

## **Becoming a Problem: How Children Develop a Reputation as 'Naughty' in the Earliest Years at School**

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### **Summary**

The aim of this 18 month investigation was to understand how and why certain children acquire a reputation as 'naughty' in the earliest years of schooling. It started from the premise that securing a successful reputation as a 'good' pupil, or acquiring a negative one as a 'problem', is never the sole responsibility of the individual child. A key starting question for the research was: what makes it difficult for some children to be, *and to be recognised as*, good students?

The research was based in one reception class (4-5 year olds) in each of 4 primary/infant schools in Greater Manchester: a 'faith' school with students of mainly white-British heritage and high entitlement to free school meals; an inner-city school with a multi-ethnic intake including asylum seekers and refugees; a school in a 'leafy suburb' of moderately affluent homes, and a city school in an area of social deprivation served by a Sure Start children's centre. The project team worked closely with teachers and other staff, visiting each school once a week, and making written and video observations of all aspects of school life, from the daily minutiae of classroom and playground activities to assemblies, concerts and parties.

### **What counts as problem behaviour?**

Two broad types of behaviour caused particular concern to adults. Firstly, there were actions that might be considered 'traumatic' in their immediate physical impact, such as biting, kicking, punching or slapping. These were always treated seriously, especially if the recipient was an adult. Secondly, persistent failure to comply with adults' requests was often an issue, especially where this offended against the collective 'rules' that are a major focus in the reception year.

### **The discursive 'framing' of problem behaviour**

Resistant or aggressive behaviour did not inevitably result in a poor reputation. This involves a *discursive frame* that grants meaning to a child's conduct as a sign of a more enduring problem. Family and community provided one such framing resource, in the form of narratives of the neglectful, indulgent, anxious, uncooperative or interfering parent who had not adequately prepared their child for school. Medical frames such as autism or deafness were also used to explain/frame problem behaviour, as were characterisations of the child herself, as 'manipulative', 'lazy' etc. Once a reputational frame is in place, it may be difficult to shift, as it will be used to 'read' a child's behaviour. And once a reputation has spread to other children and their parents, a child may find it very hard to be recognised as 'good'.

### **The risk of being 'different'**

One of the main goals of the reception year is to form a crowd of individual children into the collectivity of 'a class'. Tolerance of diversity was generally low, and children whose behaviour did not conform to the rules were *publicly* marked as different. Even though this was often done in a benevolent way – for example by allowing special privileges to children thought to be autistic or immature – the result was that some children were 'made an example of', so that 'normal' behaviour could be made more visible to the others. The public nature of classroom discipline is thus strongly implicated in the production of reputation.

### **The difficulties of being good**

Being good is not a simple matter. The research found that children need interpretive skills to decode and comply with requirements such as 'sitting nicely', 'good listening' etc. They must be able to compete for teachers' attention and approval according to the rules, and handle disappointment when they do not win. They must be able to negotiate mixed messages – for example, to comply with external authority *and* to take responsibility for self-discipline. They must learn to perform the emotions and moral qualities that are valued in the reception class – happiness, sadness, fairness, sharing, kindness, being nice, etc - and accept that other, less 'appropriate' emotions may not be equally recognised.

### **The 'proper' child**

The research concluded that some children may find it more difficult than others to identify and meet the conditions for behaving like the '*proper*' child whose image haunts early childhood education. Perhaps more disconcertingly, some may not be able to recognise themselves in the contours of the proper child, with implications for continuing disaffection in their later years at school.

### **Implications**

The research shows how the culture of the classroom is an important factor in the production of problematic reputations. The disciplinary practices that produce social order and forge a collective identity may also marginalise a minority of children. Moreover, some cherished principles of early years education may have unintended consequences. The principle of strong home-school links, for instance, may contribute to the 'framing' of families as sources of children's problematic behaviour. The holistic ethos of early years education, which embraces social, personal, academic and emotional development, may be a source of complex and conflicting messages to children about what is required in order to be 'good'. And the status of the reception year itself may be a source of ambiguity. Caught between the more flexible, child-centred ethos of nursery education and the more formal arrangements of Key Stage 1 of the national curriculum, the reception year may be troubled by inconsistencies of ethos and expectation. Behaviour programmes targeted at the individual child will do little to interrupt such broad, cultural influences on behaviour. And because classroom practices are embedded within powerful discourses about child development and the aims of early years education, change will be difficult to effect through self-reflection by practitioners. However a starting point for practitioners might be to examine their tacit notions of the 'proper' child and the ideal family, and how these might influence their attitudes to children. The public nature of discipline in the reception class is a further area for attention. Can the goal of forming children into a collectivity be uncoupled from the public administration of praise and reprimands?

## Full Report

### BACKGROUND

The research focussed on problematic behaviour as it emerged within, and was shaped by, the culture of the classroom. It started from the premise that securing a successful reputation as a 'good' pupil, or acquiring a negative one as a 'problem', is never the sole responsibility of the individual child. Children must not only act appropriately but must be recognised as having done so. They must secure *reconnaissance* (Bourdieu, 1991). Reputation is therefore a public matter: a child becomes a problem in the eyes of others (teachers, school staff, classmates and other parents).

The theoretical framework was informed by discourse analysis and poststructuralist theory (Foucault, 1977; Butler, 2004; MacLure, 2003), including previous work in early childhood (Walkerdine, 1999; James & Prout, 1997; Davies, 1989; Brown & Jones, 1992; Burman, 1994). Such an approach conceptualises subjectivity as an outcome of discursive practices that constitute and make sense of the social world. The framework also incorporated insights from Conversation Analysis, a methodology which allows for fine-grained analysis of interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992). This allowed us to trace the ways in which discourses are actualised in the interactions through which teachers and children interpret, categorise, recognise and judge one another. A key question animating the research was: what makes it difficult for some children to be, *and to be recognised as*, 'good' students?

### OBJECTIVES

*To document and critically examine the emergence of problem behaviour amongst children in the Foundation stage of school.*

This objective has been addressed and met throughout the research.

*To enhance understanding of the processes by which children begin to develop an identity and 'career' as a problem in school.*

The research has fulfilled this objective by elucidating key processes such as the public performance of classroom discipline, the interactional complexities of 'being good' and the discursive 'framing' of reputation (see 'Results').

*To explore possibilities for productive change grounded in teachers' practice and children's experiences.*

This objective has been met through (a) a methodology that remains close to teachers' and children's interactions and experiences; (b) interviews and collaboration with participating teachers. The research also indicates, however, the difficulties of changing practices that are deeply entrenched in prevailing assumptions about child development and the purposes of the reception year.

*To inform public and policy debate about behaviour and discipline in the early years.*

The research meets this objective by providing insights that go beyond current conceptualisations

of behaviour problems. It shows how the culture of the classroom is an important factor in the production of problematic reputations, and how key principles of early years education, such as strong home-school links, and a holistic view of education, may have unintended consequences.

*To contribute to the development of theory in the field of classroom interaction and pupil identity.* This objective is met (a) through an innovative combination of poststructuralist theory and conversation analysis; (b) through the generation of analytic objects such as the discursive framing of reputation and the disciplinary force of the tacit notion of 'the proper child' (see 'Results').

## **METHODS**

The research was based in one reception class (4-5 year olds) in each of 4 primary/infant schools in Greater Manchester: a 'faith' school with students of mainly white-British heritage and high entitlement to free school meals; an inner-city school with a multi-ethnic intake including asylum seekers and refugees; a school in a 'leafy suburb' of moderately affluent homes, and a city school in an area of social deprivation served by a Sure Start children's centre. The approach involved participant observation within an ethnographic orientation that sought depth of understanding of the cultures and contexts within which behaviour assumed significance for the participants. Members of the project team spent one day a week in each of the schools. Qualitative data was collected via detailed observation notes, video and audio recordings of interactions in the classroom and other school locations (collective worship, assemblies, concerts, parties), and interviews with teachers and children. All names are pseudonyms.

Fieldnote extracts appear in italics below. An Appendix provides further data examples to illustrate key themes and concepts.

## **RESULTS**

The discourse processes and interactional strategies that were identified were similar across all sites. This suggests that interactions between adults and reception-age children are regulated by deep-seated assumptions and discourses that may over-ride differences of school organisation and ethos.

### **What counts as problem behaviour?**

Two broad types of behaviour were of particular concern to teachers and other school staff. Firstly, there were actions that might be considered 'traumatic' in their immediate physical impact, such as biting, kicking, punching or slapping. Secondly, persistent failure to comply with adult requests was often an issue, especially where this offended against the collective 'rules' that are a major focus in the reception year. Repeatedly 'calling out' or not sitting 'properly' in whole-class sessions was likely to offend, as was an apparent failure to listen or concentrate. Being noisy or restless in queues, assemblies and other whole-school events, might also attract attention. Rules for good behaviour and collective order were reiterated in many forms: through explicit statements to the class, identification of infractions, posters, and elaborate systems of reward (stickers, certificates, tokens, house points, marbles etc). Classroom discipline was predominantly a *public* matter, conducted in plain view of the class. This had serious implications for children's status and reputation (see below).

### **The discursive 'framing' of problem behaviour**

Resistant or aggressive behaviour did not however inevitably result in a poor reputation. The acquisition of a reputation also required a *discursive frame* to grant meaning and duration to a child's conduct. Within a discursive frame, individual actions come to be read as 'signs' of a more enduring problem. Family and community provided one such framing resource, in the form of narratives of the neglectful, indulgent, anxious, uncooperative or interfering parent. Another framing device was 'medicalisation' – the attribution of offending behaviour to underlying physical or psychological causes such as (undiagnosed) autism or deafness. The discursive framing of reputation could also be applied to the child herself. Some children were judged to be 'manipulative', others to be self-centred (cf Appendix, example 10). Framing can be mobilised by any school staff – teachers, assistants, lunch staff, playground supervisors etc. Indeed ancillary staff, who often live locally, may have personal knowledge of children and families, which then becomes available for the framing of reputation.

Disparate frames are granted coherence with reference to the assumption of a *normal developmental course*. Children who fail to act, or to be recognised as acting, in accordance with expectations of what is normal for children of their age are at risk of being judged a problem. Developmental discourses not only identify but also 'pathologise' differences from assumed norms, and render mothers subject to blame and scrutiny (Burman, 2008: 50). Early years practitioners are likewise subject to the disciplinary effects of the discourse of normal development, risking censure (including self-censure) if 'their' pupils are not seen to be acting within the normal range. This helps to explain why open events such as assemblies or school plays often caused anxiety for project teachers.

There is a constitutive circularity in the discourse of normal development: specific child behaviours come to be read as signs of deviation from the normal path; yet the integrity of the normal path is consolidated by the identification of deviations. This has practical implications as it may lead teachers and other arbitrators to orient to children's 'offending' behaviours and pay less attention to those that stand 'outside' the frame. Once a child's reputation has begun to circulate in the staffroom, dining hall and amongst other parents, it may be very difficult for her behaviour *not* to be interpreted as a 'sign' of such imputed character traits. Children who have acquired a strong reputation may therefore find it harder to be recognised as good.

### **The pathologising of difference**

Substantial amounts of time were devoted to teaching and modelling the rules and conventions for maintaining classroom order, across all the project schools. However effective such disciplinary practices may be for a majority of the class, they also work to marginalise some children. Indeed it could be said that they work *by* marginalising a minority, so that 'normal' children can recognise themselves in their difference. While rule-breaking was sometimes dealt with unobtrusively, 'disciplinary talk' was typically done in public. In some instances children were quite clearly 'made an example of' for the edification of the class.

*[Ms A has reprimanded Daniel. He is crying] She tells him that he can't go outside to play and that he must sit on a spot that she indicates with her finger on the floor and read a book. [He sits facing 3 other children] Ms A says 'don't you go talking and joining in with those children Daniel, they're being good'. [EF 15.6.07]*

Not surprisingly, given the public nature of disciplinary events, other children made similar judgements:

*Lucy says to me [about Chloe] 'she's naughty, she doesn't sit on her bottom, she doesn't tidy up'. Sarah chips in: 'she wouldn't sit down when we came in [EF06.10.06]*

When children begin to orient to others as exceptions, reputation is indisputably at issue.

A different form of exclusion was observed with Jamie and, to a lesser extent, Ishmael and Matt. All three boys (from different schools) were thought to display autistic behaviours, and all were granted exemption from some of the usual rules and routines of the classroom. Jamie's exemption from classroom life was severe. Required to sit on a red 'spot' at the back of the carpet, he was seldom engaged by adults during whole-class sessions. He was often ignored by the other children too, even though he would follow them around, smiling. Such exemptions could be considered humane and flexible responses to children who seem to have difficulty coping with classroom life. However they may exert a cost, in terms of a child's status and identity within the class. Such children may fulfil an 'exemplary' function, enabling other children to be positioned as more mature:

*Tessa seems to have attached herself to Ishmael. She mimics his behaviour (wandering, sitting in 'unacceptable' places when it's registration, standing when the other children are sitting and so on. T: 'Tessa stop it now and grow up. You are not to copy Ishmael'. [AB12.10.06]*

Tessa is told to 'grow up' – ie to place herself ahead of Ishmael on the developmental course. (See also Appendix 5)

Jamie provided occasions for other children to rehearse the moral virtues that are strongly promoted in early years education, such as being kind and helpful:

*[Time for toilet and hand-washing before lunch] Seth says 'I'll help Jamie' and takes Jamie by the hand. 'I'll wash his hands too because I'm very helpful to James'. Ms E responds 'You are, aren't you'. Seth and Jamie walk hand in hand out of the classroom [CD30.11.06]*

Jamie's classmates are encouraged by teachers and assistants to 'practice' the virtues of kindness and helpfulness (see also Appendix, 6). While this is undoubtedly well-intentioned, it positions Jamie in a marginalised position: he becomes invisible except a resource with which other children can demonstrate their developing social and moral competence. Jamie's subordinate position was marked in other ways: he was often addressed in a rather 'babyish' tone, and was referred to, as here, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person – ie talked 'about' rather than addressed directly. He was often subject to physical interventions – touching, repositioning, leading by the wrist etc (see Appendix, 4).

Difference thus has a complex status in the production of classroom order and the fashioning of reputation. On the one hand, tolerance of difference is low and conformity is expected. Yet difference also seems paradoxically necessary to the maintenance of classroom order. A few children are granted an 'abject' status as exceptions, against which the normal order may recognise itself (cf Kristeva, 1982; Butler, 1993).

### **The difficulties of being (seen to be) good**

Being good is not a straightforward matter. Children must do ‘categorization work’ (Baker, 2000) to understand how their behaviour comes to be judged as ‘good’, or to count as ‘sitting beautifully’/‘properly’/‘nicely’, ‘good listening’, being ‘sensible’, not being ‘silly’ etc (Appendix, 7). As noted, a range of social and moral qualities are also endorsed – being kind, being helpful, working hard, being polite, sharing – and children must learn how to (be seen to) perform these virtues. The following example indicates the complexities of being (seen to be) good:

*[Brent’s teacher was angry with him (and his mother) when he came to school in wet clothes. As the class sat on the carpet before assembly, Ms A picked up a (blank) certificate] ‘This certificate was for you Brent, it was for good listening. I can’t give it to you now can I, ‘cause you didn’t listen to me yesterday when I told you not to get soaked again’. She tells the TA in front of the assembled children that Brent’s mum had been with him and hadn’t done anything about it [EF06.07.07]*

Brent’s offending behaviour (getting ‘soaked’) is retrospectively identified as a breach of the ‘good listening’ for which he was prospectively to be commended, although he was not aware of the impending commendation until the point at which it was withdrawn. Evaluations and behaviour may exist in a strange ‘future pluperfect’ timescale in which the import of children’s own actions will have been deferred, or even altered, by unforeseen events and unpredicted interpretations by others.

#### *Mixed messages and double meanings*

The incident involving Brent demonstrates, further, how classroom discipline may be a site of mixed messages. It is unclear whether Brent is being admonished for not doing what he was told, or for not exercising *self-discipline* (cf Millei, 2005). There is also possible ambiguity as to whether Brent’s teacher was ‘really’ displeased with his listening, or rather angry at him and his mother. The incident also demonstrates how matters relating to learning and discipline are often intertwined (cf Pryor & Torrance, 2000). ‘Good listening’ may be celebrated not only because it indicates engagement with learning, but also because it signals compliance and discipline of the body. Social, moral and cognitive competences are linked, so that successful participation is not just a matter of knowing the right answer, but of waiting to be chosen, and adopting the appropriate posture:

*[Mr W is leading the class in a counting song] The song demands that children calculate what number there will be when more is added, and Mr W chooses children with hands up to give their answer. Chloe complains that he hasn’t chosen her, ‘and I know the numbers’ (she seems to be counting on her fingers and is getting her hand up). Mr W says he only chooses children who are sitting and singing beautifully. She says ‘I am sitting nicely’, and Mr W says ‘I know you are, that’s why I’m really pleased with you’, and the song continues [EF10.11.06]*

Numeracy and discipline are inextricably linked here, and are also tied to pleasing the teacher. Teachers’ evaluations often invoked happiness, sadness or pride; eg:

*Ms J praises class in collective worship for ‘sitting beautifully and making me happy’ [EF30.9.06]*

*Ms L says that she is going to get very sad because Tessa is not listening [AB10.10.06]*

Being 'good' is also connected therefore to pleasing adults and winning their approval. Moreover, the economy of choosing that regulates participation in whole-class situations means that children are often obliged to compete with one another for that approval. Disappointments, however mundane, are a pervasive feature of classroom life [See Appendix, 2].

Most teachers, aware of the corrosive effects of disappointment, tried to 'distribute' approval to all children – for example by ensuring that everyone was able to earn rewards such as stickers or tokens; by giving certificates for a wide range of 'achievements'; by finding something to praise all children. However such commitments to a kind of equity in the distribution of praise may actually call into question the sincerity of teachers' expressions of praise. While many children appeared happy to compete for 'tokens' of merit, others seemed less impressed. Praise, we surmise, will only work as a disciplinary device if children believe that it is sincerely meant and genuinely earned; and moreover if earning praise through appropriate behaviour 'matters' to them.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the public nature of collective discipline, children at times took it upon themselves to hold other children accountable for rule breaking, or to report it to the teacher. This was a risky strategy however: while it sometimes earned teachers' approval, it might also be treated as 'telling tales' – an unpopular practice with children and adults (See Appendix, 8). This illuminates further the mixed messages that circulate in classroom discourse. Children might reasonably expect that helping to enforce rules would win them approval, since teachers clearly care about rules a good deal, and continuously represent them as everybody's business – a public, collective responsibility. Yet, by taking it upon themselves to act on behalf of the teacher, children may be judged instead to be usurping power that does not belong to them, and may perhaps also be viewed by their peers as acting disloyally.

#### *Asymmetries of power and participation*

As the problem of telling tales indicates, it is also necessary for children to recognise, and to accept, the 'asymmetrical' dynamics of classroom interaction (Edwards & Furlong, 1978). Children are not expected, for instance, to question the reasons for teachers' requests, nor to give unsolicited advice:

*In the art area, Ms G is trying to wind up a stick of glue. 'Why don't you wind it that way?' suggests Daniel to Ms G. 'Instead of telling me what to do, why don't you concentrate on your own work. Turn around and get on' she replies [CD7.3.07]*

(See also Appendix, 3.)

Even teachers' interest is liable to fluctuate according to the asymmetrical rules for participation. Teachers often displayed warm interest in children's contributions, where these were solicited. However children cannot rely on teachers' interest if they speak 'out of turn', make unsolicited contributions or misread the topic of the current activity (See Appendix, 2).

Children need, in summary, to exercise interpretive skills to relate their own behaviour to teachers' expectations and evaluations. They must be able to negotiate conflicting demands to comply with external authority *and* to discipline themselves. They must show their commitment to collective

discipline without trespassing on teachers' territory. They must be able to work in a climate where competition and disappointment are commonplace, value praise enough to work for it, and be able and willing to shoulder some responsibility for adults' pleasure and happiness. And some children must be able to attempt all this in the face of a problematic reputation that colours others' attitudes and perceptions.

### **Emotion work: the regulation of feelings and moral conduct**

Education in the reception year, as noted, includes learning about feelings and moral conduct - what it is possible and appropriate to feel, and how one should act towards others. Some sessions were explicitly devoted to the discussion/modelling of feelings and attitudes – for instance 'passing a smile' round the circle, or saying something nice about the person to your left. While feelings are conventionally held to be a 'personal' matter, in the reception classroom feelings can be evaluated, and even modified, by an authoritative adult:

*Supply teacher tells class she needs them to be 'really good if they want [a sticker] before they go to collective worship; Mrs C [head] will see which ones of you have stickers. How will Mrs C feel if you don't have a sticker?*

*Sad – yes*

*Terrified – well I don't think so, but it's a good word*

*Angry – yes she might be a little angry*

*Unhappy – she might be*

*Grumpy – well she might be, but I was thinking of another word, it's very long, disappointed' [EF14.5.07]]*

Several 'lessons' are combined here: how to name the feelings that would be appropriate in a particular circumstance; the importance of pleasing adults through good behaviour; the correctness of the answers given. Emotional, disciplinary and learning issues are again intertwined. The teacher evaluates the children's answers as she might in, say, a literacy lesson ('I was thinking of another word'). Emotion work may be hard to distinguish, for some children, from more academic topics, and may not always be interpreted as something that relates to their 'own' feelings:

*Adil arrives late and hangs his coat on the floor. He speaks to Farah and it seems from the tone of his voice and his facial expression that he is cross with her about something [...] he does the usual business with his name card and I note that he still puts his name card on the 'happy' face. [AB5.12.06]*

### **Mimicry and sincerity**

There is an element of mimicry involved in this education of the emotions through rehearsal and modelling. But mimicry can be problematic. Precisely because children are presented with examples and performances – ie with imitations – doubts may insinuate themselves about the sincerity of the emotional display. Do children necessarily believe that teachers are genuinely 'sad' when they fail to 'sit nicely'? How might such sadness compare with a child's own sadness over losing a pet, or a grandparent; or being bullied or ignored in the playground? How does the performance of 'passing a smile on' at the teacher's behest, or saying nice things about next person in the circle, relate to the feelings that children may already have developed towards one another? What is the status of the ostentatious attentiveness that children often perform in the

attempt to win teachers' approval or attention? Or indeed of teachers' exaggerated displays of interest and surprise? (See Appendix, 2, 4)

Mimicry renders utterances liable to being read as ironic. Yet when deployed by children, irony represents a potential threat to the moral economy of the reception classroom, since it is a sign that children may be capable of double meanings and dissimulation, and therefore of departure from the repertoire of simple and transparent emotions that are held to be appropriate to the 'proper' five-year old:

*Children are returning to the classroom with their PE kits [...] 'Charlie, I want you to get changed very quickly today. Think about what you need to do first', says Ms T. Charlie puts his finger to his chin and pulls a pseudo-'thinking' face. 'No! You're being very silly now Charlie! I want you to think about what you're doing' responds Ms T. [CD8.2.07]*

Irony interferes with the 'legibility' of children and their internal states, on which early years practice depends. Yet as noted, the pedagogy of mimicry itself raises the spectre of ironic performance.

Bhabha (1994) identified mimicry as an essential, yet fundamentally ambivalent part of the colonial relation. Aspects of that colonial relation are enacted, we suggest, in the 'civilizing' emotional and moral projects of early education. Children who successfully perform the requisite mimicry achieve a kind of camouflage, becoming 'mottled' against a mottled background (Lacan 1977: 99). Children who cannot achieve this camouflage stand out as a 'problem.'

### **The 'proper' child**

The discourse of the reception classroom offers children an idealised (if not always consistent) version of the acceptable or 'proper' child, and encourages them to mimic the behaviour, emotions and cognitive abilities of this proper child. However, children must be able to recognise something of themselves and their experiences in this idealised version. Drummond et al (2004) are concerned that the Foundation Stage goals do not acknowledge 'the colourful, difficult feelings that adults experience as challenging, such as anger, frustration or grief'. Chelsea's response, below, suggests an experience of the significance of letters that is unlikely to be invoked in Postman Pat stories:

*[The class is discussing 'Postman Pat's Windy Day']*  
*Assistant: who likes to get a letter through the door?*  
*Chelsea: as long as you don't have to pay some money [GH11.1.07]*

In order to be (seen to be) good, children need to 'pass' as the proper child who is fabricated in the texture of classroom interaction and the discourse of normal development. There may be many reasons why individual children are unable or unwilling to perform the mimicry that this requires. Some may be less astute than others at reading the interactional conventions that regulate definitions of good behaviour, or less able to handle the disappointments that are inevitably involved. Others, especially if they have life skills and experiences that exceed those encompassed in the simulacrum of the proper child, may be unable to suspend their disbelief in the moral economy of happiness, sharing and kindness that is promoted in the reception classroom.

### **Bodies and objects**

Monitoring and bodily discipline impacted on all children. However children who were perceived as a 'problem' were more likely than others to be watched, touched and manipulated by adults. As a previous ESRC investigation noted (Piper, MacLure & Stronach, RES-000-22-0815), children must 'earn' exemption from unsolicited touch by demonstrating that they have reached an appropriate developmental stage. Children who were becoming a problem were also likely to be more closely monitored – for instance through behaviour plans or the attentions of a personal worker. For some children, this seemed to exacerbate their problems. Carter, for instance, was observed to become upset and resistant when adults followed him or attempted to hold his wrist.

Certain objects operated as materialisations of power in the four project classrooms, aimed at rendering the children's bodies docile. Carpeted areas were key sites, where matter comes to make itself felt in the broadest sense - emotionally, physically and psychologically. The engagements that occur when a child's body connects with the material trouble the boundaries between stuff that is inert and that which is 'natural'. Intra-actions (Barard, 2008) between the material and the body worked to subdue children's bodies and contribute towards the ebb and flow of agency. Children were sent to 'stand by the door' in one school when they had failed to comply with the requirements for sitting on the carpet. However these significant locales were also sites of resistance. For instance, while the intra-action between the 'spot' by the door and the child initially evoked obvious discomfort, the power of this spot decayed over time. Children found other material items, such as the nearby Velcro name stickers, with which to distract themselves, and thus changed the discursive status of the act of 'standing by the door'. Somerville (2004: 51) notes, 'just as we can theorize that language is always already there, we can also theorize that body/matter is always already there, and the body can intervene in discourse just as discourse can intervene into the body'.

### **Discussion.**

The classroom is an important site for the production of reputation. The *public* nature of discipline, conducted under the imperative to form a crowd of children into the collectivity of a 'class', means that children who diverge from the rules are identified as 'different' in plain view of other children and adults. There are undoubtedly good reasons for classroom rules – courtesy, democratic participation, safety, a congenial learning environment. However these rules are operationalised in ways that marginalise a minority of children, who become examples against which the preponderance may recognise itself as 'normal'.

Some key principles of early years education may have unintended consequences in terms of behaviour. Core values such as the importance of home-school links may, however sensitively interpreted, also furnish resources for the narrative 'framing' of children's reputations in terms of apparent shortcomings of their families or communities.

The integrative, holistic approach to early years education in the UK, which embraces social, emotional, personal and cognitive development, may make it difficult for some children to handle mixed messages and decode the rules and conventions governing good behaviour. Moreover the association of behaviour with emotions, and the coupling of academic performance with competition for teachers' approval, means that early years classrooms can be places of uneven emotional temperature. Children who find themselves to be failing in behaviour terms may also feel themselves to be judged more comprehensively a failure, as a person, friend or learner.

Notions of appropriate behaviour are also deeply influenced by the assumption of a normal developmental course, a notion that may have become even more deeply embedded with the introduction of the Foundation Stage. Teachers are themselves subject to the disciplinary gaze of policy and audit, and the expectations of parents, rendering them accountable for perceived deviations from the normal trajectory sketched in the stages and goals of the Foundation Stage.

The reception classroom is also a place of mixed messages concerning compliance and autonomy. This may reflect the liminal status of the reception year itself. Caught between the more flexible, child-centred ethos of nursery education and the more formal arrangements of Key Stage 1 of the national curriculum, the reception year may be troubled by inconsistencies of ethos and expectation (cf Drummond et al, 2004). These inconsistencies may be further linked to the mixed ideologies that inform primary education in the UK, where a broadly liberal-humanist notion of the child as the locus of her own potential comes up against more authoritarian conceptions of the child as subject to adults' power.

*Conclusion: the chimera of the 'proper child'*

While the moral and pragmatic landscape of the reception classroom looks at first glance to be clearly mapped, some children may find it more difficult than others to identify and then meet the conditions for behaving like the 'proper child' that adults want them to be. Perhaps more disconcertingly, some may not be able to believe in that child. We suggest that the mismatch that some children may experience between their out-of-school realities and the proper child that is conjured in the classroom may be one source for more visible disaffections that emerge in later years at school.

### **Implications**

It is difficult to offer 'practical' suggestions since the problematic of reputation is produced through deep-seated discourses rather than individual intention. It is important to emphasise that the project teachers were caring and concerned. We might however offer some tentative proposals. Firstly, professionals might attempt not to intervene too early with explanations and 'solutions' for children who are beginning to emerge as a problem. For some children in the research, apparent developmental delays and deviations seemed to disappear, or to assume less significance for adults, as the research progressed. Practitioners might also reflect on the tacit developmental maps that underlie early years practice, and how these may generate 'deficit' views of some children, parents and families.

The public nature of discipline in the reception class is a further area for attention. Can the goal of forming children into a collectivity be uncoupled from the public administration of praise and reprimands? Relatedly, and perhaps controversially, practitioners and educators might consider the possibility of reducing the emotional quotient of classroom experience.

### **ACTIVITIES**

Papers were presented at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Illinois (2007), the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Chicago (2007) and the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference (2007). An international conference, drawing on the conceptual and theoretical framework of the research, was held at MMU: The 3 Rs: Reviewing, Renegotiating and Reframing Early Childhood (2007).

## **OUTPUTS**

Jones, L, Holmes, R, MacRae, C. & MacLure, M. (2007) Documenting classroom life: how can I write about what I am seeing? Paper presented to the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, May 2007 [Submitted to *Qualitative Research*]

MacLure, M, Holmes, R, Jones, L. & MacRae, C. (2007) Silence and humour as resistance to analysis. Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, April. [Submitted to *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*].

Jones, L, Holmes, R, MacLure, M. & MacRae, C. (2007) Pathologising difference: occupying non-conformity in an early years classroom. Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association, London, September 2007. [Submitted to *British Educational Research Journal*].

A DVD/online resource is in development, incorporating video and interview data, for the use of teachers and teacher educators.

## **IMPACTS**

The team were invited to present the research to seminars at Nottingham University and Liverpool Hope University. An international network for information exchange and research collaboration has been established with members including Gaile Cannella and Marianne Bloch (US) Susan Grieshaber and Nicola Yelland (Aus), and Hillevi Lenz-Taguchi (Sweden). The team has secured a featured Keynote Symposium slot (one of six, won in open competition) at the BERA 2008 Annual Conference, with contributions from Cannella and Bloch.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH PRIORITIES**

An ESRC proposal is in development for further research into the production of pupil reputation (both positive and negative) in the early years. The team is developing a proposal to re-analyse the extensive corpus of video recordings collected on the 1970s Bristol Language Development Project alongside the present data, to illuminate the question of how far the disciplinary processes embedded in classroom interaction have persisted over time. An international comparative study is under development with Cannella and Grieshaber. A study of the 'medicalisation' of difference is planned in collaboration with Prof Dan Goodley at MMU.

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## Appendix: Annotated examples from classroom data

### Transcription conventions (video data extracts):

T	Teacher
TA	Teaching Assistant
A, J etc	Child identified by initial capital of name
<...>	angle brackets: enclose tentative interpretation of word(s)
* * *	asterisk(s): inaudible syllable(s)
CAPS	very loud speech
<u>emphasis</u>	underlining: noticeable emphasis on part of utterance
//	point at which two speakers overlap
[context]	square brackets: enclose contextual information accompanying utterances
comment	comments to right of transcription draw attention to key points

### (1) What does being good mean?

T	NOW I know that Aisha is looking for a very <u>smart</u> quiet person to take the register [whispers aside to another child]	Class is seated on the carpet. Aisha, is invited to choose another child to accompany her to the school office with the register (each child in the class is given this privilege on her designated 'special day').
A	Sally	
T	you want to choose Sally [as S walks to front] why did you choose Sally? (...)	
A	because she's good? [sounds a little uncertain]	Aisha does not seem entirely certain why she has chosen Sally.
T	because she was <u>good</u> and- what was she doing on the carpet?	
A	sitting nicely	
T	was she [nodding; handing over register] that was a good idea <then wanting to choose her>. Here you go [handing register to A. they walk off, both holding onto register]	Although the teacher commends Aisha's 'idea', it is not clear that the idea is entirely Aisha's own. In interactions such as these, teachers intervene in children's 'internal' reasoning and decision-making processes in order to instruct them on how to make appropriate evaluations.

[AB12.06, video]

### (2) Competition, selection, disappointment

[Class is queuing up in the classroom, waiting to go out. T and two assistants are walking up and down the line]

T	OK. Let me see is it the front the middle or the back of the line that's the best part of the line. Ooh! It's hard to choose today!	Competition and selection
C	[Carter gives a little yelp. But is standing very straight and still. TA walks up and looks at him]	C is attempting to comply and compete. But his desperation for attention/approval actually 'damages' his performance
T	this might be – at the front let me see – oh some very smart children //here at the front	
C	//[yelps again]	
TA	shh! [taps C twice on shoulder]	Unsolicited touch
T	now at the back, let's see – oh! It's very <u>very</u> smart at the back. And in the middle [walks back] oh yes it's nice and straight in the middle as well. Very good that's a lovely line! [Class waits in line. C is tapping his foot, looking around. T is talking to another adult]	Quite exaggerated expressions of approval/pleasure
C	<indecipherable>	
T	if we can give Mrs I a really good surprise, now let's see –	
C	have you got a key? [to T; class is waiting to for a door to be unlocked]	Unsolicited intervention by C
T	- she can hear us you know all the way down there. Let's see if we can be – <u>perfectly quiet</u> <that means> no sounds <u>a-all</u> the way there and back again	Discipline under the imagined gaze of colleagues
C	[C is kicking toys that he has knocked off a counter top next to him. TA goes over to him. Two boys pick the toys up	
TA	thank you boys that was very helpful	Boys' actions granted approval as 'helpful' by implicit contrast to C.
C	I done it too [ie picked up the toys that he had knocked over] [children continue to queue. C is yelping like a little seal.	C tries to evade this exemplary contrast and claim approval for himself too

[GH1.07video]

### (3) 'Helping' the teacher?

[Class is sitting on carpet while T, seated at front, assembles some pictures]

T	This morning-	
R	Miss he's not sitting up	
T	[quietly] pardon? You go and sit next to Olivia then [to another child]	Is Rose 'helping' or 'telling tales'?
C	There's space there [pointing behind him] why don't you put him in there because there's a big space	Is Carter 'helping' or trespassing on T's territory?

[T talks briefly with another adult; class is restless]  
 T shhhhh. Joanna can you do a little job for me?  
 Stand up and go and sit next to Jason [points to space that C had indicated]  
 C [quietly, in triumph?] yeah!

The teacher does not acknowledge that she is acting on the children's contributions, and leaves the question of surrogate power implicit. However Carter's final 'yeah!' suggests that he has read the situation in these terms.

[GH12.06video]

#### (4) Mimicry: educating the emotions

[Ms Y, teaching assistant is at table with group of children. Jamie is playing in home area alongside Ben and Anna, who don't seem to want to play with him]

B no, no you're hurting me [to Jamie]  
 A he's hurting you, he's hurting (...) quick go and tell- go and tell Mrs Y  
 [calling over to TA at table] Mrs Y. Mrs Y. Mrs Y, Jamie's hurting us in the house  
 Ms Y JAMES [v loudly] James [leans sideways to try to see Jamie behind low wall of play house. 2 boys at table watch with interest.  
 [Jamie, kneeling, looks up, smiling tentatively]  
 B [in play house] Anna you told- you told Mrs Y  
 Ms Y STAND UP PLEASE [loudly; stern voice]  
 [Jamie stands up, holds out empty hands to Ms Y. Ms Y is now crouched down on other side of low wall of house]  
come here [beckoning with finger]  
 c'mon [pulling J towards her by his outstretched hands. Leans into his face]  
what are you doing? [loudly, slowly]  
 [J looks down]  
 Ms Y [still holding J's hand, beckons to Ben in house-]  
 Ben come here  
 [Jamie looks up at Ben]  
 B Eh?  
 Ms Y show him your sad face Ben [quite quietly] show him your sad f-  
 ohh! [exaggerated gasp, for Jamie's benefit] look at Ben  
 [Jamie looks]  
 Ms Y SAD FACE [v clear & loud] ohh – sad face!

Unsolicited touch

Ben asked to display/mimic emotion

Ms Y displays (exaggerated) emotional reaction

	[Ben comes into shot, doing exaggerated sad face, pouted bottom lip.	Ben 'mimicking' sad face
	Ms Y pulls Jamie's chin round to make him look at her]	Unsolicited touch
	<right> look at me. <u>Not happy</u> [shaking head. Jamie looks down] 'cos you've hurt him. <u>not happy</u> [J not looking at Ms Y]	Ms Y's speech has features associated with talk to younger children – tempo and intonation; 2-word syntax; repetition
	say you're sorry	
J	I'm sorry	
Ms Y	good boy. Shake hands [still holding J by left arm, throughout]	
S	[shakes hands with Ben, using left hand. Walks back into house, turning his back on Ms Y]	
Ms Y	sorry. <u>No hurting</u>	

[CDAutumn06, video]

## (5) Normality and difference

*[Jamie is sitting at craft table with 3 girls, working with clay. Jamie is sawing at his lump of clay with a table knife and intermittently watching Girl1 closely]*

*Girl1 we need a sh- I've got a sharp knife [picking up her table knife] Jamie can't have a sharp knife [notices Jamie's knife] oh! Jamie can't use a sharp knife*

*Girl2 well I have some kind of a knife when- when I was three I had some kind of big knife*

*Girl1 are you five now?*

*Girl2 no. four.*

*Girl1 I'm five  
[CD10.06video]*

The girls' positioning of Jamie as less competent than themselves provides an opportunity for them to rehearse and stabilise their own stage of development hierarchical status.

## (6) 'Practicing' being kind

*[Ms G asks Jamie to come and sit next to her. He ignores her] Camilla goes over to Jamie and bends over saying 'Jamie, come and sit next to Mrs G'. He gets up and moves next to Ms G. 'Thank you Camilla, you're so very, very kind to Jamie', says Ms G [CD31.1.07]*

## (7) The difficulty of being good

Part of the problem is that evaluations are made *retrospectively*: children must read 'back' from the adult's assessment to the behaviour which has earned it. Occasionally, children did not seem entirely sure what they had done in order to 'earn' an evaluation as good:

*Christopher comes up to me and says 'I've got a certificate'*

*Me why?*

*M for being good*

*Me what did you do that was good?*

*M I was playing nicely*

*Me What were you playing with?*

*M I don't know [EF29.9.06]*

Ellie must inspect her both her own past behaviour and her future intentions, and identify the nature of Ms H's dissatisfaction with her, in order to know what she will have done in order to 'behave more sensibly':

*Ms H starts a whole-group activity on the carpet.  
Ellie, come and sit by me*

*Why?*

*Because you'll behave more sensibly, that's why [EF20.04.07]*

### **(8) Telling tales or helping the teacher?**

Compare these examples:

- (a) *Miss, only 2 people in the sand. Ms N gently reminds the 3<sup>rd</sup> boy that he should find somewhere else. [AB28.9.06]*
- (b) *Ms P tells the children that 'one of their mummies has said that some of the boys are being a bit rough and that they are pulling at jumpers and doing pretend kicking'. Immediately Chelsea tells on one of the boys but [I] can't make out who she has named. Ms P: did you tell one of the dinner ladies? Chelsea nods. Well don't get people into trouble two times. [GH28.9.06]*

### **(9) Disciplinary touch**

*The children return from play. Sitting on the carpet and working from the whiteboard. Ms G sat at the back of the group and pulled Luke P backwards so that he was sitting next to her. He wriggled forwards again. 'No, do as you've been told' she said as she was pulling him back again. Luke started crying. Ms G ignored him. He stopped crying and wriggled forwards again. 'If you do it again I'll sit you outside the classroom. Do you want to go and speak to Mrs A [head teacher]?' [CD10.10.06]*

### **(10) Discursive framing: the child**

Some children were judged to be 'manipulative', others to be self-centred. *It's all about me*, one adult said, summing up Chloe's disposition; another described her as *a little madam*. Joe was reported to have *the concentration of a gnat*. Hugo's teacher felt there was *something about him*:

*There can be some children who are naughty, but they are likeable, and then you have someone like Hugo. Who's really good, but there's something about him, I just can't take to him. Like today, it's his birthday and I have to be really nice to him, but I find it hard and I keep telling him off. The nursery staff were the same about him, I don't know what it is. I don't like his mum, so maybe that's it. [EF28.10.06]*