or a child is on the fringes of an activity; (4) 'an inappropriate focus', where the example is given of a child writing, during an oral whole-class session.

In a later article, using the same data, Collins discusses how the emphasis on physical truancy masks an even greater problem: children who attend school but who 'play truant in mind' (1998, using a phrase used by Young, 1984). These 'quiet' children tend to have good attendance records and are physically present in the classroom; however, as Collins acknowledges, 'their inability or unwillingness to participate in the learning activities which are planned and presented by their teachers prevents them from learning' (1998, p. 1). Indeed, Oakley (1999) discusses, what he defines as, quietly disaffected pupils, who are underachieving and anonymous in a noisy class, gaining limited teacher attention, whereas other more actively disruptive pupils were allowed to dominate.

Collins (1998) also acknowledges that the predominance of girls with this profile suggests that there might be a link between such behaviour and gender. Francis (2005), as discussed in the introduction, also found, when reviewing the literature, that girls are quieter in the classroom and are often concentrated at the back of classrooms (2005). In addition, there is also evidence to suggest that 'girls' form of resistance tend to be quieter than those of boys, and are often hidden (for example the strategic seating at the back of the class), they often go unnoticed and unchallenged by the teacher' (Francis, 2005, p. 12), with Collins and Johnston-Wilder (2005) noting that girls are more likely to internalise their lack of engagement with the academic side of school. However, this was not evident in this study (Fisher, 2011), with both boys and girls discussing controlling their behaviour, to avoid reprimand: 'they subtly rebelled or expressed their dissatisfaction less explicitly, which enabled them to maintain their compliant status within the class' (Fisher, 2011, p. 135), as discussed by many of the

children, including a boy, named Alex: 'I keep it within when I am bored. I don't know how the teacher would take it' (Fisher, 2011, p. 135). However, it is important to note that Osler et al. (2002) suggest that although girls might not be explicitly disruptive, they are more likely to experience anxiety, depression and self-harming. Although this was not explored or revealed within this study, it relates to my earlier comments about the impact that invisibility and peripheral positioning can potentially have on girls' development.

Gender discourses

It also encourages an exploration of gender discourses in our classrooms, where, it is argued, the female identity can be constructed as passive (for example, Jones, 2005), which is translated into a lack of confidence, yet with no reported remediation within current educational initiatives addressing this under-confidence (Jones, 2005). Francis (2005), when reviewing recent literature, also highlights the fact that girls are 'expected to be appropriately reticent, conscientious and demure in the classroom' (p. 15). This potentially limits the acknowledgement of the dissatisfaction which can be veiled behind this passivity or compliance (Fisher, 2011); the attention paid to the girls' peripheral positioning within the classroom (Francis, 2005); their invisibility (Collins, 1996; Jones, 2005), or the fact that they can be viewed as less adventurous, in their style, and less likely to take risks (Wood, 2003). Consequently, it can lead to an absence of critical reflection on the potential impact which this can have on girls' development in the classroom.

Girls and achievement

It should also be acknowledged that, with regard to achievement, many see girls as having been homogenised as a single, successful group (for example, Elwood, 2010), thus falling victim to the 'ecological fallacy', where group-level differences are applied to individuals (Connolly, 2006). Therefore, the underachievement of some girls is not brought to the fore, and is absent from media and policy debates (for example, Francis, 2010), with 'underachievement' constructed principally as a gender issue specific to boys since the 1990s (Jones & Myhill, 2004). Indeed, there is also evidence to suggest that the discourse of boys' underachievement has resulted in the rejection of many gender-equitable strategies relating to teaching and classroom organisation (Skelton & Read, 2006; Skelton et al., 2009). Consequently, many would argue that the needs of girls have been neglected and, within this context, the needs of the quietly disengaging and, perhaps, underachieving, girl. Subsequently, she can become invisible (Jones, 2005) and her needs can fail to be sufficiently acknowledged.

Autonomy, agency and power in the classroom

These issues remind us of the potentially limited control which children and, in this context, peripheral girls, can have in the classroom. Although acknowledging that authority in Western societal views is shifting (Elliott, 2009; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), with teacher authority no longer assured (Elliott, 2009), the literature continues to detail the considerable power which a teacher can possess in a classroom (see Fisher, 2011). It acknowledges that teachers, themselves, can 'exert substantial influence over youth development, helping to shape not only their academic growth but also their social skills' (Holt et al., 2011, p. 119), with evidence that the presence of caring teachers can improve children's sense of class membership, and reduce peer conflict (Bru et al., 2002), with the values and expectations that

teachers 'convey for courtesy and fairness…deeply embedded within the classroom's social ecology' (Doll et al., 2011, p. 151).

Campbell and Stenton (2004) acknowledge the possibility of teacher–pupil bullying, as well as the limited research in this area. In their review, they comment that many children have experienced verbal maltreatment by teachers (for example, Hyman & Weiler, 1994). Sylvester (2011), although not based on empirical research, also alerts us to the fact that teachers might not be aware of their 'bullying or bordering- on-bullying behavior' (2010, p. 42). Therefore, she distinguishes between knowingly and unintentionally bullying, providing examples such as sarcasm and 'opaque name calling'.

Sylvester also states that 'Students may feel that they have no avenue of redress when they feel bullied by a teacher' (2011, p. 45) and, therefore, we are reminded, again, of the potential for pupil autonomy and agency to be undermined. Yet, elsewhere, it is also documented that teachers are under considerable pressure on a daily basis, challenged, for example, by pupil behavioural issues, or an increase in children with learning difficulties in their classes (Orpinas & Horne, 2006). In addition, the government's post-1997 standards agenda, with its accompanying corporate discourse of outcomes and effectiveness (Fisher, 2012), has the potential to leave teachers pressurised to achieve targets and, therefore, with, arguably, less opportunity to focus on the ecology of a classroom. We also know that the development of the ecology relies upon teachers striving to improve their practice, with evidence that they do not always acknowledge their own deficits (for example, Earl et al., 2003), with research also noting inconsistencies in teacher's dealings with, for example, aggressive acts (Nesdale & Pickerin, 2006), and differing staff efficacy in handling bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2007).

So what is the solution; how can we promote a classroom ecology which centralises all children? There are many possibilities provided within the literature to support practitioners: the importance of seeking children's views (for example, Fisher, 2011); the need for mutual respect (Riley & Docking, 2004); democratic participation (Dewey, 1916, 1950; Lynch & Baker, 2005); and providing opportunities for children to be 'change agents' (Riley et al., 2006). We should also be alert to more implicit examples, where beliefs and values are 'manifested in the frequency and quality of interactions between adults and students… and adults and adults' (Holt et al., 2011, p. 122), which links closely to gender discourses. Similarly, there is also literature to suggest that teachers should avoid less positive expectations for certain pupils: prompting some children for answers to questions in class less frequently than those whom they perceive to be 'bright', and using more condescending language when addressing some children (Orpinas & Horne, 2006). In addition, Orpinas and Horne (2006) acknowledge how tolerating or ignoring disrespectful behaviours in class can convey an unspoken message that the teacher supports or even encourages it. These potential solutions will be returned to, in relation to the findings of this article.

Methodology and data analysis

Introduction

Four English primary schools were selected for their relatively varied socio-economic catchment areas and national test results (see Fisher, 2011). Each school was visited for one day per week, across an academic year, where time-sampled observations were completed (one per child), together with individual semi-structured interviews (at least two per child, at

the beginning and the end of the school year). There was an average of 25 children per class, with 101 children involved, in total.

The case studies were based broadly within the interpretivist tradition, influenced by symbolic interactionism, encouraging an 'intimate familiarity' (Blumer, 1969) and acknowledging multiple realities (Fisher, 2011). It also recognised the social construction of the classroom (for example, Firestone, 1987) and, therefore, was influenced by aspects of constructionism (Bryman, 2008).

Other factors influencing a child were acknowledged, with the aim of exploring 'children's perspectives in their current state… providing the best possible experience of the curriculum for them, regardless of the mirage of other factors and experience which they brought to the classroom' (Fisher, 2011, p. 126). However, it also acknowledged more transient factors, such as a row at playtime and, therefore, the importance of focusing upon a child on different occasions (Fisher, 2011). Initially, the study sought to answer: 'To what extent is current literacy practice a source of satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction for children?', although this was broadened to include the wider curriculum, together with an exploration of 'dissatisfaction behind a veil of compliance', as the study progressed (Fisher, 2011).

Interviews

A semi-structured interview approach was deployed, using a prompt sheet of the different elements of a literacy lesson and then the wider curriculum (for example, Can you tell me about today's lesson? Can you tell me about the part where you worked with the teacher?), as discussed elsewhere (Fisher, 2011). Children were also asked to comment on their behaviour

and classroom rules (for example, What sort of behaviour do you think that your teacher likes in class? Can you describe your behaviour, today? Can you tell me about your classroom rules?). Interviews were also undertaken with teachers, to gain their perspectives of delivering and organising lessons, and also to provide a profile of each sampled child; where relevant, teaching assistants also contributed.

Children's feelings, identified through interview, were initially categorised descriptively, as to whether comments identified the organisation, the content or the delivery of a lesson. The element of the lesson was then identified (for example, guided reading), concluding with interpretive coding, completed after the observation, where comments made were categorised according to whether they revealed broad 'satisfaction' to the specific part of the lesson being discussed, or whether they revealed broad 'dissatisfaction'. Themes were identified, as detailed earlier in this article (see Fisher, 2011 for further details), which were clustered as the children's appreciation of, and desire for, greater autonomy in their learning. This emerged from four sub-themes - an appreciation of, and desire for, greater: (1) creative opportunities; (2) flexibility; (3) breadth; (4) support, leading towards greater independence in their learning. Through these, it became evident that the delivery and organisation of lessons was more important to children than individual content or subject area.

Observations

General, descriptive observations, influenced by Spradley (1980), were used at two points during the academic year, to accompany the main observations which, initially, were intended to allow reflections/comments from interviews to be followed up. However, the observations began to be formalised, with time sampling deployed (Robson, 2008), providing

structure to what was recorded, allowing two children to be observed, each lesson, and avoiding the recording of events which simply attracted attention. This effectively provided a more consistent approach to observational notes (Fisher, 2011).

However, both the descriptive and the main observations supported the eventual identification of the 'ground rules' of the classroom, which then enabled the behaviour to be coded interpretively as 'compliant towards the ground rules of the classroom', 'non-compliant towards the ground rules of the classroom' and 'non-remarked non-compliance towards the ground rules of the classroom', which acknowledged behaviour which appeared to be unnoticed by the teacher, as well as behaviour which was simply ignored/dismissed (Fisher, 2011). Therefore, each time-sampled episode was initially recorded descriptively (e.g., 'Janos focusing on sheet, looking down') and, following the observation, each episode (and finally each lesson) was given one of the three interpretive codes.

Following coding, it was evident that the majority of children presented with compliant behaviour, 'with varying degrees of non-remarked non-compliance, to the ground rules of their particular classroom, irrespective of the dissatisfaction/satisfaction which they expressed in interview' (Fisher, 2011, p. 133). Comparison of both interview and observation data revealed a group of children in each class who displayed dissatisfaction in interview, with compliant or non-remarked non-compliant behaviour in observation. Triangulation was possible by asking the children to describe their behaviour in lessons, or parts of lessons, immediately afterwards, which was remarkably accurate and predominantly matched the category established through coding.

I became particularly interested in this group, with a view to exploring why they had adopted

compliant behaviour and whether they felt that their teacher was aware of their dissatisfaction. Therefore, progressive focusing (Parlett & Hamilton, 1976) was the obvious solution: tracking 20 children, as discussed earlier (five selected from each class: one satisfied and compliant child; three dissatisfied and compliant children, to explore this profile in greater detail; and one randomly selected child).

Further regular time-sampled observations and semi-structured interviews were completed with this tracked group, which included Melissa and Chloe (tracked as dissatisfied and compliant) and Danielle (who was randomly selected, but, by chance, also had the profile of dissatisfied and compliant), where the focus was on the whole curriculum and the exploration of 'dissatisfaction behind a veil of compliance' (Fisher, 2011).

Ethical considerations

As discussed elsewhere (Fisher, 2011), ethical guidelines were referred to (for example, Hammersley & Traianou, 2007), to ensure that participants had been provided with adequate information to provide informed consent, understood their right to withdraw from the study, together with issues of anonymity and confidentiality of data. All names were changed within the study.

The children were only 10- and 11-years-old and, therefore, their participation was discussed and explored separately. It was particularly important that they understood their role within the project (Greig et al., 2007) and their right to clarify any aspects of the research throughout the process (Danby & Farrell, 2005). This included an acknowledgement that, although the children might gain enjoyment from the study, with the potential to gain new skills

(Alderson, 2005), the main purpose of the research was children in the future (Alderson, 2005, p. 31) and, therefore, classroom practice would not change immediately, following interviews.

The children were also informed of their right to withdraw at any stage (Greig et al., 2007), including specifically how to do this, particularly as there might be aspects of the adult/child relationship which might make non-participation challenging for the child (Roberts, 2008), despite our best efforts. In this way, there were attempts to obtain informed assent (World Medical Organisation, 2004), to accompany the legal consent which was provided by parents/carers.

Findings and discussion

Introduction

Therefore, in Class 3, Chloe and Melissa were sampled for displaying the profile of 'dissatisfaction behind a veil of compliance', whereas Danielle was selected at random (although did, by chance, also display the same profile). Progressive sampling enabled me to explore their profiles in greater detail and the findings are discussed below.

The peripheral status of Danielle, Chloe and Melissa

As discussed earlier, from the beginning of the academic year, Danielle, Chloe and Melissa emerged as sidelined participants, relative to the other children in their class. In addition to their dissatisfaction behind a veil of compliance, they displayed what could be described as

reticence, in class: they were reluctant to contribute during whole-class work and in peer-led group work; they did not seek or gain help from the teacher; and, in addition, there was evidence that they controlled their behaviour to avoid reprimand, or having to contribute.

In interview, they suggested that their reticence was influenced by the following:

• their lack of understanding;

• what they described as the 'bossiness' of some of the boys, which they suggested

that they found intimidating;

• what they described as favouritism shown towards the 'brainy' children.

Therefore, these three areas will be explored in greater detail below.

Lack of understanding

The girls (including a large proportion of other Class 3 members) continually discussed their lack of understanding; initially, this focused on literacy, but also extended to other subjects, as the wider curriculum became the focus. Melissa, for example, stated: 'I would like longer for understanding: the teacher telling you, because sometimes you don't understand it, and it's not really enough time'. The influence of this lack of understanding to the girls' oral contributions was also noted, for example: 'I sometimes put my hand up, [but] sometimes the questions are hard to answer…and complicated' (Danielle); 'I think that I would be encouraged to say something if I understood a little bit better' (Melissa); and 'If I don't understand, I don't put my hand up much… I don't always get what the teacher's saying. I didn't put my hand up, today, as I didn't understand the plot' (Chloe).

The three girls suggested strategies for supporting them: 'It would help to have a piece of paper to prompt you' (Danielle) and 'It would help if you worked for the first half of the lesson before the teacher explained it—cos you'd get to think of your own answers' (Melissa), suggesting that greater reflection and processing time would also have been supportive and might have encouraged more participation.

Indeed, observations revealed that processing time was not provided, prior to answering a question, and strategies such as pre-tutoring or partner time were not used. It was also acknowledged that, when children did not contribute, they were sometimes asked directly, which they suggested they disliked, for example: 'If I am asked a question by the teacher, it makes me feel a bit uncomfortable. If I am forced, it's hard: if you get it wrong, you feel embarrassed' (Chloe). This might have been linked to the teacher's responses to the children's answers, which ranged from: 'Well, you've fallen at the first hurdle' to 'Very good', although the girls did not explicitly comment on this.

In addition, the girls did not discretely discuss the type of questioning deployed, although both open and closed questioning was observed. Only Chloe suggested that she was influenced by the type of questioning used: 'I like lots of answers: you can't get the answer wrong'. However, Melissa suggested that she preferred 'one answer' questions, which implied closed questioning.

We also know that children in Class 3 were not allowed to respond, apart from to teacher-led questions, for example: 'Answer the question first: stay focused' (Class 3's teacher, during an observation), a view reinforced by the girls, in interview, for example: 'I wouldn't make comments, in class, as it is against the class rules. I only speak when the teacher asks a

question' (Melissa). This was, arguably, a further missed opportunity for the girls to clarify their misunderstanding.

Danielle also suggested that the teacher asserted too much influence over the ideas used, for example: 'The teacher gets to decide everything' (Danielle). In observation, there were times when the teacher appeared to have previously decided upon the ideas to be included. This meant that, on occasions, an idea provided by a child was excluded; alternatively, the teacher was observed channelling the children's ideas into what appeared to be a preferred area, for example: 'Think about the first line of the poem. That gives us a clue'. This, again, one could infer, could have made the girls more reluctant to contribute, particularly if their initial understanding was limited.

In addition, as the teacher did not use teacher-led group activities, the girls did not have an opportunity to reinforce their understanding within a small-group context, as confirmed in both interview and observation. Indeed, in Class 3, generally, working independently from the teacher appeared to be viewed as a 'badge of honour', for example: 'I don't need to do that because I'm not in the support group. I can work without the teacher. Only children in the support group need to sit with the teacher' (Janos); 'The lowest group need [teacher-led group work], to make their work easier for them. The rest of the class don't need it' (Danielle); and 'I don't get to work with the teacher. The lower group do, sometimes, when the LSA [teaching assistant] is away' (Sarah). Although some of the girls were working 'below the expected level', they were not part of the 'support group', which was defined by the teacher as including children with 'special educational needs'.

Therefore, Melissa and Chloe commented upon how they often used the independent part of

the lesson to discuss the task, which they described as: 'trying to understand what we have to do' (Melissa). However, as both girls' knowledge appeared poor, they often did not gain from working together and frequently could be heard stating, for example: 'I still don't know what to do' (Chloe), and, increasingly, the discussion moved off-task. It was also noted that the tasks which, generally, the girls reported as finding challenging were often given to the rest of the class, too. Consequently, Janos, a boy who was also tracked through progressive sampling, and who was working 'above the expected level', described the tasks as 'Boring. There's no challenge' and his experiences will be returned to, later in this article.

Towards the end of the year, there was also evidence that Danielle, Chloe and Melissa were engaging in greater examples of 'non-remarked non-compliance', relative to their predominantly compliant behaviour, at the beginning of the year. One could infer that this was linked to their increased lack of understanding, as the year progressed, for example: 'I have such a laugh when I sit with Chloe and Melissa. If we don't understand, we just have a giggle instead'. It was particularly noticeable that the three girls escaped reprimand. Chloe, Melissa and Danielle maintained their pens on the page, ready to start work, should their teacher notice. This is also mentioned in the literature, for example: Collins discusses one girl who remained still and silent to avoid answering a question (1996). The girls, it would appear, were using their compliant reputation, combined with a careful avoidance of the teacher's gaze, to control their participation in the lesson.

There were other examples of controlled behaviour to avoid contributing (Fisher,

2011), for example –

'They slanted their heads on one side, looking through their hair as they spoke. This behaviour appeared to act as a protective mechanism from areas of the curriculum which they wished to avoid, found difficult, or found intimidating; for example, when they were asked questions directly' (Fisher, 2011, p.134)

-which reminds us of a phrase used by Collins, 'refusal to participate' (1996, p. 42), where pupils would 'simply hang their head and refuse to speak' (Collins, 1996, p. 42).

We also know that this behaviour was reinforced by the teacher, 'whose voice lowered when speaking to them' (Fisher, 2011, p. 134). Yet, it also reflects what could be seen as the teacher's contribution towards encouraging it. Paradoxically, although the girls appeared to think that they were in control, they were, arguably, being controlled/ manipulated by the teacher, who, one could infer, was reinforcing this refusal and, as a consequence, contributing towards their sidelined position, rather than demanding a more central role for the girls— which, one would hope, would expose their limited understanding. This is also discussed by Francis, who states:

'The teacher was far more sympathetic and kind to the girls, and more tolerant of any lack of understanding expressed by them. This paternal benevolence may have been well intentioned, but it had the effect of allowing girls to refrain from participation in the lessons' (Francis, 2005, p. 14–15).

Therefore, to conclude, this discussion has provided us with a clearer understanding of why the girls were refusing to participate, which is linked to their poor understanding and, arguably, the teacher's reinforcement of this. In addition, their poor understanding and reluctance to contribute was, arguably, influenced by some of the boys' behaviour, which will be discussed further, below.

The 'bossiness' of the boys

On several occasions, some boys called out negative comments to Melissa, Chloe and Danielle whilst they were reading aloud, or criticised them for not answering swiftly enough, for example: 'Hurry up and say something!' Sometimes, this occurred when the teacher was

distracted, but, on other occasions, the teacher was present during the comments. At times, the teacher responded with 'Ssh' or 'Be quiet'; however, one could argue that the force of the reprimands was not adequate, as it did not prevent repeated incidents, and 'calling out' actually increased as the year progressed.

On another occasion, during the teacher's short absence, liaising with the TA at the classroom door, one boy, Mark, stated to Melissa: 'I can't hear what you are saying. I'll read instead'. Although some of the class objected, he proceeded to read, until the teacher reappeared. He then asked the teacher whether he could take Melissa's place; although this was not permitted, it emphasised Mark's confidence in a whole-class context, and the fact that he interrupted Melissa's turn was not commented on. Such examples are evident, elsewhere, for example: 'Girls are also frequently directly silenced by boys, through ridicule or by sexist or misogynist abuse' (Francis, 2005, p. 15).

Similar patterns of behaviour were also observed during peer-led group work, as detailed in the following example. The children were placed in groups by the teacher, to complete some role-play; Mark immediately took control and began to instruct/direct the other children. The other two boys in the group began to follow his lead, whilst Chloe, Melissa and another girl just stood, leaning on tables at the side. After five minutes, they began to talk amongst themselves; Mark proceeded to become frustrated at their lack of participation and began raising his voice: 'Why don't you just say something instead of just sitting there?' The girls remained silent for a few minutes, but then returned to their previous conversation.

These incidents were commented upon, in interview, for example:

'Sometimes people take over. It was kind of like that this morning. They boss you and tell you what to do. I feel more confident with people I know. I get nervous with people I don't know. If they boss me, I get quieter because I am nervous' (Melissa)

Subsequent interviews also revealed the frustration felt by Mark, for example: 'It was only us boys working. Cos the girls are just messing around, talking about doing their hair; they need to listen more' (Mark, Class 3). Again, this is discussed by Francis (2005):

'In their interviews, some boys were keen to stereotype girls as obsessed by their appearance, and for this reason I found myself quite irritated with the girls who spent so much of a lesson discussing their hair since their behaviour seemed to support the stereotype'
(Francis, 2005, p. 13).

One should also note that, when the girls were observed in other contexts, a different picture emerged, as stated earlier: the girls were fluent in their responses, in interviews, and were observed contributing in friendship groups, as reinforced by Melissa: 'I feel more confident with people I know'. One could argue that this simply demonstrates a shyer personality, with greater confidence exhibited in 1:1 and small trusted groups, and reticence exhibited in whole-class or non-friendship groups. Yet, we cannot just accept this position for the girls and, indeed, the fluctuation within their personality highlights their potential for greater participation. It also, perhaps, highlights their vulnerability with more confident and aggressive peers, and the difficulties which can emerge for them when boys are allowed to 'call out' and the teacher does not effectively reprimand them, to prevent it being repeated.

Perceived favouritism towards the 'brainy children'

A further potential explanation for the sidelined positioning of the girls relates to the perceived favouritism shown towards those working 'above the expected level'. Danielle (Class 3), in particular, was concerned by the increasing attention given to what she described as the 'brainy children'. This was related to her anxiety and, indeed, the other girls' general

anxiety, regarding the explanations provided within Class 3, for example: 'It would help if the teacher helps you a bit more, by explaining it and saying, like, it goes like this - explains it, instead of going to the brainiest who don't need a lot of help' (Danielle).

Danielle continued by commenting that the teacher selected the same children to answer questions, the 'top group', and, consequently, appeared to presume that all the children understood. Indeed, the children sitting at the front table, those 'working above the expected level', were selected to answer questions more frequently, as also discussed by Orpinas and Horne (2006), earlier. However, they also raised their hand more often to answer questions, relative to the rest of the class. They were also the children who appeared not to need processing time, and were willing to answer any type of question. In the latter parts of the year, where children were not asked questions, both individually and directly, this meant that this group were more likely to dominate discussion.

It was also observed that Class 3's teacher often stood in front of the table occupied by those 'working above the expected level', to address the class, and, therefore, was able to gain eye contact with them more effectively. In addition, they often made comments without raising their hands, which was often received without reprimand. It also had the potential to give the impression that the teacher was simply working with a small group, particularly as they dominated the answers, as discussed above, and also because the teacher often remained in front of them, during the independent section of the lesson. This, again, reminds us of the comments of Orpinas and Horne (2006), who discuss how beliefs and values are manifested in the frequency and quality of interactions with pupils.

Children working 'in line with, and below the expected level', sat at the back and sides of the classroom (with seating arranged by the teacher), which meant that they could not easily make contact with the teacher, unless they raised their hand, and, noticeably, when they did, the front table turned around to face them, which some of the children found difficult, for example: 'Everyone looks at you. It can be complicated, if you don't know. Then everyone laughs, and you can be embarrassed' (Sarah).

Observations also revealed that the teacher often made specific reference to Janos, a boy 'working above the expected level', who was discussed briefly, earlier. On many occasions, Janos was portrayed by the teacher as unique and different, almost set apart from the rest of the group: 'I bet Janos will know this'; 'OK, Janos. If no one knows, you'll have to tell us again.' Even in his absence, Janos was referred to, for example: 'Usually, Janos does all the answering, but he's not here, today, so you'll have to concentrate instead'.

This encourages a greater exploration of the categorisation of children by ability which is common place in our schools and, arguably, indicative of the previous government's 'new emphasis on target setting and value-added measures of achievement' (Hart et al., 2004, p. 9). Hart et al. comment that:

'If we think that differences in learning reflect the so-called ability range, and that the ability range is a natural, normal and inevitable fact of life, then we will expect to find young people who make only very slow progress and find learning a continual struggle' (2004, p. 29).

Therefore, if translated to Danielle, Melissa and Chloe's context, one could argue that the teacher, potentially, expects them to have difficulties and, arguably, does not question it. Equally, if the teacher conforms to the earlier discussed stereotypes of gender, viewing the

girls as passive, and less likely to take risks, their sidelined position might be further compounded.

This might also explain why the teacher appeared to see Janos differently to the girls 'working above the expected level' and sharing a table with him. For example, unlike Janos, who was described by his teacher in terms of his underlying 'ability' and 'passion' for subjects, Hannah, for example (who was discussed as 'working above the expected level') was described continually as 'hard working'. This can also be compared to Melissa, Chloe and Danielle, where their 'motivation' and 'hard work' also dominated their teacher's descriptions of them.

However, if Hannah and Janos were compared in class, Janos was asked by the teacher to respond slightly more often, although he did not, on average, raise his hand more frequently. Therefore, the fact that Janos was invited to answer more often, together with the fact that his 'intelligence' was discussed so openly and frequently by the teacher might have created an impression to the rest of the class that Janos was, indeed, 'brighter'. This resonates with literature from the past, for example, Walkerdine (1989) where boys were perceived as active learners, enquiring and questioning, compared to rule-bound girls. Interestingly, Janos was not satisfied either, commenting: 'Lessons are not brilliant at the moment because there's not many good people to challenge me'. Whether this was his genuine view, or whether his raised status had increased his own confidence and, paradoxically, his dissatisfaction, can only be speculated upon.

However, regardless of whether Janos was more 'able' than the rest of his group, such obvious promotion of one boy could have potentially impaired the self-esteem of other boys

in the class. Yet, the impact on the girls is particularly concerning, as the majority of the group 'working above the expected level' were female, and sidelined children within the class were also female. Indeed, Hannah's buoyancy and satisfaction (as discussed elsewhere, in Fisher, 2011) suggests her acceptance of her subordinate position, which, one could argue, is even more concerning, as, at least, Chloe, Danielle and Melissa are dissatisfied with their positioning and have begun to question it.

Therefore, in some ways, it could be argued that Hannah is also sidelined, although her physical positioning in the classroom, on the front table, and her 'working above the expected level' status appears to cushion her from a completely peripheral position, which is Danielle, Chloe and Melissa's experience. In addition, it could be argued that this was also the experience of the 'support group' who worked exclusively without the teacher, except in the TA's absence. This is an aspect of provision which has been criticised elsewhere (for example, DCSF, 2009) and can, potentially, lead to segregation, and, therefore, reinforce a peripheral position in a classroom.

This suggests that it is the fact that the girls were not 'working above the expected level' which contributed most to their peripheral positioning. However, we should also note that some children outside of this group also appeared to retain a more centralised position, notably Mark and his friends. After all, they were not part of the front table, and, therefore, were not working 'above the expected level', but rather 'in line with the expected level'. However, they were prepared to shout across to the teacher, or to one of the girls, which required them to amplify their voice considerably, as often the teacher was distracted by a comment made by someone on the front table. As discussed earlier, this was not consistently reprimanded by the teacher and, therefore, they continued to dominate.

It might also be important to consider the profile of Mark and his friends, who displayed explicitly masculine traits, including assertion and confidence (Francis, 2010), and appeared to have a rapport with the teacher because of this, as discussed elsewhere: 'Such teachers appear to be drawing upon their own perceptions of acceptable models of masculinity to establish rapport with macho-lads' (Warrington & Younger, 2000, p. 502). Although Warrington and Younger's study was secondary-based and, due to its age, arguably less current now, it does support the notion that such behaviour encouraged the sidelining of non-masculine (Francis, 2005) pupils, both boys and girls, of which Danielle, Melissa and Chloe were a part.

Whether this was exemplified by the teacher's own gender, which was male, can only be speculated upon. However, Warrington and Younger's study did comment on girls' perspectives of male teachers who 'tried to be "in with the in crowd" and in so doing, [ignored] the quieter and less confident students' (2000, p. 502), with about half of the boys' groups mentioning that male teachers did not always take the girls seriously (2000, p. 502).

This is similar to Pye, albeit writing in 1985, who, reflecting upon his experiences as a secondary teacher, discusses his desire to be liked, and how he formed relationships with pupils who best fed this desire, rather than those with whom he felt were in most need of his attention. Although not based upon empirical research, it does prompt us to consider the possibility that the masculine pupils and/or 'those working above the expected level' fed, to varying degrees, this teacher's desire to be liked more effectively than Chloe, Danielle and Melissa. Therefore, again, we have to consider the fact that this teacher, intentionally or otherwise, was content with the girls' and other pupils' sidelined positioning in the class, and even, potentially, nurtured and encouraged it.

Conclusion

Therefore, the girls, through identifying their dissatisfaction and, both implicitly and explicitly, their sidelined position, have revealed that this classroom would seem to neglect, to varying degrees, non-masculine (Francis, 2005) pupils and/or those working outside of the 'above the expected level' group, and that absence from these groups appears to have contributed to the girls' marginalisation and their dissatisfaction.

Therefore, Janos, a perceived 'masculine' boy, working above the expected level, had a more central position within the class. Yet, he remained dissatisfied. It could be argued that this dissatisfaction was compounded by the teacher, who emphasised the perceived gap between Janos and the rest of the class and, therefore, it could be inferred, made Janos more aware of it and the associated 'lack of challenge'. Although this can only be speculated upon, the suggestion that the teacher potentially contributed towards Janos's dissatisfaction, as well as to Melissa, Chloe and Danielle's, emphasises the power and influence which he has in this classroom; power and control which appears to separate and divide. It is important, therefore, to pay close attention to the classroom ecology (Doll et al., 2011), so that equitable autonomy (Fisher, 2011) has the potential to emerge, equitable autonomy which supports a broader interpretation of masculinity and femininity, and reflects upon and challenges the potential limitations of 'ability'. There are many valid suggestions to achieving this: minimising the extent to which girls can opt out (Francis, 2005); demanding mutual respect (Riley & Docking, 2004); ensuring that pupils do not interrupt, criticise or ridicule one another (Francis, 2005); encouraging children to be inventive, creative and experimental (Thompson & Bell, 2011). Adherence to these examples would, quite possibly, have seen an improvement in Class 3.

Yet, influenced by Holt et al. (2011) and Orpinas and Horne (2006), as discussed earlier, we, perhaps, need to penetrate deeper than this, and pay close attention to the values which the teacher inspires and encourages in the classroom and throughout the school day, values so often witnessed, anonymously and silently, by children: the corridor conversation about a child in the 'SEN group'; the interaction with support staff—the TA or cleaner; the time spent with the seemingly uncharismatic child, who does not feed the teacher's desire to be liked (Pye, 1985). It is, arguably, all these interactions which have the potential to influence the classroom ecology. In our pursuit of open, dynamic and equitable experiences for our children, we should not be reticent in challenging the intrinsic ecological core of our classrooms, and this transcends the PSHE lesson on a selected subject, or even the time spent within the room itself. It requires consistent values across the school day, in all conversations and actions; for it is here, at unexpected moments, where influence can happen, and

change potentially emerge.

I would argue that this needs to be prioritised more rigorously in inspections and observations, to prevent the sidelining of some of our pupils, particularly considering the challenges which have been documented here: teachers lacking awareness of their own deficits (for example, Sylvester, 2011; Earl et al., 2003); evidence of teacher bullying (for example, Sylvester, 2011); policies/strategies encouraging teachers to focus on boys' achievement and, therefore, having negative consequences for girls (see Jackson et al., 2010).

However, Chloe, Danielle and Melissa and their peers have inspired us to look beyond individual dissatisfaction, towards the core of their classroom ecology and, through this, to how it can be intrinsically repaired and restored. Until we prioritise this, in all aspects of practice and policy, the perspectives of Danielle, Melissa and Chloe and, potentially, many

others like them, will continue to be veiled, their positions sidelined and their hopes and ambitions neglected.

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