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Early Years Learning, play pedagogy and social class

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Early Years Learning, Play Pedagogy and Social Class

Abstract

Despite 50 and more years of 'progressive education' in the UK, classed patterns of educational success and failure stubbornly prevail. So how, where and when does it all go wrong for the many children who continue to fail or underachieve? Drawing on the work of Basil Bernstein this paper centers processes within early years' education, which are claimed to help launch children on careers as either educational successes or failures. Our data suggest that in the progressive play pedagogies of Early Years Education (EYE) children more or less happily play their lives away, in the process learning their position in social and ability hierarchies that help define their future careers in and outside schools. That such hierarchies prevail is neither fault of teachers nor parents. Indeed, it is what EYE settings are legitimized to do; sieve and sort, make children 'school ready', pliant and prepared for a lifetime of learning to succeed or fail.

Key Words: Social Class, Play, Early Years Education, Ability, Identity

The Politics of Early Years Education (EYE)

In Europe, Australasia and the USA, linking EYE participation to higher paid employment, fewer social problems and greater social mobility has been commonplace since the 1960s. In recent years, however, declining social mobility and growing income inequality have grown in urgency. In the UK, leading politicians from Tony Blair's to David Cameron's governments have invested EYE with the hope that its greater provision will allow more of the currently all too few working class children to make at least the first step on the ladder of educational opportunity (e.g., Cameron, 2016). However, although consensus seems to abound among EYE practitioners, academics, politicians and business leaders that increasing opportunities for more children to *access* EYE is the good and decent thing (OECD, 2014; Stewart, 2013), there are two elephants on this discursive terrain that leave little room for other opinions and discourses to roam. Two unspoken, seemingly unchallengeable orthodoxies, indeed, one might call them theologies, dominate.

The first holds that 'meritocracy' is the unquestionable, ideological bedrock of a neo liberal, democratic society and its education system. In this view, children in EYE/schools are to be rewarded essentially according to their demonstrated 'abilities', not their status in society or their personal or familial connections, or manifest characteristics (looks, size, shape, etc.). Henceforward, their 'position in society can be considered fair expression of what they deserve' (Powell, 2012, 1). While the author of 'The Rise of the Meritocracy' (Young, 1958) intended it to be 'a satire meant to be a warning [] against what might happen to Britain between 1958 and the imagined final revolt against the meritocracy in 2033' (Young, 2001; 1) it has become, perversely, a celebration of what education and society *should* become, in general circulation in political discourse, especially in the United States and the UK. Within this political culture, it is contended that EYE policy discourse (see Johnson and Kossykh, 2008) should address: social mobility rather than social justice; means (equality of

opportunity and access) not aims and purposes (equality of process or outcomes); and structures not contents or resources. This emphasis was attested in the lead up to the May 2015 UK general election where the votes of parents with preschool children was fought for largely on issues of access and opportunity i.e., the number of hours of free care on offer to families, rather than the nature or quality of provision once received.

The second ‘unspoken’ relates to pedagogy and centres on play (‘invisible pedagogy’ and the identification and development of ‘generic skills’) as the indisputable, progressive, early years modality, ensuring establishment of values and mindsets that best underpin individual children’s sense of self, attitudes to later learning, communicative skills and natural creativity (Woodhead, 2006). Its protagonists (see *The Telegraph*, 2013) in what Bernstein (1975) called the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF) have come to see the more expressive, child centred, ‘competence’ based play pedagogies of EYE (Rogers and Lapping, 2012) threatened by too much formality, testing and assessment, as government Ministers in England have with increasing persistence viewed it simply as a preparation for school. Such major actors in what Bernstein (1990, 192) termed the ‘official recontextualising field’ (ORF) (particularly specialised departments and sub agencies of the state and inspectorate) had, for much of the period from the fifties to the seventies in the UK allowed individuals and agencies in the (PRF) (particularly specialist educational practitioners in schools, colleges, teacher educators and other specialist institutions of education, publishers and the specialised educational media) a high degree of relative autonomy with respect of curricula, teaching modalities and forms of assessment. This was to shift from the late seventies onward as Ministers discovered how surprisingly easy it was to enforce change sanctified in the name of competitive economic necessity and to wrap up the necessity of its implementation through a fetishized managerialism.

In this new world largely shared by both political Right and Left, Rogers and Lapping (2012, 249) have argued that, particularly since the 1990s, the discourse through which play has been configured in the ORF has subtly shifted,

‘from the progressive child-centred ideals of the post-Plowden (see CACE, 1967) era to a more market driven ideology of accountability, talking about the ‘quality’ of educational experience and the need to take account of ‘the requirements of the National Curriculum’ and ‘the government’s expenditure plans’ (DES, 1990).

There has, they claim, been a ‘collocation of ‘play’ and ‘purpose’: For young children, *purposeful play* is an essential and rich part of the learning process (DES, 1990, 7)’ (Rogers and Lapping, 2012, 249). Furthermore, this ‘merging of ‘play’ and ‘purpose’ within a discourse of accountability clearly articulates with ‘a performance model of pedagogy in which ‘play’ is constructed and evaluated in relation to perceived absences in the child’s practices, defined in relation to the criteria of an externally regulated curriculum’ (ibid., 249). Recent alliterations of EYE policy (see DFE, 2014, 5) neatly endorse this collocation as ‘school readiness’ a trope that now dominates policy pronouncements, despite the abovementioned reservations of academics and researchers in the PRF.

If, however, we were to accept that providing more EYE for more children is likely to be beneficial, both in terms of individual and national wellbeing, it follows that proper battle certainly needs to be fought over issues of access and opportunity, accompanied by honest, in contrast to hitherto evaded, accounting of what provision of high quality EYE for all would, in reality, cost (see Gurney-Read, 2015). As it is, only those with decent incomes can access full time EYE (see Hirsch and Valadez, 2015; Rutter, 2015). Those with less are unlikely to be able to access experiences (both pre and within EYE) in forms likely to guarantee that

their offspring are made appropriately ‘school ready’, that is to say, equipped with the necessary habitus to establish and sustain progress in EYE and later stages of formal education. Relations *within* EYE inevitably are in large part determined by relations *between* individuals, families and the state, conditioned by political ideology and, critically, levels of resource. But ought we to focus simply on matters of improving access and opportunity, positioning EYE itself as a primary source of cultural capital and educational resource? Is it, the wrong place to centre attention (see Ball, 2009; Evans and Davies, 2010) rather than on the dynamic between family and individual perceptions and transactions within EYE centres (Rogers and Lapping, 2012; MacLure, Jones, Holmes and MacRae, 2012) and state ideologies as to the purposes of EYE and education generally where reproduction of extant social and cultural inequalities in the UK is to be found? These issues are addressed below.

Relations Within

Tony Blair’s 1996 New Labour neo liberal project embraced EYE as testimony to the party’s commitment to making a meritocracy work, equalising opportunities for all children especially those from the most ‘disadvantaged groups in society’. Since the enactment of the National Childcare Strategy by New Labour in 1998 early years has seen rapid political reform (Baldock et al, 2009) reflected in policy initiatives such as *Sure Start* (DfE, 1998), *Birth to Three Matters* (DfE, 2003) and *The Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2008), the latter, after review by the Conservative/Liberal coalition government in 2010, becoming the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) framework (DfE, 2012; revised 2014), which ‘sets the standards for learning, development and care of children from birth to five, building on and replacing all existing statutory guidance’. The EYFS framework (DfE, 2014) articulating the principles of the ‘pedagogic device’ (PD) is critical to our analysis. The pedagogic device is ‘a grammar for producing specialised messages, realizations, a grammar which regulates what it

processes: a grammar which orders and positions and yet contains the potential of its own transformation' (Bernstein 1990, 190). It represents the 'voice of pedagogy', establishing the rules, which govern, regulate and define communication and consciousness within education. Such principles are neither arbitrary nor value free, but grounded in particular academic/theoretical conceptions of childhood and learning *and* class ideologies. As mentioned, Rogers and Lapping (2012) have documented for England how meanings attached to the signifier 'Play' in official discourse have shifted in recent years toward more instrumental, performative ideals, through a variety of policy initiatives including the Practice Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2008a), the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008b) and the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS), implemented in 2000 (QCA, 2000). The latter, in particular inserted 'ideas of purpose, quality and the market into the understanding of play in the early years, setting an agenda for a more explicitly regulated and accountable educational provision for all three and four year olds' (Rogers and Lapping, 2012, 249). With this in mind we can broadly interrogate how power and control embedded in the above policy texts and more recent EYE discourse (e.g., EYFS, DfE 2014) translate into principles of communication, specific pedagogic practices and attendant subjectivities. More specifically here we embed them in the even broader question of how these principles of communication 'differentially regulate forms of consciousness with respect to their reproduction *and* possibilities of change' (Bernstein, 1996, 18).

To address these questions we shift the point of analysis from EYE as a *relay* of class and cultural relations *external* to itself to study of the *medium* of transmission, each EYE centre's own voice, that is to say, the social structuring of (play) pedagogy itself (see Stirrup, 2015). As message systems, both relay and relayed nurture particular forms of subjectivity and facilitate constraint *and* opportunity for resistance and change. Bernstein (ibid: 46-7) pointed

out that pedagogic discourse is not a discourse in its own right but ‘a principle by which other discourses are appropriated and brought into special relationships with each other’. He called the discourse, which creates specialised skills and their relationships to each other *instructional discourse* and the moral discourses, which create order, relations and identity, *regulative discourse*. He argued that instructional is always embedded in dominant, regulative discourse. ‘The transmission of skills /understandings and the transmission of values always go hand in hand. There is only one discourse.’ (p.47). Accepting this, we are obliged to interrogate EYE discourse as comprising both instructional and regulative discourse, as generating and conveying knowledge competencies and skills and moral codes, imperatives as to what and how ‘the body’ should be in relation to other bodies. As Bernstein stressed, all pedagogic discourse projects an interlocutor to whom the discourse is addressed. He referred to the interlocutor projected by pedagogic discourse as ‘the *imaginary subject*. ‘Subsumed within the imaginary subjects projected by ‘teachers’ pedagogic discourse are ideological views about who children are and who they ought to become’ (Ivinson and Duveen, 2006: 109; MacLure, Jones, Holmes and MacRae, 2012). This leads us to examine how EYE policy discourse constructed *outside* EYE centres and expressed in the EYFS, helps form pedagogic discourse, foregrounding its instructional and regulative dimensions, respectively; and how pedagogies nurtured *inside* EYE are infused with codes (e.g., competence, performance and perfection; Evans and Davies, 2004; Rogers and Lapping, 2012) whose principles regulate but cannot ‘determine’ the actions and positions of individuals. Our analyses (see also Stirrup, 2015) here highlight how the discursive intersection of instructional and moral imperatives help form pedagogic discourse, providing the principles that configure the pedagogic play forms and implicit pedagogic positions and identities that circulate in EYE settings and children’s responses to them. Fundamental to such principles is the conception of play embedded in the EYFS (DfE 2014, 9) framework

which invokes an imaginary subject; an individual, individualised child, ‘ideally’ already predisposed or to be made ready for the generic and specialist discourses of primary and secondary schools.

Play Pedagogies

‘Play is essential for children’s development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, to think about problems, and relate to others. Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play which is guided by adults. There is an ongoing judgement to be made by practitioners about the balance between activities led by children, and activities led or guided by adults. Practitioners must respond to each child’s emerging needs and interests, guiding their development through warm, positive interaction. As children grow older, and as their development allows, it is expected that the balance will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for Year 1’. (EYFS, DfE, 2014, 9)

Notwithstanding its reorientation toward more instrumental and performative goals, the EYFS (DfE, 2014) like previous EYE policy, privileges play as the primary means of delivering the aims of EYE. Its text in many respects is evocative of the principles of what Bernstein termed ‘invisible pedagogy’. In such pedagogy, ideally: teachers arrange the *context* which children are expected to re-arrange and explore; within it children, apparently, have wide powers over what they select and structure and over the time scales of their activities; apparently regulate their own movements and social relationships; there is reduced emphasis upon the transmission and acquisition of specific skills; and the criteria for

evaluating the pedagogy are multiple and diffuse and, so are not easily measured (paraphrasing Bernstein, 1975, 23). From Plowden (HMSO, 1967) to EYFS (DfE, 2014) it was taken as axiomatic that these principles, should underpin best practice for early year education. However, in Bernstein's view play pedagogy is also deeply encoded with class and cultural assumptions:

'If the ideologies of the old middle class were institutionalised in the public schools and through them into the grammar schools, so the ideology of the new middle class was first institutionalised in private pre-schools, then private/public secondary schools, and finally into the state system, at the level of the infant [to which we might add nursery] school (ibid., 26).

This matters greatly because, if pedagogy is invisible, certain aspects of the child have high visibility for the teacher: 'readiness' relates to the inferences teachers make of children's developmental stage and 'busyness' linked to their external behaviour. Hence,

'The child should be busy doing things. These *inner* (readiness) and outer (busyness) aspects of the child can be transformed into one concept of 'ready to do'. The teacher infers from the 'doing' the state of readiness of the child as it is revealed in his present activity as this state adumbrates future 'doing'...Thus a non-doing child in the invisible pedagogy is the equivalent of a non-reading child in the visible pedagogy. (However, a non-reading child may be at a greater disadvantage and experience greater difficulty than a 'non-doing' child).' (ibid, 23)

An EYE teacher's/practitioner's class and cultural values, beliefs, assumptions and expectations thus become all the more important in the production of social and educational

outcomes, enacted as they constantly monitor, survey and assess children's manifest behaviours, as we see below.

The research settings

The fieldwork was set within three socially and culturally different early year settings in central England: *Busy Buzzy Bees*, *Little People* and *Little Stars* each structured and defined by the play principles of the EYFS.

Busy Buzzy Bees (BBB) is a publicly (Government) funded early years provider located in a large Midlands town. It provides sixty childcare places for children aged three months to five years old and is commonly utilised by staff and/or students at the local university college. Housed in three mobile classroom units, the setting consists of one unit, divided up into four separate sections; one for each age group (age three months-one year, two-three and three-four), with each 'section' catering for up to fifteen children supervised by two or three practitioners at any one time. The other two units were mostly used as office space. The outdoor facilities consist of a large playground, which each group uses at different times of the day. As many of its children are from professional middle class families it provided stark contrast to the families who use '*Little People*' and '*Little Stars*'.

Little People (LP) is located within a large housing estate on the outskirts of a large town within the Midlands area. It serves the local community, providing childcare for children aged three to five years old, with provision of nursery education funded places for children aged three to four years old. The setting has two rooms dedicated to three-four year olds, one for children whose parents paid for their full time care and the other for those who only attended for their entitlement of fifteen hours Government funded 'free care' per week. It was the latter on which this research focussed, at any one time catering for twenty-five children, supervised by three to four practitioners. Serving a working class area this setting facilitated

exploration of the opportunities available to working class children to access early years and their experiences of that provision.

Little Stars (LS) is a preschool located within a market town in England catering for children of a number of ethnic groups (but mainly Bangladeshi families) within the community. This setting was selected because of its cultural diversity. Approximately eighty per cent of the children on roll were from ethnic minorities, of whom forty-five per cent spoke English as an additional language. It occupied three large rooms in one building, offering two daily three hour childcare sessions for three-four year olds, catering for up to forty children at any one time, supervised by four-five practitioners.

The research involved ten months of sustained ‘critical’ ethnographic fieldwork using participant and non-participant observation, field note records and the content of informal conversations with children and practitioners, as data. Across the three settings, eighty children were observed and seven were selected for detailed investigation as illustrative of the dominant categories *in situ* and representative of those within the settings as a whole. The data were first analysed ethnographically to determine the organising categories and concepts of each setting, at this point loosely coupled with the researcher’s theoretical frame. Second order analysis imposed questions of equity, social reproduction and control, adding another layer of questions to the study. In this paper, data our illuminates how children begin to develop their corporeal realities and a sense of self in relation to social class and culture, as well as how conscious and subconscious embodied action is given ‘personality’ amongst relations governed by the principles of pedagogic discourses (PD).

Playing for position in the world of EYE

EY settings are contexts of fluid movement, some children ‘quietly’ sitting engaging in play, others swarming around particular activities until bored or satiated, moving on to the next,

apparently as whim and fancy take them. All the while practitioners guide and cajole them so that while *in situ* or transit no damage to other human beings or property is done. In all three settings practitioners were concerned to establish the instructional and regulative rules governing both how to behave and how, when and with what to learn. Yet each of these settings offered very different forms and experiences of learning. Beneath the surface of apparently volatile, always potentially combustible, free play activities lay structures of opportunity featuring different forms of experience cultivating and requiring different skills, sometime generic and other times specialized, to be accessed and realised. These play forms, documented elsewhere (see Stirrup, 2015) were contexts in which clear social hierarchies and identities emerged.

The Good, the Odd and the Difficult

Children learned and experienced their ‘place’ and status amongst their peers as part of being identified in the practitioner’s eyes as ‘good’, ‘odd’ or ‘difficult’, each identity being defined differently in each setting. Here, due to the limits of space we concentrate primarily on the construction of ‘good’ and ‘difficult’ children.

The majority of children at *BBBs* were identified as being both ‘good’ and able’, i.e. displaying positive attributes, responsive to practitioner expectations, for example, of tidying up toys, sharing, or displaying ‘manners’ at snack and lunch. These manifest behaviours were perceived as evidence of a child’s ability to recognise and realise *in situ* instructional and regulative rules that were deemed to have significance beyond the EYE context within formal education and wider society. Critically, they were considered manifest evidence of ‘good parenting’ and wider family influences and investments at play. By contrast at *LS*, as at *LP*, the categorisation of children was also more fluid and less certain than at *BBB*, with children slipping between ‘good’ and ‘difficult’ depending on their engagement with the pedagogic

discourses of the setting. At *BBB* it was much ‘easier’ for practitioners to observe and to know the children personally rather than as types. *LS* and *LP* housed almost double the number of pupils as *BBB*, space was more confined and children were largely part time attendees. Practitioners also had a lot less time to engage with them than did their counterparts at *BBB*. Furthermore, at *LS* given the high percentage of English as an additional language (EAL) children and those from low SES backgrounds, practitioners tended only to tolerate poor/difficult behaviour initially until they deemed children had attended long enough to understand the disciplinary expectations of practitioners. For example, Jordan was frequently observed ignoring practitioners, scaring other children and disrupting singing time, behaviour that practitioners believe to be accepted at home, as Mrs Jones commented:

“She just doesn't listen, not even to Mum when its home time. Mum doesn't seem bothered by it she just waits until Jordan is ready to leave. Not very helpful when we're trying to tell her off for this behaviour at nursery!”

The ‘Good’

Across all three settings the ‘good’ child was characterised as having good listening skills, demonstrating an interest in ‘academic’ play and displaying appropriate behaviour at nursery. Such children had not only to recognise these characteristics as important, but express them appropriately in how they moved, communicated and, in some instances, dressed in appropriate clothing for being outdoors or at the art table. Children able to recognise and ‘play’ appropriately within the discursive spaces available to them gained more practitioner time both within *BBB* and *LP* (but not at *LS* - see below). For example, James is described as ‘bright’ within the *BBB* context; he listens, follows instruction and works well with the other children despite being smaller in height than most of the boys. He is outwardly confident and

inquisitive and always first to put his hand up to answer or ask questions of practitioners and even the ‘silliness’ of storybooks (e.g. ‘Why does the duck have wellies on inside? They are for outdoors!’). He has been at the nursery since he was a baby and conforms to the setting’s concept of being ‘school ready’ and as such is often asked first if he would like to take part in a task, and at times is given more ‘difficult’ tasks to perform. For example, when talking to Helen (practitioner) about the children and the theme camouflage, she comments:

“I mean, I don’t explore the meaning of camouflage with all the children just the more able ones like James, with the rest I just mention it...I think the able ones need (to be) pushed more to achieve their maximum”

Furthermore, James appeared to be one of the few children interested in having books read to him, which practitioners were frequently happy to do, consequently spending more time with them than many other children, further developing and demonstrating his ‘ability’. He is not only seen as ‘academically but also physically able, having an understanding of when to demonstrate a physically active body and when to be passive. In effect, he had already acquired quite sophisticated play skills and play sense, the ‘ability’ to recognise and realise instructional and regulative codes;

Example1:

While the children are having snack Helen (practitioner) is demonstrating to another member of staff the exercises she has been doing in the gym after work. The children overhearing Helen’s conversation stop talking and begin to watch her as she demonstrates abdominal exercises,

James: “Helen, exercise is for outside”

Helen: “Yes James, running around is, because we don't want to fall into something and hurt ourselves inside do we...”

James: “I can do press up too, look (he gets up and shows Helen his press up)...Daddy taught me that he does them at the gym”

Example 2:

At snack time James and Amy are sitting together at the snack table, James is counting his raisins and talking loudly to Amy about how he spells his name:

James: “Mines J, A, M, E, S (says it phonetically) and yours is A, M, Y” (says it phonetically)

Helen (practitioner): “Well done James, that's very good, did mummy teach you that?”

Amy: “That is good James isn't it, we're best friends Helen, James and me...”

James then, demonstrates an ‘ability’ not only to engage with instructional discourses which are highly valued in this EYL setting (in this case orientated toward language development), but also perform such actions in appropriate ways i.e., meets its regulative rules; his transactions with peers (in this case, Amy) are disciplined and ‘educative’. Such orientations are perceived by practitioners to be reflective of his parents’ investment in his academic development outside the EY context.

Rhianna is regarded by all *LP* practitioners as a ‘lovely chatty child’ very ‘able’ and mature compared to some of the other children’ (John - practitioner). She is one of very few so defined in this setting. However, being considered ‘able’ within *LP* is rarely considered product of the kind of parental investment that James *at BBB* enjoys. It's considered more nature than nurture. When asked if she took part in any activities outside nursery, Rhianna

commented, “I’m not allowed to go to dance, mummy doesn’t let me”. Rhianna was often seen assisting practitioners with tasks such as tidying up, telling the other children when it is tidy up time and is rewarded for her ‘good behaviour’ more often than other children, by being allowed to pick songs to sing or numbers to count up to during ‘gathering¹’. Whilst most of the children participate in these ‘helping’ tasks, Rhianna does them more frequently and consequently receives higher amounts of practitioner contact. Claire (practitioner) described her as “like another little member of staff isn’t she?” while John views her as “in control, other children listen to her”. Her dominance over others and ‘teacher’-like persona was evident in her interactions with other children;

Example 3:

During play time, Rhianna decides to play the ‘honey bear’ game. She gets her friends (three other girls) to sit in a circle. Rhianna takes on the role of the teacher; she asserts her dominance by standing in the middle of the circle and picking (by pointing) one child to be the bear and one to collect the bear’s honey. Rhianna controls the game by ensuring she always picks herself or a close friend. When her dominance is challenged by Patryk, Rhianna demands the honey off Patryk in a similar manner to the practitioners “Patryk, give me the honey, you’re not playing” (holding one hand out, the other on her hip)

This display of recognising and enacting the official expectations of practitioners affords Rhianna high social status among both peers and practitioners who were then more willing to indulge her requests to select songs or ensure the toy she is playing with is given back to her, because she is seen as a helpful, co-operating child.

Unlike *BBB* and *LP* where the ‘able’ child could be perceived as spending the most time interacting with practitioners, at *LS*, the ‘able’ child, for example, Rebecca, is deemed so because she requires (and receives) *very little* attention from practitioners unless it is praise related. Rebecca is considered a quiet, unassuming child who blends into the background; able to listen, manage her own personal hygiene, put on her own coat and shoes and play with others co-operatively; a stark contrast to the ‘difficult’ child. She is described as “such a quiet, lovely girl, so well behaved” (Ms Smith). At *LS*, children were deemed ‘able’ because they did not require constant practitioner intervention and consequently received little time with practitioners, unlike those (albeit few) deemed ‘difficult’.

These different ‘good’ identities cannot be understood other than as a relational effects of EYFS policy principles enacted uniquely within each setting, and the embodied dispositions of children brought to those contexts from the family and home. Children at the top of the social hierarchy at *BBB* and *LP* readily engage with and accept the instructional and regulative discourses of these settings as defined by EYFS policy and enacted by practitioners. They arrive at their EYL context already predisposed with an appropriate embodied consciousness. James, demonstrates legitimate (high status/valued) knowledge by engaging appropriately (quietly) in ‘academic play’ (which in terms of time allocation dominated this setting, see Stirrup, 2015). The focus of practitioners is on his cognitive competencies (e.g., reading or writing) rather than his already attuned (and regulated) play sense. In contrast to *BBB* and *LP*, at *LS*, pedagogic discourse privileges the realisation of regulative rather than instructional rules and centres inculcating the social world of the English speaking cultural habitus of their practitioners and of play pedagogy. As such, being ‘able’ in this context meant a capacity to follow instructions while requiring little attention from staff.

The Difficult

Patryk is a Polish child at *LP* who struggles to speak English and consequently finds it difficult to communicate with staff and children, often speaking in Polish to them without getting a response. Small in height but athletic in build, Patryk engages in more rough and tumble play than the other boys, demonstrating his strength by lifting ‘heavy’ blocks (sometimes two at a time) while others carry one between two during ‘physical play’. He is seen by staff as a ‘problem child’, not because he is Polish but rather because his listening skills are perceived as poor and they believe he wilfully pretends not to understand when being told off, often finding it funny to have staff chase him round. Claire (practitioner) describes Patryk as; “naughty, he knows what he is doing, and finds it funny and he’s aggressive with the other children”, a view shared by other staff. Sarah labels him:

“A funny child, one on one he can be really sweet and good but with other children or during gathering he just wants to do his own thing. He takes toys away from others and can become too boisterous and aggressive. Obviously language can be a barrier between him and us, that’s why we often use gestures and sign.”

Field Notes 1:

Patryk is on the computer playing quietly; the boys (Justin, Callum and Duane) come inside and decide to play a ‘game with him - they begin poking him in the back and running away. Initially Patryk is engaged in his game but after the third time, he gets up and chases the boys, kicking and punching. The boys scream and laugh running away.

As Patryk is fighting with the boys, Clara begins to play on the computer. Patryk sees this, leaves the boys, goes back to the computer and pushes Clara off saying, “no my computer”.

Clara runs over to Sarah (practitioner) and tells her what happened;

Clara: “Patryk pushed me off the computer, he’s not playing with kind hands, he never does”

Sarah goes and speaks to Patryk

Patryk is seen as an ‘outsider’ by his peers; he is inside the EYL setting but outside its culture. He is not only positioned as such and attributed negative identity by virtue of his physical stature (stronger and more aggressive), but also how he uses his body i.e., his failure to recognise and appropriately enact the regulative rules of the pedagogic device. Rather than telling a member of staff that the boys were annoying him and Clara had taken his seat at the computer, Patryk becomes violent.

Jordan is often the first child one notices within the *LS* setting, she is very loud with a distinctive scream, overpowering some of the smaller, less vocal girls. She is viewed by staff as a ‘difficult’ child whose behaviour is very poor, often being aggressive and rude to other children. She is one of three girls viewed in this light and considered to be the worst of them. On one occasion, Jordan and another ‘difficult’ girl were playing ‘tickles’ - they began tickling each other and then started to tickle a child nearby. The child shrieked, curled up into the corner and began to cry. Although reprimanded by Ms Smith “play nicely, Priya doesn’t like being tickled so don’t do it to her”, Jordan ignored this and continued to tickle her. Ms Smith, commented to me; “you can tell she (Priya) is intimidated by her, if I was that age, I definitely would be!” The staff deem Jordan to be a threat to others, a view not helped by the fact she is bigger and taller than most of the other children and much more outspoken (i.e. her appearance belied her immaturity). As a result of her challenging behaviour Jordan spends much of her time under practitioner gaze especially during singing time when she is allocated a seat next to a staff member in an attempt to control her behaviour. Despite this high volume

of surveillance and interaction with practitioners, she is given very little opportunity to alter the view they have of her.

Jordan and Patryk are defined as ‘difficult’ because they either do not or cannot recognise the appropriate regulative rules for behaviour and interaction *in situ*, in part due to cultural (as illustrated by Patryk) and class differences between home and their EYL learning environment. Again, we are mindful of Bernstein’s (1975, 32) observation that: ‘in the case of invisible pedagogies the attention of the teacher is focused on the *whole* child: in its total doing and ‘not doing’ and that this can lead to ‘discrepancies between the teacher and parents’ view of the child unless the parents share the teacher’s theory. Indeed, it is possible that the dispositions and acts which are subject to evaluation by the teacher may be considered by some parents as irrelevant or intrusive or inaccurate or all three’.

The above identities are then, not arbitrary but constructed and defined in relation to the implicit imagery of the EYFS ideal imaginary subject, which is critically important in establishing not only the identities of ‘able’ children but all in the class - what others are not, but should be. As Bernstein (1975, 23) claimed, if the pedagogy is invisible, certain aspects of the child have high visibility and that:

‘the teacher makes inferences from the child’s ongoing behaviour about the *developmental* stage of the child. This inference is then referred to a concept of *readiness*. The second aspect of the child refers to his external behaviour and is conceptualised by the teacher as busyness. The child should be busy doing things’.

At *BBB* the majority of children were identified as ‘good’ because they approximated the ‘imaginary EYFS child’ and parents were deemed to have invested well in their children’s

academic and work play outside school through enrichment activities, developing both generic and specific skills of play. They had already acquired the recognition and realisation codes of their EYE setting. At *LP* and *LS*, which catered for families of very similar working class background, practitioners perceived there to be very few ‘able’ children, because it was felt that parents had neither the time nor resource to invest in them in ways that would help make them ‘school ready’. While there was distinctive cultural dissonance in *LS*, there were also nuanced differences between the two settings in ways of categorising children. *LS*, like *LP*, catered for employed and unemployed working class families but at the former the majority of children were deemed to arrive unable to recognise and display appropriate play behaviours (e.g., sitting still, listening, and ‘kind hands’) for learning. Over time their inability was redefined as an unwillingness to play by centre rules. Here there seemed to be acute cultural differences and dissonance between predominately Eastern European or Bengali home values and white British middle class codes school. At *LP*, ‘good’ children were those able to recognise and realise *in situ* discipline rules and codes and demonstrate some interest in ‘academic’ play.

Discussion

The data here undoubtedly resonate with the findings of Rogers and Lapping (2012), MacLure, Jones, Holmes and MacRae (2013), as well as earlier studies (e.g., see James and Prout, 1997), further illuminating ways which notions of child autonomy and development are actualised in the interactions through which teachers and children interpret, categorise, recognise and judge one another (MacLure, et al, 2012). However, they also confirm that play pedagogies as currently configured and enacted within a meritocratic discourse do little to confront the social hierarchies and outcomes they are designed to alleviate. In this there is

nothing new. Over forty years ago Rachel Sharp and Anthony Green's (1975) study of progressive, child-centred primary school educational practices and their effects on working-class children clearly documented how class-bias and stratification was produced, even in a system of progressive Primary school play (arguably then less performative and instrumental than today's version), such as was intentionally designed to avoid such corollaries. On our evidence, current configurations of EYE policy and practice simply consolidate and credential differentiating processes already inherent in the sector, rather than introduce (or shift) them anew and appear as somewhat inevitable expressions of EYE discourse, practitioner predispositions and meritocratic ideals.

The identities described above are inherently relational categories, constructed consciously and subconsciously through actions and perspectives of practitioners and children (Svahn and Evaldsson, 2011; Thompson and Bell, 2011; Sondergaard, 2012; Rogers and Lapping, 2012; Maclure, et al., 2013). These children are inducted into socially classed, self-regulating modes of behaviour, which leaves those who cannot or do not adhere being classed as 'difficult', leading to potential educational difficulties as they progress into 'formal' education. The play forms evident in EYE express both elaborate and restricted codes – the former dominating the setting (Stirrup, 2015). We are not, however, saying that working and middle class children are inherently differently predisposed to express or recognise these codes, though value preferences may be involved. Nor is it the case that middle-class families *only* engage with generic, elaborated codes and modes of invisible play pedagogies (see Evans and Davies, 2010). What gives them their pedagogic advantage and ultimately privilege and position is, more likely, their financial capacity to access and engage with *both* elaborated and restricted play pedagogies, calling on a vast array of private services, summer schools, after school clubs and other educational add-ons which further 'resource' their

children (Vincent and Ball, 2007; Wheeler, 2011; Evans and Davies, 2010). By so doing they develop both predispositions and skills that enable them to take advantage of the melange of child and adult led generic and activity-specific play opportunities provided in EYE as a requirement of DfE (2014), regarded as ensuring that children can effectively perform an appropriate desire for learning and ‘success’ in educative play. Those with the financial wherewithal to access private and public ‘play’ resources *are*, thus, better equipped to display the play skills for ‘sustainable trainability’ in EYE, schools and later life. As they move from the elaborate codes of pre-school and nursery to the ubiquitous restricted codes of secondary school, their investment in physical and cultural capital is likely to mark them out either for *distinction* (skilled performance) and/or *disposition* for participation – the markers of ‘ability’ in education. Even though central government, some local authorities and schools in the UK have invested heavily in recent years to increase opportunities for children to engage in ‘free’ or reasonably priced play, physical activity and sport in and outside school, for those families who have the inclination but not the resource to engage consistently with any of these things, ‘success’ is not an option. For them, ‘the gap’ remains unbridgeable. Their children cannot display ‘the right’ forms of disposition for participation in the various forms of play which feature in EYE and so are likely to be defined as lacking ‘ability’ for success in such contexts.

Much else follows from the above analyses. In Ball’s (2009, 14) view, ‘Differences generated elsewhere, that is to say out-with the EYE or school setting, are likely to be taken as essential and fixed characteristics, indicators of the capabilities of children built into institutional differentiations, opportunities and expectations in the school’ . The circle is then completed as these assumptions become self-fulfilling, both during interactions within EYE, and later through forms of setting, banding, withdrawal schemes and associated resource allocation differences in schools. The collective efforts of practitioners and differentiated investments are thus translated into individual ‘ability’ differences, or what are regarded as indicators of

different sorts of abilities, which become distinctly marked off from one another. ‘The child and the child’s performances thus are essentialised rather than seen as socially, culturally and, critically, economically, made up’ (ibid. p. 15). This, of course, is not to suggest that practitioners in EYE can do nothing to address inequalities or enhance the lives of children, but they cannot do so in isolation. The advocacy of BAECE (2015) for better trained professionals, more CPD and the nurturing of professionals better able to deal with diversity of children in their care, is hugely important. All this, notwithstanding, we share Ball’s (2009) view that addressing social injustices will require more than these interventions, in the form of new pedagogies and a new ‘social imaginary’, in which ‘the ways people imagine their existence, how they fit together with others, how they go on between them and their fellows’ and their environments - become the focus of educational debate and practice. ‘Abilities’ are, an ‘effect’, always outcomes of the interplay of value orientations with different levels of class and culturally based investments of time, energy and economic resource. The ‘fact’ that EYE practitioners recognise such ‘ability’ differences and sometimes then seem to discriminate inappropriately, does not make them inherently elitist, sexist, racist, or antagonistic toward the ideals of social justice. It makes them fallible, human and humane as they meet and enact the meritocratic principles and expectations of EYE play.

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