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This paper examines the experiences of children learning to read in a multi-ethnic London primary school. The data are drawn from doctoral research, based on ethnographic fieldwork, with children aged six to seven years and ten to eleven years. Reading is revealed as a strongly emotional realm for children. The children are weak to resist teacher assessment of themselves, but nonetheless seek to create consoling narratives against what they perceive to be the negative identity of 'poor reader'. The data are distinctive, as resistance to school hierarchies and strong feelings about educational failure are manifested in the narratives of children as young as six years old.

Keywords: literacy practices; reading; educational hierarchies; minority children

Introduction

The focus of this article is on the responses that individual children make to their encounters with the core skill of reading in the primary school. The data presented here focus on reading and meaning-making in children who are considered poor readers. The data presented are particularistic; they do not represent broader social differences, such as evidence of socio-economic class divisions between children, although the sample were almost entirely from ethnic minority backgrounds. Children's reading attainment continues to occupy a significant place in national policy and media agendas, framed through narratives of anxiety about the failure of particular individuals and groups. Research, policy and media discourses have not consulted young children's opinions either on reading practices and processes in the primary school or on the classroom hierarchies produced. The phenomenon of reading, as an everyday social practice and as part of 'schooling as usual' (Davies 1993, 71), from children's perspectives at school is an understudied

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area. Other research aestheticises the picturebook but does not reflect upon children's narratives of the process of learning to read (Arizpe and Styles 2003). Alternatively, it considers adolescents' experiences of educational failure (Sharp and Green 1975; Willis 1977; Corrigan 1979) rather than the experiences of younger children.

The first section of this article focuses on methods and setting the context to the study, with the aim of providing some background to the children's narratives. The second part of the paper presents findings on the meanings children make of reading identities in school, where they work primarily with constructs of 'being' intelligent or not and with the label of 'poor reader'. Data that present children's resistance to reading and to the reading identities they are assigned at school are explored. The children negotiate and repair narratives of their-selves-as-readers, through reading competency narratives and those they use to console themselves. The paper ends with a discussion of the role that policy plays, as a silent actor, in the institution of the school, followed by a discussion of findings, and offers some concluding remarks with regards to reading practices and the meanings children who are 'failing' make of learning to read at school.

Methods

This article presents findings from ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in 2010/11 as part of a PhD project. Fifty-eight children took part in the research, which encompassed semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Children were interviewed twice, in friendship groups. The interviews aimed to privilege pupil voice, through ceding some of the power in the researcher-researched hyphen (Fine 1994, 14) to participants. The intention of employing these methods was to allow children to story themselves (Morrice 2011) in relation to reading and learning to read. Picturebooks were used as a 'trigger material' (Troyna and Carrington 1990, 2) for talk, although in the data presented in this article talk turned more generally to reading as the children made meaning of it, outside the context of individual books. The children's ethnicities and/or nationalities are self-described.

Although this paper is not methodological in design, the ways in which ethnographic data and field notes were used are significant for understanding the nature of data generated, and for the argument developed here. Grave, Boshuizen, and Schmidt argue that 'verbal interaction shows only the tip of the [communication] iceberg' (1996, 321). Therefore, in order to gain a 'thick description' of how the children make meaning of reading, non-verbal aspects of their communication are included; such 'dialogue' is a methodologically distinctive aspect of this research. Fielding (2008) suggests that ethnographic field notes should describe everything, to show rather than tell the reader what is happening – for example, taking account of where someone is looking.

The children's emotionality on the topic of reading is a strong thread running through the data, and it was frequently through the body that emotional hurt, or resistance, to the topic of poor reading was expressed; looking away, lowering of the gaze or changing tone being examples. It is clear from their body responses that 'reading' in school is something about which the children enact strong – often negative – emotion. The data were selected for their salience, 'illustrative and evocative and qualities', and to evoke 'understanding or empathy … [and] provide a meaningful illustration' (Mason 2002, 176) of emotional hurt being expressed.

Denzin argues for 'an evocative and not a representational epistemology [to be] sought' (1997, 265–266), which echoes the approach taken with these data. Taking Blumer's (1956) broadly interpretivist approach – to make meaning of the everyday – the specific excerpts presented in this paper are not exceptional or unusual; rather, they indicate everyday responses to the practice and skill of reading expressed by many children. Whilst being everyday responses, the data were also selected for their vividness (Woods 1999) in evoking childhood worlds. The data present new insight into the understudied area of children's perspectives on reading at school. This research follows well-established ethnographic practices such as those used by Brice-Heath (1983), Hartigan Jr (1999) and Renold (2005), in that the data used are evidence of 'coming to "know" … to move very close to a living understanding of the ways of behaving, feeling, believing the children' (Brice-Heath 1983, 13) and how they story themselves as readers at school. The aim is that by having taken 'snapshots' (Mason 2002, 189) of the children's experiences, over one school year and across different interviews, the data presented bring to life their feelings and understandings – as they were co-produced with the researcher – about reading.

Setting the context

The children were recruited from one London community primary school, 'Three Chimneys'. The children were multiply marginalised; 98% came from ethnic minority backgrounds, around one-quarter were from refugee and asylum-seeker families, and OFSTED deemed the school 'Failing'. The principal aim of the study was to explore reading as a social practice, but by starting with children's voices. The study sought to allow them space and credibility on a topic of great importance in their lives. It took for granted that children are agentic, socially competent actors, able to be interviewed and to comment upon the social world of the primary school in which they find themselves (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Lee 1998; Qvortrup 2004; Christensen 2004) if given time to be listened to seriously.

This research is not concerned with starting from one theoretical standpoint, but rather with what the children have to say about themselves as

readers, and working from that towards understanding their underlying perspectives on reading. Theory on identity, for example, seems divorced, or at least disjointed, from the world, and especially the talk of children (cf. Butler 1993; Foucault 1975; Bhabha 1994), if only in the terms in which it is articulated. It is not necessarily possible to map concepts theorised in relation to adults onto the child, nor onto the ways the child is produced and produces themself as a social actor. This is not to dismiss such theory, nor to suggest that children inhabit a separate universe or world from adults – far from it – their social context is informed by and enmeshed with the adult world. Nonetheless, children are distinct social actors and there is a lack of theorisation of children's selves as readers, which this research could feed into. The research could also contribute to the work on theorising childhood such as that of James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) and Alanen and Mayall (2001).

Creating theory on children's reading can be built if we work from what they say about themselves and take it seriously. This research therefore aims to draw upon a range of interdisciplinary sources, where they link with what the children have said. The argument made is that a theoretical overarching framework should not be used if it serves to drown out, rather than comple-ment, their voices. The paper uses concepts that emerge from the data – for example, Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1977/1983, 23). His concept of social embarrassment or 'getting it wrong' is evoked in the ways the children respond to the identity of poor reader. Rather than starting with a Bourdieusian lens through which to view, or foreshadow, the whole research, this concept is evoked in the children's talk.

Through the data we can trace the ways that children understand, respond, react, deny, enjoy and hurt as they encounter the world of school reading. There are insights into the ways that from a very early age children come to gain and make an identity for themselves as readers at school. The data indicate the power of these processes and how the children perceive, accept, accommodate, resist and reject them, and seek to find ways to manoeuvre within the frames.

Findings

Young children emerge from the data as acutely aware of the meanings they find in school of academic judgement and stratification on themselves and others. What becomes clear is that the children have little ability to move within this web of school reading. It is imposed upon them in a tightly dominant fashion. We see, however, in the following data that they respond creatively to the frames that reading makes.

We start to see the beginnings of narratives of failure in the younger children's accounts of reading, and how painful these experiences of failure are. By the time the children are in Year Six, they have internalised these

narratives to a large extent, and have adopted strategies of deflection and ways to create distance from themselves and reading as part of their identity work. The intricate techniques they used to avert and indeed avoid reading were part of this process.

When we began with the business of 'reading' – that is to say, decoding text by saying it aloud – the children's skill was almost universally low, in terms of how the school measured reading – that is to say, children struggled to correctly decipher print, according to classroom-based competencies. Few were able to 'read' confidently and independently in this way. The school authorities, teachers and policy assessment frameworks validated 'reading' as a skill that involved speedy decoding, remembering words and pronouncing them correctly. In the following data, however, we see how nuanced the children's understandings of good reading is for them, and how much emotional importance reading carries as freight.

We are able, through the data, to explore the taken-for-granted processes of children learning to read at school, developing new perspectives on these important processes through their eyes. In their narratives, school reading is experienced as anything but neutral, and moral orders and hierarchies are employed to comprehend the processes and positionings to which individuals are assigned in the classroom, and defray the costs of those hierarchies. The children create what Yardley calls 'consoling narratives' (Yardley 2008, 671) as affordances for the recognition of the allocation of the self to the stigmatised category of 'poor reader'. The analysis proposed here focuses on how the children's emotional responses to reading are interwoven with their broader identity work at school. Their talk about reading indicates its complexity as an academic and social practice in the classroom.

The children engage with intelligence as a significant 'property' (Goffman 1974, 54) of reading. There are contradictions in their commentaries, as children modify school discourses about reading, and themselves as readers, whilst simultaneously siding with the powerful messages they are given, and repairing those same discourses in their talk. It is important to note that the factors individual children emphasise are dependent on perceptions of their own position in the hierarchy of reading ability based on the place the child comes to occupy in that hierarchy of ' readers' in the classroom. Adult actions mingle and brawl with the child's self-assigned judgements.

Intelligence: being a 'good reader'

This section explores the way children understand what being a good reader is, and what it means to them when they recognise they are not in this category in the English primary school. When asked about her reading, one Year Six pupil responded:

> [Says this into her lap, head hung low, muffled and in a slightly wavering voice as though ashamed, but frank] I am not good at reading. I am not [pause] clever. (Muni, Kurdish, age 11)

Muni spoke with sadness, evidenced in her voice and in her body – she looked down and appeared 'ashamed'. Muni did not question the way in which school had positioned her as 'not good at reading'. She spoke later in the interview about her mother's illiteracy but, like the children in Evans' study on working-class children's educational failures in a London school, did not critique the way that, if 'home' could not help, school had also failed to teach her to read well (Evans 2007). The children saw cleverness as an innate quality that reinforced the passivity of those such as Muni who did not see themselves as 'being' clever.

Salim (Lebanese, age six) articulated sentiments similar to Muni's on the issue:

> Lexie: Why do you think some people are better at reading than others?
>
> Salim: [Picks up the recorder, waves it around.]
>
> Lexie: [Putting it down] Why is it some are in bottom reading group some in top?
>
> Salim: Because [long pause]. [Looking at the ground.]
>
> Huh. [Sighs hard.] [Then, looking right into my eyes, with a wounded look, like he might even be about to cry, he speaks much more hoarsely than usual.]
>
> Salim: They are cleverer than us.
>
> [As Salim speaks he moves his body. He hunches his shoulders forward further, so he has sloped back into the chair. I am suddenly aware that his physical movement makes him look smaller. He withdraws his hands from the books on the table where they have been flicking through pages, and crosses his arms in front of him, now making a concave shape of his body.]
>
> Dodi: Mmm [assent]. (Field note, 16 June 2011)

Holland and Leander argue that in terms of children's experiences of reading at school we:

> position [our]selves through words, bodily reactions, glances … these often imperceptible yet defining marks can become significant in shaping one's self perception … with each mark growing into layers that 'thicken' through experience. (2004, 252)

It is through the body as well as words that Salim positioned himself in relation to reading, and showed how he perceived the situation and felt about the question asked, and this is evidence of a 'thickening' of his subjectivity as a reader (Holland and Leander 2004) and the story he tells about himself as a reader.

Abdi (Somali, age six) reacted in a similar way when the topic of reading was broached. Abdi commented on how he had found the interview, on his way back to the classroom afterwards:

Abdi: [Under his breath] That [was] hard.

Lexie: Hard? What did you find hard about it?

Abdi: The reading long words because they hard.

Lexie: Even though Nicholas [Year Six partner] was reading, was it still hard?

Abdi: Yes. Cos I am not good [twists round the banister, into the wall, kicks the wall] at reading. (Field note, 3 March, 2011)

Abdi indicates that the work of reading is 'hard' even when you are following someone else reading a story. When asked to elaborate about what was difficult, Abdi drew on his own perceived skill as a reader – which was low – and responded physically. He twisted away so as to hide his face in shame, or anger, and then physically lashed out, face to the wall, and kicked it. This was a form of resistance through movement; perhaps a physical action was the only way in which to express the self when you have no words to articulate your experience.

The excerpts from Muni, Salim and Abdi illustrate that speaking about reading and intelligence has strong emotional significance. Salim at first attempted to evade the question about why some people are better at reading than others. His resource for resistance was a physical one – he picked up the recorder and waved it around, which disrupted the interview and offered him some element of control over its progress. When Salim finally spoke it is interesting that there was another 'in the body' reaction. He physically hunched himself, defending against the way he perceived that reading mapped onto his own 'intelligence'. He also effectively showed he did not wish to explain or develop his thoughts and feelings on this matter, as it pained him. He showed this through non-verbal aspects of his communication, such as his posture tone and gaze (Hutchby 2002).

Hutchby's study was concerned with recording children's counselling sessions, so it was a surprise to find similar dynamics co-produced between child and interviewer in these data, on the topic of reading. This shows the

extent to which the children made meaning of the personal, academic implications of reading abilities, and equally its strong emotional significance as part of their experience of schooling, but also how positioning and being positioned by school hierarchies as 'not clever' was in their eyes not the thing to 'be'.

It is important to note that Salim uses the plural pronoun 'us' referring to himself and Dodi (Kurdish, age six), his interview partner. It may be that there is comfort in not being the only one with a 'discreditable identity' (Plummer 1975, 93). It is equally important to note that this child's estimation of his reading ability matches precisely the teacher assessment in school. On one hand, teachers' 'official' actions made attempts on a daily basis as part of their interactions with the children in their classrooms to prevent the children operating the hierarchical judgements that teachers used. One example is the names for the different literacy ability groups, which did not specify ability openly.

The groups in both classes were given names of cartoon characters, animals or shapes, and were never referred to as 'higher' or 'lower', nor was the work set for the children ever talked about as 'easier' or 'harder' by staff in front of the children. On the other hand, a number of practices made the stratifications very clear to children. The children's talk is positioned within this context of stratifications that are mostly silenced or hidden but that are nevertheless pervasive in everyday classroom life.

Studies such as Davis, Butler, and Goldstein's argue that children's 'perceptions of themselves are not greatly affected by success or failure in learning to read at this early stage' (cited in McMichael 1980, 76). More recent research such as Stipek and Herbert (2005) supports this, as it explores the development of such perceptions in older children, but not younger. These data offer a fundamental challenge to such assumptions and understandings. Salim invokes a distant 'they' who are cleverer than 'us'. Salim knows of his own deficiencies and inadequacies because of the comparisons he is exposed to in the hierarchy of the classroom. Bronwyn Davies argues that children by the age of 11 are strongly aware – and become disaffected by – classroom competition and comparisons with others (Davies 1993). It is important to note that these data suggest that children in an English primary school by the age of six absorb and utilise teacher assessments of themselves. Salim's comments also tell us how he feels about it.

Reading surveillance

In the following data, the children monitor and comment upon the reading of others. Children worked with a discourse of 'cleverness':

Salim: They are cleverer than us.

Lexie: You think they are cleverer, OK.

Dodi: Matthew [a child in their class].

Lexie: You think Matthew is cleverer?

Salim: Ben [a child in their class] is cleverer than me [pause].

Lexie: Really? Do you not think that sometimes people are just good at different things, so Ben might be good at reading but you might be really good at maths?

Salim: Mhm [not sure, or not convinced sounding, raises his eyebrows slightly].

Difference in 'cleverness' is the source of the hierarchy of the classroom in this account. It is mapped onto individual children by Salim – he compares himself with Ben and Matthew in his class. The data also reveal that schools are spaces where children 'do' being emotional, about their learning as well as about peer relations – an area in which there is more research, such as McRobbie (1978), Nilan (1991), Pollard (1996), Hey (1997) and Besag (2006). Attempts to offer a consoling narrative that could protect the sense of self are seen as relatively powerless in the face of the authority given to reading competence at school.

Hutchby (2002) cites Geldard and Geldard, who argue that children 'tend to avoid emotional pain' (2002, 71). It could be argued that the same applies to adults. We can contextualise hesitancies and avoidances as evidence of a person with an inner world, which is not laid out transparently in the interview, and which perhaps challenges some taken-for-granted notions about children's worlds being simple and open. The topic of reading hierarchies unwittingly created 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1977/1983, 23), a feeling that one 'fall[s] short' in terms 'of the right way of being and doing' (Bourdieu 1984 cited by Skeggs 1997, 90) where the research stumbled, with no maps, upon a volatile area in the children's worlds.

Resistance tactics to poor reading

Hutchby (2002) again cites Geldard and Geldard, who argue that children deflect strongly emotional issues from themselves in order to not have to speak about them. This manifests itself through 'becoming silent and withdrawn or may involve the child seeking to distract attention away from the issue being loud and boisterous' (Geldard and Geldard cited in Hutchby 2002, 149). Salim and Dodi do not become loud and boisterous, but Tina (Malaysian, age seven), in her interview, responded with physical aggression

– when the issue of her 'being' and her 'reading' was raised. She uses the body to deflect the question about 'good reading' away from herself:

> Lexie: Why do you think some people are better at reading than others? [Pause.]
>
> Tina: [She has moved swiftly across the room, spotted a lizard puppet under a table, put her hand inside it, and advances with alarming stealth towards me where she clamps its fabric jaws on my wrist, quite hard, so it hurts for several minutes afterwards] Ahhhhhhhhh [a war cry].
>
> Lexie: Oh he got me. [In slight pain] Ow! (Field note, 14 March 2011)

Tina performs an attack with a puppet, the closest object to hand with which she could make a legitimate volley – it is playful but also is aggressive; as noted, she 'bit' quite hard with the puppet! Her resistance was effective; it disrupted the interview and allowed Tina to avoid developing or pursuing the topic, one that can produce painful feelings. Tina aims to retaliate – to produce reciprocal pain, or at least shock and distract from answering the interview question. Again it is significant that we look at Tina's gestures as well as her words, because the words alone do not provide a full picture of what happened in the interview. Hutchby argues that 'it is not always immediately clear when children are in fact resisting, or even *that* they are resisting' (2002, 164), which seems to be the case with Tina's 'biting' back.

Rogers and Elias suggest that children:

> (re) act against the scripts provided for them, such as 'good reader' providing counter narratives. These counter-narratives are often subtle and invisible. (2012, 260)

Although Tina's 'biting back' was not an 'invisible' act, it was a counter-narrative to those available to her from school about reading, and it was subtle in relation to how it engaged with what Rogers and Elias call 'scripts provided for' children (2012, 260). Her response offered resistance, even fury about the topic of reading hierarchies. Jewitt (2008, 245) argues there is a tendency to 'pathologise the non-verbal', both in the social world more widely and when analysing interview data. If instead we see the act – the 'bite' – as a counter-narrative to the researcher's narrative about reading at school, we are able to see how the 'biting back' is used to resist the question asked. Taking account not of articulate commentary, but rather of actions or facial expressions, we can see how non-verbal aspects of communication manifest meaning in the excerpt of data from Tina's interview.

The older poor reader

Emma (white British, age 10), identified by Miss Berg as a very poor reader in Year Six, used almost identical language to that of the Year Two children already discussed when she talked of her own positioning in class as a reader. Florence (Bangladeshi, age 11) and Emma were talking about reading in their interview:

Lexie: Why do you think some people are better at reading than others?

Emma: [Head pricks up, and puts up her hand, sitting very upright and answering brightly and promptly.] I know! Because [pause] with reading, yeah, [frowns] yeah, err, you sort of read, and then you have to err, like read, reeeead, well, and then, with pictures [imitates flicking through a book, but speaks now without conviction] and that's something peoples do. Like [more faltering, and in a softer voice]. Like, err, in my class, yes, like they look, yeah, you look, and, errr.

[Long pause.]

Emma: Some people are more intelligent than us [slightly frowning].

Lexie: So if they are more intelligent, does that make them better readers?

Florence: [Looking at Emma, sighs a short sharp sigh as if frustrated. Then narrows her eyes, fixes her gaze on Emma. She turns on her seat so her back is now to Emma.]

Florence: Some people are more intelligent and have better memories than others. [Sighs again, crumples up her face in displeasure and with a brisk motion, keeping her back to Emma, shifting on her seat so she is as far away from Emma as the space the chairs occupy permit, she squints and juts out her jaw at Emma, looking very displeased.] I have finished; can I go back to class now? [As she rises she scowls at Emma, over her shoulder.]

Emma begins eagerly and seems pleased to be able to offer an answer. The data indicate how she rapidly loses confidence. We struggle to follow the flow of Emma's comments; after her initial confidence in speaking about reading, they become halting and her sentences fragment. The data are not easily analysed. It is interesting that as words begin to fail she reverts to expressing what she does 'know' with her body and her face. She 'frowned' and then 'stopped speaking with conviction': her hesitation about reading is symbolically expressed by her lack of words; she lacks a coherent narrative with which to articulate her understandings about reading. She seems to provide words in order to say and offer something, but she gets lost, and her performance runs into the sand. She realises that her utterances do not have power in the space of the school to talk competently about reading

with others, like Florence, who harness narratives about the mind such as 'memory' in relation to reading.

The comment that indicates the point where the carapace of talking 'about' reading slips, and we see Emma's experience of her own position in the reading hierarchy, is when Emma says after a silence: 'some people are more intelligent than us'. She tried and failed to talk about reading as a generality, something distant and 'objective', and found only an uncomfortable knowledge of her own inadequacy in talking about reading at all. It proves fraught, after all, to 'do' a performance about reading where the personal – her own experience of being a reader – does not intrude. Like Muni, Salim and Dodi, Emma has a clear view of the judgements that the school has made about her; she is not 'clever' or 'knowing' about reading enough to discuss it competently. She does not exhibit the 'right' sort of classroom competency to be validated by those in authority at school (Davies 1993). This is evidence of the emergence of narratives of failure like those in the younger children's talk, although there is an initial attempt in what Emma says to deflect this by speaking about techniques of reading.

We gain additional insight into the way the children feel about their allocation to the reading hierarchy from these data. Florence resists being placed with Emma in a collective bracket of 'not intelligent'. She seeks to evade Emma's attempt to label her and assign her identity and place in the hierarchy. Florence sends out a chain of body and verbal indications of the wish to distance herself from this comment. Florence seeks to reframe reading by more 'objective' criteria. She talks about 'some people' rather than herself or her classmates by name, in order to retreat to a more formal sphere and to create distance, and to avoid potential upset of others. It is important to also question whether she was resentful about an adult researcher's seeming 'innocence' about hierarchies in the classroom, especially when talking to children as they were taken out of class for daily remedial support; we know that such categorisations and divisions of children as readers are experienced as 'symbolic violence' by the children (Bourdieu 1977/1983, 23).

Florence goes so far as to remove herself from the interview setting in order to not be tangled in Emma's comments and positioned by Emma in the 'branded space and blemished identity' (Wacquant 2008, 173) at the bottom of the 'good reader' hierarchy. The fundamental point is how the children have clear understandings of classroom hierarchies, and the stigma that accompanies the categories of those who are delineated as being at the bottom of the structure. It is important to note that the older children had better awareness of the implications of these judgements, and at least some of them sought to resist them.

The ways in which the children were multiply marginalised, discussed in the earlier section 'Intelligence: being a "good reader"', are managed through their identity work, and this includes their construction of their

selves-as-readers. Poor reading formed part of a 'blemished identity' (Wacquant 2008, 274) and so was something children sought to negotiate and distance themselves from; they worked to create boundaries around the self and the label of poor reader.

Negotiating the identity of a 'good reader'

It is important to recognise that there could be some damaging implications to gaining the label of 'good reader'. Hakim (Kurdish, age 11), one of the only male 'good readers' in Year Six according to teacher narratives, employed humour to indicate that while he was a good reader, he was still 'bad' enough to count as a 'proper boy'. The following excerpt is from a lesson where paired work was required, and therefore where social as well as academic considerations came into play. Salman (Bangladeshi, age 11) and Hakim were put together in a 'mixed ability pair', Hakim being the only boy in the 'top' reading group. Salman, usually in a 'lower' group, noted how far ahead Hakim was in his work:

> Hakim: Of course, man, I was reading when in my mother's stomach, I was on it then!

> Salman: Yeah right!

> Hakim: I was playing on my Game Boy when I was in there, man [elbows Salman in the ribs] come on blud, catch up with me [looks at Salman, who looks crestfallen] sorry blud, I was only joking.

In this situation, Hakim's quickness with reading is synonymous with his quickness with humour and verbal repartee, which other research indicates is a valued commodity for establishing hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2008). 'Of course' he claims he is quicker (or more intelligent) than his classmate because he was, he suggests, a precociously early reader and therefore precociously intelligent. The conversation descends into the absurd as Hakim intimates he was also 'playing Game Boy' before his birth. By introducing humour he avoids a head-on competitive tackle. He then cajoles his friend to 'catch up', language that avoids resonances of a teacher request by being framed in 'street' language, and with humour.

   This interchange indicates again that the children are positioned within discursive fields that they negotiate. In their talk, they produce discourses about reading and articulate its hierarchies. In doing so, they reproduce the school system's stratifications at the same time as being produced as readers by those same processes and stratifications. The process is dynamic; children are positioned as objects within school discourses, but they co-construct their positionality within those discourses as part of their broader identity work at school. These data reveal other considerations that

children make meaning of. They indicate that the need to be 'good' at reading is also mediated by the need to get along with classmates, and present the self in what is perceived as accepted and acceptable ways in the school.

Repair work and consoling narratives

Leyla (Algerian, age six) focused on her proficiency in a different area of the curriculum than reading as an affordance for her poor reading, and dislike of the skill. It was the subject area of art that offered an alternative source of positive identity from her perspective:

> Lexie: Why do you think some people are better at reading than others?
>
> Leyla: They are better at reading than me because they read more books.
>
> Lexie: Who do you mean?
>
> Leyla: [Shrugs] [pause]. Then aggressively pushes the books on the table to the other side of the table] Gnnnnh [uttering a grunt – almost a warning growl – as she pushes the books].
>
> Lexie: Like … some people in your class?
>
> Leyla: [Folds her arms tight to her chest and pouts – a sulk. She says under her breath, with venom but audible] I not a lot like reading. [Then, more brightly] I like drawing, I am really really really good at drawing. I draw alllll the time.

Leyla indicates that by practicing drawing often she is able to be 'good' at it and that she draws 'all the time', unlike reading where she avoids the work of decoding and reading many books. Her resistance is also partly physical in its nature, as she pushes the books away.

In another example, Emma attempted some 'repair' work, back in class with Florence. Emma indicates a sense of her own vulnerability as a poor reader, but also of having destabilised categories that require maintenance within the peer group, by labelling herself and her friends as 'not clever'. She evidences ontological insecurity in the implications attendant on not being good at reading, and how this positions her and her friend. Emma attempts to offer comfort:

> Emma: [Speaks warmly to Florence] You are good at writing, you're neat I'll tell you that. [Pause.] And, maths, you help me.
>
> Florence: [Shrugs, not looking up.]

Emma seeks to buttress Florence, and position her as someone who is good at mathematics and therefore less vulnerable to the 'discreditable identity'

(Plummer 1975, 93) of being unclever. Emma talks about other qualities such as writing. Emma also draws on discourses that are critical to gendered identities because Florence is someone who 'helps': she helps Emma with mathematics. Emma draws upon discourses of 'neat and tidy', which again evoke gender-appropriate elements of 'being' (Weekes 1997). She focuses on presentation rather than content of work. The credence of this claim is rejected and shrugged off; it is clear that neatness of work alone does not carry weight for Florence.

What is distinctive about the findings in this article is that we see the notion of hierarchies in school in the talk of very young children, and these are used in the applied context of the practice of reading. The data provide evidence of how the reproduction of inequalities is individualised in the children's accounts. These individualised inequalities are articulated based on what the children see and experience in the classroom in highly nuanced ways.

Policy and reading hierarchies

The silent actor in the picture of the child, the teacher and the skill of reading is policy. Ball (2010) argues that policy is performative – it is iterative, and speaks itself, but is rarely positioned as such by practitioners, for whom it is rigidly part of school structures. Policy that replaces direct intervention 'with target setting, accountability and comparison' (Ball 2010, 123) is common, and inflects teacher's practice and children's experiences with learning to read. Such processes remain under-studied in the research on children's learning and self-perception (see, for example, Reay 2006; Rogers and Elias 2012). Ball also highlights an element of the absurd in relation to policy in the way in which new policies 'feed off old policies, which are rendered "unthinkable"' (2010, 126). In this way, then, both teachers and individual children can be seen to be extremely vulnerable, caught adrift a sea of policy change, part of an institution that needs must subscribe to such policies. The children's individualised experiences of failure can gain a new focus when framed through a policy lens. A focus on policy also helps steer away from individualist notions of reading failure, so painful for the children, and refocuses attention on the shadow cast by the institutional power and processes of the school. For children in school, and their accountable teachers, there is little space to critique policy or challenge its hegemony. This is neither to suggest the passivity of teachers or children, but rather to make visible the silent power that policy exerts on children in the institution of the school.

Whilst policy undeniably operates to create targets, systems and hierarchies of reading in school, it might also be through policy that counter-narratives to the emotional hurt of reading failure could be produced, by and for children. With no easy answers, one solution might be

to follow Dweck's (2000) suggestion that it is key to improve self-esteem and the way to do this is to do away with ability groups in the classroom. Another possible way to repair emotional hurt created by reading hierarchies might be to apply a SPRinG research-type model (Kutnick et al. 2003), using a group therapy approach where children sit in a circle and share feelings. It would be overly simplistic to suggest that it could be the same teachers who had placed the children in the reading hierarchy in the first place who would run such sessions. Nonetheless, the SPRinG approach is child-led. The approach's strengths lie in the opportunities for peer scaffolding and support. There are many concerns with this suggestion; not least that the children involved would not be consulted on what they see as a way forward, and also, importantly, that it does nothing to critique the ongoing performative power of policy in schools as institutions. Children have a role to play to indicate they can 'do' the skills that policy dictates, and as long as policies with a strong leaning toward accountability and monitoring remain in place, so too will hierarchies of reading and children's emotional engagements with them.

Conclusion

This article explored children's framings of reading as an important aspect of their school experiences. The article focused on the meanings they made of intelligence, and the affordances they created when they perceived they were not intelligent. We saw how good reading could be a negative category to occupy, and needed to be manoeuvred. The children's reading identities, and selves-as-readers, interwove with teachers' assessments of them as readers. Children recognised and adopted discourses that reproduced teacher, and policy, values. They also translated and transformed them in ways which were meaningful to them. The children simultaneously recognised and absorbed the hierarchies as they commented upon processes of learning to read, while they negotiated with them and resisted them to rescue a valuable sense of self. They indicate the child's work of making sense of the world in which they find themselves members.

The children seek to avoid the 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1977/1983, 23) of discussing themselves as poor readers and hence having a 'poor' sense of self, mobilising disruption and avoidance strategies. The data indicate that children have great weakness in resisting the category of 'poor reader'. They did create consoling narratives, but these were not fully effective at protecting their feelings, throwing off the cultural dishonour associated with poor reading, or separating reading from the slippery concept of intelligence. The analysis suggests that these children grappled strongly to avoid the stigma of being positioned at the bottom of the heap in their own accounts of themselves, and this changed as they became older – from responding with pain to notions of failure, to working hard to avoid

talk about reading. Older children also avoided being involved in the production of the reading act – reading text out loud so that others could assess the quality of the reader's performance.

The data offer us some indications of 'coping strategies' (Pollard 1985; Hargreaves 1987) that children did use. These arguments serve to reinforce the importance of the findings about reading and social stratifications. The children here wriggle and manoeuvre; they find some space to save and to produce a benign sense of their self. Such cultural productions, however, have a clear limitation in the wider world of discrimination and labour-market disqualifications that accompany the inadequate reader in the western world today. The implications of these findings are that much younger children than previously thought respond to hierarchies they meet in the classroom. The reading stratifications found in the classrooms of 'Three Chimneys' are mirrored in schools across the United Kingdom. Reading in mainstream schools is consistently taught through banded levels, and it is usual practice for children to be grouped together in hierarchical reading groups through teacher assessment. There are no straightforward answers to the question of how to change attitudes and feelings towards reading or how reading hierarchies are managed.

We learn that reading is a highly emotional realm for children – they react to reading at six, but in different ways to how older children tend to react. The older age group simultaneously had stronger narratives of themselves as poor readers and more effective strategies to avoid the work of reading and deflect the reading identities conferred on them by teacher assessment. The children's reading identities had become more sedimented as they progressed through primary school and experienced failures in reading, so that by the time they were in Year Six they had developed more satisfactory strategies of resistance to protect the self. We see how children create narratives to patch up a damaged sense of self-as-reader when they are positioned as not good at reading, whilst also understanding this to be a negative label to 'own'.

We see reading as a sensitive area, as the research stumbled into a land with no maps that was full of uncharted pain for the children. What children do with reading stratifications, and how they feel about them, sheds new light shed onto this area, in terms of what meanings children make of their failing reading.

Funding

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