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Moments of Inclusion and Exclusion: pupils negotiating classroom contexts

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ABSTRACT *This paper uses evidence from a small-scale study of two English primary school classrooms to examine school inclusion in its political contexts. We argue that 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' are complex processes, enacted moment-by-moment by pupils and teachers. Our focus is on the pupils' negotiation of these moments, and we examine how their negotiations are contingent on (although not determined by) a web of intersecting indices of 'difference', including differences of social class, ethnicity, gender/sexuality, perceived academic ability and physical appearance. We take a post-structuralist approach, well-known in feminist educational research but less often used in research and thinking about 'inclusive' schooling, to foreground children's active role in making sense of social conditions that are not of their own making or choice. We conclude that a politically literate understanding of the processes of inclusion and exclusion is necessary both to highlight the continuing reproduction of educational inequality, and to produce the necessary conditions for egalitarian change.*

Introduction

What does it mean to be a pupil in an 'inclusive' school? This paper examines the processes of inclusion and exclusion in two inner-city English classrooms in separate schools that we have called George Holt and St Blythe's. Both schools were committed to working towards inclusion in their urban, multi-ethnic and mostly working-class contexts. Our small-scale study of two classes of 10-year-old and 11-year-old (Year Six) pupils revealed the processes of inclusion and exclusion to be complex ones, re-negotiated moment-by-moment by pupils and teachers. This, however, is not to suggest that those negotiations took place on a level playing field. To the contrary, it became evident that they were played out in classroom contexts framed by overlapping sets of micro-cultures: children's and teachers' micro-cultural worlds, and the struggle for power and prestige within those worlds, were key in producing moments of inclusion and exclusion for specific children and groups of children.

To understand those micro-cultures, it is necessary to look beyond the local production of meaning in our case study classrooms, and to examine the wider context of the network of power relations in which that production is embedded. While we were keenly interested in perceived academic ability—or, as we argue elsewhere, performance in tests (Hall *et al.*, 2002)—as an organising category for inclusion and exclusion, such a focus cannot be separated from other axes of social and material inequality. In this paper, we look at the imbrication of gender/sexuality, social class, ethnicity and physical appearance in the production of inclusive and exclusive moments in the two schools. The Year Six children in our study were produced, by their schools, as differently able, gendered, classed, racialised and embodied subjects. All the children played an active role in their subjectivity: they could take up, resist and manoeuvre around the subject positions on offer to them. That activity, however, always took place in relation to the identity resources available, and the discursive practices in play.

Children's (and young people's) negotiation of subjectivity in classroom contexts has been widely researched and documented (see, for example, Hey, 1997; Connolly, 1998; Francis, 1998; Renold, 2000; and many others). We were interested in how such processes map onto the current policy drive towards inclusive education. In the study, we set out to use ethnographic methods to begin to unravel some of the inter-relational complexities at work in schools that have a stated commitment to 'inclusion'. Two researchers spent several days in each school, observing classrooms and interviewing pupils and staff, and we sought to involve class teachers as well as the rest of the research team in data analysis: however, the extent to which we ourselves managed to be 'inclusive' in the research process was limited, and is the subject of another paper (Nind *et al.*, in press). In this present paper, we examine how the children negotiated their classroom contexts. We draw primarily on observations in the form of fieldnotes, but it is important to remember that, although we do not quote from them here, the interview data are part of our total stock of knowledge about the schools and the children, and have informed our thinking. Through detailed consideration of fragments of fieldnote data, we show how an understanding of multiple and intersecting indices of difference is essential in the task of understanding the processes of inclusion in schools.

Diverse Learners and Strategic Essentialism: a post-structuralist approach

Lepa has joined us at our table, and she and Claire are making hearts out of scrunched-up tissue paper. I suggest to Shabnam that she does this on the inside of her card and she agrees. We go into production-line mode—I'm cutting and scrunching the paper, she's gluing and sticking them. This is fun. We talk about countries of origin. Lepa is from Albania, and only arrived here three years ago. Claire's family are from Grenada but she was born here, and Shabnam's family are from India though she, too, was born here. On the next table, Joseph, Danny, Iftekar and Karl are playing with a car-kit, making model cars. On the far table Mark, Stephen and Christopher are playing cards. Paulie wants to join them, but they don't want him. They say their game is only for three, so he sits and watches, which they don't seem to mind. Jonathon is sitting on his own, drawing Garfield. Simon is sitting with the Red table girls, finishing off their 'Alice' posters. (Fieldnotes, George Holt)

Why are we finding it necessary to hold on to difference categories so firmly in today's shifting, plural world of hybrid identities? Some advocates of inclusive education (see, for

example, Barton 1997; Thomas & Loxley, 2001) argue that schools need to move towards valuing diversity as difference, instead of continuing to categorise children on the basis of their belonging (or not) to distinct groups. There is much to recommend such an argument, and particularly its emphasis that ‘difference’ should be regarded as a necessary and enriching part of everyday life. It is possible to read the earlier extract as an example of valuing diversity in a classroom context. The children had been allowed to choose an activity from a range on offer to them. The girls on the table with the researcher were fully engaged in an activity they had negotiated with the class teacher, and one in which they were clearly interested. They worked co-operatively, discussing and making sense of their diverse countries of origin as they worked. The boys on the next table were similarly involved in a co-operative activity, again one they had been able to negotiate with the teacher and that fully engaged their attention. Jonathon—a child who dislikes collaborative working—was allowed to complete his preferred solitary activity, and was not co-erced into a group situation. And Simon had opted into a ‘girlie’ drawing activity, his presence on the table of girls accepted without comment. Even Paulie, who was not accepted by the group of his choice, was allowed to sit with them, although his partial exclusion might suggest that work could still be done with this class on participation and inclusion.

Such a reading would have much validity. But there is much more than this going on in the extract. To make visible and to explain the moments of inclusion and exclusion in the extract, we need conceptual tools that a liberal pluralist perspective of ‘different but equal’ does not make available (Sedgwick, 1994). First, we need theories that will enable us to ask questions about the construction of ‘common sense’ that has allowed the gendered pattern of activity in this classroom to be normalised. We have to be able to ask what meanings and practices underlie this common sense, what its consequences are for specific children and, in the larger scheme of things, whose interests are being served. As Weedon (1997, p. 94) notes: ‘It is the need to regulate disparate forms of subjectivity in the interests of existing power relations that motivates the language of common sense’. Second, we need theories that will enable us to examine the enduring reproduction of inequalities, to make those inequalities visible, and to allow us to organise against them.

Hall (1990) argues for a ‘strategic essentialism’ that can take account of the very real social and material consequences for individuals of belonging to particular groups but that does not assume that those consequences are fixed and unchanging, nor that they are a necessary condition of some individual, inherent characteristic or perceived lack. As Mort (1994) notes of strategic essentialism in the context of sexuality, we need to beware of premature attempts to do away with difference categories: the trick is to politicise our understanding of difference so that we are *more*, rather than *less*, able to come to an understanding of the reproduction of inequalities over time. Third, we need to understand how membership of specific (although always multiple and overlapping) categories is implicated in the production of subject positions that it is possible for any individual to occupy. In the earlier extract, when Simon transgresses the gendered norms of the classroom, it is important to consider how the other groups to which he belongs—as an academically proficient white boy—produce resources that he can take up in this piece of his identity work. To consider this, we need to be able to take account of the ways in which subject positions are prescribed and proscribed, how they are made differentially available and desirable, and who feels themselves to be addressed by and interpellated into specific subject positions. We need ways of understanding what Walkerdine (1989) has called the ‘canalisation of desire’ through unequal relations and practices of power.

A post-structuralist approach is one that enables us to make use of the dynamic relationship between subject and context, and to foreground children actively making sense of themselves in conditions not of their own making or choice (Davies, 1994; Epstein & Johnson, 1998). A post-structural view both allows and compels us to take account of, and account for, the production of children as included and excluded pupils, and children's own production of moments of inclusion and exclusion. The conceptual tools and understandings derived from post-structuralist theory, enable and require us to go beyond simplistic, uni-dimensional or blame-and-shame explanations of schooling to interrogate what we really mean by 'inclusion'. In the remainder of this paper, we focus on a small number of fieldnote extracts, drawing out moments of inclusion and exclusion from each account. We look in particular at how these moments are produced through multiple and intersecting indices of difference, notably those of perceived academic ability, gender/sexuality, social class, 'race'/ethnicity and physical appearance. We look too at how the children negotiate their way through these moments, and how they position themselves as active and/or audient members of classroom micro-cultures.

Consuming competition: gender, physical education and cultures of consumption

After a brief run round the yard as a warm-up the class engage in a boys v girls game of rounders. The girls bat first. The boys are much more skilful than the girls in terms of individual skills and their ability to play as a team. The boys' fielding is marked by a number of reasonably accurate throws. By comparison the girls appear to lack skill and confidence. They run with the ball rather than trust to their ability to throw and catch with accuracy. When the ball is hit to the boundary every girl runs after it leaving the bases unprotected. This difference and the fact that the boys win hands down frustrates me. Sonya [the teacher] ends the lesson with a speech about this being 'just a game' and that any unpleasantness or boasting after the game would be highly inappropriate. (Fieldnotes, St Blythe's)

As we start to write this paper, the Commonwealth Games have just opened in Manchester. Hundreds of expensively clad, finely-tuned bodies beautiful are about to burst onto our television screens in wall-to-wall media coverage of the competitions. Also arriving in Manchester is the footballer Rio Ferdinand, bought last week from his former side at a cost of £29.3 million. Sport is big business, and the rewards for excelling are unimaginable wealth, fame, and the power and prestige that wealth and fame can bring. This is one of the contexts in which the boys of our inner-city schools have apparently learnt the rules and practices of sport to much greater effect than have the girls.

To begin to explain this, we have to look to discourses of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), and to their association with sport (especially football in the UK context) and with ideals of bodily strength and power (Skelton, 2001). In his compelling study of Mike Tyson, Jefferson (1996) identifies a masculine discourse that he calls 'the will to win'. He describes how Tyson's childhood, impoverished on many levels, led him to make what were in the first instance: fantasy identifications with a muscular, physically powerful, triumphant version of the subject 'man'. In Tyson's case, the identifications were extreme, as was his emotional investment in the model. He also inhabited a body that could be trained in such a way that the attainment of the ideal was, to an extent, possible for him, so that he was able to triumph through his sporting prowess.

Many of the boys in this extract from St Blythe's have, to a lesser extent, learned to recognise themselves as potential winners on the competitive sports field. A complex cocktail of processes is going on here. Historical legacies (Willis, 1977) and current economic conditions, alongside the moral panic over boys' perceived 'underachievement' (Kenway *et al.*, 1997; Epstein *et al.*, 1998; Hey *et al.*, 1998; Raphael Reed, 1999), tend to make the subject 'academically successful working-class boy' difficult to imagine. This tends to make it hard—if not almost impossible—for boys to position themselves as such, leading to a situation in which opportunities for working-class boys to be triumphant in the academic sphere are largely unavailable. Those opportunities for academic excellence that *are* available to boys largely centre around the subject 'gentle, studious boy' who is discursively produced as the butt of homosexual bullying (Warren, 1997). Such a subject position is not widely desirable. It can be taken up by boys who are sufficiently 'resource-rich' in hegemonic masculinity for transgressions not to matter (Thorne, 1993). It can also be taken up by boys who have little choice: those who inhabit bodies and dispositions that are so distant from the physically powerful masculine subject that they cannot recognise themselves (nor can they be recognised by others) as that particular version of the subject 'boy'. But for many working-class boys, the triumphant sportsman is a powerfully attractive emblem of how they could come to access the fortune, fame and power held out to them as possibilities by the football business and other gendered apparatuses of twenty-first-century consumer capitalism (Willott & Griffin, 1997; Kenway & Bullen, 2001).

Girls are somewhat differently positioned by the sports industries. On the one hand, they are not addressed as directly as potential participants and consumers as are working-class boys. This is especially true of the football industry, which addresses young working-class and ethnic-minority boys as potential billion-pound earners (Ellsworth, 1997). On the other hand, popular culture and the entertainment industry makes available a wider range of 'triumphant girl' positions than it does 'triumphant boy': there is a long and continuing discursive history of the production of little working-class girls as hetero-sexualised superstars of stage, screen, dance hall and rock venue (Walkerdine, 1997). In addition, feminists have long argued that the ideal female body is one that is looked at, and constructed as 'attractive', rather than one that is superbly active and competent (Segal & Macintosh, 1992; Cherland, 1994; Rossiter, 1994; Van Zoonen, 1994). This is not to argue that there are no alternative images in circulation, but rather to point out that the discursive practices of popular and sporting cultures and industries construct an easily recognisable male working-class football superstar and female working-class music or dance superstar. This tends to make it more likely for working-class boys and girls respectively to recognise themselves, and to be recognised, as such subjects, to desire such recognitions, and thus to invest in them. Running alongside is the availability of the subject position 'hard-working girl' that, although it is not productive of high status for working-class girls, does not carry the penalties that await 'hard-working boy'.

One of the results, as we can see from St Blythe's primary, is the production of moments in physical education (PE) lessons in which the boys have become able, over time, to participate as potential winners, and to access the skills, capacities and dispositions that will enable their further inclusion in physical activities of all kinds. For both groups, however—girls and boys—there are costs in over-investment or under-investment in PE, with many boys neglecting the more 'academic' curriculum (Sewell, 1997), and girls learning to take up spectator-only roles, or losing interest in physical activity altogether (Clarke & Humberstone, 1997).

Leanna's team always comes last—she moves very slowly, and has difficulty with the games that involve a ball and/or feature complex instructions. Jonathon is also on the losing team, and he is getting fed up, remarking at first to himself, and then publicly, 'this is a rubbish team'. Ken re-divides the children for the last game, into two teams. The game requires each pair of children to sit facing each other at a distance, race around the edge of the hall when their pair's turn comes, run into the middle, and kick a ball over one of the benches which have been upturned at the end of the 'ladder' of children. Leanna cries at first, because she doesn't understand what to do. I find myself at first thinking how damaging competition is, and how the problem here is that there have to be winners and losers. But then I find myself getting really into the competition, especially when the pairs are evenly matched—it's exciting. When all of the pairs have had a turn, Ken ends the lesson. As they line up, Karl notes to Iftekar that 'your team won because you were nearly all boys, our team only had two boys'. (Fieldnotes, George Holt)

The context for this episode was different from the context of the St Blythe's PE lesson. This competitive activity happened at the end of the lesson, as a light-hearted piece of fun to finish with. It is competition, and the opportunity to be triumphant, that provides the excitement, but not all the children are equally able to position themselves as successful, or even as partially successful. For Leanna, a girl with significant learning difficulties, the problem is acute. The difficulties she experiences in processing information are inscribed in her body, which moves slowly and in an unco-ordinated way. The PE lesson highlights her distance from the norm, and, in the context of a PE lesson, that distance produces a difference that cannot be understood as neutral. In many other classroom contexts, most of the children are able to position themselves as tolerant of Leanna's 'difference'. Their tolerance ranges from an appreciation of the progress she makes to attempts to govern her (Allan, 1999), and sometimes appears as valuing diversity. But in a competitive situation, in which the need to triumph comes to dominate the imperative to position oneself as 'nice' or 'caring', Leanna's diversity cannot be valued. In such a context, Leanna's 'diversity'—and her physical body—get in the way of other children's aspirations, and her difference gets configured as deficit. The social consequences of her impairment (Light, 2002) disable Leanna in particular ways here: in the competitive PE lesson, unlike the classroom, she cannot pass as 'normal'. Moreover, she potentially disrupts the commonsense that to be abled is normal (Ferri & Gregg, 1998).

The competition in this PE lesson is seductive, with the researcher being drawn into the excitement of the chase. It is also pleasurable (for some) and fun (again for some). But it also draws a very stark line between participants and non-participants, and between the successful and the unsuccessful. There are no complex hierarchies here, just a winning team and a losing team. Perhaps this is part of the seduction of the enterprise. In most of their classroom lives, these Year Six children endure what must sometimes be a very dreary round of fairly formulaic literacy and numeracy lessons, and preparation for national tests. The messages they receive about the national tests are mixed, and must be hard to decode. They are constantly exhorted to work hard and do well, but contradictory discourses are in play about what doing well means. The dominant discourse values normative achievement, and privileges the Level 4 benchmark; the 'expected standard' for 11 year olds (Department for Education and Employment, 1999). Alongside this discourse of what counts as success operates a 'consolation' discourse,

deployed in relation to those children who whom the Level 4 benchmark is inaccessible. This is an individualised discourse that values individual incremental progression, and tends to be operated by teachers who want to make an alternative version of success available to those children who cannot succeed in normative terms (Benjamin, 2002). But, as Kenway *et al.* (1997, p. 35) point out, ‘difference seldom wins out over dominance’, and the resulting confusion is hard for children to negotiate. At least, when there are publicly identifiable winners and losers, you know where you stand.

Knowledge, Power and Street Wisdom

The classroom contexts of our two schools are produced through a number of wider societal contexts. So, too, are the knowledges available to the Year Six pupils. They include the private and public, local and inter/national cultures and knowledges of classroom, school, education system, family, community, popular culture and, for many of the children, religion. These overlap and impact on each other, producing different possibilities for children to position themselves as expert or apprentice ‘knowers’, and giving rise to differential opportunities for children to access the status, authority and power of expertise. In the following extracts, taken from the same day’s observation at George Holt, children use the resources and knowledges available to them to struggle for ‘expert knower’ status, negotiating what are sometimes conflicting loyalties and producing moments of inclusion and exclusion.

Claire and Danielle come over, and ask if they can show me a dance. They start to sing and dance to the words, ‘Remember, re-re-re-remember, you’re gonna remember me’ and then dissolve into giggles and say they have to go and practice. They reappear moments later, and sing, ‘Remember, your gonna re-re-re-re-remember me, because you come into my class’, which is the point at which I realise they are making the song up. Some black boys from the other Year Six class come over, and Danielle refuses to carry on while they are there. She tells them to go, and, surprisingly I think, they do. The song and dance resume, but the black boys—who seem to operate as a gang—are soon back. Danielle shouts at them, ‘I’m telling you one more time, will you just go, please?’ The girls decide they need reinforcements, and they go and get Kerry. The three of them launch into a Steps song, and are again interrupted by the boys. The three girls give chase ...

In this playground episode, one black girl and one mixed-race [1] girl have accessed the expert status that popular culture, as we argued earlier, has made available and desirable to them. Their expertise is superior to that of the adult researcher who not only would be unable to perform the dance they are showing, but is also so unknowing that she does not know whether this is a song the girls are inventing until they make it plain. These two girls occupy a high micro-cultural status relative to other children. They are physically mature, and take trouble to hetero-sexualise their school uniform as far as they are able, wearing high heels, transparent or pale pink nail varnish and discreet make-up whenever they can get away with it. The boys who disrupt their singing are also of high micro-cultural status. They are the stars of the playground football games, and they occupy a disproportionate amount of playground space by running through it and disrupting other children’s activities. It is impossible not to notice these boys. In a way, their persistent disruption of the girls’ singing confirms the girls’ micro-cultural standing:

in their refusal to pass on to the next disruption, the boys invite the girls into a chasing sequence, thus beginning a game for high-status girls and boys.

As Thorne (1993) has argued, such disruption and chasing sequences are full of hetero-sexualised meanings, and cannot be understood outside a hetero-sexual matrix. Here, that matrix is also racialised. This is a game for bad black girls and boys. Danielle and Claire have a decision to make between doing ‘good girl’—investing their time and energy engaging with the adult observer—and doing ‘bad girl’—joining in the chasing game. The third girl they fetch is not merely another girl who might be expected to display some loyalty towards a female adult observer. She is another black girl who will also be expected to display loyalty to the bad black girls’ gang that is in formation. In the end, the opportunity to take up positions as a bad black girls’ gang, desirable to the chasing group of bad black boys and visible to everyone on the playground, is irresistible to the three girls, and they leave the adult researcher to her own devices. It is a moment of inclusion, for the two gangs, in discourses of adult hetero-sexual attractiveness. They are able to take up positions as micro-cultural experts, appropriating for the moment the status of the street-wise adolescents of their home communities who access adult status through early entry into hetero-sexual activity. It is also a moment of exclusion, for other children on the playground who are positioned as less desirable, but also for the gangs themselves who are re-inscribing themselves as the subject ‘naughty black child’ who is currently the focus of many national concerns about disproportionate exclusion and under-achievement (Wright *et al.*, 2000; Blair, 2001).

The four boys sitting on the table by the door seem utterly engrossed, and are keeping up a hectic pace as they check their work with each other. There’s a competitive edge to their approach, but I can’t quite work it out, as whatever the competition may be, it doesn’t preclude them working with or helping one another. Simon is sitting on a table of bright, quiet girls, and the boys on the table by the door occasionally take their work over to him to check that they have definitely got the right answers—he appears to occupy a real position of authority as far as work is concerned. Perhaps this is partly why his apparent preference for working alongside girls can go unchallenged. Chris is sitting with Danny, and they are trying hard to keep pace with Simon and with the door table, but they have to copy answers sometimes to avoid getting left behind. Getting the right answers, rather than understanding what they are doing, seems to be their goal. They ask Simon a question and he checks it with Emily and Joyce. I can’t imagine Chris asking Emily and Joyce for their opinion, but it seems OK for Simon to do it ...

The George Holt classroom is often characterised by collaborative working. In this numeracy lesson, as in many other lessons observed at George Holt, there is a sense of excitement, particularly for the boys. There is a feeling that it is ‘cool to be clever’ at mathematics, discernible in children’s desire to do well. The most highly-skilled children are Simon, Emily and Joyce. All three are white, and for most of the time all three position themselves as pro-school and pro-teacher, but it is Simon alone whose academic proficiency has been translated into micro-cultural authority. In a sense, he uses this authority to act as a broker for inclusion, helping other children when he can, and drawing in the girls with whom he has chosen to sit by referring the boys’ question to them.

There are further questions that could be asked; this is a moment of inclusion and of full participation, but in what? Chris and Danny in particular have been included in the

getting of correct answers, but they are not necessarily participating in the development of the skills, knowledge and dispositions that will enable them to progress. What else is being learnt in this lesson? It is possible that Emily and Joyce are learning that their skill and expertise does not count in the way that Simon's does, and that they are learning to take up a subordinate, servicing role in the production of knowledge in relation to the boys. It is also possible that they are learning not to offer to share or display their skill and expertise, but to quietly get on with developing that expertise until it is noticed, and until someone asks to share it. Whatever the reason, they appear to be taking up the position of quiet, hard-working girl who succeeds through her own zealous application (Walkerdine & Girls into Mathematics Unit, 1989) in relation to Simon's outgoing, brilliant boy who is naturally clever, and Chris's and Danny's slapdash boy who does not pay enough attention to what he is doing (Walkerdine & Girls into Mathematics Unit, 1989). Arguably, it is Emily and Joyce who are most closely positioned to the new managerial subject 'pupil', who progresses diligently through the incremental curriculum, whose 'performance' is above the average level, and who is easily governable and desirous of academic success. Simon is closest perhaps to the 'Gifted and Talented' subject (Department for Education and Employment, 1999), needful of special provision to develop his 'natural' gifts.

Ken tells the children he is going to end with a very difficult question, from SATs paper 2. Simon and Danny, independently, remark, 'oh, easy', when the question goes up on the board. To add realism, Ken asks the children to nominate something that would cost about £340. There is heated discussion, mostly among the boys. Suddenly, what can count as knowledge has changed—the teacher's knowledge is displaced, and the children (or some of them, perhaps the most streetwise ones) are the experts. For once, Ken has asked a question to which he does not necessarily know the answer. Once the problem is safely written on the board, the atmosphere changes again. Ken asks the children how they would work out the answer to the problem. The discussion that follows this is distinctly less heated. (Fieldnotes, George Holt)

At George Holt, as in many inner-city areas, street knowledge is almost coterminous with consumer knowledge. One of the surest ways to access micro-cultural status is to wear expensive designer-label (but the right designer-label) trainers. Street wisdom is working-class and youthful wisdom: the teachers, whatever their original class origin, cannot possess it or be seen to possess it. When Ken invites the children to display their street knowledge, he draws on a common-sense construction of teacher as middle-class and middle-aged, handing over to the children the task of knowledge production. This is a moment of inclusion, in which customarily resistant and less academically skilled children are invited to participate as experts in the production of knowledge. The heated discussion that takes place is among pupils who often invest in being visibly unengaged with classroom tasks. The foremost among these are the bad black boys: the children whose presence more often disrupts the production of knowledge in this classroom, and who can least afford to invest in, or even show interest in, the 'girlie' pursuit of academic work. But they can bid for and display street knowledge without abandoning their quest for hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), and they take this opportunity to do so. Their participation in this moment of inclusion generates an excitement in which there is a genuine edge of not knowing what is about to happen, as the teacher has momentarily relinquished his role as expert knower. It also opens up a stage for the enactment of

micro-cultural struggle, and the children use a differently constellated hierarchy of resources—primarily those derived from the street knowledge associated with consumption of highly-regarded commodities—to position themselves as expert or inexpert in the debate. In the end, however, it is the teacher who decides how to incorporate, or not, this informal knowledge into the formal curriculum, by deciding whose suggestion to take up. The children know that ultimately this will happen, so their informal micro-cultural negotiation is framed within the more formal balance of classroom power.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the paper, we suggested that the processes of inclusion in our two ‘inclusive’ schools were characterised by moment-by-moment negotiation and re-negotiation. What we have shown in the paper is that children were active participants in those negotiations, but that the negotiations themselves were far from arbitrary. They were in part produced through a complex constellation of systemic indices of difference—primarily those of social class, ‘race’/ethnicity, gender/sexuality and perceived academic ability. The children used this constellation of multiple and intersecting indices of difference, together with the schools’ own formal curricular and policy cultures to produce moments of inclusion and exclusion. These moments themselves became part of the micro-cultural ‘history’ of specific groups and individuals, and in turn formed part of the micro-cultural stage on which new moments of inclusion and exclusion were enacted.

Apple (1995, p. xv) notes that unequal power relations—what he calls relations of dominance and struggles against them—are ‘based on and built out of an entire network of daily social and cultural relations and practices’. This has profound implications for studies of inclusion in schools. As more and more schools come to prioritise inclusion, we need to keep interrogating the (often unintended) reproduction of excluding meanings and practices that can go on alongside the production of newer, more egalitarian ones. In this paper, we have looked at some of the ways in which perceived academic ability interacts with a range of social factors to produce discursive resources with which children negotiate their inclusion and exclusion. Our data show that ‘inclusion’ is not a target to be hit, or a goal to be reached; nor is it the final destination of a road of continuous linear improvement. Rather, inclusion is an ongoing process: marked out by struggle and negotiation, and worked out through interpersonal actions and relations in a wider social and political context.

As we write this paper, we are mindful that some of the children about whom we are writing will, in the past few weeks, have been labelled as educational ‘failures’: they will not have reached the ‘expected standard for their age’ (Department for Education and Employment, 1999) as measured by the national tests they took in their final term of primary schooling. While we do not want to present children as the helpless pawns of a rigid system of schooling, neither would we want to under-estimate the importance of the fact that ‘conceptions of ‘ability’ and ‘failure’ have and continue to be constituted in and by the practices of schooling’ (Barton & Slee, 1999, p. 7). An understanding of the wider politics of class, ‘race’ and gender/sexuality is a necessary part of the project of understanding—and struggling against—the constitution of ‘ability’ and ‘failure’ in schooling. Such an understanding can help us make visible the inequalities produced through multiple sites of difference, and can help us construct arguments for educational change.

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NOTE

- [1] There is debate over the use of the term 'mixed-race'. It has been argued that the term is derogatory, and 'dual heritage' is often used in its place. However, as Ali (1999) points out, children of this age routinely describe themselves as 'mixed-race', and 'dual heritage' has no meaning for them. As we are concerned here with children's meaning-making, we have retained the 'mixed-race' designation.

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