

Making sense of low
attainment: children's
experiences in the primary
classroom

Laura Quick

UCL Institute of Education

A thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy

Declaration

I, Laura Quick, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Word count: 96400



Laura Quick

Abstract

Despite continuing concern over low attainment in schools, the experiences of those children designated 'low attainers' are largely ignored. My thesis aims to address this gap, investigating how their designation affects their sense-making, construction of themselves and relationship to learning. As part of the UCL study, *Children's Life Histories in Primary Schools*, I use innovative play-based interviews and observations to explore the stories of four children over three years, from ages 7/8 to 10/11. All were engaged in attempts to construct a self of dignity and worth as 'low attainers' within an attainment-driven education system: Max fears he is deficient, 'a jigsaw with pieces missing', and struggles to consider himself of value; Summer resists school values in favour of a relationship-based counter-discourse; Britney denies her low attainment and fabricates a version of herself as a 'good pupil'; and Jake constructs himself as academically 'middling' but socially and emotionally successful.

Although each of their stories is unique, they suggest underlying similarities in the challenges 'low attainers' face. Using Foucauldian tools, I demonstrate the enormous amount of emotional work my participants put into negotiating their designation, experiencing it as a potential source of shame. I identify three reinforcing pressures this was due to, all threatening to position them as failures. First, the dominance of attainment in schools makes 'low attainers' *academic* failures. Second, the responsabilisation of this attainment, part of a wider neoliberal responsabilisation of success and failure, makes academic failure also a failure of *character*. Third, the responsabilisation of emotions that has accompanied the growth of positive psychology suggests happiness is a choice, and unhappiness therefore an *emotional* failure. This triangle of pressures not only damages the learning and wellbeing of 'low attainers' but also reinforces meritocratic discourses that justify and reproduce social and economic inequalities. I propose changes to reduce these pressures on low-attaining children.

Impact Statement

Although explaining the low attainment of some groups of children is considered a priority in this country, the views of 'low attainers' themselves are rarely sought. As yet, no research has looked at their school experiences in-depth and over time, a gap this study addresses. Part of the *Children's Life Histories in Primary Schools* UCL project, it enriches the small but growing body of sociology of education literature that foregrounds pupils' voices. It is unusual in exploring in detail the experiences of pupils who, being both young and low attaining, are generally ignored.

This thesis also makes a methodological contribution. Recognising the limitations of conventional verbal interviewing with many primary-aged children, I develop innovative interview techniques, inspired by play therapy and drama exercises, which could be more broadly used. I show the richness of the data these produce, particularly when they allow for working in metaphor, where children can explore uncomfortable feelings safely given the 'psychic distance' (Drewes and Schaefer 2015:39) this technique offers.

My final academic contribution is theoretical and concerned with the fields of resistance studies and what I shall call 'happiness' studies. I show how Foucault's (2007a) concept of counter-conduct, usually applied to adult resistance, can be usefully extended to younger children. Focusing on 'diffuse and subdued forms' (Foucault 2007a:200) of classroom resistance, augmented with Scott's (1985) work on 'everyday resistance', I show that children can be usefully understood as engaged in counter-conduct, critique and 'care of the self' (Foucault 1996b; Ball and Olmedo 2013). In doing so I shed light on how they construct alternative selves to that which they feel school is constituting them as. Second, although the rise of positive psychology and the 'new discourse of happiness' (Binkley 2011) have been subject to critical analysis (e.g. Binkley 2011; Cabanas and Illouz 2019), they have as yet been little

applied to schools, particularly at the primary level. I illustrate how employing these ideas in analysis of children's sense-making illuminates how emotionality works to govern pupils in primary schools, an important, new and still unexplored area.

In terms of 'real world' impact, this thesis aims to be useful to teachers, parents and policymakers. By demonstrating the struggle and emotional turmoil those designated as low attaining can suffer, alongside their creative and determined responses, it highlights the value in listening to their voices, important at the classroom, school and policy level. My key finding, that low attainment necessitates intense emotional work due to the threat of threefold failure, points to several urgent and achievable school reforms. I call for the abolition of performativity-driven, attainment-related policies that have been shown to have little positive impact on primary school pupils, such as testing and attainment grouping. I also highlight how common pedagogies, which often accompany these, impact low-attaining pupils disproportionately. Finally, this thesis illustrates the urgency of problematising the widespread promotion of ideas of 'responsibility' and 'growth mindset' in primary schools, as well as the recent focus on 'teaching happiness'. Often assumed beneficial, I show that implementations of these ideas can impact the sense-making of low-attaining children in unexpected and harmful ways.

Acknowledgements

There are many people I want to thank for their help with this research. I would like to start by thanking the Leverhulme Trust for funding me, and my incredibly supportive *Children's Life Histories in Primary Schools* team who have become valued friends, Professor Eleanore Hargreaves, my primary supervisor, for her academic mentorship, wisdom and belief in me, and Dr Denise Buchanan for her encouragement and support. Huge thanks also go to my secondary supervisors, Professor Martin Mills for his invaluable help in shaping my project in its beginning stages when it was most muddled, and Professor Alice Bradbury for her astuteness in its later stages. Thanks also to Dr Patrick Baily for his insightful comments on final draft, Dr Jiexiu Chen for her feedback on my analysis and Emily Barlow for her play-based interview expertise. I would also like to thank those who have developed my thinking about education outside of academia, particularly my Year 6 teacher Clive Fairweather, who demonstrated how rewarding teaching from the heart can be and the Radical Education Forum for showing me I was not alone in my attempts to teach for a better world.

The years over which I completed this thesis were particularly turbulent ones personally and the support of friends and family was invaluable in helping me maintain faith in my research. Thanks particularly to Emily for the constancy of her support through thick and thin, Tamsin for invigorating me intellectually as well as talking through my findings, and Poppy for reminding me that change is always possible. The biggest thanks, however, go to my family, Annie, Dick and Pete for being the very best of families, and most of all to Allison for teaching me to enjoy scrutinising ideas and logic; you made writing this thesis so much more enjoyable than it would have been without you.

Finally, I would like to thank my two study schools and most of all my four participants who, although they remain anonymous, offered so much of their

time and were unwavering in their intelligent reflection, humour and trust in me. This thesis is for them and all those like them who are navigating their paths through school under difficult conditions.

Research declaration forms

The following pages declare journal articles produced as part of the UCL *Children's Life Histories in Primary Schools* (CLIPS) project on which I am a named author. All refer to small sections of data from the four participants discussed in this thesis alongside that of the other CLIPS participants.

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Educational Review, Volume 74, Issue 7

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Cambridge Journal of Education, Volume 51, Issue 3

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5. e-Signatures confirming that the information above is accurate (this form should be co-signed by the supervisor/ senior author unless this is not appropriate, e.g. if the paper was a single-author work)

Candidate

Laura Quick

Date:

21.12.22

Supervisor/ Senior Author (where appropriate)

ER Hargreaves

Date:

21.12.22

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Chapter 1: The context of my study

Introduction

This thesis is about some of the ways an accountability-driven education system in an unequal society affects primary school pupils who do not get good marks in maths and English. It explores how they experience the classroom and how this shapes their sense of themselves and their relationship to learning. It tells the stories, from their own perspectives, of four pupils considered by their schools as at the 'bottom of the class', illustrating the importance of pupils' voices in understanding how attainment practices work to reproduce inequalities in schools.

Educational inequality in the UK is significantly greater than in most other rich nations (UNICEF 2018) and, by most measures, is not reducing (Reay 2022). Indeed, even before the pandemic there appeared to be some groups of pupils falling more behind (Demie 2019) and research since is starting to suggest that gaps are further widening. The 2022 Key Stage 2 Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs), taken at the end of primary school, were the first since the pandemic and show the largest difference between 'disadvantaged' pupils and their peers in ten years (DfE 2022; see also Blainey and Hannay 2021).

This thesis takes as established that 'success' in school is more available to some children than others and that the availability of this 'success' is heavily influenced by a child's intersectional position (Bradbury 2013b; Demie 2019; Youdell 2006). Discourses around multiple axes of difference, most obviously the 'big three' of gender, 'race' and class, collide, reinforce and compete to create a complex intersectional picture of systemic advantage and disadvantage. Schools are part of society and, far from levelling the playing field, actively reinforce and reproduce many of society's inequalities (Bourdieu 1986; Gillborn 2010; Reay 2017), with background a major factor in sorting and

categorising pupils. Schools require and reward the behaviours, attitudes, language competencies and knowledges of the dominant and powerful groups in society (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), viewing those children who exhibit these as intelligent, sensible and cooperative (Reay 2017). Schools also discriminate more directly; Black pupils, for example, are 2.5 times more likely than White pupils to be misallocated to low 'ability' groups (Francis, Taylor, and Tereshchenko 2019). That is, Black pupils are placed in lower groups than their White peers with the same attainment as them. Rigorous research has shown repeatedly that schools' role in constituting some children as 'good' and some as 'bad' pupils not only reflects, but also reproduces, social and economic inequalities (Bradbury 2013a; Youdell 2006).

I see my study as beginning where this research ends. It tells the stories of children whom schools categorise as 'unsuccessful' – those who have been designated 'low attainers' and documented as such on spreadsheets and reports with phrases such as 'working towards' or 'below age-related expectations'. These stories are my readings of how four children who are part of this inequitable process of social reproduction resist, incorporate, shape and make sense of the learners they are being constituted as within school. They are, above all, stories of survival, and of the hugely creative, determined and brave work of children who at such a young age are labelled as academically 'less than' their peers.

In this way, I contribute to the small but growing body of work foregrounding pupils' own perspectives of school (e.g. Reay 2017; Hargreaves 2017; Robinson 2014; Devine 2003). My contribution lies in focussing on a significant gap in the literature, the voices of a group severely marginalised by contemporary discourses of 'success'. I explore, in-depth and over time, how such children negotiate and are damaged and limited by such discourses and the policies and practices associated with them. It is only by understanding this that we can begin to consider how to challenge and reshape schools for the benefit of *all* their pupils.

These narratives were based on termly interviews and observations of four 'low attainers', starting when they were in Year 3 (aged 7/8), and continuing for three years until Year 6 (aged 10/11). I examine how they experience their positioning within a context of performativity (Ball 2000) and how this affected them.

Building on this broad research aim, I explore the following research questions:

1. How do 'low attaining' children make sense of attainment labels?
2. How do they view themselves and others in the light of this sense-making?
3. How does this affect the way they navigate their paths through school?

I explore these questions in relation to my four participants, allocating each a full chapter.

My study was part of *Children's Life-Histories in Primary Schools* (CLIPS) at University College London and funded by the Leverhulme Trust. CLIPS was a large-scale study of twenty-three pupils across four schools over thirteen terms, on which I worked as a doctoral student with my supervisor as Principal Investigator and a second researcher. This meant that I did not devise the overall focus or methodology for this study, although my research questions, theoretical framework and analytical approach are my own. I also chose the focus, and designed the activities, for half the interviews, and contributed significantly to the rest. I conducted all those with the four participants discussed in this thesis, as well as with others. My study, then, was both strengthened and constrained by being part of CLIPS and I consider this relationship in Chapter 4.

I became interested in pupils for whom school did not seem to 'work' a few years into primary school teaching, one of the reasons I moved to teach in a small democratic school (see Apple and Beane 2007) in the United States. This was based on a model where pupils chose what and whether they studied, and where school decisions were made by pupils and teachers collectively. A rare

approach, this school was even rarer in its diversity, taking many 'disadvantaged' pupils from the local community who had been unhappy with, or excluded from, regular school. Initially apprehensive – I had been used to pupils *having* to come to my classes – I was impressed by the degree to which even the youngest children were able to organise their time constructively, often requesting classes and committing to them. They were also very good at working cooperatively and contributed to their school community skilfully, including at the weekly 'school meeting' where all decisions were made.

Many pupils who had been 'failing' at previous schools made good academic progress in the democratic school. A small group who asked me to help them with basic maths skills made a similar level of progress in a short session each morning in a term as UK pupils are expected to make in a year. Moreover, they were enthusiastic, rushing in first thing in the morning and grappling with new ideas, helping one another make sense of the work. Many were 'behind' in relation to expected curriculum levels, but they felt they were learning, working together well and enjoying themselves, and considered themselves successful as a result.

Returning to a large London primary school, Ofsted graded 'outstanding', I was struck that those pupils considered 'behind' felt very differently about themselves. These London pupils would tell me they were 'rubbish', that it was 'pointless to try' or would refuse to engage, sitting dejectedly with their heads on the table. Some had already decided they were life-long school failures. Many had skills and qualities that would have had considerable status in the democratic school – social skills, wit, creativity and sometimes impressive knowledge or skill in an area such as gymnastics, story-writing or cooking. Some also resolved conflicts with consideration and insight, skills that would have enabled them to facilitate school meetings well; were this to have been part of their curriculum they may have excelled. The contrast between these similar groups of pupils in dissimilar contexts made explicit the power of the criteria by which we define 'success' – that the differing values that underpin

different ideas of success mean we consider ourselves one type of person and not another. The pupils in the democratic school, though often with previous experience of school 'failure', frequently experienced themselves as competent and valuable; the pupils in my London school did not. Conducting a PhD as part of the CLIPS project offered me the opportunity to explore the experiences of 'low attainers' from their own perspectives.

In this chapter I discuss the context of my study. Schools have a long history, but at least since the 19th century, they have 'become the chief socialising mechanism intermediate between the family and the world of work' (Deacon 2006:179). The ideas I use, such as examination, normalisation and discourses of ability, conduct and morality, were all features of schools long before neoliberalism (Allen 2014). This is also true of practices of division, including the construction of a 'bottom of the class'. Over the last 30 years, however, the ways in which these operate have been increasingly influenced by a neoliberal agenda, leading to changes, and in some cases intensification, of practices and discourses. It is to these that I now turn in the rest of this chapter. In the first half I look at the ideological framework within which low attainment, and therefore 'low attainers', are understood and understand themselves, focusing on meritocracy and what is considered 'merit' under neoliberalism. In the second half I discuss the 'pressure to perform' (Ball et al. 2012:521) that currently dominates UK schools, arguing that neoliberal education policy and its enactment (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2011) have significantly altered what pupils are experiencing in primary school classrooms. I finish by outlining the timing of my study and the organisation of this thesis.

Low attainment under neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is important to both parts of this chapter. Neoliberal meritocratic ideas define current views of 'merit' and how low attainment is viewed within

this; neoliberalism also shapes the policy context and schools' responses to it. It is, however, a confusing and contested term. Sometimes it refers to political theories developed around Hayek and the Mont Pelerin society in the post-war period (Byrne 2020; Mirowski and Plehwe 2009), committed to ideals and practices that involve a shrinking state mandate, the superiority of private enterprise and a faith in markets. This 'collapses the epistemological distinction between economy and society' (Shamir 2008:6), making the rationality of the market increasingly a model for the social as well as the economic (see Trnka and Trundle 2014). The term neoliberalism is also used, more loosely, to refer to both the dominant political discourses and the social and economic changes in the West from the Regan/Thatcher era in the 1980s onwards (Lentzos and Rose 2017:42) and it is in this sense that I generally use it. It describes a highly complex, volatile, even incoherent, system containing many cross-currents and contradictions (Byrne 2020; Shamir 2008), and is arguably increasingly unstable (e.g. Bauman 2000; Fraser 2019; McGimpsey 2016). However, neoliberalism remains a main organising system in which education is considered and constructed (Davies and Bansel 2007; Ross and Gibson 2006).

Neoliberal Meritocracy

The broadly-held belief that our place in society should be, and largely is, determined by our 'merit' – some combination of talent and effort – is a key part of the context of my study. A discourse of meritocracy influences the policies and practices of schools and shapes how pupils see themselves and are seen by others. It serves to legitimate the distribution of power and wealth (Littler 2018; Reich 2019; Sandel 2020) and enmesh pupils in an acceptance of their position.

Although the word 'meritocracy' comes from Michael Young's (1961) satirical attack on the values behind the tripartite school system, the idea that structuring society so that those with more 'merit' have the greatest rewards and the most power is much older (Littler 2018). The 'American Dream' and Victorian ideas of

'bettering yourself', embodied the view that those with talent could 'rise to the top' through hard work. Those at the 'bottom' lacked talent, character, or both, and had no-one to blame but themselves. Moreover, because failure is as much the result of lack of character as of lack of ability, success becomes a sign of moral virtue, and failure of moral inadequacy (Anagnostopoulos 2006; Taylor 2018). The resulting social order, its distribution of rewards and power, can therefore be presented as both 'fair', in that people 'deserve' their position, and as working for the benefit of all, as those at the top have proved their fitness to exercise power.

The post-war 'golden age' of social mobility saw some movement of people from the working classes to the middle classes to fill the new white-collar and managerial roles (Timmins 2017), accompanied by reducing income inequality. However, at least since the 1980s we have seen a substantial increase in financial inequality (Equality Trust 2019) accompanying broadly static social mobility (Eyles, Major, and Machin 2022). This continuity of wealth and power across generations would seem incompatible with the claim that the country is meritocratic, suggesting that privilege and capital – cultural, social and economic – are crucial determinants of social position.

Despite this, the public debate is dominated by the ideal of meritocracy and the belief that, by and large, it exists in the UK (Bradbury 2021; Reay 2017). Those 'at the bottom of the pile' are demonised as unworthy, 'scroungers' and a drain on the rest of us (Jones 2012), while any instances of upward social mobility – the scholarship kids who made good, the self-made millionaires – are showcased to demonstrate that anyone who has what it takes can make it. Maintaining the illusion of meritocracy also requires downward social mobility; as Bourdieu (1986) argues in his extensive examination of elite postgraduate training in France, upholding the deception that the elite have *earned* their power requires not only the occasional admission to the ranks from below but also the sacrifice of a few children of the elite who fail to make the grade. Politicians on all sides may differ on the extent and cure for barriers to social

mobility, but all agree on its importance, using the language of allowing everyone to develop their talents as far as they can to realise their potential (Bradbury 2021). There is almost no mainstream discussion of the implications of focussing on individual success rather than collective welfare, or even what sort of achievement society should reward. In addition, there is a deep-seated belief that merit – as indicated by success – often runs in families, a topic I return to.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that both the 2009 social attitudes survey (Sandel 2020) and an investigation into whether Covid has changed attitudes (Duffy et al. 2021) found that hard work and ambition are seen as the most important determinants of success. They were viewed as far more important than family wealth, connections and education, and also more important than demographic traits such as gender, religion and ‘race’ (hereon without quotation marks, accepting it as socially constructed (Witzig 1996)). The ambivalent feelings around this are, however, illustrated by a 2019 YouGov poll that finds 44% think ‘where a person ends up’ is largely dependent on background (Social Mobility Commission 2020). A belief in the desirability of meritocracy, and a more nuanced belief in its existence is, then, the discursive environment in which school failure is viewed.

Neoliberal ideas of ‘merit’

Historically, meritocracy has taken somewhat different forms (Littler 2018), incorporating varying ideas of ‘merit’, the set of characteristics needed for upward social mobility. The values of neoliberalism, the ‘logic of human capital’ (Spohrer and Bailey 2020), mean it is no longer enough for pupils to be talented, hardworking and obedient. The neoliberal subject must also be entrepreneurial, self-confident and self-promoting, ambitious, competitive, good at taking responsibility and see themselves as a project for improvement (Bradbury 2019a; Keddie 2016; Rose 2016). While often implicit, these characteristics are occasionally expressed explicitly, as in this striking

statement, made in 2008, by the British Columbia Ministry of Education (quoted in Cabanas and Illouz 2019:74–75), who claimed that the ideal students have:

...management and organizational skills, show initiative, responsibility, flexibility and adaptability, self-esteem and confidence, believe actions and choices affect what happens in life, make effort to reach personal potential by pursuing what [they] enjoy doing and market [their] skills and abilities in the same way as [they] would a business.

At the same time, the traditional disciplinary virtues of obedience and deference remain important in schools under neoliberalism, particularly for some groups of pupils such as the working classes (Booher-Jennings 2008; Reay 2017; Saltman 2016). These conflicting pressures form part of ‘good pupil’ discourse, a key education discourse that I discuss in my next chapter and use in analysis.

Attainment and ‘Ability’

Ideas of ‘merit’ often contain a conflation of attainment and ‘ability’ that proves important to my study. Although my participants were sampled based on their attainment, this is defined, understood and experienced within broader educational and cultural discourses of ability that frequently mean attainment is viewed as a measure of ‘ability’. In other words, the CLIPS study of children designated ‘low attaining’ is a study of children likely to be seen, and treated, as ‘low ability’. It is therefore important to briefly discuss this conflation, and its ongoing significance to understanding the experiences of ‘low attainers’.

‘Ability’, in contemporary educational discourse, is a highly contested concept loaded with political and ethical baggage, and is seen by many as illegitimate, not corresponding to any real characteristic of people but used to serve a political and ideological function (Ball 2013; Bradbury 2021). ‘Ability’ (hereon without quotation marks) is central to education debates; as Youdell puts it: ‘ability is a staple of education policy and guidance; it is part of common sense’

(Youdell 2016:unpaged). It is frequently used as a 'common-sense substitute for intelligence' (Ladwig and McPherson 2017:346) and discussion of it parallels the debate over 'general intelligence' (see Rose and Rose 2012; Ball 2013), though in my experience teachers describe pupils as 'low ability', whereas they would feel 'low intelligence' unacceptable. Ability, like intelligence, is a statement of potential, setting expectations and limits on future performance. As Marks (2015:3) writes, '[t]he dominant view of ability in schools...is as a fixed determinant of pupils' future attainment, relatively impervious to change'.

Two studies (Ladwig and McPherson 2017; Bradbury 2021) on teachers' conceptions of ability discover a range of responses that highlight the complexity of the term but both find most teachers incorporate (while not necessarily accepting) current attainment and future potential in their characterisations. Although people may speak of specific abilities – musical or mathematical, for example – in general the term suggests some more-or-less unitary characteristic of the child, part of who they are.

However, my study is on *low-attaining* children, and attainment is, in theory, quite different – not intrinsic to the person but an 'objective' statement of what pupils currently achieve against a set of (often both academically and culturally narrow) criteria. In practice, however, the two are closely entwined; attainment is seen as a measure of ability and ability as setting the expectations and limitations for future attainment. I have found the words are often used interchangeably in schools, an observation echoed by others (Bradbury 2013b). As a Year 6 teacher, for example, I was told to split my class into 'ability groups' for maths and English based on their attainment as measured by Year 5 tests. Such cross-fertilization of meaning can be very damaging. The low attainment of a particular group or individual can be viewed as an indication of limited potential, which in turn is used to explain, excuse and justify their continuing low attainment (Gillborn 2010).

Crucially, attainment is measurable, so the attainment/ability conflation makes ability measurable, 'scientific' and 'objective', by extension. Measurability enables the detailed ranking and comparison of children, a key part of ability discourses (Bradbury 2021), allowing the sorting of children through practices of division (Foucault 1988a), distinguishing the 'normal' from the 'abnormal' (Foucault 1991), and positioning each against the other.

Ability discourses are important to understanding how low attaining children are situated, linking power at the population level and in the disciplining of the individual subject. They can be seen as operating in three ways. First, they are fundamental to the idea of social mobility and meritocracy. They are therefore key to shaping schooling and wider society as well as ideas of the individual characteristics necessary for 'success'. Second, they are an important part of the discursive field in which my participants are making sense of themselves and their schooling; they shape how 'low attainers' are viewed by others and how they view themselves. This includes beliefs about their potential, what is expected of them, and their relationship with ideals of the 'good' or 'failing' pupil, a subject I return to. Such expectations are not only highly self-reinforcing, but unsurprisingly are also socially distributed along axes of advantage and disadvantage, notably class, race and gender (Bradbury 2021; Gillborn 2010; Youdell 2016). Third, ability discourses have a major effect on the school environment, acting, in conjunction with the 'pressure to perform' (Ball et al. 2012:521), to encourage and justify grouping and influence pupil/teacher interactions in ways that impact 'low attainers' and the construction of their learner identities (Bradbury 2021). That is, ability discourses work to organise school practices in ways which reinforce continuing individual low attainment. I explore this in my discussion of the 'pressure to perform' (Ball et al. 2012:521) in the last half of this chapter.

Although the idea of ability may be viewed as 'common sense', it is in fact an empirical claim. Its plausibility rests in part on appeals to the authority of science, a determinist and reductionist 'science-talk' mainly in the language of

genetics, though increasingly also that of the brain sciences. As I discuss in the following section, this plays an important role in reinforcing the idea that some people are just 'better' than others which, in combination with ideas of meritocracy, acts to explain and justify existing social and economic inequalities.

Genetics and the biologizing of social disadvantage

Hereditarian explanations for differences between people and their implications for social structure have a long and chequered history. Widely rejected after the war due to their association with Nazi eugenics, their resurgence from the 1990s, running alongside the growth of neoliberalism, came from across the academic spectrum (Rose and Rose 2012).

The Bell Curve (Herrnstein and Murray 1994), written by a psychologist and political scientist, argued that intelligence – largely genetic, though 'bad environment' played a part – explained class and race inequality. At the same time, the birth of the Human Genome Project (HGP) led to excited anticipation from those who believed that increased knowledge of genetics would illuminate all aspects of the human condition. This genetic turn proved shaky. Many of The Bell Curve's findings were challenged (Jacoby, Glauber, and Herrnstein 1995) and both the hopes and fears of the HGP proved unfounded as the old Mendelian model of differences between individual characteristics caused by one or a few genes, broke down. Hopes of finding 'a gene' for criminality, intelligence or perseverance were abandoned as researchers claimed to find, for example, over 500 genes playing a role in 'intelligence' (Hill et al. 2019) and 178 in depression (Levey et al. 2021). Some scientists even argue that one should start from the assumption that every gene influences every other (Boyle, Li, and Pritchard 2017). Such claims, even if they stand up to examination, suggest a complexity that makes them of no foreseeable practical use.

However, the idea of a genetic basis for ability and character – for 'merit' in fact – fitted the political agenda of individualism and the inevitability of inequality, so

these difficulties were largely ignored and substantial research funding channelled into behavioural genetics (Gillborn 2016). Over recent years research has been used to provide support to a massive edifice of illegitimate social and policy assumptions and the debate has been heated and acrimonious. Advocates for the importance of genetics in the classroom, such as Plomin, who argues that it is the ‘the elephant in the room’ for education (2013 quoted in Gillborn 2016:378), tend to speak not of intelligence, but of academic attainment (Asbury and Plomin 2013). Being more easily measured, it seems more ‘objective’ and scientific. It is also wider, potentially incorporating aspects of character – perseverance and resilience, for example. The good neoliberal subject is, at least partially, determined by their genes.

Such ideas are important to understanding the position of low-attaining children because a belief that science shows that some people are just born ‘better’ than others, with more of what it takes to succeed, can be used not only to suggest that policies designed to support everyone are a waste of time (see Gould 2006; Rose and Rose 2012), but also to reinforce the idea that society is indeed organised on ‘merit’ and people’s positions deserved. To grasp the importance of this I cannot do better than to quote Gillborn (2016:382) in full:

The view recasts existing inequalities of achievement, no longer to be seen as disgraceful injustices that deny opportunity and rob society of so much talent, but as the inevitable and *fair* outcome of a functioning meritocracy. By this thinking, White people and economic elites are privileged not by the wielding of power, but by nature: their children inherit their privilege in their genes, not through their bank accounts, elite education and enhanced access to closed employment and social circles.

Alongside genetic explanations, social disadvantage can also be ‘biologised’ and naturalised by casting social background as the cause of (relatively) fixed ability. Recent developments in neuroscience have been used to support this,

suggesting that children's brain development, and therefore their potential, is affected and limited by their background (Bradbury 2021; Rose and Rose 2016; Youdell and Lindley 2018). Like genetics, this work uses impressive scientific language and images (in this case brain scans), is generally poorly understood, is used to draw wide and unjustified implications, and is accused of underplaying evidence of plasticity and recovery (Bradbury 2021). It hardens up developmental processes, fixing early experiences and trauma in changes to the brain, difficult or even impossible to overcome or reverse. It suggests that these influence not only 'intelligence' but the personality traits needed for success – a sense of agency, optimism, concentration or resilience, for example. While the Jesuits are credited with saying 'Give me a child until seven, and I will show you the man' (Singer 1998), it is now the first three years of a child's life that are seen as particularly crucial, and policy focusses on early intervention, particularly the quality of parenting, an area rife with individualising and discriminatory assumptions (Bradbury 2021). Epigenetics, though sometimes welcomed as offering a genetic basis for progressive concerns over environmental influences, for example that the benefits of more equal and socially supportive societies can be consolidated at the biological level (Wilkinson and Pickett 2018), still suggests that a child's characteristics are relatively fixed, perhaps even before conception.

I have noted above how genetics can be used to justify meritocracy, explaining why people's position in society is both *fair*, reflecting their ability and character, and *stable*, explaining why most individuals end up in a similar social position to their parents. Although biologized environmental influences are clearly unfair, so cannot (unlike genetics) be used to *justify* social hierarchy, they do offer to *explain* it, and its persistence. By the time a child gets to school, their potential is seen as largely set; disadvantage becomes a biological, rather than a social, phenomenon (Bradbury 2021). In Bradbury's (2021:85) words 'poverty is forgotten as a structural problem and reduced to an 'adverse childhood experience''.

Because such environmental influences are socially distributed along the familiar axes of privilege and disadvantage, this debate reinforces pre-existing assumptions about who will succeed and who will fail at school. In addition, the obvious social stability of wealth and power over generations seems potentially explained, for those unhappy with genetics, by references to cycles of deprivation, cultural differences in parenting styles or the social distribution of adverse childhood experiences. Despite attempts to develop more progressive biosocial models (Youdell and Lindley 2018) 'science' seems often used to suggest that 'low attainers' are damned to failure both by their genetic inheritance and by the effects of their background.

The pressure to perform

I have looked at how neoliberal ideas of meritocracy and what constitutes 'merit' provide the framework within which low attainment is understood. In the rest of this chapter I discuss the ways that neoliberal education policy and its enactment (Ball et al. 2011) affect what my participants experience in their classrooms, often exacerbating longstanding tendencies. What I have called, drawing on Ball (2012:521), the 'pressure to perform' in schools emphasises the importance of attainment measurements while also narrowing what is measured. As a teacher, and particularly when Assessment Lead for my school, I experienced this pressure first hand. I was shaken by how rapidly it led me to reduce children to data; before each termly 'assessment point' they became numbers on spreadsheets in need of tweaking for targets to be met. Despite my educational principles, the pressure to get the 'right' percentages sent me into a whirl of data manipulation that reduced the experiences, struggles and successes of the children beneath the numbers either invisible, or a guilt-inducing inconvenience. My study is about understanding the experiences of those children who bring these percentages down, experiences too often irrelevant to meeting school priorities determined by the pressure to perform.

There is a substantial and generally highly critical body of work on this pressure and the broader influence of neoliberal ideas on education policy over the last 30 years (Apple 2006; Ball 2017b, 2016a; Reay 2017). Ball, whose work in education policy sociology has been particularly influential, describes this as a shift from 'professional-ethical regimes' to 'entrepreneurial-competitive regimes' (2017b:57). He identifies three interrelated 'policy technologies' – marketization, managerialism and performativity – as key to this process (2003), and argues that they have changed education at all levels. As he puts it:

...the power of privatisation in service delivery gives rise to change in education as part of a slow burn; how management is altering social connections and power relations to less democratic and caring forms, and how performativity and accountability agendas are radically undermining the professionalism of teachers in the hunt for measures, targets, benchmarks, tests, tables, audits to feed the system in the name of improvement. (2016a:1046)

This hunt for measures has created a 'climate of hyper accountability' (Keddie 2014:504), leaving schools dominated by disciplinary regimes of inspection, evaluation, target-setting and comparison (Selwyn 2016b:54).

In England, in the 'market' theoretically created by parental choice, schools are positioned on performance tables and graded by Ofsted. One year of negative results can have severe repercussions (Perryman 2009), including 'naming and shaming' both school and headteacher, a drop in applications and even forced academisation (Simkins et al. 2018). In response, schools shape and reshape their pedagogy, practice and documentation around targets and measures (Ball 2003) to avoid these consequences. Ball (2000) describes this as performativity, a culture of regulation employing judgements and comparisons as means of control. The performances of schools or individuals within schools serve as demonstrations of productivity, representing their worth. Perryman's (2009:616) study of the impact on schools of Ofsted, the government body

responsible for inspecting educational institutions in England, explains its inevitability in these conditions:

The discourse of OfSTED involves standards, quality, efficiency, value for money and performance. In order to be successful, schools need to accept that this discourse is the way forward... There is no room for schools to 'do their own thing' in terms of improvement. If a school is to be judged as effective, it must demonstrate that it has met pre-determined criteria which are set to judge a school, irrespective of the socio-economic environment, and it is the need to demonstrate according to external success criteria which leads to the performance culture as a reaction to inspection.

Schools are trapped by these pressures, reinforced by severe repercussions for failure, into needing to perform.

The pressure to be judged 'effective' is so strong that it has led to what Michael Wilshaw (2013), when Head of Ofsted, described as schools 'putting on a show' and presenting activities that are not part of normal school life. This idea of schools 'performing the good school' (Perryman 2009:611) and engaging in what Ball (2003) calls 'fabrications', parallels pressures on children to 'perform the good pupil' an idea I return to in my analysis. Fabrications, Ball (2003:225) explains:

... are ways of measuring oneself within particular registers of meaning, within a particular economy of meaning in which only certain possibilities of being have value. However, such fabrications are deeply paradoxical... Fabrications are both resistance *and* capitulation. They are a betrayal even, a giving up of claims to authenticity and commitment, an investment in plasticity.

An Australian study (Keddie, Mills, and Pendergast 2011) finds even ‘top’ schools feel unable to ‘do their own thing’ but embrace discourses of performance, competition and accountability to shape themselves ‘into an auditable commodity and fabricate an identity around being ‘Number 1’ (2011:75). Their paper highlights the lack of authenticity in schools’ fabrications, drawing attention to their careful and deliberate construction. Clapham (2015) develops this theorisation, suggesting that being ‘inspection ready’ so dominates English schools that it goes beyond fabrication to what the author calls ‘post-fabrication’. The *threat* of inspection means that schools can no longer rely on putting on the occasional show, for Ofsted for example; rather, post-fabrication means schools must be in a ‘state of perpetual readiness’ (Perryman 2009:627). My own fixation on data as Assessment Lead, for example, was driven primarily by the threat of an impending Ofsted inspection that was delayed for almost two years; I had to ensure that documentation providing an acceptable ‘data story’ for our school could be produced with only a few hours’ notice throughout this entire time.

The increased prominence of data that has risen from the advent of digital technology in schools (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017c) has been termed ‘datafication’, explored extensively by Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017c; Roberts-Holmes 2015; Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury 2016) among others (e.g. Manolev, Sullivan, and Slee 2019; Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013). Datafication is a complex process, impacting education at all levels (Ozga et al. 2011; Selwyn 2016a, 2016b). Selwyn et al. (2021:2) explain:

These data uses include managerial decision-making, academic predictions, and the general profiling, sorting and categorising of students, teachers and school on the basis of ‘their’ data trails and traces. All told, many different aspects of everyday school life are increasingly imagined and enacted on the basis of ‘what the data says’.

A school's data is key to its 'performance' – through data schools can tell a story of effectiveness (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017a). Hence the pressure on myself as Assessment Lead to massage my spreadsheets to generate the 'right' data story; it was essential to show that the school was 'effective' and pupils were 'making progress'.

The production and maintenance of *attainment* data has become central to these stories. As Ward and Quennerstedt (2019:261) put it, 'these government standards are primarily based upon pupils' performance within a narrow range of subject-specific skills'. Academic results, though a focus of schools for a long time (McCourt 2017; McLelland 2018) have gained new importance. At primary level, pupil performance in maths and English – or rather a particular, tested, subset of these subjects – can determine a school's future.

Chasing attainment targets

The current obsession with attainment data arises, at least in part, from the dominance of testing as an accountability measure (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017c; Lingard et al. 2013). In England, the frequency of statutory assessments in primary schools has increased in recent years and they are regarded as increasingly difficult (MTAS 2017). Tests, rather than teacher assessments, dominate this phase of education in England (Ward and Quennerstedt 2019). Children undergo statutory assessments in Reception and Years 1, 2, 4 and 6. The last of these, the KS2 SATs, is particularly significant as they feed directly into school performance tables as well as being key to Ofsted judgements (see Bradbury 2019b). A 2017 Twitter survey (TES 2017) found that one in ten teachers admitted to cheating in SATs because of pressure from senior leaders, and schools' decisions around admissions, exclusions and 'off-rolling' are often reported in the press (e.g. TES 2019b, 2018; The Guardian 2018) as driven by their impact on league table position (see YouGov 2019). While for *pupils* high-stakes testing is not new (Lacey

1974) – the 11 plus, for example – it is now schools and teachers for whom results are so important (Stobart 2008).

The drive to push up test results has a significant effect on headteachers' decisions, as shown by a research project I worked on (Bradbury, Braun, and Quick 2021), and many changes made in primary school classrooms can be attributed to this pressure. Unpacking such changes is important to understanding what primary school pupils, particularly those who bring results down, are experiencing – or 'coping with', as Pollard and Filer (1999) put it – and I turn now to outlining these changes.

First, the curriculum has narrowed to spend more time on the assessed subjects, maths and English, at the cost of 'foundation' subjects (Boyle and Bragg 2006; Bradbury 2019b; Hutchings 2015), including the arts, humanities, languages and technologies, and even within maths and English schools focus on those areas most assessed (Beverton et al. 2005; Boyle and Bragg 2006; Hutchings 2015). The recent introduction of the Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar (SPaG) SAT, for example, led to a huge rise in time allocated to these subjects (Safford et al. 2015), and post-pandemic findings showing children were four months behind in SPaG (Blainey and Hannay 2021) were treated as a crisis (Lough 2021). Changes in what is assessed, then, shapes what is taught (Reay and Wiliam 1999; see also Sadler 2007; Torrance 2007).

Second, pedagogy has changed. A focus on statutory tests has been found to lead to lessons speeding up (Hall et al. 2004), rote-learning (Harlen and Crick 2002), incessant use of practice papers and 'SATs style' questioning and assessments (Bradbury 2019b; Reay and Wiliam 1999; see also Paris et al. 1991) and a move from problem solving to instruction (Johnston and McClune 2000). Statutory testing also brings with it an increase in internal testing (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in Harlen and Crick 2003) and most primary schools now conduct school-wide 'in house' assessments termly (Bradbury 2019b) as well as frequent smaller class tests (MTAS 2017).

A key pedagogic change is an increase in attainment grouping practices in primary schools (Bradbury et al. 2021; Marks 2016a; Towers et al. 2020). Towers et al (2020) found different grouping practices being used for year groups with statutory tests, generally justified by the need to improve outcomes. This is despite well-documented research finding no statistically significant overall link between grouping and attainment, though sometimes slight benefits to higher groups counterbalanced by disadvantages to middle and lower groups (Francis et al. 2019; Marks 2016a). Given evidence that fluidity between groups is very low and pupils' group allocation is influenced by background, this has been characterised as a 'double disadvantage' (Francis et al. 2019) for some pupils, widening the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

Third, the drive to improve attainment data has led to widespread use of 'educational triage' (Gillborn and Youdell 2000; see Marks 2014a for primary). This focuses resources on those pupils on the 'cusp' of making the required target, at the expense both of those sure to reach 'age-related expectations' (ARE) and those viewed as 'hopeless cases' (Gillborn and Youdell 2000). Marks (2014) shows how one school directed energy and resources, including staffing, at Set 3 (the 'cusp' group) while Set 4, the bottom group, were marginalised, moved around lesson spaces including corridors where resources weren't readily available, and taught either by a 'floating teacher' or a teaching assistant. Having a teacher without a degree in the subject is more common for lower groups in other schools too (Francis et al. 2019), and was a practice I observed in one of my study schools, Jayden Primary (a pseudonym), where a teaching assistant often taught a handful of the very lowest-attaining pupils outside in the corridor.

Educational triage is an obvious example of 'gaming' (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017c; Souto-Otero, Beneito-Montagut, and Roser 2016) – improving results by focusing on a few with no overall benefit (and probably some disbenefit) to the attainment of most – and is still common (Bradbury et al.

2021). Strikingly, in the mid 2000s the government actually encouraged this by providing 'booster packs' for use with 'cusp' groups (Stobart 2008).

Government, like schools, could use the resulting figures to suggest improved attainment. However, since then, in response to concerns about the neglect of 'high attainers', the percentage of children reaching 'greater depth' (GD) has become an additional target. Predictably, schools have responded by creating special interventions for those on the 'cusp' of GD, leading to a system that has been termed 'double triage' (Bradbury et al. 2021).

Fourth, there appears to have been a recent increase in 'intervention culture' in primary schools (Bradbury et al. 2021) where children are withdrawn from normal lessons, playtime or assemblies, to rectify 'gaps' in their learning.

Different from 'triage' in that they tend to focus on a few children for a specific curriculum area, they are usually taught by adults other than the class teacher and range from bought-in programmes covering weeks or months, to taking children who struggle with the morning's core lesson in English or maths out of afternoon lessons to be 'fixed through targeted action' (Bradbury et al. 2021:11). The reopening of schools after lockdown saw an explosion of intervention culture, supported by a £1.4bn government programme (DfE 2021) aimed at funding, among other things, 6 million sets of 15-hour tutoring courses for disadvantaged pupils. Although of potential benefit to 'low attainers', reports of the quality of tutoring have been very mixed (Ofsted 2022) and risk further stigmatizing pupils and interfering with their social development.

Fifth, the time allocated to primary school lunch and breaktimes has reduced significantly since 1995 and particularly since 2006, justified in part by the need to make more time for teaching so as to be able to cover the core curriculum (Baines and Blatchford 2019). In addition to this, 60% of primary and secondary schools said that children might miss a full break or lunchtime as a punishment or to help them catch up with schoolwork (Baines and Blatchford 2019), a practice significantly more likely to impact those who find work difficult or work at a slower pace.

Sixth and last, there is clear evidence that the time needed to collect, manage and respond to data that accompanies statutory assessments takes away from teachers' time and focus on building relationships with pupils (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017c:52). Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes' (2017c) research with Reception classes (ages 4-5) in the UK shows how teachers' anxiety about collecting and documenting evidence for the 47 statements in the Baseline Assessment within its strict timeframe has shifted their priorities. Teachers spend less time building relationships with pupils during the important first few weeks at school. One headteacher explained:

If you have got 60 young people coming in through the door and in six weeks' time you have got to tick 47 boxes about all of them, of course your mind is going to be on that rather than on talking to them about their nice shiny shoes and about their pet rabbit at home and all those things that give young people a sound, secure start to learning. (2017c:64)

Pratt's (2016) study of internal competition in English primary schools provides insight into this preoccupation with data. While some teachers might criticise and resist 'datafication' (see Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017c), he shows how important data has become to many teachers, highlighting its status as 'a sort of non-arguable level of proof' (2016:898) and the feeling of ownership they have over it. Pupils' data, he states, 'becomes a commodity to be made use of' (2016:890), as teachers attempt to navigate the demands of increased accountability measures. This changes how they view pupils, seeing them 'in narrow terms of performance and attendance' (Selwyn et al. 2021:1). As I suggest I experienced as Assessment Lead, the complexity of children's learning becomes reduced to single numbers (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017c).

Moreover, all of these changes are not found only in statutory assessment years or in the run up to tests, they are evident throughout the seven years of primary schooling. The impact of the KS2 SATs, in particular, is remarkable.

Interviews conducted with headteachers (Bradbury 2019b; Bradbury et al. 2021) found over half said preparation for the KS2 SATs affected other year groups, with many acknowledging the impact throughout the school. One explained:

We're really aware now that the work starts right from the moment they enter the school in Nursery and every single teacher, every single Year Group, plays a part in getting those children where they need to be at the end of Year 6. So, the preparation starts as soon as the three year olds step through the door. (Bradbury 2019b:24)

This 'trickle down' in test preparation is not restricted to SATs: a survey in the Times Educational Supplement (2019a) just before the pandemic found that 63% of schools begin teaching the GCSE curriculum designed for Years 10-11 early, some as early as Year 7, thus greatly narrowing curriculum content. Indeed, the past few years have seen even Ofsted voice concerns over schools' focus on attainment data and the detrimental effect that the dominance of maths and English is having on learning (Ofsted 2018). Their suggested solution, that schools be penalised for 'disproportionate data collection' (Ofsted 2019:44 - 45) and instead focus on a wider curriculum, seems unlikely to lessen the pressure on schools (NEU 2019), but rather push them to develop new 'gaming' strategies across more subjects and targets, although the pandemic may have slowed this for the moment.

Although schools have long felt pressure to demonstrate good academic performance (Allen 2014), these six changes are some of the ways schools have responded to neoliberal education reforms, particularly changes to statutory assessment. It is important to recognise that responses vary between schools in extent and intensity (Bradbury 2019b) and tend to be more prevalent in schools with lower attainment, lower pupil progress, lower Ofsted ratings and/or a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils (Hutchings 2015). In short, the impacts of the reforms I have discussed in this section may have a disproportionate effect on pupils experiencing multiple axes of disadvantage.

We might also expect them to particularly affect pupils, such as the participants in this study, who are not attaining the desired levels. It is useful, then, to look at the limited evidence we have on the impact of these reforms on the wellbeing of 'low attainers'.

The pressure to perform and the wellbeing of 'low attainers'

Children's wellbeing in the UK compares poorly with that of other European countries. Writing before the pandemic, the Children's Society (2020a:37) concluded that 'over the past decade, childhood in this country appears to have taken a turn for the worse'. Although their 2020 Good Childhood Report (TCS 2020) was based largely on data from the 2018 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which collects academic and subjective wellbeing data from a large international sample of 15 year olds (OECD 2019), the results suggest stresses on younger pupils, and makes depressing reading. The UK ranked lowest of 24 European countries for the *proportion* of children with high life satisfaction, lowest for *mean* life satisfaction, and showed the greatest *reduction* in life satisfaction between the 2015 and 2018 studies, bucking the European trend for stable life satisfaction. UK children also scored lowest for a sense of purpose in life, 23rd for low sadness (i.e. the second highest level of sadness) but, intriguingly, 9th for happiness. Girls had somewhat lower subjective wellbeing than boys (see also Children's Commissioner for England 2021). As The Children's Society (2020a:37) puts it:

At age 15 children in the UK are sadder, less satisfied, and do not feel they are flourishing compared to their European peers.

Work on the wellbeing of younger pupils, although scarce, provides further support for the UK's poor international position. In a Children's Worlds Survey (Rees et al. 2020) of 10 year olds, England and Wales scored below average on all 10 measures of wellbeing, while a previous survey of 12 year olds (Rees and Main 2015) found the UK again well below average for positivity about the

future. Other international studies also find the UK in the bottom section of results (see TCS 2020).

Differences between the wellbeing of children of different ethnic groups does not appear to be much researched. The Children's Commissioner for England report (2021) of over half a million 9-17 year olds found 21% of White children were unhappy with their mental health compared to only 16% of Asian children. Similarly, the Good Childhood Report (TCS 2020) quotes findings that children of Indian ethnicity have significantly higher subjective well-being than those of White and Mixed ethnicity though much of the data in the report uses a broad Black, Asian and minority ethnic category and finds no significant difference from White British pupils. However, the school experiences of children from different ethnic groups – Chinese and Caribbean for example – are likely to be so different as to make summing them into an overall figure meaningless, as the authors acknowledge. Worth noting, however, is that, pre-pandemic at least, how wellbeing relates to either disadvantage (measured by Free School Meals/Pupil Premium) or to Special Educational Needs, was far from clear (DfE 2019:22–23).

The pandemic, of course, has and will continue to affect children's wellbeing in the UK. The National Health Service (2020) reported a rise from one in nine young people and children reporting mental health problems in 2017 to one in six in 2020, and other studies point in a similar direction (e.g. O'Shea 2021). The Children's Commissioner for England report (2021) found almost half the children surveyed said they weren't 'happy' with their wellbeing, 23% saying they were 'ok' and 20% that they were unhappy. Particular worries about the pandemic were frequent. The report states that stories of '...isolation, uncertainty around schooling, exams or assessment-related stress, constant frightening stories on news, absorption of parental anxiety, estrangement from wider family, social media addiction, anorexia, self-harm, thoughts of suicide, early bereavement and grief' (2021:32) were common. Interestingly, there was little variation in children's subjective wellbeing by deprivation, though children with what they call a 'vulnerable background' (young carers or those with social

workers) were slightly more likely to be unhappy with their mental health than others.

More encouragingly, The Children's Society (2021) found that 85% of the children in their 2021 survey said they had coped well with the pandemic, though 8% did not. These 8% were disproportionately from less well-off families, had experienced higher impacts of COVID (illness, caring responsibilities, family job loss etc), and were those who reported lower life satisfaction. It seems likely that children already negotiating multiple axes of disadvantage have been hardest hit by the pandemic.

Even before COVID, concern was being expressed about the relationship between schooling and wellbeing, both nationally and globally (OECD 2019). How much the pressure to perform is implicated in this decrease in child wellbeing over the last decade, particularly for those who find themselves designated as low attaining, is an important question. Evidence, though suggestive, is far from conclusive. The Good Childhood Report (TCS 2020) considered a number of hypotheses to explain the PISA patterns outlined above and found strong evidence across countries for a correlation between 'fear of failure' and life satisfaction; it is striking that children in the UK come out bottom of the 24 European countries considered on both measures. Unfortunately, the PISA report did not ask direct questions about *school* pressure, although as it was focused on academic learning it seems likely that school failure was a significant component of 'fear of failure'.

The Good Childhood Report (2020:35) says of its own research:

Children and young people often tell us how bullying, disciplinary measures, exam stress, and little choice over the subjects they study, result in school not being an enjoyable place to be.

Their 2021 report (TCS 2021) found more young people unhappy with school than with any other aspect of their lives and their happiness with schoolwork

has decreased in recent years, particularly for boys. Other work points in a similar direction. For example qualitative analyses of 2018 ChildLine data (Verity et al. 2022) found that young people talked about school as the main contributor to their experiences of loneliness.

There is widespread belief and some evidence (Connor 2001; UK Education Select Committee 2020; Cho and Chan 2020; see also Bradbury 2019b; Bradbury et al. 2021) that the stress of tests is bad for pupil wellbeing. However, Jerrim (2021), using the millennium cohort data to compare the wellbeing of pupils in England at the time of their KS2 SATs with those in the rest of the UK where SATs are not taken, found no evidence that SATs is 'associated with lower levels of happiness, enjoyment of school, self-esteem or children's mental wellbeing' (2021:1). This research has a number of limitations acknowledged by the author, for example that his population-level results may not apply to sub-groups (which could be relevant to the 'low-attainers' that interest me), that the UK countries other than England have considerable, if non-statutory, testing, and that SATs may have become more important in English schools since his data was collected in 2012.

Parents and teachers seem to be increasingly concerned about the stress caused by tests. A 2022 ICAPE report (Wise, Bradbury, and Trollope 2022) found that over 90% of both educators and parents agreed that the current system worsens pupil stress, agreeing with the statement: 'there should be no statutory assessment in primary schools', three out of four strongly agreeing. Other studies support these findings, reporting that 95% of parents felt SATs had a negative impact on their children's wellbeing (ParentKind 2022) and most teachers strongly agreed with the statement: 'many pupils become very anxious/stressed in the time leading up to SATs' (Hutchings 2015). Pupils in primary schools, too, make a link between tests and wellbeing, a point I return to in Chapter 3.

Direct evidence on the connection between wellbeing and low attainment is scant, largely because it has been little investigated. However, back in 2009 Dunn and Layard (2009:4) argued that ‘low attainers’ have ‘significantly lower self-esteem’ following the introduction of national tests in England, and Wyse and Torrance’s (2009) literature review found that the introduction of SATs seemed to produce a correlation between low achievement and low self-esteem. In addition pupils placed in low groups and sets (an indicator they are regarded as low attaining) report feelings of shame, sadness and stupidity, with recent research highlighting the potential long-term impact both psychologically and socially (e.g. Francis et al. 2019; Hargreaves 2017; Marks 2014a, 2016a; McGillicuddy 2021; McGillicuddy and Devine 2018, 2020). It is often assumed that the relationship is circular, wellbeing aiding attainment and vice versa, although it is far from straightforward (T. Clarke 2020). One study found children with low subjective wellbeing had lower engagement in school than those with higher wellbeing (TCS 2019:13) though it is of course difficult to identify causality. Jerrim’s (2021) findings on the millennium cohort study, however, found no evidence that children with higher wellbeing attain better in KS2 SATs.

‘Low attainers’ have, though, been found to show more hyperactivity and emotional problems when placed in within-class ability groups than when not grouped (Papachristou et al. 2021), the authors of the study concluding that if children are placed in low groups they ‘should be monitored closely to ensure that their well-being is not compromised’ (2021:1). In addition, low group placement has been found to lead to bullying (McGillicuddy and Machowska-Kosciak 2021), which is a key risk factor for poor wellbeing and mental ill-health (Arseneault 2018), although findings vary significantly depending on the methodology used (DfE 2019). Bullying does seem to be, however, significantly higher for those who receive extra help at school – 23% as compared with 16% who did not receive help, across the school age range (DfE 2019:36).

The scant but growing research on the impact of school closures on children’s wellbeing during the pandemic is also relevant to my study; my participants

spent a significant part of term time in Years 5 and 6 at home. There is some evidence (Manyukhina 2021) that pupils disliked school closures because they missed their friends and were lonely, although they enjoyed being able to work 'on their own terms' (2021:6). A study on autistic young people's experiences found, similarly, that most were keen to return to school despite anxieties and reservations (Oliver, Vincent, and Pavlopoulou 2021). My participants echoed this variety, two of them much preferring to work at home and two missing school desperately.

Blanden et al. (2021) looked at the impact of school closure on the wellbeing of 5-11 year olds. Using data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study, one of their conclusions was that extra support for children's 'mental health and wellbeing is likely to be required for some time and justifies the focus that many schools have been placing on pupil wellbeing' (2021:4). Indeed, we know from research with primary school teachers (Moss et al. 2020) that those teachers in schools with pupils from poorer families felt they operated in 'crisis mode' in order to attend to the wellbeing needs of their most disadvantaged families, which invariably left less time to focus on academic 'home learning'. Teachers felt that they had a 'duty of care' for the wellbeing of pupils alongside the 'duty to teach' (2020:4), and this may well continue as the cost-of-living crisis grows. The Sutton Trust (2022), for example, reports that 52% of senior state school leaders have seen an increase in the number of children not eligible for free school meals who are unable to afford lunch, while 72% of teachers say that financial pressures are affecting the ability of a third of their class to achieve at school, with students tired, unable to concentrate and cold because they are without adequate winter clothing.

In short, the evidence suggests that children's wellbeing is declining, and, by most measures, the lockdowns, pandemic more generally, and now the cost-of-living crisis, are making it worse, perhaps particularly for the most disadvantaged. There is evidence that too many children find, in the words of The Children's Society, that school is not 'an enjoyable place to be' (2020:35)

and although research is scant it seems likely that this is particularly true of pupils designated as low attaining.

The timing of my study: cuts and covid

This study was conducted at a specific point both historically and geographically – broadly that of Anglo-Saxon neoliberalism in the twenty-first century, and more specifically that of two racially mixed urban English schools affected initially by austerity and then the COVID pandemic. The three years of this research, from 2018-2021, were exceptionally difficult ones for schools in this country. After a period of increased spending in the 2000s, government austerity policies included significant education cuts. In 2019/20 the IFS reported an 8% fall in spending per pupil in England compared with 10 years before (Britton, Farquharson, and Sibieta 2019) and larger class sizes. Numerous spending promises from both Cameron and May, the Conservative Prime Ministers during this period, were not met, leading to passionate complaints from both within and outside the profession that education cuts were having devastating repercussions (e.g. Pells 2017; Ratcliffe 2017).

Then, in March 2020, after we had completed six terms of our CLIPS research interviews, the COVID pandemic hit the UK and schools closed, leaving most pupils, including the four in this study, attempting to learn at home with whatever adult help, technology, space and internet access were available to them. The impacts of the pandemic and of school closures are the subject of ongoing research but, as noted, there is widespread fear from many professionals of damage to both wellbeing and learning, particularly for those already suffering systemic disadvantage (see Blainey and Hannay 2021).

Year 6 SATs were cancelled in 2020 when my participants were in Year 5 and by the summer term of 2021, when they returned after England's second lockdown into Year 6, their SATs too were cancelled, making them one of only

two cohorts of state-schooled children not to undergo these tests since their introduction in 1991. This, of course, affected my research. On the one hand, I was not able to document their experiences of SATs, which as the most 'high stakes' of the primary school tests was disappointing given the focus of my study. However, it did mean that I was in the unusual position of collecting face-to-face data over the course of the pandemic and so was able to document their experiences and views of school closures and the cancellation of SATs, and I include discussion of these in their individual stories.

The organisation of this thesis

This thesis is split into three parts. Chapters 1-4 outline the background to the research, Chapters 5-8 tell the stories of the four participants and Chapter 9 brings the findings from all four together to draw some overall conclusions. I include a brief description of each chapter below.

In this chapter I have outlined the context of my research, establishing the ideological framework within which low attainment, and therefore 'low attainers', are understood and understand themselves. I have argued that neoliberal meritocracy individualises and biologises success and failure, shaping how 'low attainers' are positioned. I also outlined how neoliberal education reforms, and schools' responses to them, have significantly changed primary school classrooms. Finally, I looked briefly at evidence of the low wellbeing of children in the UK today, discussing its links with low attainment.

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical ideas I use in analysis of my participants' sense-making, largely drawn from Foucault and those who have extended his work such as Rose (1996, 1999a), Ball (2003, 2016b), Youdell (2006, 2011) and Bradbury (2013b, 2013a). I begin by outlining the 'tools' I use most, discussing the relationship between power, knowledge, discourse and the subject, along with disciplinary technologies and technologies of the self. I then

look at what schools consider a 'successful' pupil and explain 'good pupil' discourse, before exploring how schooling promotes 'happiness' through happiness discourse. I finish by arguing that Foucault's idea of counter-conduct can be usefully extended to make sense of some forms of children's resistance.

Chapter 3 outlines the relevance of my empirical contribution, identifying a concerning gap in our knowledge of how both younger and low-attaining pupils experience and understand school. Focusing purely on research on pupils' own perspectives, I show that from the limited literature we have it appears that 'low attainers' are both stigmatised and suffering in their classrooms and that neoliberal education reforms are exacerbating this. I discuss why primary school pupils see academic success and failure as so important and how they understand its causes. I then move to what current research tells us about the experiences of 'low attainers', how they make sense of being designated as such, and what strategies they adopt in response to this designation.

Chapter 4 explains my methodology and outlines the procedures I used in data collection. I discuss the relationship between my study and the wider CLIPS project and reflect on the process of collecting data, the role I played and the ethical issues involved in working with young low-attaining children. I also discuss the creative interview activities I developed, which drew particularly on play therapy techniques.

In Chapters 5-8, the core of my study, I develop my analysis of how four children made sense of being designated as low attaining and its impact on the construction of their school subjectivities.

Chapter 5 tells the story of Max, showing how his intense anxiety about what he experienced as failure within a context of almost continuous academic ranking, led to sadness, humiliation and anger. I argue that he found it difficult to construct a subjectivity he considered of worth and describe his growing sense-making about himself as lacking, deficient and incomplete.

Chapter 6 discusses Summer and her refusal of the subjectivity made most available to her within school. A story of resistance, I extend Foucauldian uses of counter-conduct to explain her efforts to draw on a counter-discourse to construct an alternative subjectivity, one that was in opposition to much of what school – at least in her view – considered important. I explore how intolerable Summer found lessons and her ‘little resistances’ that, despite their costs, she used to survive day-to-day and consider herself of value.

Chapter 7 tells the story of Britney and the importance she placed on presenting herself as a ‘good pupil’, even when this felt a stretch to her. I suggest that she can be understood as engaged in a ‘fabrication’ (Ball 2003), though a fragile one, and that this was because she was highly responsibilised. I look, also, at the pressure she put on herself to be happy and positive, arguing that her responsibilised attitude extended beyond school work to encompass emotions. I finish by considering the concerning way happiness and ‘good pupil’ discourse worked together for her.

Chapter 8 discusses my final participant, Jake, and the three subject positions he drew on to construct a school subjectivity he considered of value: ‘in the middle’ academically, a ‘good player’ socially, and ‘happy’ and ‘never sad’ emotionally. I show that each was reliant on the others, making his sense of self fragile. Following from discussions of Summer’s counter-conduct (Chapter 6) and Britney’s deployment of happiness discourse (Chapter 7), I develop my analysis of the ways these operate for ‘low attainers’.

Chapter 9 discusses the three key issues about the experience of low-attaining children that emerge from my findings and their relationship with neoliberal meritocracy and the pressure to perform discussed in Chapter 1. First is the emotional work my participants put into surviving day-to-day and devising strategies for feeling good about themselves, often finding this intensely difficult. This, I suggest, is due to my second key finding about three pressures that

seem especially harmful to 'low attainers', posing the threat of failure and experienced by my participants to different degrees. Presented as a triangle, they arise from the dominance of attainment in schools, the responsabilisation of that attainment, and the responsabilisation of happiness, each compounding the others and threatening three-fold failure for those who experience all three. The third key point to emerge from my analysis is the value of expanding and refining theorisations of resistance in primary school classrooms using Foucault's concept of counter-conduct. I finish the thesis by looking at the implications of my research for teachers, schools and policymakers, reflecting on the limitations of my study and making some concluding comments about why my findings are important to understanding the inequitable processes of social reproduction that exist in this country.

Chapter 2: Theorising the ‘low attainer’

My previous research on children’s experiences of primary school (2015; summary published in Hargreaves 2017:44–48) was influenced by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1986, 1990). In particular, I was drawn to the way his ideas were used to analyse how pupils’ experiences illuminate how classrooms act as vehicles for the reproduction of inequalities (e.g. Archer et al. 2018; Ingram 2018b; McGillicuddy and Devine 2018; Reay 1995, 2006, 2015; Stahl 2013). I began analysis of my participants for this thesis in the same vein but found, increasingly, that attempts to unpick the ways they were making sense of themselves led me to the ideas of Foucault and others who have developed these in relation to education and the construction of school subjectivities, including Ball (2003, 2016b), Youdell (2006, 2011), Bradbury (2013b, 2013a) and Rose (1996, 1999a). It is these ideas that became the main influence on how I understood my participants’ experiences.

Foucault’s ideas are notoriously difficult to pin down, partly because he wrote over a long period, during which they changed and developed, but also because he had little interest in sharpening and narrowing them (Ball 2017a). He writes:

I would like my books to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area... I write for users, not readers. (1974:523-524 in Fadyl, Nicholls, and McPherson 2013:490)

In this spirit I start the chapter by outlining the theoretical tools I found most useful, while acknowledging that they are only a few from the toolbox, subject to a range of interpretations and used somewhat differently by some of the authors I discuss. I begin by explaining the relationship between power/knowledge, discourse and the subject alongside disciplinary technologies and technologies of the self, both crucial to governmentality and pastoral power. I then look at

what schools consider a 'successful' pupil and use this to develop what I call 'good pupil' discourse, following research on 'ideal clients' (Becker 1952, 1963) and 'ideal' or 'good' 'learners' or 'pupils' (Bradbury 2019a; Hempel-Jorgensen 2009; Oughton 2007; Sjöberg 2014; Thornberg 2009; Wong and Chiu 2020). I follow this with an exploration of happiness discourse (Binkley 2011; Cabanas and Illouz 2019) and the ways 'happiness' and 'character' are being promoted in classrooms. I finish by discussing resistance and consider some issues that arise when applying Foucault's (2007a) concept of counter-conduct to pupils as young as my participants.

Power/knowledge, discourse and the subject

Power and knowledge are usually regarded as distinct concepts, one political and the other epistemological. They may each influence and circumscribe the other but are, in principle, separate. For Foucault (1980, 1998a), however, they cannot be disentangled, even in principle, but are combined into what he calls power/knowledge. In speaking of power, we are implicitly referring to the systems of knowledge that underpin that power. In speaking of knowledge, we are implicitly referring to the power relationships that allow the production of this knowledge and determine its acceptance or otherwise.

Foucault saw power not as something that some exercise over others, but as dispersed, operating as 'a net-like organisation... not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the situation of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power'(1980:98). As he explains:

Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere... Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations. (1998a:93–94)

Discourses are the way in which power operates through historically constituted 'knowledge'. Power, in this context, is seen not as coercive or restrictive of the individual, but as 'productive' of society and of subjectivities. It 'produces reality' (Foucault 1991:194). Some discourses define 'truth', those powerful 'taken for granted' truths, seen as 'natural' or 'self-evident' that together Foucault calls 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1980:131, see also 1991). However, as well as these dominant discourses, there are many other discourses in circulation, including those of 'disavowed' or 'subjugated' knowledges (Youdell 2010:220), which are experienced as impossible, ridiculous or simply unthinkable (Youdell 2006). Discourses overlap, reinforce and contradict. They include, but are much more than, ways of thinking and systems of meaning. They circulate not only through language, but also through visual representation, bodily movements and gestures, social and institutional practices (Youdell 2010), architecture and the organisation of space, such as the layout of a school classroom (Gutting 2005).

Discourses, then, are not *reflections* of knowledge, but are, crucially, the means by which knowledge is produced and by which productive power operates; they both encompass and create social meaning. As Foucault (1998a:100) notes, 'it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together'. Circulating discourses make and remake what we consider true and false, right and wrong, good and bad, common-sense or absurd, thinkable and inconceivable.

Central to the analysis of my data is an understanding of the person or subject as discursively produced (Foucault 1998a). Discourses are not an external social context in which we think and act, rather, they make us who we are. As Ball (1993:14) explains:

We do not speak a discourse, it speaks us. We are the subjectivities, the voice, the knowledge, the power relations that a discourse constructs and allows. We do not 'know' what we say, we 'are' what we say and do.

I understand a subject, therefore, not as complete or constant, but as created and recreated through ongoing relational processes making them, as Foucault (1982) called it, *subjectivated*. Subjectification refers to ‘the productive force of circulating discourses that creates people as social subjects at the same time as it subjects them to relations of power’ (Youdell 2010:220). Individuals are constituted as subjects both in the ways in which they are positioned and in their active responses. A person’s subjectivity, then, is the way in which they experience and relate to themselves, what might be termed their identity, and I use the term *school subjectivity* to describe the way my participants understand themselves in relation to school. Discourses establish and organise subject positions, as Gee et al. (1996:10) put it, ‘from which people are “invited” (summoned) to speak, listen, act, read, work, think, feel, behave and value’. The discourses circulating at a given time and place provide the ‘menu’ of roles or possibilities – subject positions – from which the subject may be constituted and constitute themselves.

Butler is well known for extending Foucault’s concept of the subject, and her work on identity performativity parallels this concept of subjects as discursively produced. For her, too, identity isn’t something that an individual has. Rather, it is something constituted through performance. In her words, identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results’ (1990:25). It is not singular or deliberate, but ‘that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names’ (Butler 1993:13) and thus is a fluid ‘reiterative and citational practice’ (1993:2) which is made and remade and eventually becomes part of who you are (Weedon 2004). As Dean (1996:224) notes:

There is no single mode of subjectification corresponding to an age, an epoch, an institution or even a single individual. We are obligated differently according to different regimes of governmental and ethical practices. The same individual may find him- or herself obligated by various governmental-ethical regimes as citizen, mother, breadwinner,

worker, entrepreneur, manager, health-conscious individual, consumer, taxpayer, juror, voter, patient, client, member of a neighbourhood or community, and so on.

Using the label 'low attaining' as an example, then, my participants are not viewed only as individuals on whom the label 'low attaining' is pressed. Rather, they are subjects who are being constituted in school as 'low attainers' within and by dominant school discourses and are themselves part of this process. Moreover, this appears as though it were pre-existing and self-evident, a 'truth' about them, rather than a process of being acted upon through discourse.

This view of the subject breaks down oppositions between public and private, that is, power at the population level – what Foucault called biopower (1998a) – and at the level of the individual. Subjectivity is not seen as a private matter negotiated by the individual in the private sphere; rather, the public is considered as *productive* of subjectivities. Analysing the relations between the self and power is, in Rose's (1996:151) words:

... not a matter of lamenting the ways in which our autonomy is suppressed by the state, but of investigating the ways in which subjectivity has become an essential object, target, and resource for certain strategies, tactics, and procedures of regulation... Power, that is to say, works through, and not against, subjectivity.

Or, as Rose (1999a:3) puts it elsewhere, '[t]o govern humans is not to crush their capacity to act, but to acknowledge it and to utilize it for one's own objectives'. However, this utilization is far from straightforward; individuals may embrace the subject positions available within dominant discourses with enthusiasm or reluctance, or reject them in favour of others, a topic I return to at the end of this chapter. They are, then, neither free-floating agents pursuing their intrinsic aims, nor passive pawns dominated by powerful external structures, but both the products and the producers of power/knowledge. As

Foucault (1998a:63) puts it, ‘power is everywhere’ and ‘comes from everywhere’ so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure’. This ability to transcend the crude binary of structure and agency is an important strength of his conceptual framework (Rose, O’Malley, and Valverde 2006).

Technologies

Power operates through techniques of control, or ‘technologies’; that is, those practices or mechanisms that ‘shape, normalize and instrumentalize the conduct, thought, decisions and aspirations of others’ (Miller and Rose 2008:31) in order to achieve certain objectives. The two most relevant to my thesis are *disciplinary technologies* (a technology of power, and the focus of Foucault’s earlier work) and *technologies of the self* (which increasingly became his focus).

Disciplinary technologies

What Foucault called *disciplinary technologies* work through institutional practices to control our behaviour without resorting to the application of force, to produce ‘docile citizens’ (1998a), who have internalised the discipline required by modernity. In developing his idea of disciplinary power, Foucault writes about how such technologies became the dominant (though not the only) form of power in the West from the 18th and 19th centuries onwards, through institutions such as the family, factories and schools, with his most detailed examinations exploring punishment, medicine and madness (1991, 1996a, 1988a).

Disciplinary technologies can take many forms. They can be *spatial*, concerned with ‘the distribution of individuals in space’ (Foucault 1991:143) in ways that might separate, categorise or rank – the use of ‘ability tables’ in classrooms, for example, or moving ‘naughty’ pupils to the front of the class. They can also control *activity*, exemplified by the daily, or often hourly, classroom timetables my participants had memorised, or the work waiting on pupils’ desks when they

enter the classroom in the morning so as not a moment of 'learning time' is 'wasted'. The control of activity can include regulating movements or gestures – the crossed legs and finger on lips instruction in so many primary schools, or the 'hands nice' rule in Sandown Academy, one of my study schools, requiring pupils to place their hands empty and clasped in front of them on the desk when signalled to do so.

Central to modern power is *hierarchical observation* (Foucault 1991) – being able to 'see' what everyone is up to, as in the ranked tiers of a stadium, a shopping centre's CCTV, or analysis of till receipts allowing a supermarket to know you are pregnant before you have told anyone. Indeed, the architecture of many modern schools, particularly academies, leaves no space unobservable, with hidden corners monitored by CCTV (see Carlile 2018; Kulz 2017) – 'behind the bike-sheds' is a thing of the past. Sometimes one person can exercise surveillance but it is more typical that 'relays' of observers transfer data upwards to the more powerful, hence the term *hierarchical observation* (Foucault 1991).

Hierarchical observation works in conjunction with *Normalizing judgment* (Foucault 1991), a particularly pervasive feature of modernity with its preoccupation with what people have *not* done, their *failure* to meet the norms. This focus on the binary distinction between normal and abnormal is key to the aim of modern discipline, to correct deviant behaviour and 'normalise' people to society's standards. In addition, individuals are 'judged not by the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of their acts but by where their actions place them on a ranked scale that compares them to everyone else' (Gutting 2005:84). For any level of achievement, the scale shows that an even higher level is possible so one can never feel secure but must always be endeavouring to move higher. I found my participants, however, generally more concerned with the strain of negotiating the liminal space between the normal and the abnormal than with the endless ranking above this.

Normalisation, both the crude binary between normal and abnormal and the finer gradations, is pervasive in society: we live surrounded by charts of approved weight, cholesterol levels, café hygiene ratings, and, of course, numerous national standards for educational progress, tests and qualification processes. Such norms, plus the observational data to position individuals against such norms, is the basis of *examination* – surveillance or ‘the gaze’:

The examination combines the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgement. It is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them. (Foucault 1991:184)

Examination (which I continue to italicize to avoid confusion with school exams), claims to find the ‘truth’ about a subject by observing them and positioning them relative to norms, and by doing so to control their behaviour. Foucault (1991) sees this as a key aspect of disciplinary power, making it different from the earlier models of power where *acts* were judged allowed or forbidden but did not define the normality or abnormality of the person who performed them. *Examination* is an instance of what he means by power/knowledge and is inescapable. As he puts it:

The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social worker-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based. (1991:304)

Moreover, ‘the highest visibility now belongs to those (criminals, the mad), whose thick dossiers are maintained and scrutinised by armies of anonymous and invisible functionaries’ (Gutting 2005:86). This is an inversion of visibility: no longer is everyone gazing at the magnificence of the powerful king, rather,

power itself has become relatively invisible – a ‘modest, suspicious power’ (Foucault 1991:170).

However, increased data collection means it is no longer just the criminal, the insane or the child with Special Educational Needs who have thick dossiers; we all do. Schools are particularly prone to ‘datafication’ (see Chapter 1), with frequent data collection making all pupils, not just the ‘abnormal’, highly visible and subject to detailed *examination* from their very first weeks in school.

Foucault uses Bentham’s model prison, the Panopticon, to illustrate how *examination* operates. This circular prison with floodlit cells and a central observation tower allows prisoners to be watched, and their behaviour monitored for deviations from the required norm, at any moment. However, prisoners are never able to see if the watcher is actually present. It works ‘to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct... to make it possible to know them, to alter them’ (Foucault 1991:172). Because prisoners could always be under observation, and any sign of deviance from the norm punished, they must always *assume* they are being watched. This makes ‘surveillance... permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action’ (1991:201). As a result:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (1991:202–3)

In other words, we become increasingly obedient without the need for force; we begin to self-police, or self-discipline.

For Foucault, the Panopticon was the perfect illustration of a modern disciplinary institution, and it has been noted that a school’s well-lit classrooms,

with large windows and wide aisles, function in much the same way (Gutting 2005). However, 'the gaze' of *examination* is not of course necessarily visual; power/knowledge may be based on many forms of data. Moreover, it can operate at every level: the pupil is subject to the gaze of the teacher, the teacher to that of school management, and all are subject to the gaze of the state (Youdell 2011). This idea is useful in analysing how my participants respond to a school system in which they are constantly subject to *examination*.

Technologies of the self

Whereas disciplinary technologies encourage obedience, *technologies of the self* work through our desires – our attempts to be the person each of us want to be (Rose 1999a). Technologies of the self 'permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (Foucault 1988b:18). These 'arts of existence' are reflective and voluntary practices for which we set ourselves rules so as to transform and change ourselves to meet criteria we experience as our own (Foucault 1990).

To feel able to act on ourselves, we need to feel free enough to do so. Freedom – autonomy, choice and the feeling that we can act so as to improve ourselves and our lives – far from being the opposite of being governed, is key to the operation of modern governance. As Rose has emphasised (1999a, 1999b), subjects are 'required to conduct themselves responsibly, to account for their own lives and their vicissitudes in terms of their freedom' (Rose et al. 2006:90–91). This understanding is in sharp contrast to the conventional view of freedom and self-expression as spaces from where people could critique and resist being governed. For Rose, 'the very ethic of freedom was itself part of a particular formula for governing free societies' (2006:90–91). He explains:

We can now be governed through the choices that we will ourselves make, under the guidance of cultural and cognitive authorities, in the space of regulated freedom, in our individual search for happiness, self-esteem, and self-actualization, for the fulfilment of our autonomous selves. (Rose 1996:166)

In other words, we are ruled *through* our freedoms and aspirations rather than *in spite of* them. Technologies of the self, then, are ways in which we are governed by the choices we make within certain regimes of authority and knowledge (Rose et al. 2006).

Responsibilisation

The flip side of freedom is responsibility – through our choices we create our own futures, our own selves, and so we both *take* responsibility, and *are held* responsible (Lentzos and Rose 2017), for who we are and what we do. As Shamir (2008:4) notes, ‘while obedience had been the practical master-key of top-down bureaucracies, responsibility is the practical master-key of governance’. Responsibilisation is a key technology of the self in the creation of neoliberal subjects (Lentzos and Rose 2017; Rose 1996, 2007; Shamir 2008) and I found it crucial in understanding my participants’ sense-making. Individualisation is a major aspect of neoliberalism and, as Hache (2007:2) puts it, ‘it is clear that within [neoliberalism] responsibility is one of the major tools of this individualization’. Individuals are – or at least seem to be – given:

... the possibility of actively participating in the solution of specific matters and problems that had hitherto been the domain of distinct state agencies specifically empowered to undertake such tasks. (Lemke 2016:86)

However, this participation comes at a price (Burchell 1993); individuals have to assume responsibility both for finding solutions and for the outcome of these

solutions, including their possible failure. Responsibilisation is ‘the practical link that connects the ideal-typical scheme of [neoliberal] governance to actual practices on the ground’ (Shamir 2008:7). Unlike being merely obedient or compliant, responsibilisation ‘presupposes one’s care for one’s duties and one’s un-coerced application of certain values as a root motivation for action’ (Shamir 2008:7; see also Selznick 2002). Responsibility is ‘both a set of values and a way of behaving’ (Lentzos and Rose 2017:27); to be responsible involves not only choosing, but making the *correct* choice.

This ‘Foucauldian paradox’ – that the state (in the broadest sense) governs in the name of freedom but that this freedom is subservient to what is considered societally ‘normal’ (Garland 1997) has widespread implications. It explains why choice and individuality are now such prevalent and all-intrusive cultural themes in societies with entrepreneurial-consumerist ‘regimes of truth’ (Fimyar 2008). Lorenzini (2016:18) makes a related point, arguing that:

... [because] the concrete functioning of governmental mechanisms of power rests on the freedom of individuals, it is also essential to governmentality to produce discourses that “neutralize” this freedom, thus giving [individuals] the impression that there is no real choice to be made.

The dominant discourses in schools are just such discourses, and I discuss one of the most powerful, ‘good pupil’ discourse, shortly. They define what sort of person you should *want* to be and *need* to be for a successful life, leaving little room for alternatives. Crucially, they suggest that the individual should treat achieving this as a project to be pursued. If they do so responsibly, they should succeed; failure to grasp this responsibility is an individual failure (Torrance 2017). This means that lack of responsibility is added to lack of ability as a way of explaining away the ‘failure’ of whole groups. ‘Underachieving’ working-class children, for example, are no longer categorised as just incapable, but are viewed as disorganised, lazy and lacking in endeavour and

ambition (Reay 2017). Indeed, Torrance (2017) goes so far as to say that responsibility has *replaced* lack of ability in explaining their educational failure in this country, though others would argue that ability remains a key organising concept (Bradbury 2021). Explanations foregrounding responsibility (or lack of it) obscure the reality that gaining positional advantage through hard work is very much more available to class and race privileged groups with distinctly gendered effects (Keddie 2016; McLeod 2000; Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody 2001).

Governmentality and pastoral power

While Foucault saw the rise of disciplinary power coming to dominate the 18th and 19th centuries through its institutions and bureaucracies, he did not view this as sufficient to explain the contemporary operation of power (Golder 2007). In his discussions of governmentality and pastoral power, Foucault (1988b) explored how technologies of the self came to work alongside and in conjunction with disciplinary technologies to govern individuals, speaking of ‘this contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self’ (1988b:19).

Foucault’s ideas on governmentality have been widely used as a framework for examining neoliberalism, exploring the connections between models of the market and technologies of the self. Under neoliberalism, the values that motivate individuals, particularly responsabilisation, correspond with the rationalities of the market, creating a situation that:

... is unique in that it assumes a moral agency which is congruent with the attributed tendencies of economic-rational actors: autonomous, self-determined and self-sustaining subjects. (Shamir 2008:7)

The logic of the market is extended to encompass all social life, including areas that were previously seen as outside or even opposed to market values (Shamir 2008).

Governmentality grew out of Foucault's (1981, 2007a) study of the pastoral techniques of government exercised over Christian religious communities, particularly through the confessional, and the personal role of the pastor in fostering the desire to be a good member of the 'flock'. Pastoral power combines the disciplinary technologies of power that Foucault wrote about earlier in his career with technologies of the self that occupied him later. As Martin and Waring (2018:1298) note:

On the one hand, the pastor is a 'relay' of surveillance and discipline; on the other, the pastor promotes self-reflexive, self-governing subjects.

The focus on a very personal, relational form of power is highly relevant to the primary school classroom, where studies show the teacher/pupil relationship to be charged and emotional (Bibby 2011; Devine 2003; Gore 2004; Hargreaves 2017) and a teacher's role is not only to maintain discipline and obedience, but also to exhort and encourage self-responsibility and self-examination (Millei and Raby 2010). The pastor/teacher guides their pupils, individually and collectively, towards salvation – which, in the modern world, is 'no longer a question of leading people to their salvation in the next world but, rather, ensuring it in this world' (Foucault 1982:215). In schools this is achieved by, for example, good SATs results or developing the correct 'character'. Perhaps surprisingly, there are relatively few (e.g. Bailey 2015; Ideland and Malmberg 2015; McCuaig 2012; McCuaig et al. 2020; McCuaig, Öhman, and Wright 2013) uses of pastoral power as an explanatory tool in education research, although Allen (2013) concludes from his analysis of the moral training schools of the 19th century that it is the key to understanding the role of teachers in today's schools. I found it particularly useful in exploring the intense feelings one of my participants had about his teacher.

What both pastoral power and the governmentality that grew from it have in common is the way disciplinary technologies and technologies of the self operate alongside and reinforce each other. Understanding how this worked in the classroom proved fundamental to my research. A high degree of disciplinary power is evident in classrooms – children’s bodies are required, by law, to be present, told when to be where, what to study when, when to eat and go to the toilet (Gore 2004) – but so too are technologies of the self that emphasise self-governance. Raby and Millei (2010:34) highlight this tension, arguing that discourses of school rules and behaviour work to:

... produce active subjects who are expected to voluntarily take up particular ways of conducting themselves as if they were their own decision-makers while these behaviours are also ascribed by codes of conduct... [and] serve to justify and legitimize power relations between teachers and students by re-fashioning the idea of obedience as a responsibility or a contingency of respect.

Disciplinary technologies and technologies of the self mix, connect, combine and contradict to produce a complex picture in primary school classrooms. Circulating discourses embody this complexity, and I go on now to outlining the two discourses I identified as most prominent in my data – what I call ‘good pupil’ discourse and happiness discourse.

‘Good pupil’ discourse

Dominant discourses circulating within schools and classrooms include strong ideas about which groups of children are likely to be ‘successful’ in school and which not. These incorporate and are intertwined with beliefs about the qualities needed for success, qualities such as intelligence, hard work, enthusiasm, resilience and obedience, that members of ‘successful’ groups are viewed as more likely to possess. These discourses have been explored under the labels

of 'ideal', 'idealised', 'desirable' or 'good' learners or pupils (Bradbury 2019a; Hempel-Jorgensen 2009; Oughton 2007; Sjöberg 2014; Thornberg 2009; Wong and Chiu 2020). I choose the term 'good pupil' as 'pupil' suggests something wider than 'learner' while also being restricted to the child's role within school. Those pupils who fall outside the ideal are positioned as 'other', 'excluded', 'abject', 'unacceptable', 'abnormal' 'impossible' and even 'unintelligible' (Bradbury 2019a; Butler 1990, 2013; Youdell 2006).

Howard Becker (1952, 1963) famously found Chicago teachers believed the 'ideal client' of education was White, middle class and male, which immediately cast most pupils as 'deviant' or 'outsiders', and David Hargreaves (1975) found similar views in the UK. Foucauldian-inspired ideas of the construction of the successful student have grown from this tradition. Youdell (2003, 2006, 2010), drawing on Foucault and Butler, has been particularly influential in developing the conceptual framework for exploring how the process of including and excluding certain groups works at the level of subjectivities, through her concepts of 'ideal' and 'impossible' learners:

... 'who' a student is – in terms of gender, sexuality, social class, ability, disability, race, ethnicity and religion as well as popular and sub-cultural belongings – is inextricably linked with the 'sort' of student and learner that s/he gets to be, and the educational inclusions s/he enjoys, and/or the exclusions s/he faces. (2006:2)

In other words, your intersectional location makes some subject positions – such as 'good listener', 'hard worker' or 'low ability' – available to you and closes others down.

The link between 'who' a student is and what 'sort' of student they get to be is, as noted in Chapter 1, my starting point for this research. However, my question is not how 'who' my participants are shapes the 'sort' of learners they become although, of course, I recognise that the subject positions made available to

them are, in Youdell's phrase, 'inexplicably linked' with 'who' they are. Instead, my focus is on how the discourse about the *qualities* associated with school 'success' or 'failure' is deployed and negotiated by pupils, and its role in the construction of their school subjectivities.

The relationship between 'who' a student is and the subject positions available to them, including the qualities associated with them, is complex. Qualities may themselves embody cultural bias or be judged in discriminatory ways, and lack of appropriate cultural capital and the problems raised by social and economic disadvantage may make it harder for some to develop and demonstrate certain qualities. Much of the work in this field follows Becker in exploring teachers' attitudes to different groups of pupils (e.g. Archer 2008; Archer and Francis 2005; Campbell 2015), but some looks at what models of the 'good pupil' are promoted by policy (e.g. Bradbury 2013a, 2019a), school rules (Raby 2012a; Thornberg 2009; Wun 2016) or school practices and procedures, such as assemblies (Silbert and Jacklin 2015). Some also considers *pupils'* views of what constitutes a 'good pupil', a subject I return to in my next chapter.

Research on the link between school subjectivities and the role of schools in reproducing class inequalities has a long history (Apple 1982; Ball 1981, 2002; Benn 2012; Reay 2017). In the UK, Reay's analysis has been influential in examining the ways 'working-class education is made to serve middle-class interests' (2001a:334), positioning working-class pupils in such a way as to make educational success systematically more difficult for them. Her explorations of how this plays out at the classroom level in primary schools (e.g. 1995, 2006) were a key driver to my interest in research in classrooms. Work on the role of race and ethnicity, too, shows how particular learner identities are created or refused for minoritised groups of pupils. Black pupils, for example, are more likely to be viewed as badly behaved and 'low ability' (Bradbury 2013b; Raby 2012a; Rollock 2007b, 2007a; Sewell 1996; Youdell 2003) and Asian pupils as diligent, hard-working and passive (Archer 2008; Archer and Francis 2005).

Attitudes to gender have a complex history, with girls tending to be considered 'diligent plodders who are careful, neat and lacking flair' and boys 'sloppy yet having the necessary spark to 'pull it off' (Jackson and Nyström 2015:400) as well as being naturally 'brilliant' compared to girls (Barnes 2011; Fisher 2014). However, girls' consistently higher attainment (Demie 2019) has complicated this and led to girls being considered the 'winners' of education and boys chronic underachievers (Ringrose and Epstein 2017; Schiffrin-Sands 2021) in such a way as to mask the gendered power relations that disadvantage girls in classrooms (Francis 2006; Reay 2001b; Schiffrin-Sands 2021; Skelton 2009).

Studies have explored the way gendered subject positionings are also mediated by race, showing how certain groups are positioned, for example, as 'loud black girls' or 'quiet Asian boys' (Lei 2003) and how this may be further mediated by religion with, for example, Muslim Asian boys often seen as problematic (Archer 2003). Recently, the poor attainment of White working-class boys in the UK has underlined the importance of such discussions, the moral panic surrounding this being notable for its racist and sexist undertones (Gillborn 2021). The body of work on the gendered, raced and classed nature of the availability of successful subject positions is substantial and, although not the focus of my study, is an important part of its context.

Qualities

The qualities associated with models of the 'good pupil' vary, although 'ability' and high, or at least adequate, attainment are generally included, a point I discuss in detail in relation to pupils' perspectives in Chapter 3. Other than this, those qualities associated more with disciplinary technologies include obedience, the acceptance of school values and exhibiting appropriate effort, and arguably also traits such as kindness, truthfulness and helpfulness (Millei and Raby 2010; Gore 2004; Reay 2017). However, much of the recent work that looks at what it means to be a 'good pupil' has focused on technologies of

the self and the changes neoliberal education reforms have made (Bradbury 2013a; Keddie 2016; Youdell 2006). Keddie (2016:109) for example, outlines the characteristics required in today's climate, stating that pupils must be:

... living a 'performative' and entrepreneurial existence of calculation... They are 'commodified' both in their ability level and their capacity to add value to, or enhance, their own and their school's reputation... Success in this climate involves being enterprising and competitive. It involves students achieving on the measures of success that 'count'.

Keddie views the requirement for these responsabilising qualities as in part a response to the pressure to perform I discuss in Chapter 1.

These qualities may be fostered more, or less, explicitly. A detailed study (Morrin 2018) in one English secondary academy found the desired pupil character was promoted through a refined system of codes and rewards. Classroom posters displayed the words determination, passion, creativity, risk-taking, problem-solving and teamwork, and pupils were continually called on to reflect on their 'entrepreneurial capabilities'. The author describes how pupils were expected to perform these capabilities, and awarded 'badges' for doing so:

To show determination students are expected to 'move towards a goal and be resilient to difficulties along the way' [and] to win a badge for passion, one must show 'high energy levels, self-belief and a desire to succeed'... In developing these entrepreneurial characteristics, the Academy claims students can develop their own 'entrepreneurial mind-set', which they see as a 'mind-set that strives to take action, solve problems, and reject the status quo'. (2018:465)

Promoting a rejection of the status quo is particularly ironic in light of the accompanying disciplinary measures that were in place, the enforcement of which was aided by the glass-walled panoptic design of the school.

Bradbury's (2013a, 2019a) interrogation of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) used to assess 4-5 year old children in England also sheds light on the neoliberal qualities of the 'good pupil'. This assessment is unique because pupils of this age are formally judged on a much broader range of criteria than the academically-focussed testing of older children. It sets out a very detailed model of a 'good pupil' that, although it continues to be promoted and expected throughout a child's school career, is never again so explicit. Using Walkerdine's (2003) 'neoliberal subject', Bradbury shows how the EYFSP and its associated practice lay out a very particular ideal based on particular values: rationality and enthusiasm; flexibility, industriousness and self-regulation; and reflection, self-promotion and displays of learning. In the Reception classrooms she studied, being an 'ideal learner' involved 'being enthusiastic and motivated to learn, able to choose activities appropriately, and able to display learning at the correct times and in the correct ways' (2013a:15). The required learner identity embodied in the EYFSP, Bradbury argues, is 'constituted through a framework of neoliberal values' (2013a:1); the EYFSP both demands and expects pupils to become 'little neo-liberals' (2019a).

Such neoliberal qualities do not, however, replace earlier, often disciplinary, requirements, but overlay them, leading to incoherence and contradiction. While some neoliberal values align neatly with older ones, others lead to a shift in meaning. For example, children who choose writing or maths activities are not only constituted as academic; within the EYFSP they also become *good choosers*. Furthermore, newer neoliberal values might challenge older ones. Traditional discourses of 'good behaviour' such as being quiet, Bradbury argues, may conflict with a neoliberal focus on verbal expression linked to the need for self-promotion (2013a). We might expect to find similar conflicts between truthfulness or modesty and self-promotion, or the importance of following instructions and the requirement to think 'outside the box'.

Bradbury's (2019a) research also found that 'growth mindset' has become so dominant that it is now included in constructions of the 'good pupil's' qualities. 'Growth mindset', developed by Carol Dweck in her bestseller book *Mindset* (2006), argues that a child's achievements can be increased with the right mindset, one focused on stretching yourself, working hard and believing in your ability to reach your full potential, making it a route to success.

The popularity of the 'growth mindset' approach was at its height in schools when I began this study (Busch 2018) and has fundamentally changed school discourse. Empirical evidence of its success in achieving its aims is mixed. Some studies suggest that growth mindset interventions lead to higher attainment (Yeager et al. 2019; Yeager and Dweck 2012), even when an intervention is short and online (Yeager et al. 2019), and work has linked it with better mental health outcomes in teenagers (Schleider, Abel, and Weisz 2015). However, others (Li and Bates 2017), including two meta-analyses (Sisk et al. 2018) suggest little significant positive impact, and it has been described as 'all hype and no benefit' (Bloom 2017). In fairness, some of the less impressive outcomes could be, as Dweck argues, the result of poor implementation (2020), and school interventions have been found to reference 'growth mindset' but use an intervention unique to their school, making it difficult to identify the growth mindset element (Savvides and Bond 2021).

The current preoccupation with fostering a 'growth mindset' in schools foregrounds character alongside attainment and can be understood as part of broader neoliberal ideas of the 'self' discussed above, promoting the responsabilising message that character matters more than structural factors (Highet and Del Percio 2021; Jerome and Kisby 2019) in determining who becomes successful. Pupils have also been found to promote this idea, a point I pick up in Chapter 3. Key, however, is that 'growth mindset', like many of the other qualities associated with the 'good pupil', is viewed as a route to achieving the attainment required in core subjects.

The operation of 'good pupil' discourse

A key aspect of 'good pupil' discourse is its binary division between those for whom a *good enough* pupil subject position is available, albeit only partial or aspirational, and those to whom it is denied (Bradbury 2013a; Youdell 2006). In other words, the qualities of the 'good pupil' I have just outlined act as the criteria against which pupils are judged, distinguishing those who are normal or adequate from the inadequate, abnormal, undesired or 'other' (Bradbury 2019a; Butler 1990, 2013; Youdell 2006). In her exploration of the ways in which the ideal pupil is constructed and governed through teacher training in Sweden, Sjöberg (2014:522) highlights this in relation to what she calls the discourse of competence:

First, [the discourse of competence] constructs and positions the ideal pupils, i.e. those pupils who are sufficiently competent to be accepted in the competence discourse; second, and more problematically, the same discourse operates by shaping and positioning the 'less-than-ideal' and 'undesired' pupils, i.e. those pupils who, despite the all-encompassing competence discourse, cannot be classified and positioned as competent ('the Others')... every child cannot possibly fulfil the expectations of the competent child/pupil.

This binary division is of obvious concern in relation to those with SEN (see Allan 1996; Thomson and Pennacchia 2016) but powerfully affects other pupils too, including those designated as low attaining, who, because academic performance is such an important part of current 'good pupil' discourse, may be frequently engaged in negotiating the slippery distinction between the two.

Another striking feature of the way 'good pupil' discourse operates is its strong moral dimension. While being disobedient or lazy may always have been seen as morally unacceptable, it seems plausible that equating, as Keddie (2016:120) puts it, 'a good student and a good person' is a particularly strong

feature of neoliberal performative classrooms (see Thompson 2010; Youdell 2006). With the scholarisation of childhood, school takes up more of children's lives (Kjørholt 2013), so 'success' increasingly means *school* success, and is seen as essential for the individual to create a successful later life. In addition, it can be linked to changes in wider societal discourses that extend the ethics of the free market model across society, making the pursuit of self-interest morally commendable (see Shamir 2008 for full discussion).

These changes fit within the tradition of 'moralistic individualism' (Anagnostopoulos 2006). This 'depicts material success and failure as both the products of individual efforts and abilities and the outward signs of individual moral character and worth' (2006:14) resulting in what Anagnostopoulos (2006:7) calls an 'ideology of deservingness' (see also Taylor 2018). Wealth is a sign of virtue, poverty of moral failure. The poor are responsible for their own situation, and therefore 'undeserving' of resources and opportunities. This ideology is so pervasive that even those pupils on benefits have been found to label others as 'scroungers. Taking off the state... like they don't work hard' (Vincent 2022:3). Indeed, it may be that those in a liminal financial position are particularly tough on others in a similar position, in the hope that being so distinguishes themselves as different and secures their 'normality' (see also Vincent, Ball, and Braun 2008).

Anagnostopoulos (2006) makes a convincing case that a similar discourse is at work within schools in the construction of successful and unsuccessful learners, 'good' and 'bad' pupils. This way in which school success is seen as both a sign and a prerequisite of moral virtue, a judgement of the whole person, raises serious questions about how those who are excluded from 'good pupil' subject positions, including those who are designated 'low attainers', are valued and value themselves, and is key to my analysis.

The qualities required of the 'good pupil' vary in different contexts. A comparison of two primary schools (Iverson and Duveen 2006) found that the

school with a 'competence mode', where children were seen as 'self-actualising agents' and cooperative working encouraged, viewed achievement as a result of pupils' ability to access natural energy. The school with a 'performance mode', however, viewed children as having 'unruly inner forces [that] needed to be suppressed' (2006:117), taught didactically and discouraged cooperative working. Being a 'good pupil', then, looked quite different in each of these schools because of their differing conceptions of learning and learners. Given the research showing that teachers' pedagogy becomes more didactic, with less open-ended inquiry, with lower groups (Francis et al. 2019; Marks 2016a), we might also expect similar differences *within* the same school in relation to differently positioned groups of pupils, and potentially even within the same classroom between different 'ability' tables.

There is evidence that 'good pupil' discourse alters with pupil intake. Hempel-Jorgenson's (2009) comparison of two primary schools with economically contrasting catchments found the working-class school promoted passivity, discipline and obedience in contrast to the middle-class school which had a model of the 'ideal pupil' as 'clever and funny' (2009:441). She explores this difference primarily through the perspectives of pupils and I return to her findings in Chapter 3. Jackson and Nystrom (2015) show that pupils positioned as 'intelligent' are more likely to be White, male, middle class, and their academic achievement regarded as 'effortless'. Working-class, Black or female students, by contrast, need to be seen to demonstrate effort or risk being positioned as lazy, ignorant and lacking aspiration. As well as highlighting the role that variations in 'good pupil' discourse plays in reproducing inequalities, this suggests that classed, gendered and raced ideas of ability and potential continue to underly the rhetoric that anyone can achieve if they put the work in (see Bradbury 2021).

Happiness discourse

Alongside ‘good pupil’ discourse, what I call happiness discourse has emerged as increasingly influential in schools. The relationship between happiness discourse and ‘good pupil’ discourse is little researched, and an area I touch on in my analysis and Chapter 9. Here I outline happiness discourse and the role it may be playing in the governability of individuals – what Jupp et al. (2016) term ‘affective governance’ – in schools. I also make reference to the character education literature, both because of the limited work on happiness discourse in schools and because its focus on resilience and what has been termed a ‘positive mental attitude’ (Gill and Orgad 2018) overlaps with happiness discourse.

The rise of the positive psychology movement, spearheaded by Martin Seligman (2003, 2011; Seligman et al. 2009; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000) at the turn of the 21st century, has had a huge influence on current understandings of happiness and wellbeing (Cabanas and Illouz 2019; Ecclestone 2012; Gagen 2015). Described as part of a ‘psychological turn’ in neoliberalism (Binkley 2011; Gill and Orgad 2018), positive psychology offered the prospect of overcoming growing criticisms that neoliberalism fostered an uncompassionate individualism and an unsustainable materialism. It claimed that objective, scientific research had identified the psychological characteristics that defined the healthy, successful and optimally functioning individual – the *happy* individual (Cabanas and Illouz 2019). Happiness was no longer nebulous and subjective but could be precisely and objectively measured (Seligman 2003) and, conveniently for neoliberalism, the characteristics required proved similar to those needed by the knowledge economy (Cabanas and Illouz 2019).

Happiness could also be presented as ‘self-evidently’ desirable. As agreed by authorities ranging from the US constitution, which held that the pursuit of happiness is an ‘inherent and inalienable’ right, to Richard Layard (2006), Labour peer and doyen of the ‘happiness economics’ movement, happiness is

seen as what humans ‘naturally’ aspire to, a universal objective beyond reasonable questioning. Positive psychology, then, with its rules for maximising objectively measured happiness, appeared to come as near as possible to providing that holy grail, an objective basis for a utilitarian morality. Science could *prove* what made people happy and it turned out to be primarily a matter of psychological characteristics rather than circumstances. Positive psychology thus provided a strategy for pursuing personal fulfilment, and at the policy level offered a utilitarian, technocratic approach, appearing to transcend ideology or moral choices and, with its stress on individual psychological characteristics, a convenient lack of implications for structural change (Binkley 2011; Cabanas and Illouz 2019).

Schools seemed an ideal site for establishing the lifelong character traits necessary to achieve happiness. In 2007 Layard made the strong claim that the *central* purpose of schools should be to teach children the secrets of happiness and suggested that schools should have specialists in ‘emotional intelligence’ (BBC 2007 quoted in Harden 2012:83–84). Developed by Seligman, ‘positive education’ (Seligman et al. 2009) quickly became influential; indeed, Cabanas and Illouz (2019) argue that between 2008-2017 it established itself as a top educational priority across the western world, led by the UK, US and Canada. Press reports (e.g. Evans 2008; Seldon and Furedi 2008) highlighted the apparently successful introduction of what they called ‘happiness lessons’ in schools. These were based on the ideas of positive psychology, or the ‘the science of happiness’ as they called it (Suissa 2008). Influential schools such as Wellington College were at the forefront of developing and promoting such programmes (Suissa 2008).

In the UK, the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme became positive education’s main platform and was widely introduced from 2005. Combining happiness and character education (see Bates 2019; Jerome and Kisby 2020; Bull and Allen 2018; Suissa 2015), SEAL aims to teach pupils emotional self-awareness and the ability to regulate their emotional behaviour

using the neuroscientific technologies of positive psychology (Gagen 2015:141). Its five curriculum areas are self-awareness, managing feelings, motivation, empathy and social skills (SEAL Community 2022), topics which are taught in classes and assemblies and accompanied by home learning activities, peer mediation schemes, anti-bullying sessions, school councils and other initiatives (see Humphrey, Lendrum, and Wigelsworth 2010; SEAL Community 2022). It was at the forefront of what has been called 'the rise of the happy student' (Cabanas and Illouz 2019:74) in the UK; by 2007 an astonishing 90% of English primary schools and 70% of secondary schools were delivering SEAL (Humphrey et al. 2010). The SEAL curriculum's targeting of emotionality in classrooms represented a substantial shift in education policy and the largely uncontroversial claim that emotions are central to learning obscured critical discussion of this development (Gillies 2011).

Key to positive psychology's message, and therefore the positive education programmes delivered in schools, is a belief in the plasticity of emotions. As Binkley (2011:384) puts it, positive psychology holds that 'the potential for happiness is something possessed by all, it is a thing that can be objectified, mapped, manipulated and measured'. Thus, 'negative emotional states derive from the perception of one's own helplessness to make oneself happy' (2011:385) and this perception of helplessness is itself the result of a lack of those character traits promoted by positive psychology. Therefore, the task of positive education is to teach pupils 'the specific techniques whereby circumstantial optimism and appreciative self-regard can be intentionally cultivated by individuals themselves' (2011:374), regardless of how challenging their situation.

Resilience, the ability to 'bounce back' from difficulties and retain a 'positive mental attitude', is seen as crucial to developing a desirable psychological state and is particularly significant in relation to responsabilisation. Viewing resilience as an individual character trait that can be learnt and developed places the

responsibility for coping – or failing to cope – with challenging circumstances firmly onto the individual (see Lewis 2021). As Gill and Orgad (2018:490) note:

Rather than calling forth docile subjects engaged in passive compliance, [resilience] inculcates a quite phenomenal psychic *agility*, exhorting the ability to bounce back by speedily reframing negative experiences as opportunities. Injuries of various kinds are never totally disavowed but must be rendered recoverable through PMA.

This injunction to create a mindset ‘in which negative experiences can – and must – be reframed in upbeat terms’ (Gill and Orgad 2018:477) arises for my participants as they confront evidence of low attainment, a point I develop in Chapter 9.

A belief in the plasticity of emotional states, and therefore that happiness results largely from the cognitive outlook of individuals, implies that people should intentionally cultivate positive emotional states. Happiness becomes an individual endeavour and a personal project ‘produced by consciously directing one’s thoughts to happy subjects, with the same intentionality one might pursue in a fitness regime’ (Binkley 2011:376). It should be ‘a voluntary entered into set of practices as well as an imposed or disciplined one’ (Gill and Orgad 2018:490). As an article in *Businessweek* put it, ‘happiness is a muscle you can strengthen’ (2009 quoted in Binkley 2011:371). This link between happiness and individualism is considered so strong within this discourse that Cabanas and Illouz (2019:54) argue its effect is to make ‘individualism a cultural and ethical precondition for achieving happiness’ and ‘happiness the scientific justification for individualism as a morally legitimate value’. And, like lack of fitness, it provides an opportunity for ‘victim-blaming’ – if you are unhappy, it is your own fault for failing to engage in the appropriate psychological regime.

Although there is useful work of the effects of happiness discourse on society generally (Binkley 2014; Gill and Orgad 2018; McDonald and O’Callaghan

2008; Miller 2008), its impacts in schools have been under-researched. There have been a few notable exceptions (Cabanas and Illouz 2019; Ecclestone and Hayes 2019), including analysis of the SEAL programme (Gillies 2011; Humphrey et al. 2010; Wigelsworth, Humphrey, and Lendrum 2013), the impact of mindfulness in schools (Reveley 2015, 2016; Forbes 2019), and work in the related field of character education (Bates 2019; Jerome and Kisby 2020; Bull and Allen 2018; Suissa 2015).

Evidence on SEAL's effectiveness is mixed (Durlak and DuPre 2008; Humphrey et al. 2010). A major study of secondary schools concluded that it had no significant impact upon pupils' social and emotional skills, general mental health difficulties, pro-social behaviour or behaviour problems (Humphrey et al. 2010; see also Wigelsworth et al. 2013), although possibly due to poor implementation. However, it is still used in many schools, including one of my sample schools, Jayden Primary, and is a prominent feature in some local authority (e.g. Lancashire) and online (e.g. twinkl) resources for teachers as well as online parent forums (e.g. theschoolrun), and its general approach continues to be widely influential.

Gillies' (2011) work on SEAL argues that it does a disservice to the complex, fraught and socially embedded emotions that many pupils struggle with and that the programme encourages schools to overlook such experiences in the search for personal deficits. SEAL's approach to empathy, in particular, has raised concerns. Illouz (2008:93) argues that it consists of a 'peculiar mix of self-interest and sympathy, of attention to oneself and manipulation of others'; empathy is tied to conflict management, with pupils encouraged to search for 'win-win' situations (Gillies 2011:199) – that is, to appreciate how being empathetic can be of personal benefit. Ecclestone and Hayes (2019) also raise concerns that happiness education programmes sell a false rhetoric of empowerment that makes pupils anxious and preoccupied with their inner-selves in a way that undermines their autonomy.

Another criticism is that the focus on individualised attributes that is at the heart of happiness discourse suppresses political anger at structural inequalities and injustices, focusing it inwards instead (Bull and Allen 2018). As Suissa (2015:111) asks, 'are there things we should not be resilient to?'. Gagen (2015) uses the government's post-riot report as evidence that emotional regulation has moved up the political agenda, reducing complex issues to personal psychological inadequacies. Young people involved in the riots were described as lacking 'self-discipline, application, the ability to defer gratification, and resilience in recovering from set-backs', and making poor choices: 'it is evident that rioters chose not to resist the temptation and excitement that the riots offered' (RCVP 2012:49 in Gagen 2015:149). As 'the ability to defer gratification can be observed at a young age' and those who demonstrate this ability 'are more likely to succeed in later life' (RCVP 2012:50 in Gagen 2015:149), the riots were used to support the need for happiness education, diverting attention from examination of structural issues. As Burman's (2018; see also Bull and Allen 2018) analysis of the UK's 2014 Character and Resilience Manifesto shows, character and resilience are drawn together by 'individualising and responsabilising the precarity of current economic and political insecurities to render them as qualities (traits, characteristics) to be found within (primarily working-class) children, and in so doing making that social context disappear' (2018:419).

As happiness discourse becomes more embedded in schools (Cabanas and Illouz 2019) it is important to explore its relationship with 'good pupil' discourse. It could be seen as an additional requirement of the current 'good pupil' ideal, but I have chosen to keep them apart, running in parallel. This is partly because the concept of a 'good pupil' is already subject to enough variation and complexity. It is also because, although school discourses are key when it comes to constructing a *school* subjectivity, constructing an *emotional* subjectivity may be as much or more dependent on social and cultural discourses, varying between communities and families. While two of my

participants appeared to deploy discourses of happiness strongly in their constructions of their school subjectivities, for example, the other two did not.

Children in classrooms, however, are not pawns trapped and helpless within these powerful discourses; they are actively making and re-making them, and can also resist them. It is to the idea of resistance that I turn to next.

Resistance

Resistance has traditionally been understood as opposition to hegemonic structures of power, with interest focused on movements offering counter-hegemonic challenges to such power – revolutions, campaigns, protests and social movements. Unsurprisingly, those working in a Foucauldian tradition have been critical of this binary view of power and resistance (e.g. Lilja and Vinthagen 2014; Rose 1999b, 1999a; Ball 2016b). Seeing resistance as nothing more than ‘the obverse of a one-dimensional notion of power as domination’ is ‘too simple and flattening’ (Rose 1999b:279), and particularly unsuited to exploring resistance to attempts to constitute and impose particular subjectivities, or to the technologies of the self that are part of this process.

Foucault’s own ideas on resistance, however, are much less developed than those on power, and there is general agreement that this is a gap – what has been called the ‘theoretical silence’ (Ball 2016b:1129) in Foucault’s work – and that he ‘neglect[ed] the central role played by forms of resistance or counter-conduct’ (Death 2016:208). Indeed, making sense of struggle and resistance from a Foucauldian perspective is potentially a knotty issue. As Youdell (2011:27) puts it:

... post-structuralist theory sees the notion of identity as a site of counter-political mobilisation as inherently problematic. This is because it sees

identity as a product of 'subjectivation' – the process of being named and made the subject – and therefore an effect of productive power.

In other words, viewing power as productive implies that we are products of it, making our resistance, too, a product of the very power we are attempting to resist. Power and resistance, then, must be understood as existing 'in a mutually constitutive relationship... as interconnected and entangled' (Lilja and Vinthagen 2014:111) rather than as distinct and opposed. Resistance cannot be seen as happening *outside* of power. Rather, resistance is an inherent *part* of power and could not exist without it; power 'produces the potential of the subject to see itself differently' (2014:111).

In his lecture course *Security, Territory and Population* (2007a), Foucault discussed the 'specific revolts of conduct' (2007a:194) that arose in reaction to the pastoral direction and regulation of conduct, or 'conduct of conduct'. He considered and rejected a number of terms, including resistance, dissidence, revolt, insubordination and disobedience, before settling on counter-conduct to refer to the 'struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others' (2007a:201), or, as Deleuze (2016:202) puts it, 'forms of conduct which subvert dominant techniques for the production of responsible subjects'. For Foucault, we cannot escape being governed; counter-conduct is the 'art of not being governed quite so much' (1996b:44–45). In a thorough examination of counter-conduct throughout Foucault's work Lorenzini (2016:11) argues that it:

... always implies, on the one side, a governmental mechanism of power trying to impose on a group of individuals a specific form of conduct (which is the target of resistance, of struggles) and, on the other side, a refusal expressed by the individuals who can no longer accept being conducted *like that* and want to conduct themselves *differently*.

Lorenzini (2016:12) highlights Foucault's focus, in discussion on medieval Christian resistance, on the 'refusal to bend to the principle of pure obedience,

together with the attempt to construct an other form of subjectivity'. Not all defiance, then, is counter-conduct. Some – for example the pupil who challenges a mark they are given for an essay – may deploy and accept dominant discourse, challenging only their own positioning within it, and so should not be seen as engaged in the construction of an alternative subjectivity, a distinction I found useful.

Although Foucault talked of counter-conduct quite broadly in *Security, Territory and Population*, he went on to focus increasingly on developing his ideas of critique and 'care of the self'. These, for Foucault, involve a high level of introspection, self-reflection, and a sense that you develop critique by regarding yourself as a 'project' for self-improvement, in a way that provides an interesting mirror to the neoliberal governmental project of self (Zamora 2019). His much-quoted description of critique as 'the art of voluntary inservitude, of reflective indocility' (1996b:386) emphasises that it requires the cultivation of a critical awareness of, and ability to problematise, both oneself and one's context. 'Care of the self', which stems from Foucault's interest in ancient Greek ethics, is a highly introspective form of self-examination involving work one does on one's body, mind and soul, in order to live an ethically-driven life and relate better to others (Ball and Olmedo 2013; Foucault 2007b).

Both critique and 'care of the self' have been discussed within education in relation to teachers, rather than pupils, and their conscious opposition to neoliberal reforms (Ball 2016b; Ball and Olmedo 2013; Choi 2017; Comisso 2013). Ball (2016b, 2017a; Ball and Olmedo 2013), who has been influential in this area, focuses on a group of teachers whose struggles to avoid internalising the dominant neoliberal, performative models of 'teacherhood' involve 'a continuous practice of introspection' (2016b:1136) which they achieve largely by engaging in articulate confessional writing, a highly intellectualized practice.

These more self-aware forms of counter-conduct do not translate easily to primary-aged children, who do not generally show the introspection and

articulate intentionality demonstrated by Ball's teachers. However, this is also true of most adult resistance, so the question of how widely these ideas are relevant is a broader one. Nevertheless, I found that critique and 'care of the self' can be illuminating in considering pupils' relationship with school. According to Lemke (2016:24) 'the activity of problematization, the art of voluntary insubordination and the audacity to expose oneself as a subject... are the three elements that define critical activity according to Foucault' and I discuss how one of my participants can be seen as demonstrating all three in Chapter 6.

I also argue that Foucault's conceptualisation of resistance as counter-conduct, as the rejection of the subject positions made available within dominant discourse and the construction of others within counter-discourses, is too useful an idea to restrict to the self-aware, particularly when considering resistance under governmentality. Authors have extended Foucault's ideas beyond his own use of them, to make sense of less self-aware deviant behaviours as challenges to imposed subjectivities. Behaviour such as the London riots, Occupy movements and human rights campaigns have been explored within this framework (Death 2016; Odysseos, Death, and Malmvig 2016; Sokhi-Bulley 2016). Death (2016:215), for example, says of teenage 'pexers', who compete to destroy valuable consumer goods, that they 'are largely unreflective and do not see themselves as engaged in practices which are either political or which present a considered social critique'. Rather, they are motivated by an 'intransigent desire not to 'fit in too easily', to counter the subjectifying power of circulating dominant discourses.

Rebellion, defiance, aggression and truancy, sometimes collective, occur in schools, and these theories could prove fruitful in exploring them. However, such behaviours were far outside the repertoire of all my participants and so I do not make use of the 'grander' forms of resistance in my analysis. Indeed, open challenges are more difficult in institutions such as schools 'once discipline is a dominant feature... and when institutional correction systems are

in place for those who do not conform' (Lilja and Vinthagen 2014:114). Application of the concept of counter-conduct in schools, then, requires not only an acceptance that it is not always self-aware, but also that it may not be obviously defiant, taking more 'diffuse and subdued forms' (Foucault 2007a:200).

Choi's (2017) study of how South Korean teachers subvert unwelcome educational reforms usefully augments a Foucauldian framework with the ideas of the anthropologist Scott. In Scott's influential book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance* (1985) he argues that if we see resistance only as uprisings and social movements, we miss powerful forms of less visible 'everyday resistance' – forms of non-cooperation and cultural resistance such as foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage. He finds these in rural and factory settings, and also in the middle class and elites (e.g. through avoiding conscription, or tax evasion) but especially amongst peasant and slave societies. These are typically relatively powerless, rarely politically organised and where overt opposition may have serious consequences – characteristics shared, although in a less extreme form, with classrooms. Although he accepts that such behaviour may have practical benefits – in Choi's case it led to the reforms being abandoned – Scott speaks of the need to preserve dignity as an important motive, a concept that seems closely related to the 'art of not being governed quite so much' (Foucault 1996b:44–45).

Choi (2017:485) argues that we need to look at:

... the mundane ordinary routines of teachers for resistance, such as classroom teaching, copy room chats, email exchanges, and inset days. Those acts may not be presented as outright resistance, and emerge in different points of small decisions, such as when they design a classroom activity, when they express their views about daily encounters,

tasks, and demands upon them, and when they make small, innocent-looking complaints.

She concludes (2017:497) that her findings have ‘implications for the theorization of resistance in modern societies’, showing that it is ‘necessary to look at the ‘invisible’, ‘docile’ and ‘diffuse and subdued’ resistance exerted through everyday routines within the boundary of governance’. Scott, she argues, usefully enriches our understanding of the practicalities of such counter-conduct, and I explore this idea in my analysis.

Given the research interest in the construction of what can broadly be called ‘neoliberal’ subjectivities, there are relatively few studies of pupils’ counter-conduct. However, much the work exploring resistance in education (e.g. Ingram 2018b, 2018a; Gore 2004; Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004) builds on Willis’s (1977) influential study of working-class ‘lads’ and can often be usefully reframed in terms of counter-conduct. Some use a Bourdieusian lens to explore issues of identity formation for those whose habitus – our reoccurring patterns of beliefs and values (Bourdieu 1990) – does not align comfortably with that required by school. Stahl (2014, 2016), for example, looks at White working-class boys’ aspirations to ‘ordinariness’, ‘average-ness’ and ‘loyalty to self’. He puts this down to their rejection of the aspiration-orientated ‘entrepreneur of self’ (2016:665) habitus favoured by the school, instead constructing what he calls a ‘counter-habitus’, motivated by attempting to negotiate a ‘care of the self’ to maintain a sense of value in a field they find uncomfortable, an idea I find useful in my analysis. Such studies regularly include pupils’ own perspectives and are therefore discussed in the next chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explained my theoretical stance and the tools and concepts I draw on to analyse my participants’ experiences. I have described my understanding of power as productive and my participants as discursively

produced as well as discussing the technologies – both disciplinary and those of the self – that operate within primary school classrooms. I have discussed the two discourses that emerged most in analysis, ‘good pupil’ and happiness discourse, as well as outlining whether and how we might usefully understand pupils as resisting in classrooms. There are times when these tools and concepts rub up against one another in analysis and I have attempted to foreground this complexity in my analysis chapters, explaining my theoretical decisions. There are also risks in using Foucault; for example his idea of ‘nets’ of power can obscure oppression, he was surprisingly uncritical of early neoliberalism (Zamora and Behrent 2016), and his analysis of resistance was thin (Ball 2016b; Death 2016). However, these are all, it seems to me, overcome by those now using his ideas in education (e.g. Ball 2016b; Ball and Olmedo 2013; Bradbury 2013a, 2019a; Keddie 2016; Keddie, Black, and Charles 2019; Youdell 2006, 2010) to understand the operation of power and ways subjects are constructed in classrooms.

Next, I move on to reviewing the literature on what children themselves say about their experiences in the classroom and of the practices, discourses and ideas I have outlined in Chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 3: Listening to pupils' voices on low attainment

This chapter looks at what we already know from existing research about the questions this thesis sets out to answer. These are: how primary school 'low attainers' make sense of attainment labels; how they view themselves and others in light of this sense-making; and how this affects the way they navigate their paths through school. I focus purely on *pupils'* perspectives and experiences in this chapter, rather than on those of teachers or on school policies. I show that although there are very few studies that focus on the experiences of 'low attainers' (or, more broadly, those viewed as at the 'bottom of the class'), the wider literature that includes primary pupils' voices suggests that 'low attainers' are often stigmatised and suffering in today's classrooms. Moreover, although this may always have been the case, this situation appears exacerbated by the neoliberal education reforms discussed in Chapter 1.

Existing research: scope and gaps

Since around 2000 there has been increasing recognition of the importance of listening to pupils in assessing school practice (Greig, Taylor, and MacKay 2007). However, there remain two key omissions from this field. First, such research is still largely in secondary schools, and the studies in primary schools mainly focus on Years 5 or 6 (ages 9-11), neglecting younger pupils (Roberts-Holmes 2018). Second, the voices of low-attaining pupils are strikingly absent (Archer et al. 2018), a gap which is only starting to be addressed. Even when the research focus directly relates to attainment, 'low attainers' are underrepresented and samples skewed against them. Published data from the Millennium Cohort Study (Hallam and Parsons 2013) on setting and set allocation, for example, discusses a sample of almost half top-set and under a quarter bottom-set pupils. Similarly, a paper from the large UCL study on

grouping, discussed in Chapter 1, reports on a sample containing twice as many top-set as bottom-set pupils (Francis et al. 2017b) and a write up of some of their qualitative findings on the ‘symbolic violence of setting’ (Archer et al. 2018) includes quotations from only one pupil in Set 4 as opposed to fifteen in Set 1. Other studies do not indicate pupils’ attainment at all, even when it seems highly relevant, for example a survey claiming that pupils prefer being grouped to taught in mixed-attainment classes (YouGov 2018).

There is certainly no lack of interest in low attainment in the UK – it is much discussed both inside and outside academia – though whether there is the same concern for ‘low attainers’ is less clear. We can only speculate on the reasons why low-attaining pupils’ perspectives have been so underrepresented: researchers, sharing academic trajectories and, often, social class with ‘high attainers’, may find them easier to empathise with and interview; it may be harder to get parental permission for ‘low attainers’; schools as gatekeepers may be hiding their ‘low attainers’ for fear they will miss lessons or present the school unfavourably; or the lowest attainers may be judged such ‘hopeless cases’ (Gillborn and Youdell 2000) that they are considered irrelevant to overall outcomes or school improvement design.

The work that does include the voices of ‘low attainers’ is sometimes that with a broad focus on pupil experience (e.g. Bibby 2011; Devine 2003; Hargreaves 2017; Pollard and Triggs 2000) but more often that which is more focused, often on high-stakes testing (e.g. Booher-Jennings 2008; Hall et al. 2004; Keddie 2016; Reay and Wiliam 1999) or attainment grouping (e.g. Francis et al. 2019; Marks 2016a; McGillicuddy and Devine 2020). Reay and Wiliam’s influential paper *I’ll be a nothing: structure, agency and the construction of identity through assessment* (1999), further discussed below, was my introduction to this body of work, showing through interview data from a London primary classroom the intensity of emotions Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs) trigger and the lasting impact this appears to have on pupils, particularly those expecting to receive low marks.

A flurry of studies on grouping have been published since I began this project, and these have been instrumental in drawing much-needed attention to the experience of 'low attainers'. Most have been in secondary schools, much emerging from the UCL study (e.g. Francis et al. 2020; Archer et al. 2018; Francis, Archer, et al. 2017; Francis et al. 2017b; Mazonod et al. 2019; Tereshchenko et al. 2018; Francis et al. 2019) and gaining considerable public attention (e.g. George 2018; Russell 2018). In primary schools, Marks (2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015, 2016b) has focused on 'low attainers' in her important work on pupil perspectives on grouping in England. This has been augmented by McGillicuddy and Devine's (2018, 2020) recent papers on Irish primaries and work on the relationship between grouping, peer relationships and ethnicity (McGillicuddy 2021; McGillicuddy and Machowska-Kosciak 2021). These all include the experiences of low-attaining children, almost always through analysis of their own words. However, none of these studies analyse individual children in depth or focus on how these practices impact the construction of their school subjectivities over time.

There are a few detailed studies of individual pupils (e.g. O'Flynn and Petersen 2007; Pollard and Filer 1999; Reay 2002; Warin 2010). Although none focus on 'low attainers', they are valuable in highlighting how pupils make sense of their experiences in school and the complex process of constructing and reconstructing a school subjectivity, in a way that is not possible in shorter studies or with larger samples. Only two compare to the *Children's Life Histories in Primary Schools* (CLIPS) project in depth and breadth. The first is the *Identity and Learning Programme* (Filer and Pollard 2000; Pollard and Filer 1995, 1999, 2007) set up by Pollard, later joined by Filer, that examined a group of 4-year-olds from 1987 for 12 years. This was a set of detailed ethnographic studies – which the authors call 'strategic biographies' (1999) – involving interviews with pupils, parents (usually mothers) and teachers, as well as extensive observations in classroom and playground, alongside scrutiny of parents' diaries and pupils' schoolwork. Their school was very different from either of my study schools, situated in a suburban, largely white, middle-class area, and

none of the children were considered to be struggling academically. However, the discussion of how children negotiated ‘coping strategies’ and developed their identities within a network of changing interpersonal processes is informative and I discuss Pollard and Filer’s taxonomy of strategies later in this chapter, considering how it relates to my participants in Chapter 9. Broader structural issues are less discussed in their work, a limitation noted at the time (Mayall, Duveen, and Shorrocks-Taylor 1997) but more glaring given theoretical developments since, for example on intersectionality (Crenshaw 2022).

The second study was conducted by Warin (2010) and was influenced by Pollard and Filer’s work. She looked at 10 participants from the ages of 3-17, both in and out of school, initially for an intensive 3-year period, and intermittently thereafter. Using a psychological as well as sociological lens, her book, focusing on four of these children, is concerned with the construction and functioning of identity, particularly the impact of formal education on this. Questioning whether children’s paths are determined from a young age, she highlights their resilience in making and remaking themselves, often against the odds. Her work shows the importance of considering and valuing children as they are in the here and now, not simply in relation to their future success and the adults they may become, and is an important contribution to the children’s rights literature, from which my own interest in pupils’ experiences grew. Although neither of these studies share CLIPS’ focus on ‘low attainers’, both demonstrate how much can be learnt from detailed analysis of individual children.

In short, then, there is a serious lack of research on low-attaining children’s experiences of primary school. I therefore draw, in this chapter, on a wider body of literature on pupils’ perspectives to shed light on my research questions. I concentrate on that produced since the key shift in education that followed the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 and SATs and Ofsted soon after (see Alexander et al. 2010; Hall et al. 2004; Pollard and Triggs 2000; Reay 2017; Reay and Wiliam 1999). I also focus mainly on UK primary schools,

although I include a few secondary or non-UK studies that proved useful to my thinking. I do not look at literature on Special Educational Needs (SEN) as none of the pupils in this study were on their schools' SEN register and the experiences of this group have been well-explored elsewhere (Berridge et al. 2021; Webster 2015; Webster and Blatchford 2013, 2015, 2017). For reasons of clarity, I also omit discussion of publications from the broader CLIPS project (Hargreaves, Quick, and Buchanan 2019, 2021, 2022; Hargreaves, Buchanan, and Quick 2021a, 2021b; Buchanan, Hargreaves, and Quick 2022, 2020; Hargreaves et al. forthcoming) as they refer to my data. All references to Hargreaves, our PI, are to her work preceding CLIPS.

The research on pupils' perspectives that I draw on, although from a range of theoretical positions, shows little disagreement or debate. This may be for two reasons. First, such studies, by their nature, focus on subjective experience, which does not lend itself to challenge. Second, much of this research is motivated by concern over the 'neoliberal turn' in education policy since 1988 and assumes that understanding pupils' experiences is necessary to assess the impact of these policies, which presupposes some similarity of outlook. Those defending such policy changes are more likely to focus on outcomes, often quantitative and relating to attainment (e.g. Figlio and Loeb 2011), which makes pupil experience largely irrelevant, except perhaps in indicating problems in 'delivering' policy (see Gillborn, McGimpsey, and Warmington 2022); as a result there is relatively little common ground for academic debate.

The remainder of the chapter draws on the research on pupil perspectives to shed light on the importance pupils attach to academic success and failure and how they understand its causes. I move then to what can be established about the experiences of 'low attainers' in school, discussing how they find being designated as low attaining and what strategies they adopt in response to this designation.

Pupils' views of academic success and failure

Pupils generally believe that being 'clever' or 'smart' is key to being valued at school, and they usually equate this with being good at core subjects (Hall et al. 2004; Hargreaves 2017; Reay and Wiliam 1999). Most are very clear who is at the top of their classroom's academic ladder (Reay 2006) and show a capacity to rank themselves and others' academic abilities with remarkable fluency (Bibby 2009; Booher-Jennings 2008; Devine 2003; Hall et al. 2004; Marks 2013, 2016a; Pollard and Triggs 2000; Reay 2006; Reay and Wiliam 1999). A study of older primary pupils (Marks 2015), for example, found they had no difficulty in placing themselves and their peers on a 'perceived ability line' and did so with enthusiasm. Moreover, most children align themselves with relatively 'clever' learner identities (Marks 2015; McGillicuddy and Devine 2020) although a significant minority hold less positive self-perceptions (Marks 2015). For example, 14% of McGillicuddy and Devine's (2020) Irish primary school sample identified with being 'not very clever'.

Although children have always ranked one another academically (Reay and Wiliam 1999), the importance children attach to this ranking seems to have grown in line with education reforms that prioritise academic attainment. Testing and attainment grouping, both of which have accompanied these reforms (see Chapter 2), seem to have increased children's awareness of relative position (Marks 2016; McGillicuddy and Devine 2020; McGillicuddy and Machowska-Kosciak 2021; Reay and Wiliam 1999), leading to intensely unpleasant attainment-related teasing between peers (McGillicuddy and Machowska-Kosciak 2021; Reay and Wiliam 1999). Testing and the resulting changes in classroom pedagogy have led, it seems, to 'disturbing shifts in how children [view] themselves and others' (Reay and Wiliam 1999:349; see also Bibby 2009) in ways that appear, as Reay (2006:179) puts it, 'powerfully influenced by the narrow remit of the standards agenda'.

Hall et al's aptly named paper *SATurated pupildom* (2004) describes the extent to which Year 6 pupils' subjectivity was 'invaded' by the requirement to do well in KS2 SATs, side-lining alternative models of pupildom. Interview and observation data collected in two urban UK schools found that SATs increased the significance to the children of attainment in those subjects being tested, as well as shifting the focus from collaborative to competitive working. These findings are mirrored in Reay and Wiliam's study, in which one pupil commented 'we're not allowed to help any more. It's cheating.' (1999:351). SATs have also been found to lead to pupils worrying that they are expected to work quickly (Bibby 2009; Hall et al. 2004; Reay and Wiliam 1999), and this need to hurry is one of the reasons pupils give for no longer helping each other (Marks 2016a). Moreover, the recent work discussed in Chapter 1, showing how KS2 SAT preparation has trickled down from Year 6 right into Reception (Bradbury 2019b), suggests repeating Hall et al.'s (2004) or Reay and Wiliam's (1999) studies, now 20-years-old, might well find such effects not just in SATs year but right across the school.

As academic attainment becomes more important to pupils, so too does understanding how it is assessed. Such 'system smartness' (Löfgren et al. 2019:13) has been found when looking at testing and grading both nationally and internationally (Bibby 2009; Black 2015; Hargreaves 2014, 2017; Jonsson, Lundahl, and Holmgren 2015; Reay and Wiliam 1999; Tanner and Pérez Prieto 2019) even when assessment systems are new and complex (see Löfgren et al. 2019). These findings are in striking contrast with those from a study of US pupils *before* high-stakes testing was introduced (Evans and Engelberg 1988). Although many did not fully understand their assessment systems, this did not worry them as the grades themselves did not seem very important. Marks (2016a) found similar 'system smartness' in primary pupils' competent explanations of ability group placement.

'System smartness', however, can be hard-won. Bibby (2009:50) found that in the summer term of Year 5, the term before SATs year, some pupils strive to

make sense of their grade levels, putting 'considerable mental and emotional energy' into the task, a struggle echoed in other studies (Reay 2002; Reay and William 1999). Moreover, many found this task distressing. Younger pupils and 'low attainers', particularly, have been found to struggle more than others with understanding assessment systems (Harlen and Crick 2003:196), suggesting that primary school 'low attainers' may be particularly affected by the stress of navigating them.

Teachers, unsurprisingly, play a key role in defining academic achievement, in reinforcing its importance and in shaping how individual pupils see themselves. In UK primary schools, where pupils are generally taught by one core teacher for at least a year, the teacher-pupil relationship has repeatedly been found to be one of the most charged aspects of pupils' classroom experience (Bibby 2009, 2011; Devine 2003; Hargreaves 2017; Pollard and Filer 1999; Pollard and Triggs 2000; Reay and William 1999). Pupils appear to view teachers as the arbiters of cleverness, effort, behaviour and general value as a person (Bibby 2009; Devine 2003; Hargreaves 2017). This is shown by how children in McGillicuddy and Devine's (2020:9) study explain teachers' decisions about attainment group placement:

...they know what's kind of best and they know like who is smart and clever and knows how to read and doesn't know how to read

...she (the teacher) knows if it feels good inside her or feels bad inside her

Group placement is experienced as a form of teacher feedback, the result of the teachers' all-seeing eye.

There is also considerable research on how pupils view teachers' verbal and written feedback, though again younger pupils' voices are scarce (Eriksson, Boistrup, and Thornberg 2020; Hargreaves 2013). Pollard and Triggs (2000:139) argue that in the early 1990s primary school pupils felt teacher

feedback was formative and helpful, but that after the introduction of SATs it became increasingly anxiety-inducing:

They had little, if any, concept of assessment as formative... Overall two-thirds of the sample described themselves as feeling anxious or worried about showing their work to their teacher.

Although pupils have always used what strategies they can to suggest to their teachers that they have the 'right' answers (see Holt 1964), research since the introduction of SATs (Bibby 2009, 2011; Black 2015; Devine 2003) shows how pupils in today's classrooms fixate on whether they are 'right' or 'wrong' – something Black (2015) attributes to their familiarity with practices that provide marks on work, seeing this as a key contributor to labelling pupils 'smart' or 'dumb' (2015:169). Hargreaves (2017:91), for example, describes a primary school child telling her she is 'fearful before receiving the teacher's feedback in case she was wrong', the study finding feedback often stressful and demotivating to pupils.

Pupils have long feared their teachers' judgements. In *How Children Fail* (Holt 1964:9), Holt highlighted children's fear of 'failing, of disappointing, or displeasing the many anxious adults around them' and fear, particularly fear of failure, is still prominent in schools (Hargreaves 2015; Moore 2013; Reay 2006). Hargreaves (2017, 2015, 2014) links this to authoritarian approaches that emphasise the academic disciplines to the exclusion of broader or alternative purposes of schooling. She describes pupils' multiple experiences of worrying, dreading, panicking and feeling tense and pressured in the classroom – as one child put it, 'really, really scared' (2017:33). She also emphasises the negative impact of this fear on learning, reducing concentration and producing either nervous energy or fatigue. One child explained that 'my head spins' and another that 'it feels like you have hit a brick wall' (2017:34). Children felt that they should not only be continuously working hard but understanding correctly all the

time too; they believed the teacher would be angry if they did not know the answer to a question and found this highly anxiety inducing.

If one recognises classrooms as sites for the operation of pastoral power (see Chapter 2), then it makes sense that the teacher is the source of both knowledge and judgements of value. Desire to be a good member of the ‘flock’, and fear of rejection, entwine with and reinforce the disciplinary technologies of hierarchic observation and normative judgement – that is, of *examination* (Foucault 1991). Indeed, Thompson (2010) finds that children regard this desire to be included by the teacher as an important characteristic of the ‘good pupil’.

An additional reason pupils think academic success is important, found in several studies, is that they believe academic failure will blight their futures (Devine 2003; Keddie 2016; Löfgren et al. 2019; McGillicuddy and Machowska-Kosciak 2021; Reay 2017; Reay and Wiliam 1999); pupils defend assessment systems as ‘preparation for the grown up world of work and productivity’ (Devine 2003:107), as one of Devine’s Irish primary school children put it. A child in Pollard and Filer’s (1999:145) study, working towards grammar school entrance, said ‘so I’ve got to work really hard. And I want to get a good job and not be one of those people on the streets’. Similarly, Reay and Wiliam (1999:347) quote a Year 6 girl explaining that someone with high SATs results will have a good life and job, and ‘it shows he’s not gonna be living on the streets’. Asked what it would mean if she got poor results, she says she ‘might not have a good life in front of me and might grow up and do something naughty’.

Such attitudes provide the basis for judging those ‘below’ you. A ‘mid-ability’ child in McGillicuddy’s (2021:8) study, for example, explained that those in low groups:

... would grow up and they would have it in their head that they are stupid and if somebody asked them a question they would be like, ‘don’t ask me

I am stupid'... they could grow up thinking I am never going to amount to anything... I'm not going to get a job, I will probably get a job of being a hobo.

Such views are also found by Keddie (2016), among others (McGillicuddy and Machowska-Kosciak 2021; Marks 2016a), who quotes a high-attaining boy stating bluntly '... to be honest... [if you're] not clever academically [you] won't have a good job when [you're] older which means [your] life is over basically' (2016:112). Keddie concludes that pupils believe doing well at school is necessary not only to signify 'ones worth and value as a good citizen, but to ensure survival' (2016:113). Scores, grades and groups hold power; power to frame who you are and who you are able to be. 'Low attainers' tend to be seen by their peers as not only failing at school but damning their futures too.

Pupil constructions of the 'good pupil'

Academic success, however, is not the only thing children view as important to being the pupil that schools want you to be. In other words, their model of what makes a 'good pupil' includes, but extends beyond, academic success. Pupils seem to identify a mix of academic ability and more general behavioural attributes of which 'trying hard', 'being good' and being 'quick' are usually most prominent (McGillicuddy and Devine 2018; Hargreaves 2017; Pollard and Triggs 2000; Reay 2006; Hall et al. 2004; Bibby 2009; Reay and William 1999).

Aspects of the 'good pupil' other than academic success are explored in Thompson's (2010) rare attempt to categorise the *range* of ways pupils characterise what is required by school. Looking at Australian secondary pupils, he finds qualities such as docility, acceptance of authority, a desire to follow teachers' moral leadership, taking responsibility, being organised and reliable, subscribing to gender roles and 'joining in' are all important. His study shows pupil awareness of both the disciplinary requirements of obedience and the more neoliberal technologies of the self. A boy in Pollard and Filer's (1999:150)

study, describing a peer he considers successful, also includes a mix of qualities: 'clever, gets good marks at tests, gets parts in plays and is... in the netball and rounders and she gets lots of friends... you can tell from the way they are in class that they must work hard to do these things'.

Pupils' characterisations of the 'good pupil' are, unsurprisingly, mediated by social class, gender and race. Hempel-Jorgenson's (2009) study, discussed in Chapter 2, compared the views of 8-9 year olds in two English schools with contrasting social class composition and found that pupils in the working-class school characterised 'success' as being passive and obedient, dominated by issues of discipline and behaviour rather than academic outcome. Pupils spoke of what Hempel-Jorgenson calls the 'ideal pupil' as hardworking, polite and helpful, one girl describing someone who is 'sensible, calm, good, listens good, well behaved... concentrates a lot and doesn't mess around on the carpet when they, like, get into school' and another boy commenting, 'when [the teacher] looks at him, he has like angel rings... like an angel thing around his head' (2009:440). In her middle-class school, however, although children also commented on the need to be quiet and hardworking, high achievement was more prominent, alongside being 'clever and funny' (2009:441). There was also a gender difference, with girls emphasising taking care of others and not being 'too shy' and boys talking about participating in 'friendly banter' (2009:441), though both understandings foregrounded confidence and speaking out, a distinct contrast to the passivity emphasised in the working-class school.

Much of Reay's work (1995, 2001b, 2002, 2006; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2010) also explores the relationship between social class, gender and pupils' sense-making about themselves and others. Her highly illuminating 1995 paper shows girls reinforcing their middle-classness by positioning themselves as equal to their teachers, making suggestions for improving assembly planning or recommending textbooks. Reay never observed this behaviour in the working-class school she used as comparison, nor did teachers seem to expect it. 'Tidy up time' threw up particularly striking differences; in the middle-class school

children grumbled or even refused, stating 'it's not our job' and 'they employ cleaners to do that' (1995:363) while in the working-class school it was carried out with gusto and enthusiasm. She found willingness to help, both with tidying up and with others' work, was both classed and gendered; helping narratives were far more common from working-class children, particularly girls. This contrasted with a focus on competitiveness that emerged in the behaviours of middle-class pupils – and indeed from their mothers, who feared their children were held back by helping others.

Thompson (2010) also found gender differences in his Australian pupils' conceptions of the 'good pupil'; the 'good female' should be 'docile, organised, submissive, valuing of social success, static and silenced through many of the institutional practices' (2010:424). She was also cooperative, one girl describing the 'good female' pupil as:

Generally someone who puts in whenever they are needed or if they are asked to do something they pretty much say yes. (2010:424)

In contrast, pupils tended to consider a 'good male' as more vocal, risk-taking, comfortable with success and ambitious. Many male pupils considered a 'good pupil' in terms of social or sporting, as much as academic, success, and most of those Thompson calls the 'sports stars' (2010:424) were boys.

In an rare exploration of how different ideas of success influence the construction of pupils' subjectivities, O'Flynn and Petersen (2007) compared two successful Australian teenage girls. Faye attends a prestigious private girls school promoting excellence and 'boundary pushing' (2007:466) and Felicia a government school with a stress on behaviour and limited aspirations. Faye is the embodiment of the neoliberal, entrepreneurial subject, committed to not wasting time, maximising productivity and judging activities on the basis of their 'value-adding capacity' (2007:465). She sees herself as a project for improvement, an accomplished 'enterprise individual' (2007:468) with a

constant eye on adding to her CV. Felicia, equally accomplished and active, speaks of herself and her activities very differently – she aims to fulfil family responsibilities caring for siblings, avoid boredom, stay healthy and enjoy herself with friends. Although the girls are similar in terms of the activities they engage in, their classed framing of these activities shows the subjectivities they are constructing to be significantly different.

I have noted in Chapter 1 the degree to which the ‘good pupil’ is mediated by race, but I do not know of any studies looking at *pupil* perspectives of this. However, the educational potential of different groups of pupils is viewed so differently (Gillborn 1990; Archer 2008, 2003; Bradbury 2014; Youdell 2003), that it must surely influence pupils’ own sense-making. For example, Bradbury (2014) discusses a Reception child, Abeje, whose assertiveness and identity performances such as singing, dancing and talking of her home country Nigeria led her to be regarded by the adults in her school as a ‘bad learner’ despite her high standard of work and enthusiasm, as she was understood through discourses of the ‘loud Black woman’. We might expect this positioning to impact Abeje’s own understanding of what schools value – restraint and subduedness rather than assurance and eagerness, for example. Research has repeatedly shown how Black pupils, boys in particular, are ‘trapped’ (Youdell 2003) within particular learner identities, in Youdell’s (2003:3) terms, as ‘undesirable, or even intolerable learners’, often despite their engagement in education (see also Bradbury 2013b), which again must surely influence the boys’ models of a ‘good pupil.’

Studies indicate, then, that class, gender and (though research is scarce) race, will affect pupils’ models of ‘successful’ pupildom, with concerning social justice implications emerging: passivity, discipline, cooperation, acceptance of authority and being helpful perceived as the model for some students, and excellence, ambition, independence, competitiveness and character the model for others.

Pupils' views of the determinants of academic success and failure

There is a small body of sociological research exploring why pupils think some are academically successful and others not. Some pupils seem to view 'ability' as a permanent characteristic of people. Marks' (2015) mixed methods study with Years 4 and 6 in two English primary schools found that pupils made significantly more references to ability as internal and biologically determined than as driven by external factors such as age or experience. Also, they believed that ability set limits that effort could not overcome, a stronger finding when strict attainment grouping was in place. Marks quotes, in other papers, children explaining 'I was just not born clever' (2016a:6) or 'their brain's bigger... it just happens. They were born like that. They were born clever' (2016b:unpaged). This conception of ability as fixed is also found in work with secondary pupils who make comments like '... if you know you're bad at it then you just think you're going to be bad at it for the rest of your life' (Stables et al. 2014:635; see also Francis et al. 2017b).

In contrast, several studies, most in secondary schools, find that both low- and high-attaining pupils talk of effort, hard work and concentration, alongside or instead of innate factors, as the route to success (Anagnostopoulos 2006; Booher-Jennings 2008; Eriksson 2009; Löfgren et al. 2019). Discourses of 'hard work' can be linked to broader notions of meritocracy and the view of schools as engines of social mobility, responsible for enabling pupils from any background to succeed if they have the talent and also apply themselves. A recent paper (Owens and de St Croix 2020) on the impacts of meritocratic discourses in a large London secondary found that most pupils endorsed meritocratic narratives and internalised these expectations, but they also recognised challenges associated with these, including the stress of meeting high expectations and the complexities of who should be held responsible for 'failure'. Although most resisted simplistic 'victim blaming' discourses, the persuasiveness of meritocratic logic meant many felt a high level of personal responsibility, despite their awareness of structural inequalities. They believed, in short, that they had

little choice but to, in the writers' words, 'bear the burdens of meritocratic expectations and to try to work hard and do the best they can' (2020:18).

Mendick et al. (2015) argue that the value young people place on hard work is increasing in parallel with shifts in policy and what they call the 'hard work zeitgeist' (2015:174) that has accompanied schools' increasing preoccupation with academic results. Their study of 14-17 year olds found a '... universal valuing of hard work among young men *and* women, from middle-class *and* working-class backgrounds' (2015:162, italics in original). Moreover, female and/or working-class people were often denied access to the position of 'hard worker' in their participants' talk. This is in striking contrast to previous research (Jackson and Nyström 2015), noted in Chapter 2, that found achievement is most valued if it is effortless; if female, Black and working-class pupils succeed, it can only be because they are 'hard workers'. Class, race and gender continue to define success, albeit differently. When effortless achievement is most valued, some groups are regarded as succeeding only through hard work; when hard work becomes valued, they are denied access to being a 'hard worker'. While Mendick et al. point out that narratives of hard work can open up successful subject positions for some previously excluded pupils, then, they highlight how problematic this shift can be. Hard work narratives obscure the existence of inequalities and reproduce neoliberal meritocratic discourse.

Two studies look directly at how primary pupils view academic failure. Booher-Jennings (2008) discusses how 8–9-year-olds in Texas who had passed the test to move up a grade held those who had not passed responsible for their failure. Pupils made comments such as 'because they don't listen, they don't know. They don't get good grades because they don't listen' and '... when we were working on the reading book, they didn't read and they, they just passed a lot of pages' (2008:156). Moreover, most of the held-back boys accepted the explanation that their failure was due to not working hard enough and so they *deserved* to re-take the year (2008:158–59).

Keddie's (2016) interviews and observations with Year 5 pupils in London draw similar conclusions. She found that some 'high attainers' believed that 'low attainers' did not realise the importance of working hard. She quotes a high-attaining Year 6 boy explaining:

... the children that aren't as clever, they don't really mind because they don't really see that it's, kind of good to be clever... they need to work harder, they need to be good at sitting tests and all that, they just aren't... aware of what life is really... they'll hopefully realise that in secondary school, and then they know that they're a bit behind and they can hopefully work harder... (2016:114)

It is striking how little participants in either study used biological or innate explanations given the enduring strength of fixed ability discourses in this country (Bradbury 2021; Marks 2016a). It is possible that pupils felt it was more palatable to consider failure as due to a lack of effort rather than innate inadequacy, perhaps because it suggested they could turn it around, though the authors do not discuss this. Important to my study, however, is the responsabilisation of 'low attainers' by their peers in both Booher-Jennings' and Keddie's studies, and the discourses of 'deservingness' and blame that permeate pupils' sense-making.

Although I concentrate on the sociological literature, discussion of how pupils understand educational success is dominated by psychologists, particularly Dweck's (2017) 'growth mindset' theory. As noted in my previous chapter, implementation of growth mindset ideas in schools have been varied, and although undermining fixed-ability thinking was long overdue (see Marks 2013, 2016a; Yarker 2019), Keddie's and Booher-Jennings' studies illustrate that a simplistic message that success is a result of effort may bring its own problems. If 'mindset' is held up as equally important as socio-economic factors, 'growth mindset' becomes just another manifestation of a simplistic 'achievement ideology', blaming individuals for structural disadvantage (Jerome and Kisby

2019). Older students have been found to hold such views in their classroom interactions, participating in class discussions using buzzwords like ‘fixed mindset’, which highlight individual rather than structural barriers, and getting positive responses from teachers when they do so (Highet and Del Percio 2021). Research has also suggested that an emphasis on effort can make those in lower-attaining groups feel worse about themselves because even their ‘greatest efforts’ aren’t good enough (Hargreaves 2017:8), a point I return to in Chapter 5.

Being designated as low attaining

There is a long history of educational research showing that low-attaining pupils are regularly stigmatised by staff and other pupils (Boaler, William, and Brown 2000; Francis et al. 2017b; Hallam and Deathe 2002; Ireson, Hallam, and Plewis 2001; Macintyre and Ireson 2002; McGillicuddy and Devine 2018, 2020). Studies in primary classrooms have shown them to be regarded with pity (Marks 2013) and as personally lacking for not passing tests (Hall et al. 2004). Children work differently when they consider their partner low ability (Marks 2013) and are unhappy at doing so (Bragg 2016), repeating teacher-talk such as ‘they need smaller classes to learn’ (Marks 2016a:50).

It is unsurprising then, that low-attaining pupils often report feeling ashamed and judged (Hargreaves 2017; Macintyre and Ireson 2002; Marks 2016a; McGillicuddy and Devine 2018, 2020; Reay and William 1999). The public nature of much of the ranking in classrooms appears key to their experience of this, combining observation and normative judgement into *examination* (see Chapter 2). Even minor practices that risk exposing academic failure, such as swapping work for marking or pointing out mistakes in public, are stressful, and pupils report how poor judgments from a teacher can lead to ridicule from other pupils (Devine 2003). Reay and William (1999:351), for example, describe a girl struggling with a KS2 science mock SATs paper, told by the teacher not to try

the 'hard ones' and experiencing this as a humiliating public identification of herself as 'thick'.

The impact of practices of division

Much of what we know about pupils' experiences of low attainment comes from studies on testing, attainment grouping and triage. These rank, sort and divide children, leading to Bradbury et al.'s description, following Foucault (1988a), of these as 'practices of division' (Bradbury et al. 2021), discussed in Chapter 2. Practices of division are both the *result* of ranking and *create* such ranking. This produces a feedback loop particularly damaging to 'low attainers' who can become trapped in a designation that is being continually cemented. Moreover, because they are often 'carried out in a public and highly visible manner' (Devine 2003:91), children are easily able to compare and contrast their performance with others, in other words, to scrutinise the outcomes of *examination*.

Group allocation has been found to be highly 'socially and emotionally charged' (Marks 2013:10) and to significantly affect children's self-concept (McGillicuddy 2021; McGillicuddy and Devine 2020; Bibby 2009; Marks 2015). The large UCL project in secondary schools, discussed previously, found that set placement had a significant impact on self-confidence in that subject, which spilled over into general self-confidence (Francis et al. 2017b). Moreover this was found to create a 'snowball prophecy', with those allocated to lower sets feeling cumulatively worse about themselves (2020). Pupils placed in bottom groups described experiencing 'pain and shame' (2017b:107) in contrast to top-set pupils who admitted feeling 'superior' (Archer et al. 2018:9). Some Year 7 pupils recognised the self-fulfilling implications of this, explaining that 'some people think if they're in a lower set they're not good at anything' and 'it makes you upset and a lot less excited to do the work' (Francis, Connolly, et al. 2017:103).

Primary school studies have similar findings, with those placed in lower groups reporting feelings of 'upset', 'inferiority' and 'shame', in contrast to higher-groups' 'pride', 'happiness' and 'confidence' (McGillicuddy and Devine 2020). Pupils moved down attainment groups reported being unhappy because their friends could see how 'thick they were' (Marks 2016a:50) with one child in Hargreaves' (2017:105) study saying '... people laughed at me every single day for two weeks'.

McGillicuddy and Devine's recent work (McGillicuddy 2021; McGillicuddy and Devine 2018, 2020) on the impacts of grouping in Irish primary schools gives considerable weight to pupils' perspectives. Drawing on data from a mixed methods study which included in-depth case study analysis in several schools, they found that children wanted to be moved to a higher group, not only because they wanted to get 'smarter', but also 'because when you are in the lowest everybody just slags you... you are all handicapped, you have to go to the slowest class. And you just feel bad and all' (2020:15). Their findings reinforce concerns that 'low attainers' are worryingly stigmatised where grouping is practised. The authors conclude that:

This polarisation of ability, demarcated by what is considered smart and not smart, is reinforced by the use of ability grouping, as it legitimises the hierarchical positioning of the children along a value of 'worth'. Examples include 'bit higher than other people' (smart), 'a little bit lower' (not smart); 'high people', 'low people', 'dumb', 'intelligent'. This also feeds into social worth in dichotomies of being 'liked' or 'not liked', 'bad', 'good', etc. The language of affect used by the children to describe the lower-ability group was comprised of negative, derogatory, incapable and dysfunctional terms, as being 'dyslexic', 'slow', 'dumb' and 'poor' in contrast to their 'smarter', 'ok' higher-ability peers. (2020:11–12)

Using network analysis, McGillicuddy (2021) found that lower groups suffered lower social status and increased experiences of bullying, leading to feelings of

disengagement, anger and isolation. Other children did not choose to sit next to them and tended not to ask them for help, preferring to ask the 'smart' children. There was also little cross-over in friendships between groups of differing abilities, and pupils in lower groups found efforts to forge friendships with higher-placed pupils were not reciprocated. Ability-related teasing was common, increasing their feelings of anger and sadness:

... any time you tell them about your reading group and you tell them that you finished your book in 2 days they do be saying, 'ha, ha, you get an easy book,' and all ... it makes me feel like just hopping me fist off someone's head

... they say, 'oh you are in a lower class than me, ha, we don't even get reading'... it makes me feel sad and it makes me feel like I don't want to come to school. (2021:8)

Such exclusion and teasing seemed particularly harsh when low attainment combined with minority ethnic or traveller identities (McGillicuddy and Machowska-Kosciak 2021).

In addition, research suggests that children tend to internalise their group placement, considering it as identifying a permanent characteristic of themselves. This is evident in comments such as 'I've always been last in every maths group... I'll just be low now in my next school, too' (Marks 2016b:3). In another example, a Key Stage 1 teacher recalled how a girl's ambition to be a doctor like her mother disappeared when moved down a set, telling her:

I used to want to be a doctor like my mum but since I moved to the middle set I've realised that that's not something I can do, because I'm not good enough so I'm thinking about what else I might do in the future. (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes 2017b:41)

Bragg (2016) found this internalisation remarkably robust. Studying schools that had abolished strict attainment grouping for ‘choice and challenge’ (where pupils chose their work level), she found pupils unwilling to relinquish their group identity. One Year 4 pupil explained how they used their previous group placement to inform their choice, commenting:

You get to choose your level because some people have more ability at maths than others. I go for the hardest because I am in the top stream for maths. I am in the triangles which is the top group, so I usually go for 3 or 4. For circles, [the teacher] will choose for them, because they are the lowest. (2016:89)

A child in another of Bragg’s study schools who had previously been placed in the bottom group – the ‘red’ group – resisted the change passionately, arguing ‘but I am a RED child!’ (2016:89). Such findings indicate that pupils incorporate group placement into their sense of who they are and their possible futures (see also Reay et al. 2010), and this is not easily reversed.

There is evidence that ‘low attainers’ are not only stigmatised but also feel discriminated against in terms of resources and appropriate pedagogy. A prominent secondary school study (Boaler et al. 2000) found pupils placed in lower groups complaining vehemently that the pace was too slow and the work too easy. Such complaints were fully justified; the researchers saw pupils finishing their work in the first 5 minutes of the lesson and being told ‘you can’t have finished, you’re in set 5’ (2000:638), leaving them waiting for the remaining 55 minutes.

Educational triage, discussed in Chapter 1, is explicitly *designed* to focus resources away from ‘low attainers’ and towards ‘cusp’ pupils, and children are both aware and resentful of this. Marks (2014a:48) quotes three boys explaining:

Peter: Mr Quinton's set [Set 3] are Level 4 and Mr Leverton's we're like 3... Well it's not fair. In Mr Quinton's group you get treated differently.

James: It's soooo different. They don't care about us being happy, we don't have nothing, no resources in lessons, nothing. We don't have nothing to use.

Samuel: We all need helpers in our class, [Set 3] have got helpers, but we haven't got no helpers, it's really different.

The academic and emotional effects of educational triage, including the resentment at being ignored and considered 'hopeless cases' (Gillborn and Youdell 2000), show clearly in these boys words.

Strategies for dealing with being designated as low attaining

Although 'low attainers' seem to experience themselves as stigmatised for their low attainment, there is little work on how they respond to this. What there is, however, is work on pupils' responses to school more generally and how they construct their subjectivities given the wider discursive context and their positioning within it. Pollard and Filer (1999), as part of their *Identity and Learning Programme*, identify three approaches within which pupils' responses to schooling – what they call 'adaptive strategies' – can be positioned: conformity (compliant to academic, behavioural and gendered expectations, resulting in good classroom integration), anti-conformity (deviance and opposition, alternative values, status systems and priorities, solidarity through gangs and gendered behaviour, seen as deviant and disruptive) and non-conformity (relative independence from classroom concerns and values, absorbed in own interests, often seen as 'oddballs'). They also identify a leadership role, one that pushes the boundaries, which they call 'redefining'. These categories replaced the more static identification of pupils as 'goodie', 'joker' or 'gang' in Pollard's (1987) earlier work.

Much research in this area looks at pupils who fall into Pollard and Filer's 'anti-conformity' strategies – those viewed by schools as disruptive or deviant. These studies often find that pupils who do not gain a sense of self-worth through school, look for it elsewhere. There are of course several ways this can be achieved, overlapping to different degrees with 'good pupil' discourse and/or discourses of deviance. Gaining self-worth through becoming accomplished in certain sports or music, for example, may offer a subject positioning that is accepted and admired within official school discourses. Gaining self-worth through routes such as rap, sportswear knowledge, helping a friend with their work or rule-breaking, may be viewed very differently (see Raby 2012a).

Paul Willis is viewed as the father of this genre of research with his influential book *Learning to Labour* (1977). This is an ethnographic exploration of 'lad culture' amongst White teenage boys from manual labouring backgrounds in Northern England. These lads felt that what school wanted them to learn was not only irrelevant to 'real life', but also deeply feminised, and thus incompatible with their fragile, emerging masculine identities. Instead, the lads resisted, demonstrating their toughness and ability to succeed *despite* school by rejecting its values completely, engaging in everyday resistances to symbols of school authority, including both teachers and conformist peers. They recognised, too, that the chances of school success were stacked against them, so replacing failure with bravado made sense to them. This was a strategy that had worked for their fathers when skilled manual jobs were still available, but the collapse of heavy industry left the lads with limited choices for their futures.

Although Willis' methodology of ethnographic neutrality has been criticised for not challenging, and therefore implicitly reinforcing, the lads highly sexist attitudes to gender issues (Dolby and Dimitriadis 2004; McRobbie 1991), he has been hugely influential. He left two particularly valuable legacies. First, he showed how these young men were complicit in the reproduction of their social positioning, in this case their class. Second, he foregrounded the young men's agency. As Dolby and Dimitriadis put it in their introduction to *Learning to*

Labour in New Times (2004) published 25 years after Willis' text, 'Willis drew attention to the importance of scrutinizing youth's everyday lives and practices' (2004:5), something we have come to take for granted. Willis' perspective acknowledges the 'art' of everyday life (see Willis 2000), understanding individuals as making sense of their lives in creative ways. Both ideas are fundamental to the way I have approached my study.

Almost all work in this tradition continues to focus on secondary pupils, perhaps because disruption and deviance are viewed as more threatening or harder to ignore in older children. Raby's (2012a) book, based on her ethnography in a Canadian high school, contains a particularly useful and extensive review of work on rule-breaking. She explores pupils' negotiations of school rules from a social justice and participatory democracy angle, highlighting how they try to establish and maintain positive individual and group identities through clothes, language and behaviour in ways that interact with official codes of conduct (rules) to mark some out as disruptive and deviant and others not.

Her emphasis on how classed, raced and gendered these negotiations are is particularly valuable. She discusses, for example, a middle-class White boy caught for wearing a hat (against the rules) and his use of cultural capital to negotiate with the teacher and avoid a sanction, exhibiting the 'right' set of behaviours such as apologising with an 'appropriate' level of eye contact. Such strategies are not available, she points out, to pupils whose background, values and behaviours do not align with those of the teachers. Her reframing of ongoing conflict over rules through the lenses of resistance and negotiation is also valuable. Viewing pupils' rule-breaking, however minor, as part of their broader strategies to counteract a sense of disenfranchisement not only highlights pupils as agentic, but also emphasises the importance of considering such behaviours as part of pupils' wider sense-making about the world and their place within it.

Archer, Hollingworth and Halsall's (2007; Hollingworth and Archer 2009) earlier UK work in many ways parallels Raby's, finding that working-class secondary pupils may generate status and meaningful identities in ways other than through academic success. Like Willis, their focus is social class not attainment, and, like Raby's participants, not all are low attaining. However, their work suggests strategies that may be available to low-attaining pupils. In their 2007 paper, for example, they argue that traditional academic success and higher education is seen as 'not for me' by some urban working-class pupils. They found that these young people:

... actively took up and constructed collective (classed) identities creating distinctions between 'us' and 'them' through their consumption of particular (sportswear) brands and by owning, performing, reading and manipulating different branded styles. (2007:223)

Here, 'success' required the right 'bling' and for some this assumed an importance that drew them 'into crime and away from education' (2007:230).

The link between low attainment, disruption and deviance emerged as significant in research undertaken as part of my masters study (2015; summary published in Hargreaves 2017:44–48), which found that primary school 'low attainers' were using what they called 'tricks' (low-level transgressions) as a way to access experiences of mastery and accomplishment – experiences other pupils might gain from diligent and fruitful school work. One boy, Michael, for example, told me that he felt 'really proud' when he did a trick and did not get caught – 'it makes me feel like I'm the cleverest boy in the whole school' – and Desreta said, 'I feel like 'yeah, I've done it, I've done what I'm meant to do, like. I've, I've, I've... I've got the job done' (2015:57). She and her friend Shauna explained further:

Desreta: Miss Lotts says 'cross your legs' and you go like this (demonstrates with one leg bent to look crossed from the teacher's chair, the other in front)...

Shauna: We feel like (pause) she doesn't know what we're doing (pause) and we feel like, very clever.

Desreta: Yeah, clever, clever, clever, clever... definitely because we can use our brain. We can use our strength... it's a good feeling, it's a good feeling.

Shauna: Yeah cos we can control (pause) every single time when we do tricks we control stuff. Like, we don't, we don't get told off because they think everything we say is true, so it feels like *we control them* (her emphasis), all the teachers. It feels (pause) free. (2015:55-56)

'Tricks' gave these pupils a sense of power that they did not usually experience. Indeed, both high- and low-attaining pupils agreed that 'high attainers' get away with things and 'low attainers' are often blamed unfairly. This sentiment is echoed in other studies (McGillicuddy and Devine 2018; Pollard and Filer 1999; see also Raby 2012b for secondary), as well as being supported by classroom observation (Hall et al. 2004; Hargreaves 2017; Marks 2013).

Moreover, 'low attainers' seem to experience less autonomy (Hargreaves 2017). The pupils in my masters study felt that 'clever children' got to do what they wanted in comparison to low-attaining children who were 'controlled' (Quick 2015:53). 'Tricks', it appeared, provided a little of this autonomy to 'low attainers'. As one girl explained to me:

It's like two paths, but the two paths lead the same way. So for example, one path is 'trick lane', the other path is 'good lane' and then the trick lane and good lane both lead to the same place, so either way you still find the... 'you get to do what you want' lane. (2015:60)

This research supplements earlier studies, for example that of Pollard and Triggs (2000) who, looking more narrowly at the range of reactions to doing badly on a test, find pupils becoming demotivated, 'denying the tests' or becoming disruptive. Such links between low attainment and disruption point to the potential of work on anti-conformity to illuminate the strategies of 'low attainers', though it is important to keep in mind how raced, classed and gendered constructions of 'disruption' are. Gillborn's study (1990:19) of a secondary school, for example, found that teachers' reactions to Afro-Caribbean boys sustained the 'myth of an Afro-Caribbean challenge to authority'. These boys' dress, speech and way of walking became a racialised site for institutionalised disciplinary practices and were interpreted by teachers as challenging, irrespective of intention.

A somewhat different approach was explored by Fisher (2011) who looked at how apparently compliant behaviour could mask both dissatisfaction about the content of lessons (boring, too easy, too hard), and frustration at a lack of autonomy. Year 6 children were articulate in describing their attempts to disguise this dissatisfaction from teachers, making careful judgements about the minimum effort they could get away with, or chatting softly to friends with pen in hand, ready to resume work the moment the teacher turned towards them.

Although most of the studies exploring pupils' responses to school focus on adaptive strategies that are seen as disruptive and deviant, such strategies are of course not the only avenue for pupils designated as low attaining. A group of girls who failed the Texan Grade 3 test and had to repeat the year in Booher-Jennings' (2008) study, for example, appeared to accept the school's system of ranking but argued that they were not, as their test failure might suggest, at the bottom of it. Rather, they were keen to symbolically draw a line between themselves and the 'failing boys', who they claimed were different from them because the boys did not 'want' to pass (2008:155). In so doing they 'separate[d] their deserving and underserving peers... [and] fought to maintain their own precarious position in the school's social hierarchy' (2008:156). In

other words, they were working to position themselves on the 'normal' side of the school's normative binary and avoid being seen as 'other'.

Another strategy that may be available to pupils is to reject the value judgements attached to attainment. McGillicuddy and Machowska-Kosciak's (2021) work on the relationship between attainment grouping and ethnicity suggests that pupils may use their 'difference' to dissociate themselves from exclusionary attainment and ethnicity discourses. Janek, a Polish pupil in their study who was assigned to low-ability groups and frequently teased, explicitly identified as 'strange' and 'other' (2021:15). He deliberately avoided adopting an Irish accent, expressed his differing interests and considered himself 'smarter' because of his biliterate and bilingual skills. He was proud of his Polish background and the only participant in the study who chose to speak Polish with the researcher in front of classmates. The authors interpret Janek as attempting to actively resist 'otherness' by positioning himself outside of those discourses that 'othered' him.

Such studies provide snapshots of some responses to being seen as low attaining. What is lacking from the existing literature is analysis that is both broader and deeper, investigating the multifaceted aspects of this positioning and how it affects their sense of self. As the need to drive up attainment in core subjects increasingly dominates classrooms, understanding how children make sense of and negotiate their positioning within this becomes increasingly important.

The emotional complexity of negotiating attainment

It is perhaps surprising that there is more written about the emotional complexities of high attainment than of low attainment, though this work is useful to my study in its exploration of pupils' sense-making about their academic position. As might be expected, studies generally find that pupils view being high attaining positively (Foy, Solomon, and Braathe 2018; Keddie

2016), a deserved result of talent and hard work (see Booher-Jennings, Keddie 2016). However, high-attaining pupils can struggle to construct a subjectivity they are comfortable with and the pressure of *staying* at the 'top' can be highly anxiety-inducing. Keddie's study (2016) found Year 5 (age 9/10) 'high attainers' disproportionately affected by discourses of performativity. Although they were proud of their position, she highlights their anxiety and continual dissatisfaction as they strove to be better, and more particularly, better than others.

Maintaining their reputations as 'clever pupils' was key and meant constantly calculating their position in response to targets and each other (2016:115; see also Ball 2003). A similar preoccupation with academic success has been found in girls at an even earlier age, with those as young as 7 displaying 'self-surveillant, hypercritical attitudes to both their behaviour and their schoolwork' (Reay 2001b:158).

Pupils can also view academic success as incompatible with social success. Work in secondary schools has long found that 'school work' and 'cool work' (Jackson 2010:48) demand different behaviours and that 'high attainers' often struggle to balance the two. A Swedish study (Foyen et al. 2018), for example, found that girls in top maths sets wanted to be recognised as clever but were anxious not to be seen as 'the cleverest' or as showing off. Once again, testing has been found to exacerbate the impact of ranking, leading to high-attaining pupils being stigmatised and giving an increasingly unkind edge to peer assessments. Reay and William (1999:352) describe a high-attaining boy long regarded by his peers as 'clever' being re-identified as 'teacher's pet', 'spotty swatty', 'clever clogs' and a 'show-off' as SATS pressure hotted-up, despite the authors observing no change in his behaviour.

Work on the complexities around social-class and high attainment has been led by Reay, herself a high-attaining working-class pupil (discussed in Reay 2017). Her case-study (2002) of working-class Shaun, for example, sees him determined to succeed in a low-ranking secondary school but finding that 'when I do my work the others think 'he's a fool, look he does his work. It's stupid

working, he's a goody two shoes' and all that' (2002:227). He therefore has to ensure he maintains his social position as 'the hardest in Year 7' (2002:226) and do his work secretly. This 'psychic work' as Reay calls it, this 'double perception of the self... requires almost superhuman efforts to maintain' (2002:226).

Reay also explores, in another of her papers, the difficulties of negotiating being middle class and high attaining in a working-class school. She discusses Nancy, who is described by her peers as 'a pain', 'just being good' and 'just perfect. Yuk' (2006:174) and appears to have internalised such comments:

I know I'm in the top group but I'm not seen as one of the clever children. I'm not really clever. I'm in the top group because I work hard. (2006:175)

Reay compares Nancy with upper middle-class Melanie, who, in an effort not to be seen as a 'sado', works hard to be a football-playing tomboy and appear casual about her schoolwork – just naturally 'clever' – but has a private home tutor, which ensures she remains ahead. Like Shaun, this balancing act requires a 'high level of awareness and self-consciousness – a hyper-reflexivity in relation to her positioning in these myriad overlapping fields... Melanie has to engage in a complex re-invention in order to be dominant within the field of school' (2006:177). The research looking at how high-attaining pupils negotiate their place within attainment discourse and construct their subjectivities in response to this emphasises complexity, struggle and hard emotional work. In the absence of similar research on 'low attainers', these findings proved useful to my study.

To conclude this chapter, there is a shortage of both in-depth and recent studies on the experiences of primary school pupils, and the voices of low-attaining pupils are particularly absent from the field. However, what there is suggests that the current position of 'low attainers' is of considerable concern.

MicGillicuddy and Devine (e.g. 2018, 2020), responsible for much of the most recent work on primary school 'low attainers', state this unequivocally:

Especially evident is the feeling of shame expressed by children assigned to the lower-ability groups, preying deeply on their psyche and how they see and define themselves as learners in the classroom. Across interviews with all children, fear permeated deep into their consciousness, defining what they believed they could 'do' and 'be'. This has profound implications for their expectations around what is possible for them, how to be, feel and do as learners in the classroom. (2020:16)

Although McGillicuddy and Devine are looking at attainment grouping, the existence of what our CLIPS study, drawing on Marks (2013), has called 'within-head' grouping (Hargreaves, Buchanan, et al. 2021a:1227), suggests that these problems are wider and only partly remedied by moving to mixed-ability teaching (see also Marks 2016a). Moreover, the increase in accountability measures seems to have exacerbated the impacts that attainment labels are having in classrooms, potentially making maintaining a positive sense of self, for these pupils, increasingly difficult. Although work like McGillicuddy and Devine's, among others (Francis et al. 2019; Hargreaves 2017; Marks 2016a) points us to this as an area of concern, there is very little in-depth research on how being designated as low attaining affects individual pupils, particularly over time. This is the gap my study aims to fill.

Chapter 4: Methodology

My research aimed to examine how children who were designated as low attaining by their schools experienced their positioning in the classroom within a context of performativity (Ball 2000) and the impact of this on them. Building on this broad research aim, my research questions were:

1. How do 'low attaining' children make sense of attainment labels?
2. How do they view themselves and others in the light of this sense-making?
3. How does this affect the way they navigate their paths through school?

My PhD was part of a larger study, *Children's Life-histories in Primary Schools* (CLIPS), a Leverhulme-funded project [RPG-2017-413] with Professor Eleanore Hargreaves as Principal Investigator, a part-time researcher and myself as a doctoral student. The project followed 23 children, initially from four primary schools, over 13 terms; my thesis focuses on four of these children from two schools over the first nine terms (3 years) of the project.

My research questions therefore had to fit within the aims of the overall project. This was initially to investigate how primary school pupils experience being members of the 'bottom ability group', focusing on their personal and social flourishing and their learning, as well as to explore which factors influenced these experiences. However, due to the increasing scarcity of primary schools willing to come forward to say they grouped by attainment – which does not mean, of course, that they did not (see Marks 2013) – the project shifted to looking at the personal and social flourishing and learning of 'low attainers' more generally, whether or not they were grouped.

Being part of a wider project meant that some methodological decisions were pre-decided. The sampling procedure, termly visits, initial codes used and

analysis of children individually rather than thematically were stipulations of the project. However, within these I was largely able to make my own choices. This chapter addresses each stage of the research process, identifying which decisions were my own and which not. I discuss my research design, provide a description of, and rationale for, my methods of data collection and analysis, and consider my role in the research process and the ethical challenges that arose.

Research design

The CLIPS project describes itself as a collection of longitudinal school-life-histories, standing in the tradition of other school-life-histories (Armstrong 2003; Lawson, Parker, and Sikes 2006; Goodson and Sikes 2001). However, it is relatively unusual in being longitudinal and prospective (Hargreaves 2021), more common in quantitative life-course studies (e.g. Richards et al. 2022; Sandau 2022; Sharland et al. 2017), as well as aiming at the depth of understanding of individual lives that anthropological life histories achieve (e.g. Shostak 2015; Bourgois 2003; Neihardt 2008; Abu-Lughod 2008). CLIPS took a broadly interpretivist approach, which meant it focused on beliefs, values and views – including our own as researchers – to create meaning and understanding (Flick 2013). My thesis is positioned within this framework, and I found that Foucault's interrogation of how meaning and power interrelate (power/knowledge) added an extra dimension to my understanding, a subject I return to. Documenting lives as they unfolded, I aimed to explore how my participants constructed their school subjectivities by creating 'an intimate, up-close-and-personal movie' (Neale 2021:3) full of rich and situated data.

The term 'life-history' has been used to cover a wide range of approaches with different theoretical assumptions, methods and purposes, and the complexity and historical developments of the life-history and broader narrative research traditions have been usefully documented (e.g. Harrison 2009). Although there

is no such thing as a 'typical' life-history, there are some important commonalities. Above all, life histories aim to help us see through another's eyes. As individuals' personal versions of their own lives (Miller, Fung, and Mintz 1996), life histories allow us to explore people's views of themselves and their social world. In the classic words of Faraday and Plummer (1979:776):

The life-history technique documents the inner experiences of individuals, how they interpret, understand and define the world around them. This understanding can also of course be gained with participant observation, but the focus of the life-history is paramountly concerned with the subjective meanings of individuals. Most notably it comes to lay bare the 'world taken-for-granted' of people – their assumptions and what it is they find problematic about life and their lives in particular.

From their inception, life histories have often aimed to give voice to the voiceless. Developed by anthropologists around the 1900s, anxious to record the vanishing world of Native Americans in their own words (e.g. Radin 1999 [1926]), they extended to marginalised groups more generally, with a burst of activity from interpretivist sociologists between the wars focusing on Chicago's waves of immigrants and the underworld of petty criminals and prostitutes (Goodson 2001). Although life histories remain a staple in anthropology, they form a relatively modest part of sociological research (Antikainen 2016), with life-histories of children and young people particularly neglected (Tierney, Sabharwal, and Malish 2019).

This focus on members of marginalised groups points to an abiding concern with social justice (Hargreaves 2021). Life history researchers frequently see themselves as helping individuals make their stories known with the purpose of highlighting injustices that may be obscured by the invisibility or stigmatised status of the 'victims' or hidden within quantitative data. They may focus on the impact of specific policies; for example, the life histories of those previously attending Special Educational Needs (SEN) schools has been used to reassess

the history of SEN policy (Armstrong 2003). They may also illuminate individual sense-making, such as staff understandings of school inclusion (Lawson et al. 2006), or be used to explore responses to particular, often painful, historically specific situations, for example the holocaust (Greenspan 2010) or in communities with high levels of HIV/AIDS (Kakuru and Paradza 2007). In addition, studies may be used as a way of interrogating theory, for example criticising or refining ideas about the construction of identity, perhaps particularly suited to exploring how different identities intersect, as in the stories of Black woman in the US with serious mental illness (Sosulski, Buchanan, and Donnell 2010).

My study aims to do all of these. By telling the stories of low-attaining pupils, a group whose voices are generally invisible or under-valued, I hope to shed light on the impact of performative education policies within the context of enduring discourses of ability and conduct. I focus on how my participants are constituted as subjects and how they construct themselves within a discursive context that puts them at risk of marginalisation. I use their stories to develop my theoretical ideas, such as counter-conduct.

Life-histories rest on accepting the importance of stories. Indeed, story can be seen as:

... the principal way of understanding the lived world. Story is central to human understanding – it makes life liveable, because without a story, there is no identity, no self, no other. (Lewis 2011:505)

My background in social anthropology as a first degree and my training in narrative mediation (see Winslade 2000; Winslade, Monk, and Cotte 2007) meant I was comfortable with the idea that we make sense of ourselves and our lives through constructing stories. However, life histories are a particular type of story in that they involve an unusually complex relationship between interpretive layers as the 'teller' turns their lived experience into a story with the help of a

researcher, who interprets it and puts it in context to create a situated history (Goodson and Sikes 2001).

To start with, then, the stories people tell are strikingly individual and varied; the same teller may tell different stories to different audiences, at different times and for different purposes. Many different stories can be constructed about one experience. Asked how a new job is going, for example, we will reply differently depending on who is asking; we might tell our manager a story of increasing success in mastering the work or our friend a story of ongoing experiences of office sexism. The researcher needs to be at peace with this variability:

Life historians have to accept that people tell the story that they, for whatever reason, want to tell the person who is listening. (Sikes et al. 1996 in Goodson and Sikes 2016:80)

At the same time, the skill of a good life historian is using ‘intensely idiosyncratic personal dynamics’ (Sikes et al. 1996 in Goodson and Sikes 2016:72) to get more, and more insightful, material from their interactions. It is a job, according to Goodson and Sikes (2016:73), for the ‘incurably curious who are interested in and fascinated by the minutiae of others’ lives, and particularly in how people make sense of their experiences and of the world around them’.

The skill and interests of the researcher influence not only the story they are told, but also their choices about what to include and exclude. The view of early life historians that they were merely ‘editors’ of the teller’s story (e.g. Radin 1999 [1926]) now seems hopelessly naïve. However, the researcher has a further role, that of placing the teller’s story in context, answering the question: why *this* story at *this* time? As Glazzard (2014:99) notes:

Lives are not lived in isolation. They are shaped by the prevailing... discourses which influence practice. The life-history approach seeks to analyse the effects of these discourses on people’s unique experiences.

Such analysis makes the individual of more than individual interest, creating additional levels of meaning and shedding light on society's processes and injustices, and therefore how we might interrupt them. The meaning of a story depends on moving constantly back and forth between the individual and wider structural analysis (Goodson 2016). For example, stories of socially mobile working-class grammar-school pupils in the 1960s read very differently if not positioned within the changing labour market of the time (see Goodson and Sikes 2001).

However, in placing a story in its context, it is the researcher who chooses *which* context. This, inevitably, is fraught:

Moving from a life story to a life-history involves a move to account for historical context – a dangerous move, for it offers the researcher considerable colonizing power to locate the life story, with all its inevitable selections, shifts, and silences. (Goodson and Sikes 2001:139)

Life-history research is, then, about as far as you could get from the positivist ideal of intersubjective repeatability. No two researchers will provoke the same story from the teller, develop the same themes or contextualise the story in the same way. For this reason, it is particularly important for the researcher to interrogate their own assumptions, and I return to my role in the research process later in this chapter.

The idea of a neutral or objective account of participants' lives has long been discredited in sociological research (Youdell 2006) and Foucault's idea of power/knowledge extends these criticisms. If 'truth' is viewed as a product of discourse, it is not something that can be *discovered* through research but something *produced* in particular conditions and relations of power. Theory, then, is 'inescapable' (Youdell 2006:61). It lead the way I questioned my participants and the data, the choices about what to include and exclude, and how I situated my participants' stories. I have therefore laid out my theoretical

lens upfront in Chapter 2, outlining my selective use of Foucault's 'tools' – power/knowledge, the technologies through which this operates, processes of subjectification, two key discourses and counter-conduct. By doing so I hope to help the reader understand my methodological decisions. I return to my use of these tools in analysis later in the chapter.

Researching lives as they unfold

Life histories are commonly constructed retrospectively. The researcher encourages the teller to reflect not just on their present but on their past and on how they got to where they are. Work has been done, for example, on teachers reflecting on their careers (e.g. Glazzard 2014; Jupp 2013; O'Brien and Furlong 2015; Tamboukou 2013). This often includes constructing personal time-lines (see Gramling and Carr 2004).

This was not a major part of the CLIPS study over the three years of my project. The children were only 7 or 8-years-old when interviews started, which is generally considered too young to rely on the extended recall typical of life histories (Hargreaves 2021), and so CLIPS conducted prospective life histories where we documented the children's stories as they unfolded over the course of the project. The extended period over which interviews took place also allowed us to ask questions such as 'in Year 3 you told me this, do you still feel like that now you're in Year 6?' which encouraged them to reflect on changes. We also did an activity where participants 'jumped' from one school year to the next considering each, discussed below. By and large, however, our participants told us about their present, and the sense of time, the 'processional' element of their stories, was added by us.

As a result, I do not think our participants had the experience of 'creating their story' – their own, temporally-rooted version of the progress of their lives – as is common in life-history work (e.g. Glazzard 2014). The relatively tight overall shape of the interviews, moving between several activities determined by us

and largely at our pace, as well as the considerable power difference between adult and child (both discussed below), may also have reduced any sense that they were controlling a narrative of their own. They told us numerous smaller stories about their very recent past, about birthday parties, football games or plans to get out of their homework, but it was us who chose which to include and how they were stitched together into a narrative across the three years.

One decision the researcher makes – in my case made by the CLIPS protocol – is what to regard as data. We relied on interviews augmented by relatively brief observations, restricting school information to the initial and then annual assessments in maths and English and whether the children were eligible to pupil premium (extra funding allocated to ‘disadvantaged’ pupils in England) or on the Special Educational Needs register. We could have included schoolbooks and reports, interviews with teachers, parents, siblings, or alternative viewpoints on events discussed. Such data could clearly have provided useful information that might have influenced or even completely changed our analysis. For example, my knowledge that Britney received low marks in maths and English was critical in my interpretation of her as engaged in a ‘fabrication’ (Ball 2000) of herself as a high-marks pupil, discussed in Chapter 7. What collecting this additional data would have been less likely to do was help us understand the *child’s* viewpoint; indeed, it might have made it more difficult to do so. Contrasting the CLIPS methodology with that of Pollard and Filer’s *Identity and Learning Programme* (e.g. 1995, 1999, 2007) illustrates this. For Pollard and Filer, pupil voice was one source amongst several in building a rounded view of the child and their situation, very different from our focus, which was purely on the child’s own experiences and sense-making.

Although this meant we prioritised the pupil’s perspective, not collecting wider data brought limitations. We had no reliable information about their social class, and what they told us about their parents’ occupations was surprisingly vague – ‘like a nurse’, or ‘he does different jobs’. My participants, one identifying as White, one as Black, and two as from mixed Black and White ethnic

backgrounds, wanted to tell me about their families' home countries, but very rarely mentioned race, and we did not pursue this subject. Although I was of course aware that their position on axes of advantage and disadvantage would most likely be a significant factor in their positioning as 'low attainers' (see Chapter 1), it was not something we were able to explore as deeply as it deserved. I return to discussing the limitations of my research in Chapter 9.

Selecting the research sites and participants

Schools were chosen based on ease of travel and willingness to take part, and the two schools my four participants attended were secured through my existing contacts. Jayden Primary was in inner London and near my home, and I contacted the headteacher through the chair of governors who was a neighbour. Aware that the headteacher may have felt obliged to agree due to being asked by his chair of governors, I was alert to any reluctance, but felt he was pleased to be part of the project. My contact at Sandown Academy, in outer London, was an ex-colleague who taught there, and I was able to set up a meeting with the headteacher through her. Both schools had significantly more pupils eligible for pupil premium and with English as an additional language than the national average. Also, both were judged as 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted for the duration of the project. This was important, not only because we did not want our findings to be dismissed as the result of poor schooling, but also because being in Ofsted 'special measures' has a major effect on schools (Perryman 2006) and therefore on pupils' experiences. Although the schools were not the subject of my study, they were my participants' daily environment and so I describe them briefly below.

Jayden Primary School was attended by Britney, Jake and Max. It was a two-form entry community primary school; Britney was in one class and Max and Jake in the other. Situated in the heart of a sprawling social housing estate in a poor but gentrifying area of London, it had a history of heavy Ofsted

involvement but had been Ofsted graded 'good' with attainment levels in line with the borough averages for several years. Roughly half the pupils were eligible for pupil premium, and half had English as an additional language. The majority of pupils came from a range of ethnic groups, the largest being Black or Black British African.

Sandown Academy, attended by Summer, was an all-through school for ages 3-18 across four sites, part of a large academy chain and situated in outer London in a poor area largely surrounded by social housing. At the start of the project it was Ofsted graded 'outstanding' but moved to 'good' soon after. Its attainment levels were significantly above average at the start of the project, slipping to average in some areas the following year. Roughly half the pupils were eligible for pupil premium, nearly three-quarters were from a range of minority ethnic groups, and around a third had English as an additional language.

Pupils in Jayden were chosen in discussion with class teachers and pupils at Sandown with the headteacher. The two key CLIPS criteria for sampling were attaining 'below' or 'well below' age-related expectations (ARE) in maths or English and not having, and unlikely to be given, an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), a cross-agency support plan given to pupils in England with high levels of Special Educational Needs. This was because the experiences of children with an EHCP had been recently addressed effectively by others (Blatchford and Webster 2018; Webster and Blatchford 2013, 2015; Blatchford et al. 2003). Alongside this, we requested pupils who spoke English confidently enough to be interviewed. I felt uncomfortable about this last criterion as it excluded an already marginalised group, but from a practical point of view it made sense because none of us spoke the languages most common in either school.

I was satisfied with the sampling procedure at Jayden, where I was given a class list in order of attainment (excluding those with an EHCP), and chose my

sample after discussion with the class teacher and with parental agreement. The sampling at Sandown was more opaque, chosen by the headteacher from a list of those 'below' ARE from across the four classes. I did not see the list and do not know the criteria of choice other than that specified by us, but suspect, given the pupils that were selected, that she omitted pupils considered as behaviourally challenging, pointing to a limitation for my research and the CLIPS study, discussed further in Chapter 9.

The 24 pupils included six from each school. I was initially lead researcher for nine (as well as co-researcher for several others); at the end of the first year I chose the four I would concentrate on. My criteria were to include more than one school, both boys and girls, and a mix of pupil premium status and ethnicity. Beyond this, I chose the four whose emerging analysis most intrigued me, and who between them seemed to offer a range of approaches to school.

My research with the CLIPs pupils other than the four I discuss in this thesis contributed to the development of my thinking. I include a full description of each of my four pupils, their attainment, pupil premium status, and what they told me about their ethnicity, gender and more general background, at the start of their individual chapters. The children chose their own pseudonyms, and I chose all others used.

Data collection

My observations and interviews, as part of the CLIPS study, were termly, excluding Term 7 when the schools were closed due to the pandemic, so totalled eight sessions over nine terms. In Term 5 we did not observe, only interviewed, because of time constraints. The first set took place in the summer term of 2018, when the children were in Year 3 and 7/8 years old, and the last in the spring term of 2021 when the children were in Year 6 and 10/11 years old, although I continued to interview the children for a further four terms for the

CLIPS project, following them into secondary school. Because the CLIPS project was committed to a child-only perspective (see Hargreaves 2021), we avoided discussing pupils with school adults during the project, other than collecting annual data on where children were in relation to age-related expectations, which, in the case of my participants, did not show significant changes over the three years. Throughout this thesis, the school term in which data was collected is indicated in brackets; for example, (2) indicates information or quotation from Term 2's interview and (obs 2) a reference to Term 2's observation notes. In quotations, ellipses (...) are used where material has been edited out, and square brackets around anything added.

After initial sampling I spent two mornings in each of the pupils' classrooms so that participants, teachers and other pupils became familiar with my presence before I begun formal observations and interviews. These mornings were documented in my personal research diary, explained below, and reflected on but not coded with the rest of my data.

Interviews

The bulk of my data came from termly semi-structured individual interviews of around an hour, although participants took part in paired interviews in Terms 1 and 5, except for Britney who was absent during the first and so was interviewed individually on her return. This was not what was in the initial CLIPS proposal, which was for all interviews to be in pairs. However, this threw up two issues. First, we were concerned that although having a peer present might make children more comfortable in some ways, it might also make it difficult to express uncomfortable feelings. Second, and more immediately problematic, our transcriber found distinguishing between the pupils' voices difficult. Therefore, after the first set of interviews we saw children individually, returning to pairs only in the fifth term in response to pupil requests. For this, we videoed the interview so that our transcriber could see who was speaking.

Because interview methods were a particular interest of mine, I was lucky enough to design half of the interviews over the period my research covers and contributed significantly to the rest. The timing, design lead and nature of each interview is shown in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 Interviews: timing, design lead and format

Term	Pupil school year	Interview design	Max	Summer	Britney	Jake
1 (April 2018)	Year 3	EH	P <i>(Landon)</i>	P <i>(Taylor)</i>	I	P <i>(Alvin)</i>
2 (Sept 2018)	Year 4	EH	I	I	I	I
3 (Jan 2019)	Year 4	EH	I	I	I	I
4 (April 2019)	Year 4	LQ	I	I	I	I
5 (Sept 2019)	Year 5	LQ (no ob)	P (Jake)	P <i>(Rosie)</i>	P <i>(Eleanor)</i>	P (Max)
6 (Jan 2020)	Year 5	EH	I	I	I	I
7 (April 2020)	Year 5	No visits due to UK lockdown				
8 (Sept 2020)	Year 6	LQ	I	I	I	I
9 (Jan 2021)	Year 6	LQ	I	I	I	I

I - individual interview

P - paired interview (partner in brackets, italicised if not part of my PhD project)

EH - Eleanore Hargreaves (PI)

LQ - Laura Quick

Interviews were designed for the entire CLIPS cohort though I increasingly included an individualised list of follow-up questions for each of my participants, allowing me to explore unique themes. Each interview was different, except that once a year we asked the full cohort a few repeated questions about their best and worst parts of school, whether they liked school or not, what they wanted to do when they left school and what sort of people they saw as successful. We hoped that repeating questions would help us track change and continuity over the years. The questions about future career and successful people proved particularly useful to my analysis.

Conducting research into children's subjective experiences, from their perspectives, demands a distinct approach (Christensen and James 2017; Einarsdottir 2005; Morrow and Richards 1996). As Linxmayer et al. (2013:312) put it:

Methods need to be both developmentally appropriate for children and effective in acknowledging the influence adults may have on children.

I found that, particularly when the children were younger, they were not as verbal as I was expecting, often giving short answers and looking to me for further prompting. The reasons for this were unclear. It may have been that they were being led by a desire to please or gain perceived acceptance from us, a concern documented by others (Greene and Hill 2005; Mayall 2008). It may also have been because they were initially interviewed by two of us and therefore felt overwhelmed or outnumbered; indeed, after the first year we began to interview individually and I felt they relaxed. It may also have been because our subject matter – the day-to-day stuff of classrooms – was the taken for granted truths of their lives, and they often spoke as though such things were obvious, a little flummoxed at our ignorance. For example, questions about where they sat and why had to be asked a few times to generate a clear reply because their grouping practices were considered 'just the way it was' and often they could not explain or look critically at them, incapable of imagining it any other way. They also, particularly when younger, preferred to do activities rather than talk, and we found activities stimulated more discussion than a question-and-answer approach.

We therefore looked for ways to develop innovative and creative child-friendly interview methods. As has been documented elsewhere (Gibson 2007, 2012; Greene and Hogan 2005), increased interviewing of children has not been accompanied by a corresponding development of good practice. My own experience working with young people in a variety of settings had given me some knowledge of play and drama therapy activities (e.g. Jennings 2005),

theatre of the oppressed exercises (e.g. Boal and McBride 2013; Hammond 2015) and various other teaching and facilitation techniques, all of which I drew on. Alongside this, I was informed by methods commonly used in interviewing very young children, such as the multi-method MOSAIC approach (Clark and Moss 2011) that collects data, for example, through photographs, tours and maps. I also obtained useful suggestions from a play therapist colleague.

The activities that formed the bulk of the interviews were mostly play-based or creative, with only short question and answer sections. Working with two colleagues meant that when I designed interviews, I had to model methods they were less familiar with. This was helpful, offering me the opportunity to discuss and refine my emerging ideas. I outline below the core activities I used, all developed in conjunction with my colleagues. Each interview included several of these activities; I have focused here on those that most inform my analysis in Chapters 5-8. Appendix 2 also shows an example of a full interview schedule.

Toy animal play involved introducing a context – such as a classroom during a test, or a playground – and asking the children to pick toy animals to represent different people and play out the scene. I would usually ask if they would like me to be an animal, but would then allow them to lead the action, asking what I should be doing or saying. Occasionally I would choose to say or do something that directed the play in a particular direction. An example of this is in Chapter 7 when I play the teacher in Britney’s ‘animal classroom’ and announce that there will be an English test, the test Britney’s animal is most dreading.

Toy animal play was most successful when physically contained in some way, leading to greater engagement from the children than when just playing scenes out on the tabletop. Indeed, the idea of a ‘protective container’ is much discussed in therapy circles (e.g. Mehlomakulu 2019), seen as providing emotional safety in the same way that we use ‘worry boxes’ in schools with children, and it may have been an increased sense of safety that opened up my participants’ play when it was contained. I twice used a sand tray with kinetic

sand, a method developed for therapy (see Lowenfeld 1993) but used in qualitative research with children (e.g. Watson, Staples, and Riches 2021), and found by some more successful than drawing or photographing (Linzmayer and Halpenny 2013). Figure 12 in Chapter 8 shows a photograph of one of Jake's sand tray activities. I also took a large one-roomed dolls house in during Visit 4 (see Figure 11, Chapter 7), along with tables, chairs and plastic animals. Although this was not as popular as the sand (which the children loved to run between their fingers throughout the interview), the data generated was equally valuable.

As I discuss in my analysis chapters, the animals the children chose to represent each character proved illuminating. For example, Summer cast her teacher as the huge spider (6), indicative of many of the feelings she described, and Max explained his choice of a crab for the girl who was excited at the prospect of a test as 'because there are so many legs that can do so many things at once' (4).

It was important that once the child had chosen an animal to represent them, I referred to the animal rather than them, upholding the metaphor. This provided 'psychic distance' (Drewes and Schaefer 2015:39), with the aim of enabling the child to express and do things they may have found difficult to do as themselves (see Pernicano 2015). Britney, for example, stormed angrily out of an imaginary test when in the role of 'Big Cat' (6), something I feel she would not have done if playing at being herself, when she was keen to appear a 'good pupil'.

Most of the participants said that toy animal play was their favourite activity, and as they became more relaxed with their play in front of me, I was left with the problem of how much to control it. Jake, for example, tended to move swiftly from whatever context I'd suggested to an imaginary breaktime, dominated by a game of football between the animals, every kick described in detail. Usually, I would allow them to take the play in the direction they wanted, after a short time

bringing the activity to a close if I did not feel the data generated was contributing to answering my research questions.

Role play was used in several interviews. For example, we used paper cut-outs to represent teachers, peers or family members, I asked questions and the children answered in role as these people. I also used a plastic Splatoon figure (a favourite of the pupils) to tell a story of an alien who was visiting from another planet where there were no tests. The children then explained to the alien what tests were and advised on whether they should be introduced on their planet. Another activity involved children choosing which 'blob person' most represented them during different stages of lockdown (see Appendix 3). A further activity involved getting their reactions to an imaginary 'high-marks' child, 'Julie', before revealing that she also got regular detentions, which led to outrage and confusion from all participants. I discuss Summer's and Jake's responses to 'Julie' in Chapters 6 and 8.

Stimulated recall involved filming the child on an iPad during a lesson and playing it back in the interview following, asking them to explain what was happening and what they were thinking and feeling. As noted above, CLIPS had intended to use this method for every interview, but after the first few we found it less useful than our PI had done in previous projects (see Hargreaves 2013), perhaps because we were using it individually rather than in groups, so used it less. On several occasions, however, it was invaluable in encouraging the child to explore experiences they may have otherwise forgotten about or avoided, for example Jake's explanation of his response to receiving disappointing test marks (see Chapter 8).

Quote-sort and sentence starter activities were used regularly. In quote-sorts children were given cards with 'quotes' either from earlier interviews or invented by us, such as 'I feel embarrassed when I answer a question wrong in class'. They divided these either between three stand-up signs – *Agree*, *Disagree* and *It's Complicated* – or by placing a plastic animal in one of four boxes – *Always*,

Often, Sometimes, Never – and were encouraged to talk through their choices. In sentence starter activities children turned over a card and completed the sentence on it, for example ‘I learn best when....’. Both activities were simple variations of question and answer, but were more active and so more engaging.

Ranking activities entailed asking the child to place a self-portrait on a numbered counting frame peg to indicate where they, or their teacher, would rank them from 1-10 in relation to a particular issue. This was usually ‘ability’, expressed in various ways. These activities were inspired by Mark’s (2015) work with a similar age group on perceptions of mathematical ability.

Drawing and photography were used regularly, and children encouraged to provide an ongoing commentary. In one, we split a paper in two and asked children to draw what about school made them feel ‘Yay!’ or ‘Oh no!’. Max’s was dominated by tests and Summer’s by maths, revealing strong themes I discuss in their chapters. In another activity children were given outlines of faces on which they drew the expressions of ‘low marks’ or ‘high marks’ children, and their teacher’s responses, with speech bubbles. Photography provided the chance to discuss emotions as pupils took me to places in school they felt scared, anxious, peaceful or happy. I include some of the pupils’ drawings and photographs in their chapters.

Jumping activities were used to get children out of their seats and moving. In the ‘school-life-history’ activity, mentioned above, we sought to collect retrospective data by placing A3 paper on the floor to represent each school year since Reception. Holding hands (if they wished) we jumped together up the line while they explained what they could see, hear and feel in each year group. This also revealed key themes; I discuss in Chapter 5, for example, how Max could retell his humiliation at test results in every year group. Some children, particularly Jake, also appreciated the moving, jumping me back and forth along the line over and over as he remembered new things about each year.

The activities described above give a flavour of our interviews and I found these methods more effective than direct questioning, particularly when my participants were younger. Some were especially useful with children who found it hard to verbalise vulnerability, upset or difficulty. Britney, for example, tended to be unwilling to express negative feelings outside our toy animal and role play. Summer, in contrast, was quickly able to be vulnerable with me, and so the animal and role play activities were less illuminating. Often, Summer did not even bother to work 'in the metaphor', continuing to call her animal 'I' and others by their 'real names', often relapsing into just explaining situations to me rather than playing them out. For this reason, stimulated recall worked particularly well with her, as she would readily analyse her body language in class, and explain what she was thinking, telling me, for example '... in my head I'm like 'come on, come on, I've got to do it!' (2).

However, it was not the activities themselves, but how they were delivered, that was crucial to the quality of data they generated. My relationship with participants and how emotionally safe they felt were key. I devised several techniques to support this process. Jake, for example, told me that 'we sometimes forget about the research because it's a long time' (6) and so I tried to ensure they knew I thought about them between visits by using an 'I remember when...' sentence at the start of interviews, picking one event from our previous interview to 'remember'. This was usually framed positively in relation to how useful their answers had been or how thoughtfully they'd completed an activity. Also, if pupils appeared to be feeling shy, I used a common children's drama game called 'Yes, and...' (e.g. Drama Notebook 2021) at the start of interviews to collectively tell the story of what had happened in the lesson I'd just observed. This got the child talking where there were clearly no 'wrong answers' and where they did not need to think too hard. Both of these techniques were part of my Interview 4 schedule in Appendix 2. I also tried to ensure children knew when my visits were. This was possible when teachers were responsive and told children in advance, but at other times the children I interviewed on the first day of a termly visit were taken off guard. I

made sure, however, that at the start of each school visit (usually over three days) I would tell each child when I was planning to interview them, checking they would not miss their favourite lessons.

My overall approach in interviews followed Gibson's (2012) advice on conducting interviews with children. I tried to invite questions, start with questions that could be answered with a brief, easy response, use open-ended questions and show interest and encourage detail by using follow-ups and prompts. I was also patient, avoiding being too quick to redirect or jump to conclusions, refraining from providing cues or assistance and using reflective statements, summary statements, acknowledgment of feelings, and generous praise for engagement. Participants always chose their own seat and we sat squared off rather than face to face, which seemed less likely to be intimidating while still enabling eye contact. I also tried to keep activities varied so that we were not sitting down for long periods. If they appeared tired or bored I would suggest we play a 'copy me' game for a few minutes, where we took turns doing an action while the other copied, such as star jumps or running on the spot. I found these techniques meant children stayed alert while feeling safe to explore what could be uncomfortable emotions.

An important issue that arose was the temptation to offer reassurance – mainly, given the focus of our study, related to academic performance. It felt natural, for example, to respond to a child pleased with a mark or test result by saying 'well done' or 'what a good mark' or to an upsetting mark with 'that doesn't sound too bad'. However, doing so put us, like teachers, in the position of 'judge' (Devine 2003) and suggested we considered their mark of importance. I therefore worked hard to simply reflect rather than evaluate and to communicate unconditional positive regard (Rogers 1959), particularly in relation to academic performance.

Observations

CLIPS visits started with a 20-minute observation of each child, usually during morning maths and English lessons (a limitation I discuss in Chapter 9), so that we could film them during a lesson to use stimulated recall in interview afterwards. However, in the second term I began to experiment with taking copious notes during this observation period, aiming at the ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1977) associated with ethnography, designed to gain the depth necessary to examine the complexities of everyday life (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). I based my observation notes on Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein’s (2011) fieldnote essentials which include not just detailed description but sensory impressions, personal responses, and questions about people or behaviours for future consideration.

I found that the more I wrote about my immediate impressions, the richer and more nuanced my analysis of my observation data became. A participant’s glance at the teacher, for example, might seem like nothing at the time but informative when examined carefully and in context afterwards. Although I worked hard to keep a low profile in the classroom, I must have appeared odd, looking at my participant intently while typing furiously, only glancing away if they looked at me so as not to unnerve them. Although I was of course making choices about what to include and what not, attempting to write *everything* down stopped me getting caught up in these decisions. Observing for 20 minutes meant I generated around a thousand words of notes. A sample of a full observation is included in Appendix 1, and extracts are included in my participant’s stories in Chapters 5-8.

Three challenges arose in relation to observations. First, the classrooms in both schools were small, and with around 30 pupils it was difficult to get close enough to hear what participants were saying to peers without being intrusive. This meant I could not record all they said, particularly whispers during ‘quiet work time’. Second, visiting only termly meant that both pupils and teachers did

not familiarise themselves with my presence as much as I would have liked. Of course, as observers we are only ever observing situated performances (see Wilkins 2012), but I was still keen to be as unobtrusive as possible, and was aware of limitations in relation to both participants and their teachers. In particular, filming the participants on an iPad during observations, needed for stimulated recall, felt invasive. The practicality of positioning the iPad so it could film the child without making them constantly aware of it proved difficult. I tried placing it on their desk, but felt this was too distracting for them, so tended to film from the side of the room, where, despite occasional sidelong glances, it seemed largely forgotten. I was also aware that teachers were adapting their practice due to our presence. In particular, I suspected that during the first few observations in Max and Jake's class, the teacher was attempting to 'exhibit' the child I was observing. My observation notes from my second visit, for example, run:

Max is very nervous (unclear if this is the lesson or us, though I suspect both), and [the teacher] seems to be giving him a lot more attention than at other times I've been in the class to observe other children. I assume this is because he knows I am observing Max today?

However, as the project progressed the teachers and pupils seemed to get more used to our presence, helped by filming less as we reduced our use of stimulated recall. I also increasingly visited alone rather than with a colleague, which helped me slip largely unnoticed into the room, although I always greeted the child in a whisper to let them know I was observing.

The third challenge was that we told class teachers, at the beginning of each school year when obtaining their permission to observe, that the project focused on the children and did not set out to judge their teaching. I attempted to reinforce this by looking unjudgmental whenever possible, trying to appear disengaged from what the teacher was doing and looking just at the children. However, detaching the children's experiences from the teacher was more

difficult than I had anticipated and I discuss this in relation to ethics later in the chapter.

Although the observation element of the project was limited, I found it invaluable. Not only did observation mean I could see for myself what pupils described to me, but, particularly in Britney's case, it provided a contrast with their words that informed my analysis.

Data analysis

My data analysis followed that of the CLIPS project, which was based on a grounded theory approach and used thematic coding. Grounded theory is a set of strategies for constructing theory through analysing qualitative data and 'classic' grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) is somewhat positivist in its approach. However, CLIPs, in accordance with a more interpretivist or constructivist position, used it as a tool for focusing on the meaning of social action, the beliefs, motivations and understandings of those involved, including ourselves (Charmaz 2006). Foucault's idea of power/knowledge usefully augmented this by highlighting how 'meaning' is related to power, and how some meanings become 'truths' and others marginalised (Khan and MacEachen 2021) and my developing codes reflected this. For example, the code 'questioning school values' was developed for Summer in response to my developing interest in critique (1996b).

Well suited to a longitudinal study, grounded theory's iterative, comparative process, involving simultaneous data collection and analysis (Charmaz 2017), meant we could successively focus data collection to develop an emerging analysis. This enabled us to 'make conjectures and construct hypotheses about categories, and then check them against data' (Charmaz 2017:299), an approach I used constantly. I coded each set of observation and interview notes before planning activities for the next round of interviews, adapting and refining

themes as this process continued, while also staying alert to new themes that emerged as participants grew older.

Although it is broadly acknowledged that 'Foucault was not a theorist of narrative per se' (Fage-Butler 2020:86) his toolbox of theories and techniques has been used by a number of researchers in narrative analysis (Fage-Butler 2020:e.g.; Harwood 2001; Tamboukou 2013). Rather than following the more traditional life-history path of working out the meaning of a story to its narrator and then placing this in its social/political context, Foucault's concept of power/knowledge provides the basis for a richer and more sophisticated exploration. A Foucauldian approach to narrative is concerned with the discursive positioning of narratives. As Fage-Butler (2020:86) puts it:

... of paramount importance in Foucauldian/poststructuralist narrative research is its concern with meaning ("representations"). Given this emphasis, poststructuralist narrative research is heavily reliant on the notion of discourse.

This allows for the 'critical deconstruction of powerful discourses that set the agenda for individual and collective identities and practices, and legitimize action' (Fage-Butler 2020:87). In other words, it problematises subjectivity, representation and the ways power and knowledge operate.

Tamboukou (1999, 2003, 2013) applies this to analysing the narratives of women, seeing her participants' stories both as discursive effects and as sites for the production of meaning. Narratives, she says, should be 'theorized as a discursive regime wherein the female self is being constituted through procedures of objectification – wherein she is categorized, distributed and manipulated – and procedures of subjectification – ways she actively turns herself into a subject' (2013:106). Tamboukou says that through the story a woman tells she 'reveals herself in the discursive context of her narrative; which institutional constraints she accepts and what rules she has to obey'

(2013:107). It also reveals 'the subjective capacities that were being developed in an attempt to resist the power that had made women what they were' (2013:107).

This is what I, too, am aiming to do; to deconstruct the most powerful discourses that emerged in my participants' narratives – most prevalent were 'good pupil' and happiness discourse – as well as exploring how counter-discourses were being deployed. That is, I looked at what my participants' narratives told me about the discursive context within which they were constructing their school subjectivities and the technologies used to do this. I also aimed to combine this with an 'up-close' (Neale 2021:3) view of my participants in all their singularity and complexity, respecting their struggles, fears, creativity and courage.

The necessity of starting data collection immediately after my PhD began meant I was also in the unusual position for a PhD student of reading and writing for my preliminary literature review and theory alongside collecting and analysing data. This meant that not only did my reading inform my data collection and initial analysis, but also the reverse, allowing my library research to shift and change in response to the lines of enquiry raised by my developing analysis. I kept a critical diary to reflect on this process, noting emergent themes, reflections on my role as a researcher and practical arrangements. I did not code this with my data but it proved a useful place to reflect on all aspects of the process, including interrogating the taken-for-granted assumptions I brought to it.

Observations were initially handwritten and typed up afterwards, although I soon decided that the proliferation of laptops in classrooms meant that typing on a small laptop was not out of place and, being a fast typist, meant I could write more. I used participants' pseudonyms, and usually wrote thoughts and questions underneath each set of observations, which I also coded. Interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber, again with pseudonyms. This

saved a huge amount of time but meant that I did not benefit from the immersion in the data that transcription offers. To go some way to overcoming this, I always listened to the recording while following the transcript as soon as I received it from the transcriber and before coding. As I did this, I made notes and added anything the transcriber had omitted or had been inaudible to them, for example a child whispering, dancing or playing as they spoke. Important contextual information was included in brackets, punctuation at my or the transcriber's discretion and anything emphasised by the children in italics.

Thematic analysis works well with a life-history approach. As Payne and Payne (2004) explain, there are various ways of analysing life stories, many aiming at finding commonalities, differences and relationships, which is what thematic analysis achieves (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). After the first visit, we began thematic analysis by developing CLIPS codes between us, coding our own participants on separate Nvivo projects, a data analysis programme I found hugely helpful in organising codes, quickly retrieving information and noting initial ideas. After each subsequent visit we refined and added to these codes, ensuring we had a consistent set across the three of us. I include a list of the core CLIPS codes in Appendix 4.

At the end of the first year, I wrote a 'narrative' for each of my pupils, discussing key themes. At the end of the second year, when I had completed 6 visits per child and the UK entered its first lockdown, I listened to and read all interview recordings and transcripts again, re-coding them from scratch alongside my observation notes. This time I added new codes, unique to each participant and often embedded in existing CLIPs codes, as I further developed and refined my themes. Appendix 5 shows an example of this second set of codes, which I used for the remaining interviews.

The addition of my own codes, my taking over as interview design lead for most of the last half of the project, the development of my own approach to note-taking in observations and the addition of my own unique set of questions for

each of my participants, meant my analysis increasingly developed independently of the CLIPS team. This was inevitable given that I took a different theoretical approach and needed to be able to follow up themes that arose in relation to my interpretations. In addition, the privilege of having only four children to analyse meant I could do so in more detail than the wider CLIPS project could.

My role in the research process

The centrality of the researcher's role in every aspect of the research process is widely acknowledged (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Youdell 2006), making reflexive practice crucial. Hertz (1997:viii) describes this process as, first, actively constructing interpretations by asking 'What do I know?' while, second, questioning how those interpretations came about, asking 'How do I know what I know?'. Well-established in much research (Warren and Vincent 2001), reflexivity means 'we can produce accounts of the social world and justify them without placing reliance on the futile appeals to empiricism of either positivist or naturalist varieties' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:21–22). Far from making things easier, however, reflexivity commits us as researchers to rigorous interrogation of our decisions and interpretations.

This is not unproblematic. For a start, reflexivity will only ever be partial. As Warren and Vincent (2001:41) put it:

... we remain the arbiter of what we disclose, and what we do not, of how such disclosures are framed and presented for public consumption. In this context, our voices as researchers remain dominant, even when it is the research respondents who are speaking.

Moreover, the idea of reflexivity suggests a knowing researcher subject who can 'assess rationally the actions, words, thoughts, meanings of both

her/himself and the researched' (Youdell 2006:61), a premise that does not sit comfortably with a Foucauldian position. Indeed, through a Foucauldian lens, subjects are constituted by research and so research is implicated in processes of ongoing subjectivation (Youdell 2006), an uncomfortable recognition when my focus *is* processes of subjectification. There was no simple answer to how this could be addressed in my research design; I therefore simply heeded Youdell's advice to proceed from a recognition that I was 'implicated in constituting subjects, and an acceptance that analysis can only ever be a set of interpretations of the discourses the researcher imagines s/he can identify' (Youdell 2006:64) and I try and make this clear in the way I write up my analysis.

This was made easier by the life-history approach we took because the explicit storytelling involved brought my dominance in the process into sharp focus – I was the storyteller. As discussed, this was particularly the case given that data collection was contemporaneous rather than retrospective. The children's stories, as presented here, are not really *theirs*, they are mine, as much a product of me as them. Their words are being understood through my theoretical lens, my experiences, reading and biases and need to be read as such.

Key to my interpretation of participants was my familiarity with schools; I have been either pupil or teacher for most of my life. This familiarity proved practically useful: I knew at which points in the year I would be most likely to receive responses from teachers; where I should and should not sit in the classroom in order to be discreet; and what pupils meant when they discussed 'guided reading', 'dojo points' or 'talk partners'. Indeed, many ethnographic researchers argue for the importance of thoroughly understanding the group under study before making any interpretations of their behaviour (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). On the other hand I was aware of warnings from others that 'the more familiar a setting may seem, the greater the danger of bringing your

own unexamined interpretive frameworks to making sense of what you see' (Dowling and Brown 2010:50) – what Erikson calls 'homeblindness' (2015:40).

Accepting that bringing my own interpretative frameworks was not a danger to be avoided but an inevitability, I focussed on questioning my taken-for-granted assumptions about schooling, in particular the criticisms I have developed over the years. This helped me stay open to participants' experiences of schools being different to my own. For example, having recently worked in a school for pupils who had been excluded from mainstream schooling, I expected some of my participants to respond to their subordinate positioning with 'bad behaviour', as many of my students had, and their highly compliant approaches to school surprised me.

Power dynamics are always problematic in the research relationship (Oakley 2005; Phoenix 1994) and 'researcher and respondent symmetry' (Warren and Vincent 2001) is often considered important. Matching researchers and respondents means female researchers interviewing female participants, Black researchers Black participants, and so on (see Warren and Vincent 2001; Youdell 2006 for full discussion). The match between myself and my participants, however, was decidedly asymmetrical. The adult/child asymmetry was the most immediate issue (see Alderson 2008; Mayall 2015), though I was also a White middle-class female. On the one hand, I agree with Youdell (2006) that desiring a 'match' can be unhelpful if premised on an idea that 'true' experiences can be made accessible if the 'right' researcher is provided. On the other hand, I felt that my significantly more privileged and powerful position in relation to the children further deepened the divide that always exists between researchers' understandings and their participants' lived experiences.

Acknowledging this power inequality, I worked to push back in small ways. I was keen to avoid being 'placed' (see Warren and Vincent 2001) as a teacher; I wanted them to feel that our interviews, although at school, were outside the typical pupil-teacher school hierarchy. I emphasised that I wanted to be called

by my first name, reminding them if they said 'Miss'. I avoided wearing 'teacher' clothes, choosing jeans or trainers and large hoop earrings. Most challenging, however, was adapting my behaviour. I was aware that once in a school my years as a primary teacher meant I could slip quite easily into acting as one; I was struck that when children near me wanted help or screamed, I had to fight the urge to intervene. Interestingly, having never taught in secondary schools, I found the ongoing CLIPs interviews left me feeling a 'fish out of water' in my participants' secondary classrooms, no longer tempted to act the teacher.

Aware of how little choice pupils are given at school (see Chapter 3), I created as many opportunities for choice as I could. I always checked they were happy with the time of our interviews and tried to reorganise them if they were reluctant to miss a favourite lesson, restating that they never had to participate if they did not want to. I also respected their breaks and lunchtimes, pausing the interview unless they said they'd prefer me not to. I gave them a choice of chairs during interview and they invariably chose an adult one, usually a swivel chair, leaving me on a short wooden child's chair. I brought various fruit in to eat during interviews, moving to grapes as their favourite. I asked them, too, to press the 'record' button on the Dictaphone when they were ready so that they had a little sense of control over the process, and checked if they'd like me to move on with an activity if they lost focus.

These attempts to push back on the significant power imbalance between us were largely symbolic and will have had, at most, a small impact. What made the most difference to how comfortable they felt with me was that I was able to conduct repeat visits over a long time. This was a rare privilege given the 'hit and run' (Warren and Vincent 2001:46) research climate, and allowed me to show them commitment and respect, building significant trust between us, essential in life story collection (Sikes and Goodson 2016). Building this trust would have been far more difficult in fewer or more condensed visits. The longitudinal nature of our project enabled me to demonstrate to the children that despite being older, more middle class, White, culturally unfamiliar in many

ways, and similar to many of their teachers, I respected and valued them unconditionally, showed I took what they told me seriously by regularly referring back to their words, and always returned when I said I would. All the pupils said they enjoyed our interviews and all seemed to like me, although at times appeared to consider me rather an oddity, wanting to be called by my first name and asking them about aspects of their lives they sometimes considered trivial. At the end of each school year I wrote them a thank you card, reflecting on how valuable they'd been to the research over the previous year. The only time I missed a visit, during the summer term of 2020 when the schools were closed during lockdown, I sent a card explaining why I had not been able to visit them.

Ethical considerations

I obtained ethical approval as a PhD researcher from the UCL Institute of Education's ethics committee alongside the ethical approval gained for the CLIPS project, which needed to be re-gained at the start of the pandemic so that we could continue face-to-face research with increased health and safety measures in place. The research was conducted within British Sociological Association (2017) guidelines including a commitment to confidentiality, anonymity, non-traceability, the right to withdraw and informed consent, a subject I will return to. I was CRB checked, worked in line with GDPR (2018) and all data was stored in password-protected files.

The information I provided to all parties and the consent I obtained were incorporated into the CLIPS permission procedure. Initially, written information was provided to headteachers, parents and teachers, and verbal and written consent gained. The parents' information sheet and consent form are shown in Appendix 6. All parties were assured that they would remain anonymous, with identifying or sensitive information on participants omitted and the schools were also kept anonymous from one another so pupils could not be cross identified. The children's information sheet was the most challenging to put together as we

wanted it to be simple enough to be understood but comprehensive enough to inform them fully, aware of the difficulty of gaining genuinely informed consent (see Warren and Vincent 2001). It was also developed just as UCL was moving to abiding by GDPR (2018) and so our form was rather over-complicated to cover all eventualities (the ethics committee later recommended less complex forms for children). I include the pupils' information and consent form in Appendix 7. We then re-gained permission to interview with extra health and safety measures in place from all parties at the start of the pandemic.

A 'model of continuous or process consent, where the researcher reaffirms consent throughout the research process' (Allmark et al. 2009:49) was then used with the children. This was particularly important given the longitudinal nature of the study as the children matured and changed over the three years. I sought their consent formally at the start of each year, and informally in each interview, reminding them that their presence was not compulsory and that they could leave whenever they wanted to. They never took me up on this though did periodically ask if we could move on to a new activity and we occasionally finished an interview early if a lesson had started that they wanted to get back to, usually PE.

The most delicate issue in relation to gaining consent from parents and children was how we spoke about the 'low attaining' label. Because we did not want to reinforce a label we considered highly problematic, we avoided the term, explaining that we wanted to hear the views of children 'who sometimes struggled in maths or English'. This was also because one of the other CLIPS schools required that we did not mention low attainment and we sought consistency across schools. Although I felt some discomfort at not being explicit with parents and children, the common conflation between attainment and 'ability' (see Ladwig and McPherson 2017; Youdell 2016; Marks 2016) meant the term could have been upsetting and not necessarily one they identified with. In the last interview of the CLIPS project, when the children were in Year 7, we made a point of being particularly explicit with participants about exactly why

and how they were sampled, and I was glad when they said our explanation was broadly what they had understood all along.

Teachers' consent was also sought. How genuine this was, however, was problematic. First, they may have felt unable to refuse given the headteacher's support. Also, we wanted to ensure they were fully informed about the project while not emphasising the rationale behind it, particularly schools' differential treatment of pupils. An additional issue then emerged during the writing up stage of the project. Because our focus was the pupils, we told teachers we would be observing in their classrooms but that our attention was not on them or their teaching. Once I began writing up, however, I found that it was difficult to discuss observation and interview data without sometimes including the teacher. We had gained consent for this, but doing so without making judgements on their teaching proved tricky. Aware that consent is always complex (Allmark et al. 2009), I have therefore done my best to cut discussion of particular teachers and teaching approaches to a minimum. However, teachers are an important part of a pupil's classroom experience and in the case of Max I found it difficult to discuss his sense-making without engaging with this. All teachers and children mentioned by participants are anonymised.

Two further ethical issues arose. First, one of my participants, Summer, often complained vehemently about school in interviews. Aware that the 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers 1959) I was attempting to offer might unintentionally endorse her developing criticisms and thus exacerbate the costs associated with these (see Chapter 6), I tried to simply reflect her words back to her, focusing on thoughts and feelings rather than saying anything that could be construed as affirming her criticisms and rejection of school.

Second, the children's emotional safety in interviews raised ethical concerns. The relationship between research and therapy is a messy one, and some participants experienced challenging home circumstances including overcrowding, poverty and difficult family relationships, perhaps unsurprising

given the increasingly acknowledged effect these have on attainment (e.g. Harris 2018). As a researcher, I did not aim to engage in therapeutic intervention (see Richards and Schwartz 2002; Rosenblatt 1995), but the longitudinal nature of our interviews, and the fact that they were quite personal in nature, meant I felt it necessary, indeed ethically important, to use basic emotion coaching (e.g. Foroughe 2018; Rae 2017) when children talked about anything potentially distressing. The time this was most needed was when, during an early visit, one of my participants positioned their model 'dad' on a chair across the room and proceeded to throw large pieces of plasticine violently at it while shouting angrily that their dad had 'ruined Christmas', becoming distressed and emotional. Relatively familiar with therapeutic techniques, I offered support while guiding them away from the topic, and in this instance did so successfully. However, the experience taught me to stay continually alert to the children's emotional states and take care around topics that could become personal or distressing.

I move on, in the following four chapters, to analysis of my participants over the three years of the project. I tell Max's story first, followed by Summer's, Britney's and finally Jake's. I then finish with a discussion of all four children in Chapter 9, highlighting my key findings.

Chapter 5: Max

A jigsaw with pieces missing: the deficient subject position



Max's self-portrait, Year 6 (9)

Background

Max lived in a flat with his White mother, a photographer and artist who ran two online shops, and their life appeared both sociable and busy. He often told stories about meeting up with her university 'pals' for dinners, joining friends for sleepovers and holidays, and the hotels they stayed at with his grandparents. Max's Black father worked as a cameraman on film sets, and Max saw him and his family regularly, telling me of his struggles to eat his grandmother's spicy Caribbean food. Describing his family as half English and half Jamaican, Max spent most of one interview mixing brown and white plasticine in an attempt to make the exact colour of his own skin. When in Year 6 he told me he was 'at the bottom of middle class' (8), and, unlike the rest of my sample, appeared to align culturally and economically with middle-class categorisations (see Savage 2015). Max joined Jayden Primary School in Year 3, not long before the project began, having moved from another local school where he had been unhappy. He struck me and my co-researchers as unusually anxious and twitchy, regularly scratching and jiggling in his seat and appearing sensitive to noise, smells and general classroom bustle.

At the start of the project Max's attainment was 'below' age-related expectations (ARE) in writing and maths, and 'at' ARE for reading, and this varied little over the three years. I was struck at the disparity between his verbal and written

work and was not surprised when he told me in Year 6 that he was being referred for a dyslexia assessment. He was the youngest in his class, increasingly looked smaller than most of his classmates, and always chose to sit on the highest chair during interviews. He was also unusually emotionally articulate; more than my other participants, he seemed willing and able to link his feelings and behaviour, reflecting on how events had affected him and explaining this lucidly.

Outline of my argument

My analysis of Max starts with his anxiety, so apparent in both observations and interviews. I suggest that his experience of school was dominated by his designation as low attaining – he felt the subject of near-continuous disciplinary *examination* within the classroom, constantly ranked, and ranking himself, as academically inadequate, the wrong side of the normal/abnormal binary. This resulted in feelings of fear, humiliation, sadness, and anger.

I explore how this operated in conjunction with his powerful emotions about Mr Reed, his teacher for Years 4 and 5. I suggest that the concept of the disciplinary ‘teacher-judge’ is insufficient to explain this relationship, and that the idea of pastoral power, of a leader who cares and guides, inspiring his ‘flock’ to devotion (see Chapter 2) is helpful. Max longed to be ‘seen’ but felt he rarely achieved this except negatively, when he triggered his teacher/pastor’s anger and disappointment at his academic performance, reinforcing his distress.

Max, more than my other participants, seemed to struggle to construct a school subjectivity that allowed him to maintain even a precarious sense of self-worth. Unable to achieve this within ‘good pupil’ discourse, he tried to do so by drawing on what I call the ‘included’, ‘sporty’ and ‘wronged’ subject positions. However, none of these proved easy to maintain, leaving him struggling to move beyond his understanding of himself as an academic failure.

I finish by exploring how Max made sense of this failure. He worked hard, and the responsabilising discourses that are so dominant in schools suggested this should have enabled him to succeed, or at least get by. It did not, however, and this perplexed him. He increasingly seemed to feel that the answer must lie in some personal inadequacy and that the only school subject position fully available to him was that of the deficient, lacking and incomplete pupil; he described himself as a jigsaw with pieces missing, or a story with a missing page (5).

Anxiety, fear of failure and *examination* in the classroom

Max appeared anxious much of the time during observations. The extract below is typical:

[The teacher] picks children at random to answer questions... Max's neck begins to tense, with the muscle pumping in and out of it, in and out. He isn't picked. He looks down at the table and sucks his lower lip in. He begins to massage his jaw with both hands. (obs 9)

During my second visit I played him the film I had taken of the start of that morning's class:

Laura: I was like 'I wonder if Max is feeling anxious?' I couldn't tell.

Were you?

Max: A bit.

Laura: ... What were you feeling anxious about?

Max: (sigh) Work... Just about work because I was wondering what we were going to do, and I was wondering if it would be hard or easy for the English lesson.

Laura: Is it sometimes hard?

Max: The maths sometimes is just really hard... Sometimes it's easy,

sometimes it's hard. Like sometimes it's so hard like, and like – 'stop! it's so difficult' – sometimes I'm like that.

Laura: What's that like then starting a lesson and not knowing if it's going to be easy or hard?

Max: I just feel a bit worried because it could be so hard for me. But other people, it might be, there might, it might be easy for other people, but it might be just like 'Oh it's so hard' for me.

Laura: And how is that for you when it's easy for other people but it's hard for you?

Max: I don't even think of it, I'm just like, I'm just so angry and sad at the same time like. I'm angry because it's so hard and sad because (big sigh) it's really hard. (2)

Max's words convey a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability at being expected to complete tasks he was not sure he could manage. He ranked himself against others, painfully aware that work he struggled with might be 'easy' for them.

While in the above extract Max seemed to be judging himself, he showed the most emotion in response to *public* judgement. For example, during my sixth visit, Mr Reed's attempts to help Max catch up – he had missed the previous maths lesson – worked to publicise Max's deficiencies. My observation notes read:

Mr R gets to the end of his explanation at the front of the class and says 'Max, do you understand?'. Max sucks his lips in and after a pause makes an 'mmm' affirmative-sounding noise. Mr R says 'kind of? Come over here and I'll explain'. Max gets up and stands at the front of the class. Mr R begins explaining. Fractions. Max looks around, at the class, Mr R and me and around the room; it's hard to imagine he's really listening, his focus appears to be all over the place. Mr R's explanation draws to a close and he puts his hand on Max's shoulder and leads him

back to his seat. He then starts explaining more, loudly, using the whiteboard, which is right in front of Max, who is sitting at the front of the class. The entire class can hear them... Mr R begins counting up in halves and Max is asked to continue. He jogs his head as he says each one. Mr R is speaking at the same volume as when he's talking to the whole class. He says '1 add 3 equals..?' Max says five. Mr R pauses. Max looks strained. Mr R swings his hand jokingly over Max's head, pretending to hit him on the head, and they both say 4 at the same time... Max's cheeks are twitching... He is asked if he understands it. He pauses. He pulls his mouth in and says 'yaaaahh' quietly. He is constantly managing a nervous smile thing, switching between smiles, laughs and frowns. It's stressful to watch. (obs 6)

Mr Reed's well-intentioned support, by drawing public attention to Max's lack of understanding, left him twitching, unfocussed and unable to add 1 and 3 – well within his capabilities.

Such events seemed not uncommon for Max. In an activity where he identified and photographed areas of school that prompted different emotions, he chose the classroom as his 'stressful place' because:

... sometimes I have ideas and then they just pop out of my brain and then I'm like (imitates panting) and I'm just breathing in and out deeply in through my nose and out... like um (pause) 'I have a good one. Oh what was it again? Oh yeah it was that'. So it was basically I mainly forget it, forget what it is. (3)

This lucid description of anxiety and its effects suggested that, for Max, the classroom was far from being a site for effective learning.

Tests

As discussed in Chapter 2, academic performances are, to use Ball's words, 'displays of... the worth, quality or value of an individual' (2003:216), and much of Max's anxiety seemed to relate to fear of displaying a *lack* of worth. Poor test results, perhaps the most explicit and public form of academic ranking, were a source of considerable humiliation and sadness. During our 'school-life-history' activity, where we jumped up a giant timeline, tests were the only thing he spoke about other than his class teachers. Even Year 1, when he was five, had involved the trial of tests. He explained:

[Year 1 was] good. There was one thing I hated though – spelling tests...[We also] had spelling tests in Year 2 and if you didn't get more than five or something right you missed your break...it was Miss Labana's rule...she was so mean. (4)

Since the very start of school, tests had been a source of anxiety, potential public failure and punishment. He told me in Year 5 that when Mr Reed read test results aloud, he found it:

Max: Embarrassing... feel very sad and disappointed.

Laura: What would you prefer him to do instead?

Max: Not shout, not shout out the scores. Not shout out other people's scores because it makes me feel really sad, embarrassed... Like he shouts it out in the whole, to the whole class. (5)

He spoke about tests more than any other child in my sample and with intense emotion, frequently introducing them into conversation. Our drawing activity on the best and worst aspects of school (3) illustrated the shame, anger and unhappiness Max associated with them. The left-hand side showed his elation at scoring a goal. On the right, around the cry of 'oh no' were test papers with the low marks he had received, shocked and sad faces, and an example of the

hard sums involved, alongside a BMX accident he'd had. Down the centre was a chart representing good, bad and 'in-between' school subjects, with corresponding faces. There were so many disastrous tests that there was no room for them all on the right-hand side, and they spread onto the left. I was struck that although some dated back to 'test week' over 6 months previously, he still remembered every mark vividly, and the accompanying emotion appeared raw. He exclaimed passionately 'I hate those weeks'.

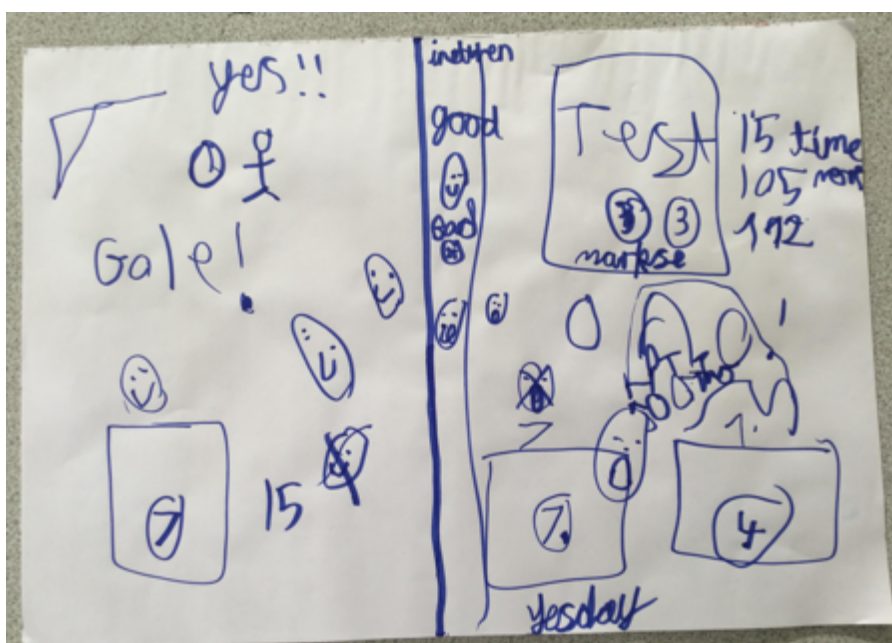


Figure 1: Max's 'best' and 'worst' aspect of school

As he was telling me about these tests he began viciously beating the face of a plasticine model he had made for a previous activity. This was of a teaching assistant at his old school, one he told me he 'really didn't like' and who 'shouted all the time' (3). His violence towards the model suggested a fury at being made to feel inadequate:

Max: (talking fast and loudly) Maths... I got 3 marks... I only got 3 correct out of 20 something... it was a test week... I hate those weeks...

Laura: So how is [test week] for you?

Max: Like, kind of hard (beating the plasticine figure with his hand).

Laura: Kind of hard. You're really wanting to hurt [the teaching assistant] there aren't you, really beating her face...

Max: (drawing) I got three marks.

Laura: How was that for you?... Ah you've drawn your little face down there.

Max: It's meant to be a sad face. It's hard to express it really... Well on a different test I got like (drawing) 'sorry face'... one big maths test got 3, one small maths test got 4. (3)

Listening to his fast talking I was struck with an image of these test marks crowding in on him, filling up his experience and leaving him shocked and sad, depicted by the three little faces on the 'oh no' side of the page, one of which he put a large cross through as though in an attempt to delete this emotion.

The intensity of his feelings about tests also showed in his choice of animal to represent him in our animal classroom activity:

Laura: What [animal] do you think most represents you on the morning of a test?

Max: The most laziest animal here... (picking up the snail, thoughtful) I'm not slow.

Laura: ... Why are you going for a lazy animal for the morning of a test?

Max: I'm just like 'ahhhh...I don't want to do it'. But (thoughtful) if I do it I can just get it out of the way, so I'm going to pick this... I think it's a chameleon... they're really fast and they can just be like, they can camouflage... Uh, no a tortoise, yeah a tortoise'. (4)

Max deliberated more than any other child before choosing his animal. He seemed to work consciously and explicitly with the concept of representation, swapping between animals as he considered his approach to the test. His first thought, 'ahhhhh... I don't want to do it' was represented by an apathetic and

slow-moving snail. He then decided a better strategy was to 'get it out of the way', picking a chameleon which, he told me, was not only 'really fast' but could also 'camouflage', suggesting a desire to be invisible and not stand out as abnormal. His final choice, the tortoise, had, like the snail, a thick protective shell to retreat into and avoid being observed. His other animal choices were also illuminating. Mr Reed, a large presence in Max's classroom experience, was an elephant, and the two children who he felt would be excited at the prospect of a test were cast as the crab – 'because there are so many legs that can do so many things at once' – and the cheetah, 'the fastest in the class'.

The tortoise, Max's final choice, was, he told me, feeling 'can we just get this over with?'. He continued:

I'm just like, get this over: read, read, read, read, read, read, then – it's meant to be the breaktime but I read, read... And then I'm just carrying on and then I finish like 10 minutes later than the other people [who] are just messing around on the board because they've finished. (4)

So despite the poor tortoise's somewhat frenzied attempts to 'just get it over with', he still failed to complete in time, his slowness publicised by his need to continue working when others, already finished, were 'messing around'.

In a striking discussion with Jake in their joint interview (5), Max showed an acute awareness of tests as a form of *examination* that draws a particularly sharp binary distinction between normal and abnormal, acceptable and 'other'. Max is painfully clear that he is on the 'wrong' side of this boundary: ,

Max: (angrily) Have you ever done a massive maths test and only got 6?

Jake: No.

Max: Or 3?

Jake: No.

Max: Or 2?

Jake: No no no. The only scores I got -

Max: (interrupting) Yeah, welcome to my world... it was test week, and we had this maths test and I only got 2...

Laura: What does it feel like to be in your world when you -

Max: (interrupting) Sad... disappointing... I was 4 off -

Laura: 4 off what?

Max: 4 or 3 off from 10 or 11. 4 off from 11, 3 off from 10.

Laura: What score do you think you would have needed to get to not feel that embarrassment?

Max: 12. (5)

Max's words can be understood as describing the boundaries of normality – 10, or 12 to be secure, far higher than his own marks. Max evaluated his position, judging how far he was from the 'normal' and acceptable – '3 off 10 and 4 off 11' – in accordance with the idea that disciplinary *examination* is particularly concerned with the *failure* to meet norms. His cry to Jake, 'welcome to my world', the world of 2s, 3s, 4s and 6s, describes a world outside of these norms. Rather than moments that pass, he presented these tests and their results as key to his experience, part of what defines his world and makes him who he is.

Freedom from 'the gaze'

Unsurprisingly, Max seemed to welcome any reduction in the pressure to perform, preferring to work away from 'the gaze', *examination* and the threat of humiliation. He also said he found the classroom too loud and too busy, with too many competing demands, a point I return to. During our photography activity Max took me to his favourite spot, which was in the library, saying 'it's like a magical place' (3). It was hidden between two tall folding boards, and held a single low mushroom-shaped seat on which he placed his favourite book. A secret place where he could read peacefully away from others' eyes, it stood in stark contrast to the schools' classrooms which were large and square, brightly lit, busy, and where every action, and every failure, was in public view.



Figure 2: Max's 'magical place' photograph

Max told me he had loved learning at home during the first lockdown. He drew himself contentedly working at his quiet kitchen table every morning with his computer and mum to help:

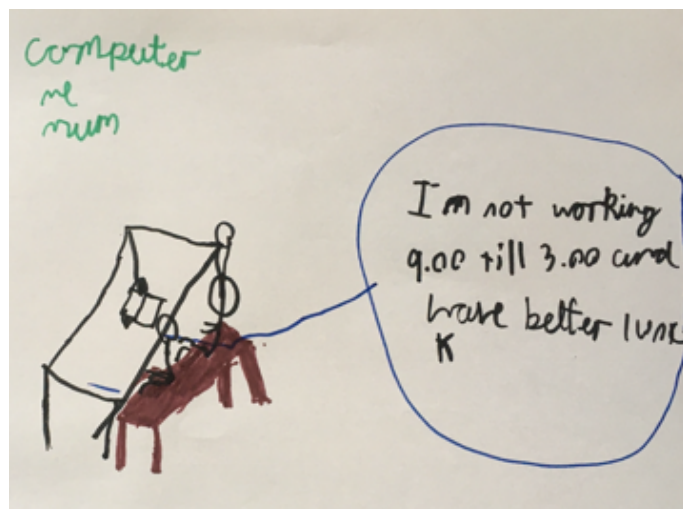


Figure 3: Max's drawing of learning during lockdown. 'I'm not working 9.00-3.00 and have better lunches'

The simplicity of this picture – computer, me, mum – emphasised that this was *all* there was, with no others to evaluate him or his work, or distract or make demands on him. Lockdown appeared to suit him well, and unlike Britney and Jake, he did not express concern at falling behind with work, telling me after the

second lockdown that he would prefer to continue working at home as long as he 'could meet my friend at the park' (9). He also began to express new frustrations with aspects of school that had worked better for him at home, telling me that he did not like school food and was usually 'bored' (9) in maths and English lessons.

Max was delighted when KS2 SATs were cancelled, giving me what he described as 'a very smug and happy face' (9) accompanied by a thumbs up, and talking of his excitement when he saw the announcement on the news. Unlike Britney and Jake, who were concerned that the cancellation of SATS might be detrimental to their learning, Max felt sure he would benefit. He told me that it would 'take a lot of stress off me... I don't have to worry about it' (9) and that he would learn more as 'I would have had a lot of tension on me... because I would be so stressed and think about it so much, I would underperform' (9). In addition, free from the pressure of SATs, the class were 'recapping stuff in maths lessons... so I'm understanding a bit more... maths and SPaG' (9), two of the subjects he struggled most with.

In short, classroom processes of *examination*, particularly tests, left Max extremely anxious, to the point of inhibiting his learning and wellbeing. He seemed to live in constant fear of being positioned on the wrong side of the normal/abnormal binary, so key to 'good pupil' discourse. School appeared to be a series of dangerous moving hoops, arriving frequently but unpredictably, through which he had to jump to avoid falling into the realm of the deviant. He presented as always nervously alert, caught between keeping an eye open for where the next hoop might bowl in from and addressing the hoop he could already see, and spaces free of this pressure, such as library time or lockdown, were therefore a great relief to him.

The role of the teacher in Max's sense-making

We know that teachers play a key role in pupils' experiences of school, particularly in primary (Bibby 2011; Devine 2003; Gore 2004; Hargreaves 2017), and the various ways in which they exercise power are complex. Schools are key institutions of disciplinary power, and teachers are central to implementing this. However, they also exercise a very intimate and personal form of power through their relationships with pupils.

Pastoral power is a useful lens through which to understand this. As discussed in Chapter 2, 'on the one hand, the pastor is a 'relay' of surveillance and discipline; on the other, the pastor promotes self-reflexive, self-governing subjects' (Martin and Waring 2018:1298). In other words, pastoral power brings together disciplinary power with the utilisation of technologies of the self, combining the (pseudo) neutrality of the 'teacher-judge' with the ability to inspire a devoted 'flock' to view him as their leader. Whereas disciplinary power requires only obedience, pastoral power also requires subjects to strive to be the people the pastor has shown them they desire to be.

Mr Reed was Max's teacher for Years 4 and 5, and I found it illuminating to analyse Max's feelings about him through the lens of pastoral power. Mr Reed was very popular with pupils – all the CLIPs participants who were taught by him said he was their favourite teacher – and had a large, charismatic personality. Max was full of admiration for him and never expressed annoyance or dislike of him in interviews. If criticising some class practice, he was careful to avoid blaming Mr Reed for it, describing him as 'a funny teacher but strict when he has to be, that's why I like him as my teacher' (2). Max was thrilled to be staying in his class for a second year, bursting into our last Year 4 interview with 'My [Year 5] teacher is Mr Reed!... I feel excited... For me with Mr Reed there isn't a bad thing!' (4). After the first lockdown he told me that 'the worst thing about learning at home during lockdown was I didn't see my favourite teacher'

(8) and in Year 6 when looking back on his time with Mr Reed, said 'I just miss him... yeah, he was a good teacher' (8).

Max's relationship with Mr Reed presented me with a problem of interpretation. On the one hand, I observed several occasions when Max's anxiety seemed exacerbated rather than reduced by the teacher's actions. On the other, Max was adamant that Mr Reed made him feel secure and confident:

... he makes me feel good and successful when I'm being taught, because when he tells me something it just locks into my head sometimes, [though] I need to learn it, learn it, learn it before it locks into my head. Like spellings. (2)

I feel like my teacher just makes me feel happy and gives me courage. (4)

I know sometimes he does think we can all do well... I don't know [why], I just know he does... Because it seems like he often thinks I can do well. (6)

Despite this, Max seemed far from confident that he was 'seen' and accepted by Mr Reed as much as he would have liked. When I asked directly how Mr Reed regarded him, I got replies such as 'I have no idea. I am just speechless. I don't know what to say' (2). He once suggested his inability to spell might be key – hardly the characteristic he would have chosen:

Laura: ... If I climbed into Mr Reed's brain, what would I find in there about Max?

Max: I think Max needs extra help on his spelling. Max needs extra help on his spelling.

Laura: ... Would I find anything else in there?

Max: About me? I don't think, no, I don't think so.

Laura: Okay so that's the main thing that you think Mr Reed thinks about you. That's it?

Max: I think, I think I think that. (2)

Several times Max suggested that Mr Reed did not really understand his experience. He told me that 'I know he listens, but only sometimes he listens carefully – I don't know' (6) and when, echoing words Max had just used, I asked if Mr Reed 'gets what it's like in Max world' he replied 'no, not really' (6). The only way Max was sure he was 'seen' by Mr Reed was the way he most feared – as academically inadequate. He told me that 'sometimes when I don't know things that the class do, he gets a tiny bit, he gets the tiniest bit annoyed, but [still] annoyed annoyed' (6). He felt the responsibility of this strongly, expressing disappointment in himself:

Max: I made Mr Reed really mad because I can't spell...

Laura: What does he do to make you think that he's getting really mad?

Max: Just gets really annoyed and he raises his voice.

Laura: What's that like for you?

Max: Annoying. Not annoying but makes me feel disappointed in myself.

Laura: Would he get annoyed if you'd really tried hard and just couldn't do it?

Max: He just gets annoyed that I can't spell really easy words. (5)

The humiliation that came with this disappointment is illustrated in a conversation with Jake later in the same interview, when they were discussing Mr Reed walking out of a class test. If Max's version of events had not been supported by Jake, I might have wondered whether he was exaggerating Mr Reed's response:

Max: ... he got so mad when I got 7.

Jake: He got so mad!... He just left the maths test, and he left it somewhere far away, I don't even know -

Max: ... I'm the one that got him mad because I got 7. And I'm the one that... [made him] mad with my super-low score... And Muna he was disappointed in. (5)

Max experiences his failure as a moral failure, a failure to be a good member of the 'flock'; he has let Mr Reed down, driving him to anger and disappointment, to the extreme response of leaving the room.

It is not surprising, then, that Max took great pleasure in any signs of Mr Reed's positive regard for him. After observing Mr Reed tell Max 'you're on fire today', I asked Max how he felt: 'I felt happy. Yeah I really felt happy. I felt happy and really – I don't show it, but I just feel happy and proud' (2). My notes indicate the impact of this on Max's behaviour afterwards:

[Max] begins to read aloud slowly and quietly but correctly. He gets stuck on 'initial'. Mr Reed corrects him quickly. When Max is finished Mr Reed says 'beautifully read Max'. Max looks up with a nervous but beaming smile. After this... his hand shoots up for the next question. He is chosen and answers correctly. The questions continue. Max is completing everything as the lesson continues and still looks visibly anxious but considerably less so than before the praise from Mr Reed. (2)

Moreover, praise from Mr Reed was something Max remembered for a long time – an indication of its importance to him, and also, perhaps, of its rarity. He was particularly pleased to tell me of an occasion when his mum had been privy to this praise: 'I remember in Year 5 my teacher called Mr Reed, when it was parents' evening, told my mum that I'm the class dictionary because I knew so many big words other people didn't know' (9). Such experiences, however, did not seem to outweigh Max's fear that he was not living up to Mr Reed's academic requirements, something I interpret as having a significant impact on his sense of self.

Attempts to generate self-worth: (un)available subject positions

Max seemed to feel that the subject positions within 'good pupil' discourse that he viewed as acceptable were unavailable to him. Even that of being only just the 'right' side of the normal/abnormal binary seemed precarious at best. Over the course of my study I observed him attempting to construct three others, all of which seemed to offer alternative routes to self-worth. First, he attempted to gain Mr Reed's approval by being a humorous and central member of the 'flock', to be 'included' despite his academic failures. Second, he attempted to construct himself as 'sporty'. Third, he toyed with the idea of blaming school, or adults, for his academic failures, rejecting the responsabilising discourses around academic attainment to develop a 'wronged' subject position. For different reasons, none of these positions were securely available, and none appeared to significantly reduce his anxiety.

1: The 'included' school subject

Max may have wished to be a camouflaged 'chameleon' during tests, but he was keen to be 'seen' by Mr Reed and included in class banter. A different child, with a different teacher, might have adopted other strategies such as extreme helpfulness and vying for jobs. This type of attention, however, did not appear to offer Max what he wanted; when I asked how he felt about being chosen by Mr Reed to deliver books he replied 'I don't really feel anything, it's just like a job' (3). Instead, he craved to be included in *social* activity, a strategy offered by Mr Reed's teaching style, which was full of clowning and banter.

However, Max's attempts to take part in the social scene surrounding Mr Reed seemed less successful than his friend Jake's, discussed in Chapter 8, and he often ended up looking on from the margins, despite his best efforts:

Mr R makes a joke about using the word 'password' as the password for his computer and Max stops writing, laughing and falling around in his seat, making jokes about passwords very quietly under his breath, to no-one in particular... He sucks his lips in, smiling and jiggling around in his seat. Mr R says that he's forgotten to take the register because of all the chat about passwords and begins reading the names out using some joke names. He makes a joke about Jake's pineapple haircut and Max opens his mouth in a silent laugh. Mr R gets to Max's name in the register. He reads it normally and Max answers 'password password', giggling. Mr R plays along, saying 'it's a secret, Max' and continues with the register. Max makes quiet laughing noises, jiggling up and down in his seat. Mr R calls out 'Lemonhead', as a girl walks in late. Max laughs theatrically again, collapsing over his work. (obs 3)

At the previous interview Max had told me about 'Lemonhead' and how he would have liked the specialness of a nickname from Mr Reed:

Max: Because her name is Lematia and Mr Reed calls her Lemonhead and Lemsip and all the stuff that has lemon

Laura: Does he have any names for you?

Max: No.

Laura: Would you like him to?

Max: Yeah, I just like it when, oh he's just so funny... (2)

I caught the moment during registration on camera, and Max insisted on watching it twice, laughing in a way suggesting that although Mr Reed had not given him a nickname, his own jokey response to his name perhaps offered a little of the same acknowledgement.

Max liked to watch Mr Reed making class jokes on video, especially when he felt involved in them, and he explained them to me with delight, wanting to savour every moment:

Laura: Can I fast forward it a tiny bit? No?...

Max: I want to watch all of it. (2)

However, attempts to take part in clowning and banter created a tension between Max's desire to complete his work and his desire to join in:

The girls on his table are discussing the maths and look like they're helping each other, comparing answers and showing each other how they got there. Max is working alone. Mr R says someone is doing well: 'I can't wait to take a green pen to that'. Max scratches his head. He continues to write. Mr R is sitting behind him talking very loudly to Jake, who is at the far corner of the room, about a question. Mr R makes a joke to Jake... Max looks up at Mr R and smiles. He looks down and continues working. Then Mr R says 'Hope you're all looking at this'. I don't notice as it's in the flow of talk, but Max does and looks up immediately, stopping writing, although his pencil is still in hand. He gives the board a long lingering look as Mr R finishes an explanation. He goes back to his work... He counts on his fingers. Mr R is still speaking loudly to Jake at the back of the class and is now throwing a tennis ball in the air near Max's head. Mr Reed kicks the ball against the wall. A child walks in as the tennis ball hits the wall for the third time. Mr Reed makes a joke and Max looks up at him, jiggling a little in his seat. His table are discussing something. He keeps his head down... He is chewing his lips. Mr R makes a joke to a child at the back of the class. Max glances over at him and smiles. (obs 6)

During this observation I was struck by Max's attempts to finish his work despite the highly distracting events surrounding him. Rather than blocking them out, however, his smiles and jiggles suggested the need to be constantly alert to any chance of joining in.

For any pupil, balancing focus between academic work and the class social scene presents a challenge, and perhaps particularly so in Mr Reed's class, where the boundary between the two felt especially fluid. For Max, who struggled with both sides, it appeared to take significant reserves of emotional energy. This also suggests a further reason why the quiet of the library and home learning during lockdown might have been a relief to him.

2: The 'sporty' school subject

The 'sporty' pupil, unconcerned about academic performance because they achieved status and a sense of self-worth through sporting success, was a subject position Max seemed to feel both desirable and somewhat available. In our first few interviews this construction of himself as 'sporty' was strong; he often talked about football and told me that his teacher would say he was good at sport (2). Halfway through Year 4, for example, Max told me what he most liked about himself:

... for me I think I'm a sporty person, so I try to be as active as possible... I do like myself because I basically try to spend as much time as I can when I'm outside trying to play football so I can get better. So I really just do like being a sporty type of person... once, in Year 3, I got a second place medal and I was showing it to my dad, and my friend... said 'stop showing it off!' because he was just so jealous... I was just like 'Wow'... I think [my dad] got super happy. (4)

Being 'sporty' brought a great deal of pride to Max. He was good at it and improved with practice, was envied by others and pleased his father. His success in sport also acted as an explanation for not being 'smart'. He told me that a 'perfect pupil' was someone who was 'really good at most subjects apart from PE' and that 'people that are smart don't really like sports' (9).

However, over the course of my study the “sporty” subject position became gradually less available. In his previous school he had felt he was the ‘best goalie in the class’ (1) but told me that ‘I seem to have gotten worse now that I’m in this school... I need to improve it. I feel a bit sad that I’m getting worse’ (2). Although Max continued to play with his football club at weekends and to consider PE his ‘best’ (9) subject, he spoke less about football as he grew older. When in Year 6 he explained:

Every time I play in goal at school I get shouted at... Like if I let in a goal they always shout at me like ‘Urrr’, and when I don’t want to go in goal they would say ‘Go in goal, go in goal’... I don’t like going in goal because literally everybody shouts at me... It just makes me want to leave. (8)

Max’s experience of being in the high stakes, publicly prominent role of goalkeeper echoed his experiences in the classroom; being visible is not enjoyable if your performance may let you down. Max’s attempts to adopt a successfully ‘sporty’ subjectivity that would relieve some of the pressures on academic performance appeared to flounder as he felt less successful and under greater pressure.

However, sport continued to be important to Max and to offer a partial route to self-worth. I observed this in action when Max’s class were running the ‘daily mile’. This was not a race, but Max treated it as an opportunity to show how fast he could run. He overtook Mr Reed, who was at the front, and engaged in some jokey ‘roughhousing’ with him, succeeding in taking part in the playfulness and intimacy that Mr Reed more commonly offered some other children. In addition, when in Year 6, Max asked me about ‘scholarships’, explaining that ‘what I’ve heard of is that you get an invitation to a private school for being good at a certain sport... and you get to go to a certain school that like excels in the thing you’re good at... football or something like that’ (9). The ‘sporty’ school subject,

it appeared, may have still appeared somewhat available to him even if less so than at the start of the project.

3. The 'wronged' school subject

The final way I viewed Max as attempting to maintain a sense of self-worth was to blame his attainment on poor schooling. Max had only recently moved to Jayden when my project started, and he told me that 'my old school is completely trash' (4), and that except for football, he had disliked his time at King's Manor, 'a bad school' (2) that made him feel 'bad' (2) and where teachers were 'mean' (4). He explained:

Max: In my old school they didn't make me feel successful when I learnt, because at the start it was good, but when I moved into Year 1 it just got bad. The school teachers were just like 'Pfff' – [they] were like that (sighing and groaning)

Laura: Tell me what's -

Max: I'm just finding it hard.

Laura: You're finding it hard to talk about?

Max: Yeah.

Laura: Do you want me to move on?

Max: Yeah. (2)

Max was visibly emotional when talking about King's Manor in early interviews, full of sighs and groans, and he appeared to place the responsibility for his unpleasant experiences there on the teachers, not on himself – 'they didn't make me feel successful when I learnt' (2). This attribution of blame was evident in the violence with which he beat up his model of his hated teaching assistant, noted earlier. He was also the only child in the sample not to consider the 'low-marks child' in our drawing activity solely responsible for their low marks, insisting that they needed 'special help' (2) and drawing a smiling

teacher keen to offer this – the help, I suspect, he was hoping to find now he'd moved schools.

When I showed Max a film of a pupil being ignored by his teachers, he was the only child in the sample to feel he recognised the experience, interpreting the teachers as having let the child down:

Max: It's shocking, absolutely shocking... the teachers were so rude and they're not being nice to their students... [They] let him down...

Laura: Have you ever had any teacher who's been a little bit like those teachers?

Max: (nodding)... One, two – (counting)... five... that's just in my old school... I only had three teachers that were nice... I was cross at the [other] teachers. (5)

When in Year 6 he told me:

Max: [Jayden] is a good school. I'm happy I moved from King's Manor... That school was so bad. They had two teaching assistants who were rubbish... It's like their favourite thing to do was shout at people...

Laura: How do you think it affected you?...

Max: Um, not that well to be honest. (8)

These experiences in King's Manor may have fed into the worries he experienced before his move to secondary school. He was the only one of my participants who did not express enthusiasm about the transition, concluding his story about 'Me', the boy who moved to secondary school, with the words 'He did not enjoy it' (9). He said the thought of the transition made him feel 'sad... devastated and nervous' (9) and he was worried about 'bad teachers' (9), perhaps like those he remembered from King's Manor. Despite this anxiety, he said that 'Me' was looking forward to 'new lessons' and the promised 'rich

curriculum' where perhaps 'he could find his interest' (9), suggesting some hopefulness about discovering new opportunities for success.

In short, when we began the project, which was soon after Max had moved schools, he appeared to have set up a dichotomy between King's Manor as 'bad' and Jayden as 'good', and this continued as he grew older. Nonetheless, Jayden was not above criticism. He devoted much of one interview to an angry and emotional demonstration of how infrequently he was given help in class, illustrated with objects on the table:

So I basically have my hand up for like a million years and Mr Reed never comes to me... I'm like (raising hand for a long time, illustrating the waiting)... So this is the table, this is the other table... And then this is me (illustrates with 'Mr Reed' moving back and forth along the other tables with the pencil sharpener representing Max separated and away from the group). (5)

However, when I asked directly, later in this interview, if Mr Reed ignored his requests for help, Max, in stark contrast to this earlier fury, replied that he thought Mr Reed just did not see when his hand is up. Similarly, Max's criticism, above, that Mr Reed 'shout[s] out' (5) test results was directed at the *practice* of announcing test scores rather than at Mr Reed. Criticism of Jayden was rare, and criticism of Mr Reed largely taboo.

Max's strategy of maintaining his self-worth by blaming King's Manor for his academic failure was undermined when he continued to feel academically inadequate at Jayden. He could have decided he was wrong about Jayden, and it, too, was a bad school, responsible for his anxiety and lack of progress. However, he seemed committed to viewing the school, and more particularly his adored teacher Mr Reed, largely positively, so the 'wronged' school subject position became unavailable to him.

Trying but failing: the paradox of effort

Max's attempts to feel valuable through constructing a school subjectivity as included, sporty or wronged, then, were largely unsuccessful. He might have adopted the subject position often associated with working-class and/or Black boys, rejecting the aspiration embedded in 'good pupil' discourse and maintaining a sense of autonomy by attributing his attainment position to the *choice* not to care or put effort into his work (e.g. Archer and Francis 2007; Raby 2012; Willis 1977). However, he regularly demonstrated how much he cared about schoolwork and how hard he tried to concentrate in class. He told me, for example, 'if I find something hard I just try my hardest' (5) but still said he understood the work in only half the lessons (6).

As discussed in Chapter 2, education discourse promotes the responsabilising idea that hard work will result in academic success (Torrance 2017), supported by the influence of ideas such as 'growth mindset' (Jerome and Kisby 2019). Within this discourse, to try hard but still fail becomes a paradox, one that Max struggled to explain. He could have questioned the discourse, as three boys in Keddie's study did (2016, discussed in Chapter 3), but he did not. Rather, he increasingly appeared feel the explanation must lie in his personal inadequacy. If the school was a good one, his teacher an exceptional one, and he was trying as hard as he could, there must, surely, be something wrong with him if he still couldn't succeed?

He displayed this sense-making in his joint interview with Jake (5). After Max told us how disappointed and humiliated his low test results made him feel, I asked Jake what should be done about this. Jake's answer was highly responsabilised, responding to Max's heartfelt cry that he works hard by saying he should work still harder:

Jake: He needs to change like his like spellings... he needs to do like hard work, he needs to do like -

Max: (interrupting) I do hard work!

Jake: Okay, you do hard work... Like he needs to like understand it, he needs to like listen to the teacher on the whiteboard, he needs to put his hands up so many times.

Max's response was passionate:

It's like my life, it's like it's a massive jigsaw, and I just – then pieces are missing... Like I pay attention then it's like I fall asleep for 10 seconds and then we're moving on to the next thing... It's like when we're doing the work I forget, it's basically like my life is a jigsaw and then I keep, I basically, I miss out bits. It's like a story and then it's missing a page. Do you know what I mean? (5)

Max's emotional portrayal of his life as a jigsaw with missing pieces or a story with a missing page suggests he sees a permanent lack; there will always be a part of him that should be there but isn't. He seems to be drawing on ability discourses (see Chapter 1) to suggest that his difficulties are the result of a 'natural' inadequacy, a flaw that is a characteristic of him. He is not complete, an explanation for his understanding of himself as on the wrong side of the normal/abnormal binary.

What we learn from Max

All four pupils in my study were engaged in creative and active negotiations to find a satisfactory subject position within the discourses available to them.

Max's negotiations were different only in that he did not, over the years I interviewed him, appear either to find ways of positioning himself as an 'acceptable pupil', or to find an alternative subject position that allowed him to achieve some sense of security and dignity in the face of academic struggle.

Each of my other participants, I argue, developed an overarching 'coping

strategy', to use Pollard and Filer's term (1999) – a way of understanding and constructing themselves in order to maintain a sense of self-worth in the face of negative academic judgements. As later chapters explain, Summer attempted to reject the 'good pupil' subjectivity in favour of an alternative, home-based and relational subjectivity, Britney determinedly identified as a 'good pupil' and Jake positioned himself as 'middling', claiming it was the best place to be, while constructing himself as socially and emotionally successful. As I will show, these strategies were not always effective, had negative consequences and required considerable emotional work to maintain. Additionally, they may not necessarily remain viable as my participants continue their school careers. Nonetheless, they at least offered some sense of self-worth for a time.

Max, on the other hand, appeared to construct his school subjectivity largely within a 'good pupil' discourse that valued narrow understandings of academic success he felt excluded him. He failed to meet the criteria of *examination* and, by doing so, failed to meet the requirements of his teacher, letting him down and causing him disappointment and anger. In other words, through the lens of disciplinary power, he saw himself as excluded from normality, positioned very publicly on the wrong side of a normative binary, and through the lens of pastoral power, he saw himself as failing to live up to what was expected of him by his teacher/pastor, fearing, perhaps, that he would be cast out of the 'flock'. Without an acceptable subject position available within 'good pupil' discourse, Max expended a huge amount of emotional work to construct and maintain alternatives, though these seemed largely unsuccessful.

I have discussed in Chapter 2 how, in a performative education system, academic failure becomes a failure of character (Anagnostopoulos 2006; Bull and Allen 2018; Reay and Wiliam 1999; Spohrer and Bailey 2020). If you are trying but still not succeeding, what does this say about you as a person? I have suggested that Max's answer was that there must be something wrong with him, that he must be defective or incomplete. His story suggests that the belief that hard work will lead to success has troubling consequences when children

experience themselves, like Max, as ‘trying my hardest’ (5) but still failing academically. Max’s experience reinforces Mendick et al.’s (2015) argument, discussed in Chapter 3, that discourses celebrating hard work, despite opening up successful subjectivities to some previously excluded groups, can be problematic.

Max’s story raises several further issues. First, it highlights the significance and complexity of the primary teacher’s task. Max’s sensitivity to the teachers’ powerful role as *examiner*, as the ‘relay’ of disciplinary power, echoes findings in previous studies (Bibby 2009, 2011; Devine 2003; Gore 2004; Hargreaves 2017). However, the teacher’s role as *pastor* is much less explored in the education literature. What, then, does this lens add to our understanding of pupils’ experience? I have argued that Max viewed Mr Reed as a moral leader, longed for his approval and dreaded his rejection. Mr Reed, therefore, can be seen as exercising pastoral power, incorporating the technologies of disciplinary power but intensely personal in operation. Motivated by a longing to please and live up to Mr Reed, the desires laid out for Max became his own desires.

If you experience yourself as relatively powerless, it makes sense to consider those who exercise power over you as benevolent and with your interests at heart, rather than arbitrary, indifferent or vicious (see Jameson 2010). At its extreme, in situations of life-threatening near-total powerlessness, this becomes the Stockholm Syndrome, where hostages come to identify with their captors, even fall in love with them. Although Mr Reed’s power is clearly of a different order, I have suggested that Max experiences him as hugely influential in defining his emotional safety in the classroom. However, believing that your leader is benevolent and rooting for you is not unproblematic; with no basis to criticise your pastor, you leave yourself vulnerable to any negative judgements they make. We have seen that Max doubts his own ability to live up to the standards of *examination* in his class, to achieve academic ‘normality’. However, achieving a positive personal relationship with his teacher, being a

valued 'member of the flock' to 'get in with' the pastor, appeared almost as hard work.

Max's story also demonstrates how important pedagogic choices can be. Mr Reed is of course himself subject to pressures and restrictions, but without wanting to place judgement on his teaching, it is worth noting that hearing your test scores read aloud to the class or being asked loudly if you understand work in front of your peers are all easily avoidable, even if completing statutory tests is not. Such teacher choices may be unthinking or intended as motivational. Max shows that, for some pupils at least, they can be both painful and demoralising, the kind of public judgement – the visibility of failure to meet the norm – that Max fears so much.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Max's story illustrates the intense anxiety and fear pupils may experience in the classroom. Max's vivid and insightful descriptions of his feelings about academic judgement move from passionate recall of past humiliations to his dread of future ones, of difficult work to upcoming tests. The severe and recurring anxiety and shame Max feels not only affects his learning but also his wellbeing and sense of self. Although some children's anxiety may be due to out-of-school challenges, in Max's case it seemed to me rooted in classroom practices, most of which can be simply addressed. It is indefensible for primary schools to tolerate this level of fear and anxiety when it can be avoided.

Chapter 6: Summer

Constructing oneself otherwise: 'I wouldn't mind like little marks...it just matters about people just like doing good'



Summer's self-portrait, Year 6 (9)

Background

Summer lived with her mother and older brother and saw her father two or three times a week. She said her mother cleaned buses at night, 'from 7pm to 7am' (1), but shifted to being a dog walker soon after the project began. Her father, she explained, was initially unemployed, then worked as a handyman and decorator. Summer was White British, did not receive pupil premium, and was the only child in my sample who attended Sandown Academy. She was classified by school as working 'well-below' age-related expectations in reading, writing and maths at the start of the project and this varied little over the three years.

Summer said she loved being interviewed; she enjoyed missing lessons and talking with me. Her speech was fast and lively and she often omitted words or phrases, jumping between ideas and slurring words. She was physically expressive and frequently communicated thoughts and feelings with her face and body; I often had to ask 'can you explain what that face means for the recorder?'. As she grew older, however, she learnt to use words more confidently and her explanations became detailed with graphic analogies. She told me, for example, that her holidays 'down the caravan' were as exciting to her as 'a trip to Disneyland would be to little kids' (9).

In contrast, my lesson observations showed her to be extremely quiet, avoiding taking part whenever she could. If she was sitting near friends and not required to be working in silence, she would often be whispering quietly, comparing work and swapping pens. She seemed keen to be invisible to teachers, and her success at this was illustrated when I requested her attainment data at the end of the first year of the project and her Head of Year showed astonishment on looking it up, saying she couldn't fathom why she wasn't part of any intervention groups. During playtimes, however, Summer was loud and surrounded by friends, and, as her favourite part of the school day, she was keen never to miss a moment of them, always keeping her eye on the clock during interviews.

Outline of my argument

I interpret Summer's response to being designated a 'low attainer' as one of resistance, using Foucault's idea of counter-conduct (see Chapter 2) to do so. I see her as *pushed* into counter-conduct by her dislike of school, feeling it offered her only unpleasantness, boredom and a the experience of failure, but also *pulled* into it by her alternative ethical beliefs, which she viewed as conflicting with those of school. School, she appeared to feel, was working to constitute her as one sort of person, and this was not someone she wanted to be.

In the first part of the chapter I explore how intolerable Summer found lessons. I discuss her hatred of the disciplinary control over her physical and mental activity and the humiliation of *examination*, carrying the constant risk of being judged 'abnormal' by its criteria and reinforced by the painful technology of spatial distribution. In the second part I explore Summer's rejection of the subject position she felt school made most available to her, that of an academic failure. I interpret her as constructing an alternative subjectivity within a counter-discourse – she was resisting the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault 2007a) in an effort to conduct herself differently.

I argue that Summer achieved this in four ways, all of which supported her counter-conduct as well as being forms of counter-conduct in their own right. First was her critique and rejection of her school's 'regimes of truth'. Second was her deployment of a counter-discourse. Third was the validation that her life beyond the classroom offered her, and fourth was the everyday acts of resistance that helped her endure the daily demands of school and maintain her counter-discourse. These four meant she could work at building an alternative subjectivity to the one she felt school made most available, and, despite the considerable costs they involved, allowed her to consider herself a person of worth.

Ten minutes with Summer

I begin this chapter with a typical fragment from an observation of Summer, aged eight, in her bottom set English group. This illustrates the disengagement, boredom and discontent I so often witnessed, as well as some of the strategies she used to 'get by' academically. I refer to this fragment later in the chapter.

Summer is rubbing something out on her mini-whiteboard while the teacher is asking children to read spellings out. She isn't asked. She winds her fingers together in front of her. Children have their hands up to give the next spelling. Summer doesn't put hers up. She puts her cheek in her hands and looks like she's dozing behind her eyes, squishing her cheeks with her hand and running her lips over her finger. Her seat is right in front of the board. Miss Riley asks them to rub out the spellings on their whiteboards. Summer rubs hers out. She hasn't read any out and no-one has looked at her board. The class read a list of words from the board aloud in unison. Summer doesn't join in. They read the list aloud again. Summer moves her lips very slightly for each one but with no sound, or at least it looks like that from here. They read them aloud a third time. Summer does move her lips a little more but seems to be making the main sound in each word, rather than reading the whole

word, just after the class do it. Miss Riley asks for words with 'es' at the end from the collection of words on the board. Another child does this. Then Summer is asked. There's a short silence. Then she says 'boxes' quietly. She's correct; the teacher moves on... After a few moments she yawns and puts her fingers in her mouth.

They are asked to pluralise spellings on their mini whiteboards choosing 's' or 'es' for the end of them. Summer does this, quickly. It looks like she's putting 's' on almost all of them – where it's correct and incorrect – and 'is' on some. She is working very fast, almost like she's in a rush, in a slightly haphazard way, with her handwriting changing size and shape. Miss Riley says 'Good, I can see some people are already on challenge 2'. I can't see if Summer is. Her writing at the end of her list – the spellings get harder so these are the difficult words – gets messy and is difficult to read. Summer stops writing. Miss Riley says '10 seconds'. Summer waits. Miss Riley says 'pens down, hands nice'. Summer puts her pen down and her 'hands nice'. Miss Riley starts talking. Summer's hands are still in 'hands nice', clasped, with her elbows on her table in front of her. The teacher begins to go through the spellings and Summer marks her work. The first is 's' and she gives it a tick. The second was supposed to be 'es' but she'd put 's'. She puts a dot. The third is 's' so another tick. The fourth is 'es' and she's put an 's'. She takes her pen and adds an 'e' and gives it a tick, moving her arms around her work with her head low and cheek in her hand so I can no longer see her board. They finish marking. Miss Riley says 'hands up if you got them all right'. Summer doesn't put her hand up. Miss Riley says 'got all right but didn't finish?'. Summer doesn't put her hand up. She had finished. Miss Riley says 'hands up if you just made some mistakes but you can learn from these'. Summer puts her hand up slowly, low, so her elbow is still on the table. The teacher moves on to more explanation of plurals. Summer rubs her board out, although they haven't been asked to. (obs 3)

The intolerability of school

Resenting disciplinary control

Summer did not just dislike school, she found it intolerable, unjust, and intrusive. A key aspect of this was the tight disciplinary control over her physical needs and school's failure to respect them. Reciting vocabulary in her bottom-set English group made her 'mouth all dry' (1), the classroom was 'sweating hot' (3), the toilets best avoided 'because, like, you never know' (2) and the strip lighting makes 'my eyes water... I can always see my shoes, but I can never see where my pencil's going because like it shines down and it's so hard' (4). She explained:

I hate school cos, like, when I want a drink I can't go off and just get a drink, I've got to ask the teacher, sometimes they say no... [Also, we] can't go to the toilet. Well, my mum told the teacher, but [I] still really don't get to go... sometimes when [I] ask the teacher she says yes, but sometimes she says no... I'm like 'Oh my God, I can't hold it!'. (2)

School was also unpleasantly noisy – when 'Year 5 and 6 are outside so like it's hard to concentrate... because of the noise' (3) – and teachers shouted so loudly that 'you can hear them all the way from like their class to our class... they shout like a lot' (5). Moreover, time spent sitting bored was agonising and she longed for breaks so 'I can be free, I don't need to do any maths, any work, I just get to go outside and play' (4). In our first interview she told me that the only things she enjoyed at school were 'to play with my friends, and I like to run' (1), and little changed over the three years. Echoing other studies (e.g. Devine 2003; Gore 2004; Hargreaves 2017), discussed in Chapter 3, Summer found the control over her physical body in school not only unpleasant but unreasonable.

Control over her mental activity was equally intolerable. As my opening observation illustrates, she almost always appeared bored, disengaged and dejected during lessons, explaining that she was usually 'silent' (2), often joining activities unenthusiastically or not at all. I noted she read aloud, for example, 'in an extremely low key, floppy way' (obs 2) often with her hands over her face (obs 4, 6), repeatedly stifling yawns (obs 9, 8), and sitting so low in her chair her head almost rested on the table (obs 3, 6).

During moments when she felt expected to perform academically, however, she appeared watchful and anxious. She explained that:

... in my head I'm like 'come on, come on, I've got to do it', and then sometimes like I'm still on my maths and the whistle [goes]. (2)

I observed this anxiety during a whole-class multiplication game, noting that 'Summer's legs are knocking together fast under the table, her pen is hovering above her board... her lips press together' (obs 6).

Summer often complained about 'countdowns' and the need for 'fast writing' (2, 8, 9), when she had 'to write really quick, yeah. Like hurry, hurry up... and when [the teacher] says you've got one more minute and I'm like 'Come on that's 60 seconds, I cannot do it!'" (2). Time pressure caused her significant stress and anxiety, as was also the case for Max and Jake, and cannot have helped her learning, a point noted in a number of other studies (Devine 2003; Eriksson et al. 2020; Hargreaves 2017), discussed in Chapter 3. Indeed, in Year 6, Summer showed signs of recognising this, explaining 'I'm a fast writer. I try to be slow, I just can't' (8), acknowledging that rushing at everything in a panic is unhelpful. The threat of having to stay in to finish her work at breaktime, a common practice at her school, further fuelled this need to hurry.

She found the lockdowns, when she was in Years 5 and 6, hugely positive, allowing her to work at her own pace and giving her autonomy over her physical needs:

The best thing about learning at home was that it felt like different because I could like eat stuff while I'm working to help my brain work. I could do it in my bed, I could do it downstairs with my bird, I could listen to music in the background, because I love music... (8)

She told me 'I just hated [returning] to school' (9), drawing herself stressed and confronted by a daunting amount of work, and choosing the most miserable blob person to express her feelings:

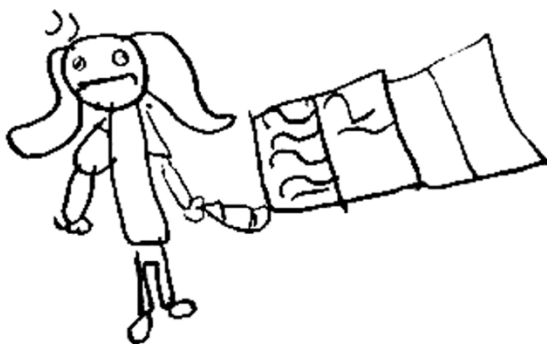


Figure 4: Summer's drawing of herself returning to school and confronted with lots of work (8)



Figure 5: The blob person Summer chose to represent her feelings on returning to school (9)

The requirement to attend school and the disciplinary control it had over her, both physically and mentally, were, however, only part of the reason Summer found school so intolerable.

Examination and the role of maths

Summer seemed to find classroom *examination* (Foucault 1991) just as intolerable as the minute-by-minute disciplinary control. Publicly judged against

a narrowly academic norm, the normal/abnormal binary appeared very present for her, as it did for Max. Her day was peppered with such judgements, constantly putting her at risk of being marked out as inadequate. However, unlike Max, who worked hard to be positioned on the right side of this binary, Summer seemed to feel that she was unavoidably on the wrong side of it much of the time, and her main aim was to avoid drawing attention to this. Activities that involved public displays of academic ability were when she seemed to feel at most risk; she explained that when picked to answer a question in front of the class, 'I usually feel like dumb... because sometimes when I'm really positive about the answer it's never the answer, so that makes me feel a bit dumb' (9).

Maths lessons were worst. She spoke about them passionately and constantly, exclaiming 'I'm terrible at maths... when it's maths I'm like 'Why? I wish I never came to school today' (2), 'I just hate those four words – or letters – MATHS' (3) and 'I've dreaded maths my whole life... I think I'm just going to hate maths forever' (9). When asked to pick a blob person to represent herself in a maths lesson, she chose 14, a falling figure, saying:

That describes me very much in maths... Because in maths I feel like failing everything, and I just, I don't want to do maths... When the teacher explains it, it's like 'this is so hard'. (8)



Figure 6: Summer during maths lessons (blob 14)

Whenever our interviews were during a maths lesson, she would scoot out of the classroom in delight, with comments like 'I was so glad I had to come here, cos I hate maths!' (2) and telling me how relieved she was she hadn't yet been picked to answer '... the hardest question... it was like hard for me. And I was like, I was sitting down in my chair and I was like 'I don't have that much fingers!' (2).

Moreover, maths made her highly anxious. From the second term of Year 4 her seat was in front of the maths display board and she spoke of this repeatedly, exclaiming 'I don't know why, but I'm facing the maths board... when I look on the maths board I'm like 'Oh my God we're going to do maths!' (4). Her strategy to deal with this anxiety was to try not to look at it:

... cos like the signs on like the board, and like I just feel so stressed...
Every time like I look at the maths board I'm just like 'Oh, hopefully we're not doing that today'... I'm just like 'No, I'm not going to look at it'... (3)

Summer seemed a classic case of 'maths anxiety', described as 'feelings of apprehension, tension or discomfort experienced by many individuals when performing mathematics or in a mathematical context' (Richardson & Suinn 1972 in Szucs et al. 2019). Although not a focus of this project, it is worth noting that while maths anxiety may accompany cognitive difficulties, it is in itself an emotional problem (Ashcraft and Krause 2007). However, because anxiety interferes with performance, and poor performance increases anxiety, children can find themselves in a vicious circle (Carey et al. 2016) and I suspect this was true of Summer.

This loathing and fear of maths dominated her experience of school. In our 'best and worst' drawing activity (3) she began with 'Maths. Going to write that big cos I hate maths', continuing 'Um, bad things about school – probably, being me, getting questions wrong on my maths...Probably getting them all wrong would be bad'. This was accompanied by a picture of herself with a giant maths

worksheet and her sad face. Finally, when encouraged by me to include an aspect of school other than maths, she drew her teacher, explaining 'if Miss said 'it's time for the next lesson' and she said 'Maths' that would be bad'.

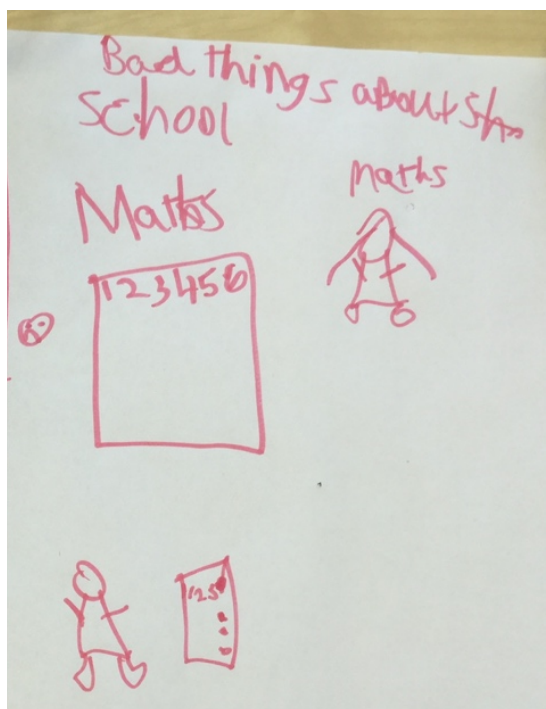


Figure 7: 'Bad' things about school

The most unconnected discussions would find their way back to maths, as when she told me about a 'scary' PE cupboard she and her friends had heard 'sounds' in:

... cos like there's balls in there that are always bouncing and (pause) if we ever had a sleepover at school and like we had a sleepover there, then that would be my worst nightmare... But I'd rather sleep there than do maths... that's how much I hate maths! (3)

Being 'bad at maths (1,2,3,4,5,6,8,9) – both hating it and feeling 'terrible' at it – was a phrase Summer used in every interview, revealing a key aspect of the subjectivity she was constructing. Maths, for her, appeared to be the norm on

which *examination* was based, and the source of classroom ranking more broadly. SATS had ‘mostly maths in them’ (4) and she believed the teacher thought her the ‘lowest in the class’ because of her poor maths (8). Teachers favoured those ‘good at maths’; they were allowed to go and get a drink of water when she wasn’t (2), got rewarded more (4), and in her animal classroom were picked by the teacher to do special jobs (4). She believed pupils, too, shared this preference; the ‘cheetah’ in her animal classroom was ‘friends with everyone’ because ‘he’s like really good at maths... the best at maths in school’ (4). Maths was not only experienced as exclusionary and segregating during maths lessons but was key to how Summer made sense of a person’s school status more generally.

As someone who was ‘bad at maths’, then, the subject position Summer seemed to find most available within ‘good pupil’ discourse at Sandown Academy was one of failure and inadequacy. She told me she was ‘not smart’ (2) and that even outside of maths lessons the teacher would place her at the ‘bottom of the class’ (9). Central to schools’ criteria for success was academic attainment in core subjects, and Summer’s academic judgement of herself, one dominated by her relationship with maths, meant she was clear she did not meet these criteria.

Spatial distribution as intolerable

Summer experienced the spatial distribution that accompanied the school’s practices of division (Foucault 1988a) as a particularly painful disciplinary technology, an acute way of marking the boundary between the ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’. Two examples highlight this. The first was during Success for All (SfA), a whole school English program that set by ‘ability’ across the four classes in the year group, and Summer was one of only 5 in her class to be allocated to the bottom set. My observation notes highlight the intense visibility of this ranking, as the class rose at once in a huge wave and departed, chattering, leaving the five sitting in the almost empty classroom awaiting the

rest of the bottom set. I recorded this on camera, Summer explaining as she watched it afterwards:

I'm like 'Oh my God, SfA, really?... No, you guys can't leave me!'... Cos I want them in the same class as me... I need people to stay in the same class as me... I need my friends... I'm like 'Don't leave me!'... Dessy and Chandie go to the exact same SfA [together, and] I was like 'Come on, come on, you go to *this* SfA group!' (2)

Echoing the 'pain and shame' (Francis et al. 2017b:107) many studies have found bottom set pupils feel in primary schools (e.g. Marks 2016a; McGillicuddy and Devine 2020), discussed in Chapter 3, Summer experienced this moment of spatial reorganisation as a traumatic one.

To make matters worse, she explained in Year 4 that 'you don't learn' (3) in this group because the work was the same as that in previous years:

... it's really easy, like, I think the Receptions could even do that. Like that's what we done in Year 1, so, like, I know how easy it is... We done it in Year 3 as well... And I'm so scared we're going to do it in Year 5! If we do it in Year 5 then just – no!... And in Year 5 like I've heard that's like a high year to be doing that... The first time we done it someone put up their hand and said 'Miss, this is what we done in Year 1'... And then she said 'well we're going to be doing this... every Thursday and Friday, because that's when we do SfA. (2)

Summer felt marked out as having no prospect of progressing, held back by being made to do demeaning work year after year.

The second example of the pain spatial distribution caused her was during maths lessons, where, although the class were not divided into sets, she was nevertheless separated from her friends and sent to sit with Paul, also in the

CLIPS project, who she described as having 'problems' (3, 4). He had his own, separated, 'work station', wore ear defenders and, as Summer told me enviously, was allowed to play with silly putty during lessons. She and Paul were, she said, given 'different, easier' (4) maths. Summer's feelings about this were complex, as she explained lucidly, noting the 'weirdness' of wanting 'easy work' while at the same time humiliated by the accompanying separation:

I feel embarrassed when I get different work, but like I'm kind of happy as well because like I'm doing easier work, and when I get real work like with everyone else and I'm kind of happy then as well yeah... It's really weird... I get a sheet like full of other stuff, so say for example if we were learning about like money, then my friends would do like other money sheets. So, and me and Paul would get like a sheet, not like do it in our book... But like everybody else just does it in their book. (4)

Noticeably different work when sitting with Paul was embarrassing and marked her out as 'abnormal', but 'real work' was difficult and so carried the risk of failure and further negative judgment.

However, when Maddy, the other child in the class with her own 'work station' and also allowed to play with putty, chose Summer as her 'special friend' to sit next to, Summer's response was very different. She explained her feelings to me by dancing on her chair and saying, 'In my head – I couldn't do it out loud – I said 'Yes!!'... [because] she's allowed to talk so I feel quite happy, cos like I don't need to learn or anything!' (3). Being 'chosen' not 'sent' may have removed the stigma of separation, leaving her able to enjoy a reduction in the pressure she usually experienced. Unlike my other participants, Summer recognised advantages to being seen as 'different', telling me, 'like most of the time when [children] have got problems the teacher treats them sometimes differently... differently like good' (2). She seemed to feel her own, highly marginal position came with many of the same disadvantages as theirs but without the advantages.

In this part of the chapter I have shown that Summer, to a greater extent than my other participants, found the minute-by-minute experience of school deeply, almost unbearably, unpleasant. School's control over her – both physical and mental – felt painful, restrictive, unfair and intrusive, leaving her uncomfortable, fearful and agonisingly bored. In addition, the feelings about maths that dominated her view of herself as a learner left her constantly anxious in the face of the near-continuous *examination* within the classroom. She resented and feared the relentless threat of being judged abnormal and the 'pain and shame' this caused, particularly the risk of punishment and spatial distribution, a brutal technology by which these judgements were made public.

Summer experienced her rejection of school and its regimes of truth as necessary. School offered her unpleasantness and boredom, and the only subject positions she experienced as available to her within 'good pupil' discourse were those of failure, outside the realm of the normal and acceptable. Resistance is often fuelled by necessity (Scott 1985) and I see Summer as *pushed* into counter-conduct by her experience of school; it is only by rejecting school that she can avoid the implications of school rejecting her. However, this was only half the story. I came to see her as also *pulled* into counter-conduct by her ethical beliefs, which she viewed as incompatible with acceptance of school discourses. It is her attempts to construct a subjectivity outside of these discourses, to conduct herself 'otherwise', that I now turn to.

Counter-conduct and conducting oneself 'otherwise'

I came to see Summer as engaged in counter-conduct – 'forms of conduct which subvert dominant techniques for the production of responsible subjects' (Death 2016:202). School, she felt, was working to constitute her as one sort of person, and this was not someone she wanted to be. I interpret her as showing resistance to the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault 2007a) – she was refusing to be

conducted *like that*, and desiring to conduct herself differently. As Lorenzini (2016:17) puts it:

... in order to break the (governmental) relationship of obedience, the individual must withdraw his/her consent to be conducted like that. To do so... s/he has to contest and detach from the form of subjectivity that these specific governmental techniques aim at constituting and imposing on him/her.

Summer, I suggest, was doing this in four ways, all of which served to support and motivate her counter-conduct while also being forms of counter-conduct in their own right.

1. Summer's critique of 'good pupil' discourse

The view that school is an essential part of childhood constitutes a society-wide regime of truth (see Foucault 1991). Although many children resent aspects of school, Summer was unusual in questioning its relevance entirely. She told me, 'I wish that school wasn't a thing' (9) and repeatedly brought up the idea of home schooling (1,3,4,5,8). She also toyed with adaptations to schooling, explaining thoughtfully 'you know how there's 5 days at school, right, and then there's 2 days off – you should have 5 days at school...and 5 days off, I think that would be fair' (8) and complaining '[school is] like half my day!' (9).

Rather than considering school an unpleasant necessity, as other participants did, she increasingly suggested that its overall impact, at least on her, was negative. She explained, 'I think I don't suit school' (9) and 'I don't really think school's a good influence' (8). When answering a question on whether school made a difference to people, interpreted by others as asking about its benefits, she exclaimed 'Yeah... it gives me anxiety and I hate it, so yeah' (9).

Summer always placed schoolwork at the bottom of her priorities, though recognised that others did not. She explained when in Year 5:

... when I say I don't want to go to school [my parents] say 'Well you've got to, because you've got to learn' and I was like 'I don't want to learn'... The whole point for me is that I get to see my friends, but like for other people it's probably just like learning. (6)

Throughout the project, academic judgement did not seem to have the status for Summer that it did for my other participants. She resented the separation from her friends that resulted from it, but poor judgement in itself, as indicated by low marks or getting questions wrong, left her, outwardly at least, indifferent. At the start of the project she told me:

... if I had a question and got it wrong, I don't feel anything... if I put my hand up and I get it wrong I'm like 'Well I never was good in maths, so... when I get low marks I'm like 'Well I wasn't good at maths'... I wouldn't worry about it. (2)

She answered similarly when asked how she felt getting a times table wrong, explaining 'it was ok I guess, because, like, I know that I'm bad at maths' (4) and that 'it [doesn't] really bother me where my work would be to be totally honest' (8). When considering her move to secondary school she said:

I don't really care about how smart I am... I don't really care about maths, like school work, so, yeah, so I wouldn't really care what my score is... If I don't get good marks then it doesn't really make a difference to my life'. (9)

Even being in the bottom group stopped mattering to her in Year 6 when her friends were also allocated to that group; she explained 'it doesn't really concern me, I don't really like care about what group I'm in, it doesn't really like

matter to me' (9). Indeed, she was not even convinced of the importance of attainment to 'high attainers', saying 'maybe they feel happy or maybe they like don't like don't care about it that much' (8), an answer I cannot imagine from any of my other participants. Unlike Max or, as we will see, Jake, who remembered bad marks vividly, she rarely mentioned them unless explicitly asked and often could not recall her marks.

Of course, Summer may have minded her low marks and mistakes more than she admitted. However, she appeared in interviews to be strikingly unconcerned about her attainment and not at all defensive, so different from others. This contrasted dramatically with her fury at being refused a drink, a visit to the bathroom or being separated from her friends. I came to the conclusion that low attainment – as opposed to its consequences in the form of being kept in at break, told off, publicly humiliated or separated from friends – was not in itself very important to her or a particular source of shame.

Summer also rejected the idea that effort affected attainment in any significant way. Maths has been found to be the subject that communicates the strongest fixed ability messages to pupils (Boaler 2013, 2015) and Summer seemed to share the view of maths ability held by pupils in Marks' (2015:6) study, as 'something real and located within the individual rather than being an aspect of a person's developing and changeable identity'. As noted, she identified repeatedly with being 'not smart' (2), maths usually cited as the reason for this identification.

It has been argued that those with fixed ability views of themselves can feel that putting effort into their work is both pointless and undermining (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, and Dweck 2007; Haimovitz and Dweck 2017), affecting performance (Gulemetova et al. 2022; Hodgen et al. 2018), and this would seem to fit Summer. In every observation I noted her lack of motivation, and she said she always chose the easiest work when given the option (4, 6). This was in sharp contrast to her commitment to challenging herself in out-of-school

projects, such as nursing an ill bird back to health (1), one she was still looking after 3 years later (9), dog-grooming (1,8,9), cake-making (1,4,6,9) or planning a 12-hour fundraiser handcuffed to a friend in a box of 'squishes' (3).

Although Summer was remarkably consistent in rejecting the possibility of academic progress, resisting such a key part of neoliberal 'good pupil' discourse was no easy task. In both Years 4 and 5 I asked a direct question about what she could do to be more successful academically, and both times she showed awareness of the expected response, while catching herself and qualifying it. In Year 4 she replied: 'So for like me in school to do success is probably to like listen to the teacher in maths, because (long pause) even if I listen in maths I just can't get it!' (4). In Year 5, when I asked if she believed she would ever be able to learn maths, she replied 'Um, I don't believe that, I just, I think I *might* be able to believe' (6). She appeared caught between her own lack of belief that she could ever learn maths and dominant discourses of progress suggesting she might be able to change her mindset.

2. Summer's counter-discourse

I interpreted Summer as engaged in a critique of school and a rejection of 'good pupil' discourse more broadly, and this was made possible by her deployment of a counter-discourse, one which prioritised the relational. The most important thing to Summer was being a 'nice person' (9); she explained 'I wouldn't mind like little marks because it doesn't matter about your work, it just matters about people just like doing good' (5). She told me she most respected 'people being helpful and people who do nice things for friends' (9) and that 'a good person would be someone who helps you, like they'd help you with work, they'd help you with anything really' (8).

In interviews she spoke of the importance of empathy and thoughtfulness and demonstrated them frequently. For example, distressed by a teacher's behaviour towards her, she told me that she had decided not to tell a friend

about it because they adored that teacher and might be upset (6). Moreover, she showed considerable ability to recognise that her opinions were not necessarily shared by others, unusual amongst my participants. She interrupted her more dogmatic statements, for example, with qualifiers such as ‘well, this is just what I like’ (9), ‘some people might say that’ (8), ‘I don’t actually *know* what they’re thinking’ (4) or ‘I think some children like school, and some don’t’ (9).

She was thoughtful about her friendships:

Summer: ...Sammi’s been doing some mean stuff to [Somayah]. So me, Dessy and Chandie are just going to talk to Sammi at lunch, because um we want to know what’s going on with her...Because apparently Sammi elbowed Somayah apparently.

Laura: ...what are you going to say to Sammi?

Summer: ‘Why are you hurting my friend?’ We call each other step-cousins, so ‘Why are you hurting my step-cousin?’...She’d probably say ‘No I didn’t do that’...She *might* have done it. I’m just going to say ‘apparently’ because I don’t know if she done this or not. (4)

Understanding relationships, and considering how to act to support them, was something she approached with seriousness and focus. She took pains to behave fairly and not jump to conclusions, as her comment ‘I’m just going to say ‘apparently’ because I don’t know if she done this or not’ illustrates, and aimed to learn from her experiences:

So basically me and my friend Chandie were in the hall hugging, and then my friend Dessy, like, she didn’t get a hug, so she says ‘Can I have a hug?’ and we hug her. So that’s what I should do as well... I should say what she said, like ‘Can I have a hug as well?’ so I don’t feel left out. (4)

Her conscious attempts to become more of the person she wanted to be showed an emotional maturity not often credited to 8-year-olds. I read her as

developing a technology of self, working on her own relational and emotional development to improve herself and her relations with others within her counter-discourse. As discussed in Chapter 2, this is, in Foucault's terms, a particular form of counter-conduct, 'care of the self', a conscious attempt to develop and support a different subjectivity, which for her was living 'other-wise' rather than 'self-wise' (Tronto 2013; see also Lolich and Lynch 2017), prioritising her relationships with friends and family over and above more individualised pursuits such as high school attainment and being 'better' than others more generally.

For Summer, it was not that 'good pupil' discourse did not give adequate weight to the relational, she believed the relational was actually *incompatible* with it. A 'good pupil' was oriented 'self-wise' rather than 'other-wise'. Like Jake, Summer appeared to consider high attainment as ethically suspect in its focus on individual success and competition. A conversation between Summer and Rosie, Summer's interview partner for Visit 5, highlights this. They are discussing imaginary 'Julie' who gets top marks, and the differences between the two 9-year-olds are illuminating:

Laura: So tell me, what do you imagine Julie's like?

Summer: Smart...

Rosie: Quite confident in her maths, her work, and maybe she practices at home all the time...

Summer: I just feel like – I just feel like she isn't really nice... She might be really nice at just like getting stuff good in school, like good grades and stuff for the test and stuff, but when she's like in the playground playing she might be a little bit rude...

Rosie: Yeah. But I also think... maybe she practices like stuff and does her homework a lot...

Laura: So what do the teachers think of this girl?

Summer: That she's good. (5)

Rosie and Summer are attempting not to disagree, despite viewing Julie very differently. For responsibilised Rosie, good marks result from confidence, practising at home ‘all the time’ and doing her homework ‘a lot’ – the worthy qualities of effort and optimism central to the ‘good pupil’. For Summer, in contrast, Julie’s good marks are due simply to being ‘smart’, a characteristic that does not seem to warrant further analysis or deserve admiration. Rather, Summer sets up a dichotomy between being ‘nice’ in lessons – an individually-minded endeavour dismissed as ‘just like getting stuff good in school, like good grades and stuff for the test’ – and being ‘nice’ when playing. Of these two forms of ‘niceness’, teachers, predictably, value the former, while Summer values the latter. Indeed, given her frequently-expressed views on the importance of kindness and friendship, her statement that Julie is ‘a little bit rude’ when ‘in the playground playing’ is pretty damning.

Summer seems to be drawing a distinction between her own efforts to be a good friend and Julie’s focus on being a ‘good pupil’, what has been described as boundary work (Lamont 2000). Summer’s framing of Julie can be understood as part of a rejection of neoliberal performativity (Stahl 2016) and its individualism and self-motivation in favour of a concern for the relational (Reay 2003), in a similar way to Jake’s, discussed in Chapter 8.

When I revealed that Julie got regular detentions, both girls looked astonished, having equated ‘good marks’ with ‘good behaviour’. When I commented on Summer’s ‘shocked’ face, she explained that she was ‘very surprised... Because I feel like someone who gets like good marks just never gets in trouble’ (5). Summer and Rosie then told me about an occasion when Tom, a high-achieving classmate, got a detention, and Summer looked delighted:

Every time, good people who get like, people who are better in like lessons and they get told off, I’m like, I’m just so shocked (smiling), I’m just so shocked, because they never usually get told off. (Summer, 5)

A 'high attainer' receiving a detention threw the social order Summer rejected on its head, a prospect she seemed to find highly satisfying.

3. Summer's life beyond the classroom

Summer's life outside lessons supported her counter-discourse, validating the alternative subjectivity she was working to build and making this neither abnormal nor unrealistic. It justified and offered a concreteness to her visions of an alternative way of being.

When she was younger, this seemed to take the form of constructing herself as a 'home person' in opposition to a 'school person'. More than my other participants, Summer talked repeatedly about her mum and dad, friends she played with on her street, her dog and baking cakes with her nan. Although school was the focus of interviews, she would break off halfway through her answers to questions to tell me about something happening after school or at the weekend, and these thoughts seemed to keep her going through all the misery, fear, boredom and clock-watching of lessons. She exclaimed, for example:

I can't wait to just get out of school, have hot chocolate, play down the road with my friend, come back and then my dad's there. That's what I want. (4)

As she grew older, however, relationships with friends at school became increasingly important. When I asked, just before she left primary school, what was 'important to be happy and fulfilled in life', she replied:

I think you need a dog to be happy because I love dogs. And you definitely need a phone to be happy – this is just what I like – you need a phone to be happy, because you can do so many things on it and play games with your friends, you can text people. And what makes *me* happy

is to see my friends, like yeah having friendship is good, I like seeing my friends... they make me happy. Like I don't think if I never had them in my life I wouldn't be that happy, so I'm glad that they're in my life. (9)

Summer already had the things she valued most, and school success was largely irrelevant to them.

This approach to flourishing, so different to that of the neoliberal 'good pupil', also showed in her ambitions for future employment. I showed in Chapter 3 that studies find many pupils believe school success is essential; without it your life may be ruined, you may end up homeless or breaking the law. This was a view shared vehemently by Jake and Britney. Summer, however, had no difficulty in imagining desirable employment futures to which school was almost entirely irrelevant. The way she talked about this included both a critique of dominant school discourse – school taught nothing of use and was unnecessary for meaningful success – and a deployment of her counter-discourse, in which she could prioritise differently. This alternative aligned with the adults and activities she loved and respected and did not involve embracing the ambitions of social mobility.

Her main employment plan, originating from helping with her Mum's dog walking business, was to be a dog groomer (1,8,9). At age 10, she drew herself as she imagined she would be in ten years:

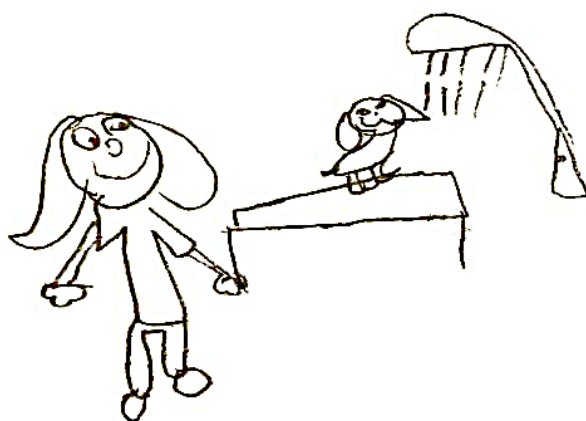


Figure 8: Summer's picture of herself at age 20 (8)

As the smiles on both herself and the dog indicate, Summer was enthusiastic and confident about this, telling me that the dogs her mum worked with missed her when she wasn't there (9). She approached her career plan with knowledge and pragmatism:

I learned from my mum... like you know when you cut the dog's fur and then like you shower it?... Like my mum's got like these dog grooming tools things for when I'm older and I need like practice... My mum says 'just be careful with the scissors and like hold them still so you don't like move them around'. (8)

Summer viewed school as largely irrelevant, because 'it doesn't tell me about dog grooming' (9), although basic maths, she thought, would be necessary, because 'I'm going to obviously need to give [the customers] money, and they're going to give me money' (9).

Although dog grooming was her primary career plan, she toyed with other ideas, all inspired by the experience of life outside school. Her 'fallback' position, to work with children with special needs (1, 8), was based on her experience with her cousin, who was partially deaf, and her hairdressing plan based on enjoying arranging her dolls' hair (6). She also contemplated setting up a bakery with friends:

... because like I bake cakes with nan, like the little mini ones, and (pause) I'm just scared like when I got to work, because... like after my nan put them in the oven I like eat out of the bowl and it's really nice. So like if I do that [at work] then people will be staring at me [so] I'm just going to grab it like into the staff-only room probably. (4)

All her employment plans were both specific and well thought out, her explanations suggesting that she had imagined the day-to-day of them, such as how to lick the bowl with customers present.

Summer's aspirations were both narrow and down to earth, rooted in her experiences with family and friends. This contrasted with Britney's ambitions to be a doctor and Jake's to be a businessman, discussed in the following chapters, neither of whom indicated any consideration of what was involved. Her experience of concrete alternative possibilities to the more 'aspirational' and socially mobile career paths promoted by 'good pupil' discourse may have made school failure less threatening.

Her feelings towards school were validated by her family, enabling her to consider her response to school 'normal':

Laura: Did your mum like going to school when she was little?

Summer: I don't think she did. I don't think anyone in my family did...

They said that it was like boring, and I understand that... I don't think anyone in my family does like going to school. (6)

Even her dislike of maths was shared, she said, by her parents:

I think I'm just going to hate maths forever. My mum said 'yeah I've always hated doing maths', so – I can't really blame her for hate doing maths because it's terrible... [also] my dad hates it. I was born to be them because they hate maths. (9)

At school, friends provided similar confirmation. Although when younger she seemed isolated in her dislike of school, as she grew older she felt increasingly part of a group. She was pleased her friends also did 'support' work, the 'easier' work, saying it made her feel 'kind of happy, I feel like I'm not the only one' (4) and telling me 'my friend, she doesn't like [maths] either... none of my, none of my friends do' (6).

Family, friends and her life outside school, then, acted to support her counter-conduct. They contributed to the development of her critique of school, and the

content of her counter-discourse, but equally importantly they acted to normalise her, to provide a context in which she could be judged, and judge herself, as successful by conducting herself differently (Foucault 2007a), living 'otherwise' and rejecting the subjectivity made available to her within 'good pupil' discourse.

It may have been the case that this counter-discourse was particularly available to Summer because of her gender. Summer rejected the individualism of competition and ambition, traditionally viewed as masculine, in favour of the more 'feminine' other-oriented concerns of relationships, empathy and kindness (see Charlesworth and Banaji 2022; Francis and Skelton 2005). Her friends were largely girls and her home life domestic – making cakes with her nan, helping her mum and chatting about boyfriends. Her employment ambitions, too – dog-grooming, hairdressing, baking or working with children – were classically 'female' occupations (see H. M. Clarke 2020). Her gender, as well as her life outside of school, acted to validate and reinforce the value of her alternative subjectivity.

4. Summer's everyday resistance

I have argued that Summer's critique and her alternative subjectivity were forms of counter-conduct designed to help her maintain the sense of herself she aspired to, but this still left her with the problem of surviving and negotiating the day-to-day intolerabilities of school. In Chapter 2 I made the point that open resistance becomes difficult 'once discipline is a dominant feature of society and when institutional correction systems are in place for those who do not conform' (Lilja and Vinthagen 2014:114), as is the case in schools. Summer was not a rebel, telling me 'I never get away with breaking rules, I'm not lucky' (5). She tried to avoid getting told off and was always one of the first to place 'hands nice' or stand neatly in line. However, punishment for academic failure was harder to avoid; she was very upset when speaking of being sent out from a long division lesson because:

... [the] teacher said 'you must have [completed] one by the time I come back to you' and I was thinking, but like I couldn't... I got sent out for like I think 10 minutes! (3)

In Year 6 the threat of punishment for poor work remained 'scary, nerve wrecking' (9).

In situations such as this, that feel unsafe, counter-conduct may need to take a more 'diffuse and subdued' (Foucault 2007a:200) form. Summer wanted to find ways of mitigating the unpleasantness of the classroom and maintaining her sense of self and dignity while staying inside the rules and avoiding punishment. Discussed in Chapter 2, Scott's (1985) less visible forms of minor resistance – forms of non-cooperation and cultural resistance such as foot-dragging, evasion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander and sabotage – are an interesting lens through which to understand Summer's classroom conduct, albeit a different context.

Summer's most evident form of everyday resistance was to broadcast her view of school as useless and intolerable at every opportunity. Other strategies were designed either to suggest she could do the work when she couldn't or to get her through the painful boredom of lessons. Both relied on remaining invisible to power and staying in the background as much as possible. The extended observation that opens this chapter shows Summer engaged in several activities motivated by the desire to perform academic conformity rather than to actually engage with learning, so as to avoid being told off or humiliated. These include: correcting incorrect answers and marking them with a tick; not reading aloud but just opening her mouth slightly at each word; hiding incorrect answers with her arm and using illegible or ambiguous handwriting to answer difficult questions.

Cheating is a way to perform conformity. If answers are available, they can simply be copied. She told me when she was in Year 4, with a matter-of-fact satisfaction:

... I cheated because like it has the answers on the back, so if Miss is looking somewhere then I could turn it round and look at the answer... Just be an easier way... just be an easier way to get the maths done. (3)

This was a tactic she continued when possible, telling me in Year 6:

'I normally cheat... you open the answer book and you like look, like look at it and then like copy it... but you need the answer book to like get the right answers. (8)

Copying friends, along with marking incorrect answers correct, was, however, the most available route to adequate performance:

Well, Chandie tells me like to look at her work... Sometimes in maths we get some wrong, but we still mark them right sometimes. But yeah, we mostly get all the work right, because she's good at maths. (9)

She showed no sense of pride at having 'outwitted' the system at these moments, as the children in my masters project did when they achieved 'tricks' (see Chapter 3). Rather, it was just convenient, 'an easier way' (3) to meet the demands of school. She never suggested that 'cheating' was detrimental to her learning or ethically questionable; the task at hand was to be seen to perform well enough to avoid reprimand, and cheating was an easy way of achieving this. She even assumed it would be the way to get through SATs, because 'there are parts like you can't do anything, like you can only copy off people like sitting next to you' (4).

What Scott (1985) called 'foot-dragging' was also evident in every one of my observations of Summer. Appearing focused and busy is part of successful performances of pupildom and so tasks which Summer found easy she often extended. I note:

She spends a long time gluing the page, moving the pritt stick back and forth on all sides, finding the lid and pressing it back on to the glue stick leisurely. With no hurry, she presses it down, running her fingers over the page slowly. She moves slowly, closing the exercise book. (obs 8)

Summer was also often painfully bored, and had strategies for dealing with this. In fact, boredom itself has been understood as a form of resistance (Chen 1998; Llamas 2006). As Chen (1998:3) notes, 'students' boredom is an expression of constructed emotional resistance to the knowledge and skill that they are expected to learn in schools'. Boredom can be seen as an expression of refusal to be conducted in a particular way and Summer complained about boredom vociferously throughout every interview. For example, she told me at our first meeting:

We have 6 hours of school, it's just so boring... I'm like 'Oh my God I'm so bored, what is there to do?'. I'm like 'Oh I can't do anything really cos I'm at school and there's nothing to do'. (1)

Boredom as resistance is caused by, as well as contributing to, powerlessness and helplessness in learning (Chen 1998). Chen (1998:17–18) found 'the more difficult an activity was perceived and less control the students felt they had during the learning process, the more likely the resistance to the content resulted' and maths, unsurprisingly, was Summer's 'boringest bit' (1,2,4,5,9) of school.

Summer dealt with this boredom by daydreaming, clockwatching and imagining what she would do after school. Watching herself in class on video, she explained she was:

... just daydreaming... I used to always daydream... I'm just staring... I think I was just daydreaming because I got bored of one of the questions. And then I was just thinking 'I wonder what I'm doing? I wonder what I'm doing? I have no idea!'. (1)

She told me at the start of Year 4 that 'once I even fell asleep and... I was like 'Oh God I'm in school and I fell asleep'. Luckily no one caught me though.' (2), a risk she still worried about in Year 6 (9).

Clockwatching was another frequent distraction as she waited longingly for breaks or home time. Interviews were peppered with comments like 'I always keep my eye on the clock, because I'm like 'Yes, 15 minutes till break or lunch''(4) or 'the best part of the day is probably the afternoon, because I love it when it hits 12 o'clock because then I know that there's like – school ends at 3, so there's only 1 and then 2 o'clock' (9).

By Year 6, Summer's counter-conduct appeared a little less invisible and docile; in both visits I noted a change in her. She seemed more confident, whispering to those around her (8,9), and exhibited displeasure in a way she hadn't before.

I note:

She moves her foot, tapping it below the table. She does not look nearly as anxious as she used to, whispering occasionally to Chandie and tapping her foot up and down as though she's bored and impatient. (obs 8)

She also seemed to be experimenting with transgressive or mildly rebellious behaviour. She appeared proud when telling me that, against the rules, 'I snuck

my phone into class when we were just leaving, and the teacher didn't see me, so that was good' (9). This was in marked contrast to the matter-of-fact way she had described cheating when younger – necessary for survival but not otherwise satisfying. Gaining satisfaction from sneaking her phone into class as a 'trick' (Quick 2015; summary published in Hargreaves 2017:44–48), it seemed to offer her a little of the feeling of autonomy she craved, and of mastery she lacked, when at school.

This Year 6 change included developing an *embodied* everyday resistance, a topic more explored outside of the education literature, often from a feminist perspective (e.g. Bobel and Kwan 2011; Gonzales 2019; Grenier and Hanley 2007). With eye makeup (obs 9) a dyed fringe (obs 9) and remnants of blue polish on her fingernails (obs 8), both my Year 6 observations comment that she 'stands out' (obs 8,9) from the rest of the class. Her footwear was particularly striking. I noted at the start of Year 6 that 'she is wearing furry boots turned over at the top with big silver zips and thick black fur covering her ankle to her heel – they feel like a statement and stand out among the dull school shoes in the class (obs 8). I was equally struck during my next visit, writing 'she is wearing big black trainers with the laces tied so that the tongue of the trainer sticks up high from her foot. They are very different from the school shoes the rest of her class is wearing' (obs 9).

She was keen to assure me, however, that her makeup, hair and shoes were all within the rules – her shoes were 'black so they're allowed' (9) and her mascara 'not bright' and 'only a little bit' (9). However, they were not the norm in her classroom and suggested that the invisibility she had craved when younger, hiding behind conformity with the school uniform, was no longer as important to her. Her body appeared to have become a site where she could resist being conducted *like that* and conduct herself differently, while still staying just enough within the rules to avoid getting into trouble.

Summer's everyday acts of resistance, particularly when younger, helped her to perform conformity and go under the radar, and also to survive the intense boredom of school. As was true for Scott's peasants, these acts also enabled her to maintain some dignity in a context in which she was constituted as academically 'less than' others, gaining a little satisfaction from developing the 'art of not being governed quite so much' (Foucault 1996b:44–45). By the end of the project she seemed to be changing, prepared to be seen as nudging the boundaries, in her attempts to be governed a little less, though still careful to remain within the rules.

What we learn from Summer

I read Summer's story as one of resistance. She seemed to hate school much more than my other participants and was alone in the extent of her rejection of it. School, she felt, was forcing her towards being someone she did not want to be, and her struggle was to resist this and be someone different. Whereas Max, Jake and Britney negotiated the school's designation of them as low attaining, and their dangerously liminal position between normality and abnormality, with a determination to construct themselves as on the 'normal' side of the line, Summer did not. She seemed to believe that academic adequacy was unachievable and that the only school subjectivity available to her within 'good pupil' discourse was one of failure and abnormality. This can be seen as providing a 'push' for her counter-conduct and efforts to construct an alternative subjectivity, one in which she was included and respected.

However, this was only half the story. Although her rejection of school might have been less complete if she had felt academic adequacy was achievable, her critique of school was also inspired by a counter-discourse. This was based on values and ambitions that were supported and validated by her out-of-school life and which seemed counter to dominant 'good pupil' discourse, pushing her to reject it.

My analysis of Summer highlights a number of points about resistance. First is the importance of considering 'subjectivity as a key site of political struggle' (Ball 2016b:1129) for children as well as adults. I suggest that ideas of critique and 'care of the self', although more often applied within the education sector to teachers and their sophisticated written problematisation of performativity (Ball 2003, 2016b; Ball and Olmedo 2013), can illuminate the ways young pupils negotiate their school subjectivities. Although Summer's responses are different from the articulate adult self-reflection of Ball's correspondents (2003, 2016b; Ball and Olmedo 2013), her attempts to develop and pursue an ethical project, to be more the person she wants to be, are more conscious than children of her age are usually given credit for.

Summer could negotiate her position as she did because she had unsettled key assumptions that are taken for granted within 'good pupil' discourse; she seemed able to problematise the whole 'regime of truth' of school. The intolerability of school and the subject position most available within school pushed her towards this, but at the same time her counter-discourse helped her to experience school as intolerable. For most pupils, however much they may dislike it, school is to be *tolerated* because alternatives are 'unthinkable'.

Such problematisation of accepted truths, such as the value of school and its beneficial impact on pupils, may be easily missed when expressed by younger pupils. Not only may it be less clearly articulated, but powerful discourses of childhood tell us that children's complaints about school are juvenile and lack substance (Mayall 2015). However, Summer shows us that if we take the time to unpick their words and feelings we can find the 'uncertainties, discomforts and refusals' (Ball and Olmedo 2013:85) they bring to their everyday practice at school just as ethically motivated as those of adults. Ball and Olmedo (2013:85) say of their teachers:

By acting 'irresponsibly', these teachers take 'responsibility' for the care of their selves and in doing so make clear that social reality is not as inevitable as it may seem.

I hope I have shown that Summer's 'irresponsibility' is just this – a sometimes more and sometimes less conscious effort to not only survive the fear, boredom and stigma of being designated as low attaining at school, but to maintain a sense of herself as someone of value and worth by problematising the discourse within which she is constituted a failure.

My second point about resistance is the continued usefulness of Scott's (1985) concept of everyday resistance. Still much used in the wider resistance literature (e.g. Johansson and Vinthagen 2019; Rosales and Langhout 2020), these often invisible acts are particularly prevalent in contexts, such as schools, where disciplinary control is strong (Lilja and Vinthagen 2014). Foucault (1998a:95–96) himself argued that often 'there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt... Instead there is a plurality of resistances... and the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities'. Summer's little everyday resistances may seem insignificant but are hugely important to her struggle to manage school's daily difficulties while maintaining her dignity and sense of being a person she wants to be.

Third, resistance of the relatively powerless is easily romanticised and I have tried to highlight Summer's suffering, and the costs she paid. There are always costs to resisting (Ball and Olmedo 2013:94) and Summer's everyday resistance and general disengagement from learning, which involved getting by in whatever way she could (cheating, daydreaming, foot-dragging, timewasting) may well have sabotaged any possibility of school success. In addition, the emotional work that went into publicising and maintaining her opposition to school was significant. The costs, therefore, were high, though we do not know whether the costs of attempting to conform would have been higher.

Fourth and finally, Summer's interviews with me may have been 'part of the process of struggle against, of critique, of making things intolerable, of 'unsettling' and the struggle to be different' (Ball and Olmedo 2013:93), in the same way as Ball and Olmedo (2013) describe Ball's email exchanges with his teachers. Although only termly, our interviews were a space where Summer could explore and develop her thoughts and feelings about school which, given their nature, meant that they offered an opportunity for her to develop her critique and 'care of the self'. The unconditional positive regard (Rogers 1959) I aimed to provide in my interviews (see Chapter 4) may have offered an additional source of validation to that of her home life. Given the costs of resisting, this threw up ethical considerations, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Summer was very different from my other participants in that she conformed so little, and disliked school so thoroughly. I found myself watching two different people, the excitable, enthusiastic girl in interviews, and the disengaged, detached and depressed girl I observed in class. Although I could not help but respect her insistence that she could make a good life for herself irrespective of school and the thoughtfulness with which she tried to be a better person, the unhappiness she went through, particularly when she was younger, was partly as a result of this and was distressing to observe. From early in my relationship with her I felt she would have thrived in a democratic school like the one I describe in my introduction – a self-directed learning space where she would have been free to pursue her own projects and interests with the focus and enthusiasm she showed outside of school, where she would likely have gained respect for her relationship skills and cheerful efficiency, where anxiety might not have dominated her relationship with learning. I can only hope that as she continued her school trajectory, her enforced time in classrooms became less painful to her, or even provided some benefits, while also allowing her to pursue being the person she wanted to be.

Chapter 7: Britney

Negotiating self within 'good pupil' discourse: responsabilisation and fabrication



Britney's self-portrait, Year 6 (9)

Background

Britney lived in a three-bedroom flat on a large social housing estate, initially with eight other people and then six – her mum, younger sister, two 'aunties' and two 'uncles' (friends of her mother). She shared a bedroom with her mum, sister and one auntie. Her mum was not in employment, though Britney told me she used to be 'like a nurse' and thought she'd previously been in the navy. Britney's father, who she saw regularly, was a DJ and lived nearby. Her younger sister started school soon after the project began, where Britney said she got into considerable 'trouble', hitting teachers and throwing chairs, though this reduced as she got older. Britney attended church every weekend with her mother and sister.

Britney described herself as half Scottish (her White mother), half African (her Black Congolese father) and told me her sister was from Cameroon and her aunties and uncles from Ghana, England and Jamaica. At the start of the project Britney's attainment was 'below' age-related expectations in maths, reading and writing and fluctuated little over the course of the project. She was in receipt of pupil premium.

Britney was one of the oldest in her class, friendly, loud and physically large in comparison to her classmates. When younger, she always greeted me with a smile and sometimes a hug, and said she loved being part of the project. As she grew older she was less demonstrative and her movements appeared increasingly assured; she adopted a leisurely lope, and often sat at the back of the class with an un-bothered look on her face. However, she continued to say she enjoyed our time together and was often reluctant to return to class.

Outline of my argument

I start my analysis of Britney by discussing the conspicuous incongruity between my observations of her in the classroom – finding work difficult, often confused and disengaged, easily distracted and engrossed in what others were doing – and how she described herself in interviews. This was strikingly different; she told me she was ‘smart’, found work ‘easy’ and was always ‘good’ and hardworking.

I suggest that this difference is explained by viewing Britney as engaged in a type of purposeful fabrication (Ball 2000) of herself as a ‘good pupil’. I argue that this fabrication was a way of maintaining a positive sense of self in a situation where she was both deeply committed to deploying ‘good pupil’ discourse and, at the same time, did not experience herself as constituted as a ‘good pupil’ within it. She was highly responsabilised, and felt that failure indicated a failure of character, a moral inadequacy, and was not to be acknowledged. In addition, her deployment of happiness discourse meant she felt she should ‘never doubt yourself, to always convince yourself that you’re great’ (9). To tell herself, and others, that she was an ideal ‘good pupil’, regardless of the evidence, seemed a route to maintaining self-worth. I go on to discuss the usefulness to this analysis of interview activities that enabled her to work in metaphor, allowing ‘psychic distance’ (Drewes and Schaefer 2015:39), through an extended case study of the ‘animal classroom’.

I finish by exploring Britney's increasing commitment to the ideas promoted in happiness discourse; she worked hard to be happy and positive and believed one should take responsibility for being so. In pursuing happiness – unlike academic attainment – she had an impressive repertoire of techniques of the self to draw upon, and so was able to engage in a substantial but not unproblematic project of psychological self-improvement.

Britney observed

My classroom observations suggest that Britney often found work difficult and confusing. This extract is typical:

They are given another subtraction. Britney writes it out on her board, puts her lid on her pen and her fingers out in front of her, counting. She mutters under her breath, concentrating hard. Most of the class have held their boards up and Britney is still working on her sum. She looks at the board of the girl next to her (to check hers is right?) and holds hers up... They are given another challenge and the teacher says 'go'... Britney looks up at the board, confused. She whispers to her partner. She has a small frown on her face. She looks at the board, eyes wide. Miss asks her a question – 11 minus 4 – and Britney says 6. 'It's not 6' says Miss H and asks another child. (obs 4)

In every set of observation notes I describe Britney as misunderstanding, confused or defeated by a task, sometimes struggling with it but more often giving up. During these times I often interpreted her expressions and body language as sad or despondent:

They are asked what a synonym is. Children put their hands up. Not Britney. A description is given. Britney looks confused, then almost sad, staring at the teacher and looking down, her mouth turned down. She

stares ahead, her pencil by her lips. Lots of the children have started writing... Silence falls and Britney looks down at her book. She follows along with her finger. She turns the page over and back again, over and back again. She looks over at the work of the girl opposite, and then at the boy's work next to her. She hasn't written anything... She asks the girl opposite her something in an almost silent voice. The girl looks like she asks 'what?'. Britney waves her hand back and forth as if to say 'it doesn't matter'. She plays with her nails... She has her hand on her head and her pencil is poised over her page but is not moving... She looks up at me again as though she's longing for me to take her out for interview. (obs 6)

However, in stark contrast to Summer, Britney seemed keen to exhibit her knowledge when she did know an answer, putting her hand up high in the air and wagging it energetically (obs 2,4,9). She also appeared keen to demonstrate obedience, enthusiastically reciting the expected 'eyes on you' in response to the teacher's 'one, two, three' (obs 4), or putting her fingers to her lips in what my notes call an 'I'm being good pose' (obs 6) when the teacher asks the class to be quiet.

As she got older, she seemed increasingly bored and disengaged, perhaps a consequence of being so often confused about what she should be doing. The below is typical of my Year 6 observation notes:

Britney yawns a little... she continues doing something on her mini whiteboard. She looks like she's drawing. She looks up, realising the TA has moved on with the spellings, and marks what she's missed... She yawns a huge yawn, eyes glazed. (obs 8)

Perhaps because others were a welcome distraction, she appeared very alert to social dynamics. Every set of observation notes describes her watching social interactions carefully and never missing an opportunity to be part of

conversations, which often distracted her and left her even more confused with school tasks. The extracts below are from my observations of her during 'work time' in Years 4 and 5:

The teacher is describing the task. Britney stares across the classroom and doesn't look like she's listening. She mouths something to the girl on the other side of the table... She is now looking around the room at wherever there is any action – anyone moving, talking, when anyone walks into the classroom... She speaks to Eleanor, then to the girls on the rest of the table. She has her book open and pencil in her hand but has been talking for just under 5 minutes now although the class has started working. (obs 3)

A child comes in. Britney's head shoots to the side... The girl next to her says something to her and Britney looks up at her, smiling and laughing. She is now looking over to a boy opposite her and says something to him. She and the girl next to her are leaning into each other. She has not written anything for a while. (obs 4)

She whispers to her table... she is talking to the boy next to her and sticking something in her book. She's always glancing around, and now is talking to the girls opposite. It's like her attention is out not in, as though the task is an extra but the social is what she's concerned with. She stops sticking and a long conversation ensues. (obs 6)

Social interactions saw her lively and involved. However, although they certainly distracted her from working, she usually kept a wary eye on the teacher (obs 6, 8, 9) and fell silent if at risk of a reprimand (3,6).

This reading of Britney in class – unenthusiastic, easily distracted and often disengaged and despondent as a learner but at the centre of social activity – was strikingly different from the self she described in interviews.

How Britney described herself as a learner

Throughout the three years of the project, Britney described herself in interviews as someone who was highly successful at school, both academically and in terms of behaviour and attitude. She said she was 'always getting high marks' and finished her work 'really quick' (2), and that 'I find maths easy... I find topic easy' (3). Her Year 6 teacher, she said, would say 'she is a smart and intelligent girl' (9) and when I asked how she thought she'd do in her SATs before they were cancelled, said 'I think I will get a good score... [because] I can focus' (8). She also told me that she had *never* answered a question in class incorrectly or been asked to stay in at break to 'finish off' (2), although I observed both.

Right from our first interview she spoke of her high academic ranking:

... some can't do the work and some can do the work. And, well, the 'can' is me, Loulou, Sanja, Zamda, Yamaya, Sem, Marty... every time. Then like Maths tests, we always get the hard ones... [Daniel] can't read or write, so he has to be like easy work like some people can do. And we have to do all the hard work because we are smarter than him. (1)

Here, Britney seems to be wanting to do more than just show that she is not one of the people who 'can't', the 'bad people' (3, 6), as she called them. She presents herself as one of the group at the top of the academic ranking, a model 'good pupil' – always finding work easy, knowing the answers and with high marks. This contrasts with Max and Jake, who are merely anxious to establish that they are on the right side of the binary division between 'normal' and acceptable and the 'abnormal' or deviant.

Britney also described her attitude and behaviour as exemplary. She told me that when she was doing work 'I am very good' (2) and that 'I like be good and I never ever ever will not listen to a teacher' (3). She claimed she had never been

given a 'red card' (5) or had her name moved down the 'traffic light' behaviour chart (3), and that she would never receive a detention (5). She felt her teachers would agree with this, telling me her Year 3 teacher would describe her as:

... just amazing. She's one of the goodest, one of the goodest, one of the goodest child. She always put her hands up, she's paying attention, she's the fastest one to write. (3)

This teacher wished, Britney said, that other children were more like her because she listened so well in class (2), while her Year 4 teacher would describe her as 'very smart, she's paying attention every time in class... [she] joins in and doesn't muck around' (3). Here, too, she was drawing a distinction between herself as one of the 'good pupils' at the top, and the majority, something she did repeatedly:

I just put my hand up every time... like some people don't... cos the teacher always says 'Why is it always these two? It's never someone else!'. (1)

They muck around, they play too much with other people, they don't get to finish their work. And I tell them, 'if you don't finish your work you're going to stay in', but they don't listen so they just, they'll play around. (2)

She once even told me her ability to focus was put at risk by her friends, explaining 'I try to not get distracted, but they keep on saying my name and I have to say 'stop, stop, stop', but they won't listen' (2), which contrasted with my observation that she often started the 'distractions'. Such good behaviour was not only related to work, however, but increasingly, as she got older, to more general issues of character. She said of her Year 6 teacher, for example, that 'I think she thinks of me like I'm polite, I'm nice, and I'm a gentle girl... Because

like, like every time we finish breaktime I always ask her how was her lunch or how was like her break' (8).

Fabricating a 'good pupil'

The contrast between the bored, confused and distracted child I observed in the classroom, and the hard-working, enthusiastic, focused and high-achieving pupil Britney described in interview, struck me soon after we started working together and put me in a dilemma of interpretation. Whereas with Summer I felt I was experiencing the same child behaving very differently in the classroom and in interviews, with Britney I felt that she was describing a girl to me in interviews that I had never met.

I considered the possibility that her 'good pupil' performance in interviews was 'put on' for me, telling me what she thought I wanted to hear (see Greene and Hill 2005; Mayall 2008). However, I dismissed this because, first, she was so consistent and coherent in her model of 'good pupilhood' that it did not seem like a performance put on for only an hour a term. Second, and unlike some other CLIPS participants, she never 'performed' the 'good pupil' during those moments in class when she noticed me observing her, but continued to chat to her friends and ignore the work, even sometimes giving me a knowing and including smile.

Britney was not unusual among the CLIPS participants in viewing academic success and hard work as important, while also finding schoolwork difficult and unengaging. However, she was unique in claiming, despite all evidence, that she was exceptionally successful. I concluded that it was useful to view her as engaged in a kind of fabrication (Ball 2000), an idea I have discussed in Chapter 1. This fabrication was a version of herself that did not exist (Ball 2003), 'produced purposefully in order 'to be accountable'' (Ball 2000:9) within powerful 'good pupil' discourse. As Ball (2003:225) states:

Fabrications conceal as much as they reveal. They are ways of presenting oneself within particular registers of meaning, within a particular economy of meaning in which only certain possibilities of being have value.

The fabricated self Britney presented to me in interview was one that aligned very closely with an idealised 'good pupil', high attaining, well behaved and keen to learn. I concluded that Britney felt the need to fabricate, despite her low attainment and experiences as a learner, because she was both deeply embedded in 'good pupil' discourse and *at the same time* did not experience herself as constituted as successful within it.

Given how difficult she found success as a learner, she could have pursued other strategies, attempting to gain status from alternative spheres such as sport or humour like Max, working to construct herself outside of 'good pupil' discourse, like Summer, or aiming to be 'middling' academically but socially central, like Jake. She did none of these, however, because her deployment of 'good pupil' discourse meant she was highly responsabilised and believed academic success and failure were determined at the level of the pupil, a matter of individual choice and the adoption of the right attitude. This made low attainment shameful and a failure of character (Anagnostopoulos 2006), incompatible with a sense of self-worth.

Britney's fabrication was also fuelled, I suggest, by her deployment of happiness discourse and her belief in the plasticity of emotions. As she told an (imaginary) child who feared a test in one of our activities, 'always convince yourself that you're great' (9). This could be an injunction to herself: if she can convince herself – and others – that she is a 'good pupil', then she will be able to maintain a sense of self-worth whatever the evidence. I discuss Britney's deployment of happiness discourse in detail at the end of this chapter.

The value of convincing yourself that you are great explains why being anything other than at the top of the academic ranking was not acceptable to her. Simply being ordinary, the right side of the normal/abnormal binary, although it might have been achievable without such fabrication, was not compatible with being 'great'.

Britney's commitment to the responsabilised view of attainment that fuelled her fabrication showed clearly throughout the three years of the project. During our second interview, when she was eight, her faces and thought bubbles for imaginary high- and low-attaining children and their teachers (2) showed her high-marks child ranking herself competitively, 'the only one who pays attention'. This child was also ambitious, saying 'I need from my teacher harder work because these sheets are too easy for me'. This was reinforced by the teacher, who said smilingly that the high-marks child was 'really really really really really good... she's trying so so hard, I wish (pause) I wish the other child was trying so hard too'.

The 'other child', the low-marks child, was telling herself that 'she has to try her best'. What she wanted from her teacher was 'a bit more help... because sometimes it's hard', a less responsabilised view, and acknowledgement that academic success may be harder for some, and external factors such as teacher support important. However, the teacher did not agree and was no longer smiling with her 'lips strawberry cos she has lipstick', but had a downturned, black-lipped mouth, and eyebrows 'going down to look mad'. Far from being the help-giver the low-marks child wanted, the teacher held the child fully responsible for her own failure. She was not just critical of lack of effort, stating that 'I wish the other child was trying so hard too', she was angry, 'really really really mad... I'm so mad at this child cos he, she, is supposed to be doing harder!'. The contrast between the low-marks child's plea for help and the teacher's fury was stark. The low-marks child was left alone, unsupported and censured, and blamed for their own failure.

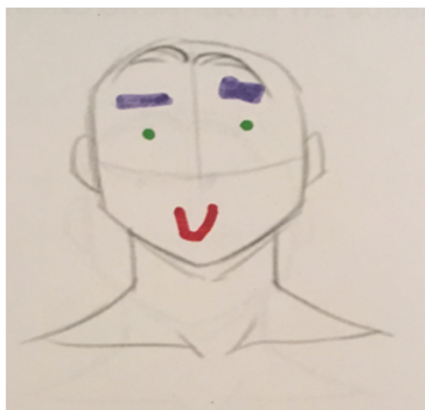


Figure 9: The teacher thinking about the high-marks child; blue eyes and smiling, mouth with 'lips strawberry cos she has lipstick'

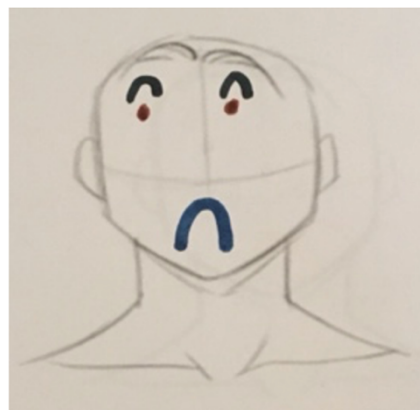


Figure 10: The teacher thinking about the low-marks child; eyebrows 'going down to look mad', dark eyes, and black, downturned mouth

Britney's comments imply sympathy towards the low-marks child, but also suggest that she is failing to accept responsibility; she is relying on help and viewed as not trying hard enough by the teacher, who becomes angry and relegates her as 'other'. These interpretations are not incompatible; Britney may be pitying the child who is not adequately taking responsibility for their performance. She seems to accept that the reasons for success and failure at school are located *within* the two children. The teacher has, and feels, little responsibility; pleased with one child and angry with the other, there is no suggestion that she feels pride or dissatisfaction *with herself* for the part she may have played in their success or failure. This is in striking contrast to Max, who drew the teacher smiling at the low-marks child, pleased with the prospect of giving extra help.

Britney's unwillingness to criticise the teacher is unusual. Pupils in many studies (e.g. Gore 2004; Marks 2014a; Raby 2012a; Woods 2008) as well as the wider CLIPS project, have been found to complain vociferously that teachers and schools are unfair, favouring 'high attainers', discussed in Chapter 3. However, Britney never claimed, and indeed denied, accusations of partiality, responding to probing on the subject with answers like 'we're all kids, we get treated

the same way. It's not about – you get treated the same way, not differently' (5) and claiming that being given the same maths sheets was proof that they had 'the same chances' (2). This extended to future opportunities: 'when older, [people] can be whatever they want. They can be a doctor, they can drive an ambulance, they can be a police officer, they can be anything, anything in the world' (1).

A fair system implies that your position in it must be deserved. When I asked Britney what she felt about being moved down the 'traffic light' behaviour chart in her classroom, she saw it purely as a personal responsibility, telling me it felt 'embarrassing' and saying 'when this happens... I need to make a change and put it up' (3). Behaviourist classroom practices, such as 'traffic light' charts, can be seen as tools to obscure social processes, governing through holding individuals responsible for modifying their behaviour to conform (Woods 2008). Not all children, however, respond by conforming; for some, sanctions elicit anger and blame rather than shame. Woods (2008), for example, describes Zak, a primary pupil who sees sanctions as a reflection of teacher bias and becomes increasingly angry and uncooperative. In contrast, Britney saw being moved down the behaviour chart as a legitimate judgement on her, and the shame she described and her solution, to 'make a change', expresses a high level of responsabilisation and acceptance of school's judgements.

The belief that school is unrelentingly fair is an indication of Britney's move from obedience alone, the hallmark of disciplinary power, to adopting the school's aims as her own, of *choosing* to conform, key to the operation of governmental power. Most children contest some school rules, and a few, like Summer, experience them as an insufferable imposition, a continuous and unjustified restriction of choice and autonomy, whether by forcing her to do maths or denying her the right to get a drink or go to the toilet. Britney, however, never complained about any aspect of school as a source of coercion or restriction on her freedom. Given the level of traditional disciplinary

requirements for conformity and compliance within classrooms (Devine 2003; Gore 2004) and Britney's loud and physically active personality, I found this remarkable. By presenting herself as aligned with school aims and values, she suggested she was *choosing* to follow them rather than merely being obedient to them; in other words, for her, a technology such as a behaviour chart, a classic instance of disciplinary *examination*, observation followed by very public statement of degree of conformity to the norms, operated also as a form of governmental power. This suggested a highly governmentalized subjectivity centred around freedom, albeit a highly regulated freedom (Rose 1996), within which she experienced herself as responsible for making the 'right' choices.

The 'right' choices, for Britney, involved working hard, listening, avoiding distractions and generally being obedient. In the face-drawing activity discussed above (2), the high-marks child was 'always paying attention' and 'trying so hard', an example the low-marks child failed to follow. In the same interview Britney told me that some pupils won't do well academically 'because some people don't concentrate, they will get everything wrong while the teacher's talking. And... when Miss is trying to show what to do on the sheets... they don't pay attention that much' (2). Describing a boy who found work difficult, she placed the responsibility squarely on his attitude:

He can do it but he's just acting silly, like he can't do it... He has silly behaviours... like, say we're in English and we're doing it and he's not... he doesn't want to listen... Why would Miss like someone to be silly as she's trying to teach him more, more to learn so he can know better? If he was listening he would learn more, more maths! (5)

It is this boy's failure to *want* to listen, to take responsibility for his own learning, that Britney views as the problem.

In a sand tray activity with toy animals at the end of Year 6, Britney situated 'failing' pupils in the same way as the 'silly' boy above, enacting a classroom

'maths competition'. The team who lost did so 'because they don't try hard, they only guess to think they know what the answer is. But they always get it wrong because they never try it' (9). The winning team, however, 'try their best, they do the calculation in their head or on a whiteboard or on a paper, they don't just guess'. They were winners because they obediently followed school instructions on completing calculations.

Attitude, according to Britney, determined future, as well as present, success, and she told me the key was 'putting your head into it':

... literally you put your mind on something. Like me, I want to be a doctor or a scientist. If I just do put, like do all my, my um tests and things in secondary and college, and I want to put my head to it just so I can be a doctor. (8)

When asked of obstacles to this success, she told me that 'say like I was studying and I just didn't want to do it because like it's boring, so like I wouldn't do it' (8). Attitude was what led to failure as well as success.

Britney saw attitude as the key to attainment group allocation. When I asked her how she would respond if moved to the bottom table for maths, she was both baffled and indignant, answering me passionately; she had been showing the right attitude, so how could this possibly occur?:

I don't know what, what, what did I do? I did nothing wrong! I pay attention, I do all the work and, and I help people when I'm finished working, so I don't know why I'm going to that other group! (2)

It is notable that she did not mention getting the right answers or understanding, areas where she might find arguing for her place harder. Even her current position on the second-lowest table, though, was not compatible with being 'top', and she told me that this placement was not a reflection of her

ability – she had been put there because ‘I’m good at maths, I can help other people that sits on that table’ (2).

As she grew older Britney less frequently suggested that the right attitude automatically led to high attainment and increasingly emphasised the importance of resilience, needed particularly in the face of academic failure. Phrases such as ‘try your hardest, never give up’ (6) and ‘at least you’re trying and doing your best’ (4) began to emerge. However, attainment remained important. Her comments about secondary school indicate this double set of values:

You would have to study really really hard if you want [a] high level... you can just try your best... I’m going to try really really hard to get the high marks. I will say: ‘You can do it. You might get high marks or low marks it doesn’t matter.’ (9)

On the one hand, high marks are important, but on the other, they don’t matter as long as you are trying your best. Attitude and resilience did not replace attainment in her talk, but she no longer volunteered that she was ‘always getting high marks’ (2) as she had when younger.

The fragility of fabrication

A fabrication is not easy to maintain. Although Britney worked hard to describe herself as the ‘good pupil’, this often collapsed or lacked depth on examination. Statements of her high attainment tended to dissolve, and, unlike Max or Jake, she avoided articulating her marks. The exchange below is typical:

Britney: I’m always getting high marks.

Eleanore Hargreaves: Is this in maths and in English?

Britney: Uhuh (trails off). (2)

The only exception was her excitement at telling me she had got 23 marks out of 25 in a Year 5 maths test:

I used to get low marks when I was in Year 4, then I've got higher every second, every minute, then yesterday I got 23 out of 25 marks, I was so surprised, I was so surprised, because that's basically, um, two – if I, if I got two more right, then I have 25. (6)

She was, at this moment, happy to articulate her marks – they 'fitted' the fabricated version of herself. Moreover, despite conflicting with her remarks in Years 3 and 4 on her high level of academic success, this experience gave rise to a new narrative of improvement. There was a freshness to her surprise and delight in this passage that underlined how vague and unsubstantiated her other comments about attainment were, reinforcing my interpretation.

Although she claimed to 'love learning' (4) and that the best thing about returning to school after lockdown was 'doing new learning about things' (8) this was always very general. She told me that a good thing about her was that 'I like to learn new stuff' (4) but, typically, could not produce examples and struggled to expand:

Um, that it makes it, it interesting, because we never knew, knew it. And um, it makes you even more um, um um satisfying in, in the work. (4)

She showed frequent signs of what Biesta (2015, 2016) calls 'learnification', the effect of the prevalent language of learning over the last two decades, a key part of current 'good pupil' discourse. The 'ready to learn' traffic light on the behaviour chart in Britney's classroom is a classic example of 'learnification'. Being 'ready to learn' was something Britney seemed to feel was crucial to the 'good pupil' subject, but her descriptions in relation to herself lacked detail, complexity and contradiction – qualities one would expect genuine engagement with the content and experience of learning to show. She

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sounded to me as though she was parroting school messages rather than reflecting on her own experience.

As Ball (2000:9) points out, a fabrication is not only 'something to be sustained, lived up to. Something to measure individual practices against... It also excludes other things which do not 'fit' into what is intended to be represented or conveyed'. It takes constant vigilance to construct and maintain a fabrication – decisions have to be made about what should be included, what rejected, what might pass as plausible, and what not, and this seemed apparent in Britney's corrections and U-turns. For example, when asked where her teacher would say she was on the behaviour chart, she replied, 'She would say that she's always (pause) always sometimes on 'wow' and 'superstar' (3), the top two, the 'sometimes', perhaps added on realisation that I only needed to walk into the classroom to see this was not always the case. In fact, I never saw her on either, but only on the 'ready to learn' and 'stop and think' circles.

This vigilance was also apparent in the way Britney determinedly refused to engage in conversations that had the potential to undermine her description of herself as a 'good pupil'. She was reluctant to name *anything* she was not good at in school, eventually, when pushed, suggesting 'electricity', a single topic within the 'lesser' subject of science (3). She refused to give a single example of not doing what the teacher said, telling me that although when very young she had been 'naughty... I am [now] a bit smarter and I listen to the teacher, I pay attention in class, I have friends, I'm nice. I am more mature' (3). After guessing that the teacher would rank her as a 9 out of 10 on an 'attainment scale' (8), she avoided answering my questions about why she wasn't a 10, instead wanting to tell me why she wasn't lower, and seemed so uncomfortable I abandoned the topic. I was left with the impression that the experiences Britney wanted to include in her version of herself could feel a stretch, and the experiences she wished to ignore often crowded in on her uncomfortably.

Indeed, Britney occasionally revealed a very different version of herself when our discussions caught her off guard. For example, when I placed an agree/disagree card with the words 'it's stressful when I put my hand up and I get it wrong' down on the table, she blurted out 'Yes!' before quickly qualifying it with 'Oh wait, oh, no no, no I don't get it wrong' (2). Similarly, when she misinterpreted a question as asking whether older children do better than younger ones at school, I was confused, and in frustration at repeating her explanation she used her own experience as the oldest in the class to illustrate her point:

So basically what I'm trying to say is, you see, because when (pause) say like me... I'm not really good at stuff. (sniff) So it doesn't mean just because I'm born first that you're better at something. (6)

In this passage we hear an unusual lack of belief in her abilities, contrasting strongly with the answers she gave me in response to direct questioning.

The play-based activities we used in interview, however, were where the complexities of maintaining her fabrication were most apparent. At these times, as discussed in Chapter 4, she was able to explore thoughts and feelings in metaphors that provided some protection from the subject matter through their 'psychic distance' (Drewes and Schaefer 2015:39).

Working with 'psychic distance': The animal classroom

The 'animal classroom' activity we conducted at the end of Year 4 (4) provides the most detailed example of the intense emotional work that was involved in Britney's negotiation of her school subjectivity, although I could have used any of our play-based activities to demonstrate this. During this activity, I asked Britney to set up a dolls-house room as though it were a classroom on the morning of a test. She chose toy animals for herself, teacher and classmates

and played out the action, speaking through each animal. Below I describe our play chronologically.



Figure 11: Britney's animal classroom. Britney is Big Cat on the largest chair.

Britney began by casting herself as Big Cat and the teacher as the dog, and the action began with Big Cat being told she had a reading test, when she would have preferred maths:

Laura: ... what's Big Cat thinking when the dog says there's a test today?

Britney: Um, I wonder what kind of test it is today.

Laura: What does the Big Cat hope it is?

Britney: She hopes it is a maths test.

Laura: What would be the worst test for Big Cat?

Britney: Um, reading test.

Laura: Reading test. Why does she not like the reading test, the Big Cat?

Britney: Because it's kind of is hard because you have to like create text, write down the answer, check if it's right... And in the maths one it's easy because you could just like read half the question and do it, and then half of the question, you do it.

Laura: Okay. Oh poor Big Cat. Do you know what, the dog says 'We've got reading test today' – what does Big Cat do?

Britney: 'No!'

Laura: What's going to happen? What's she going to do?

Britney: 'Miss, Miss, I don't want to do it!'

Laura: 'But yes we've got the reading test today.'

Britney: 'Hum, I'm going out – bye!'

Laura: Oh, where's Big Cat gone? The Big Cat's left the room. What's she thinking?

Britney: That it's not fair.

Laura: Say a bit more?

Britney: It's not fair because everyone gets what they want and not me.

This outburst, shouting 'No!' and 'I don't want to do it!' at the teacher, and storming out of the room, was delivered with sincerity. During this dialogue neither of us acknowledged the other animals at all. However, positioning herself as alone in her fear of the reading test – 'It's not fair because *everyone* gets what they want and not me' – was rare for Britney who usually presented school as unceasingly fair, and led me to ask how the other animals were feeling. It was perhaps this introduction of others that led to the sudden U-turn that followed, one I found disconcerting. The dialogue below followed directly on from the above:

Laura: So how are the rest of the animals in the room feeling?

Britney: Happy.

Laura: Happy at the reading test? Okay. What are the rest of the animals thinking about Big Cat leaving?

Britney: That what's the point of coming if you're going to leave the room.

Laura: Okay, right, so Big Cat's outside the room, the test is here. Does the cat ever go back?

Britney: Yes, just to say (pause), to say sorry.

Laura: Who does she say sorry to?

Britney: To, um, the dog.

Laura: Why does she say sorry?

Britney: Because she feels um sorry... Um, because, because she feels like she's confident, she's confident in herself.

Laura: ... So in what way is she confident?

Britney: Um, she might get the score, even if it's a bad score she could try.

Laura: Right okay. So what does she do? So she comes in, what does she say to the dog?

Britney: 'Sorry Miss'

Laura: What does the dog say?

Britney: 'It's all right, but try your best, it doesn't matter what your score is, at least you tried'.

Laura: Does the cat really think that? Does the cat really think it doesn't matter? (Britney nods) So if the cat gets a bad mark does she really not mind?

Britney: Because at least she's tried.

We see Big Cat shouldering the shame of a public apology to undo her positioning as different – 'abnormal' perhaps – the only one publicly unhappy at the test and buckling under the fear of it. She is failing to show resilience and grit (see Saltman 2016) when faced with a challenge. Indeed, the other animals judge her harshly for it – 'what's the point in coming if you're going to leave the room?'. This retort, too, is telling – the 'good pupil' *chooses* school, rather than simply attending because it is the law, just as they *choose* to feel pleased at the prospect of a reading test.

Big Cat's U-turn in behaviour – accompanied by a sudden shift from fury to meekness and shame – can be understood as responsabilisation working as a technology of the self. Britney seems to be working on herself to 'shape itself in order to become that which it wishes to be... a self that calculates about

itself and that acts upon itself in order to better itself' (Rose 1996:154). Big Cat is struggling to correct and improve herself, judging herself against a model of an optimistic and endlessly resilient 'good pupil', as well as against her responsabilised classmates.

The teacher does not, in Britney's hands, discipline Big Cat – as I expected – but instead, rather implausibly, accepts Big Cat's apology calmly, saying simply 'it's all right' and repeating the unwavering message to 'try your best, it doesn't matter what your score is'. Big Cat, then, is not simply being obedient out of fear of getting into trouble. Rather, she is *choosing* to change her attitude. Big Cat's apology is unclear: 'she feels um sorry... because she feels like she's confident, she's confident in herself'. I read this as apologising for her failure to behave in an appropriate way, to be confident and optimistic whatever the outcome, a subject I return to when discussing Britney's deployment of happiness discourse.

As the activity continues, Big Cat goes one step further to become an advocate of effort for those in the class who don't try. Even when, as the calf, I question her repeatedly about the need for effort, she continues to push back unrelentingly, finally introducing the panda (her friend Louise) to support her position. Again, this dialogue follows directly on from the above:

Laura: ... Are there any of the animals that don't try?

Britney: All of them try, but let me get one more, because, okay, Daniel and, Daniel and um Omar [she chooses a calf and a goat].

Laura: ... So the calf and the goat don't try. What does the Big Cat think about the calf and the goat?

Britney: That – 'but you have to try your best, it doesn't matter how high your score is, at least you tried'.

Laura: Okay, can I be the calf now and you be Big Cat?... 'I can't be bothered, I'm not going to try!'.

Britney: 'Okay Daniel, just try – it doesn't matter how, how um, how big your score is, at least you tried'.

Laura: 'But I know I'm going to get a bad score so what's the point, what's the point in trying when I know I'm not going to do well?'

Britney: 'But it doesn't matter about the score, at least you tried. Try hard and try hard, it doesn't matter.'

Laura: 'But however hard I try I know I'm not going to do well, so why would I try?'

Britney: 'But at least you're trying and doing your best.'

Laura: 'So why is that important, doing my best, because I know it's going to be rubbish'.

Britney: 'Because it's more important to do your best than have the highest score, it doesn't matter how high your score is.'

Laura: '... why do you think this, Big Cat – why do you think this?'

Britney: [speaking as Panda, who she walks into the conversation to support Big Cat] 'Well I'm with her.'

Laura: The panda's come along.

Britney: 'I'm with her, Daniel, it's true though, you have to try your best. At least do, at least this one test. If you do it wrong, tell Miss, this dog. Okay? Please? Just for us?'

Britney slips here between the relative importance of effort and attainment. In her return to class above she says she is confident because she might 'get the score'. However, the message to Daniel and Omar – two of the 'bad' (3, 6) people in her class – focuses entirely on effort irrespective of attainment, a message she is perhaps also wanting to believe herself.

‘Well behaved is basically like you’re smiling’: a project of self-improvement

With the growing prominence of positive psychology, the assumptions embodied in what has been termed ‘happiness discourse’ (Binkley 2011), discussed in Chapter 2, are increasingly influential in schools as well as wider society, turning happiness into an endeavour you can succeed or fail at. Being happy is regarded as a self-evident good and learning to cultivate those properties seen as supporting happiness, and to control those that work against this, therefore unarguably beneficial. These ideas are embodied in happiness education programmes, including the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme that Britney’s school taught weekly.

I came to understand Britney as strongly influenced by this discourse. She emphasised the importance of controlling emotions and seemed proud of her ability to do so via an impressive repertoire of strategies, including prayer, breath control, visualisation, mantra, meditation and moving to somewhere quiet, technologies of the self that allowed her to pursue a project of self-improvement. In contrast to her academic struggles, where she seemed to experience herself as lacking the tools for successful self-improvement, I interpret her as pursuing her project to be happy with increasing energy, commitment and perseverance.

Britney’s belief in the importance of achieving the desired psychological states both fuelled her fabrication of herself as a ‘good pupil’ – by convincing herself she was one she could maintain a sense of self-worth – and gave her access to an alternative source of success – achieving happiness and positivity were something to be proud of in their own right. Even poor achievement, such as low-test results, might be made less shameful if they could be recast as opportunities to demonstrate resilience and optimism, as *emotional* success.

I have discussed how the task of both explicit and implicit positive education initiatives is to teach pupils ‘the specific techniques whereby circumstantial optimism and appreciative self-regard can be intentionally cultivated by individuals themselves’ (Binkley 2011:374), what has been termed a ‘positive mental attitude’ (Gill and Orgad 2018), regardless of how challenging the circumstances. Britney’s sense-making seemed to be, as did Jake’s, significantly informed by this discourse. She told me: ‘I think I’m like a happy, always excitable and happy person’ (3) and felt others would agree, offering her an emotional identity she seemed keen to embrace: ‘My aunt would say I’m so nice and always always always always always happy’ (3).

This presentation of herself, not just as generally happy but *always* happy, was restated regularly, increasingly presented as an individual choice, with emotional states largely plastic and within her control. She told me, for instance, that ‘maybe once I was sad and my friend said ‘come on, don’t be sad, be happy’ and then I was happy’ (8). Sadness was a rare and avoidable event.

Britney was strikingly unwilling to acknowledge negative emotions – sadness, anxiety, anger or resentment, for example – whenever possible. When asked to photograph somewhere in school where she had felt stressed, she instead chose a place where she could go to *eliminate* stress:

Britney: Stressed – oh, the secret garden.

Laura: Why have you chosen that?

Britney: Because whenever I’m stressed nature makes me feel happy... because like you can sit down and watch all the birds come and it will be so quiet here. (3)

Her commitment to positivity stood in stark contrast to her first interview, when she told me that getting ‘angry and mad’ (1) was the worst thing about her, and described how upset she had felt on answering a question incorrectly:

... sometimes I get it wrong... [and] like, stress, cos usually I get it right, not wrong... once I got one wrong and I just went stressed out like... 'I don't want to do anything' (demonstrates clenching her fists and putting her hands over her face), so I had to like, I had to breathe in and breathe out, cos sometimes my teacher, when I'm mad I have, I have to breathe in and out, and it helps me relax and not be mad anymore... I have like red cheeks and red [face] and I'm really hot... I can't be like mad in the summer because I would be real (pause) be sweating and I will have a nose bleed so that's why I can't be like [mad] any more... I don't want to (long pause) be mad or angry or get in trouble EVER. (1, capitals indicate shouting)

Her vehemence seemed less directed at getting the question wrong and more towards herself for responding with anger, and the sweating, redness and nose bleeding that came with it. She said that she would never get mad again, and, indeed, she never admitted to me that she had. I reminded her of this conversation several times in later interviews, but she tended to deny such feelings and tell me that 'I don't really get mad or angry' (4) and that 'it's changed' (3). Such emotions were painful and – perhaps realistically – associated with getting into trouble, and she seemed committed to denying she had ever felt them.

During one of these follow up conversations she described how she conquered anger and attained a state of positivity:

... just to calm down, relax... just go somewhere like in my imagination and like go somewhere really quiet and relaxing... Like I'm somewhere like a candy-land and I have friends there that will play with me, and I live in a gingerbread house and I meditate when I'm angry and mad... I cross my feet, I have to – first I pray, and then when I've finished praying I um meditate just quiet for like two minutes. (4)

This description of herself as conquering negative feelings through the power of her imagination drew from the fields of meditation, visualisation and prayer. How she had collected this repertoire of techniques was unclear, though she had said her teacher had told her to 'breathe in and out' (1) when she was angry in our first interview and that they did yoga at school 'just to relax and like just think of your imagination, where you are and stuff like that' (6), as well as being taught the SEAL curriculum. Throughout the project she also attended church every weekend with her mother where she prayed. Her comfortable familiarity with this repertoire of technologies of the self supports the interpretation that she viewed her own wellbeing as a project for which she needed these technologies.

As noted in Chapter 2, resilience provides a link between happiness discourse and 'good pupil' discourse. Being able to sustain a 'positive mental attitude', remaining hopeful, optimistic and self-confident in the face of difficulty, is important to maintaining the 'grit' (see Saltman 2016) expected of a 'good pupil'. The importance Britney placed on this showed clearly in one of our sand-play exercises (9). Choosing to enact a classroom test, she told me that the children were 'very very very happy' and enjoyed tests, positioning this as the basis for normative judgement. The only unhappy child was so because he lacked the right attitude and emotional state 'because he doesn't like studying'. On being told 'come on, you can do it', however, he got top marks along with the others and learned that he should 'never doubt yourself, to always convince yourself that you're great'. The use of the phrase 'convince yourself' suggests that controlling such doubt is a task to be achieved.

Although in this case success flowed from self-belief, Britney also presented positive emotions as intrinsically valuable, independent of their relationship with outcomes. Our discussion about the card 'believe in yourself' illustrates this:

Britney: This one is a good one because like you can believe in yourself no matter what. Say like I was in a race and then so like I was the slowest, and then I said 'I can't do this, I can't do this' – I would tell, I have to, I would tell myself: 'believe in myself, believe in myself. Come on, I *can* do it'.

Laura: Okay, so what if you still failed the race, you came last?

Britney: I would be happy because I had fun. (8)

This discussion illustrates Britney's commitment to the importance of telling herself that she can be successful even when the evidence suggests otherwise, alongside one of her key techniques for doing so, to speak encouraging words to herself in a repetitive mantra style.

Britney's belief that people should tell themselves they are 'great' irrespective of outcome showed even more clearly in her response when Eleanor, also in the CLIPS project and with whom she was 'basically best friends' (4), did badly in a maths test:

I said to her when we was packing up, when we was getting our stuff, I said 'never give up, no matter what', because sometimes she goes to a different group for maths... the different group [is] easy, because it's not really like our work... I just think – because she will give up and then say 'I don't want to do this no more, I didn't even get even close to 25'. And then, just in case she said that, in my head I said to myself 'I will just go to you and say 'never give up Eleanor, try your hardest no matter what'... Because if she gives up then she won't really have that much hope... if she gives up then, then she'll really really lose all that hope... [and] worry about what her maths test – because we usually do maths tests like... three or two a term. (6)

Britney mentioned Eleanor's need for 'special' maths in several interviews and never suggested that 'trying your hardest' would lead to improved

performance. Rather, giving up would make life more unpleasant, leading her to 'really, really give up hope' and worry about the frequent maths tests, making it harder to maintain a sense of self-worth. She wanted to support Eleanor to be resilient in the face of continuing failure, maintaining hopefulness and self-esteem 'no matter what'. She also shared her technique of mantra-like repetition to her friend, advising that during tests Eleanor should tell herself, 'never give up Eleanor, never give up, never give up' (6).

Negative emotions were increasingly viewed by Britney as something to not only be avoided but to be ashamed of, a moral failure. She was reluctant to name the only person in the class she told me 'doesn't really like school so much' (8) as though describing him as unhappy was 'badmouthing' him. He was also a child she described as a 'bad person' (3, 8) who she'd placed bottom on the attainment scale (8) and said was often moved down the classroom behaviour chart (5).

To return to the animal classroom activity discussed, Britney's deployment of happiness discourse is evident here too. Big Cat apologises for the lack of self-belief that led her to run from the room, having replaced it with feeling 'like she's confident, she's confident in herself' (4). She should not fear failure but be positive whatever the outcome. Feeling worry and fear of the test where she is likely to do badly is shameful. Indeed, she feels the need to publicly apologise for her lack of confidence, though whether she's apologising for a lack of a *feeling* of confidence or a lack of a *performance* of confidence is not clear.

What does this do to a low-attaining animal/child who fears poor results when faced with a test she expects to fail? Not only is she under pressure to perform *academically*, but she has to perform *emotionally* too. As Britney told me, 'well behaved is basically like you're smiling' (6). She suspects she is going to fail the reading test but in addition has also failed the emotional test by being unhappy about this. As Britney grew older and her low academic position

harder to deny, mastering herself emotionally seemed to grow in importance to her, enabling her to continue to see herself as a successful school subject.

What we learn from Britney

I have explained in this chapter that the incongruity between my observations of Britney in the classroom and her descriptions of herself during interviews led me to interpret her as engaged in a type of purposeful fabrication (Ball 2000). This was motivated by the dominance of 'good pupil' discourse in her sense-making, particularly its responsabilisation. With a successful subjectivity out of her reach within 'good pupil' discourse, and with the lack of alternative discourses in which to construct a school subjectivity she was comfortable with, she narrated a fabricated version of herself as a top attainer and an idealised 'good pupil', avoiding substantiating claims and resorting to vagueness where necessary. Play activities that offered 'psychic distance' revealed the struggle and emotional work this fabrication involved, struggle she usually denied when asked directly.

I have also explored Britney's deployment of happiness discourse, her increasing commitment to being happy, hopeful and resilient, and the repertoire of strategies she used to achieve this. I have argued that this also fuelled her fabrication of herself as a 'good pupil' and that the idea of 'positive mental attitude' worked as a technology of self for her; she was working on herself in order to develop and maintain happiness and self-belief. I have suggested that as her fabrication of herself as a top attainer became increasingly fragile, working on herself psychologically was an area where she could continue to feel good about herself. In other words, emphasising her psychological success bolstered her understanding of herself as a successful school subject.

The findings in this chapter are important for several reasons. At a broad level, Britney's narrative underlines the increasing pressures of performativity on primary school-aged children, even in the younger years. It shows how 'good pupil' discourse refuses 'low attainers' a safe space. All four of my participants have to negotiate this and all devise different and creative responses to it. Britney's fabrication of herself as an ideal 'good pupil' points to her inability to find acceptable alternative subjectivities within this discourse, or access alternative discourses as Summer did.

Foucault argues that distinctions within institutions involve not only a sharp delineation of the 'other' – the sick, mad or criminal for example – but also finely graded distinctions within the 'normal' – the healthy, sane or law-abiding (see Chapter 2). The ways in which ranking, so key to dominant classroom discourses, is negotiated by pupils has been under-explored and Britney shows one, perhaps unexpected, consequence of this ranking. Whereas Jake and Max aim to be 'normal' rather than 'other', for Britney, simply being 'normal' did not appear to feel safe enough. Because of her belief that you must 'convince yourself that you're great' (9), she seemed to need to construct herself as part of the group at the top of the class, as though being anywhere else in the ranking was shameful. Safely negotiating the liminal space between 'normal' and 'other' might have been possible for her; feeling that only the top of the class was of value left her with the option of seeing herself as a failure or engaging in fabrication.

Britney also illustrates how fabrications can be used purposefully by children as well as adults. Fabrications are always coping strategies to some degree; teachers and school leaders fabricate to pass Ofsted inspections, for example (Keddie et al. 2011). Britney shows how high-stakes and long-term such fabrications can be when allowing them to collapse would risk a terrifying re-positioning of oneself as 'other', as 'deficit'. She also illustrates the intense emotional work fabrications can take to maintain – a point Ball makes about the 'fabricating' teachers he corresponds with in his much-quoted 'terrors of

performativity' paper (2003) – and raises concerning questions about the potential long-term psychological implications of negotiating cognitive dissonance and one's position in school under such performative pressure.

Analysis of Britney's experiences also offers an opportunity to explore the role that happiness discourse plays in the governability of pupils. 'Positive mental attitude', I have suggested, works for Britney as a technology of the self. Using particular regimes of knowledge – the 'taken-for-granted' assumptions that are part of positive psychology – Britney works on herself to improve herself (Rose 1996) and judges others on whether they are doing the same. The idea that happiness is something one can and should consciously pursue as a project is key to this; as noted, happiness compares with discourses around fitness (Binkley 2011) – if you are unhappy it is your own fault for failing to engage in the appropriate psychological (rather than physical) exercise. Britney has access to a repertoire of techniques to achieve this: mantra, prayer, visualisation, breath control, safe space and meditation.

I interpret Britney as constructing her school subjectivity in the way that one might expect under governmentality – with a model of freely choosing to pursue the aims that school laid out for her. Under governmentality, subjects 'account for their own lives and their vicissitudes in terms of their freedom' (Rose et al. 2006:90–91) and my analysis of Britney suggests she was doing just this. In fact, the freedom she considers she has to make choices is the reason, I have suggested, that she feels the need to fabricate – if it is her responsibility to be successful, it is shameful when she fails, and so she must fabricate an alternative version of herself she can be proud of.

Chapter 8: Jake

In the middle, a good player and happy: constructing an academic, social and emotional self



Jake's self-portrait, Year 6 (9)

Background

Jake lived with his mum, dad and older sister. He told me his family were Eritrean and during the first summer of the project Jake visited Eritrea for the first time. At home he spoke English and a little Tigrinya. He told me that his mum worked as a cleaner and later in a hotel kitchen, and his dad was a taxi and bus driver. His auntie and cousins lived nearby and often picked him up from school. He was in receipt of pupil premium, 'summer born', and considered by school at the start of the project as 'well below' age-related expectations in reading and writing and 'below' in maths, and this fluctuated little over the three years. He was in the same class as Max.

Jake was large for his age, loud, likeable, and highly sociable. In interviews he presented as thoughtful, and always approached our activities with his full focus, thinking about questions seriously and often becoming quite tired by the end of the hour. In contrast, when observed during breaktimes or non-work lesson-time, he was constantly joking and talking with friends and was in conversation with his teachers significantly more than any of my other participants. He appeared often in the centre of whole-class banter, and if discussions erupted in some other part of the classroom tended to scoot over to join in or shout his contributions across, often to favourable responses.

Indeed, he was proud that he was ‘friends with literally everyone’ (2), ‘happy’ (3) and ‘very kind’ (8) and liked to include everyone in jokes and discussions. Jake was mentioned by other CLIPS participants in his school more than anyone else; they described him as popular with both pupils and teachers, although his ‘class clown’ persona led to frequent, though mild, reprimands. During work time, however, Jake, like Max, showed signs of anxiety and bewilderment. He did not seem to daydream or opt-out like Summer or Britney, instead becoming increasingly frenzied and frantic to complete his work in the allocated time.

Outline of my argument

In this chapter I explore three subject positions – the academic, social and emotional – that I view as central to Jake’s construction of his school subjectivity. Jake’s *academic* construction of himself centred on being ‘in the middle’, and he asserted that this was the best place to be. The ‘bottom’ he considered highly stigmatised, and he protected himself from it by comparing himself to those he considered ‘lower’ than him, defining the boundary between normal/abnormal and placing himself on the right side of it, if sometimes precariously. His claim to ‘middlingness’, then, was a claim of normality rather than one of being academically average. He also justified the ‘middle’ as better than the ‘top’ by deploying a counter-discourse of ‘ordinariness’, one that emphasised fairness and togetherness and criticised aspirations to be the best, key to dominant discourse. The ‘top’, he said, was ‘too perfect’ (6), ‘overconfident and... mean’ (5), and morally objectionable because of its inherent exclusivity. By working to construct a school subjectivity as ‘middling’, I understand Jake as engaged in counter-conduct, rejecting both the individualistic competition inherent in ‘good pupil’ discourse, and its ranking. However, this was only partial; he accepted a normal/abnormal binary, and by the end of Year 6 seemed less critical of ‘the

top' and generally less committed to the counter-discourse that enabled this counter-conduct.

Jake's *social* construction of himself was as 'a good player'. This position offered considerable social status in the class and combined both being central to classroom banter – 'the class clown' (4,8,9) – and being inclusive, kind and helpful; I interpret Jake as wanting to be popular but also wanting to *deserve* popularity. This subject position appeared more reliably available to him than that of his academic construction of himself as 'in the middle'.

Jake's *emotional* construction of himself was as 'happy' and 'never sad'. Exploring his deployment of happiness discourse, I suggest that his feeling that negative emotions were shameful drove Jake to attempt to reframe potentially difficult experiences in upbeat terms, which seemed to take a huge amount of emotional work. By considering the loss of a 'positive mental attitude' as a personal failure, Jake was denied a space in which he could acknowledge – and, perhaps, challenge – the feelings of humiliation and anxiety that his academic positioning caused him.

Jake saw all three of these subject positions as valuable, I argue, and so the maintenance of them important. I suggest that he felt he negotiated them relatively successfully, if sometimes precariously, and that the construction of each supported that of the others. In other words, these three constructions were interdependent, together forming a coherent school subjectivity, but one that was fragile, each part vulnerable to breakdown in the others.

'In the middle': constructing an academic self

Academic 'middlingness' was a strong theme in the way Jake spoke about himself in many of our interviews (3,5,6,8,9). He told me:

I'm like in the middle, and being in the middle is okay, and being in the middle's like fun...I'm in the middle, so yeah, that's what I'm like. (5)

Most importantly, this distanced him from the stigmatised 'bottom', although he did not aspire to be at the 'top' either, a subject I return to.

Jake expressed strongly that being positioned at the 'bottom' of the class was stigmatised and undesirable. When asked what he would feel like if he were at the 'bottom' he explained:

I would be sad, disappointed. I don't know, all those words that are bad. I would be like disappointed. But lucky I'm in the middle. (5)

He was articulate about the many disadvantages that being at the 'bottom' involved. When I asked what his friends would say if he were moved to the 'support table' with the teaching assistant, he suggested that they would sing mockingly 'Oh no, you're not smart, oh no, you're not smart' (2). He told me a child who got low marks:

... might be thinking that... they're not smart... friends, they might bully him... They will say that he's a dumb person...[they] will say 'Oh you're bad at maths, oh you're bad at English'... 'Oh you're not smart, you don't even know what's 1 plus 1'. (2)

As he explained, 'being on the bottom is like you're feeling like sad and like no one's playing with you and like you're being angry' (6).

In addition, academic failure had serious consequences for the future; he said that if you don't learn in school 'your life is ruined, and [if] like you don't learn, like nothing's going to happen... like you can't go to the job anymore', asking 'if [children] don't learn, then what are they going to do for their life?' (1).

Viewing those at the 'bottom' as humiliated and friendless, full of sadness and

anger and with their futures blighted, it was unsurprising that this was a position Jake was keen to distance himself from.

Jake used evidence that others were below him academically to position himself 'in the middle'. He explained that the teacher gave him 'the middle work' (5) and did not sit him on the 'support table', with people who 'are not learning that much' (2). He also said that he, unlike some others, did not go out for interventions, telling me about the two boys who 'don't understand, yeah, like, um, like I can't explain it, but they don't understand like harder stuff...they always go outside and like do easy stuff and we have to do like the hard stuff...they don't know everything like us' (4). As Summer experienced, the spatial distribution of pupils in the classroom, a key disciplinary technology, made explicit on which side of the normal/abnormal binary you were positioned.

Jake often spoke of the academic failure of others. He felt sorry for those who did badly in tests (6) and was concerned about those in his class, such as David and Maiya, whom he thought the teacher would rank a 1 on our 1-10 scale:

I don't know what good things David is, because he's like – I don't want to say, but he's kind of like a level 1. Because like in maths sometimes he gets on with things but (pause)... and Maiya, like, she doesn't really like, she's the low low low low lowest one. Well, she knows her times tables very good, like she learns them every day or something... but like sometimes whenever you give her a question she just stops and just thinks about the question – she doesn't answer it she just thinks about it. And then it just takes *long*, and yeah – actually I feel like [the teacher] would give her a 1, I'm kind of sorry, but it is what it is. (8)

Pupils such as David and Maiya provided Jake with proof of his 'middlingness' though he showed a sympathy and unjudgmental approach that suggested he

did not consider '1s' personally responsible for their failure, as Britney seemed to. Rather, they deserved pity, and he was very glad and relieved to be able to position himself above them.

He also evidenced his 'middlingness' by positioning others above, as well as below, him. He explained to Max and me during their joint interview that:

... they're like maths genius[es], like they're like the maths gods, and like the maths angels, but like us we're like, so like they're at the top score, and we're like – I'm up to here. And like you, Max, you're like somewhere here (showing decreasing levels with his hands). (5)

Despite his conviction that others were 'below' him, Jake did not always seem fully confident that he was 'in the middle'. He often found work difficult, telling me 'sometimes I get a bit confused about the work' (3) and 'I do make mistakes, so many mistakes' (5), and was worried about his inability to keep ideas or answers in his head:

I... say 'Oh I forgot', that's what I say. Like I say 'I had it, I had it', and then [the teacher] say 'oh you forget?! Like, how?'. (2)

...oh it's stuck in my head, now it's gone! (6)

Other children noticed this too, another CLIPS participant telling me that 'he always puts his hand up and says 'I forgot'... [the teacher] says to him 'So when you put your hand up you can't just forget!'"(2).

Moreover, Jake's forgetfulness and confusion could lead to consequences:

We start the work and I put my hand up [because] I don't know, and then [the teacher] will get so angry... and he will say 'Did you get

distracted?'. If I said 'yes, yes sorry'... he will make me in big trouble.

(2)

When you do like too much mistakes [the teacher] rips out your page, scrunch it up, and put it in the recycling bin and [you] start a new one.

(5)

I observed the aftermath of one such situation when Jake was working in class first thing in the morning while his peers played. He explained afterwards:

I was trying to finish off a rhetorical question... no one else was doing it but I got trouble from Friday, I don't remember, because I got mixed up a little bit. So [the teacher] took out the paper, he um, he (pause) he ripped out the paper and then I had to start again... I was writing, but it wasn't a rhetorical question... and he said... 'I don't like that, I'm going to cross that, I'm going to rip it out'... I was just confused right, I was just confused on Friday... I understand it now. (2)

Jake seemed quite frequently to experience his middling position as precarious. He was not as far above the line between the acceptable 'middle' and the unacceptable 'bottom' to be fully comfortable and seemed anxious when the 'bottom' appeared too close.

For example, when Max, who Jake described as 'a 1' on our 1-10 scale, told him that they had been given the same maths work, Jake seemed concerned that what he assumed to be 'middle work' was perhaps, unbeknown to him, 'easy work', and quickly re-positioned himself above Max, stating 'but I don't mind because I finished it. But then I went to the hard work, and then I went back to the harder work' (5). He also sounded worried when telling me that he, along with Max and another friend, had still not been awarded handwriting pens:

Whoever has that good writing they get a handwriting pen... None of [us] – Maiya and Max, neither me too – we don't have a handwriting pen. (8).

The classroom 'pen licence' worked as disciplinary technology to divide acceptable from unacceptable writers.

Test marks are a particularly sharp form of ranking and Jake was relieved to scrape an 11/20 in a mental maths test as he viewed 10 the lowest acceptable mark (5). In Year 5, speaking of the SATs he expected to take the following year, he seemed far from confident, telling me:

... if you get all that SATs wrong... they're going to say 'What is that?' and you might get bad marks... shout[ed at] and all that... you might be a year behind, you might stay in Year 6 with the other, like with the Year 4s. If you don't do that [well again], you have to stay with the like Year 3s now if they're coming into Year 6. And if you don't um behave well, you're going to do that again and again and again. (6)

His (inaccurate) belief that he could be held back for poor SATs was yet another reason to fear being at the 'bottom'.

School closures during the lockdowns caused Jake to worry he would fall to the 'bottom'. He found the 'home learning' work they were given stressful without the support of the teacher and classroom environment, explaining:

The worst thing about learning at home during lockdown was learning hard things... the English work was so hard, so I just left it and I'm like 'no!', and it was just the worst thing ever because my brain wasn't thinking and all that. (8)

He said he had done very little work over the lockdowns, explaining 'I felt like I would be down because I haven't learnt any school things and like I really wanted to learn all my stuff and all that' (8). As a result, he said:

I was a bit worried because I was like 'oh I don't know when I'll come back from school and like what happens if I get told off for a whole week [because I did] not do anything or something?'. I was a bit worried... Like if I haven't done any work I would be like shocked and don't know what to do. (9)

He was relieved, then, to find school 'just normal... We just came in Year 6 and we just started a fresh new year' (9) suggesting by implication a relief that he had retained his 'normal' position, not, as he feared, finding himself at the 'abnormal' bottom.

In fact, he seemed to feel more academically secure in Year 6, telling me:

'I'm not in the middle anymore, I'm fine now... I've changed a lot... I like going up'. (9)

This statement reinforces my interpretation of his construction of the 'middle' as a place defined not by its association with being academically average, but on the normal side of the normal/abnormal binary. The 'middle' extended dangerously down to that liminal area between the normal and abnormal and Jake seemed confident he had moved 'up' to a place of being 'fine'. Jake's positioning of himself as 'in the middle' in Years 3-5, it became apparent, was not *that* 'fine' after all.

During Year 6 he saw himself as moving from a 5 to a 7 on our 1-10 scale, considering 7 a properly secure ranking and explaining:

It's fine. I mean I got a fine education, I'm like in the middle. I'm close to going up, because I mean I've never [before] got 24 scores. I had like 6 marks before 30! (8)

Jake's increased confidence may have been due to a change of teacher and subsequent change in pedagogy, relationships and classroom culture, or perhaps the return to school, which came as a great relief to him after lockdown, discussed further below, led to a change in his approach to learning and thus construction of his academic self. Either way, in Year 6 he began to consider himself not only 'middling' but more securely 'fine'.

The 'middle' is better than the 'top'

For Jake, being 'in the middle' academically not only protected him from being at the 'bottom', but, at least until the very end of my project, he considered it a better place to be than the 'top':

Being on the bottom is like you're feeling like sad and like no one's playing with you and like you're being angry. But being in the top you're just being too perfect... But being in the middle's good (6)

His distaste for those with high marks echoed Summer's and was illustrated in our activity about 'Julie', the imaginary 'high marks' child. It was typical that Jake, alone of the participants, checked twice that she really was imaginary before criticising her, as he was so unwilling to express disapproval of anyone. He then described her as 'smart, overconfident... I'd say mean' (5). He seemed to view 'smart people' as unfairly able to avoid the trouble that he could experience, and was astonished when I later told him that Julie got detentions, saying:

She's just smart and like, when you said she stayed in for lunch like, I'm saying, why did she do that? Like, why is she in trouble? She's like the

smartest person!... She doesn't have to be in timeout. Like she *can* be in timeout but like I just want to know *how* is she in timeout? That's what I want to know! (5)

Jake was incredulous that Julie did not use her 'smartness' to avoid detentions. Being a 'smart person', for Jake, appeared to mean an easier life, privileged but not admirable. He told me when he'd just turned eight, 'if I were them I would just relax' (1), free from the dangers of academic failure and the trouble this could bring.

Furthermore, Jake seemed to view the life of a 'smart person' as ethically problematic because of its inherent exclusivity. This was evident in our conversation about his marks:

Laura: If you had a magic wand and you could choose to either get not such good marks, medium marks or really good marks (Jake nods vigorously at medium marks). You would go for medium marks? Why wouldn't you go for really good marks?

Jake: It's because that (pause) it's hard to explain, but (pause) um, it's because like being perfect is like, for example... if someone needs help and you're like you're the best... you're not helping them to learn and that...

Laura: So what would it be like do you think, if you woke up tomorrow and you were suddenly 'perfect'?...

Jake: [People] would think about like 'That's not fair, like, I want to be perfect'... being in the top you're just being too perfect, and like other people, like, they don't get the opportunity to be perfect. (6)

Jake's criticism of those at the 'top', then, was twofold. First, 'smart people' may be personally 'overconfident' and 'mean' – selfish and competitive in not using their knowledge to help those who may not have 'the opportunity to be perfect'. Second, he seemed to object to the very principle of ranking,

recognising it as a zero-sum game; by being 'perfect', occupying the exclusive top spots, you are making them unavailable to others, establishing yourself as better than them.

I consider this a form of counter-conduct; he was deploying a counter-discourse (Foucault 1988b) of 'ordinariness' based on a critique (Foucault 1996b) of the superiority of the 'top' and of the value of aspiring to it. Although Jake's counter-conduct was partial compared to Summer's, it was nonetheless key to his sense-making. It allowed him to construct a school subjectivity that rejected the ranking and competition inherent in 'good pupil' discourse; he could be proudly 'middling'. His counter-conduct, like Summer's, provided some protection from the stigma of low attainment, turning his failure to be at the 'top' into a success and a reason for satisfaction rather than shame.

The counter-discourse within which Jake constructed himself as proudly 'middling' promoted the value of 'ordinariness' and emerged in his sense-making about 'success':

Laura: what kind of person do you think becomes successful?

Jake: Like someone who works in a factory and they do all the hard work [not] like the manager [who] just signs all the papers... Like the workers who work in the factory... the manager just sits there and yeah, he just sits there, look[s] around the place... just sits around.

Laura:... And do you know anybody that's successful?

Jake: I don't know the names but they like, the people who work for like shopping centres, like who work for like in shops. (4)

Success, here, seems equated with being of social value, of *deserving* respect from others for doing the hard work, rather than an acknowledgement of position, as in a manager who 'just sits around'. This disdain also showed in his description of 'rich people', saying they were 'spoiled' and 'rude' and wrong to consider themselves better:

... richer [people] don't have to be better than people that have no money... They're not better, they're just being rude to other people... whoever's rich, they're just being spoiled, they're spoiled and all that. The people who are not rich, they're not being spoiled. (6)

It is unclear whether Jake is suggesting that being rich is inherently rude in the same way as a high academic ranking is rude; that ranking yourself above others based on finances is also unacceptable. When I asked him if *he* would like to be rich, he unsurprisingly did not go so far as to say 'no', but immediately qualified his answer with a desire to share his riches:

Um, yes, but I would give poor people money though, because [otherwise] that's being rude. (6)

His counter-discourse of ordinariness – not wanting to consider yourself 'better' than others – included a commitment to authenticity. Like Stahl's (2014, 2016) boys, discussed in Chapter 2, 'loyalty to self' may have been how Jake resisted what he viewed in others as 'inauthentically performative' (Stahl 2016:673), even if hard to articulate clearly. He told me:

Just be yourself, don't like bully anyone or anything just be yourself... That's a good thing... Being yourself is good because, like no harm is going to come to you, you just be yourself. Like it's yourself, it's your personality. (8)

In positioning 'ordinary' as better than the 'top' Jake is rejecting the disciplinary technology of ranking. As I note in Chapter 2, within a disciplinary classroom, individuals are 'judged not by the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of their acts but by where their actions place them on a ranked scale that compares them to everyone else' (Gutting 2005:84) and they should always be endeavouring to move higher (see Foucault 1991:180). It is this ranking that Jake rejects. Although he accepts the normal/abnormal binary at the bottom of the ranking

and is keen to be 'normal', he would *prefer* to be 'in the middle' than at the 'top'. Indeed, in stark contrast to my other participants, Jake felt that even teachers could value the 'middle'; he said that Mr Reed's favourite pupil was 'cheeky, funny' but not one of 'the smart people... she's like the middle one' (3).

As discussed in Chapter 2, several studies (e.g. Ingram 2018b; Stahl 2016; Willis 1977) on the school experiences of working-class children, mostly White boys, find a commitment to 'ordinariness', authenticity and egalitarianism – what Stahl (2016:670) calls an 'egalitarian counter habitus'. The working-class desire noted by Skeggs (1997) to 'fit in' rather than 'stand out', and to avoid showing off, considering yourself superior, or pretending to be something you are not, resonates with my interpretation of Jake. Reay (2003:305–6) argues that, while working-class children are subject to wider pressures to become responsibilised, aspirational and competitive:

... such processes are both ameliorated and framed by an overreaching sense of, and commitment to, collectivity and 'the common good' where the pursuit of education is framed by a strong sense of communitarian as opposed to individualistic, entrepreneurial self-motivations.

Such working-class egalitarianism involves a partial rejection of neoliberal performativity (Stahl 2016:679). I suggest this provides a plausible reading of Jake even though being a Black, rather than White, working-class boy will mean race mediates his experience somewhat differently.

In one interesting conversation in Year 6, however, there were signs that his rejection of the 'top' may have started to weaken. While the previous year he had been clear he would *choose* to be 'in the middle', when asked if he would like to become a 10 on the 1-10 scale he said that although 'for now I would like to be a 7' (8), he would like to be a 10 one day. Broadly positive about this wish, though still a little ambivalent, he explained, 'But like yeah I don't know

really... I would definitely do it of course' (8). Asked what others would think of him if he were a 10, he replied:

Like fine, they wouldn't do anything about it, they would just be like 'okay cool, well done'. Yeah... Everyone is treated equally. I don't mind if anyone's on the 10... It's fine, I don't mind. Old me is going crazy right now, but the new me is different, yeah... it's so weird because people that are at 10 they're still fine, I don't mind, like. People that are not at 10 it's cool, I don't mind, because you're going to improve, don't worry. But like people at 10 – stay like that, I don't mind, like cool. (8)

The reasons for Jake's apparent shift in his attitude to the 'top' in Year 6 were not clear, though he himself appeared to recognise it as significant enough to drive his old self 'crazy'. He could be understood as increasingly embracing a more neoliberal responsibilised view of success, a key part of 'good pupil' discourse, saying 'well done' to the achievers and suggesting that everyone is treated equally and so being an achiever is a deserved position. Indeed, he told me in his last interview, much to my surprise, that he wanted to:

... be a businessman... like, going to be chilling in my life. I don't know what kind of business really but I'm going to enjoy it. (9)

The position of 'top people' who 'just relax' (1), was now presented as desirable, a contrast to his earlier criticism of the manager who 'just sits around' (4).

These conversations in Year 6 suggest a potential weakening of his counter-discourse as he showed signs of questioning his old-held beliefs. His increased feeling of academic security may have made those at the 'top' less threatening, meaning he had less need to scorn them. Perhaps, also, experiencing himself as doing better academically without it making *him* 'mean', broke this connection, leaving him surprised that 'it's so weird because

people that are at 10 they're still fine'. A change of teacher and pedagogic practice, and the knowledge that SATs had been cancelled, may have made academic ranking seem less harsh, and therefore aspiring to move up it more acceptable to him.

Whatever the reasons, this shift only emerged in Year 6 and even then was not a wholehearted one. Until this point I interpreted him as critiquing the competition and ranking inherent in 'good pupil' discourse in favour of an egalitarianism and inclusivity; his counter-discourse of 'ordinariness' enabled him to construct a school subjectivity of proud academic 'middlingness'. Importantly, however, this desire for 'middlingness' was only in relation to academics. He was very happy to acknowledge that he would like to be a famous footballer or actor (4), for example, and had no desire to construct himself as 'middling' socially. It is to his *social* construction of himself that I now turn.

'A good player': constructing a social self

Jake seemed to feel that being at the 'top' socially, unlike academically, was both desirable and within his reach. He viewed social success as made up of two sets of behaviours. First, he was strikingly committed to being inclusive, keen to ensure no-one was left out, unwilling to criticise, and constantly stressing the importance of being kind and helpful. Second, he was highly sociable, always part of classroom banter and often very visibly, describing himself as 'the class clown' (4,8,9) and valuing his popularity. I understood him as wanting to be popular, but also to *deserve* this popularity. This construction of himself as 'a good player' interlinked with his academic construction of himself as 'middling'; Jake's positioning of those at the 'bottom' as stigmatised and friendless and those at the 'top' as 'mean' and 'overconfident' meant that being 'a good player' became a subject position more available to those 'in the middle'. I discuss this interrelationship at the end of the chapter.

Jake's social construction of himself was one of popularity. He told me that 'everyone's my friend, literally' (2) and that his friends were 'always nice to me' (2). He benefited academically from these relationships, telling me that 'sometimes I get bad at maths, but then if I sit next to Lematia I get better and better because she's helping me' (3), and that:

If I have a hard question like 60 times 14 for example, I'm like 'Oh no, I forgot' and then someone might like help me...until I get the hang of it.
(6)

He also felt Mr Reed, who taught him in Years 4 and 5, liked him, saying that he 'helps me a lot' (4) and 'when I get a mistake he just slows down and says it again' (6).

Jake said he played with 'everyone' (3) and I observed this as he moved around the class talking to everyone, both adults and children, almost as though he were 'working the room'. Whenever there was something going on, Jake was in the centre of it. He saw his role as 'class clown' as key to his popularity:

I'm the class clown... like, I'm really good at jokes... and the people just laugh... I like being the class clown because it's like, because if no one's the class clown it would just be boring... but if you're a class clown you would, you would be funny, making people laugh. (4)

His description of this role suggested that it took speed and skill and was highly appreciated:

So it's basically you're in a class in the school learning, and then the teacher says a question and you have to think of something, like you have to think of something funny, pick something funny, and then you

say it, and then they laugh... everybody in our class likes a class clown.
(8)

This was a particularly viable strategy during the two years in Mr Reed's classroom, which was often full of noisy, jokey banter, as described in Chapter 5. Mr Reed, Jake explained, was 'the class clown too' (4), saying 'everybody likes Mr Reed... he's funny and he makes too much comedy, he makes too much drama and that' (2). Year 3, Jake said, had been different. In Year 3 his talking and joking had tended to get him into trouble with the teacher, and he commented several times that he'd 'got in trouble for nothing' (1,4,8), unexpectedly finding his name had been put on the board (1) or he'd been given a 'yellow card' (8) when he had been '... just talking to just friends for like 2 minutes, just two seconds probably, and I had to go for a time-out!' (8).

In Mr Reed's class, however, not only was banter accepted and valued, but was something he could share with the teacher. I observed this on my second and third visits:

Mr R says 'You hate...' to someone and Jake shouts out 'I hate broccoli' to which Mr R replies 'Broccoli called me last night and he hates you' (both laughing). (Ob 3)

Jake contributes in class and Mr R makes a joke, saying 'it's like you've just woken up'. Jake smiles in a worried way. (Ob 2)

Although their jokes at times seemed at Jake's expense, Jake appeared to feel that being 'the class clown' offered a route to social status with both teachers and pupils. Indeed, Jake was mentioned by others in the CLIPS project more than any other pupil and almost always positively. In stark contrast to the rest of my sample, he was considered popular with teachers. However, other 'low attainers' occasionally seemed resentful. One CLIPS participant told me that their Year 3 teacher 'feels bad about us, he doesn't like

us a lot, it's only Jake' (1) and that Jake 'gets more chances' (2) from the teacher. Another told me that 'he gets picked more than anybody else... Jake always gets picked... he might not know the answer, and I might know it... I feel mad [about it]' (2). In general, however, he was mentioned by others with amused admiration.

His social ambitions, however, went beyond simply being 'the class clown' and popular. Jake spoke of the importance of 'a good player' (3,8,9), describing it as being 'good at teamwork... good at helping people' (8), which seemed to include being both kind and inclusive. Top marks even became acceptable when you could use them to help others:

I want to help my friends too... it's just like helping people is a bit better than just being perfect... getting good marks is good *because* you can help people and that... for me I would help people. (6)

He considered himself kind, explaining:

I'm very kind, I'm very kind, yeah yeah yeah. I would say 99% of, no I should say like 95% of the class says that I'm kind – sometimes bossy but very kind. (8)

He was also strikingly keen to ensure no-one was left out. This extended to our toy animal play in interviews. He was the only child in the sample who, during the animal classroom activity, insisted on finding an animal for every child in the class and counting and re-counting them meticulously to make sure no-one was forgotten, despite my attempts to hurry him:

Jake: ... we have 23 [children] – one, two, three, four, five, six –

Laura: (interrupting) We're not going to be able to put everyone in.

Jake: (ignoring me, continues to count to 23) Yeah everyone's here. (4)

He showed the same concern in a Year 6 activity, expanding the sand in the tray so he could fit everyone in and placing every single toy I had provided in his imaginary playground:



Figure 12: Jake's sand tray activity (9)

When I commented on this, he removed the spider and squid, explaining:

I don't know, I maybe have a phobia. (9)

Though quickly returned them:

Actually, I don't have a phobia of spiders... I might as well just put the spider in, he might feel left out. And then the squid. (9)

This desire not to leave anyone out extended to claiming he felt equally positive about everyone. When I asked who his best friends were, he never responded, always saying that he liked 'just everyone' (3), and when I asked

him to think of someone he considered his 'least favourite' he vehemently refused to:

Laura: Someone in school who's your least favourite person. It can be a child or a grown-up, who –

Jake: (interrupting) Like in real life?... Oh no!... No, no one!

Laura: There must be someone at school you don't like?

Jake: No. Everyone in my class... no one. No, I can't... Everyone's my friend. (3)

He refused again in Year 6 when asked to pick three people for an interview activity – one friend and two others, asking, 'do I actually have to do that? Because all of them are my friends... I really don't have anyone.' (8).

He was strikingly unwilling to do anything that might have been construed as critical of anyone, as shown by his reluctance to be critical of Julie before checking she was imaginary. However, he faced a dilemma when asked about the academic performance of those at the 'bottom' of the class; it was important to him to construct himself as better than them, on the normal side of the normal/abnormal binary, but he was loath to be disrespectful about them. Here was a tension between his principles and the reality of negotiating his liminal academic position. He spoke hesitantly at these times, his talk peppered with comments such as 'I don't want to say, but -' and, as quoted earlier, 'I'm kind of sorry, but it is what it is' (8). He reported their bad marks with expressions of sympathy and went out of his way to tell me what they did well. When I looked puzzled at his description of a child as 'less more smart' (8), he explained:

Less more smart... Yeah, because I don't want to say the word 'dumb'.
(8)

Even after suggesting rich people were 'spoiled' and 'selfish' he added that he liked them, explaining with a sigh that he liked both rich and poor equally: '[I like] both you know, both' (6).

Jake's militant inclusiveness fitted with the egalitarianism he drew on in his justifications of 'middlingness' as best. Not wanting to rank himself against others or others against himself was inclusive; being 'ordinary' was a place available to most, if not all – a place of togetherness. Whereas previous studies have found that, for both boys (Younger, Warrington, and Mclellan 2005) and girls (Jackson 1968, 2010), 'school work' and 'cool work' demand different behaviours and so need balancing carefully, this was not a problem for Jake. Rather, 'school work' did not threaten 'cool work'; if one was committed to 'middlingness' there was no conflict to be negotiated.

Lockdown, however, made his social positioning of himself temporarily unavailable; being 'a good player' only existed in relation to others. Jake's descriptions of the lockdowns showed him sadder and more negative than at any other time. He told me he had not enjoyed lockdown and that returning to school had filled him with joy and relief. Telling me how 'boring' (8,9) lockdown had been, he explained:

... when I heard school was going to come back... I was full of happiness. Because I missed my friends, I missed school, and all I do every day at that time was just playing [computer] games, that's it, no going outside, doing nothing. (8)

His drawing of himself during this period echoed this description; he explained 'I'm just like staring at the computer and saying 'no, I'm not doing this' (8):

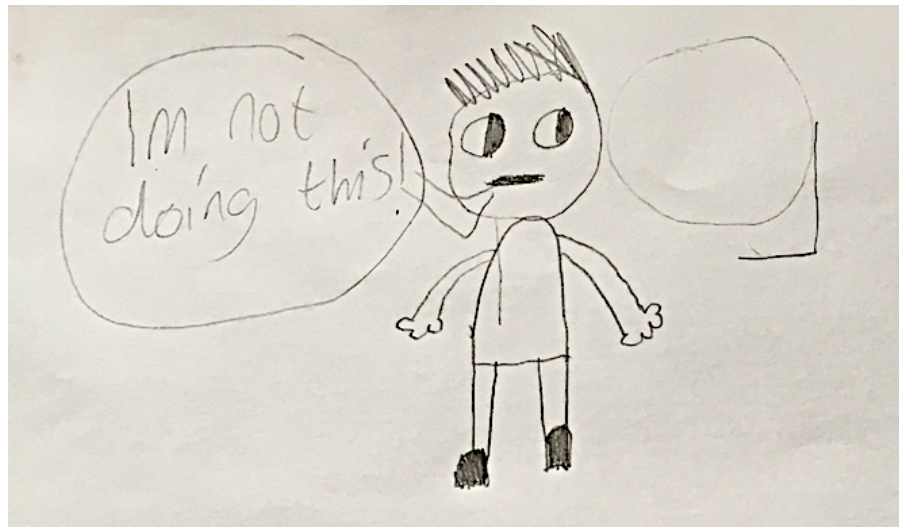


Figure 13: Jake's picture of himself during lockdown

Most of all, however, lockdown had made him 'sad because I didn't get to see my friends' (9). He explained:

Meeting my friends was the best thing about returning to school... I want to see if they changed or not, and really none of them have changed, none of them. (8)

This joy at being reunited with his friends was echoed after returning from the second lockdown, when Jake picked the happiest from my page of 'blob people' to represent himself, explaining 'they met their friends and they're just enjoying life and they're playing with them, they're having a laugh' (9). He did, however, find the year group 'bubbles' (restricted groups) school implemented limiting, wanting to 'pop the bubble' (8) and socialise with other year groups. He told me 'I don't like the new rules in the school...It's just it's very fun being together instead of just staying in [your bubble]' (8).

The isolation that came with the pandemic closed off, if only temporarily, the 'good player' subject position. Jake appeared to feel this deeply; his social construction of himself had always struck me as the most robust, more than either his academic or emotional ones. The end of lockdown meant the

reopening of this subject position and the joy Jake took in his revived classroom popularity was substantial, his social self appearing relatively solid for the remainder of the project.

‘Happy’ and ‘never sad’: constructing an emotional self

The third and final subject position I discuss is in relation to Jake’s emotional construction of himself as ‘happy’ and ‘never sad’. I view him, like Britney, as taking a highly responsibilised approach to emotions. His emotional construction of himself linked with his social and academic ones. It supported his social construction of himself as he believed happy people were more popular. At the same time, it was supported by his academic ‘middlingness’ because being at the ‘bottom’ led to feelings of sadness and anger, incompatible with being happy.

A striking feature of our interviews was Jake’s repeated description of himself as ‘happy’ and ‘positive’. When asked what he was like as a person, he replied ‘just being happy’ (3) and he explained that the first thing both his parents would say about him was that ‘I’m a really positive person’ (3). He said that the girl he sat next to in class felt the same: ‘a positive person like yeah... [she’d say] I’m like nice and friendly, I always say ‘yes yes yes’’ (3). The words ‘positive’ and ‘happy’ were peppered throughout our interviews in relation to himself (2,3,4,5,6,9) and often, when asked how he’d found a particular experience, Jake would reply simply ‘just happy’ (4).

Happiness, for Jake, was not only presented as his ‘normal’, but his constant, and his ‘positive mental attitude’ (Gill and Orgad 2018) was accompanied by a fierce commitment to never being otherwise. He told me ‘I’m never miserable, I’m never sad’ (3) and rarely used negative adjectives to describe his feelings. When I asked if anything made him lose his positivity he replied ‘no’ and ‘I’m just okay’ (3) and completed our entire ‘feelings photography’ activity (3)

without acknowledging having ever felt a negative emotion in school. When asked to take a photo of an 'unhappy' place he could not think of one and took a photo of a 'happy' place instead. His 'scared place' was not somewhere he'd felt scared himself but a PE shed he imagined would be scary to get locked in, and his 'anxious place' was in the road across from the football pitch, reflecting the imagined anxiety that a mis-kicked football might be 'popped by a car' if it landed there.

When I pushed him to express negative emotions, he often recast them as fewer degrees of positivity or lower levels of happiness. When asked how he felt when he got something wrong in front of the class, Jake explained his feelings as 'less' happy than usual, showing me with his fingers and saying it was 'okay a little bit' and that he wasn't 'that happy, it was just like this tiny bit' (2). Watching a video of test scores being read aloud to the class, he made what I understood as a sad noise at another, usually very low-attaining child's score being higher than his own, though when asked if he was surprised by this said no, firmly telling me 'I'm not surprised, I'm just happy for other people' (5).

When Jake did acknowledge negative emotions, it was often, as with Britney, during interview activities that allowed 'psychic distance' (Drewes and Schaefer 2015:39) from the subject matter. For example, Jake told Green Squid, the toy alien I used in interview, that he found tests 'stressy' although when I pushed him to elaborate said 'I feel stressed and happy at the same time' (4).

In Chapter 2 I discussed the view that the increase in emotional education in schools, based on positive psychology, is leading to the steady individualisation of emotions (Illouz 2008). Seligman's (2003) 'happiness formula' laid out the key assumptions underlying positive psychology's conception of happiness, and all emphasise the role of individual willpower

over that of one's circumstances. As Cabanas and Illouz (2019:57) summarise, within this new discourse of happiness:

Happiness can be acquired, mastered and engineered to a great extent through choice, willpower, self-improvement and the proper know-how... non-individual factors play a rather insignificant role in the wellbeing of any person.

Sadness, within this discourse, indicates that you have failed to *choose* to be happy, making it a sign of personal failure or inadequacy. Jake, I suggest, subscribed to this individualisation of emotions and so I link his sense-making with happiness discourse, though it may also have had roots in his Eritrean home culture, a link I did not explore.

Jake's view of the importance of remaining positive and the shame he attached to not doing so was evident in his comments about Mr Reed, his much-admired teacher who, he told me, never felt sad. This was despite strong disagreement from Max:

Jake: Mr Reed never feels sad. He's a strong man. I'd say he never feels sad...

Max: I've seen this guy sad a million times!...

Jake: No, he never feels sad. (5)

Jake seemed to see sadness as a sign of weakness; to be 'strong' one had to maintain one's positivity. Accordingly, Jake felt that someone who did not feel 'all right' should not express this – only positive feelings should be shared:

Jake: Sharing feelings to people is not great because, because it's just, no. Because why do people want to know about your feelings?... [It's] okay [to share] some feelings but not all feelings... If you're all right, if you're okay, if you're – yeah just if you're all right.

Laura: Okay. And what are the feelings that it's not okay to share?

Jake: Just sad, miserable, like bad stuff. (6)

He told me in Year 6 that he 'tries not to' feel sad or angry, and that 'the right emotions is like happy, excited, surprised. But like the wrong emotions is like sad, angry' (9).

It could be argued that it was the values of what McQueen (2017:208) names the 'boys don't cry' discourse of masculinity that framed Jake's emotional experience and directed what he considered appropriate in terms of emotional disclosure. However, Jake, I suggest, went further than this: successful performances of manhood within this discourse of masculinity may include not showing emotions, particularly negative or 'weak' emotions, but they are not generally understood as necessitating the continual positivity and happiness that Jake appeared so committed to.

Jake also believed that positivity was key to being popular; those who were sad were less likely to have friends:

... if you're just feeling sad and down and all that, people might not help, like people feel like you're going to be sad a lot, like no one's your friend and that if you're sad... if you're happy like you can be, like you have friends then all the time. (6)

Being a 'positive person', then, appeared key to achieving his socially successful role in the classroom.

'I do make mistakes, so many mistakes': Staying happy in the face of difficulty

Experiences of academic failure might have threatened Jake's happiness. However, it was *how he felt* as he struggled – his ability to *stay* happy and

positive during these difficult times – that Jake believed important. In other words, it was his ability to demonstrate resilience that mattered. As discussed, he said he made ‘mistakes, so many mistakes’ (5) sometimes leading to ‘big trouble’ and having work ripped from his book (2). Nonetheless, he tended to reframe such experiences positively, explaining that he ‘would feel fine if I got an answer wrong, it’s just like I’d just learn by my mistakes’ (9). This was a sentiment often elaborated on:

If I get bad marks I mean it’s okay because you’re learning [from] your mistakes... Don’t feel scared because um, yeah just don’t feel scared... just like take out the fears of your body and that, just feel happy, just feel calm and that. (6)

Despite Jake’s belief that your life is ‘ruined’ if you do not do well at school (1), noted above, the responsabilising idea central to happiness discourse that one needs to reframe and take control of negative emotions and, in his words, ‘take the fears out of your body’, echoes Britney’s visualisation, breath control and prayer. Jake’s attempts to maintain a constant ‘positive mental attitude’ were a crude reproduction of this message, echoing descriptions of the ideal resilient subjects in this discourse, working on themselves to ‘spring through’ (Gill and Orgad 2018:478) hard times by cultivating positivity.

Resilience also involved approaching *potential* difficulties with positivity and optimism, something that Jake told me, during Year 6, was becoming easier for him:

I’m fine. I’m always fine. I don’t have all these um like worries and all that. All I have, yeah, is always like (pause) how am I supposed to explain? Like before I used to have this thing yeah, when my mum says – in Year 5 for example, my mum said you’re going to go by yourself [to school] one day, and I’m like ‘oh no I don’t want to go by myself one day’. And then I tried it and it was fine. Like, nothing happened. Like, I

used to have this feeling yeah, and then after I'm fine, I can go by myself now. (8)

He told me that he still got confused in class 'but not all the time now... I'm always confident' (8).

Jake did not seem to be advocating 'putting a brave face on things' so much as suggesting that fears and anxieties are superficial constructs that can be set aside to reveal the authentic person underneath:

Believe in yourself, so like for example if you want to sky dive, but then you're in the, you're in the plane and you're like 'I don't want to do this' – just be yourself, you know, take all those frights away, take all the scaredness away. Like, you've got this, like, you're not, you're not a cry baby. (8)

His conviction that one should not consider oneself a 'cry baby', however, may not have been quite secure, as he continued: 'Are you though? – you never know.' (8).

Jake used the word 'calm' regularly (3,4,6,8,9) to describe an ideal emotional state. Common London slang indicating contentment or agreement (Urban Dictionary 2022), Jake appeared to use 'calm' to mean a state that was confident and free from anxiety. He told me he would be 'calm' at secondary school (8,9) and that people should be 'calm' when things went wrong for them (4,6). When playing out classroom scenarios with our toy animals, Jake explained that an animal who had been called 'stupid' by another animal should not react, saying 'no, he should just feel calm about himself' (9). This echoed Britney's commitment to emotional self-control and suggested that happiness discourse was working for Jake, too, as a technology of self; he was working on himself to produce desirable emotional states when faced with challenging situations.

During Jake's end of Year 4 tests, however, I observed a set of circumstances that appeared deeply distressing to him. To finish my discussion of Jake's deployment of happiness discourse, I compare an extended section of my observation notes with the interview that followed this observation to demonstrate Jake's commitment to constructing himself as 'happy' and 'never sad', even when this subject position was not easily available. My fieldnotes show Mr Reed reading out the results of one maths test before handing out the next. They run as follows:

Mr R is talking about how badly some pupils have done. He says that Max and Landon are going to spend their lunchtime re-doing the test... Jake is looking around the class as Mr R reads out the marks, saying each child's name and their score. He puts his face in his hands. Mr R reads Lematia's and Adam's scores – 17 and 18. He then reads Jake's – 13 – and says 'that's fantastic, really good job'. Jake's face doesn't respond. His lips are twitching. He holds a pencil to them. His eyes are down. Mr R continues reading marks and commenting on them... he begins explaining something about coordinates... Suddenly I hear him say 'Fine! Sara can't even look at the board, so I won't explain anything to you. You can just do the [next] test. Good luck guys'. He seems angry and sarcastic. Jake makes a frustrated sound, looks down worriedly and throws his hand to the side.

Mr R begins handing out the test papers. Jake is given a paper. He is looking back and forth from his test paper to Mr R. He writes his name on the front. His face is crestfallen. They are asked to turn to the first page. Jake leans his head against the wall. He is at the time-out table which is very low and he looks too big for it, leaning clumsily over the paper. Mr R reads the instructions for the start of the test. Jake is holding his top lip, squishing it between his fingers. Mr R continues to talk and explains the importance of 'working out'. Jake's eyes are down at the carpet. He sucks his cheek into his mouth...Mr R is now reading

the first question out loud to the class. Jake looks anxious, circling answers and rubbing them out. He is still on question 1. Mr Reed is still talking, saying 'it's an issue if you still don't know your times table in Year 4. It's more useful than learning to kick a ball, you should be learning your tables at break times, it's more important than watching the Avengers'. Mr R begins reading question 2 loudly. Jake is still completing question 1... he is rubbing something out on his page and writing something again and rubbing it out. He takes a deep breath and sighs, breathing outward visibly, putting his hands in his lap... Jake's knees touch the top of the table. He is counting on his fingers again and writing... Jake puts his chin in his hands and frowns. (Obs 4)

Watching Jake during this observation, both I and my colleague interpreted his feelings as ones of intense anxiety and unhappiness. His expressive face showed discomfort at hearing the list of higher marks read aloud followed by his lower one, and then being publicly congratulated suggested either that Mr Reed had lower expectations for him – not a 'really good job' but a 'really good job *for you*' – or that Mr Reed was being disingenuous, congratulating Jake for our benefit perhaps. Jake also appeared visibly upset by Mr Reed's anger when he refused to explain the coordinates that were coming up in the next test, and confused and worried as he struggled to keep up, spending much of his time rubbing out and re-writing answers. Throughout, his body-language, as he sucked his cheeks in, frowned and sighed, suggested he was deeply uncomfortable, and he looked awkward seated at the 'time out table', which was too small for him. This was usually a place signifying wrongdoing and separation and being sat here may have affected how Jake approached his test; I was struck that in the animal classroom activity that followed, he immediately created a 'time-out' space to sit his animal in.

During the interview that followed, stimulated recall allowed me to explore Jake's interpretation of this experience alongside video evidence of it. Jake was adamant that neither he, nor his good friend Max, were 'worried' by it.

Max, he explained, was 'never worried. He's just, like, he's normal... No he's never worried'. Jake seemed affronted that I was accusing Max of failing to remain positive, despite having been told, publicly, that his marks were so poor he would have to repeat the test at lunchtime. He was emphatic that he, too, had been unaffected, though on watching the video further (where he looked unmistakably miserable) he shifted his narrative before I could comment, saying firmly, 'No, in the outside I look worried but in the inside I'm not'. He continued to challenge this video-evidence in the animal classroom activity, choosing the top two predators in my collection of toy animals to represent him. The lion, he told me, was his (unworried) inside as, he said 'I like lions'. The tiger he chose as his (outwardly worried) outside, underlining his lack of vulnerability despite appearances, while also telling me that tigers, perhaps like worries, 'are not my thing'.

Although Jake seemed unhappy with his test result, saying that he'd '*just* got 13 marks', he said when asked, 'I was happy. I was just – I didn't really care'. He also told me that he was 'not embarrassed' at Mr Reed reading out the marks despite Max, present during our discussion, disagreeing strongly, as discussed in Chapter 5.

The only acknowledgement from Jake that he may have found this a distressing experience was in his choice of an animal to represent Mr Reed in the animal classroom:

Laura: ... who shall we have for Mr Reed?

Jake: (laughs quietly)

Laura: You're laughing. Oh –

Jake: He hates spiders.

Laura: He hates spiders?

Jake: Yeah.

Laura: So you've gone for -

Jake: He's the spider.

Laura: So why does that suit Mr Reed?

Jake: Because he hates spiders, he's scared of spiders, so I will put him as a spider.

Despite Jake's adoration of his teacher, Mr Reed is positioned, following this experience in the classroom, as the animal he is scared of, suggesting, perhaps, an ambivalence that Jake does not make explicit, or perhaps even acknowledge to himself.

Jake's emotional construction of himself as 'happy' and 'never sad', I have argued, was one he was deeply committed to maintaining. Even when this subject position appeared less available, he clung to descriptions of his experience as positive in a way that echoed Britney. If one subscribes to the idea that psychological states are the responsibility of the individual (Gagen 2015), it follows that it is shameful not to manage them 'successfully'; Jake may have viewed being 'sad and miserable', in his words, as a personal failure. Unlike Britney, though, Jake acknowledged that he struggled with schoolwork; he spoke at length and openly about his mistakes in his academic work and feelings of confusion. However, I suggest that he felt these struggles were *only his circumstances* and therefore should affect his psychological state as little as possible. Jake appeared, even at his young age, to feel that he should be able to govern his emotions at will and was working on himself to achieve this.

What we learn from Jake

Like all my participants, Jake was highly aware of the costs of being, and being seen to be, low attaining, and the subject positions I have outlined in this chapter need to be understood in this context. The three positions I discuss – his academic construction of himself as 'in the middle', his social construction of himself as 'a good player' and his commitment to being 'happy' and 'never

sad' – provided, I have argued, sources of worth and dignity and were therefore important to maintain.

In contrast to Max, who experienced a tension between pursuing academic 'normality' and social inclusion, and found completing his work while taking part socially difficult, Jake found the different aspects of his school subjectivity largely complementary. His social construction of himself as a 'good player' was made more available by both his academic 'middlingness' and his 'happy' disposition. Those at the 'bottom' were bullied and unpopular and those at the 'top' were 'mean' and 'overconfident' (5) leaving the 'middle' offering the greatest opportunities for social success. Similarly, 'if you're going to be sad a lot, no-one is your friend' (6); a happy and positive disposition made 'a good player' subject position more available.

Moreover, being 'a good player' socially may have made his academic construction of himself as 'middling' more available. The confidence that came with being popular may have aided the maintenance of this academic construction of himself, and also his positive relationships with pupils and teachers may have offered him access to greater support with his work; indeed, he spoke of how useful he found help from peers and teachers. Alongside this, his construction of himself as 'happy' and 'never sad', and the resilience that came with this, may have meant he felt able to 'bounce back' from moments when his 'middlingness' seemed unstable. Finally, being 'happy' is easier if you are not at 'the bottom' and if you are popular and have lots of friends. In short, the three subject positions I explore seem not only overlapping but helpfully supporting one another.

The impact that each had on the availability of the others, however, points to a potential fragility. If the 'middling' academic subject position had become less available and Jake had begun to consider himself at the 'bottom', both his social and dispositional constructions of himself would have been affected. The 'bottom', he believed, resulted in being bullied and unpopular, therefore

making the 'good player' social subject position less available, and also caused sadness and anger, making the 'happy' and 'never sad' subject position a struggle. Similarly, if he had been unable to construct himself as 'happy', this would have affected his popularity and therefore his negotiation of his academic positioning. His social position, and the support it offered him, did indeed become temporarily unavailable during lockdown, and it was accompanied by academic anxiety and a struggle to remain positive. The mutually reinforcing nature of these subject positions made each vulnerable to the (un)availability of the others. Such considerations highlight that even when, like Jake, low-attaining pupils can construct a school subjectivity of relative worth and dignity, one that may work to protect them from unfavourable positionings within dominant school discourses, their position as 'low attainers' can make this fragile and a constant struggle.

Alongside highlighting the interrelationship between subject positionings, Jake's narrative underlines two key points. First, Jake shows, like Summer, how morally driven pupils' negotiations of their school subjectivities can be. He cannot be said to resist the disciplinary technology of *examination* in full, as he accepts the normal/abnormal division and is anxious to establish his normality. However, this is not the case with the ranking and competition that operates within the range of normal. His denial that the top of the class was a better place to be, so strong for most of the study, can be read as counter-conduct; he is rejecting the ranking and competition inherent in 'good pupil' discourse, instead deploying a counter-discourse of 'ordinariness', one that promotes egalitarianism, inclusivity and togetherness. He critiqued aspirations to be at the 'top', seeing it as a zero-sum game; by occupying these spots one is excluding others from them, unacceptable within his counter-discourse. Alongside this, he seemed to view academic success as less responsabilised than emotional success. Although he recognised the 'bottom' as stigmatised, he did not, as Britney did, blame people for being there, repeatedly showing sympathy for them. His counter-discourse of inclusivity appeared to involve a

commitment to being quite unusually kind and a refusal to criticise others, excluding blame for academic failure.

The second key point that Jake's story, like Britney's, shows us, is the impact that discourses of happiness can have on pupils' school subjectivities. I have argued that, in contrast to his understanding of academic success, Jake took a highly responsibilised approach to psychological states. He spoke of them as though he considered being anything other than happy and positive a personal failure. Consequently, I interpret him as striving continually to display a 'positive mental attitude' even when his positioning 'in the middle' appeared precarious or he felt shamed or belittled in the classroom. If not only low attainment, but also a lack of happiness, are considered shameful and a personal failure, where does this leave a low-attaining child? Either they have the double shame of failing twice – both academically and emotionally – or they must continue to perform the happy, persevering, ever-positive neoliberal subject, turning the 'bad' into the 'good' and viewing failure as an opportunity for learning, even when their academic positioning is highly precarious or causing them distress. Both of these options may, I suggest, cause significant emotional suffering and the latter, a huge amount of emotional work to maintain. I return to this subject in my next and final chapter.

Chapter 9: Discussion

This thesis has attempted to shed light on the experience of being designated as low attaining in the current primary school system. It addresses three research questions:

1. How do 'low attaining' children make sense of attainment labels?
2. How do they view themselves and others in the light of this sense-making?
3. How does this affect the way they navigate their paths through school?

It explores these questions through the stories of four 'low attainers' – their hopes and fears, joys and struggles, and above all, their efforts to build a positive sense of self within school under difficult conditions. My participants are neither 'typical' nor reflect the full range of possible responses – they are individuals bringing very different personalities, passions, strengths and fragilities to their situations, and each negotiates the construction of their school subjectivity very differently as a result of this. Had I chosen four different pupils, I would have told four very different stories.

Nonetheless, their experiences suggest underlying similarities in the challenges 'low attainers' face in primary schools. The position of such children has recently received some overdue attention (Hargreaves 2017; Marks 2013, 2014a; McGillicuddy and Devine 2018, 2020; Reay 2017), researchers pointing to a link between this and a range of performative practices, particularly attainment grouping (Boliver and Capsada-Munsech 2021; Bradbury 2019c; Bradbury et al. 2021; Francis et al. 2017b, 2019; Marks 2013, 2014a; McGillicuddy 2021; McGillicuddy and Devine 2018, 2020; McGillicuddy and Machowska-Kosciak 2021). What this thesis contributes is a detailed exploration of some of the ways in which children designated as low attaining experience the cumulative effects of these challenges over time,

helping us begin to understand the ways they negotiate, shape and resist the construction of their school subjectivities.

In this final chapter I highlight three key issues about the experience of low-attaining children in primary schools that emerge from my findings. The first is the intense emotional work they put into everyday survival. The second is the cumulative pressures of the classroom that bear down disproportionately on them, which I present as a triangle, threatening threefold failure. The third is the value of expanding and refining theorisations of resistance in primary school classrooms using Foucault's (2007a) concept of counter-conduct, particularly his ideas of critique and 'care of the self'. I explore each of these in turn.

The emotional work of fighting for worth

A principal finding of my thesis is the enormous amount of emotional work (Chang 2009; Harris 2007) all my participants put into negotiating their designation as low attaining. Unsurprisingly, none of them took pride or saw value in low academic attainment, and none approached school with defiance, held their failure as a badge of honour, or were the 'rebels' found in some other research (see Raby 2012a). I interpret all my participants as experiencing their attainment as a source of discomfort or shame, necessitating emotional struggle which was often intense and constant.

Governed through what Lazzarato (2009) calls the 'micro-politics of little fears', the introduction of 'degrees of insecurity, instability, uncertainty... and existential precarity into the lives of individuals' (2009:119), my participants were made 'fearful and therefore active...' (Ball 2013:134). The challenge each faced was to find a way of constructing a self that allowed them some dignity and self-respect. Max tried but largely failed to find a route to feeling valuable and worthwhile outside the academic, struggling to avoid seeing

himself as deficient – a jigsaw with pieces missing or a story with a missing page. Summer rejected the dominant discourse that judged her as inadequate, instead deploying an alternative discourse, a route available to her because of her home life, ethics, social skills and gender, but one that carried considerable costs. Britney attempted to deny her designation of low attaining by fabricating a version of herself in line with ‘good pupil’ ideals. Jake determinedly identified as ‘middling’ academically, alleviating his insecurity by comparing himself to others below him and working on himself socially as ‘a good player’ and emotionally as ‘happy’. They strove to avoid being seen as unacceptable or abnormal, and worked to see themselves as better people than the learners school was constituting them as. This took, for all, an inordinate amount of emotional work.

In Chapter 3 I looked at several studies that highlighted the emotional work that can go into negotiating one’s position in primary school, and my findings are largely consistent with, and reinforce, these. However, crucially, previous studies mainly focus on high-attaining pupils. My low-attaining participants have a very different relationship to the project of constructing themselves as ‘little neo-liberals’ (Bradbury 2019a), with different effects on their sense of self, and no doubt their life chances and the adults they will become.

Nonetheless, such research provides illuminating comparisons with my own. For example, Reay’s influential study of Shaun, a poor, White, working-class, hardworking, and high-attaining boy, highlights the struggle of bringing together high attainment with White working-class masculinities. As Reay (Reay 2002:221–22) argues:

... to combine the two generates heavy psychic costs, involving young men not only in an enormous amount of academic labour but also an intolerable burden of psychic reparative work if they are to avoid what Bourdieu terms ‘the duality of the self’.

The two different selves Shaun attempts to juggle – hard-working in the classroom and ‘tough’ in the playground – are ‘riven with contradictions’ and require ‘almost superhuman efforts to maintain’ (2002:226).

Keddie (2016:116), too, highlights the ‘intensive work on the self’ pupils do. Focusing on the impact of neoliberal discourses on children’s school experience, she argues that pupils are ‘children of the market’ in that ‘they are crafting their identities and making sense of their educational and employment experiences and choices within the context of neoliberal imperatives’ (2016:109). For these pupils, ‘the targets that matter in this existence are externally prescribed in the form of classroom ability setting (streaming) and standardised tests – these are the fields of judgement that for these students seem to encapsulate and represent their worth and value’ (2016:115; see also Ball 2003). Their emotional work is a response to these targets. Keddie’s high-attaining participants find staying at the top by working hard produces anxiety but also has the reward of status. My participants can also be viewed as ‘children of the market’ but are speaking from a very different position within the market, and this strategy is not available to them. From their liminal position, developing a successful subjectivity within ‘good pupil’ discourse through hard work is a struggle, and so one option was to try and find other available school subjectivities in an effort to gain a sense of self-worth.

Of course, differences in attainment are only one reason for the difference in the emotional work Keddie’s participants do compared to my own. Keddie’s pupils are almost all privileged in terms of class and race. Indeed, her only working-class pupil must do the most emotional work, not because of negotiating conflicting school and peer culture like Shaun, but because his home life works against his status as ‘exceptional’ in school. Keddie (2016:119) explains:

Frankly, it was harder work for him to mark out his difference as outstanding given the disadvantages of his home life. Such work on the

self and on him by others was evident, for example, in [his] participation in an anger management programme organised by the school to support him to deal with what he described as his 'anger streak' arising from some of the 'difficulties in his life...'

Both Reay's participant Shaun and this boy had to work on themselves *extra* hard because of their social class. Although my participants, also largely working class, are not dealing with the difficulties of combining this with high attainment, the emotional work they are required to do on themselves to be acceptable pupils, the right side of the normal/abnormal binary, may also have been intensified by their intersectional positioning.

Pollard and Filer's *Identity and Learning Programme* (1995, 1999, 2007; Filer and Pollard 2000) also provides evidence of the emotional work pupils engage in. As noted, this influential study was the inspiration for CLIPS, as for other longitudinal research (e.g. Warin 2010). Pollard and Filer's 'strategic biographies' are fitted into a typology of four 'coping strategies' pupils can use in their struggles to survive school, though it is a shame they do not explore the implications of these for the development of identities. These strategies – conformity (adaptation), anti-conformity (deviance), non-conformity (independence) and redefining (negotiation/ challenge) – are only 'abstracted conceptualisations of potential strategic choices' (1999:298), and we would not expect a child to 'fit' any one exactly. I am nonetheless surprised to find so little correspondence with my participants. Summer, for example, is not anti-social or conflictual enough to be anti-conformity, cannot be seen as non-conformist due to being very much embedded in her peer group and is not high status enough to be redefining or 'good' enough to be fully conformist.

It is interesting, however, that all my participants show significant aspects of Pollard and Filer's 'conformity' strategy; they all tried to at least *perform* conformity, and all wanted to be seen as conforming. They all seemed to feel that they worked within others' agendas, in general upheld school rules, and,

except for Summer, broadly accepted their legitimacy. Pollard and Filer's last three strategies – all in some way non-conforming – seem of limited relevance. This may be because of variation in theoretical lens, or because Pollard and Filer's White, middle-class, relatively high-attaining pupils had different strategies available to them. It may also be that pupils' need to hide their dissatisfaction behind a 'veil of compliance' (Fisher 2011) has become increasingly necessary since the *Identity and Learning Programme* took place. The intensifying pressures of performativity (Ball 2016a; Selwyn 2016b) in an increasingly disciplinary education system (Kulz 2017) may have amplified the pressure to conform and the repercussions of non-conformity.

As well as such studies focusing in detail on the emotional work of individual pupils, there is substantial research on the emotional impact of practices like grouping, testing and teacher feedback (Archer et al. 2018; Booher-Jennings 2008; Francis et al. 2017b; Hargreaves 2017; McGillicuddy 2021; McGillicuddy and Devine 2018, 2020; McGillicuddy and Machowska-Kosciak 2021; Reay 2017; Reay and Wiliam 1999). As I have noted, insufficient attention is often paid to the disproportionate effect on 'low attainers', although nonetheless their additional 'pain and shame' (Francis et al. 2017b:107) emerges. My study aims to fill a gap by looking in detail at what this intense survival work involves, day after day, for the 'low attainer'.

The extent of the emotional work the children put into making sense of their positioning within school was not something I predicted. I expected boredom, disillusionment and anger. However, I was surprised by the intensity and sheer scale of the work they were doing on themselves in their attempts to consider themselves valued and valuable. This made clear the strength of the stigmatisation they felt subject to, and the potential shame and cruelty of the subject positions school made most readily available to them.

My findings suggest that a key reason *why* their response to their positioning took so much emotional work was because of the reinforcing pressures they

were under, pressures that put them at constant risk of failure in three ways in particular. It is to these I now turn.

Threefold failure: attainment, responsabilisation and happiness

This section explores three pressures on pupils in primary school that emerged from my findings as particularly harmful to ‘low attainers’, exacerbated by the way they reinforce one another, although not all of my participants experienced them all. These are shown in Figure 14 as a triangle. First, the dominance of attainment in schools makes ‘low attainers’ *academic* failures. Second, the responsabilisation of this attainment, part of a wider neoliberal responsabilisation of success and failure, intensifies this by making academic failure also a failure of *character* – your own fault because you must not have tried hard enough or had the right attitude. These two pressures are key elements of ‘good pupil’ discourse (see Chapters 2 and 3). Third, the responsabilisation of emotions and requirement to show a ‘positive mental attitude’ (Gill and Orgad 2018), part of happiness discourse, adds an additional pressure, threatening *emotional* failure by making happiness, and therefore *unhappiness*, a choice, disallowing pupils from showing distress at their positioning as failures. Together these put ‘low attainers’ at risk of threefold failure.

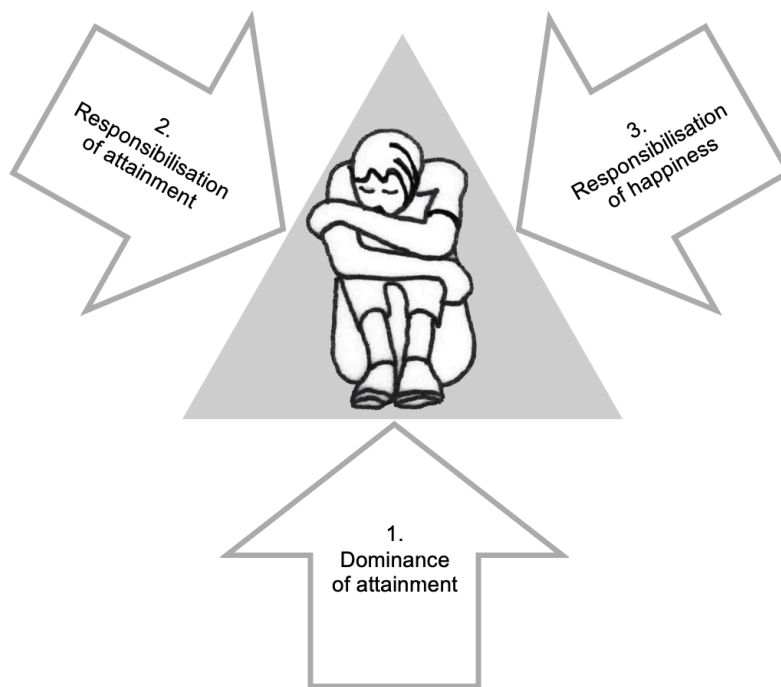


Figure 14: Diagram of three reinforcing pressures on 'low attainers'

Each of these three pressures have very damaging implications for the construction of low-attaining children's school subjectivities and engagement with learning and their futures, and also reinforce each other. I now discuss each pressure in turn.

Pressure 1: the dominance of attainment

According to Britney, a 'perfect' pupil was 'very very smart' (9) and Max echoed this emphasis on ability, while Jake described 'maths angels' (5). Even Summer was clear that 'Julie', the imaginary high-marks child she regarded as 'not really nice', was considered 'smart' (5) by teachers. 'Smartness' was at the top of their lists of what they thought school required, and was very narrowly defined as academic performance, dominated by attainment levels. Indeed, Max even suggested that what school valued might work against other forms of success; a 'perfect' pupil was 'really good at most subjects apart from PE... people that are smart don't really like sports' (9). Academic attainment, then, becomes the definition of school success.

Increased pressure to attain since the 1988 education reforms, and the stress this causes pupils and teachers, has been well documented, and is discussed at length in Chapters 1 and 3. However, the *strength* of this emphasis on attainment in my participants' models of the 'good pupil' is still striking. Although Max and Jake attempted to cultivate valued non-academic school subjectivities and Britney increasingly drew on the qualities of attitude and positivity, they were unwavering in their view that attainment was important. Max and Jake were both anxious to avoid the humiliation of being at the 'bottom' and Britney continued to present herself as 'a smart and intelligent girl' (9). It may be that, for low-attaining pupils, their constant struggle to negotiate their liminal academic position, to avoid relegation to the realms of unacceptability and abnormality (Foucault 1991), meant that attainment dominated their idea of the 'good pupil' in a way that would have been less true for pupils positioned as more academically secure.

This emphasis on attainment is perhaps surprising in light of Hempel-Jorgensen's (2009) suggestion that schools like those in this study, with largely working-class intakes, emphasise qualities such as obedience and passivity over the academic achievement favoured in middle-class schools (see Chapter 2). Although this is consistent with 'low attainers' in all schools being preoccupied with attainment, it may also be the case that attainment has become more dominant in all schools since her study, or that the strengthening of discourses around 'high expectations' and supporting disadvantaged pupils to rise to the top, a key message of academy chains (Keddie 2015; Kulz 2017), means that attainment is emphasised as much, or indeed possibly more, in working-class schools as in middle-class ones.

What is clear from existing literature, however, is that over the last 30 years narrow academic attainment has become increasingly important as a measure of school success (Reay 2006; Keddie 2016; Ball 2000; Samuelsson 2019; Apple 2006; Ball 2016a; Reay 2017), and therefore of pupil success, which for those designated as low attaining puts success out of reach. My findings show

that this has implications for the construction of their school subjectivities and their sense of themselves as valued and valuable learners and people. This first side of the triangle is the first of three ways in which academic failure is a constant threat, the need to avoid it a constant pressure, for 'low attainers'.

Pressure 2: The responsabilisation of attainment

The second side of the triangle, the responsabilisation of attainment, works alongside the first to compound this failure. By responsabilisation I mean not just the idea that success is rooted in the individual rather than the result of background, opportunity or luck, but that it is under the individual's control; it is *up to you, a choice*, whether you succeed or fail. My participants' talk was peppered with references to this idea. 'Working hard' and 'making the right choices' involved concentrating, avoiding being distracted by peers, listening to the teacher, obeying instructions, not being 'silly' and learning from your mistakes, and were presented as the route to success.

Such responsabilisation makes attainment an indication of one's character; a 'good pupil' becomes also a 'good person' (Keddie 2016:120). High attainment indicates strength of character and poor attainment a weak and inadequate character. Shame at poor attainment swells to more general shame at who one is, not only as a learner but as a person. If you take seriously that academic failure is a failure of character, it suggests that you are likely to – and indeed deserve to – fail at everything. Your position at the 'bottom' of the class is a foretaste of your position in life.

Shamir (2008) has usefully linked this belief that success is an indication of worth to the extension of the ethics of the free market into society more broadly, making the pursuit of self-interest morally acceptable and creating, in Anagnostopoulos' (2006:7) terms, an 'ideology of deservingness'. Such an ideology underpins the belief that the rich deserve their riches and the poor are responsible for their poverty (see Chapter 2). In the same way, school

attainment becomes an indication of moral virtue and a judgement on you as a whole person. You deserve your attainment, or lack of it, and its consequences.

Britney's story shows the severe impact of such an 'ideology of deservingness'. She described a 'perfect pupil' as not only 'very very smart' but also 'not rude, they're nice' (9) while failure indicated a 'bad' person (3), lazy and badly behaved. I interpret the belief that academic success signified moral value and academic failure a 'moral deficit' (Anagnostopoulos 2006), as explaining in part why Britney felt the need to fabricate an idealised version of herself in interview.

However, Summer and Jake show that the link between high attainment and good character can be problematised and contested, and that pupils' negotiations of responsabilisation can complicate, resist and be morally driven. They both see the imaginary 'high marks' pupil, 'Julie', as morally dubious, Summer suggesting she was 'a little bit rude in the playground... not really nice' (5) and Jake calling her 'smart, overconfident... I'd say mean' (5). I interpret both pupils as rejecting the overriding concern of neoliberal 'good pupil' models with ranking, individualism and a competitive desire to be better than others (see Stahl 2016; Reay 2003). Jake's critique is partial – although he rejects the values of the 'mean' people at the 'top', he regards being at the 'bottom', the wrong side of the normal/abnormal binary, as shameful, and appears to take the responsabilised view that it should be possible to escape it through hard work.

My participants also showed some signs of deploying ability discourses, rife in educational thinking (Bradbury 2021; Gillborn 2016; Marks 2015). They spoke of ability, particularly high ability, as fixed and relatively impervious to change. Jake presented 'top score' (5) maths pupils as ethereal, embodying knowledge rather than working for it – the 'maths genius[es], like they're like the maths gods, and like the maths angels' (5). He seems to share views found in other

studies that 'effortless achievement [is]... the pinnacle of success and a sign of genius' (Jackson and Nyström 2015:353; see also Reay 2006; Stables et al. 2014). This means that hard work should be played down (Jackson and Dempster 2009), 'hard workers' viewing themselves 'not one of the clever children' (Reay 2006) because their results merely reflect their effort. Jake seemed to share this view that 'ability' and effort counterbalance one another; being 'smart', he suggested, could alleviate the need for effort, telling me that 'if I were a smart person I would just relax' (1).

However, I only rarely observed my participants deploying ability discourses in their sense-making about low attainment. They seemed to feel it was wrong or rude to suggest someone lacked ability and were not given to comments like 'they were born like that' or 'it sometimes runs in the family' (Marks 2015:unpaged). Britney, in particular, took this line staunchly, accusing others of not putting the necessary effort in; bad work resulted from a bad attitude rather than because the work was too difficult. In Max and Jake's joint interview, Jake suggested that to improve his attainment Max 'needs to do like hard work... he needs to like listen to the teacher on the whiteboard, he needs to put his hand up so many times' (5) to which Max's passionate response that he does work hard leaves them both perplexed, unable to make sense of Max's low attainment. Max is driven to the conclusion is that he is somehow incomplete – a jigsaw with pieces missing or a story with a missing page (5), a view that seems part of 'ability' discourses.

Summer, alone of my participants, deployed ability discourses in her explanations of her own low attainment, explaining that she was 'not smart' (2) and 'bad at maths' (1,2,3,4,5,6,8,9). Although she would have preferred it to be otherwise, as an explanation it seemed to offer relief in suggesting that, because her poor marks were inevitable, there was no point in trying to improve them. For her, then, the deployment of fixed ability discourses over those of effort worked to lessen the impact of neoliberal responsabilisation; 'ability' discourse gave her a 'way out' of the self-blame the others

experienced. Although Summer saw her low attainment as an indication of her limited 'smartness', her deployment of an alternative discourse meant she did not consider it a judgement on her overall character or on her capacity for success in other fields or in the future, although, as discussed in Chapter 6, such a strategy had considerable costs for her.

The dominance of ideas of 'growth mindset' may help explain why my participants drew on discourses of effort more than those of 'natural' ability. As Bradbury (2019a) suggests, a responsabilised 'good learner' must display a 'growth mindset'. Indeed, in one of our activities Rosie, another CLIPS participant I interviewed, acted out a teacher telling a pupil off by shouting 'You have a fixed mindset!' (5), and my participants also frequently showed awareness of messages about needing to keep persevering and doing their personal best. However, as noted in Chapter 1, schools give highly ambiguous messages in this respect, as they are also subject to the pressure to perform, pushing them to focus on targets at all costs. Britney shows these double values:

just try your best... I'm going to try really really hard to get the high marks. I will say: 'You can do it. You might get high marks or low marks it doesn't matter (9).

Britney's words reveal a tension between the importance of high marks and a belief that it is effort not outcome that matters. Although schools responsabilise pupils through discourses of effort, when this is coupled with the strong emphasis on attainment, pupils are left caught between competing discourses.

There is growing concern about the incorporation of neoliberal responsibility into the requirements of a 'good pupil' (Anagnostopoulos 2006; Argent, Brown, and Kelly 2022; Keddie 2016; Peters 2017; Thompson 2010; Youdell 2006), where pupils at all educational levels are being constituted as choice-making and responsible consumers who need to make the 'right choices' if they are to

succeed. Choi (2021:384), for example, observes of students studying English as a Foreign Language outside their home countries that:

... caught up with the neoliberal discourse of self-responsibility, participants locked themselves into a vulnerable and insecure position of pressuring themselves to actively participate in the process of constant self-development, while blaming themselves for their hardships and suffering.

My study comes to a similar conclusion, showing how this process can operate particularly painfully for 'low attainers'. It is perhaps no coincidence that Summer, the only one of my participants who wholeheartedly rejects the connection between academic success and good character, was also the only one who took a proactive – one could say entrepreneurial – approach to her future. She talked enthusiastically about successful and future-orientated projects at home, particularly building her competence with dogs, practising grooming and collecting the tools needed for work. Even the other careers she considered – being a baker or working with children with disabilities – were described with concrete references to experience in her enjoyment of making cakes or looking after her cousin. This is perhaps possible for her precisely *because* she rejects the aspirational messages of school, messages that tell her to 'aim at the stars' (a poster in her class) and that the only place of value is the 'top', while at the same time conveying that she does not have what it takes to get there.

In contrast, Britney, and, by Year 6, Jake, could not be accused of having 'low aspirations' in wanting to be 'a doctor or scientist' (Britney) or a businessman (Jake), ambitions more in accordance with schools' exhortations to aim high. However, they show minimal understanding of what that would involve, and seem passive in relation to their futures. Ironically, at the same time as schools pressure pupils to become more responsabilised, they also increasingly deny them the opportunities to exercise responsibility. As

demands increase and teaching becomes more didactic and ‘to the test’ (Stobart 2008) pupils have less and less chance to control their own learning (Manyukhina and Wyse 2019) – less choice in what and how they study, to exercise the qualities of motivation, self-management, and entrepreneurship that the neoliberal pupil subject is meant to display, as well as choice in what they aspire to. Their responsibility narrows to that of ‘making the right choice’ in jumping through several increasingly hard-to-reach hoops. The responsibilised discourse that Britney, and, to an extent, Jake subscribe to does not seem to help them take, indeed seems to get in the way of taking, any real responsibility for their learning and future. In this they are unlike Summer, who seems to have greater faith in the idea that her own current actions, albeit out-of-school actions, can *in practice* affect her future.

There is a serious danger, in this line of thought, of slipping into ‘happy peasant’ (Graham 2009) arguments – the idea that it is easier to be happy when ambition and achievement align, so it is better to be a contented peasant than a constantly striving millionaire. This idea – that it is doing pupils a disservice to encourage ‘unrealistic’ expectations, dooming them to frustration and failure and suggesting they would be happier if they lower their aspirations and be ‘realistic’ about their prospects – has often been present in discussions of ‘colonial’ and working-class education.

I clearly do not subscribe to this. However, there are real problems in uncritically conveying a model of success, of what is worth aspiring to, that is so very class based, as well as race and gender based, focusing on the superiority of elite roles such as the professions or successful business. Responsibilisation holds out the tantalising possibility of achievements that your structural position makes unachievable, and which get in the way of being able to recognise your situation and analysing its constrictions. This traps you in what has been described as ‘a cruel and cynical fiction’ (Owens and de St Croix 2020:18) and encourages you to accept the meritocratic idea that the elite have earned their place at the top.

Pressure 3: The responsabilisation of happiness

The final side of the triangle, a third threat of failure for 'low attainers', is 'the new discourse of happiness' (Binkley 2011). Within this discourse, happiness is an unproblematic good and is responsabilised, turning it into something everyone can achieve through individual effort (see Chapter 2). This initially emerged in my analysis of Britney and I found it fruitful to extend to Jake.

There is substantial discussion on the attributes required of the neoliberal pupil subject, adding to the more traditional disciplinary requirements with character traits such as self-promotion, competitiveness, resilience and a 'growth mindset' (see Bates 2019; Bradbury 2019a; Jerome and Kisby 2020; Morrin 2018). What my findings contribute to this is the augmentation of these qualities with associated positive emotional states. In other words, schools are not only promoting the message that pupils must take responsibility for their *approach* to learning, but also for their *emotions* about it.

In Chapter 2, I explored how encouraging the idea that an individual's psychological state is primarily under their own control, a *choice*, makes happiness a task or skill we can succeed or fail at (Binkley 2011; Cabanas and Illouz 2019; Miller 2008), and cultivating a 'positive mental attitude' becomes the way to achieve this. Thus, emotions become something that can be 'right' or 'wrong'. As Jake explained 'the right emotions is like happy, excited, surprised. But like the wrong emotions is like sad, angry' (9), or as Britney said 'well behaved is basically like you're smiling' (6). Within this discourse the presence of negative emotions is attributed to a failure of resolve to maintain a 'positive mental attitude', your own fault and your own weakness. As discussed, these ideas are being increasingly criticised outside of the education sector (Binkley 2011, 2014; Cabanas and Illouz 2019; Gill and Orgad 2018; Miller 2008) and beginning to be so within it (Cabanas and Illouz 2019; Ecclestone and Hayes 2019). My findings enrich this research by

highlighting the disproportionate potential impact of happiness discourse on 'low attainers' in schools.

The ideas promoted by happiness discourse have been taken up enthusiastically in schools, many attracted by the idea that happiness is a skill that can be taught (Cabanas and Illouz 2019). Jayden Primary, which Britney, Max and Jake attended, taught Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL), the widely used positive education programme discussed in Chapter 2. Sandown Academy, Summer's school, promoted a list of qualities on posters and in assemblies that included being both 'joyful' and 'hopeful', and Summer's classmate, also part of CLIPS, told me that pupils received reward points for 'showing joyfulness'.

Jake and Britney exhibited the very qualities 'positive education' programmes such as SEAL aim to promote, although of course I do not know what role exposure to SEAL, rather than home or wider cultural influences, played. As I have shown, they were keen to present themselves as almost continuously happy and positive, and often treated negative emotions as shameful, to be hidden or avoided. They were highly responsabilised as regards their emotional states, strove to acquire and maintain a 'positive mental attitude', and both attempted to reframe challenges such as getting low marks in tests as opportunities for learning and deny or underplay their disappointment.

My analysis of Britney and Jake suggests that the responsabilisation of emotions means that being unhappy becomes a source of self-blame, a weakness or inadequacy indicating a failure of character that will also make it hard to achieve happiness in the future. As illustrated by Britney during her animal classroom activity, having the 'right' mental state becomes one more thing to fail at. Success requires maintaining positive emotional states alongside maintaining academic adequacy, which, particularly if you are facing the challenges we know 'low attainers' face in schools, demands a huge

amount of emotional work. Being low attaining, then, makes it harder to be happy, to generate and maintain a 'positive mental attitude'.

The responsabilisation of emotions within a context of severe inequality, as we have in this country (Francis-Devine 2021), has implications for social justice. Children, however privileged, may face a multitude of struggles impacting their daily life and wellbeing. However, we know that being part of a disadvantaged group increases the difficulties children face (such as racism or poverty), difficulties that make it more likely they will be designated as low attaining. In addition, they are more prone to being viewed as unlikely to succeed, to be positioned as 'other', 'impossible' and even 'unintelligible' (Bradbury 2019a; Butler 1990, 2013; Youdell 2006), which also increases the risk that they will end up designated as low attaining. The 'pain and shame' (Francis et al. 2017b:107) they may feel adds, then, an additional difficulty to already difficult lives.

These differences between pupils are disguised by a discourse that promotes the message that difficulties can be addressed through 'positive mental attitude', that people can choose to be happy. As with the message that academic success is the result of individual effort, responsabilisation again hides inequalities in society through the message that psychological characteristics are more important to happiness than circumstances, undermining any sort of structural analysis and creating an illusion of equality.

Authors on this topic in a Foucauldian tradition have raised concerns about the role this new discourse of happiness is playing in the governing of individuals (see Chapter 2). My findings reinforce these concerns in relation to primary schools; we see that this discourse can lead pupils to look to themselves for solutions rather than to society. When Jake, for example, felt miserable and shamed by his teacher reading test scores aloud, he did not direct frustration or anger at his teacher or the school or the practice of testing, but rather worked on himself to reframe his experience in a positive light, claiming that

he was just happy for the other people who got high marks. Similarly, Britney, as Big Cat in the animal classroom, quickly controlled her outburst of fury as she returned to apologise to the teacher for the lack of confidence in herself that had led her to walk out of the test.

For both Jake and Britney, the requirement to have a 'positive mental attitude' operated as a technology of self (Foucault 1988b). They worked on themselves to 'improve' their emotional states (Rose 1999a), experiencing this as voluntary (Gill and Orgad 2018), their own personal project driven by their own desire and, in Britney's case, with a skill-bank of chanting, prayer, visualisation, meditation and breath control to draw on. They demonstrate how happiness discourse may operate within governmentality, encouraging individuals to pursue self-improvement as a solution to the stresses and contradictions resulting from their situations, and discouraging an understanding of systemic constraints, criticism or resistance. To return to Cabanas and Illouz's (2019:54) words, the emotionalisation of conduct furthers the aims of governmentality by making 'individualism a cultural and ethical precondition for achieving happiness' and 'happiness the scientific justification for individualism as a morally legitimate value'.

We want to support pupils to feel joyful and hopeful about life and there are useful tools within positive psychology that can be taught. However, my findings suggest that for low-attaining pupils such as my participants, the deployment of happiness discourse alongside 'good pupil' discourse raises particular concerns. The emphasis on, and responsabilisation of, attainment in 'good pupil' discourse, discussed above, coupled with the requirement to be positive and happy, means 'low attainers' are in an impossible position – they are shamed and stigmatised for their low attainment while under pressure to deny or overcome the distress this causes. They are at risk of three-fold failure: failure to attain, which points to failure of character, and failure to adopt a 'positive mental attitude' in the face of such failure. It is important, then, that educators and researchers interrogate the ways in which the happiness

discourse promoted within schools works in conjunction with ‘good pupil’ discourse.

Counter-conduct in classrooms: resisting being positioned as ‘less than’

The final point I want to draw out from my findings concerns resistance in classrooms. The concept of resistance I found most illuminating is Foucault’s idea of counter-conduct and I consider it primarily in relation to resisting under governmentality, recognising that resistance will vary in accordance with power (Lilja and Vinthagen 2014). As discussed in Chapter 2, governmentality works by changing who we are – what we think, want and aspire to. Through technologies of the self, we work on ourselves to become individuals who serve the interests of power. Resistance, in this context, means struggling *not to be this person*, to be someone *different*, refusing to be conducted ‘like that’ (Lorenzini 2016:11) and desiring to conduct oneself differently. To do this, individuals need to develop counter-discourses as alternatives to dominant discourses – which for my participants as learners meant ‘good pupil’ discourse. This development of a counter-discourse is what enables individuals to act and think differently, and work to construct themselves as different.

I view Summer, and to a lesser extent Jake, as doing this. Summer’s rejection was wholehearted: she questioned the importance of school and attainment, developing an unresponsibilised view of her school self and a plan for her life for which school was largely irrelevant. Instead, she prioritised the relational, working on herself to improve her relationships with friends, family and pets, and actively engaged in pursuing her own projects, such as dog-grooming, with an eye to her future. Jake’s rejection was partial, scorning the ranking inherent in ‘good pupil’ discourse in favour of an egalitarianism and togetherness but still maintaining a normal/abnormal binary. However, I

interpret this rejection as wavering as he entered Year 6, possibly in response to feeling increasingly academically secure.

If we see power-relations as creative, 'enabling' and positive, as discussed in Chapter 2, schools can be understood, in the words of Leask (2012:57), as not 'merely the factories of obedient behaviour [but]... the locus for critically-informed oppositional micro-politics'. Summer's dislike of school, for example, is not simply a negative position, *not obedient*, but a consequence of an attempt to construct herself differently, to be someone else. Using the concept of counter-conduct, her lack of motivation and her refusal to aim for academic success can be interpreted as part of a struggle over her subjectivity (see Ball 2003).

Some readers may consider Britney's story as also one of resistance. She denied the label of 'low attainer', choosing instead to position herself as academically successful and a 'good pupil' more broadly. However, the concept of resistance I have explored in this thesis is counter-conduct, and I have not interpreted Britney as engaged in counter-conduct because she did not reject dominant discourse and deploy a counter-discourse in its place. Rather, she very much bought into 'good pupil' discourse, with its ranking, competition and responsabilisation. Indeed, it is her utilisation of key ideas in 'good pupil' discourse which explains *why* she fabricated; she narrated herself to me as an ideal within this discourse. Britney's denial that she is low attaining, then, though it resisted her school positioning, is not counter-conduct, an attempt to conduct oneself 'otherwise'.

My use of the concept of counter-conduct in my analysis of Summer and Jake extends the way it has so far been used in the education literature and has implications for the theorisation of resistance of younger pupils within a school setting. As outlined in Chapter 2, Foucault increasingly focused on ideas of critique and 'care of the self'. Involving a high level of introspection, self-reflection and a sense that you develop critique by regarding yourself as a

'project' for self-improvement, the counter-conduct of teachers has been explored in the context of their opposition to performativity (Apple 2012; Choi 2017; Comisso 2013). Best known is Ball's (2003, 2016b, 2017a; Ball and Olmedo 2013) correspondence with frustrated senior teachers whose struggles to avoid internalising the dominant neoliberal, performative models of 'teacherhood' involve 'a continuous practice of introspection' (2016b:1136) which they achieve largely by engaging in articulate 'confessional' writing, a highly intellectualised practice.

Although my data shows that my participants can be both reflective and self-aware, I could not claim they show the articulate and introspective intentionality demonstrated by Ball's teachers in their highly-considered writing. Neither, indeed, do most adults. However, according to Lemke (2016:24), 'the activity of problematization, the art of voluntary insubordination and the audacity to expose oneself as a subject... are the three elements that define critical activity according to Foucault' and I suggest that children can and do embody all of these, even if not as Foucault envisioned. My analysis of Summer, I think, shows just this. She problematises the whole 'regime of truth' of school, chooses to clock-watch, cheat and work-avoid, and is explicit and articulate about her priorities being different from those expected of her.

The idea of critique centralises the importance of the subject's *will* (Lorenzini 2016). Powerful discourses about childhood mean that the will of children is often disregarded, their views, wants and complaints considered trivial, misleading or unimportant (Mayall 2015). For Foucault, however, will is central to critique, marked by an ethical-political gesture or an 'ethos' (Foucault 1998b:319). It is a particular relationship between the subject, power and truth and thus is both a moral and political attitude (Lorenzini 2016). To theorise pupils as resisting in this way, then, means we must consider their will, taking their beliefs, desires and ethical values seriously. Foucault (1990:251) conceives of ethics as 'the elaboration of a form of relation to the self that enables an individual to fashion himself into a subject of ethical conduct',

something both Summer and Jake can be viewed as doing. They show us that if we take the time to unpick their words and feelings, we can find the ‘uncertainties, discomforts and refusals’ (Ball and Olmedo 2013:85) they bring to their everyday practice at school just as ethically motivated as those of Ball’s teachers. By building an other subjectivity, they are engaged in an ethical project.

Importantly, however, their counter-conduct looks different from the examples discussed by Foucault (1990, 1998a) or Ball (2003, 2017a; Ball and Olmedo 2013). This means that our theoretical focus needs to shift, in particular to exploring less self-aware types of resistance, ranging from overt rebelliousness (Death 2016) to more ‘diffuse and subdued forms’ (Foucault 2007a:200). Understanding this less conscious, more ‘subdued’ resistance, is where augmenting Foucault with Scott’s (1985) idea of everyday resistance is helpful.

Scott allows us to see how examining low-level, modest and often almost invisible acts may lead us to an understanding of rich and often complex ways of enacting and supporting counter-conduct. Indeed, open challenges are difficult in contexts where disciplinary control is strong (Lilja and Vinthagen 2014:114), such as in schools, and so resistance may well need to take more invisible or docile forms. It would be easy to interpret Jake’s attachment to academic ‘middlingness’ as only protecting him from feeling shame at not being at the ‘top’, or Summer’s disengagement, cheating and work-avoidance as only because she finds the work too difficult. However, listening carefully to *why* Jake is attached to ‘middlingness’, *why* Summer disengages and *how she explains* her cheating and work avoidance, shows that their sense-making and motivations can be seen as counter-conduct, and in so doing reveal their role in shaping their school subjectivities. Scott’s focus on such little everyday resistances helps us unpick the importance of common and therefore often unnoticed happenings, usefully enriching our understandings of the practicalities of counter-conduct – how it is developed, maintained and lived.

In extending Foucault's ideas of counter-conduct into primary school classrooms, augmented by Scott's everyday resistance, we can recognise that children may be engaged in critique and 'care of the self'. Their struggles may often be less articulate and strategic than those of their adult counterparts but, in the words of Ball and Olmedo (2013:92):

... these struggles have to do with the right to define ourselves according to our own judgements, or, in other words, to develop a particular technology of the self according to our own principles... which are focused on the question of who we are and who we might become.

Foucault and Scott help show us where to look for resistance in classrooms, offering us an analytic framework. Theorising children as engaged in counter-conduct, then, both necessitates us taking children seriously and allows us to do so. Moreover, in doing so, we recognise how morally and politically driven their sense-making can be.

Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to this study, some of which could be addressed in future research. First, my sample size presents obvious limitations; it would be absurd to draw generalisations from a study of four children. Each is unique, and I am very aware that four other children would have experienced the pressures on them differently, and responded in different ways. Although the 23 children in the CLIPS study may prove to be sufficient to see emerging patterns and allow comparison with other research on 'low attainers', it still focuses on depth over breadth (see Hargreaves et al. 2019; Hargreaves, Quick, et al. 2021; Hargreaves et al. 2022; Hargreaves, Buchanan, et al. 2021a, 2021b; Buchanan et al. 2022, 2020; Hargreaves et al. forthcoming).

A second limitation came from our restricted observations. Although the 36 interviews of 40-90 minutes I conducted provided a substantial amount of data, the 20-minute observations gave me only a snapshot and, being largely in morning lessons, were generally maths or English. An ethnographic approach, where I sat in the classroom and observed pupils over weeks and months, watching how they experienced the full school day, would have enriched my analysis. In addition, I would like to have included interviews with class teachers to establish their positioning of my participants for comparison.

Third, children respond to being labelled 'low attaining' in various ways and our sampling method is likely to have biased which of these we explored. By allowing headteachers and teachers to influence who would participate, more disruptive children who might have shown the school in a 'bad light' may have been excluded. Overt rebellion, then, may have been under-represented and CLIPS could perhaps have taken steps to avoid this. We also excluded children with poor attendance for the purely practical reason of avoiding wasted visits. However, minor illness and truancy may be responses to the difficulties associated with low attainment, as well as likely to magnify and consolidate such difficulties. It is important to understand the experience of this group of pupils, although studying them might involve different strategies, such as home interviews.

Fourth, there is, as I have discussed earlier, substantial research on which subject positions are made available or denied to which pupils, how 'who' you are, your intersectional position, shapes 'what sort' of learner you get to be (Youdell 2006). Because this was not a focus of the CLIPS project, it was not a theme in interviews, which meant that we only spoke about issues such as class, race or gender when participants raised them, which was infrequent. In addition, the demographic information that the children gave us was often unclear. Parent's jobs were loosely described – 'like a nurse' or 'he does different jobs' – and although participants identified as White, Black or from mixed Black and White backgrounds, and they wanted to tell me about their

family's 'home countries', they rarely talked about race. As a result, I was not able to explore in detail how their positioning on intersecting axes of identity and advantage/disadvantage informed their sense-making about their low attainment, although I do touch on this in places.

Fifth, although I touched on my participants' relationships with peers, it, too, was not a focus of CLIPS and I was constrained by time so did not explore this aspect of their experience, including their playtimes, as much as I would have liked. Exploring how being low attaining affects friendships has been researched by other authors (e.g. McGillicuddy 2021) as part of the wider and under-researched issue of the role that adults play in governing children's friendships, particularly across difference (see Vincent, Neal, and Iqbal 2016). This is a topic I would like to explore in future research; it is important to understand more about the relationship between low attainment and social success and how it intersects with race, class and gender.

Sixth, I was surprised to find less change and greater continuity over time than I had anticipated. I expected my analysis to give me more of a sense of narrative, to show a string of connected events spread over time and with a suggestion of direction or development. However, although my participants changed over the three years, none showed a *major* change in their relationship to learning. Given that I found this relationship dominated by their status as 'low attainers', which did not change significantly for any of them, it was perhaps to be expected; exploring friendships might have had very different results. The pandemic, of course, altered their daily lives dramatically, but on returning to school their relationship to lessons seemed largely 'back to normal'. Although finding continuity is no less significant than finding alteration, it may be that chance minimised change. None of my participants moved schools or, to my knowledge, underwent any significant changes at home during this time, and both Max and Jake were taught by the same teacher for two years, rather than the usual one year.

It may also have been that the CLIPS methodology did not foreground change as much as it could have. More repetition of questions each term may have helped (see Neale 2021), although it would also have limited the number of topics we were able to cover and our ability to follow up on themes, as well as potentially boring the children. Alternatively, an ethnographic approach would have allowed me to view much more of their time in school, which would undoubtedly have been helpful in noticing the smaller transformations that a termly interview did not reveal.

Despite the lack of significant change, however, the longitudinal nature of the study used did allow us to observe their development far more than if, for example, I had conducted the same number of interviews over a single term. It enabled me to see Summer growing into and developing her critique, shedding some of her anxiety and becoming more self-assured. It showed Jake's counter-conduct as a way of coping with not being high attaining, and highlighted how, as he grew more confident academically, it lessened. It also made Max's changing attempts at generating a sense of self-worth more visible and enabled me to see Britney as relying less on a fabricated 'high attainer', and more on emotional control, as a way of maintaining a sense of self-worth. Most of all, though, it emphasised the relentlessness of the emotional work my participants were engaged in, as without the gift of watching them over time, the perseverance and grit they put into attempts to generate school subjectivities of worth would have been far less visible.

Finally, the pandemic was an unexpected addition to the project, descending on the UK after we had completed the first two years of research. This meant my participants had a historically unique experience of school for the end of Year 5 and most of Year 6; they experienced not only lockdowns but the cancellation of their KS2 SATs. As a key driver for the continuing development and severity of performative practices in primary schools (Bradbury et al. 2021), this was frustrating from a research viewpoint; it would have been informative to see how my pupils made sense of and experienced their SATs.

However, it also meant that I was able to collect data on their experiences of the lockdowns and 'home learning' which deepened my analysis.

Implications for policy and practice

My study aims to give a voice to a few of those most silenced within our current performative system, their stories pointing to several implications for both policy and practice. In this section I consider ways of interrupting the three pressures I found particularly harmful to 'low attainers', those which all too often lead them to be positioned as failures and held responsible for this failure alongside their affective management of it. Every teacher will have low-attaining children in their classes, and it is up to us all to find ways of improving their situation. Although, of course, issues of injustice will have 'structural roots that run far beyond individual schools or the education system as a whole' (Vincent 2022:11) there are, I suggest, ways we can begin to interrupt these compounding situations for 'low attainers' at each level.

The stories of my four participants supplement the already substantial evidence of the damage caused by the attainment-driven and performative practices in primary schools, in particular the disproportionate impact such practices have on 'low attainers'. Many critics have argued that high-stakes testing – high stakes, that is, for schools as their test results influence league tables, recruitment of pupils and staff, Ofsted judgements, and even pay – is a keystone of this; it needs to be abolished in primary schools. As I have discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, high-stakes testing is at least in part responsible for the increase in attainment grouping and educational triage, in-house tests and test anxiety, the narrowing of the curriculum and a reduction in status of non-academic achievement, more didactic teaching and pupils' stress about teacher feedback. It also increases competition between pupils and damages relationships between pupils and between teachers and pupils. Moreover, all of these practices have been found to be particularly damaging

to 'low attainers'. Summer's despair at remaining in her bottom group seat as the rest of her class moved to other rooms or Max's distress at remembering the humiliation of low test scores from years before, are not experiences schools should subject children to. Individual schools and teachers can make attempts to mitigate these effects, and campaign groups such as 'More than a Score' (MTAS 2022) do important work by addressing the harm of high-stakes testing at the policy level.

I have argued that the dominance of attainment is made more damaging for 'low attainers' by the discourse of responsabilisation in which it is embedded. To interrupt the processes by which pupils are responsabilised, we need to consider the powerful wider role that responsabilisation plays in upholding and reproducing discourses of meritocracy and 'deservingness' throughout society – how we make sense of who has power, who is wealthy and who in poverty, who is valuable and who cast aside. Schools play an important role in maintaining this discourse, but also have the potential to play a role in problematising it.

First, the individualism that is key to responsabilisation can go some way to being tackled by classroom practice. As discussed in Chapter 3, the rise of the 'standards agenda' has led to decreased cooperation between pupils, with helping becoming 'cheating' (Reay and Wiliam 1999; Marks 2016a). Re-imagining classroom practice and notions of student success as collaborative and collective may go some way to addressing this individualism. Although group work has been criticised when it is not structured and purposeful (Kagan 2015), the social and academic advantages of effective collaborative learning have also been highlighted (Blatchford et al. 2003; Tolmie et al. 2010), including the role of dialogue (Christie et al. 2009). No research that I know of, however, has looked at the role that more collaborative classroom practice has on discourses of individualism, or of interrupting the impacts of individualism on pupils' ideas of what makes a 'good pupil' and how they see themselves in relation to this.

Collaborative pedagogies that reward co-operation and collective achievement rather than focussing only on individual success do exist and could be further researched and developed. Cooperative Learning Structures (Kagan 2015), for example, developed to address the differences between Black and White pupils' classroom engagement in the United States, reward supporting and coaching behaviours. These aim to ensure pupils do not get 'stuck' in particular roles and emphasise the effectiveness of collective thinking and working. Ironically, as the pressure to perform increases and teaching is increasingly didactic and 'to the test', pupils have less responsibility over their own learning – less choice in what, how and with whom they study. As noted, their responsibility narrows to that of 'making the right choice' in jumping through an increasing number of hoops.

A second way of interrupting the damaging effects of responsabilisation is to explore how 'growth mindset' ideas are being implemented in classrooms and then use this information to interrupt the widespread oversimplification of these ideas. In particular, we need to address simplistic linking of effort and achievement which can lead 'low attainers' to blame themselves for their failure and struggle to understand when their effort does not yield success.

Third, and perhaps most ambitious, is to support pupils in developing the ability to critique the discourses they are enmeshed in – to start to problematise dominant ideas that seem natural and self-evident and begin to learn that the 'unthinkable' can be made 'thinkable'. Davies (2005:13) is speaking of university students when she argues that education must aim to create:

... citizens who can understand the constitutive work that discourse does and who can work creatively, imaginatively, politically, and with passion to break open the old where it is faulty and to envisage the new.

Explicit challenge of dominant discourse in the classroom is difficult for teachers, as work on teaching Fundamental British Values has shown (Vincent 2022). Teachers are themselves enmeshed in dominant discourses and are also scared of venturing into difficult territory. However, simply taking opportunities to draw on moments when the usually opaque becomes clear is a start. For example, teachers might discuss what the pandemic has shown about the social value of different jobs and how this relates to their status and rewards. Giving space for pupils to discuss such topics allows them to begin to question taken-for-granted assumptions and to imagine alternatives.

Perhaps equally important, school practices embody values, and if they are competitive, performative and obsessed with outcomes, this is a powerful message to pupils not easily overcome by even the most radical circle time discussion. As noted above, attempts to embody alternative values into classroom practice are made difficult by the pressures to perform, lack of time and support. Again, debate, training and ongoing support, alongside policy level attempts to open up spaces for other practices, are essential.

The way many young people have succeeded in challenging dominant discourses around sexuality, gender and race over recent years should give us hope that even the most entrenched truths can be opened up and made visible for examination. Indeed, perhaps because of their background or their positioning in 'good pupil' discourse, my participants were not as competitive and individualistic as Keddie's high-attaining pupils from generally class and race privileged backgrounds. It may be that my pupils' social positioning made it easier to locate a space to challenge the dominance of personal advancement and the ambition to be better than others.

Finally, I want to suggest that the impact of happiness discourse in schools needs thorough consideration, with particular attention to its effect on 'low attainers'. The idea that happiness is our overriding goal and that it is largely a matter of individual psychology, which is under our control and can be taught,

needs problematising and a structural analysis of 'happiness' made central. The individualism that is part of the goals of SEAL and happiness education generally individualises and responsabilises pupils' character traits, such as having a 'positive mental attitude'. As Gillies (2011) notes, positive education programmes do not do justice to the complexity of emotions, and an awareness that emotions can be unpleasant, unexpected, constantly in flux and informative wherever they are in the spectrum, might help collapse the model of 'good' and 'bad' emotions that both Britney and Jake present. It is important to carve out a respectful space for pupils' negative emotions – for teachers to model dealing with discomfort and upset, moving away from the idea that 'putting a brave face on things' is always the best way. If a situation causes upset it may be the situation, rather than our upset, that needs changing. There are certainly, to respond to Suissa's (2015:111) question, 'things we should not be resilient to'.

Concluding comments

My pupils are not 'typical', but neither are they atypical. Pupils who struggle to achieve in school terms, who are designated as low attaining, respond and make sense of this in different ways, but what they have in common is that they are stigmatised and this stigmatisation is painful. The process of growing up will always involve considerable emotional work, but such pupils face a substantial additional burden, with serious implications for their wellbeing. I have explored the texture of four such school lives in detail, showing that they may contain significant anxiety, humiliation, boredom, frustration and self-doubt, and seem short of the pleasures of mastery, achievement and recognition, and of a feeling of being comfortable in one's own skin. For such pupils, school too often fails to support their flourishing. In addition, their futures are likely to be negatively affected; they may leave school both with fewer skills than they could have acquired and, perhaps worse, at risk of believing that they do not have what it takes to have a fulfilling life, that they

are on the path to failure. This is not only deeply cruel and unjust for the individual, but also denies society of their potential contributions.

Moreover, we need to ask what social function such widespread failure is performing. I have argued that the discourse of meritocracy plays an important role in maintaining the legitimacy of elite power. Although advocates of meritocracy like to focus on upward social mobility, failure is just as much its consequence; those who fail to demonstrate the talent and effort required to succeed will sink to the bottom, and do not deserve the rewards society offers others who show greater 'merit'. Many children, disproportionately those from backgrounds of social disadvantage, will experience themselves as failing to meet a narrow and socially biased criterion of success, and be told this indicates a lack of deservingness. They are denied the opportunity to develop their capacities, and their contributions are underestimated. They, and others, are encouraged to accept their low value, and correspondingly low rewards, as 'fair', reinforcing the legitimacy of the existing distribution of wealth and power. This study enriches our understanding of how this inequitable process of social reproduction is played out in primary school classrooms through a detailed exploration of the day-to-day experiences and sense-making of those at the sharp end of it.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Example of a full observation

11.50 Maths lesson

Max and I enter the room after interview. The children are doing a maths lesson. Max is sitting at the front table right in front of the board – the nearest child to the front. He sits down as Mr Reed explains numerators and denominators. He opens his book and turns the pages. He has a big yellow pencil case in front of him so I can't see what's in his book. He continues to leaf through, looking at each page. Mr Reed is asking the class questions. Max looks down and bites his lip. He continues through the pages slowly. He looks up at the board and purses his lips. He frowns. He is sitting very still; he moves his hand to his lips. He has a slight frown on his face. One foot is on top of the other under the table. He glances over at me (is he nervous because I'm observing?). Mr Reed makes a number of jokes. Some children say 'ooooh' as Mr Reed says 'I like dogs more than all of you'. Max doesn't react in any way. He is looking at the board. He has his hand to his face. The class is now quiet. He is sitting next to Sam with three girls on the table with him. Mr Reed shouts 'pencils down! I'm trying to help you here so please focus'. Max continues to look at the board. His position hasn't changed. He bites his lips and plays with his lip with his hand. He does a sideways glance at me. He bites his thumb. He crosses his leg and begins swinging his top leg under the table. Mr Reed gets to the end of his explanation. He says 'Max, do you understand?'. Max sucks his lips in and after a pause makes an 'mmm' affirmative-sounding noise. Mr Reed says 'kind of?. Come over here and I'll explain'. Max gets up and stands at the front of the class. Mr Reed begins explaining. Fractions. Max looks around, at him and me and it's hard to imagine he's really listening, his focus looks all over the place. Mr R's explanation draws to a close and he puts his hand on Max's shoulder and leads him back to his seat. He then starts explaining more, using the board which is right in front of Max. A child asks to go to the toilet and Mr Reed makes a joke. Max laughs. Mr Reed continues to explain to Max. Max is holding in a laugh or smile, but nervously, as Mr Reed says 'lets pretend that this is perfect' (talking about his fraction drawing, which is messy). Mr Reed begins counting up in halves and Max is asked to continue. He jogs his head as he says each one, correctly. Mr Reed is speaking at the same loudness as when he's talking to the whole class. Mr Reed says '1 add 3 equals..?'. Max says five. Mr Reed pauses. Max looks stressed, Mr Reed swings his hand jokingly over Max's head, pretending to hit him on the head, and they both say 4. Mr Reed pauses to tell someone off for something. Max looks at him wide eyed as he does this. Sir moves back to his explanation to Max. He is nodding as Mr Reed is explaining (really listening or a show of listening?). A

girl finishes the work and Mr Reed says 'sorry Max' as he goes to get more work for the girl. Max plays with his eyes, rubbing them. Mr Reed is approached by someone and a discussion breaks out. A child calls him 'boss' he says he likes it. Max smiles. Max waits as Mr Reed talks to someone else. He returns. Mr Reed asks for a common denominator and another question. Max gets them both right. He is pulling bits of his mouth in as though he's managing a nervous smile. His cheeks are twitching as he continues to talk to Mr Reed about fractions. He is asked another question. He pauses. He eventually gives the answer while giggling. He is asked 5 add 2. He grins and says '7' and laughs. He is asked if he understands it. He pauses. He pulls his mouth in. He says 'yeahh'. He is constantly managing a nervous smile thing, switching between smiles, laughs and frowns. It's stressful to watch. Mr Reed finishes and asks Max if he can now get on with it. Max says yes. He looks up at me and grins. He sticks something in his book and begins writing in pencil. The child next to him makes meow noises to a tune. He stops. Max is looking up at the board where Mr R's demonstration is. He looks like he's copying it down (the first question). Mr Reed is talking to another child. Max looks at him and over to the girl on the table. He pulls the curl at the front of his forehead. He glances at me. He says something to the child next to him. He is looking at me more now, up and down as he's working. He looks down, concentrating. He runs his hands through his hair. Max looks at the board again and looks like he's writing it down in his book. The girls on his table are discussing the maths and look like they're helping each other, comparing answers and showing each other how they got there. The two boys sit, the other one looking at the girls but not speaking, Max working alone. Mr Reed says someone is doing well: 'I can't wait to take a green pen to that'. Max scratches his head. He continues to write. Mr Reed says 'Do you just want me to do the sheet for you? (sarcastic). So many of you are saying 'I don't get it I don't get it'. Max continues working although there's lots going on in the classroom and Mr Reed is sitting behind him talking very loudly to Jake, who is at the far other corner of the room, about another question. Mr Reed makes a loud sarcastic joke to Jake 'Oh – it's almost like we're just doing it now, it's almost like we're doing it together' (sarcastic voice). Max looks up at Mr R. He looks down and continues working. Mr Reed is speaking so loudly right next to M, it's amazing that he can keep writing. Then Mr Reed says 'Hope you're all looking at this'. I don't notice as it's in the flow of talk, but Max does and looks up immediately, stopping writing, although his pencil is still in hand. He gives the board a long lingering look as Mr Reed finishes his explanation. Max goes back to his work (he's prob working on earlier questions?). He rubs his eye. And again. He counts on his fingers. Mr Reed is still speaking loudly to Jake at the back of the class and throwing a tennis ball in the air near M's head. Mr Reed kicks the ball against the wall. A child walks in as the tennis ball hits the wall for the third time. Mr Reed makes a joke and Max looks up at him. Mr Reed leaves the room to speak to the other Year 5 teacher. The class stays at a similar noise level. Max is rubbing his eye and continues writing. He keeps rubbing his eye. He blows his lips out. The class are talking. His table are discussing something. He keeps his head down. He has his hand against his face. He is

chewing his lips and moving them. Mr Reed makes a sarcastic joke to a child at the back of the class. Max looks over at him and smiles. His legs are twisted together and he's leaning to one side. It's as though he's taking up as small a space as he possibly could, twisted up in a line. He's been ill for 2 weeks and he does look thin.

Appendix 2: Example interview schedule

Written by LQ for all CLIPS interviews for summer term 2019

I remember when....

'I remember when....' And mention the places they photographed in the last set of interviews [when photographing places that made them feel different things]. Ensure you include enough detail.

Aim: they know you've been thinking about them and that they're important to our research

Games for the Start of the session

1. Play 'yes and' and together tell the story of the 20-minute observation that you conducted in the classroom. You start e.g. 'you walked into the classroom after break talking to Jake' 'yes and Jake said that he'd got a goal at break time when he didn't 'yes and I thought – I wonder whether that's annoying for you?' etc.

TIP: model using 'yes and I thought....' And 'yes and I felt....' To get them to focus on thoughts and feelings (Surrey - think back to the classroom [imaginary story])

Aim: the exercise is designed to stop someone blocking so particularly good for pupils who are shy/quiet or those who like to disagree or disrupt.

Follow ups from past interviews

- Get home address for each child
- Personal follow-ups from previous interviews. Football, moving house, moving school, etc. Ensure we've read their past interview carefully.

Aim: Shows we care. Creates continuity between sessions. Enables us to follow up on things we were confused about.

LOOK AT VIDEO AND DISCUSS

Annual questions

1. What is your favourite subject at school, and why?
2. Do you like coming to school, and why?
3. What are the best things about you as a person? What are the least good things? What do you want to be when you leave school? Why is that?
4. What sort of person becomes successful? Do you know anyone like that? What about yourself?

Aim: To ensure comparison over the years

Testing

1. Introduce the idea of testing. Put an alien/dinosaur on the table.
 - If an alien came down from another planet and had never heard of a 'test' how would you explain it to them?
 - How would you describe to the alien what it is like to do a test?
 - If the alien was then told they were going to have to do a test what advice would you give them?
 - If they asked if they should go back to their planet and start giving all the children tests what would you advise?

Aim: elicit their understanding of testing. By using the alien, you can claim total ignorance about what testing is, how it operates and how people feel about it. Means they start from the beginning and you can speak as the alien claiming you need more detail on things because you don't understand.

2. Use the dolls house. Lay out the different animals / tables etc. for them to use. Also any bottle tops or anything else that they can turn into things.
 - Say: 'Set up the room as though it's your classroom' (they begin) 'and something I haven't told you is that today is the day of a test. Which test shall it be? Why?'
 - Pupils choose animals for pupils and teachers / furniture layout for room etc and you ask what they're doing and why.

Questions to support this:

Who in the class might be excited to do the test? Who might be worried?
Who might really hate the test?
Are any of the animals friends?
Are any of them family? (not really family but really love each other)
Which animals does the teacher like/not like?
Which animal are you?
What does your animal think of the teacher's animal?

TIP: Keep it all in the metaphor e.g. once they've chosen a rabbit for their animal say 'the rabbit' not 'you'.

Aim: Elicit their thoughts and feelings about: pupils who do well in tests/pupils who don't do well/the importance their teacher places on tests/ their own feelings about tests and the social place of tests and academic achievement more widely.

2. Once the classroom is set up ask them what would happen during the morning of the test. You offer to be the animal (they may well ask you to be the teacher). Together, you act it out with you asking them continuously what you need to do (i.e. they're actually making all the decisions, not you). You can also pause

the play periodically to ask 'why have they done that?' or 'I wonder what the lion is thinking?' etc. If you're struggling you can use the 'yes and' format from previously with you only saying the 'yes and' not the content of the story.

Questions to aid the play:

What does the teacher say once the children are sitting down?

How does the teacher say it?

Where might the teacher be looking?

Does anyone in the class say anything back?

How is the 'mouse' feeling when the teacher says that?

Who does the teacher choose to hand the test papers out?

TIP: Ensure you do not lead at all – i.e. everything you say, the way you say it, where your animal walks in the classroom etc needs to have been directed by the child.

Aim: To understand how the child experiences the test and how they think the other pupils and teacher experiences the test and how these things compare.

If these not covered / pupils find play challenging you can ask:

- What tests have they had in their life/this term?
- How did they feel to be doing them?
- Are tests the same for all children?
- Do any of your friends love tests? Do any of them hate tests?
- Do you like getting the results of your tests or would you prefer not to know?

TIP: Ensure we do not indicate any value judgment on doing well/badly in a test e.g. avoid 'well done' or 'that's a good score' or 'you nearly passed' etc. Even positive judgments are judgment!

Retrospective History

Have a roll of paper or 4 pieces of A3 and stick together roughly with parcel tape. At the top write Nursery / Reception / Y1 / Y2.

- Stand up, hold hands/link arms (whatever feels appropriate) and say you're going to go into a time machine back in time. Close your eyes like in Mary Poppins (they may just have seen the new one) put that piece of paper on the floor and jump into it together. Ask them to keep their eyes shut and describe their classroom. What's in it? Who's in it? What are they feeling? (don't forget to jump back out afterwards!)
- Ask: In which year did you feel the best, like you could do anything? Discuss and ask them to (or you could) draw objects/stick figures or whatever in that square to represent what they're saying. Or offer to write it if they don't like drawing.
- Ask: In which year did you feel the worst? Again, discuss and draw/write.

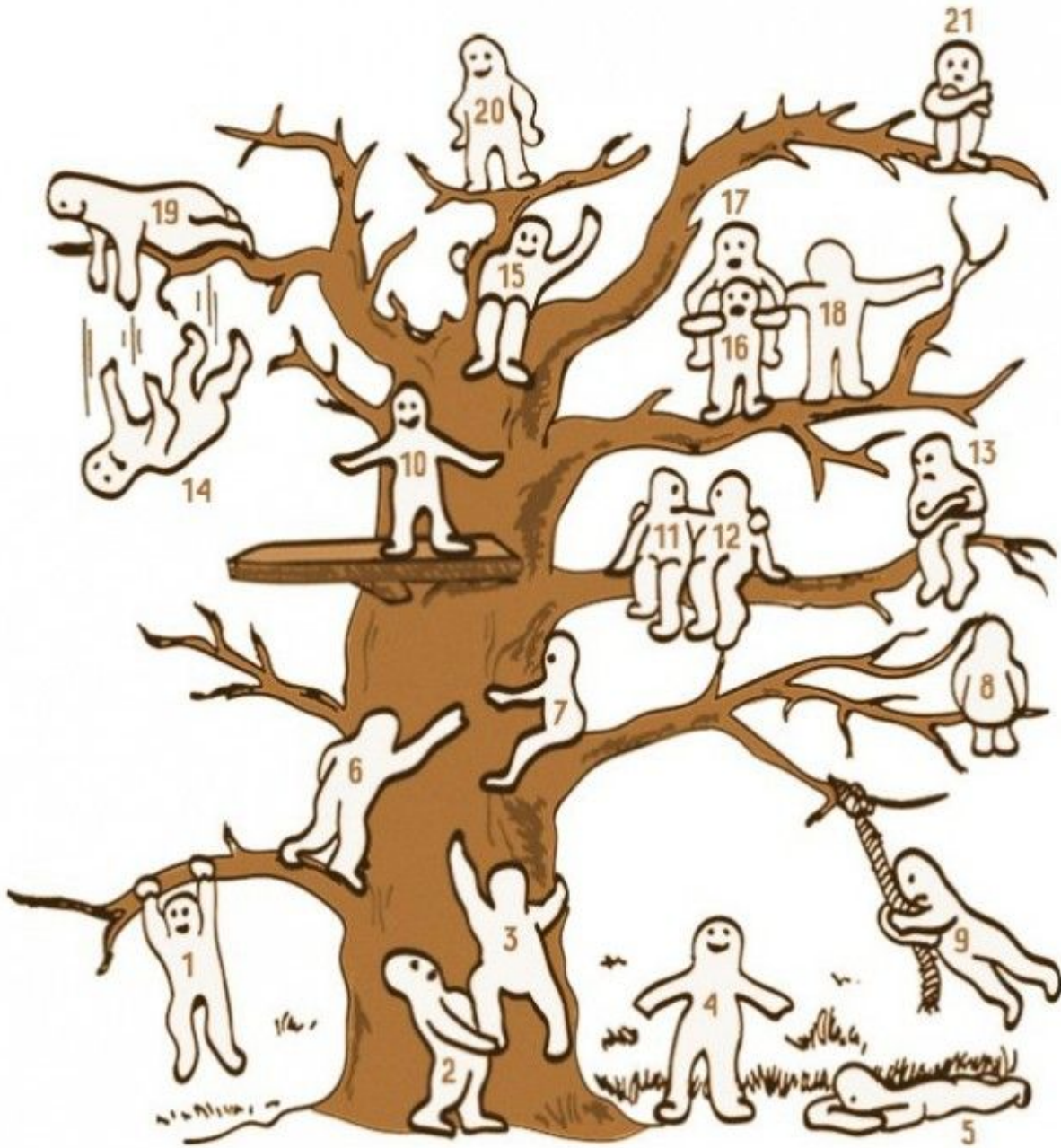
- From here ask about other years. Can they remember anything? What? Try and fill in all boxes but 2/3 filled in is fine.
- Show babies to adolescents picture of Eleanore's. Focus on change. How have they changed between these years and from then to now?

TIP: If some children want to get on with drawing without talking allow them to do this and explain to you afterwards.

Aim: Begin building a life-history of their school years before we met them.
Questions repeated from last summer.

Thank them. Discuss next interview and ask them about Y5. Do they know who their teacher is yet and how do they feel about it?

Appendix 3: Blob people page for interview



Appendix 4: List of core CLIPS codes

A. Sense of competence and confidence in school learning

Being happy and clever and well behaved
Beliefs about success and failure and what impacts later life
Effort, self management, listening and concentrating
Expressions of own competence
Expressions of own incompetence
Practice including shadow work

B. Sense of identity and relationships

Aspirations
Helping among peers
Home culture
Inclusion, exclusion and belonging
Intersecting identities
Personal hobbies or characteristics
Striking insights
Power
Resignation, repression of feelings, compliance, conformity
Resilience, proactivity, confidence
Humour
Resistance, rebellion or subversion
voice representation
Relationship with family
Parental help
Relationship with peers
Relationship with researchers (inc. impact of study on pupils plus contradictions)
Relationships with teachers and staff
Self-exclusion
Sense of self (becoming)

C. Overall attitude to learning and schooling

Ability grouping, including views of top and bottom of class
Comments on year changes
Coping strategies for managing school
Learning strategies
Lessons as boring or engaging
Physical environment of school
Rewards and sanctions
School as safe, supportive, comforting
School as unfair, difficult, painful
The need to hurry
Secondary school talk
Strong emotions about school

Subject specific comments
Views of the 'top' or 'bottom' of the class
Whole school systems

Appendix 5: Example of refined codes

Examples of refined codes developed for Summer under wider CLIPS codes that were part of

C. Overall attitude to learning and schooling

School as unfair, difficult, painful

- Desire for playtime
- Desire to be home instead
- Dislike of maths and obsession with it
- Fear
- Managing the awfulness of school
- Anxiety
- Resignation
- Responses to difficulties
- School as controlling
- Self-exclusion
- The need to hurry

Ability grouping, views of top and bottom of class

- Ability tables
- Mathocracy
- Relationship with easy work
- Relationship with difficult work

Appendix 6: Parent consent and information forms

The Leverhulme Trust



Parental consent form for the children in CLIPS

Project title: CLIPS: Children's life-histories in primary school

Department: UCL Institute of Education, CPA

Name and contact details of researchers: Eleanore Hargreaves e.hargreaves@ucl.ac.uk

Denise Buchanan d.buchanan.14@ucl.ac.uk Laura Quick laura.quick@ucl.ac.uk

Thank you for allowing your child to take part in this research. Our ultimate goal in this research is to ensure that you and your children are happy to be involved with this exciting project, so please do not hesitate to ask us anything you do not understand in the information sheet, or in what we say, before you have signed the following form. Please do not be put off by this form which is a formality that we must first of all deal with. You will be given a copy of this form which you can keep and refer to at any time.

I confirm that by ticking each box below, I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element that my child may not be able to take part in this study.

		Tick box
1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the CLIPS study. I have had the chance to ask questions, which have been answered to my satisfaction, and give consent for my child to take part in <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observations in class that are taped on an iPad for discussion in interview afterwards (see below)• Paired interviews that are audio recorded.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Occasional filming of themselves (with supervision) 	
2.	I understand that my child will be able to withdraw research data up to four weeks after it has been collected.	
3.	I understand that all iPad clips taken in class will be used during the interviews and then deleted. However, if the child or researcher would like to save particular clips, special permission will be sought.	
4.	I understand that my child's comments will be reported under a different name.	
5.	I understand that my child's data may be seen by responsible adults from the Institute of Education and The Leverhulme Trust (the project funders).	
6.	I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that we are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. If we decide to withdraw, any data collected up until this point will be deleted, unless we agree otherwise.	
7.	I understand that support will be available to my child if they become upset during the course of the research.	
8.	I understand that no promise or guarantee of benefits have been made to encourage my child to take part.	
9.	I understand that I will not benefit financially from this study or from any possible future outcome it may result in, and nor will my child.	
10.	I understand that the data will not be made available to any commercial organisations but is solely the responsibility of the researchers undertaking the study.	
11.	I understand that my child's individual research data will not be used by others for their future research.	
12.	I understand that a research report will be published at the end of the project and I would like to receive a summary of it.	Yes or no required

13.	I understand that both the audio and visual recordings will be stored anonymously using password protected software and to be used only for teaching and research purposes.	
14.	I am aware of whom I should contact if I wish to lodge a complaint or I have a question.	
15.	I agree to the data my child provides being archived by UCL.	
16.	I understand that my child's personal information (e.g. attainment levels) will be passed on from the school to the research team, if and when required. It will be stored confidentially.	
16.	I voluntarily agree to my child taking part in this project.	

If you would like your contact details to be retained so that you can be contacted in the future by UCL researchers who would like to invite you or your child to participate in follow up studies to this project or future studies of a similar nature, please tick the appropriate box below:

	Tick box
Yes, I would be happy to be contacted in this way	
No, I would not like to be contacted	

Name of child: _____

Name of parent: _____

Address: _____

Phone number: _____

Mobile: _____

E mail: _____

Signature of parent: _____

Date: _____

Name of researcher: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

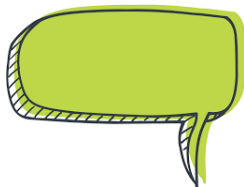


The Leverhulme Trust



Children's Life-histories In Primary Schools (CLIPS)

Research Project Opportunity: Information for Parents



Your child has been invited to take part in the 'CLIPS' project. This information page will tell you what is involved. If you have further questions, do not hesitate to call us on 07939586325

The CLIPS project is a piece of research being carried out at the UCL Institute of Education and aims to understand how pupils experience school – how school effects their learning, development, wellbeing and sense of their place in the world. It is designed to help policy-makers improve schools for all children across the country. We are particularly interested to hear the voices of pupils who don't find all aspects of school easy.

What will it involve?

We will interview the same children, in pairs, from the end of Year 3 to the start of Year 7, to see how their views change and develop. Every half term we will observe them in a lesson and record ipad clips of them learning. This will be followed by an interview where they'll get the chance to tell us their views about learning, schooling and themselves, using short sections of the recording as prompts.

Your child will also get the opportunity to work with a professional film-maker to make a film about life in the classroom, which they will feature in.

How will being part of the project affect your child?

Children who have taken part in similar projects have benefited greatly from the extra concentrated attention, and have grown in confidence and ability to

express themselves. We are confident that this will be the same in this project, and that your child will enjoy taking part.

We will of course work closely with your child's teachers every year to make sure that the half-termly interviews never interfere with core lessons, and will ensure pupils fully understand that they don't need to answer any questions they don't want to during interview.

Your child will be able to stop an interview at any time, and both they, and you, can withdraw them from the project at any point over the 5 years.

Who's in the research team? We all have current DBS checks.



Laura Quick



Eleanore Hargreaves



Denise Buchanan

Appendix 7: Children's consent and information forms

CLIPS child's agreement form

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research. An adult will read it with you and explain anything that is not clear. They will also help you decide what to tick.

Project title: CLIPS: Children's life-histories in primary school

Department: UCL Institute of Education, CPA

Name and contact details of researcher: Eleanore Hargreaves

e.hargreaves@ucl.ac.uk Denise Buchanan d.buchanan.14@ucl.ac.uk Laura

Quick laura.quick@ucl.ac.uk

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this agreement form to keep and refer to at any time.

I confirm that I understand that by ticking each box below I am consenting to this part of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked boxes means that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one part that I may not be able to take part in the study.

		Tick box
1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the CLIPS study. I have had the chance to ask questions, which have been answered to my satisfaction, and give my consent to take part in <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observations in class that are taped on an iPad for discussion in interview afterwards (see below)• Paired interviews that are audio recorded.• Occasional filming of myself (with supervision).	
2.	I consent to my interview being audio recorded.	
3.	I understand that my comments will be reported under a different name.	

4.	I understand that all iPad clips taken in class will be used during the interviews and then deleted. However, if I or the researcher want to save particular clips, special permission will be asked for from my parent/ parents.	
5.	I understand that people from the Institute of Education and The Leverhulme Trust might also want to find out what I have said.	
6.	I understand that I am freely taking part in this project but that I can leave the project at any time without giving a reason. If I do, any data collected up until this point will be deleted, unless I agree otherwise.	2 ticks required
7.	I understand the support that will be available to me if at any time I become upset or worried during the interviews.	
7.	I understand the benefits of taking part.	
8.	I understand that the interviews and filming will not be given to anyone else and will be used only by the named researchers from the Institute of Education.	
9.	I understand that I will not be paid now or in the future for taking part in this study.	
10.	I agree that my individual research data will use a different name, so that no one can know it is about me when they look at my data.	
11.	I understand that the information I have submitted will be published as a report and I wish to receive a summary of this.	Yes No (circle one)
12.	I consent to my audio and visual recordings being stored anonymously, using password-protected software so that no-one else can see or hear them.	
13.	I am aware of who I should contact if I am unhappy about something during the research.	
14.	I would be happy for the data I provide to be kept for ever at UCL.	
15.	I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.	

If you would like your contact details to be retained so that you can be contacted in the future by UCL researchers who would like to invite you to

participate in follow up studies to this project, or in future studies of a similar nature, please tick the appropriate box below.

<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes, I would be happy to be contacted in this way	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	No, I would not like to be contacted	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of child

Date

Signature

Name of researcher

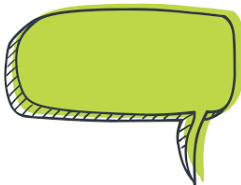
Date

Signature



Children's Life-histories In Primary Schools (CLIPS)

Information for Pupils



This information sheet will tell you what the CLIPS project is and what you'll be doing if you decide to take part. Please ask as many questions as you like to!

We are doing this project because we think it's important that adults really understand what it's like for children at school – what they enjoy or don't enjoy, find easy or find difficult. If we understand these things, it will help us suggest ways of making schools better across the country. We particularly want to help children who sometimes find some parts of school or learning difficult.

We would like you to take part in the project because we want to hear about your experiences of school. We've asked you teachers and parents/carers if they're happy for you to do it, and they are, so now it's up to you to decide if you want to.

It will be starting while you're in Year 3, and will continue until you're in Year 7.

What will it involve?

- ❖ **Being interviewed every half term with a classmate**
One of us will watch a lesson and during the lesson, record you and a classmate on an ipad. After, you can both watch parts of the recording and tell us about what you were doing, feeling and thinking. We will also want to hear about other experiences - your learning, friendships and how you feel about your place in the world.

Important: You never need to talk about anything you don't want to and you'll be able to stop an interview or withdraw from the project if you choose.

❖ **Making a film with five of your classmates**

You will also have the opportunity to work with a professional filmmaker to make a film about your time at school. You will get to meet her and do the first bit of filming soon and then she'll come back regularly over the five years to work on it with you.

Who's in the research team?

Laura Quick



Eleanore Hargreaves



Denise Buchanan



Other children who have taken part in similar projects have really enjoyed it and loved the feeling of being really listened to and their views taken seriously. We hope you do too!