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Marshmallow claps and frozen children: sitting on the carpet in the modern ‘on-task’ primary classroom

This paper examines how young children experience the moral and bodily discipline of the modern English ‘on-task’ primary classroom, in which they are expected to sit quietly and still for long periods on the classroom carpet, listening to what teachers know. It details the conditions of the classrooms, a performance-focused environment centred on delivering a knowledge-based curriculum, rooted in educational legacies emphasising social order and conformity. Staff employ different strategies to ensure compliance, including controlling the physical and sonic environment, and children’s bodies themselves. The paper details how this leaves children feeling physically uncomfortable and vulnerable to difficult emotional experiences, plus how they find ways to move and speak their critique of this education model. The study draws on a multimodal ethnography of a Year One classroom, within an ordinary English primary school, and a week-long ‘rapid’ ethnography in a Year One class in an ‘outstanding’ teaching school.

Key words: Education, primary, school, children, carpet, sitting, silence, conformity, on-task.

I think the thing is the children are, automatically they want to touch things, move things, get up, get down, that’s how they learn, because they don’t just learn passively. (Mr. Stuart, head teacher, Clifftop Primary School)

In Year One, you sit down. (Year One child)

The modern classroom operates under global pressures of performance and accountability managerialism, and is strongly rooted in legacies of social order emphasising bodily and ethical conformity. In this paper, I examine how this contributes to the creation of an ‘on-task’ English primary classroom, emphasising children learn by listening to adults, while sitting on the classroom carpet. It draws on an ethnography of Year One classrooms in two schools, which examined where children achieve agency in the classroom (Kirby,
forthcoming). I explore here the different strategies staff use to promote behaviours considered appropriate for learning, which includes controlling the physical and sonic environment, and children’s bodies themselves. Insufficient consideration of the material classroom environment is identified as contributing to children feeling physically and emotionally uncomfortable, and I illustrate how children move and speak their critique of such an education system. I begin by discussing how the contemporary education is rooted in historical legacies of conformity.

**Educational legacies of conformity**

The modern primary classroom developed in a time of modernity, with its concern for progress, reason and order, with individual will established as the master of the self. Immanuel Kant, for example, stresses the principle of autonomy, ‘a straight and self-balanced self takes its place in a straight line alongside every other self’ (Cavarero 2016, 30). Hunter (1994) details how schooling is rooted within the development of bureaucratic administration and a disciplinary pedagogy, indebted to a former pastoral pedagogy with a spiritual discipline equipping individuals to ‘comport themselves as reflective subjects’ (60). He outlines the legacy of Pietism within modern schools, including the standardisation of what is taught, pupils raising hands to ask questions, and collectively teaching. Similarly, much of the basic Victorian elementary system is felt in England today, including the domination of English and maths, and the lack of concern for ‘the immense cognitive and cultural power of talk or the rooting of truly civilised human relations in the capacity to imagine, create and empathise’ (Alexander 2009, n.p.).

The twentieth century was marked by debates and tensions between ‘progressive’ and ‘transmission’ models of education with their competing emphasis on learning driven by children’s curiosity rather than extrinsic reward and the transmission from teacher to child of
knowledge understood as established truth (Fielding and Moss 2011). By the turn of century, a knowledge acquisition model of education became dominant in England, with a return to more whole-class rather than group teaching following studies showing the importance for children to receive teacher attention (e.g. Galton 1981); an emphasis that continues today. This shift occurred at the same time as greater central control, which included a national curriculum and the establishment of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Such changes occurred against a dominant neoliberal political-economic setting, which Sahlberg (2015) suggests has led to a global educational emphasises on core subjects, test-based accountability, corporate models of management, and limited experimentation, alternative pedagogies and risk-taking.

This broader context is evident in the current English primary National Curriculum, that sets ‘high expectations for what teachers should teach’ (DfE 2014, 4), and a narrow focus on maths and English, particularly what is measurable, with content beyond those subjects slimmed down. School staff are under pressure to produce data for Ofsted, and the threat of inspections can be experienced by staff as being constantly observed, engendering ‘a regime in which schools self-govern their performance’ to conform to their understandings of ever-changing Ofsted agendas (Perryman et al 2018, 147).

The current knowledge acquisition model also borrows from the collectivist pedagogies and authoritarian public/grammar militarised ideas of schooling that emphasis pupils sit up and belt up, to achieve future benefits, rather than democratic citizenship in the here and now (Webb and Kirby 2019, 93). In the past decade, under the Conservative/Liberal Democratic coalition and subsequent Conservative governments, there has been a renewed body discipline, one taken up by Ofsted under new leadership from 2012, and remains central to the new Ofsted framework (2019). Ofsted’s (2015) inspection handbook (relevant at the time of this study) laid out exacting standards for the behaviour and safety of pupils, with ‘outstanding’, for example, requiring: ‘Pupils consistently display a thirst for knowledge and understanding and a love of learning’; ‘Incident of low-level disruption in lessons are extremely rare’ (55). Government appointed Behaviour Tsars have offered greater specificity about how teachers should promote desired behaviours (Bennett 2015; Taylor, 2011). A renewed focus on classroom behaviour also reflects concerns identified in teacher surveys, although more at secondary than primary level. A Department for Education (2012) review of this research recognises defining poor behaviour as ‘not straightforward’ (i) and draws almost exclusively on teacher rather than student perceptions. An exception is Bradshaw and
colleagues’ (2010) finding that 31 per cent of English pupils feel ‘in most or all lessons’ that ‘there is noise and disorder’, conflating the two; less emphasis is placed on how just 14 per cent feel they ‘cannot work well’ (40).

Within this dominant framing, there has emerged a normalisation of school surveillance technologies (Hope, 2015). While recognising that different classrooms continue to take various forms, an ethnography of nine primary schools identified behaviour as ‘constantly monitored’ (Bragg 2018, 125). A secondary academy ethnography identified a strong disciplinary focus (Kulz 2017), similar to those secondary schools visited and praised by Conservative politicians (Duoblys 2017). Research with young children in Reception classes identified they must sit still for long periods, demanding an ‘extreme body discipline’:

‘Good listening’ is valued:

not only because it indicates engagement with learning, but also because it signals compliance and discipline of the body. . . . [within a whole class pedagogy] successful participation is generally not just a matter of knowing the right answer, but of waiting to be chosen, and of adopting the appropriate posture. (Maclure et al. 2012 460)

Foucault (1977) highlights how the institution of schooling emphasises conformity, including in ways directed at the body as well as temperament (see Bradbury 2013; Dixon 2011). Rancière (1999) asserts that there is always a governing ‘police’ order that arranges how bodies are distributed and what is understood as sensible; this is ‘not so much the “disciplining” of bodies as a rule governing their appearing”, that ‘defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying’ (ibid 29). This is where ‘there is an identity for everyone’, including a place, role or position assigned to every body (Bingham and Biesta 2010, 34). For Rancière (1999), political activity is a precarious initiation that disturbs this order, driven by assumptions of equality, that ‘shifts a body’ from the place that has been assigned to it (30). This paper examines how broader social forces materialise as the on-task classroom order, plus children’s experiences of this context, and illustrates how one boy shifts to offer his critique of having to sit silently on the carpet.
**Multimodal Ethnography**

The ethnography conducted for this study focuses on children in Year One classrooms, in which children are five turning six-years-old. This is the first year of formal schooling in English schools, with a marked change in the pedagogy and curriculum between the Reception class, the last year of the Early Years Foundation Stage, and the Year One class. In most other European countries formal compulsory primary schooling does not begin until six (24 countries) or seven (eight) (Eurydice 2016), and early years education is variably understood. In Reggio Emilia, Italy, for example, it extends up to six years, and foregrounds a ‘pedagogy of relationships and listening’ and ‘relational creativity’ (Rinaldi 2006, 113). In England, Year One can prove a difficult transition with a shift to being work and subject based, static, teacher directed, and emphasising listening and writing (Sharp et al. 2006). A national Year Two Statutory Assessment Test (SATs) adds pressure to Year One, which already has a controversial end of year phonics test, emphasising the growing schoolification of early childhood, as well as an increased surveillance of school success or failure (Bradbury, 2014).

For the ethnography, time was spent with one class of children over the course of a year, from the end of Reception to the end of Year One, in an ordinary school that I name Daleview Primary, rated ‘good’ by Ofsted. Afterwards, a week was spent undertaking a ‘rapid’ ethnography in a Year One class in a well-respected ‘outstanding’ teaching school in another town, Clifftop Primary, with an explicit expressed commitment to children’s agency. At Daleview, I observed the class and interviewed 29 children individually plus in groups, and shadowed six children for a minimum of two days each. These key informants were carefully selected to ensure a diverse mix, including gender, social and ethnic background, current academic achievement, birth order, and agentic orientation (gauged through observation and interview). I interviewed them at different points in the day to ask how they
experienced the learning activities and how they understood themselves as learners. At Clifftop, I focused on the whole class, with three days of observations plus individual interviews with 13 children and group interviews with 22 children. I interviewed ten teaching staff across both schools. Both schools were in predominantly middle class and white catchment areas, with less than average pupils supported by pupil premium, in the south-east of England. The addition of Clifftop enabled the research to broaden its focus and I was expecting to identify differences in how children’s agency is supported; I was struck more by the similarities of the classrooms in both schools, both operating within a broader school performance culture. This suggests that the observations made in this study will be typical of other classrooms, although not all.

I used a range of multimodal methods (including drawing, photography, walking, crafting, feeling-faces) to help children recall, bring to consciousness, articulate and reflect on their experiences, recognising embodied and affective dimensions of experience. As I became aware of how the classroom offers limited sensory engagement, I took care with my own ‘interview’ space to create a comfortable corner with a rug and cushions. Together with resources that look, sound and feel good, this created an inviting space that children volunteered they like; Alice wants to spend the whole day here, ‘it would be really comfortable . . . because I keep getting wedgies when I sit on the [classroom] carpet’.

The analysis is primarily data-driven, with theoretical concepts sensitising the data collection and its subsequent analysis. A concern with embodied practices, including embodied pedagogy (Dixon and Senior 2011), emphasises that the world is not simply discursive, and the research draws attention to the materiality of the classroom, including children’s (and teachers’) bodies, as well as affect, while participants’ understandings of their experiences contributes to theory building in the search for the most effective explanations. When I asked the children about their feelings I was not expecting affect to come out so
strongly. Similarly, while sensitised to bodies through theoretical reading on materiality, I was struck by how still children’s bodies are expected to be and so began counting time spent sitting. The paper presents an impressionist analytical process, while recognising that ethnography includes the confessional as well as the realist, the latter being evident through my use of counting (Van Maanen 1988).

The ‘on-task’ classroom

In the performance-focused classroom, discourses and practices emphasise a normative ‘on-task’ pupil body as silent and still. The teacher’s message is clear: ‘Remember good sitting and listening means good learning’, and is echoed by pupils themselves, like Alice who works out the correct answer ‘because I did really good listening’. A classroom poster has a seated child and yellow stars saying children ‘shine’ when they ‘sit up straight, hands folded, in your own space, no noise, eyes on the speaker’. At Clifftop, around a third of the children (seven out of 22) tell me the most important thing in their classroom is listening: ‘You listen and you sit quietly . . . if you don't listen you don’t know what you’re doing’ (Sam).

Children entering Year One are rapidly expected to be focused on adult directed activities, working at a faster rate than in Reception, where children spent much of their day choosing from play-based activities, interspersed with adult-led English and maths activities. Now core curriculum activities extend throughout the morning and afternoon. In Daleview, there are 19 maths and English related weekly lessons, plus one each for art, humanities, PSHE, singing, Information and Communication Technology, and two physical education (PE) sessions, as well as two awards assemblies and one Golden ‘play’ Time. When I interview the children early in the academic year, they already understand what is most valued is the core curriculum, identifying numbers, letters and writing as the most important things in the classroom. When I ask what comes into their head when I mention the word
‘learning’, half the children at both schools refer to maths and/or English: ‘It’s sort of like writing with your pen . . . or reading work’ (Willa).

There is a lot to get through in Year One and Ofsted judges educational outcomes on children’s academic attainment and behaviour. In the absence of the possibility for any meaningful indicators for ‘thirst for knowledge’, ‘love of learning’ or even ‘low level disruption’, staff must interpret how behavior standards might be assessed by Ofsted:

Everybody on-task . . . and if they were not on-task, that it's being managed properly and . . . the learning didn’t stop because of the behaviour of one or two . . . I think initially when they brought out this attitudes to learning behaviour everybody thought that if a child just happened to look out the window for a second you’d fail, but I don’t think it’s quite, it’s not that extreme . . . but they do expect children to be on-task. (Ms. Rudland, head teacher, Daleview)

‘On-task’ is a term used by staff in both schools, and broadly in the wider education and research literature. The Sutton Trust’s report, What Makes Great Teaching?, recommends teachers track students’ on-task engagement, emphasising its relationship with student achievement (Coe et al. 2014). Children glancing out of the window does not seem exaggerated in this literature: Amato-zech and colleagues (2006) use a scale for on-task behaviour that includes ‘passive disengagement for a period of at least 3 consecutive seconds’ (213).

The definition of ‘task’ emphasises its imposition: ‘A piece of work imposed, exacted, or undertaken as a duty’, and in education ‘A portion of study imposed by a teacher’ (Simpson and Weiner 1989, 655-656). It is rooted in the Latin taxare, meaning ‘to rate, estimate, value’ (655). The word evokes compulsion and judgement, not ‘thirst’ or ‘love’ for learning. Some children’s definition of ‘learning’ reflects its imposition: ‘Writing, and having
to do what the teacher says’ (Dominic). With imposed outcomes and accountability mechanisms, teachers must also be on-task. This is felt more acutely at Daleview where staff talk of feeling the force of the curriculum: ‘the only thing that’s really cared about is maths and reading and writing, so then that’s all that, you know, you teach’. Reception staff are also tasked with meeting the expectations for Year One, increasing the amount of regular English and maths during my time at Daleview. In both schools, staff recount tales of Ofsted and other inspectors’ judgements of children’s ‘inappropriate learning behaviour’ that they find ‘ridiculous’ and leaves them feeling ‘scared’. This on-task culture produces a consciousness and assessment of teaching practice that is as much emotional as it is pedagogical. Staff experience the ‘disorientation and estrangement’ from core professional values of child-centeredness, similar to others operating within performance-focused primary schooling (Braun and Maguire 2018, 11), with associated psychic costs for having to attempt to meet competing demands (Bibby 2011):

There are times where we [the children] have to listen, we work on activities that help us with our learning and then you might have time to choose around the environment . . . Which in a way kind of makes me feel sad . . . trying to balance the two, I guess . . . I’ve probably (laughing) come across as horrible and harsh this term, and I think (pause) it doesn’t feel very natural for me as a teacher. (Ms. Fletcher, teacher)

**Children’s still and silent bodies**

Rising expectations means Year One children must sit and quieten down. Whole class teaching is the dominant practice at both schools, with children sitting on the classroom carpet at the front of the class, facing the teacher. At Daleview, they are positioned in parallel lines marked on the floor using masking tape and, for the same purpose, a shop bought carpet marked with squares is used in Clifftop Reception classes. Between whole class teaching, children work seated at tables situated behind the carpet. During assemblies, children sit on uncarpeted floors. At Daleview, children typically spend half the morning class time sitting
on the floor, primarily listening to staff talk. On a day when there is an awards assembly they can spend as much as 70 per cent sitting on the floor, between 70 and 90 minutes on other days. The children can spend similar proportions of the afternoon sitting. At Clifftop, children can spend longer on the carpet; they recently increased the time following a staff visit to Shanghai, to reinforce and promote pupils’ deeper understanding to work through additional examples. This contrasts to infant classes in the 1960s that had lessons blocked into 15 or 20 minute periods: ‘which was as long as little children could tolerate when most of the instruction was oral’ (CACE 1967, 190).

In both schools, whole class carpet time is primarily used for teacher explication and giving instructions, and testing understanding. Children answer questions and demonstrate knowledge. In phonics lessons, children write on their whiteboards, and in maths they make calculations sitting on the floor, sometimes writing or using calculation aids (e.g. a cord threaded with beads). Carpet time is also used for undertaking daily administrative tasks (e.g. the register), and children must sit waiting to be selected to line up for lunch/play/home or assigned to table activities. After teacher input, children move to the tables to undertake learning activities, usually involving writing and perhaps a drawing. When completed, children usually have some ‘free’ time: at Daleview, this includes the opportunity to use the temporarily and spatially marginalized role-play corner; at Clifftop, children must draw at their table.

The expectation that children sit extends into PE lessons. Physical exercise is minimal (see Table 1.0 below), with children allowed to move for an average of less than eight minutes due to explication, demonstration and on-going teacher enforcement of children being still and quiet. This time includes slow movement (e.g. warming up), and children do not always move if making a posture or opting out. At both schools, the time taken for children to change in and out of PE clothes takes an average of 26 minutes. The observations
are of three staff at Daleview and a specialist PE teacher at Clifftop. Both schools introduced
daily runs around the playground (without changing clothes), but staff find these hard to ‘fit
in’ so do them less frequently, feeling children take too long making the transition back on-
task.

[INSERT TABLE 1.0]

In the classroom, one of the moments when we see children’s bodies most engaged is
when they listen to stories, or sometimes when watching films. At Clifftop, children become
teachers for the day and the class are captured by Gus’s clear passion for Victorian history,
although less so when William mimics a testing pedagogy, asking children to name different
chess pieces. Stories offer a reprieve from the on-going demands for the children to be silent
and still; there is no need to quieten or chastise.

**Children’s sonic environment**

At both schools, the majority of the time that children are engaged in classroom activities
they do not talk. While some children will answer or ask questions during carpet time —
often names are selected at random — many others remain silent. There is a clear and
repeated message that children must not call out, and children know this rule even if they
transgress it. At table activities, some children may talk while others say only a handful of
words, engaged in individual rather than collaborative activities. Each week children are
paired with a different ‘talk partner’ to sit with on the carpet, but they are only invited to talk
with partners on half the days I observe, for between 10 and 95 seconds. Children only speak
on six out the 13 occasions when I observe for talk: ‘Stuart turns and says something briefly
to Alice but she turns away; she seems in another world’ (field note). There are brief
moments in the day when children may raise their own questions and share experiences: at
Daleview the only formalised (but unprotected) weekly space is ‘show and tell’. Clifftop uses
weekly whole-class school governance meeting, plus occasional circle groups to respond to teacher questions.

There are opportunities for children to engage creatively with music: for example, the weekly singing assembly and, at Daleview, an occasional greeting song. Music can also emphasise children’s conforming bodies: for example, a regular lining up song, ‘I’m standing straight and tall, my eyes are looking straight ahead . . .’, and the teachers’ melodic chant for silence. Staff use sounds to call for children’s silence and stillness: rhythmic clapping, tambourines and rainmakers, used alongside a common call, ‘5, 4, 3, 2, 1, freeze’. Such practices emphasise the pervasiveness of time and concern with efficiency identified in other primary school research (Bragg 2018, 125). I ask children at Daleview what sounds they hear in the classroom: the joint most frequently mentioned, by eight (out of 28) is these silencing calls. To the children, these sounds are ‘loud’ and ‘noisy’, signaling they ‘have to be quiet’ and must stop whatever they are doing, regardless of whether they are finished or ready. Behaviours that are desirable and rewarded at other times (e.g. working, talking with partners, tidying up), become instantly disallowed, even if in the middle of writing a word. Children feel these sounds in their bodies: ‘like some jelly in my tummy’, making Willa ‘jump’, jolted out of her absorption in learning. The sonic practices that enable staff to manage the transition from one activity to another make it difficult for children to remain on-task, their reverie in learning being disrupted, leaving them feeling ‘annoyed’, ‘bad’, ‘mad’, ‘angry’, and ‘stupid’. At Clifftop, the noise of the teacher’s clap, whistle or bell, is similarly the most frequently mentioned sound (seven out of 11 children). Children recognise these sounds as part of the on-task culture – heard ‘when we're talking too much’ – and competently perform silence, while knowing they occasionally violate this requirement.

Teachers shouting is the other most mentioned sound at Daleview, which surprises me as I rarely hear shouting. Emotional intensity is measured as much in tone and meaning as
decibels: children appear to remain in contact with adult’s anger well after the moment has passed. The sound is associated with being off-task: ‘the teacher told them to be quiet but they were still talking’ and children feel ‘sad’ and ‘scared’, as do older children (Hargreaves 2015). There is no shouting at Clifftop, but children select feeling-faces showing me teachers are ‘cross’, ‘mad’ or ‘sad’ when children are off-task, and ‘happy’ when children are listening, quiet and doing good work.

In assembly, children are invited to applaud those who have received awards or demonstrated a skill, but the sound of celebration is discouraged in class. At Daleview, it is silenced using marshmallow claps (a clapping action where the hands do not make contact), literal pats on one’s own back, and silent cheers (a raised arm action, but no sound). At Clifftop, when a winning child calls out ‘Bingo!’ she is challenged: ‘Year One, how should we say bingo? We say it once, in a quiet voice, we don’t need to shout’ (teacher). The pervasive messages and practices of silence and stillness can leave children suspended, as became apparent to me when the Daleview class had just finished watching a captivating dance display in the hall; the adults applaud loudly, but without an invitation to clap the children are mostly silent. It seems so unbelievable that I keep checking.

**Children’s enforced on-task behaviour**

‘Good listening’ for learning can become confused with listening to be good. I begin to appreciate the importance of this distinction when observing rewards and praise liberally sprinkled over silent and seated children, often without a clear rationale for the desired behaviour. At Daleview, singing assembly is the time in the week when I am most struck by the continued requirement for children to be seated; when in my personal, albeit limited, experience of singing in choirs, I have always stood to sing. At Daleview, I observe sixteen ways in which staff positively acknowledge different behaviours. Those promoting
collaboration and positive social relationships are recognised, but do not attract the degree of attention as on-task behaviours: sitting, silence and attendance. Silence and listening attract the most diverse range of feedback: mostly a simple ‘good’ or ‘well done’, but also feedback about the self (‘good boy/girl’), stars, marbles, stickers, certificates, and being Star of the Day. Leila is the Star for ‘making sure she does really good listening today, and works hard and having a lovely smile on her face’ (teacher). Staff say little to the children about the benefits of sitting silently beyond the simple assertion that they ‘like’ (sometimes ‘love’) children doing it and it is important for ‘learning’. It therefore becomes a small step to translate good listening into listening to be good. James tells me that in ‘good works’ assembly ‘you have to um get a certificate to win’, ‘sit down beautifully’ and be ‘good’, and that here the teddy bear would like ‘being a good boy’.

It is not easy to ensure young children sit still and quiet for long periods, despite the many mechanisms for reinforcing positive behaviour, so at both schools the day is peppered with staff reprimanding children for being off-task. At Daleview, staff use a behaviour modification warning system which leads to loss of some ‘golden time’, but also 14 other reprimands and penalties (e.g. the child’s name said sternly, told to apologise). The majority of reprimands focus on children not being quiet, and secondly not being still: all 15 types of feedback are used to reprimand these behaviours. Clifftop does not have a warning system: children more frequently have time out from lessons or are moved to another space, and threatened with missing desired activities.

**Children’s difficult feelings**

At Daleview, I observe that staff and pupils distance children’s difficult feelings in the on-task classroom. Roma explains that to be clever ‘you have to learn . . . you have to listen . . . and do your work . . . and never be rude . . . and never be sad’. Children’s distress is
acknowledged and staff will support an upset child so that lessons can continue, but difficult feelings are expected to be kept outside the classroom and rarely named in class.

An exception is the welcoming song, which includes the words: ‘Hello, how are you? I’m great, I’m fine, I’m okay, I’m happy, I’m wonderful today . . . Hello, how are you? I’m tired, I’m bored, I’m okay, I’m angry, I’m very sad today . . . Hello, how are you? I’m great.’1 One morning at the start of the day, the children are sitting within lines on the carpet, the teacher looking on as they watch cartoon penguins moving uniformly on the whiteboard in time to the sound of a cheerful melodic song sung by a soothing male voice. Everything here configures the children as calm and seated pupils, easing their transition into the school day. The song acknowledges a diverse range of feelings that children might experience at this moment; staff see their role as supporting children’s separation from carers, leaving difficult feelings behind. Most children are quietly singing; some move gently and others sit still. Leila arrives late, unsmiling, with tear-stained cheeks, and is invited to sit on a chair next to Ms. French, the teaching assistant, who is sitting with Mark on her knee. Leila sits looking down. Ms. French says, in a jolly voice, ‘We’re not sad’, and continues singing and swaying, then says to Mark ‘You’re not sad, are you?’ She echoes the upbeat musical refrain and classroom emphasis on feeling good.

When I ask children at Daleview where they experience different emotions, using feeling-face pebbles placed on their drawings of the classroom, around a third explicitly deny experiencing anger, sadness, worry, boredom. A couple of boys marginalise difficult feelings

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1 ‘Hello Song’ by Peter Weatherall, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcTZ9Km7kCQ
to the playground and three physically remove these pebbles from their drawings. Asking how a teddy bear might experience the classroom helps some children distance emotions:

Rudi: So I’m cross, when am I cross? I’m never cross.

PK: You’re never cross. If bear came to your classroom, where might he feel cross?

Rudi: Ah, on the carpet. (Interview transcript)

These children’s bodies are very clearly feeling. In the initial Daleview interviews, just under a third (nine out of 29) volunteer that they dislike sitting on the carpet. Four of the six key informants talk of this and another dislikes sitting in assembly. Similarly, Pichon (2012) found the majority of consulted 6 to 8 year olds did not like sitting on classroom carpets. Children feel both physically and emotionally uncomfortable: ‘Not sad but miserable [on the] hard carpet . . . you just have to sit down being bored’ (Alfie); ‘Worried . . . didn’t know what to do’ (Neve). At Clifftop, four out of 13 interviewed children volunteer that they do not like sitting on the carpet, including sitting for long periods, having to listen, feeling sad, cross and tired. At Daleview, every day two children are selected to be helpers and have the privilege of sitting on a much-coveted colorful padded seat, suggesting staff understanding that the floor is uncomfortable.

In both schools, two boys diagnosed with autism sometimes refuse to sit on the carpet. Once, staff physically try to force Mark to sit down on the floor, and when he resists, a teaching assistant drags his resistant body to a chair. After this event, staff receive specialist support to encourage him to sit on the carpet, but he also sits on chairs. The carpet marks the space of the on-task classroom and Mark’s refusal constitutes him as an off-task special needs child who has yet to learn to bend to adult authority. The chair he sits on separates his feeling body, containing it from the normal educational carpet space (Kenway and Youdell 2011).
Many children struggle to sit on the carpet, most say nothing; what is special about Mark is that he expresses what he feels.

**Children’s desire to move and speak their critique**

While expected to sit still, children’s bodies cannot help but move and touch the materiality of the classroom. Children stretch limbs and pick scabs, twiddle fingers and hair bands, hold hands and braid hair, feel the smooth box of books or soft lion at the edge of the carpet, repeatedly replace a sticker or bounce a hair band. Bodies occasionally find a way to squat, kneel, lie down or even stand when expected to be seated. These children are looking after themselves, wrestling with their bodies, generally careful not to disturb the class or attract the attention of the teacher: all children move, some more than others, demanding a ‘wisdom’ to manage their ‘energy by venting it bit by bit without annoying the teacher’ (Korczak 1967, 35-36). Children do not demand better classroom conditions and they are not invited to give feedback. It takes courage and a rare child to express clear verbal critique: at Clifftop, when a child says ‘Oh, I hate speed writing’, the teacher responds, ‘I didn’t ask for your opinions’. Closer observation however reveals how children speak a critique of the on-task classroom.

It is not long into the spring term at Daleview, and Ms. Peach, the class teacher, is teaching a whole class maths lesson. She is asking for double four, selecting a child who gives the correct answer; Clark calls out ‘Or we can add five plus three’ but Ms. Peach is initially dismissive, ‘Well, that wouldn’t be double’, taking a moment to acknowledge ‘You get the same answer’. Now she is asking for double one. Clark says ‘Peace’ holding up and waving two fingers gesturing victory. Soon after, the children are asked to calculate double nine with their talk partners, then Ms. Peach calls out ‘5, 4, 3, 2, 1’ for the children to be silent. Clark quickly places his finger on his lips, signally compliance, but Ms. Peach chooses
another child. Clark remains seated bolt upright, with his finger straight but now up his nose. He keeps it there for more than ten seconds. Then eats his bogey.

Clark is one of the children most visibly and vocally challenging of the teacher’s authority in the class. In this maths activity, which is insufficiently demanding, Clark’s response to waiting might be read as at once creative and critical, exploring the semantic potential of words/signs. His fingered gestures are a silent ‘up yours’ to sitting quietly, evoking the language of peace and quiet, and his momentary victory. Clark’s silent but visible gestures are working within the limitations of his context, using the language and concepts that already exist. Clark’s humour highlights the absurdity of the bodily demands on his body and the constraints on his intellect in the on-task classroom; simply identifying correct answers is not enough for him in this moment. His wit, in de Certeau’s words (1984), ‘boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order suddenly to produce a flash shedding a different light on the language of a place and to strike at the hearer’ (37-38). Clark’s actions are not just what he is against but what he is for: Clark may be resisting playing the game of the on-task classroom, but so too is he playing with this time, with his body, with numbers and meanings. Clark draws on his competence in understanding the demands to be silent and still; one he plays on and critiques.

Discussion: a linear education in conformity

There is a small sign, placed so that it is barely noticeable in a corridor at Clifftop: ‘There’s no clock in the forest’ (As You Like It). In the on-task modern primary classroom however, the power of the clock is felt very deeply. There is a lot to get through; efficiency and speed is emphasised to ensure children learn the acquired knowledge. Staff work hard so that children make expected progress and everyone is on the same route, transported along the straightest path to a series of destinations, beginning with the Year One phonics test, SATs
and beyond. An intensity of childlike experience is that of being in time (Murris 2016) and, in the absence of embodied clock time, sitting on the carpet becomes amplified for children. When photographing where they feel less good learning, children zoom in, drawing my attention to the ‘dots’ of the ‘hurty’ carpet.

The classroom pedagogy emphasises the teacher as the one who knows and the primary responsibilities of the child is to listen and demonstrate the acquisition of existing knowledge. It is not easy to ensure children are endlessly on-task, so multiple practices are used to enforce their compliance, with bodies ‘micro-managed to extract value from every moment’ (Bragg 2018, 126). The children are seen as objects of concern, requiring adult intervention and knowledge; less attention is given to how the on-task classroom increases their vulnerability. Experiences with difficult emotional resonance are discouraged from being voiced, as are joy and excitement. Everything is expected to be ‘nice and calm’ (teacher), so children are directed by a goal outside of themselves: emotional bracing. New Labour tenuously associated ‘enjoy and achieve’ as a well-being outcome in the Children Act 2004, whereas current policies prioritise achievement without a concern for enjoyment: under such conditions, possibilities of dissent must be silenced.

Limited emphasis on the material environment in the on-task classroom, including the sonic environment, the physical environment and children’s bodies themselves, contributes to children feeling physically and emotionally uncomfortable. There is little emphasis on children sounding: fingers are on lips, celebrations muted, and adult-made sounds jar children out of their reverie. The physical environment is predominantly hard, angular, and hermetically sealed from the outside world: softness is marginalised, like the cuddly toy at the edge of the carpet, which children highlight they like. In the 1950s and 60s, carpets were originally introduced into classrooms as part of the ‘progressive’ teaching movement to create more domestic, comfortable and cheerful environments, rather than an institutional
atmosphere. Although a 1967 Department of Education and Science publication talks of a new technology for hardening carpet fibers that ‘may just have the effect of removing an excessive sense of softness and luxury which may, in some circumstances, seem inappropriate’ (cited in Cunningham 1988, 141). Like the lines on the carpet that prohibit touch, there is an implicit denial of children’s sensuality and sexuality.

Children are contained within their own spot on the carpet, a series of dotted parallel lines; their upright and silent bodies invoked in the process of on-task learning. The classroom is ‘less aimed at whole individuals than at the eyes and ears’ (Oswell 2013, 120), rarely mouths, necessitating a cerebral/body binary to being a good student. Here bodies get in the way of learning; rather than discovering this place called school through their bodies, children discover their place through a submission of the body (Youdell 2011). In an article, in *The Telegraph* on October 18, 2015, the behaviour tsar, Tom Bennett, is cited as describing the need for punitive detentions involving ‘discomfort’ where children ‘have to sit in silence or they miss time playing with their friends’. What he ignores is how even the youngest children already experience such discomfort in their school day. The intensity of their affectivities are heard in accounts of what it is like to sit on the hard rough carpet, listening to teachers for long periods, about aspects of knowledge they do not understand or else they know already. They keep such intensities and affects to themselves, even though they ‘far exceed the individual to whom they are attributed and who takes them up as his or her own’ (Youdell 2011, 114).

Teachers cannot stop children from listening and watching when there is something worth attending to, as seen when they listen to stories, films and a peer’s infectious passion for history. Here the teacher is released from the role as explicator, signaling an equality of intelligences (Rancière 1991), and children’s bodies are captured by the stories. Their still bodies are a clear demonstration here that sitting listening
does not equate with passive absorption: ‘a lot of things are actually happening on the side of the students — they may of course feel bored, alienated or ignored, but they may also feel challenged, fascinated and inspired. Who knows?’ (Biesta 2016, 375). Equally, a ‘noisy classroom’, Alexander (2015) reminds us, ‘may indicate lack of student concentration but it doesn’t conclusively prove it, still less measure the precise balance of student attention and inattention’ (n.p.; cited in Alexander 2016). There is pedagogical, educational and spiritual value in silence beyond the instrumental act of discipline: it offers the opportunity to explore the inner self, to make sense of ideas, thoughts and emotions, to engage with unspoken understandings, and to embrace ignorance and unknowing as a means of being open to the Other (Zembylas and Michaelides 2004; also Lees 2012). It is also important to learn to listen quietly to what others know. What is needed however are additional images of readiness for being taught beyond the shining seated silent pupil, and an understanding of what each image may offer and deny. Jackson (1968) suggests, for example, that ‘all eyes on the teacher does not necessarily mean all thoughts on the topic’ (102), and stresses ‘relevant attention’ (103).

During a whole class maths lesson, at Clifftop, two girls lean forward, towards each other, resting their forearms on the carpet as they write answers on their whiteboards placed upon the floor; suddenly the teacher calls ‘Roz and Yaz, you’re not at home, you should not be lying down’. The logic of the instruction that children should be sitting rather than inclining extends beyond learning in any simple pedagogical sense. We hear the ‘moral admonition’ that echoes ‘the old-time pedagogues [who] used to say “Stand up straight!”’ (Cavarero 2016, 62). Something children understand. Arun explains he likes sitting on the carpet to learn ‘because then you can become a good grown-up . . . someone who’s good, not bad’, adding that good grown-ups ‘don’t steal’; listening, he thinks, helps to achieve this end: ‘Maybe if you listened when you were learning, maybe that would do it’. This is a schooling in rectitude and citizenship; becoming upright members of society, who do not dissent.
A dominant historical legacy of social order and conformity remains in the modern primary classroom, at the expense of pursuing other ways of doing, being and knowing (Webb and Kirby 2019). Being constantly on-task is a concern with linearity understood as straightness, ‘a connection between two points that has length but no breadth’, dating back to Euclidian geometry (Ingold 2016, 4). Varvantakis (2016) illustrates this in his photo essay of a school in Bangalore that includes rows of desks, children lining up and standing in parallel during assemblies. He concludes that ‘Straightness represents development. If bodies can be put in order, thoughts can be put in order and eventually a whole society can’ (250). This is evident in the on-task English curriculum with its stepped trajectory for learning and children schooled only in identifying correct answers. It is seen in the primary concern with the measurability and rationality of maths, representing the ‘fantasy’ of a ‘regular, ordered, controllable’ world (Walkerdine 1990, 188), as well as in English grammar and spelling. It is heard in Ms. Day’s praise for children’s self-regulation, ‘I’m very impressed how Roz and Claire are waiting their turn: control yourself, remember one of our [class rules] is listening’ (Clifftop).

Kant refers to the ‘crooked timber of humankind’: without a moral education, a child becomes ‘unfitted for society’, whereas ‘if disciplined early, he grows up straight’ (1997, 498). During his time, Cavarero (2016) explains, the science of orthopaedics was invented, taken from the Greek orthos meaning straight and pais meaning child, ‘In young children, as with young trees, the earlier the intervention, the more effectively the straightening’ (62). The form of ethical labour demonstrated by the ‘good’ child in the classroom is also evocative of pious subjectivities in a pastoral pedagogy, core to the English education (Hunter 1994). A discourse of moral conformity casts a long shadow over the modern on-task classroom, allowing few opportunities for children to speak out and express something different. It is a context underpinned by an assumed pupil passivity, a denial of their intelligence, and a lack of respect for each child as unique and irreplaceable (Biesta 2014).

One child at Daleview talks about learning in a very different way to others. Ben recently moved from a Reggio Emilia school and his description of learning is of an embodied openness to not knowing: ‘It’s about seeing other things . . . trying to make things, and listen . . . It feels good when you do new stuff that you didn’t know before . . . Learning is about just feeling and touching and saying’. When I return to visit his class twenty months later he now tells me he feels good learning in his ‘brain’. This reflects an understanding of the mind confined within a skull, whereas close observation of the children shows that the
mind ‘mingles with the body and the world’ (Ingold 2010, 12). Children already know, because these are human practices of knowing, that embodied engagement with the real, affective, embodied, sensory and imaginary worlds is not separate from intellectual engagement. A finger up a nose while sitting on the carpet demonstrates how children’s inner being, body and outside materiality are entangled in their knowing. The children signal the need for a deeper consideration of the effect, and affect, of the material environment in the classroom, including physical resources, the sonic environment and children’s bodies themselves.

The current school focus on behaviour management echoes a wider ‘disappearance of politics in favour of management’ (Rancière 2004, 8). For Rancière (1999), ‘there is a worse and a better police’ order (30-31). ‘The better school’, suggest Bingham and Biesta (2010), will be ‘the one that is porous to the incursion of intellectual emancipation’ (24), in which students such as Clark trouble school methods, acting with the presumption of equality to express their disquiet. Teague (2015) offers a valuable example of a pedagogue who responds to a child resisting adult instruction, in ways that do not require him to take up an identity defined by adults, but where he can ‘tell a narrative of his own’ (407). The paper acknowledges the unknowability of others as well as ourselves, drawing on Butler (2005) who asserts that stories of the self cannot be told ‘in a straight line’ (68).

It is important that children sit and listen; equally, that they experience the possibilities of silence beyond a mechanism of control. It is also important that they move and sound. The challenge is to create the supportive conditions for staff to identify and explore various forms of silence/sound and stillness/movement in the classroom, and to question, nurture and expand the educational possibilities of each. Modernity has been characterised as an experience of distraction, where ‘We become deaf not just to each other but also the sounds all around us’ (Back, 2007, p. 7). In the on-task classroom, children’s voices and feelings, the sounds they attend to and their silences remain unheard. This paper reiterates the potential value in having the opportunity for staff to engage with their own observational data and to hear children’s voices on the classroom carpet.

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