

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

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### **Extended Report**

#### **BACKGROUND**

The research was formulated in the context of the Labour Government's early childhood reforms (eg *Every Child Matters*, HM Govt, 2004). Early childhood had been identified as a critical period for children's futures – a site where early signs of social exclusion and disaffection might be tackled. At the same time, anxiety about deteriorating behaviour was also in evidence (DfES, 2005). Yet as we noted in the proposal, behaviour is an enduring issue that has prompted a wide array of interventions and approaches - behavioural, cognitive, psychotherapeutic and socio-cultural.

Many of these interventions have focused on individual children, attempting to help them to act more appropriately in school, or to compensate for presumed effects of developmental 'delay', disposition, or home background. Our research, by contrast, proposed to focus on problematic behaviour as it emerged within, and was shaped by, the culture of the classroom. We 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.*

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

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

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

*To contribute to the development of theory in the field of classroom interaction and pupil identity.*

## **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.

### **Methodological issues**

Video recording and transcription provided valuable insights into the interactional details of significant events. However high-quality fieldnotes, built up over time, provided richer and more complex understandings of the ways in which behaviour and reputation were being fabricated in the four classes. We suggest that this mix of methods provided both depth and breadth of analytic focus. We also suggest that ethnographic research, based on sustained cultural immersion in the complexities of classrooms and schools, has the capacity to counteract the accretion of common-sense views and easy answers to deep-seated educational problems. The project also raised methodological issues concerning the inherent voyeurism of research and the risks of intensifying the already-strong gaze upon the child (see Outputs 1 and 2).

All names are pseudonyms in this report.

## **RESULTS**

The research aimed to delineate the discourse practices that work to maintain classroom order and discipline across the class as a whole. It is only against this background of an emerging collectivity that one can understand how certain individuals become more clearly identified than others as a 'problem'. In this study one child, Carter, was eventually excluded from school. At another school, Jamie became virtually an isolate within the classroom: considered by school

staff to be autistic (but not medically diagnosed as such), he spent most of his time disengaged from collective activities and marginalised in interactions involving adults and children. Additionally, a few other children, across the four schools, were considered by teachers and staff to present problems. Although the four project schools were located in very different catchment areas, the discourse processes and interactional strategies that were identified were similar across all sites. This is especially significant since one of the schools operates an explicitly innovative organisation involving free flow and pupil choice of activities. However during plenary sessions (whole-class sessions, collective worship etc) the interactional and disciplinary strategies used by staff were indistinguishable from those in the other schools. This suggests that interactions between adults and reception-age children are regulated by deep-seated assumptions and discourses that may over-ride differences of 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. Biting, kicking, punching or slapping were always treated seriously, and especially so if the recipient was an adult. Indeed the effect of these actions is often so severe for the adult recipient that it seems momentarily to cause a disruption of the usual experiential order – a kind of ontological disorientation in which normal sense, including sense of oneself, is fractured. Secondly, persistent failure to comply with adult requests was often an issue, especially where this noticeably 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 involves a *discursive frame* that grants meaning and duration to a child's conduct. Within this frame, individual actions come to be read as 'signs' of a more enduring problem. Family and community provide one such framing resource, in the form of narratives of the neglectful, indulgent, anxious, uncooperative or interfering parent. One teaching assistant remarked: *Home lives are very haphazard for some of these children. The behaviours aren't their fault. I blame the parents [...] They need to live by the rules. Basically they're feral aren't they? [to T].* In a similar mode, Jamie was described as *just running wild* when he first came to school. Brent's teacher felt his mother failed to teach him self-discipline, and called her into school to be made aware of his shortcomings (*Actually in a way it is his mum who is getting taught the lesson*, his teacher remarked). Several parents were considered to have 'spoiled' their children – terminology that implies that a child has been rendered unfit or unready in some way for the demands of schooling. The school's mission becomes one of civilising those children whose parents have not fulfilled their obligations adequately.

Another framing device was 'medicalisation' – the attribution of offending behaviour to underlying physical or psychological causes. A few children were thought to have been deaf in the pre-school years and therefore to have suffered developmental delay. Others were considered to display autistic behaviour, though clinical diagnoses had not been made.

Although answers lie outside the scope of this research, we wondered whether autism was being used in a comparable way to ADHD (Timimi, 2005) as an explanation for behaviour that does not conform to attentive and docile bodies required in mainstream education.

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. *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*:<sup>1</sup>

*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]*

Discursive frames could reference more than one factor – eg a parenting narrative, physical causes and/or individual disposition. Matt's behaviour was attributed both to language delay as a result of deafness (corrected by operation), and to over-protective treatment by his mother, who was said by one adult to use his deafness as an *excuse*. See also Hugo's teacher's remarks above. Discursive frames can tolerate apparent logical inconsistency therefore, without losing their explanatory integrity: a child can be considered both an 'innocent' victim of physiology, family or circumstance *and* responsible for his or her behaviour ('doing it on purpose'), thus replaying the duality of innocence and original sin that continues to run through public discourses around children.

Disparate frames are granted coherence with reference to the assumption, derived from developmental psychology, of a *normal developmental course* (Walkerdine 1988). 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. As Burman notes, developmental discourses not only identify but also 'pathologise' differences from assumed norms, and render mothers subject to blame and scrutiny (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 range of normal behaviour and competence. 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. Individual acts by children are read metonymically, as 'standing for' the bigger problem; while the status of the bigger problem is constituted in the iterations of the acts that 'stand for' the offence. This has practical implications for children who become subject to such framing, as it may lead teachers and other arbitrators to orient to '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 good – or rather, to be recognised as good.

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<sup>1</sup> Items in italics indicate excerpts from fieldnotes or video-recorded data.

Reputations may be mobilised by any of the adults who work in a school setting, in addition to teachers – teaching assistants, key workers, lunch staff, playground supervisors etc. Indeed such staff, who often live locally, may have personal knowledge of children and families, which then becomes available for the framing of reputation. Children may also enter the reception year with reputations already partially in place. Carter had been assigned a personal key worker in nursery school because of behaviour problems. Jamie had been identified as a ‘deaf child’ when he first went into the reception year.

It is important to emphasise that the frames that make sense of problem behaviour are discursive and not causal: one cannot simply predict that the occurrence of certain family characteristics, parenting practices or behaviours will lead to a problematic reputation. It is the discursive interpretation/explanation of behaviour that that grants meaning and significance to difference. Difference is produced by the discourse of normal development.

### **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. Explicit statements and rationales such as the following were commonplace:

*T: stay on your bottoms so everyone can see .... Hands up, think, don't call out.*

[EF23.9.06]

*I can hear some children talking ... it has to be quiet when I am doing the register*

[AB14.1.07]

*Now let me see who is sitting beautifully [Assembly, AB15.11.07]*

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, or indeed overlooked when teachers judged this to be appropriate, ‘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’. [EF15.6.07]

Daniel is publicly excluded from belonging with the ‘good’ children. He was again excluded, implicitly, in the following example from his Year 1 class:

*...seconds later I hear Mr K saying ‘Daniel are you facing this way?’ followed by ‘Well done Mark for ignoring some silly children’ [EF4.10.07]*

Mark is congratulated for distancing himself from the ‘silly children’, with whom Daniel is implicitly identified.

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. Jamie and Ishmael fulfilled 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. In the following example, the children working alongside Jamie do a similar developmental 'placing' of themselves by contrast to him:

[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 hierarchical status. Jamie also 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]*

*[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]*

Jamie's classmates are encouraged by teachers and assistants to 'practice' the virtues of kindness and helpfulness. While such encouragement 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 too: he was often addressed in a rather 'babyish' tone, and was frequently 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 also Appendix A, Example 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: in all four classrooms, conventions for behaviour, appropriate feelings and moral conduct were continually emphasised. Yet on the other hand, difference seems paradoxically necessary to the maintenance of classroom order. A few children are granted a status as exceptions and examples, against which the normal order may recognise itself. Kristeva (1982) and Butler (1993) have called this excluded-yet-exemplary status that of the *abject*.

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

Being good is not a straightforward matter. Children must do 'categorization work' (Baker 2000) to understand how behaviour gets assigned to the category of 'good', or to the various related categories that are used to regulate behaviour. These included, in the present data, 'sitting beautifully'/'properly'/'nicely', 'good listening', being 'sensible', not being 'silly', putting hands up and waiting to be chosen to speak, not speaking while the teacher is speaking. As noted, a range of social and moral qualities were also required – being kind, being helpful, working hard, being polite, sharing.

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. At one school, weekly 'certificate assemblies' celebrated a wide range of behaviours and competences. For instance:

For always listening and being kind and helpful  
For always listening and working hard  
For fantastic joining in on the carpet  
For working really hard with his letter sounds  
For settling in so well (2 new girls)

Interpretive work is needed if children are to identify what they have done in the past week that counted as 'fantastic joining in on the carpet', or 'being kind and helpful'. And even when evaluations are made immediately after a particular action, children still need to do self-inspection to know what is specifically being referenced when they are commended for 'sitting beautifully' or doing 'good listening'. 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?*

*C for being good*

*Me what did you do that was good?*

*C I was playing nicely*

*Me What were you playing with?*

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

[See also Appendix A, Example 1]

Ellie, below, 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]*

The space between evaluations and the behaviours to which they retrospectively refer may be large enough for the evaluation to be *withdrawn*. 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 (coming to school '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*. As Millei (2005) notes, teacher-led control operates against self-discipline, since the former is exerted externally and the latter is supposed to operate internally. There is also possible ambiguity as to whether Brent's teacher was 'really' displeased with the nature of 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 were often linked in this way in the project classrooms. In the question-answer exchanges that form a central part of whole-class pedagogy, successful participation was 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. The example also demonstrates the significance of pleasing the teacher. Evaluations were often linked to expressions of happiness, sadness or pride by the teachers; 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 the teacher and winning her 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 A, Example 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 stickers, certificates or other '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.<sup>2</sup> 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 moreover 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 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' nature of classroom interaction, which sets different entitlements for adults and children (Edwards & Furlong, 1978). Children are not expected, for instance, to

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<sup>2</sup> 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]

question the reasons for teachers' requests (see example of Ellie, above), 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 A, example 3, where Rose and Carter attempt to 'help' their teacher relocate other children on the carpet.

Children also need to understand how teachers' interest in what they have to say may fluctuate according to the asymmetrical rules for participation. The conventions for group talk are that teachers generally have the right to set and change topics, and to identify who will speak next. Within this frame, teachers may display considerable interest in children's contributions.<sup>3</sup> However children need to learn that they cannot rely on teachers' interest if they speak 'out of turn', make unsolicited contributions or misread the topic of the current activity.

In summary, being good is a complex matter. Children need 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. In the example below, children are asked to speculate on how the head teacher will feel about children who have not received a sticker for being 'good'.

*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

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<sup>3</sup> For example: *[Children are sitting in a circle, each in turn saying 'I like the smell of...'] As each child answers Ms P gives a little gasp (as if really excited by children's responses [GH14.9.06]*

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 authenticity**

There is an element of mimicry involved in this education of the emotions through rehearsal and modelling. Occasionally this guided mimicry was explicit, as when Ben was instructed to show Jamie his 'sad face': see Appendix A, Example 4. This highlights the ambivalence of mimicry as a way of 'teaching' emotions. 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? Mimicry renders utterances liable to being read as ironic.

Some performances seemed explicitly to be marked as ironic by the child concerned. For example:

*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]*

The strong reaction of Charlie's teacher suggests that his response is seen as an act of insubordination.<sup>4</sup> Irony, when deployed by children, is 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 (see below). 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 mimicry

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<sup>4</sup> There may also be a hint of irony in Harry's contribution, which moreover seems to play off the relationship between discipline and educational work:

*[Ms H has stopped a group of boys from playing roughly on the soft bricks] A little while later when the children are on the carpet doing key word recognition, Harry says 'like "no soft play"' when Ms H holds up the word 'no' [EF]*

required of them achieve a kind of camouflage, in Lacan's terms: they become 'mottled' against a mottled background (1977: 99). Some children are unable consistently to become 'mottled' against the background of normative expectations, even though they may perform convincing acts of mimicry on some occasions, as Jamie and Carter were sometimes able to do. However neither attained a degree of camouflage that allowed them to evade their problematic reputations.

### **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 define 'appropriate' feelings, and do not acknowledge the possibility that children might also express '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 frustrations and 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**

In the reception year, monitoring and bodily discipline is a pervasive and urgent concern. While all children were subject to continuous monitoring and bodily regulation, those whose behaviour was causing concern were differentially marked for surveillance and discipline. Such children were more likely than others to be watched, touched and manipulated without their consent by adults.<sup>5</sup> 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, whose behaviour programme included trying to get him to comply with at least one

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<sup>5</sup> For example:

*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]*

adult request per day, was observed to become upset and physically resistant when adults attempted to hold his wrist or lead him away. He also often moved out of sight of his key worker, and by loudly singing or humming to himself, seemed to try to 'block out' adults' attempted interventions. Other children similarly complained or became upset when physically manipulated.

Certain objects operated as materialisations of power in the four project classrooms, aimed at rendering the children's bodies as docile. For instance carpeted areas were key sites: the act of sitting on the carpet carried with it a set of implications where the contours of the child's body had to satisfy the requirement of 'sitting up straight, with arms folded and legs crossed'. Thus matter such as carpeting 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 which are ordinarily erected 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 had a limited life and was clearly affected by 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) 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' (p. 51).

### **Discussion.**

The classroom is an important site for the production of problematic reputations. 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. Hughes (2004) notes that home-school relations can be a powerful and humane educational support, but may also involve invasion of privacy.

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, which may impact on some children more than others. In the current ethos of holistic development, 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. Children were expected both to internalise self-discipline and to obey adults without question. 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.

#### *Beyond reason: the limits of rationality and intentionality*

The research has challenged the assumptions of rationality and intentionality that underlie early years practice (see Output 3). These hold that children do things for a reason, that they either do or do not act intentionally, and that by understanding the consequences of their actions (for themselves and others) they will be able to change their behaviour. However it was often unclear to us whether children were or were not acting 'on purpose', and what the rationale for their actions might be. This may be due in part to the challenges that children face in negotiating the mixed messages and multiple meanings that attach to their own behaviour. However the notion of the rational individual who is able to 'know herself' has also been subject to a more general critique within poststructuralist theory. Quasi-therapeutic interventions that seek to help children understand the grounds and consequences of their actions may therefore have their limitations.

#### *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 and difference does not operate at an individual level, but is produced through deep-seated discourses and beliefs. This is undoubtedly the reason why 'behaviour' has been such a persistent and intransigent problem. It is important to emphasise that the teachers who took part in the project were caring and concerned about children's education and wellbeing. We saw many instances of dedication, determination and generosity of spirit in teachers' and other adults' interactions with children. The processes that produce winners and losers in the reputational stakes happen 'behind the backs', as it were, of individuals.

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 year of 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). The project was featured in a Keynote Symposium to the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference (2008). 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

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.

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.

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## Annexe

### Appendix A: Annotated examples from classroom data

#### Transcription conventions:

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 very 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! Quite exaggerated expressions of approval/pleasure  
[Class waits in line. C is tapping his foot, looking around. T is talking to another adult]
- 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 – perfectly quiet <that means> no sounds a-all 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 are granted approval as 'helpful' by implicit contrast to C.
- C I done it too [ie picked up the toys that he had knocked over] C tries to evade this exemplary contrast and claim approval for himself too  
[children continue to queue. C is yelping like a little seal.
- [GH1.07video]

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

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

The boundary between being helpful and (mis)appropriating teachers' power is often blurred.

- T This morning-  
R Miss he's not sitting up  
T [quietly] pardon? You go and sit next to Olivia then [to another child]  
C There's space there [pointing behind him] why don't you put him in there because there's a big space [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!

Is Rose 'helping' or 'telling tales'?

Is Carter 'helping' or trespassing on T's territory?

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]



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