The making of ideal pupils: explaining the construction of key aspects of primary school learner identities.

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Abstract

This paper shows how teachers and pupils have an input in creating shared understandings of the 'ideal pupil' by which children construct aspects of their own learner identities. It develops an explanation for how aspects of anxiety and confidence in learning are integral to this process as pupils contrast their own identity as learners with their view of the ideal pupil. The explanation for their identity constructs centres on the interactions between teachers’ pedagogical styles and pupil sub-cultures, against the background of the testing culture. The paper develops an account of learning identity through the study of nine pupils between the ages of 7 and 8 in a mixed socio-economic primary school.

Keywords: Learner identities; Pedagogical style; Assessment culture; Primary school children

Introduction

This paper seeks to develop an explanatory model of the ways pupils construct themselves as learners with respect to two key aspects: confidence and anxiety. It can be argued that whether pupils are confident or anxious in relation to their learning is crucial to their subsequent progress at school (Covington, 1992). However, the question of how these emotions become part of pupils’ sense of themselves as learners has not been well understood in the context of the policies and practices relating to primary schools. While

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3 The focus of research into teacher-pupil interactions has been, largely, on the effects of teaching styles and strategies in relation to pupils’ classroom behaviour and cognitive progress (Gage, 1985; Mortimore et al., 1988; Galton, Hargreaves, Comber, Wall, and Pell, 1999). However, the relationship between teachers, pupils and their peers in the construction of pupils’ learner identities has been less studied. Yet, arguably, how pupils see themselves as learners is a key to how they get on at school.
there has been considerable research on primary school pupils' identities there has been less on the explanations as to how these identities are constructed.

Much of the research in the area of pupil identities in primary schools has been undertaken by Pollard and colleagues (Pollard, 1985, 1987; Pollard and Filer, 1996) over the past twenty five years. Pollard argues that children’s learner identities are shaped by relationships with significant others; family, peers and teachers. This study focuses on those relationships within the classroom. Pollard and Filer (1996) suggest that all learning involves risk taking. But whether the ‘risk’ will be perceived as threatening or anxiety provoking on the one hand, or embraced as exciting and achievable on the other, is largely due to whether a child has a learner identity and strategy characterised by confidence and motivation in order to take the ‘leap of faith’ necessary to achieve learning challenges and progress educationally.

However, while they identify how teacher-pupil interactions impinge on key aspects of pupils' learning identities they do not examine the particular interactions by which these aspects of learner identities are constructed. In this respect Stables (2003) points to Pollard's 'jokers', which is the label the latter gives to the group of children who were often the most successful in school, being more proactive in class than other children and contributing significantly in lessons in a reciprocal relationship with the teacher. For Stables, why some children are more proactive than others is a line of enquiry worthy of further study:

There is surely scope for research into the conditions under which students are encouraged into or discouraged from becoming Jokers or moving into other kinds of roles within the broader dynamics of the class. (p.12)

While Pollard and his colleagues provide important insights into the classroom contexts in which identities are constructed, they have focussed on the prior task of developing typologies of pupils, as has been common in much sociological research into schools and classrooms. For example, Pollard (1987) distinguishes between three types of pupils: goodies, jokers
and gangs but does not explain how these types have come about and why pupils belong to one group rather than another. Moreover, with respect to the latter point, the identity status of these types is not clear, since it might be thought that they are relatively fixed throughout a pupil’s career. Paul Willis’ (1977) distinction between two types of secondary school pupil ‘lads’ and ‘ear’oles’ was criticised on the same grounds by Lauder, Freeman-Moir and Scott (1986) and Brown (1987) who argued that pupils used the resources available in working class culture to construct these identities and that they were not necessarily fixed.

Providing an explanatory account of how pupils construct key aspects of their learner identities, in terms of confidence and anxiety is intended to provide insights into current pedagogical practices and raises questions for further research as to whether under different conditions this explanatory model is applicable. The insights generated provide further evidence of the problematic nature of the testing culture. In this respect it supports the study by Reay and Wiliam (1999). Their study is of particular interest because they found that within a (slightly) underperforming primary school in an area of social deprivation, the ethos changed from one favouring group work to an individualistic approach in the run up the national exams at year 6 (KS2 SATs). Teacher anxiety over school performance in the SATs was translated into pupil anxiety to the extent that children’s learner identities became wholly connected to their perceived competence in numeracy and literacy.

In order to situate the structure of the paper some general observations about the strategy adopted are needed. The study collected data in the form of classroom observations, teacher and pupil interviews. At the same time reading of the prior literature was undertaken in order to provide initial categories for understanding the data patterns. From these more developed theoretical categories were constructed in order to refine the understanding of the data patterns. Finally, links were made between theoretical constructions and data to generate an explanatory model or account of how learner identities were constructed. The guiding methodology for this strategy is that of Haig (1996; 2005). In his reconstruction of grounded theory Haig (1996)
argues that we begin with a constraint-inclusion model of a problem. That is that our understanding of the problem is informed by initial often minimal theoretical commitments which inform our collection of data. Data patterns are identified and then more developed theories are introduced to account for the data patterns. From this theorising, explanatory models may be developed that can then be tested or evaluated in different contexts. The paper begins with an account of the key theoretical categories that were developed from the analysis of data patterns. These are: the testing culture, pedagogy and pedagogical style and the concept of the ideal pupil.

**The Testing Culture, Classification and Grouping**

In England pupils are tested in primary school, on entry to school and then at ages 7 and 11. The tests at 7 and 11 are officially referred to as Key Stages 1 and 2 respectively. The tests are designed to measure school performance and to set targets for pupils. It is a common assumption made by policy makers that pupils are best taught, in groups, according to their levels of attainment. These tests have defined levels that ‘average’ pupils are expected to achieve. Consistent with this view, pupils are typically set and grouped according to prior attainment and teacher judgements as to their potential as a means of meeting school targets (Lauder and Brown; 2007). In the school which is focus of this study, this led to the identification of a group labelled ‘potential level four’ children, on whom resources were focused in order to boost test scores to the expected performance of level four at key stage 2 (aged 11). In effect this is a form of what Gillborn and Youdell (2000) call triage in which emphasis is placed on those with the potential to achieve the target level set, at the possible expense of pupils who are considered unlikely to achieve the level. So pervasive was the impact of attainment based groups that children were referred to openly by the labels given to their ability groups across school activities.

This testing culture can be seen as part of what Lauder, Brown, Dillabough and Halsey (2006) have called the State Theory of Learning because it makes assumptions about teachers and pupils’ motivations in learning: more
specifically, that a system of classifications, labelling and targets provides both spurs and incentives for learning. In the study of an urban primary school in the United States Booher-Jennings (2008) found that the hierarchies created by the classification of students in relation to high stakes testing, produced far more than a technical solution to pedagogy and accountability. Pupils that were successful saw their less successful counterparts as ‘personally or behaviourally deficient’ (159). Hence students were socialised into a world in which they were judged and they judged others in ways that challenged the confidence of the less successful and led to the boys in her study questioning whether educational success was a function of merit and effort.

**Pedagogy and Pedagogical Styles**

Alexander (2008) has argued that the notion that pedagogy comprises more than teaching practices or styles:

> Pedagogy does not begin and end in the classroom. It is comprehended only once one locates practice within the concentric circles of local and national, and of classroom, school, system and state, and only if one steers constantly back and forth between these, exploring the way that what teachers and students do in classrooms reflects the values of the wider society. (p.1).

It therefore needs to be understood within the framework of the testing culture and the way teachers respond in the classroom to its perceived demands. In this the concept of teachers’ pedagogical styles assume significance for the way pupils construct their identities.

Consistent with his view above Alexander (2008) has defined pedagogy as the: ‘observable act of teaching together with its attendant discourse of educational theories, values evidence and justifications’ (p.4) which are constructed in order to make decisions about teaching. In this study the concept of pedagogical style is used as an element in pedagogy as defined by Alexander. Here, the focus is on the professional ‘persona’ that teachers bring to the classroom and the way it influences the delivery and pacing of lessons,
the humour with which it is delivered, and the strategies used to maintain discipline. These elements can influence the volume and content of teacher talk which relates to instruction or questioning of subject content, (Delamont; 1976).

Pedagogical style may, therefore, influence judgements as to whether lessons emphasise didactic or experiential forms of teaching. In this context, ‘pedagogical’ rather than the more familiar ‘teaching’ style is used because while the latter was seen as an unhelpful ‘catch-all’ term of teaching behaviours employed to explain pupil outcomes (Alexander, 2000), here the focus is different: on how pedagogical style effects pupil constructions of the ideal learner. As we shall see, teachers in this study make explicit judgements about the nature of the pupils they are teaching and how they can best foster their learning through the use of a teaching persona. In turn, the latter appears related to pedagogical strategies. This then raises the issue of the degree to which pupils perceive teachers as bringing themselves into the classroom and its significance to them (Alexander, Entwhistle and Thompson; 1987).

The Concept of the Ideal Pupil

The ‘ideal’ concept is used to explore how messages relating to teachers’ pedagogical styles are interpreted by children aged seven and eight in year four of one mixed social class school. The concept of ‘ideal pupil’ was first used by Becker (1952) who studied teacher’s perceptions of pupils with regards to their socio-economic family background. Becker found that teachers varied their pedagogical expectations according to pupil family background:

She [the teacher] expects that the amount of work and effort required of her will vary inversely with the social status of her pupils. (1952; 455).

In addition to work and effort, family background could also be seen to affect teaching techniques:
For instance at [low SES school] if you had demonstrations in chemistry they had to be pretty flashy, lots of noise and smoke before they'd get interested in it. That wasn't necessary in [high SES school]. (455)

Such expectations could be seen to impact upon teacher conceptions of ideal pupil such that Becker’s findings suggested that children from professional backgrounds were constructed by teachers as ideal pupils to the disadvantage of working class pupils thought not have the appropriate dispositions for learning. It has been argued by Waterhouse (1991) that:

Becker’s (1952) ‘ideal pupil’ … has so often been adopted as a ready-made ‘off-the shelf’ model to answer questions about the nature of the interpersonal dealings between teachers and pupils in classrooms (p.46).

However, Becker’s research did not consider the effects of teachers’ constructs on pupils’ views of themselves as learners. By enabling students to reflect on what they consider to be the ideal learner this study seeks to gain an understanding of the way the messages communicated by teachers and peers relates to pupils’ constructions of themselves as learners. Waterhouse (1991) went on to argue that teachers formulate their views of pupils not according to a notion of an ideal but a process of ‘norm-matching ‘in which each pupil is constructed against a notion of the ‘normal’ or ‘average’ pupil. Such a view has resonance in relation to the testing culture in which the notion of the average or expected performance by pupils is crucial to the way teachers and schools are judged. In this context the study initially focused on pupils who were considered average in the sense that they occupied the middle categories of the Goldthorpe-Hope (1974) scale and who were identified as of median prior achievement for the county in the Key Stage 1 tests. One of the advantages of adopting this strategy is that it enables social class to be bracketed in looking at the effects of classroom interactions within the context of the testing culture. If it was found that issues of confidence and anxiety were more to do with the way pupils were classified (Horne and Saljo, 2006), rather than, necessarily with their social class backgrounds, then this
would be suggestive of the very powerful effects that testing and classification may have on pupils. However, as we shall see both the notions of the ‘average’ and ‘ideal pupil’ are mediated by a series of complex interactions.

Having outlined the theoretical categories that will be used to analyse the data, the methodology is now detailed.

**Methodology**

The paper engages with 9 children from Ivy junior school, which draws children from a range of social class backgrounds. Research was conducted with children in year 4, (ages 7-8) which was thought to be an age at which they were equipped with the linguistic skills and awareness needed to reflect upon classroom processes. The school has a reputation for being inclusive, with a strong emphasis on catering for children assessed as having special educational needs which comprises approximately around 20 per cent of pupils. The school is situated in a small town that teachers describe as having a tight knit community. There is a higher than average turnover of pupils and few children from a non-white ethnic background in the school.

Year four contains two parallel registration classes to which pupils are assigned to match as far as it is possible, in terms of the social, behavioural, gender, age and attainment mix of pupils. Children are taught in their registration classes for all subjects apart from numeracy. They are assigned to sets for numeracy according to their recent attainment scores, although in ‘borderline’ cases their perceived aptitude and ‘personality’ are taken into consideration. The class 1 teacher, Mr David, teaches the lower numeracy set. The class 2 teacher, Mrs Lacey, teaches the upper numeracy set. In addition to these sets, children are also grouped for literacy within the registration class according to attainment. For non core curriculum lessons children are in mixed attainment groupings which can be determined by social factors such as friendships and change throughout the year (especially in class 1).
Research was undertaken at Ivy school from summer term 2005 to the end of the summer term 2006. During this time it was possible to carry out observations for 16 days of lessons including the core curriculum subjects; literacy, numeracy and science as well as non-core curriculum subjects such as art, PE, PSHE and geography as well as interviewing pupils and teachers.

Interviews with the pupils focussed on what they thought their teachers expected of an ‘ideal’ pupil, and what makes the teachers happy and unhappy as well as the child’s view of lessons and their teachers. These questions were asked so as to gain an understanding of how children understood and responded to the pedagogies of their teachers and the perceived values, norms, ideals and ethic of the classroom. Interviews were carried out with children in pairs and groups of four to increase their confidence in talking to an adult about, at times, sensitive topics. Teachers were asked about the educational and social nature of the children in their classes and how their pedagogical styles related to them. The observations were of the children interviewed in their registration classes and sets. Ethnographic observations involved researcher presence with some involvement, within the classroom and the school with a particular focus upon matched pairs and their friends in relation to pupil responses and peer interaction during independent and group work activity, teacher delivery and task management.

[Ceri, more here about observations time spent observing and what i/e interactions between the 9 kids and teachers, peer group interaction, seat mates etc]Time during the observations enabled me to build good relationships with the children in this study. During summer term, 2006, I carried out six in-depth, semi-structured interviews with them. These data are triangulated with classroom observations and teacher interviews. The children are: Hermione, Katie and Lapis and their friends; Ash, Woofle, Leon, Charlie, Kelly and Roxy. For the interviews, children were asked to choose their own pseudonyms and these are the names which are used in the paper.
Children’s attainment at baseline level (aged 5), as well as at the end of Key stage 1 were recorded. It enabled an understanding of their progression in tests and how they were ranked within the registration class and allocated to sets providing the basis, in the study, for dividing the children into three groups, high attainers, those deemed below ‘average’ and one with special learning needs. Details of the pupils are given in the Table 1.

Table 1. Pupils, Classes and Sets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child name</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Literacy group (1-5)</th>
<th>Numeracy set (1-2)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>SEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lapis</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woofle</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leon</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ash</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermione</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are 5 groups in each class with 1 representing the high achieving pupils and 5 the lowest. Lapis, Woofle, Tom and Roxy all achieved levels of prior attainment well above the average and continued to achieve highly as reflected by their places in the top groups. The below average attaining children are Hermione, Charlie, Kelly and Ash. Ash has levels of prior attainment which put him well above the average but is currently achieving at below what is the expected level. Katie has a similar level of prior attainment to the below average attaining pupils and is in the lower numeracy set and the middle of the 5 literacy groups. However, Katie is a more complex case in that she presents special educational needs in the form of dyslexia. She has additional learning support which includes being removed from lessons to learn on a special ICT package and has an individual learning plan devised by the Special Educational needs Co-ordinator.

Dimensions of Learner Identity: Confidence and Anxiety
Findings from pupil interviews triangulated with teacher interviews and classroom observation enabled a number of different dimensions of pupil’s learner identities to be identified. These dimensions could be categorised into those defined by elements of anxiety and/or confidence. The understanding of children as having elements of ‘confidence’ and/or ‘anxiety’ was generated from observing and talking to them both formally and informally in class and in interviews, in terms of: words used, tone of voice and manner, positive/negative experiences of work and lessons, contributions and engagement in lessons. In identifying the following dimensions or elements which constitute the source of these emotions, understanding can be furthered as to their nature and relationship to their teacher’s pedagogical style. It should be stressed that these are provisional categories, which overlap for different children. Also for the reasons given earlier and discussed later we should not see these necessarily as fixed categories. The dimensions presented were:

(i) learning outcome anxiety, by which is meant that pupils did not think their work would reach the standard that they thought the teacher expected. Moreover, this appeared to be a stable or consistent anxiety, irrespective of the teacher’s response as is shown below.

(ii) learning orientation anxiety, by which is meant the way the pupil goes about seeking to engage in learning tasks that have been set.

(iii) an orientation which had elements of a confident competitive identity and

(iv) an orientation which had elements of a confident-cooperative identity.

Clearly, the kinds of anxiety referred to above may well be related in that if pupils are anxious about the way they set about tasks then they may also be anxious about what they produce in response to the tasks. However, they have been distinguished in this way for two reasons. Firstly, there may be factors that help pupils over their anxieties in engaging in a task, such as support from their peer group or friends but that whatever they then produce becomes the focus for their anxiety. Secondly, the interviews and observations enabled a distinction between these forms of anxiety to be
identified while the connection between them would require further analysis of the data. What is clear from the data is that confidence or anxiety was related to two factors: firstly academic attainment and secondly, behaviour.

Whereas the majority of children felt either confidence or anxiety with regards to ability and attainment, one child, Katie, presented confidence with regards to behaviour and anxiety towards attainment. This dualistic aspect towards her learner identity displayed itself in Katie presenting different attitudes (characterised by anxiety or confidence) towards different subjects which will be discussed below.

Although some pupils presented anxiety with regards to both factors, one dimension emerged as more prevalent than the other and it is in relation to the dominant source of anxiety that children are categorised. It was notable that all these children were below average attainment.

**The Pupils with Learning Outcome Anxiety**

These children presented learner identities which included anxiety around learning outcomes and applied to the ‘potential level 4’ pupils in class two; Charlie, Hermione and Kelly (see Table 1). This manifested itself in relation to aspects of work either during class or as homework. Concerns were related to both quality in not producing work that was “really perfect”, but more frequently in relation to quantity which connected to issues of behaviour. In fact all three mentioned specific examples of failing to complete work and perceived this to upset the teacher and influenced the way she viewed them. When asked how Mrs Lacey (class 2 teacher) talked when children hadn’t finished as much work as she’d like, Hermione described a situation in which she was reduced to tears because of failing to complete sufficient work during lessons:

and she was sort of like really kind and she said right do you want to go and do it in the library cause it’s nice and calmer there… well it’s because [a child] was talking to me and I couldn’t get on with my work so it made me cry.
The fact that Hermione cried, although her teacher had talked to her kindly, suggests that the source of Hermione’s anxiety may have been shame at not completing her work. This was supported through my observation of the interaction in question between Hermione and her teacher. When requesting Hermione show her exercise book at the end of lesson, Mrs Lacey asked Hermione (indeed kindly) if she thought that three lines were sufficient amount of work for one lesson. In response Hermione shook her head, looked down and started to cry.

Children presenting ‘learning outcomes anxiety’ appeared to hold an association between learning and a quiet, calm, independent and serious working environment. The ‘potential level 4’ pupils had negative associations with styles of learning connected with playing and having fun and were disparaging of Mr David’s lower set numeracy lessons which are taught in this style. These pupils found such lessons ‘too loud’ and unsettling, possibly due to the contradiction Hermione understands between ‘playing’ and learning:

[Mr David’s numeracy class] is always a bit behind cause he does a bit too much into games.

A more appropriate style of lesson according to these ‘potential level 4’ pupils would be “all nice and quiet” (Hermione). This was the style of class 2 lessons and these pupils appeared to connect this style of classroom environment with that of learning, which is not to say they always behaved consistently with such a view of learning, as we saw with Hermione.

**The Pupil with Learning Orientation Anxiety**

This aspect of identity is applicable to Ash whose current attainment levels were average or below. In contrast to pupils who experienced anxiety regarding the outcomes of their learning - written and performative work, the pupil with learning orientation anxiety is associated primarily with the approach to learning while engaging in the learning task. Ash showed significant anxieties about the way he worked which he thought displeased his
teacher as well as those around him. Within lessons he felt Mr David “doesn’t pay attention” to him. On another occasion Ash had a number of spellings wrong to which Mr David responded “well nice try”. This suggests the class 1 teacher didn’t have a very high opinion of Ash’s learning potential and Ash may well have felt disappointed that Mr David didn’t expect more from him. This is supported in Mr David’s comments which show that he considered Ash to have learning problems and felt even an average class placing may have been too generous:

He’s in [group 3] which will mean he’s average, but he’s about 10 minutes behind everyone else. And… supposedly he’s been assessed for like speech and language and apparently everything’s all, everything’s in working order. Although I just, I can’t believe, I genuinely cannot believe that, he’s normal, that he hasn’t got any kind of, any kind of speech and language or…there must be some something wrong with him.

It could be argued that it is better to displease a teacher by failing to meet his expectations, than it is to be of no interest to him, a message Ash took from his teacher and which he felt was reinforced by his classmates:

Yeah, I normally ask people and say what do you do? What do we do? but normally they don’t listen, they normally just ignore [me].

It may be little wonder that Ash felt unconfident in his ability to complete learning tasks if he thought his teacher and classmates were not interested in what he did.

These comprise the learner identities which are characterised by elements of anxiety. It is notable that the pupils who were below average in their class groupings perceive themselves as disappointing their teacher.

**Pupils with a Confident Competitive Learning Orientation**

The third type of identity comprised a combination of two characteristics one referring to a competitive drive to be the best and the other to be a ‘lad’. This applied to the three high attaining boys; Lapis, Woofle and Leon all occupying the top groups. The ‘competitive’ aspect of the dualism referred to attaining highly, or more specifically being positioned highly in the perceived ability hierarchy. It was important for these boys to see themselves as being
among, if not the ‘best’ in curriculum related work; specifically with regards to core-subjects. They described themselves in terms of being the ‘best’ in particular ways which involved completing work quickly and unaided. They came across as supremely confident about their perceived elevated position in the pecking order, exemplified in Woofle’s comment:

Seeing as I’m one of the best in our year at numeracy and Leon’s like just behind me. Every time we have a question I just work it out first.

The ‘lad’ aspect of this dualism referred to a conception of ‘lad’ as being fun-loving, outgoing and loud. The manner in which these children spoke to me during interview was notably different to the ‘potential level 4 pupils. While the pupils were initially shy and spoke in quiet, sometimes uncertain voices, the boys in contrast laughed and joked, embellishing each others comments with confidence , thus supporting and reinforcing their ‘top of the group’ status.

Pupil with a Confident-Cooperative Orientation

The other element within the confident learner identity was that of ‘confident-cooperative’. This element was represented by Roxy from class 2. Like the boys from class 1, Roxy also had a high level of prior attainment and was currently in the highest literacy group and in the top numeracy set. In contrast to the ‘potential level 4 pupils, Roxy presented as confident and she thought she was held in high regard by Mrs Lacey, the class 2 teacher saying she was never reprimanded and recounted no negative experiences in relation to her teacher. Again, in contrast to the potential level four pupils but in similarity to the jokers, Roxy made a clear connection between having fun and learning, finding lessons “really enjoyable instead of just boring”. While the potential level 4 pupils perceived fun in lessons as ‘childish’ and antithetical to learning, Roxy felt fun was conducive to effective learning. However, unlike the ‘competitive lads’ Roxy did not orientate her confidence around beating other children in the hierarchical stakes, for her, appropriate classroom behaviour involved caring for other children in need of her help. She talked about this while discussing a new pupil who needed help because he had significant gaps in his education. She affirmed the importance of helping this child “when
he don’t understand stuff”. She was also careful to keep an eye out for other children in need of help:

like say um.. they do something wrong I would just mention to them that you are supposed to do something other , not in a rude way.

Roxy clearly understood her attainment as denoting a responsibility for helping others which in turn helped the teacher. While it is possible to see her helper status as altruistic it could also be seen as reinforcing her confidence.

‘Good Pupil’ with special learning needs

The last case is arguably the most complex because it allows for different stances characterised by confidence or anxiety to be present in different contexts. This can be applied to Katie. By means of prior attainment and current groupings, Katie is a ‘potential level 4’ child. However, she appeared to form a learner identity which was more connected to her SEN, than her prior attainment scores which place her alongside her friends. That is, Katie felt she was a ‘special’ sort of learner with needs apart from other children in the class. However, whilst Katie perceived these needs as ‘special’ with regards to non-core lessons taught by her registration class teacher she conceived them as ‘problems’ in relation to her core subjects, especially numeracy.

With regards to non core lessons Katie displayed a secure confidence and enjoyment in lessons:

I think I’m good at music, art history and DT

And when asked how she knew this, she responded:

because all the other things I sort of struggle with, well I know that it’s really really easy”

This confidence in relation to her experience of non-core lessons was supported in the positive way she spoke about the class 2 teacher’s regard for her and the absence of negative encounters with the teacher which the other potential level 4 pupils had described. Whilst Katie recognised her need for additional help and support with learning, she appeared to have had very positive experiences of this additional support and interpreted this as
evidence that she was important enough to have a tailored curriculum. When asked what was the most important thing about coming to school? Katie replied:

Well I have a bit of a lexia problem, Cause whenever I learn something suddenly I just forget it so I go down to the IT, ICT suite every morning and I go on to like a lexia sort of programme where I, where it helps me to learn.

Despite her general confidence with regard to the ‘right’ to learn, Katie presented similar anxieties to the ‘potential level 4’ pupils in relation to numeracy. As with the other potential level four pupils, Katie disliked the noise of her numeracy lessons finding it difficult to concentrate and feeling intimidated in admitting to being confused. Katie seemed to share the view that ‘fun’ is not conducive to learning and quiet, focussed and calm lessons as experienced in class 2 lessons are learning environments far more suited to her:

I find it easier when they’re more stricter because then people can behave and you actually learn more , with Mr David you could just have fun and then you don’t really exactly learn that much, well you do learn in a way because it makes it fun but Mrs Lacey’s routine is more um of learning.

Katie would have preferred to be in Mrs Lacey’s class but believed that she was in Mr David’s class because:

where we have problems so then we get sent to Mr David’s class.

Such findings suggest that Katie has formed subject specific learning orientations such that she felt anxiety towards core skills such as numeracy, but confidence in relation to registration class based, non core curriculum subjects. This confidence or anxiety is intimately connected to the way she viewed her SEN. Whereas in non-core registration class taught lessons Katie saw her SEN positively, in numeracy she saw it as a ‘problem’. Whilst Katie’s perceptions towards and anxiety differed between subjects, her behaviour, quiet, hardworking, and on-task was constant across all lessons.
Pedagogical styles and the processes that shape pupil identities

This research suggests that children create notions of the ‘ideal pupil’ by interpreting subtle messages from the teacher and from their peers. In particular specific pedagogical styles create and legitimate certain forms of ‘ideal pupil’. This section will therefore look at the different notions of ideal pupil for children from class 1 registration class and those from class 2.

The two teachers differed both in gender and significantly in the pedagogical styles they adopted in the classroom. The descriptions below are examples from classroom observations during numeracy lessons, in which the teachers’ different styles are most accentuated.

Mrs Lacey

Mrs Lacey demands a quiet and focused class environment with minimal off-task chatting. For top set numeracy she has the competitive lads in her class and to manage them has made them sit in rows of two behind each other to reduce their talking and practical joking. In one instance, after delivering instructions Mrs Lacey starts to wander around the class checking children’s work. There was a very low noise level as she does this. She then asks for answers to the questions the pupils are working on, picking children to answer. There is a chorus of “Yes!” amongst those who got the answer right, including Lapis. However, Mrs Lacey is not interested in encouraging competitiveness she responds:

I am not interested in who got it right, I want to know that if you got it wrong, you know why.

It is rare for children to talk off task during her lessons and when they do she responds in a polite but firm manner:

Some people down here are chatting and that’s not helpful, Anna, you’re stopping us getting on, Mike, you’re another one that’s stopping the class working and its very disappointing. It would be a real shame if we didn’t get on and do our practical because you’re talking.
During numeracy lessons Mrs Lacey uses didactic methods whereby the lesson progresses at a rapid pace characterised by questions to the class and answers followed by set tasks. She is particularly insistent on pupils being highly focused, engaged and prepared. For example, in response to a child dawdling over a task, she responded, “turning up to maths without a ruler is like a builder turning up to a job without his tools.” Mrs Lacey is even less tolerant of children challenging the order she demands, when this occurs she comments:

In this group I do not expect that sort of behaviour because we’ve got a lot of work to do if we’re going to get through everything we’ve got to do.

**Mr David**

Mr David’s style, in contrast to Mrs Lacey’s, is upbeat, noisy and fun employing a more experiential form of pedagogy with a looser rein on pupil contributions. For example, in a numeracy lesson he presents the learning task as a game and he encourages the whole class to join in. He uses the interactive white board to illustrate playing number bonds of 20. This involves children making number relationships which add up to 20. The children are excitedly involved in the game and call out answers. To quieten the class Mr David uses an attention gaining technique which involves counting down from 5 to 1, this takes some 5 to 10 seconds to be effective. Mr David tends to use colloquial language such as “Let’s see how well you remember big scary addition sums”. During his delivery, a child provides a running commentary but Mr David ignores this. Whereas Mrs Lacey does not tolerate children being unprepared, Mr David allows Hermione several minutes to look for her lost maths book before telling her to get a piece of paper without commenting on her lack of preparedness for the lesson.

Outside of maths lessons Mr Davids’ also places greater emphasis on children taking responsibility for their learning. For example, in one literacy lesson he tells children; “The whole point of this week is for you to move on…"
It doesn’t matter where you are, if you move up (literacy levels) you should be proud of yourself”.

Class one perspectives on their teacher and what it means to be an ‘ideal pupil’

The boys from class 1 like and respect their registration teacher, although notably the ‘competitive pupils’ were a lot more positive than Ash. Interestingly, descriptions of their teacher revealed that they saw two clear and distinct sides to their teacher which were connected to that of ‘Mr David the person’ and ‘Mr David the teacher’. Words used to associate with ‘Mr David the person’ were; ‘funny’ ‘good sportsman,’ ‘likes sponge-bob,’ all of which connected to a boyish masculine image in being sporty, humorous, even showing an interest in children’s cartoons. On the other hand descriptions associated with ‘Mr David the teacher’ were; ‘loud’, ‘tells people off when they’re naughty’, “explains really, really well” and ‘kind’. Lapis illustrates this perceived dualism in being asked what would make Mr David happy. His responses articulate one factor which would please the teacher and one factor which would please the person:

When you do good title pages and stuff and if you give him presents for his birthday.

It might be thought that these two roles could cause confusion for the boys in terms of understanding the boundaries which define classroom behaviour. However, this was not the case, in fact the ‘competitive pupils’ appeared to use these roles as a model from which to construct the ‘ideal pupil’ which mirrored their teacher’s characteristics. Lapis’ description best captures this ideal as someone who can:

have a laugh…down to earth.. and who is clever…probably a boy…he would behave OK, sometimes he’ll forget to do his homework and the rest of the time he will be OK….

This also connects to an image of being a joker who is fun-loving and bright but also fallible and would explain why these boys spoke so positively about their teacher, endorsing his teacher style, his ‘clever’ work, encouragement of
pupils and sense of humour whilst also legitimising negative aspects of the
teacher’s role such as telling children off.

However, Ash was not as at ease with his class teacher. Whilst being
decidedly quieter during the conversation about Mr David, Ash clearly
subscribed to the clever/ fun dualism in his view of the ideal pupil. But it is an
ideal he failed to live up to. Having noted that he is quiet in lessons he says:

[Mr David] sometimes likes noisy people, cause if you’re just really really quiet, uh it
can be a bit boring.

This comment by Ash highlights how being marginalised from the joker peer
consensus affects the way he constructs his identity. This point touches on
the observation by Booher-Jennings (2008) that the testing culture creates an
informal hierarchy constructed by teachers and peers with the effect of
excluding those that are not seen as approximating the behaviours of the
ideal pupil.

Class two perspectives on their teacher and what it means to be an
‘ideal pupil’

The pupils interviewed in class two held similar interpretations of their teacher
and her views. They felt that Mrs Lacey presented herself, as distinct from her
role of teacher. They valued her stories about her horses and daughters
finding her “nice and joyful”. However, these children, saw little difference
between Mrs Lacey as person and teacher in the behaviour she modelled and
expected of them. In relation to work, children perceived Mrs Lacey to be
pleased by individual experiences of pupil excellence “when someone has
done brilliant work”, as well as group situations of focus and responsibility for
work such as when “everyone hands their homework in on time”.

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4 It also raises a question for further research about the findings by Ivinson and Duveen (2006) that in
schools that operated weak classification and framing there was far greater ‘space’ for students to
engage in interaction, and develop power structures beyond the gaze of the teacher. Given that state
theory of learning would typically presupposes both strong classification and framing, the process
seems to be one in which there is not a separate peer culture and hierarchy but one created by the
system of pupil classification and teacher pedagogy.
Here it can be inferred how teacher characteristics have been ascribed to perceived idealised pupil characteristics. Significantly children in class 2 actually described Katie as an example of an ideal pupil, who presents, from observation and comments from her peers, all of the behavioural characteristics above. In a group interview with Hermione, Charlie and Kelly they took the view that:

Katie is really good some, a lot of the time and um… it’s like well done Katie then she writes her answer on the board. (Kelly)

Whilst the potential level 4 pupils expressed anxieties over conforming to the ideal pupil in falling short on work related expectations, Roxy and Katie expressed no such negative experiences. Roxy produced work that pleased the teacher who was also pleased by role as helper. Whilst Katie may have been anxious about the quality of the work she produced, she had a self affirming explanation for this in terms of her dyslexia. The collective recognition of Katie as having elements of the ‘ideal pupil’ also suggests that peer consensus may play a significant role in endorsing and normalising the ‘ideal pupil’ construct.

Through the examination of the way teachers present themselves to pupils as well as the interpretations children have of their pedagogies, it can be seen how they are the model by which children construct their own notions of the ideal pupil. This is not simply in relation to children’s performance. Whereas the pupils from class 1 in this study perceived Mr David as responding positively towards liveliness and good humour which he exemplified, in class 2, pupils saw Mrs Lacey as responding well to hard working, responsible and caring children. Does this mean, therefore, that teachers are looking for carbon copies of themselves in the pupil ideals they communicate or have they adopted certain styles for reasons related to the composition of the class?

Teacher's accounts of their pedagogical styles
It was noted earlier that Alexander (2008) defined pedagogy as the act of teaching with its ‘attendant discourse of educational theories, values evidence and justifications’. In discussing their pedagogical style, it would appear that teachers see this as in part being related to individual personality and in part on account of the children they teach. Both teachers expressed the importance of ‘being themselves’. It was notable that both Mrs Lacey and Mr David echoed children’s descriptions of their teaching style. Mr David described his style as “fun, outgoing, lively” whilst Mrs Lacey described herself as ‘calm,’ in favouring a quiet classroom. She described herself as a ‘disciplinarian’ which, although this comment was in jest, identifies her insistence on orderly, engaged and on-task behaviour in lessons.

However, they saw this sense of being themselves as modified by the nature of the pupils they were teaching. Mrs Lacey said:

> It’s a matter of trying and working out what works for the group that you’ve got.

This refers not just to the teaching strategies they adopted but to the way they were presented. For example, Mr David said his style of teaching was to “make numeracy fun and raising confidence” for the low attainers, whereas Mrs Lacey’s style was suited for children who enjoy lessons and are enthusiastic about learning challenges:

> If you know what you’re trying to achieve you achieve it, there’s purpose in coming, so I want them to walk through the door because they want to be here.

While, Mr Davids’ rationale for making learning fun may apply to his lower maths set, it seems he also used the same approach with his registration class. He noted that he was never lively or fun when training to be a teacher, but rather that style has developed to suit the children he teaches:

> You just look at the results and the progress and it does work for these children, it really does.

This raises a question as to whether he feels most of the children he teaches are underperforming and need the confidence he assumes comes from his
style or whether it is just his maths group. Observations suggest that his style is similar in both his maths set and registration class.

Mrs Lacey describes her approach of being very positive and encouraging especially when children try hard. When probed about why she uses this style she responds “because I find it pays dividends”. As with Mr David her registration class style is also similar to that of her upper set maths group teaching style. This raises the question of the degree to which they do adapt to the pupils rather than the pupils adapting to them.

**Conclusion: Drawing the Explanatory Threads Together**

This study extends research undertaken by Pollard (1985) and Pollard and Filer (1996) by identifying specific aspects of the interaction between teachers and pupils which serve to create key elements in the construction of learner identities. In particular, the way pupils take their notion of the ideal pupil from their teachers’ pedagogical styles and the way a shared view of what constitutes the ideal pupil among their peers serves to both include and exclude, reinforcing anxiety in those excluded. It is significant that different pupils experience varying levels of agency with which they are able to construct elements of their learner identities. Whilst the high attaining children have a degree of autonomy in exhibiting positive characteristics such as confidence, responsibility, helpfulness, or playfulness, the lower attaining children construct identities in relation to their sense of never being able to perform to the standards expected.

The analysis also enables an insight into how pupils’ identities are constructed. Waterhouse (1991) contrasted two strategies that teachers might adopt in the way they construct pupils: the notion of ideal as opposed to the average or normal pupil. Here, as with Becker’s (1952) it is assumed that teachers are key in pupil construction. But this study suggests that the processes involved are more complex and can be characterised as follows:
In this context, it has been shown that teachers' pedagogical styles, although developed with the best of intentions, may reinforce confidence or exacerbate anxiety. In both cases the testing culture which places pupils in a hierarchy of achievement has an effect on their learner identities. Why were the teachers not attuned to the negative influences of their pedagogical styles? It may well be that because confident children responded well to their registration class teacher’s pedagogical style, they stood out, dominating lessons and putting into greater contrast the ‘quiet’ anxious children who thus became more invisible. Pollard (1985) shows how children who are anxious about their learning do not wish to stand out but rather adopt strategies enabling them to ‘drift’ with the crowd and go unnoticed.

It has been suggested that teachers’ pedagogical styles may be key to understanding the construction of learner identities. However, there is a question as to the role gender played in the process of identity construction. Gender differentiation has been shown to operate through what Booher-Jennings (2008) has described as the ‘hidden curriculum’ meaning “the taken for granted understandings about the world that schools and teachers, often unknowingly teach” (p150) Gendered messages about what it means to be a
learner have been pervasive within formal structures and informal practices (Arnot 1982, 2002 Dillabough; 2000) teacher-pupil working relationships (Skelton and Read; 2006) and pupil relationships (Booher-Jennings; 2007).

Of particular relevance to this study is Booher-Jennings’ key finding that the achievement ideology related to the testing culture in the embraced by the school that hard work equals academic success was translated differently for boys than for girls. Whilst test failure for girls was attributed to issues of self esteem, boys’ failure was attributed to not trying or caring sufficiently. The pedagogical messages here resonating with this study is that ‘good’ girls care whilst boys ‘have a laugh’. However, whilst in previous studies pupils and teachers have equated ‘laddish’ fun loving behaviour with underachievement (Booher Jennings, 2007, Francis, 1999) paradoxically in this study (as with Pollard,1987) the same behaviour was perceived by pupils and their teachers as consistent with academic success. The question emerges as to under what conditions teachers’ views of their pupils legitimate or marginalise the same behaviour? While no boy jokers were observed in Mrs Lacy’s class this may have been because she did not permit such behaviour; as we have seen, she had a clear strategy for controlling the jokers in her top maths set. Since interviews were not undertaken with her most able boys it was not possible to determine their view of the ideal learner and of themselves as learners. As regards girls, Roxy was clearly confident but she also framed that confidence in ways that were consistent with Mrs Lacey's ethos and pedagogical style.

The task now for this explanatory model is to see whether it has applications in different contexts and in which the role of gender can be more clearly distinguished. Waterhouse (1991) noted that:

> the micro-macro connections have always to be regarded as empirically problematical to be explored or resolved in relation each research setting (p.50).

It was for this reason that he argued that classroom processes could not be ‘read off’ from macro structural processes. However, with respect to the state theory of learning the macro seeks to impose greater control over the micro
and with respect to pupil identity construction it remains to be explored as to whether this model has more general application and if so, in what ways it may need to be developed.

However, longitudinal research is also required to examine the nature and durability of learner identity constructions. We have seen that Katie seemed to be confident in some lessons but not others, particularly maths. What is the influence of ‘high stakes’ lessons in helping shaping pupils’ identities? Do these identities change with their teachers and peer groups as they move through school? 5 Here, in the light of the discussion above, the question may be less to do with the idea that pupils retain fixed identities and more with the resources that schools provide by which pupils may construct and reconstruct their identities. In this context, a rigid testing culture may give them few resources to change their view of themselves as learners.

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Author’s Biography

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5 In referring to identities of sex and gender, social constructionist accounts have argued that identities are inherently unstable in that they need continual “reiteration and re-enactment” to be maintained (Deutscher: 1997:26). Butler (2008) suggests that this performative aspect of identity making renders identities as fluid and open to resignification and recontextualisation. However, in underlining the situated nature of the aspects of learner identities discussed here, it’s possible to speculate that the elements of confidence and anxiety that characterise them may continue so long as as a testing and assessment based culture permeates the state schooling system.
References


Alexander, R., Entwhistle and Thompson (1987)


The making of ideal pupils


The good girls tended to be of moderate ability as considered by
their teachers. They weren't sporty but their attitudes towards peers as well as their teachers "was generally favourable and deferential"

The jokers were primarily described by teachers as academically bright, they were also good at sports and tended to be the dominant girls group. Furthermore they "enjoyed a fairly close rapport with many teachers which was one of the main distinguishing features of the joker group"

The gang group were the least academically successful and characterised by "relatively greater 'roughness and... very uneasy degree of cohesion" (p173). The gangs group was last popular with peers and teachers and "could be regarded as having anti-school values in many ways" (p177)