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Social Justice and Learner Identities in Ability-Grouped Reading in Primary School

Jess Anderson

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Abstract

This thesis explores the practice of ability-grouped reading, often termed *guided reading*, from children's perspectives and through a Bourdieusian lens of social justice. Guided reading has been a common feature of UK primary classrooms since the 1990s, following education reforms that repositioned literacy as a key driver of wealth production in neoliberal knowledge economies. With this study I reclaim and reopen a critical debate about ability-grouped reading that has been remarkably quiet since the inception of guided reading. The thesis is based on an ethnographic study of children learning in such hierarchical reading groups and then in alternative mixed-attainment reading contexts. The ethnography took place over 18 months in three Scottish primary classrooms, across two schools. The children were aged between 6 and 9 years old.

By attending to posture, gesture and gaze as closely as to words and the prosody of those words, the study presents unique insights into how reader identities are shaped by ability-grouped and mixed-attainment reading. Ability-grouped reading was found to reinforce hierarchies that pervade the classroom and to discriminate against those who were allocated to the commonly termed 'bottom reading group'. Children were agentic in accommodating, resisting, perpetuating and at times transforming those hierarchies. How social class comes to matter in this process is a central aspect of the thesis. The thesis ends with a provocation: how might literacy pedagogy change if the iterative disruption of constraining hierarchies, wherever and whenever they are witnessed, became the moral compass of pedagogical change. This requires a strong commitment to social justice, a turn away from policy-driven initiatives and a turn towards deep listening to children's experience.

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Signed: Jess Anderson

Date: 23.03.23

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Note: Figures 16, 17, 23, 24, 25, and 26 are author's own images.

Chapter 1

Introduction: A Personal Reflection[1]

Introduction to the Chapter

This thesis explores children's perspectives of being in the commonly termed 'bottom reading group', within classed, gendered and raced relationships of power. It also discusses the effects of shifting to mixed attainment reading instruction. The term *mixed-attainment* refers to learning contexts that allow children with different skills, knowledge and understandings to work together. In the first section of this chapter, *Background to the Study*, the project will be introduced, and its origins located in my teaching practice in the 1990s. I bring practitioner, research and theoretical knowledge to the thesis, a combination which, if in conversation with each other, can cross-fertilise and enrich interpretations and usefulness.

All histories are classed, and in *The Earth in Which the Sprouted Seed Grew* I will articulate how my positionality has both illuminated and occluded understanding and interpretation in the thesis. Crucially, by interrogating my positionality, I have come to recognise unexamined assumptions around literacy and social class. In the next section, *Two World Events*, global occurrences will be discussed that brought further reflection on my positionality and impacted my study. The first was the COVID-19 pandemic, which also necessitated adjustment to my methodology. The second was the global protests against racialised violence and oppression, prompted by the murder of George Floyd in the US on May 25th, 2020. These events sent me back to fieldnotes and transcripts, to reappraise the influence of my own social positioning on analysis and on relationships with the children in the study.

In *Social Class in Educational Research,* I introduce conceptualisations of social class, intersecting with race and gender, that provide theoretical ground for the study, guiding fieldwork and informing interpretations of children's reading in ability groups. The greatest influence on my conceptualisation of class is the writing of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (e.g., 1984, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, 1990) and feminist sociologists who

[1] Beginning this thesis with personal reflections is inspired by Reay's (2017) *Miseducation*, which opens with 'Introduction: a personal reflection'. Reay's work, and her engagement with Bourdieu's conceptual tools, is a strong influence on my own thinking and writing.

have engaged critically with his work (e.g., Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2004, 2017; Skeggs, 1997, 2020). I will introduce his conceptual tools and explain how I interpret them when exploring children's words, feelings and actions. The next section, *Stories*, introduces how the concept of story in research is understood and utilised in the thesis. Finally, given that theories of reading development are highly contested, I will offer an overview of theories employed in my thesis in the section *Reading Development, Literacy, Emotion and Identity*. My intention is to provide theoretical background on what will be meant by the term *reading*, as well as introducing what I assume supports children's reading development. The chapter will close with *An Outline of the Thesis*.

Background to the Study

The study explores children's experiences of ability-grouped reading, as well as experimenting with alternatives to this practice. Ability-grouped reading, often termed *guided reading*, is a common method of teaching reading in the UK (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1998; Highland Literacy, 2022; Tennent et al., 2016). Allocation to reading groups can begin in a child's first year of formal schooling, based on perceived levels of print fluency. These groups are often colloquially referred to, by adults and children in school, as the top, middle and bottom reading groups. Guided reading was practised in the schools involved in my study until mixed-attainment reading was introduced in February 2020, six months into the fieldwork. In mixed attainment reading children are grouped with others at different stages of print fluency.

The PhD was a collaborative undertaking with Renfrewshire Council, who part-funded the project with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Around this time, the council was interested in questioning the pedagogical and social effects of ability grouping, particularly in mathematics. This interest opened up the opportunity to collaborate with them in my inquiry into ability-grouped reading. I will give a detailed account of the study in Chapter 3 and so will now only briefly introduce the research context.

The study took place in three classes, over two schools, St Jude's and Fairfield.[2] Fieldwork was planned to take place over one school year, August 2019 to June 2020, but was extended to 18 months because of school closures in the pandemic. I spent one morning

[2] All names of schools, children, teachers, classes and reading groups are pseudonyms.

per week in each school before schools were closed in March 2020. The study then moved into children's on-line learning environment until I could return to school for a month in May 2021. The children in the study ranged from 6 to 9 years old. I observed children going about their school-day, observed reading events, read with children and had conversations with them about reading and their reading groups. I was curious about the effects of different forms of reading instruction on children's emotions, identities and social relationships.

Three years prior to this study, I had encountered, as a researcher, a pedagogical idea that sparked my desire to hear children's experiences of the so-called bottom reading group.[3] In a seminar to headteachers, the project leader shared a method of reading instruction that allowed children to work together at different stages of print fluency.[4] I had previously been a primary teacher who believed in the egalitarian potential of mixed-attainment learning for most subjects. And yet I had never questioned the compatibility of ability-grouped reading with this egalitarian principle until that moment. Guided reading was the only practice I had known, first as a London teacher in the 1990s and then as a teacher educator until 2015. Here, years later in the Scottish research seminar, I heard a simple idea that held promise, of replacing ability-grouped reading with mixed-attainment reading. The practice was one of collaborative learning in individually pitched reading experiences (pitched in terms of fluency level and interests). It was perhaps the viability of the approach that allowed an uncomfortable memory to arise from my time as an infant teacher; a memory which has been pivotal to undertaking this thesis.

The memory was of a parent who had spent time in my classroom. Her child was in a reading group made up of the least fluent readers in the class. She watched him, day after day, fool around with his group while children in other groups settled into, and practised, reading. She pleaded with me to move him to another group. The family spoke Arabic and had recently come to Britain to seek sanctuary. His mum wanted him to make up ground in reading (in English). She felt he should spend time with children who got engrossed in reading so he might have the space to do so too. I knew that his group dynamic was not conducive to settling into reading. Yet, I also believed he would find the print complexity of books in other groups difficult and frustrating. And so, I apologised and refused her request. It was the refusal that now, in the seminar, flared hot in the tensions it exposed. I had not tried

[3] Throughout the thesis I will refer to the groups with the precursor *so-called* or use the terms *lowest positioned* or *highest positioned group*. I appreciate that, for the reader it may sound clunky and unnecessarily repetitive, but I choose to do it to keep in view the hierarchical positioning of these groups while troubling that hierarchy.

[4] The Renfrewshire Literacy Approach, https://pure.strath.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/72042928/Ellis_etal_2018_Report_on_the_renfrewshire_literarcy_approach_august_2015_july_2017.pdf

to think of an alternative system that would have allowed the child to read well-pitched books *and* read with children who might help him settle into reading. But what of the other children in the bottom reading group if I had responded to one parent's advocacy and moved her child?

Looking back, I don't think the system was working well for any of the children in the lowest positioned group. Nor was it good for some in the higher groups who told me of their anxiety in trying to keep up with the others. I had never inquired into the affective dimensions of ability-grouped reading, its impact on motivation or reader identity. The system, which was prescribed to teachers, had been devised around organisational and pedagogical matters rather than emotion and identity. In that moment, in the seminar, I wanted to know more, and I wanted to undo the practice. I also began to reflect on classed and raced dynamics of ability-grouped reading. Did the family's status as refugees make it easier for me, a White[5] English-speaking teacher, to refuse the request? Would I have been more compelled to act if the same request had been made by a White middle-class parent versed in English school-based language?

It was from this practitioner ground that my study has grown. The thesis is a reflection on the affective relationships of power and identity that swirl within ability-grouped reading. But it has also opened out to encompass a meditation on the nature of reading itself. I have come to reflect on the socially situated workings of power within the most personal of reading encounters, and what might change if the disruption of hierarchies became the key driver in reading pedagogies.

The Earth in Which the Sprouted Seed Grew

Echoing Reay (2017, p. 2), in the spirit of honesty I want to make clear my "passionate partiality", which has inspired, guided and misguided this ethnographic inquiry into children as readers. I wish for and work towards a socially just world in which all children of whatever race, faith, class, gender, dis/ability, and sexuality, are free to fulfil their potentials,

[5] The capitalisation of 'Black' is now widely used to signify a collective (though diverse) racial identity and history of people whose ancestors were born in Africa. In some circumstances it is used politically, beyond African ancestry, to include other minoritised non-White populations to represent a shared experience of oppression in a White supremacist world. Although there are anti-racist arguments for and against the capitalisation of White for white people of European origin, I have chosen to capitalise it in order to draw attention to the shared if not homogenous history of privilege experienced by White bodies and to the social construct of race that produces Whiteness. To capitalise Black and not White risks misrecognising Whiteness as neutral and 'normal' from which other racialised groups deviate (Appiah, 2020; Nguyên & Pendelton, 2020; Tharps, 2014). Ethnic groups will also be capitalised e.g., South Asian and Indigenous.

educational and otherwise. This involves recognising and challenging educational orientations that curtail some groups' experience of learning. This doctoral project is part of that work; it has always had activist intent. The study has evolved and changed in its doing. A process of reorientation and adaptation has been prompted by external conditions but also by inner reflection. I have needed to examine my positionality, for example, in order to understand my relationships in the field and what has influenced my interpretations. I will begin here by reflecting on how social class, in particular, has shaped me and shaped how I show up in the research. I will think through how I might reflexively step aside (though this is almost like trying to out-jump one's shadow) in order to appreciate more clearly the workings of power that affect children's experience of reading in school.

I began my study with a hunch that viewing children's experience of reading groups through a sociological lens would help make sense of that experience for an academic, and, hopefully, practitioner audience. What I did not anticipate was that issues of class and race would be the most emotionally and intellectually challenging aspects of the project for me, but this is how it has proved to be. I began with a crusading spirit and believed I was, as a working-class woman, culturally aligned with working-class children in the so-called bottom reading group. The motivation for the study included the possibility it held of amplifying their voices, which, even in school, are less heard, in the interests of social justice and emancipation. But I found there are many ways of being working class and I had to contend with my unexamined assumptions that set me at odds with aspects of the children's lives, as I will discuss more fully in Chapter 6.

I grew up in a White class-conscious working-class home, in which socialist politics was always in the air. When, aged 7, I sold my Curly Wurly chocolate bar for two pence profit, my mum angrily told me that this was "the unacceptable face of capitalism". At the time, this phrase was more commonly reserved for the worst excesses of capitalist exploitation (Gimson, 2016). In the spirit of Lawler (2014) who describes identity being made through story, the markers of my class were woven through events like that of the Curly Wurly. They were also made through stories told of my parents', grandparents' and ancestors' dignity and resistance to the economic constraints into which they were born and lived. I come from a long line of domestic servants and coal miners. My mum became a different kind of care worker (an auxiliary nurse) and building society cashier and my dad, a joiner and chargehand who worked for the council. I never met my maternal great-grandfather but know him from a photo shared of him and two pals in an open-topped motor car in the US, their fedoras tilted

jauntily. He had caused trouble for the coal bosses, been banned from every pit in Lanarkshire and fled to America, before being thrown out of the US for being a communist.

Another story often told was of my mum and dad's intelligence, and the socioeconomic conditions that thwarted their chances of a university education. My mum had been the only girl in her primary school to pass the eleven-plus and go to the local grammar school. My nana spent a large chunk of the meagre compensation she had received on my grandfather's death in a pit accident to purchase my mum's grammar-school uniform. From the first day my mum felt like the proverbial fish out of water, separated from her friends and surrounded by middle-class girls whose home lives were so different from hers. On many occasions she had to skip school to do my nana's shift as a primary-school dinner-lady because my nana's health never recovered after the shock of my grandfather's death. After the auspicious entry to grammar school, dressed in the uniform of educational privilege, my mum soon couldn't wait to leave. Education remained a vision for both my parents, however, and was emphasised as the exit route for me and my sister if we didn't want to "end up working in the factory" looming at the top of our road.

These stories helped form the identity I have brought to this doctorate but so too did the dis-identifications (Islam, 2020; Skeggs, 1997) that set us apart from other families on the council estate where I grew up. While my dad resisted co-option as an intermediary between workers and management by refusing to wear a suit, my mum spoke of cultural difference from her neighbours. Bourdieu (1984) shows the oppositional character of social and cultural habits and choices, which seek distinction from other class groups in capitalist society. Although Bourdieu focusses on distinction-making in the middle classes, Skeggs (1997) shows how working-class people, like my family, also seek distinction, though the pay-off is usually more limited. In her study of working-class women on care courses, Skeggs argues that the distinctions of "respectability" and "caring" were claimed by the women to distance themselves from stigmatised portrayals of working-class lives.

My mum felt she had inherited a snobbery from her mum, who despite abject economic hardship held herself above the community she had always been a part of. The snobbery was often gendered. If a woman left her washing on the drying green overnight, for example, this would be noted as the kind of slovenly behaviour that my mum and nana would never engage in. The source of their distinction was a novel and contradictory one. My nana was born with the word *illegitimate* on her birth certificate. And so, my mum believed her mother had been

fathered by the ‘gentleman’ of the big house where her grandmother had worked as a domestic servant. It was this imagined act of, at the very least, sexual exploitation, that accounted for our perceived middle-class brains and cultural ways, from my nana to my mum to my sister and me. We were really middle-class in disguise, or so the story goes.

Going to university in the 1980s and subsequent employment as a teacher, lecturer and literacy researcher has altered my class identity. It has taken me geographically, academically, occupationally, culturally and socially into more commonly identified middle-class territory. It continues to be an uneasy transition and I describe my adult self as a working/middle-class hybrid. The literacy habits of middle-class friends and colleagues who have children resonated with my love of reading. They also introduced me to an unfamiliar but appealing world of daily intergenerational reading, bedtime stories, and bookshelves heaving with children’s books. I imperceptibly shifted to a view that reading was the best vehicle in which to travel to emotionally and economically fulfilling futures, in a society that rewards fluency in print-based literacies.

What I have come to see, through working on the PhD, is the classed sub-plot to this view. If working-class families could only adopt the literacy practices I associated more with middle-class families, then working-class children would fare better educationally and beyond. Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1990) notion of “the cultural arbitrary” proved significant in exposing my prejudice. It captures the idea that no cultural practice is inherently more valuable but that cultural practices of the powerful come to be legitimised as such.

I write about the classed stories that have helped shape me for the following reasons. Understanding social class as a lived experience, as I have done through my own experience, is central to investigating how ability-grouped reading does and does not reproduce educational inequalities. By reflecting on the idiosyncrasies of my own influences I point to the impossibilities of talking homogenously about class. There are indeed many ways of being working class, not least gendered and raced ways of being working class. This observation was important to remember as I undertook the study. I have had to uncover prejudices and assumptions that unwillingly at times put me at odds with my participants and led me to misperceive deficits in children’s home and literacy lives. It is this quirkiness of experience, while still producing recognisable patterns of culture and power, as well as emotionally acute experiences of class, that makes class so difficult but crucial to discuss (McKenzie, 2015; Skeggs, 1997, 2004).

Two World Events

Two world events occurred during the study which had significant impact on the project and on my interpretive process. The first event was the global pandemic of COVID-19. My year-long ethnographic fieldwork was at a crucial point when schools around the world began to close in efforts to limit the spread of the coronavirus. For a few weeks it felt like I and the teachers were trying to outrun a sandstorm, hoping to conclude the fieldwork before the storm engulfed and derailed the project. The surrealness of that moment is captured a little in this fieldnote from St Jude's Clyde class:

> The children come into class…from his bag Jeffy produces a taut red balloon and a colourful packet of hand wipes. He tells Will and Jay the hand wipes are to wipe his hands. Within five minutes I have heard the word 'coronavirus' six times.

Two weeks later, Scottish schools closed and the exploration into mixed-attainment reading that had recently begun came to an abrupt 'pause'. It was a strange time. I felt as if I had abandoned my participants; my night-time dreams were vivid. There were days when I woke to find Chicken Licken had taken up residence inside me. Chicken Licken, a character from a European children's folk tale, runs frantically from one animal to another warning them that the sky is falling in.

As the consumerist fabric of society quietened, cafes and bars boarded up, and the skies emptied of planes, society was locked down. In the oddness of this moment, I sought ground in reading fictional narratives. One of my preparation-for-lock-down purchases was not a large pile of toilet rolls (as reportedly it was for many) but the very fat new book by Hilary Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light.* I felt a settling, that I would be in good company in the lockdown with Hilary Mantel, Thomas Cromwell, his kith and kin. This being the third of a trilogy, I was excited to live again in the evening light among the orchards of Austin Friars.

Reading first worked this settling magic and welcome transportation, when as a child I found myself climbing up *The Magic Faraway Tree,* in the prolific hands of the children's author, Enid Blyton. Oblivious to her racial stereotyping and my real-life exclusion from the cosy middle-class worlds she created, I found myself at home in the fictional Land of Do-As-You-Please and Topsy-Turvy. It offered relief from the boredom, and sometimes tension, of my seven-year-old's home. Later, in tumultuous teenage years, I found escape and solace in

the wild heaths and market towns of Thomas Hardy's Wessex. I vicariously lived through characters such as Bathsheba, Tess and Eustacia.

It is unsurprising then, that my first thought on the shock of school closure was to find ways to read to my child participants. I imagined how lockdown might unsettle them, curtail freedoms and connection, as well as exacerbate social inequalities. I read, and recorded, a chapter a day to post in the children's on-line learning community, starting with the delightfully silly *Ottoline and the Yellow Cat*, by Chris Riddell. My preference for reading emotionally complex fiction with children was temporarily replaced by a desire for unrealistic simplicity and guaranteed happy endings. In the virtual learning hubs, which had been hastily set up by schools, the children could also communicate with me, write or post video responses to the story. In these virtual ways, the fieldwork continued from March until the July summer break. Schools reopened in August 2020, but it would be later again (May 2021) before I could return to school.[6] In the meantime, I learned how mixed-attainment reading was going from two of the teachers who continued it in their classes.

The second event, that of anti-racism protest following George Floyd's death, influenced my analysis of relationships between me and the children in the study. Like thousands of others, I took part in protests and joined an anti-racism discussion group. I began reading material, largely written by Black, Indigenous and other People of Colour, that challenged my self-view as a White life-long anti-racist (e.g., Akala, 2018; Kimmerer, 2013; Menakem, 2021). Growing up, I was socialised with conversations at home about the injustice of racial inequality and its deep roots in capitalism. From my teenage years I protested against and challenged racism acted out *by others* and felt *by others*.

It was this belief that racism happens 'over there', in hatred, that has been most challenged since 2020. Eddo-Lodge (2017, p. 64-65) eloquently describes how racism is also enacted in "silently raised eyebrows (and) snap judgements made on perceptions of competencies." DiAngelo (2018) highlights the sense of superiority internalised by White people of which they are often unaware or can't admit to themselves. I was relieved to read this because I recognised the unwelcome racialised judgments that sometimes arise in my own mind. I found hope in her words because if White people can be conditioned into White superiority, then we can be unconditioned, even if as DiAngelo also suggests, this is always a work-in-progress. These insights sent me back to my field material to question how my

[6] When schools reopened to children, they remained closed to adults who were considered not essential to the running of the school in continued efforts to limit the spread of the virus.

Whiteness, my racialised assumptions and comfort-zones, showed up in my relationships with the children in the study. I will elaborate on this in Chapter 5.

Social Class in Educational Research

How social class, and its intersections with gender and race, come to matter in ability-grouped reading is a key preoccupation of the thesis. It is a preoccupation that finds echo in academic critiques of social reproduction in education in Britain and beyond (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979,1990; Gillborn et al., 2021; Taylor, 2012). Understandings of social class have had many iterations in the last fifty years (Savage, 2016, 2015; Tyler, 2020). Its sociological relevance has been questioned and conceptualisations contested (e.g., Giddens, 1991a&b). It is necessary, therefore, to tease out how class will be put to work in understanding the experience and effects of ability-grouped reading.

There are two very different strands in how class has been historically understood (Skeggs, 2020). One strand stratifies people according to their position in society and the other conceptualises class within relationships of capitalist domination and exploitation. The first strand, that of classification, is based mainly on employment and economics (e.g., Goldthorpe, 1992). This form of classification, according to Skeggs, is largely undertaken by those in power for purposes of control. There are many issues with this form of class conceptualisation. Not least of these issues is that women's class position and that of immigrants, have rarely been so easy to map onto employment as that of predominantly White men (Steedman, 1987; Skeggs, 1997; Tyler, 2013). However, I agree with Savage (2016) that such socioeconomic classification can still be utilised for emancipatory purposes. Classification could, for example, be used to draw statistical attention to unequal distributions of socioeconomic groups within a stratified education system. In a limited way, I will draw on such class conceptualisations to question whether children from different socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to occupy one reading group or another. Nevertheless, class conceptualisations based on stratification alone are not enough to understand how inequalities are felt or reproduced.

The second strand, which will be used in the thesis, is that of conceptualising class within relationships of power; it focusses on how class shapes our lives and possibilities. It is an important *and* difficult concept to work with (McKenzie, 2015; Skeggs, 1997, 2004). Since

the 1970s, rich economies, like the UK, have been characterised by deindustrialisation and the rise of neo-liberalism. The neo-liberal project reframes life chances as less to do with birth and more to do with making the 'right' lifestyle choices, according to Tyler (2013). An intentional consequence of these politico-economic shifts is that class identity becomes less relatable for many (Tyler, 2013). At the same time classed advantages and slights continue to be felt deeply in people's lives (Savage, 2015).

A consequence of this fragmentation and disidentification with class, is that classed analysis cannot begin from the assumption that class is a subjective individual or group identity (Skeggs, 2020). Research into how class might matter in children's reading groups cannot therefore rely on children's classed self-identification. Nor is it always straightforward to assume a class position based on partial knowledge of parental occupation or economic circumstances. When considering how educational practices like ability-grouped reading may or may not challenge or sustain intergenerational privilege it is fruitful to ask not what class *is* but what class *does* (Taylor, 2009). Bourdieu's work is transformative here, as are the writings of feminist theorists who have used and stretched his work (e.g., Lareau, 2011; Reay, 1995, 2002, 2017; Taylor, 2007).

Bourdieu (1984) compares classes to forests or clouds, discernible but with no hard demarcation lines. This analogy is particularly apt when we know that traditional boundaries between working and middle classes are now fuzzier than ever (Savage, 2015). But, while acknowledging this nebulous middle, and the messiness of objective and subjective identifications of class, I think there is efficacy still in using the terms *working class* and *middle class* as Skeggs (2020) and Reay (2017) do, not to pin children into categories that don't quite fit, but to keep attention on inequality and how power is reproduced.

The conceptual tools Bourdieu developed to probe inequality offer models of class based on how class matters, is lived, and is felt. His enduring concern was to expose the injustices and delusions of a so-called meritocratic capitalist society. This concern makes his work valuable when interrogating educational practice (Costa & Murphy, 2015). Central to his proposition are the concepts of *habitus, capitals,* (in the economic, cultural and social sphere), *legitimation* and *symbolic violence*. These concepts will be put to work in my study and are introduced as follows.

Bourdieu uses *habitus* to represent how the social is embodied in the self (Lawler, 2014). The concept allows subjective activity to be investigated within "structuring structures"

(Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72) and structures to be interrogated within small interactions (Reay, 1995). Bourdieu (1984) defines habitus as dispositions inculcated from birth. These dispositions influence ways of being in the world, as a "feel for the game", expressed in "a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking" (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 70). This includes ways of reading and of writing. Habitus is never only an individual embodiment – it holds the collective histories of the family into which one is born. Those histories are classed as well as gendered and always inflected by the different material effects of the social construction of race (Skeggs, 2004, Rollock 2014; Singh, 2021).

While the concept of class habitus recognises agency and the multiplicity of individual practices, it also points to classed patterns of lifestyle. These patterns are born of the "necessities and facilities characteristic of that class of (relatively) homogeneous conditions of existence" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 95). Habitus is not fixed; it is responsive to the social conditions it encounters in different fields of action. Early socialisation can however sediment and have a powerful influence in (childhood and) adult encounters (Lawler, 1999).

Although he insists that habitus is generative (rather than determining) of life trajectories within social constraints, social constraint can weigh heavily in Bourdieu's work. Yet, as he stresses, his weighting of agency and structural constraint must be read in the historical context of its production (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Bourdieu was writing in the era of neoliberal declarations of meritocracy and the end of class. His writing reveals why the social conditions into which we are born still have a profound generative effect on our life trajectories. Nevertheless, there is an element of rebalancing required to appreciate empirically and theoretically how social agents resist, adapt and accommodate the social conditions of their existence. I agree with McNay (1997) that Bourdieu does not linger enough on "intention" and reflexivity as central aspects of human agency. I think he also misses the originality that can arise within working-class "virtue(s) of necessity" (Bourdieu, 1984). Preferences for replica paintings and such like, recorded in *Distinction,* can obscure the kind of ingenuity and humour that is conveyed in, for example, McKenzie's (in Savage, 2015) interviews with working-class people for the Great British Class Survey.

The social relations and space that children are born into provides access to different amounts of capital assets, which have different capacities for capital accumulation. *Economic capital* refers to monetary assets including inherited wealth and income. As Marx (1977 [1867]; 1992 [1867]) shows so clearly, the more money you have the easier it is to accumulate

more. Bourdieu (1984) extends this theory of accumulation beyond the economic into cultural and symbolic spheres, and this will be used to examine children's experience in my study. *Cultural capital* has three aspects. It is embodied within habitus, as described above. It is objectified in cultural goods such as furniture, art and books. And it exists in institutional states as, primarily, educational qualifications. *Social capital* refers to one's network of social relations through which one can accrue economic and symbolic value. Although all children are born into a network of social relations, the advantage that can be gained from these social networks is unequal. The more valued the cultural and social capital one has, the easier it is to accrue more advantage. *Symbolic capital* is a term Bourdieu uses in different ways but most commonly to describe any of the other capitals when they are recognised and legitimised in a particular field. It is also important to recognise that the ability to accrue advantage from one's capitals is unevenly raced, as Rollock et al. (2016) show in their study of Black Caribbean middle-class parents in a UK education system that centres Whiteness.

The concept of *legitimation,* and its relation to *field* (Bourdieu, 1984), is key to understanding how cultural and social resources are unequally converted into symbolic power and advantage. Fields, such as education, are structured social spheres, sites of struggle according to Costa and Murphy (2015), in which particular cultural practices and knowledge are legitimised and delegitimised through struggle. This notion of cultural legitimation and delegitimation has proved critical both to questioning my own positionality but also to making sense of children's experience in the study. Class operates relationally within particular fields often through the valorisation of cultural dispositions, artefacts and the knowledge of the more powerful in society (Bourdieu, 1984). Rollock (2014) has extended Bourdieu's work to show that this process of valorisation is raced as well as classed. Through legitimation, privilege is maintained and extended. Conversely, the cultural practices and competences associated with those who are marginalised are frequently delegitimised and stigmatised, as Tyler (2016, 2020) illustrates. Bourdieu and Passeron call this cultural stigmatisation, *symbolic violence* (1990), which is the imposition of tastes and values of dominant groups as if they are innately superior. Symbolic violence impacts to the extent that it is believed by the dominated, even as it is resisted. As Skeggs makes clear, "the inability to trade one's cultural capital because it has only limited value or is not recognised in the places where value can be accrued is a substantial disadvantage to and a sign of being born working-class" (1997b, p. 129).

How Bourdieu's concepts may be used to help understand and nuance the experience of ability-grouped reading will unfold through the research itself. I will use these tools as they have been laid out in this chapter, with a reorientation towards complexities, instabilities, resistance and ingenuity in children's experience. It is important to be clear, however, that I see this reorientation as a shift in gaze and emphasis rather than suggesting it is absent from Bourdieu's work: it is not (e.g., Bourdieu, 1999). And as Reay (1995) says, there is something about the indeterminacy and messiness of habitus that makes it an apt tool when examining the complicated messiness of real life. I will discuss how different class habitus, including literacy practices, meets the reading practices valorised in school and show up in ability-grouped reading. Bourdieu (1999, p. 423, 425) directs me, for example, to the "gentle exclusionary practices" of ability grouping that create "outsiders on the inside". Ability grouping, argues Reay (2017, p. 25), is one of the key mechanisms by which some children thrive at the expense of others resulting "in a very overt form of class labelling".

Stories

The children's stories, told either in their own words or narrated by me, are the beating heart of my study. They are the medium through which more abstract meditations on reading, reading groups, identity and power are formed and made more relatable. In this epistemological centring of story, I find myself in the good company of other working-class feminist academics who demonstrate the affective and analytical power of elaborate participant narratives (e.g., Lareau, 2011; Luttrell, 2020; Reay, 2002, 2017). In a well-worn pamphlet, entitled *Stories and Meanings* (1985), Rosen talks of the enduring place of story in human experience; stories which criss-cross geography, ethnicity, class, gender and generations. It is so universal that it must, he concludes, be wired into the core processes of what make us human. We select and interpret from a hotchpotch of events, people and objects, much as we do in telling the story of a research project (Lawler, 2014).

Ethnography has the potential for rich, complex portrayals to be constructed from the way children interact, what they say, embody, and appear to feel, as reading events play out socially in the classroom. And ethnography allows stories to be told that have a different centre of gravity from the adult social scientist's concerns and assumptions. I am motivated to tell these stories by the possibilities they hold of showing complexities of readers' experience. In short, I hope the stories afford the children the complicated emotional and

intellectual lives that are often hegemonically denied the less economically or socially powerful in society (Steedman, 1996).

More recently, I read an interview with the poet Vanessa Kisuule (2020), which further guided my inquiry and discouraged tendencies towards hearing constraint more loudly than agency and resistance. She was asked if she would write more about Black Lives Matter after her poem about the statue-toppling of slave trader, Edward Colston. Her response challenged how I engage in my study with race and class as a White, hybrid working/middle-class woman. She says,

> I think I am much better speaking to our joy, our mundaneness, all the things that people don't afford us. The establishment is obsessed with [black people's] trauma. Those are the stories they keep commissioning from us… They have fetishised our pain… Obviously we have to speak to our reality, to the struggle, but not for the titillation of white liberals.

In her caution about white liberal obsessions with others' trauma I can hear my starting point, my concern for the pain and constriction of those placed in the lowest group in a reading hierarchy. I hope it will be clear in this thesis that I have heeded this caution. I have attended closely and reflexively to children's words and silences, movement and stillness. Through this I have come to very different understandings of the relationships between reading and children's identities in the lowest positioned reading group. These reflexive shifts in understanding will be told through Chapters 4 to 7.

One of my favourite novels is George Eliot's Middlemarch. Every so often Eliot writes so directly it is as if she has just walked into my living room in her slippers. It is thrilling, intimate and disconcerting. At times, I write in this intimate voice that talks conversationally with you, my imagined reader. I do it partly because I want the research and stories it contains to affect you. Why would I not, when I am writing from a celebration of working-class children of all ethnicities, and from an anger and sadness that their potential is constrained within neoliberal education systems that do not teach in their interests (Finn, 1999; hooks, 1994; Patrick, 2013). Reay (2017) talks about *her* passionate partiality as I do here. I hear her concern that passionate partiality can lead to over-simplifications and echo her intention to come closest to emotional truth, despite this passionate partiality.

I have also learned to speak and write in an academic register. This has, again in Reay's words (2017, p. 2), "involved a process of thinking (and writing) against the person that class and community made me". Academic writing has brought complexities of understanding and helped me express complicated ideas more incisively. I value the many writers that I have read and think along with in this thesis. Yet academic writing also excludes those who are not so familiar with its register. Many may have no interest in getting familiar with it but may be deeply interested in understanding the impact of ability grouping on children's reading lives and may be in a position to help make change happen.

So, I remain ambivalent about academic writing, particularly because of the epistemological priority afforded to it within the academy above other ways of sensing, thinking and knowing the world. As I discussed earlier, by using the term *the cultural arbitrary*, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990; Bourdieu, 1992) point to how the cultural and linguistic ways of the powerful come to be legitimised as the 'right' ways of being and talking. Given these interpretations, I find it ironic that understanding the writing of Bourdieu is such a mark of distinction in the academic world. Of course, I am far from alone in grappling with such thoughts within academia itself. In the thesis I insist on the equal epistemological importance of people's ideas who sit outside academia, not as neat or knowable data to be expertly analysed at a distance, but for their inherent worth. This means that there will be voices in this thesis that may seem out of place in an academic project such as this.

Reading Development, Literacy, Emotion and Identity

The theoretical understanding of reading development upon which this thesis is based draws on a complimentary mix of affective, psycholinguistic, sociocultural, and multimodal perspectives on reading. I will outline them here to provide the background that informs my focus on ability-grouped reading and the subsequent directions the fieldwork and analysis has taken.

I am influenced by the affective turn in literacy research (e.g., Anwaruddin, 2016; Leander & Bolt, 2013; Leander & Ehret, 2019), which stresses that acts of reading, or talking about reading, are infused with shifting emotion. I use *affect* to signify energetic movements comprised of emotion but also of more attitudinal states like confidence, resistance, boredom and enthusiasm. Affect is understood not as individualised feeling, but socially, in and

between players. I was struck by the number of people who, on hearing the subject of my research, told me stories of being positioned or feeling like a poor reader in primary school. One woman recalled the fear that arose on entering the classroom, triggered by the knowledge she had to participate in round-the-class reading and might get the words wrong. As Williams (2018) stresses, emotions that are experienced in earlier reading situations can settle into dispositions, affecting engagement in reading and beliefs about ourselves as readers.

To understand children as readers, as this thesis aims to do, these affective dimensions of reading, played out in relationships, must be heard and understood. Also important when considering affect is the availability of reading material that might engage children and make them feel part of the reading game (Cremin, 2019). It is much easier to concentrate on reading when the subject and format resonates with your interests. When literacy researchers pay attention to affect and emotion, different understandings about children's reading can emerge than might emerge from more decontextualised literacy studies.

Intersecting with affective aspects of reading, are the sociocultural and sociopolitical dynamics and contexts of reading. Reading happens within relationships of power and control and is constantly in conversation with family, peers, cultures, knowledge and other texts (Cremin et al., 2019; Govender, 2020; Street, 2002, 2013). In reading texts, we are also reading the world. Within this sociocultural-political understanding, I assume a multimodal understanding of what reading is. Meanings are conveyed through printed words but also through visual and auditory mediums and their interplay (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kress, 2000; Pahl & Rowsell, 2020). When referring to the reading of printed words specifically, as I do at different points in the thesis, I will distinguish this by using the term *print reading* unless it is obvious from the context that print reading is signified. There is an important caveat to my use of the term *print reading* however, which is that few instances of children reading are purely print-based. Rather, it frequently involve a mediation between print and visuals, such as in picture books and comics. The status of different mediums is also, as Govender (2020, para. 3) insists, "imbued with issues of power, access, and diversity". Consider, for example, the limited space given to popular culture in school (Marsh & Millard, 2013). Popular culture is familiar to many children and has the often unfulfilled potential of bridging home and school-based knowledge (Comber, 2005; Pahl & Rowsell, 2020).

Lastly, psycholinguistic views of reading are assumed in the thesis and these work with the affective, sociocultural and multimodal understandings of reading so far discussed. Psycholinguists emphasise the active, problem-solving and meaning-making nature of reading (e.g., Goodman, 1967; Liu, 2022; Tennant et al., 2016). Four cueing systems interrelate when the reader makes sense of what they read. These are: graphophonic, attending to letter/sound relationships; syntactic, which is grammatical awareness of what would make sense; semantic, relating to meaning and context; and pragmatic, the purpose and function of the text. A fluent reader would use these four cues automatically, and each would refine the others. You might, for example misread *blue* as *blub*, but realise that this doesn't make semantic or syntactic sense in the sentence. Literacy scholars and practitioners have found that interlinked cueing works best to maintain sense of what is read when children can read at least 90% of the words in the text accurately (Bodmin & Franklin, 2014).

Reading pedagogy based on psycholinguistic views of reading encourages children's active engagement with the text. They are coached in reading strategies, based on the four cueing systems above, to work out words and maintain sense of what they read (Hall, 2003). Coaching for reading strategies is common in guided reading, and was practised in my project schools, as teachers prompt children on what to do if stuck on a word. Books are selected for and by children from levelled or banded book collections, which offer them a reading challenge of easy difficulty i.e., of reading with between 90 and 95% word accuracy. It is on this basis that guided reading is organised into ability groups, so that children will read the level of text they can maintain sense of. There can be tension between this practice of banding books and the affective attraction of choosing books purely on interest. However, there can also be a negative effect on motivation if books are too difficult to make sense of when they are read independently. Conceptualisations of reading, as outlined in this section, are relevant to understanding what happens in ability-grouped reading as well as considering the pedagogical viability of mixed-attainment alternatives trialled in the study. Reading is never merely a set of cognitive skills but is indeed alive with affect.

Outline of the Thesis

This chapter has been an introduction to how I am situated in the research. In efforts at transparency and reflection, I write of the personal, political and social conditions that have influenced my thinking before and during the research process. Although it is an introduction to the thesis, it has been written towards the end of the long journey through reading, fieldwork, analysis and self-scrutiny. As such, it has allowed me to reflect on my initial intentions, who and what I was directing my research to and against, and the institutional and personal conditions that made the study possible (Kramsch, 2008). It has also allowed me to hint at how my inquiry proceeded beyond my initial curiosity of children's experience of reading groups, without pre-empting the intricate work of findings and analysis. I have included background information on ability-grouped reading and on conceptualisations of reading in the thesis, which I hope will help the reader orientate in the chapters that follow.

In Chapter 2 I analyse some of the academic literature that has captured my interest, provoked reactions and developed my thinking. The issues discussed include ability-grouped reading, ability grouping in general, and the sociopolitical and emotional contexts of literacy in education and society. Through this discussion the scarcity of children's perspectives on ability-grouped reading becomes evident, and it is to this relative lack that my research questions are directed.

Chapter 3 introduces the children, teachers and schools that participated in the study and the research methods employed. The research process changed from initial plans; the situational factors and self-reflection that prompted these changes will be explained. The chapter also details the PhD's methodological landscape, which, through a feminist lens, centres power and inequality, reflexivity, emancipation, and the multiplicity and partiality of knowledge. Chapters 2 and 3 provide the foundations on which the following four substantive chapters (Chapters 4 to 7) are constructed.

Chapter 4 begins to acquaint the reader with some of the children who were in the so-called bottom reading group in the study. It does so by reflecting on how reading fits into the matrix of their rich lives. The decision to begin with the children's complex feelings for reading establishes a challenge to common deficit portrayals characterised by the referent 'bottom' to describe their position.

Chapter 5 shifts focus to children's identities mediated by ability-grouped reading. Utilising and stretching Bourdieu's (1984) notion of *distinction*, I examine the positions children take up in relation to the different groups. Always I have the question in mind: who benefits from this organisation of reading that is hierarchically structured from the (allegedly) least to most fluent readers? The chapter will explore how positions, sometimes gendered, are pushed back, accepted, accommodated and refused, in anger, resignation, optimism and neutrality.

Chapter 6 continues to keep power and privilege in the frame, by thinking through how social class, in particular, comes to matter in the workings of ability-grouped reading. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1990b) notion of class habitus in relation to reading and other family pastimes, I argue that ability-grouped reading advantages those families that prioritise book reading in daily life. Going further, using Lareau's (2011) notion of concerted cultivation, I suggest parents can intentionally seek advantage for their child through this prioritisation by securing a place in the top reading group. Once secured, there are considerable social, status and educational benefits accrued from the position, which help reproduce classed advantage and disadvantage in distinct ways.

Chapter 7 diverges from the holistic analysis of ability-grouped reading to consider affective experience and social constructions of literacy for one particular subset of children in the so-called bottom reading group; that is, children experiencing profound difficulties in reading print. Through the close analysis of one child, Cash, and his engagement with print, theories of phonological processing difficulties are, in turn, accepted and troubled by issues of power, culture and affect. The impact of contexts like ability-grouped and mixed-attainment reading are questioned, while resisting the urge to reach for overly simplistic solutions to the challenges that reading difficulties can bring.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, offers conclusions from the study's key findings as well as discussing the take-aways from the theoretical and epistemological perspectives that have informed the thesis. The chapter ends with a provocation: what might be the egalitarian potential of making disruption of hierarchies the guiding principle of literacy, in terms of policy, pedagogy and practice? The thesis may not have provided a final answer and instead gestures towards ongoing efforts needed by teachers, pupils, parents, academics and policy makers to always provoke on what constitutes reading practices and readers.

Chapter 2

Reflections on a Selection of Literature

Introduction

This chapter explores literature related to ability-grouped reading and ability grouping in general. In particular, the chapter addresses classed, racialised and gendered influences on ability grouping and the affective dimensions of literacy learning in stratified groups. The term ability grouping will refer to three distinct forms of pupil organisation: streaming, setting, and within-class attainment grouping. Streaming refers to placing secondary-school pupils in the same hierarchical group for all subjects. Setting, found in both primary and secondary schools, places pupils in different classes for particular subjects on the basis of 'ability'. Within-class ability grouping, which is more common in primary settings, organises children by so-called ability within the same classrooms for all or specific subjects.

In *Researching Reading in Ability Groups,* below, the chapter begins by interrogating the political landscape and trends in literacy scholarship within which ability-grouped reading developed from the 1990s. Little critical research has been published on the subject since that time, despite the prevalence of the practice, and I position myself in conversation with such absences and possibilities. The chapter then examines the larger research output on ability grouping in general, in *Ability Grouping Across Age Phases and Subjects* (e.g., Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017; Gillborn et al., 2021; Francis & Tereshchenko, 2020). My search for studies on ability grouping was open, honest and thorough (see Appendix 1 for a detailed account of my literature searches). Much of this literature on ability grouping concerns secondary school pupils and is not focussed on literacy education. However, issues of social inequity, and the affective and situational affordances and constraints revealed by this research could guide inquiry into the impact of grouping young readers hierarchically.

The chapter then shifts, in *Affective Movements in Reading Lives,* to foreground affect in literacy and learning (e.g., Duckworth, 2012, 2013; Leander & Ehret, 2019; Williams, 2018). In particular, connections are made between emotion and social positioning, such as in reading and writing groups, which may influence reader identities and life trajectories. The

chapter concludes by returning to the gaps in research knowledge around ability-grouped reading and presents the guiding questions for my thesis emerging from this gap.

Researching Reading in Ability Groups

In order to understand patterns of research into ability-grouped reading in the last 40 years it is helpful to situate it in its politico-economic and educational context. In the last quarter of the 20th century, as industrialisation in the world's richest countries ceased to guarantee economic wealth, 'knowledge' came to the fore as valuable global capital (Olssen & Peters, 2005). The emergence of this *knowledge economy* repositioned education as a key driver of wealth production and, as a consequence, the 1980s and 90s witnessed large-scale revision of education policy by many governments in the Global North and South (Patrick, 2013; Peters, 2001; Peters & Humes, 2003). Underpinning these revisions were the neoliberal paradigms of enterprise, marketisation, globalisation, competition and personal responsibility (Brancaleone & O'Brien, 2011; Olssen and Peters, 2005). These changes had profound impact on the way children's learning was organised. Following an era of comprehensive mixed-attainment teaching in England in the 1960s and 70s, for example, ability grouping re-emerged as a practice deemed more likely to meet growing government demands for pupil progress, mediated by high-stakes testing (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

The rise of the knowledge economy has prompted state intervention in *literacy* education in particular. Since, as Brandt (2005) argues, text becomes the main product in knowledge-intensive industries, companies' reputation and profits come to rely on the literacy skills of knowledge workers. Moral panics around falling literacy standards are nothing new, as Williams (2007) illustrates through a history of such literacy panics. But with the knowledge economy, crises in literacy standards become linked to the economic health of the nation. In Scotland, for example, 'poor literacy outcomes' and their potential to exclude future adults from knowledge-based employment has been a recurring theme from the last days of the Scottish Office to more recent Scottish Government National Improvement Frameworks (NIFs)[7] (Scottish Office, 1999; Scottish Government, 2015[8]).

[7] The Scottish Office was a department of the UK Government with a wide range of governing functions pertaining to Scotland until the Scottish Government was established in 1999 following devolution.
[8] Although there have been no direct connections made between literacy and the knowledge worker in more recent NIFs, including the most recent of 2022, the linking of literacy with social inclusion remains a prominent aspect of the NIF.

In the drive to improve literacy outcomes in England, the New Labour government introduced the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (DfEE, 1998), which stipulated content and how literacy should be taught in primary schools. Literacy teaching was to be organised around *The Literacy Hour*, a key component of which was guided reading. Guided reading is organised by so-called ability as children are grouped together to read and discuss a book matched to their level of print fluency. Although the National Literacy Strategy has been superseded by subsequent government interventions, specifically the teaching of synthetic phonics[9] (Rose, 2006; DfE, 2022), guided reading remains a common practice in English schools. Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (Education Scotland, 2023) does not specify *how* reading instruction should be organized,[10] as the NLS did, and so has never prescribed that reading be taught in ability groups. Local authorities in Scotland also retain more autonomy in pedagogical matters than they do in England, meaning there is less government-directed practice. Nevertheless, influential guidance produced by some Scottish local authorities[11] promote guided reading and this guidance has helped make ability-grouped reading a common practice in Scottish primary schools. Hamilton and O'Hara (2011) in their survey of Scottish teachers found that ability grouping children for literacy was a common and favoured practice for children as young as five years old.

Guided reading does aim to do valuable pedagogical work, such as collaborative development of children's response and comprehension of children's literature. As such, it received a positive reception from a number of influential literacy scholars in the countries in which it was first introduced, namely the UK and US[12] (Fountas & Pinnell, 1998; Hobsbaum et al., 2006; Tennent et al., 2016). These authors each produced award-winning handbooks to support guided reading. However, guided reading is also a form of ability grouping. The emotional and motivational effect of organising reading hierarchically is not questioned in the handbooks. Nor is it interrogated in the many studies that have explored different pedagogical aspects of guided reading (e.g., Fisher, 2008; Skidmore, 2003; Young, 2019). This theoretical and practical uptake of guided reading, I believe, helped relegate critical research into ability-

[9] Synthetic phonics is a way of teaching reading and writing in which words are broken down into, or built up from, the smallest units of sound i.e., phonemes.
[10] The CfE covers experiences and outcomes for children rather than prescribing how those experiences are to be taught or organised. Appendix 2 contains the section on reading in the CfE.
[11] Most notably, Highland Literacy: Literacy Learning for Practitioners https://highlandliteracy.com/reading-2/guided-reading-2/, accessed January, 2023.
[12] In terms of 'influence' it is worth noting that the US dominates the global education market. In 2021, the US share of global revenue from the education technology market was 35% (Grand View Research, 2022). Heinemann, based in the US, is one of the world's largest educational publishers. *Guided Reading,* written by Fountas and Pinnell in 1998, was still Heinemann's best-selling title in 2021, more than 20 years after publication (APM Reports, 2022). The adoption of guided reading in South Africa, for example, cite Fountas and Pinnell as the key influence (Kruizinga & Nathanson, 2010).

grouped and alternative mixed-attainment reading to the educational hinterland. With this study, I aim to reclaim it and reopen a debate about ability-grouped reading.

I found only three studies that have looked specifically at the *ability-grouped aspect* of group reading (Cunningham et al., 1991, 1998; Cunningham, 2006;[13] Grant and Rothenberg, 1986; Haller and Davis, 1980). The studies were done prior to the promotion, from the late 1990s, of the particular form of group reading that is guided reading. All three studies were US based, a country with different educational traditions to my own Scottish-based study. Nonetheless, there were similarities in government pronouncements on education leading to the introduction of guided reading in the US and UK (e.g., DfEE, 1998; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Scottish Office, 1999) that make the US studies useful to explore in the absence of UK studies.

In 1980 Haller and Davis challenged a commonly voiced proposition, and one I make in this chapter, that ability grouping helps reproduce parents' social status in their children. Yet, Haller and Davis grapple with, and actively reproduce, contradictory ideas in this analysis of ability-grouped reading. Firstly, they found that allocation to the highest and lowest reading groups *did* follow socioeconomic patterns. Economically poor children were statistically more likely to be in the lowest reading group. This confirms part of that common assumption their study aimed to refute. Secondly, they describe how the children's placements were justified by their "reading ability". This statement highlights the authors' lack of engagement with how differentiated educational outcomes can be the product of an education system that reflects and rewards middle-class norms (Bourdieu, 1986). Instead, Haller and Davis appear to assume a view of intelligence as hereditary and innate, which results in more middle-class children in higher reading groups.

How hierarchical reading groups might indeed contribute to classed outcomes in reading attainment is illustrated by another study conducted by Grant and Rothenberg (1986). The authors used secondary ethnographic data to investigate the effects of ability-grouped reading. The study concludes that ability-grouped reading may reproduce socioeconomic inequalities intergenerationally. Although the status of the lowest positioned readers suffered in both contexts, it was only the highest positioned readers in the working-class context that enjoyed a privileged status and only the lowest positioned readers in the middle-class context who lost out on this privilege. The authors noted particular behaviours and their frequency

[13] The papers by Cunningham et al. (1991, 1998) and Cunningham (2006) refer to the same study at different times.

that galvanised a sense of belonging and pedagogical advantage in the top groups, as summarised in the following table.

Table 1: Educational advantage in ability-grouped reading (Grant & Rothenberg, 1986)

Classroom Practices	Highest Reading Group	Lowest Reading Group
Pupil/teacher communication.	Warmer, conversational, more equal.	Children rebuked for more informal chat with teacher.
Cultivation of personal, and reading, characteristics.	Initiative and independence encouraged in making sense of text.	Instructed to complete reading in unison and 'not race ahead'.
Life trajectories associated with the above characteristics.	Initiative and independence are important in educational success and valued in adult leadership roles.	Quality of compliance valued in non-professional workers.
Teacher's use of praise.	Unqualified.	Qualified.
Criticism by teacher.	Often softened e.g., noting a mistake as out of character.	Direct, unsoftened.
Reading resources.	Reading books and word boxes demarcated for their sole use.	Children reprimanded for touching reading material demarcated for higher group.
Reading sessions.	Infrequently interrupted.	Frequently interrupted.

For all these reasons, the authors argue, social inequality is reproduced intergenerationally within ability-grouped reading. These conditions could also help explain why some children do better in terms of reading fluency than others, and challenges Haller and Davis's (1980) lack of criticality around the notion of "reading ability".

Grant and Rosenberg's (1986) study has helped direct my gaze in the field towards the hospitable and inhospitable nature of school-based reading for different children. They describe discrimination that may be felt keenly as personal experience but sit within structures that reproduce inequality. Bourdieu talks to this interplay in saying that "narrative about the most "personal" difficulties, the apparently most strictly subjective tensions and contradictions, frequently articulates the deepest structures of the social world and their

contradictions" (1999, p. 511). Five years after their article appeared, Cunningham et al. (1991) reported on a mixed-attainment alternative to ability-grouped reading entitled the Four Block Framework. In the first of what became a series of studies, research was conducted in one classroom and was only minimally informed by theoretical or research-based literature. Instead, the study developed from the practitioners' knowledge that ability grouping disadvantaged those placed in bottom reading groups.

The Four Block Framework, which Cunningham et al. had devised, attends to the social, emotional and pedagogical needs of all children, including the least fluent readers. The 'four blocks' of the framework are: modelling reading through shared big books, self-selected reading individually and socially, making words, and writing. Early test results showed that four children who would previously have been in the so-called bottom reading group, were reading at, or above, age-related expectations. This confounded previous static group patterns. Subsequent studies reported encouraging results in hundreds of schools that adopted the Four Block Framework across US states (Cunningham et al., 1998; Cunningham, 2006). Children, including less fluent readers, were reading on average six months ahead of those in ability groups, based on independent assessments conducted by district officials. Schools using the method also appeared to be bucking the trend of literacy attainment in high-poverty contexts. The authors attribute these results in part to a maintenance of enthusiasm and self-belief in children who would previously have been placed in the bottom reading group on school entry.

> First graders who come with little print experience but much eagerness to learn maintain that eagerness and their 'I can do anything' attitude. Many of our inexperienced first graders become grade-level or better readers and writers.
>
> Cunningham et al., 1998, p. 663

The teachers and literacy researchers had also been motivated by the social isolation they witnessed for children in the so-called bottom reading group. Based on a simple survey of naming best friends in the 1998 study, friendships now appeared to cross traditional attainment lines. Again, this series of studies offered guiding direction to my own research. It prompted exploration into fluidity and fix between reading groups particularly for less print-experienced readers on school entry. It also encouraged equal attention to the social, affective and pedagogical dimensions of reading, as well as experimentation with mixed-attainment alternatives to ability-grouped reading. However, the studies (Cunningham et al., 1991, 1998;

Cunningham, 2006), like that of Grant and Rothenberg (1986), do not include the standpoint of children and so left me curious about the lived experience of children within mixed-attainment and ability-grouped reading.

Ability Grouping Across Age Phases and Subjects

Since research specifically on ability-grouped reading in primary school is relatively rare and somewhat dated, I turn to the field of ability grouping across ages and other curriculum subjects. This wider body of work offered relevant insights to my exploration of ability-grouped reading. Although many of the studies are of secondary education, grouping children hierarchically has been found to begin in nursery classes (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017). I will consider the following themes: allocation to groups, mobility between groups, self/perceptions of being in lower groups, educational attainment, and the tenacity of ability grouping as an organising principle in schools.

Allocation of pupils to ability groups is influenced by classed, raced, and gendered biases according to numerous studies over many years (e.g., Cassen & Kingdon, 2007; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020; Siraj-Blatchford & Troyna, 1993). Recently, an England-based study by Francis and Tereshchenko (2020) involving 126 secondary schools, found a large minority of students were placed in maths and English sets that did not fit their Key Stage 2 SATS results.[14] Instead, patterns of allocation fitted and reinforced raced and gendered stereotypes. Similar discrepancies between test scores and group placement had been raised almost twenty years earlier by MacIntyre and Ireson (1992).

Francis and Tereshchenko found, for example, gender stereotypes reproduced in the greater prevalence of boys in the lowest set for English (60% compared to 40% for girls) and highest sets for mathematics (56% compared to 44% for girls). White pupils also dominated top groups for English, at 81%, and for mathematics at 77%. Black and mixed heritage pupils were over-represented in the lower groups for both subjects, and Asian[15] pupils for English. The Centre for Research in Race and Education (Gillborn et al., 2021) draws on numerous qualitative studies to report similarly raced patterns of allocation. The greater proportion of

[14] SATs tests, which stands for Standard Assessment Tests, are national tests in English, mathematics and arithmetic completed at the end of Key Stage 1 (Year 2) and Key Stage 2 (Year 6) in England. The results of the Key Stage 2 SATs are believed to inform secondary school placement of pupils in ability streams or sets.

[15] Francis and Tereshchenko do not specify whether this group is South, East, Southeast Asian or a combination but based on individual testaments in the book, 'Asian' is most likely to refer to students of South Asian heritage.

Black pupils in lower sets, compared to White pupils of the same social class and gender, is influenced by teachers' persistently low expectations of Black pupils (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Gillborn et al., 2021). For example, Joseph-Salisbury's (2020) interviews with teachers on race and racism in schools, revealed an awareness of negative stereotyping of Black pupils among the staff. These included perceptions that Black pupils were "aggressive, angry, really big and lacking motivation for, or interest in their own schooling" (Joseph-Salisbury, 2020, p. 9). Once in lower groups, argue Gillborn et al. (2021), pupils' educational trajectories are curtailed by poorer quality teaching and by disbarment from working for higher qualifications.

Pupils from economically poor families, of all ethnicities, are significantly over-represented in middle and low academic sets, again according to multiple studies across curriculum subjects and ages (e.g., Dunne et al., 2007; Francis et al., 2017b; Kutnick et al., 2005; Ireson et al., 2002). Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) found children as young as four years old being allocated to ability groups based on teachers' classed assumptions about home literacy practices. One teacher in their study remarked on this by saying, "I think we end up with middle-class and *not-middle-class* groups" (p. 40, emphasis added). According to the UK's Social Mobility Commission (Shaw et al., 2016), if economically poor children are placed in lower ability groups at a young age, they make less educational progress than they would otherwise, thus compounding social inequality and discrimination.

Parental pressure has also been found to influence group allocation, to the benefit of middle-class children. Davies et al. (2003), for example, in their study of ability grouping in six English primary schools, found that parental pressure successfully moved their children out of the lowest group. Classism and possibly racism seem to be unspoken factors in the authors' following observation:

> Confidence that parents themselves feel in contesting school's decisions or actions may work against certain groups and against equality of access for all.
>
> Davies et al. (2003, p. 58)

According to Lareau's (2011) study of education, class and race in the US, and Taylor's (2009) study of lesbian and gay parenting in the UK, middle-class parents are significantly more proactive and effective in favourably influencing school practice for their children compared to working-class parents. Working-class parents may feel less 'at home' in dealing

with school and more likely to defer to the perceived expertise of teachers (Lareau, 2011; Taylor, 2009; see also Francis et al., 2017b). Nevertheless, the success of middle-class capital to influence school is racialised. Rollock et al. (2016) have shown that despite having similar capitals and educational strategies as White middle-class parents, the payoff for Black middle-class children can be unequal. Black parents incur additional "emotional labour" in being vigilant and guarding against racism in their child's educational experience.

In terms of mobility between groups, research suggests that once in a lower set, pupils are most likely to remain there (Dunne et al., 2011; see also Hallam and Ireson 2006, 2007). In a review of research on teachers' and pupils' experience of setting in England and Wales, Wilkinson and Penney (2014) highlight factors that contribute to this lack of mobility. Firstly, systems can be inadequate to help teachers re-assess children's groupings on the basis of their achievement. Schools also tend to overestimate movement between groups, being unaware of its static nature. In addition, pupils in lower groups are usually taught a simplified or alternative curriculum, at a slower rate, often by less qualified adults. Slavin (1990), for example, found teachers were often reluctant to teach lower sets and had poor expectations of outcome. This combination of factors works against the possibility of 'catching up' and shifting groups (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000).

I turn now from teaching to learning, to consider how pupils in lower groups feel about their position, and how they are positioned by others. A recurring theme in Reay's account of her 25 years of researching with children and young people, is that ability grouping creates "fragile, unconfident learner identities" (2017, p. 16). She has found it common for pupils in the bottom sets to see themselves as hopeless, placed in groups marked by educational failure where they feel written off. Similar feelings are expressed by students in Boaler's (2000, 2015a) studies of maths groups. The students in her study attribute their despondency, and lack of achievement and motivation, to membership of a lower set. In Moss's (2000, 2007, 2021) work on gender and reading, she found that when boys are spatially marked as struggling learners, in ability groups for example, they develop avoidant reading behaviours that hamper their progress. In Chapter 5, I will bring Moss's work on gender and reading into conversation with my study's findings. Feelings of despondency and poor learner identities correspond with psychological research showing how profoundly people are affected when they believe others expect them to fail (Reay, 2017). This in turn reduces their capacity for success. But as well as hearing feelings of failure from those in the lower group, Reay also hears outrage that they are unfairly allocated less resources and teacher expertise.

In primary schools, group naming can attempt to conceal the hierarchy embedded in the groups but is still recognised by children as a hierarchy. This is clear from numerous children's comments in Mark's (2013, p. 5) study of primary mathematics, with one child explaining, "The Blue Table means you don't have a clue." Within this hierarchical relationship, those in higher groups can slight those in lower ones. In turn, children who themselves are subject to slights from those in higher groups can seek to distinguish themselves from those they regard as further down the hierarchy (Reay, 2017).

Teachers can, at times, stigmatise pupils in lower groups. Qualities of intelligence, application and engagement are ascribed more to pupils in the top groups and laziness, lack of work ethic and behaviour problems to those in lower sets (Ireson and Hallam, 2005; Macintyre and Ireson, 2002). These qualities, suggest Wilkinson and Penney (2014), rather than being accurate or innate, are reproduced by teachers' belief in them. However, I must say, from personal experience as a teacher and researcher, that not all teachers perpetuate these views. Early in my study I was struck by how passionately a teacher spoke of the progress children were making in the lowest reading group, and how this was reflected in their changing self-view as readers.

Middle-class parental pressure to move children from low-positioned groups also highlights the perceived stigma of occupying lower groups (Davies et al., 2003; Lareau, 2011). This pattern was illustrated in a recent story told to me by a teacher in which a middle-class parent slammed her keys down and demanded that her child be moved from the bottom maths group. How, the mother argued, would her child feel being put in a group with *those* other children? If this stigmatisation happens in literacy teaching it could be doubly injurious, given the role of reading and writing in affecting identities, educational progress, and life trajectories (Duckworth, 2013; Duckworth and Cochrane, 2012; Tett, 2016).

What, now, is the evidence of ability grouping on academic attainment? The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), an English education charity,[16] produces research summaries, called Toolkits, which aim to give accessible research-informed information on the impact of various educational initiatives. On first view, they report that within-class ability grouping has a positive impact on educational achievement, improving outcomes by two months (EEF, 2016, 2018). However, critical reading of the EEF summary throws up a number of issues that trouble their positive presentation of educational outcomes. Firstly, although the summary states that

[16] The stated aim of the EEF is to help "break the link between family income and educational achievement." https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk

children's overall progress increased by an additional two months over a year, the detail shows that this was in fact only in mathematics. In literacy there was no impact on attainment as a result of ability grouping. Secondly, although the EEF summaries are based solely on quantitative studies measuring attainment, worries about pupil morale came up so frequently that the EEF stresses the need to monitor for negative impact of ability grouping on the confidence, engagement and attitudes to learning of low-attaining pupils. They also make the point, as this chapter does, that "disadvantaged pupils" are more susceptible to low teacher expectations leading potentially to over allocation to lower groups. In this regard alone, in-class ability grouping appears unlikely to close what is often termed 'the poverty-related attainment gap'.[17]

The strength of the EEF claim that in-class ability grouping has a positive effect on academic attainment is weakened further by the age and quality of the studies on which their report is based. Much of the data comes from *reviews* of previous studies. The reviews are by Kulik & Kulik (1992), Lou et al. (1996), Puzio & Colby (2010) and Slavin (1987). When the sources in these reviews are consulted it is revealed that the EEF's assertion is based largely on studies conducted prior to 1970. It would seem unwise to read too much into such aged studies when evaluating current practice. In addition, Kulik and Kulik did not name the studies they consulted for their review. Others who did name them referenced a majority of studies that were either unpublished doctoral theses or conference papers, making it impossible to interrogate them.

Specific to reading attainment, Slavin concluded, in 1987, that there was insufficient evidence from research studies to evaluate the impact on attainment of ability-grouped reading. Evidence is also limited in what Lou et al. (1996) term their meta-analysis of studies on reading attainment. Although the studies analysed showed a small overall improvement on attainment for ability-grouped reading, pupils in the lowest group fared less well in ability groups than in mixed-attainment settings. In 2010, Puzio and Colby conducted another meta-analysis, which included only studies conducted in the previous 30 years. Although they found that ability grouping for reading appeared to increase reading proficiency by six months, no indication was given of the effect size for different ability groups. It cannot, therefore, be ascertained from their analysis how the least fluent readers fair in ability-based reading groups. A final caution on the evidence upon which the EEF's report is based: it is unclear from the studies when ability-grouped reading was being compared to whole-class reading and when it was compared to mixed-attainment group

[17] This phrase, 'the poverty-related attainment gap' has been used frequently by the Scottish Government, including in their National Improvement Frameworks since 2016. https://www.gov.scot/publications/closing-poverty-related-attainment-gap-report-progress-2016-2021/

reading.[18] The EEF acknowledges the weakness of the evidence on their website but, unfortunately, much more visible is their conclusion that in-class ability groupings increase attainment by two months.

It is interesting to note that at least two of the literature reviews drawn on by the EEF, that of Kulik & Kulik (1992) and Lou et al. (1996), appeared after an influential and damning critique of ability grouping in the US by Oakes (1985). Oakes criticises the practice for the barriers it creates for minoritised ethnic groups and those from low socioeconomic communities. The timing of these reviews could be interpreted as an effort to reassert ability grouping, which had been significantly challenged by Oakes's work. Indeed, James Kulik was part of The National Centre for the Gifted and Talented and criticised Oakes's work for its threat to "their brightest learners…if they were required to move at a common pace" (Kulik, 1992, p. 73).

So far, this chapter has charted the research-informed evidence that finds ability grouping to be a largely unfair and exclusionary practice. And yet, it is an embedded and welcome practice in many schools (Hallam and Ireson, 2003). In a survey of Scottish teachers, a majority of the respondents believed ability grouping made their teaching more effective *and* raised attainment for all pupils (Hamilton & O'Hara, 2011). By narrowing the 'ability' range they had to teach, ability grouping was perceived to encourage targeted support, increase interaction between children and teachers and, consequently, improve motivation and self-esteem among pupils. As Hamilton and O'Hara point out, this is a surprising finding given the extensive evidence to the contrary in terms of attainment, motivation and self-esteem, but it does convey how some teachers view the practice. However, teachers have also reported feeling pressure to teach in ability groups because of government and management demands to improve attainment results (Bradbury & Roberts-Holmes, 2017). Ability grouping is often believed more likely to improve results. In England, attainment results are also linked to teachers' salaries and job security.

In a review of literature, Hallam and Ireson (2003) also found teachers felt more successful when teaching ability groups, particularly higher groups, because of the greater self-efficacy they perceived in those pupils and the limited behaviour issues encountered. In contrast, mixed-attainment teaching was viewed as difficult and more onerous on teachers'

[18] Whole class reading takes different forms but could include the practice of children taking turns to read aloud to the whole class from one class text. Issues around such practice include the pressure it puts on pupils to perform, the public nature of making errors, and the lack of text suitability for children at different stages of print fluency. This whole-class practice contrasts with the mixed-attainment reading explored in this thesis, in which texts are matched to children's reading fluency, reading is practised without public exposure, there is more concentrated interaction between the teacher and the small group of pupils, and more opportunities for collaboration between the pupils.

workload. But in a challenge to these views, both Hallam and Ireson (2003) and Hamilton and O'Hara (2011) found teachers with additional qualifications, such as Masters or PhD, were more likely to question the practice. Those teachers favour mixed-attainment teaching because of the research literature they had encountered on the problematic issues related to ability grouping.

As well as (some) teachers, successive governments have maintained the ideological weather for ability grouping to endure in the UK education system. This differs from countries like Sweden where no form of ability grouping is practised in primary or secondary schools up to the age of 16 (Ramberg, 2016). It is interesting to observe that those who promote ability grouping often do so using similar language to those who oppose it, that of challenging social inequality. New Labour's David Blunkett, for example, in the foreword to the National Literacy Strategy in 1998, presented it as a means by which social disadvantage could be ameliorated by helping all children achieve good standards of literacy. As the NLS goes on to outline, improved literacy outcomes were to be achieved through ability-grouped structures such as guided reading and writing. Subsequent governments have continued to fuse ability grouping to 'high standards' in discourses around the poverty-related attainment gap (Francis et al., 2017b).

In addition to teachers and governments, middle-class parents increase the symbolic power of ability grouping. Fear of losing social and economic advantage is deeply rooted in middle-class psyche, suggests Reay (2017), and ever more so as economic and professional possibilities for their children are squeezed. In one study of White middle-class choices of urban secondary schools, being in the top set was regarded as insulation from the 'undesirable Others' (Reay et al. 2011). It is these fears that increase classed mobilisation to press home advantage and advocate for ability grouping. Francis and Tereshchenko (2020) suggest that schools' reluctance to try mixed-attainment learning may be influenced by the benefits accrued to schools from attracting middle-class families. As previously mentioned, middle class parents can be very successful in canvassing for school practices that appear to benefit their children (Reay et al., 2011; Lareau, 2011; Taylor, 2009).

To conclude, I return to the emotional impact of ability grouping, which has been discussed. This connects to the next and final section of the chapter, which widens focus to the affective movements within reading and writing more generally. I will explain and draw on the relatively recent "affective turn" in literacy scholarship (Leander & Ehret, 2019) as well as other

scholars who have paused to listen to the felt sense and emotional sediment of literacy learning. This turn to affect will be done while keeping in view the relations of power that influence movement within and between reading groups.

Affective Movements in Reading Lives

Literacy is understood in the thesis to incorporate the myriad mediums and ways that meanings are made/conveyed in diverse fields and sociocultural groups, including the everyday practices involved in, for example, social media, music and art. This widening of meaning from narrower definitions of literacy as 'reading and writing print' flows from the concept of "living literacies", coined by Pahl and Rowsell (2020), which builds on the work of Heath (1983) and of New Literacy Studies (e.g., Street, 2013). Living literacies focus on how literacies are lived, through gesture, visuals, sound and words, and are concerned with affect and power. Yet, as this thesis focusses particularly on the affective movements and relationships of power within and between reading groups, it necessarily centres attention on the school-based literacies of reading books and other forms of word-based print.

The turn to affect in literacy scholarship invites the educator and the researcher to notice the embodied intensities, faint, muffled, and strong, that are evoked in doing literacy (Anwaruddin, 2016; Leander & Ehret, 2019; see also Zembylas, 2021, for the related affective turn in educational theory). The term *affect* is used in the thesis to represent the sometimes elusive energetic intensities within and across beings. The term includes emotions but also more attitudinal reactions like enthusiasm and disengagement. Perhaps inevitably, there will be a shifting slippery un/coupling of the terms *affect*, *emotion* and *agency* in this thesis as there is in the literature. This follows Ahmed (2010, p. 231) who suggests that although affective reactions can be discerned separate from emotion, this is not how they are experienced in practice. "In fact," she argues, "they are contiguous; they slide into each other; they stick and cohere, even when they are separated." There are also scholars, whose work is less closely associated with the 'affective turn' in literacy scholarship, but who offer valuable insight into affect, emotion and agency in doing literacy (e.g., Duckworth, 2014; Reay, 2017). Williams (2017, p. 19), for example, who explores emotion and agency in writing development, helpfully defines emotion as "embodied-meaning making *and* performance" (original emphasis and hyphen). He stresses this coupling because emotions are felt and played out in the social transactions in which they arise. I use the concepts of affect and emotion as

Dutro does, with power and structure in sight, recognising that they both constrain and yield to affect. She suggests that not all scholars of affect are similarly orientated:

> Sometimes in reading a scholar engaging with affect I whiff a suggestion of bracketing sensation from the also present lurk of structure… be vigilant about keeping power in the frame.
>
> Dutro, 2019, p. 76

Speaking, reading, and writing are, contend Leander and Ehret (2019), expressions of our deepest humanity. Through them we connect to others and narrate ourselves, our histories and memories. Literacy also mediates many social, economic and cultural relationships. Whether we can read and write proficiently in a range of contexts can have significant and potentially life-defining consequences. (Williams, 2018). As such, reading and writing are potent aspects of cultural capital (Bourdieu,1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1984). They are capitals because they confer "strength, power, and consequently profit on their holder" (Skeggs, 1997, p. 6). They are not evenly distributed in a classed, raced and gendered society.

Through solitary and shared reading experiences, we can make sense of our lives, and increase empathy and understanding of others, according to Kidd & Castaño (2013). 'Empathy' is understood in the thesis as a reaction more akin to the traditional meaning of sympathy, in which one gains a sympathetic understanding of and general identification with others as fellow humans and other sentient beings (Boler, 1999). Yet, coupling reading novels with empathy, as Kidd and Castaño do, can ignore classed differences in how empathy is cultivated. There are continuous reminders of working-class 'habits' not orientated towards books, but this should not equate to a lack of working-class empathy or imagination. I came to understand this vital distinction through the words of author Douglas Stuart in a radio interview in 2021[1]: "I don't think not having books made us any less creative or compassionate or curious. We were all those things as kids. It's just we didn't feel invited into the world of literature." Indeed, the focus of this section of the chapter is the inner and reactive experience of learners navigating through literacy landscapes with smaller pots of legitimated cultural capital than others, who may not "feel invited into the world of literature".

[1] Douglas Stuart is the Scottish author of the Booker prize-winning novel, Shuggy Bain. The book echoes his own working-class upbringing as a White queer boy navigating poverty, homophobia and his mother's alcoholism in a community affected by deindustrialisation in the 1980s. Reading had not been a common pastime growing up.

The role of emotions in affecting and being affected by literacy experiences is well illustrated in *Literacy Practices and Perceptions of Agency* (Williams, 2017), which recounts 30 years of literacy participatory research in the US, Britain and Kazakhstan. Williams explains how emotional reactions in literacy events create dispositions, which in turn affect experience, performance, and outcomes in reading and writing. I use the term 'literacy event' here to describe any event that is mediated in some way by reading or writing (Heath, 1983). Aligning with feminist theorists (e.g., Duckworth, 2013; Reay, 2002, 2017), Williams argues that when affect and emotion are unconsidered, opportunities are missed to address structural barriers and to fight for more equitable literacy practices.

Williams describes some of the more dispiriting encounters a student might have with school literacies. These include undertaking assignments that don't resonate with the student's interests, failing to gain the teacher's approval for what they write or receiving only negative feedback. Emotions affect the student's approach to a current task but also settle in memories that are re-felt when similar situations occur. Often, Williams argues, these formative interactions coalesce in a negative self-view or disposition towards reading or writing. And, as previously discussed, how children and adults are viewed and positioned by others as readers and writers can contribute profoundly to their disposition. As Reay (2017, p. 77) has found "when we expect to be viewed as inferior our abilities seem to be diminished, and this sense of inferiority is particularly strong in the bottom sets."

How children see themselves as readers may impact more on their identity than other curriculum subjects do because of the common association of reading with notions of intelligence. The linguistic and psychological coupling of reading difficulties and stupidity can be heard in the words of many of Duckworth's (2013) adult basic-skills participants. The word "thick" is peppered through the participants' discourse on finding reading difficult. Some participants described themselves as childlike because of their unconfident relationship with reading and writing. Arriving at college brought up the same fears of being judged and dismissed that many had experienced in school. And yet, the participants also describe affective acts of resistance, taking themselves out of hostile environments and "wagging school".

Refusal to accept the roles assigned by society take many forms, in childhood and adulthood. It can be heard in Taylor's (2005) working class lesbian participants "who are necessarily, unavoidably, painfully and pleasurably, living out the intersections of class and sexuality." It can be discerned in the envy and longing of Steedman's (1987) mother as she refused to embody the role assigned to poor working-class women like herself. And it can be witnessed in the child who

struggles with reading in Scherer's (2016) research. The child grabs an animal puppet and 'bites' the researcher while emitting a battle-like roar when asked why some children are better at reading than others. Although experience can accumulate and form dispositions, these dispositions, our habitus, are malleable. They are responsive to the field and to the rules of the field that are encountered. If educational contexts are changed to become more equitable and sensitive, dispositions can also change, even if as Bourdieu (1990b, p. 54) makes clear "the dispositions of the habitus … give disproportionate weight to early experiences." If we believe that dispositions are fixed there would be little reason to struggle for fairer, more equitable and kinder educational practices, as my research does. With regards to the common practice of placing children in so-called bottom reading groups, we might reflect on its emotional residue, both positive and negative. We can further speculate on how reading practices that foster collaboration and social integration may impact on children's sense of agency and self-view as readers.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored a body of literature guiding my ethnographic study of children's experience of ability-grouped reading and mixed-attainment reading. Although engagement with literature continues, no source thus far has demonstrated positive social, emotional or egalitarian outcomes for ability grouping. The evidence on attainment is also unconvincing and the impact on reading attainment in particular is unproven. The attainment outcomes for US studies of mixed-attainment reading (Cunningham, 2006; Cunningham et al., 1991, 1998) suggest something potentially life-affirming and barrier-breaking about mixed-attainment reading instruction and this promise warrants the further interrogation in the UK context that my study provides.

Little is known about children's emotional and social experience of ability-grouped reading from their own perspective, and it is a gap I feel compelled to probe. I welcome the affective turn in literacy scholarship as described by Leander and Ehret (2019), which engages with ambiguity, complexity, contradictions and the messy middle of things. I hope to research in ways that are attentive to affective surges and small emotional movements within and among children as they engage and disengage as readers. The reality of reading groups is more complex than I had imagined.

I stand in good company in attending to how social advantage and disadvantage is reproduced in education (e.g., Bourdieu, 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, 1990; Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2002, 2017). As Dutro (2019) reminds me, issues of power and inequality must

be kept in the frame when attending to the affective dimensions of reading in ability groups. Bourdieu's concepts, introduced in Chapter 1, of habitus, capitals, legitimacy and symbolic violence will be put to work in exploring how children welcome, resist, accommodate and reject the positions entangled within ability-grouped and mixed-attainment reading.

It is timely to reopen a debate around emotional and motivational effects of ability-grouped reading that has been quiet through the years of neoliberal education policy and the promotion of guided reading by literacy scholars. The questions that will guide my study are as follows:

- Does ability-grouped reading affect children's identity and feelings for reading and, if so, in what ways?
- How do social inequalities around class, race and gender intersect with the practice of 'ability grouping' for reading development?
- What effect does mixed-attainment reading have on children's identity and attitudes to reading?

Chapter 3

Methodological Preoccupations

Introduction

This chapter introduces the methodological considerations that have informed fieldwork and analysis, using a feminist ethnographic approach to think through power, representation and ethics. The chapter also gives an account of the project's methods, including detailing the research site, participants, and phases of research. My study has been motivated by a desire to contribute to sociological and educational debates and to influence policy and practice. This ESRC-funded collaborative study offered the potential to ground my research in practice and increase its impact in the non-academic sphere. This "participatory turn" (Facer & Enwright, 2016) in universities and research funding bodies arguably fulfils the potential of wider engagement. I am mindful that the participatory turn could also inhibit social justice research that is not financially advantageous in the commercialised terrain of neoliberal universities (Taylor & Lahad, 2018; Walford, 2008). But with regard to this research project, it has been a fruitful, mutually beneficial collaboration, that I hope will support action for social justice.

The first draft of this chapter was written before I entered the field. On returning to revise it after fieldwork and substantive analysis, the unpredictability and messiness of the research process was evident. By retaining this messiness, showing missteps, changes of direction and tensions, I hope to show the uncertainties, coherence and incoherence that inevitably inform research findings and conclusions. The chapter is organised in five sections. The first section, *The Research Sites and Participants,* introduces the schools and children in the study. It also includes an explanation of how and why categories of social class, race, ethnicity and gender are applied to the participants. Section two, *Recruitment, Data-sharing and Slow-Turning Wheels*, outlines the setting up of fieldwork. This includes recruitment, data sharing agreements, negotiation of consent and choosing of pseudonyms. In the third section, *Ethnography: Phases and Philosophy,* the broad phases of the ethnography are outlined within the disruptions occasioned by the pandemic. Ethnography as a methodology is also discussed, including discussions of intergenerational power relationships. The fourth section, *Ways of Seeing, Hearing and Being in the Field,* describes the four key methods employed in the ethnography, that of multi-sensory observation, conversation, reading events and intervention. The final section, *Telling Stories of Children's Reading in Hierarchical Reading Groups*, focuses on data analysis and writing. I will explain how I have combined narrative

portraiture (Rodríguez-Dorans &Jacobs, 2020) with thematic analysis and Bourdieu's conceptual tools to make sense of the empirical material and write stories of the findings.

The Research Site and Participants

Scottish school communities are made up of children, teachers, learning support assistants, parents, janitors and administrators. Initial research plans included interviews with parents and teachers, as well as children, but this changed for three reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, the study draws epistemologically on feminist standpoint theory (e.g., Smith, 2002; Hill Collins, 1990; Hartsock, 1983). I qualify my use of standpoint theory to insist that there is no universal children's standpoint, and that children can be positioned very differently to each other. And still, novel insights emerge from the standpoints of children compared to top-down culturally dominant investigation. Secondly, there was a small number of teachers involved in the study (N=5 teachers & 3 headteachers). For reasons of confidentiality their presence is largely absent from the thesis although we shared insights and worked together to introduce different ways of teaching reading. Thirdly, pragmatic reasons based on time availability and volume of data, additionally influenced the decision not to interview parents.

Fieldwork was conducted in three classrooms in two primary schools: I call these schools St Jude's and Fairfield. The children were aged between 6 and 9 years old. There were 62 children in the study, and 24 children became a particular focus of attention.[20] Both St Jude's and Fairfield are situated in Scotland's more highly populated post-industrial central region. Two classes in St Jude's participated in the research, which I call Avon and Clyde.[21] In Fairfield, one class participated, which I name Kelvin. St Jude's is a small Roman Catholic primary school. The children generally lived close by, and most came from the large housing estate that surrounds the school, which has a mixture of private and social housing. The area is a suburb of a small town, with a row of convenience shops and a train station. At St Jude's the percentage of children who were eligible for a school clothing grant on the basis of low family income was relatively low, at 28%.[22] Fairfield is a large non-denominational primary

[20] Although children from the middle reading group were observed, were involved in conversations with me, and do appear in the thesis, they were generally not the focus of my attention. Rather, I was interested in the experience of children in the so-called bottom reading group and their positioning in relation to the highest group. It was children in the bottom and top groups who were the 24 focus children.
[21] Avon was the younger of the two classes at St Jude's by one year and the same age as the children in Kelvin, at Fairfield.
[22] A school clothing grant provides help to buy school clothes. I have used it as an indicator of the economic composition of Jude's instead of eligibility for free school meals because of the universal availability of free school meals for the younger year group in Scotland at the time of the study.

school situated in a big town not far from St Jude's. The area served by the school is one of the 10% most deprived areas in Scotland in terms of SIMD.[23] Of the school community, 40% of the families were entitled to a school clothing grant.

As the intersections of social class, race and gender are central to the analysis of whether (and, if so, how) ability-grouped reading reproduces privilege and social disadvantage, it is important to situate the children in terms of class, race, ethnicity and gender, and to explain how these are conceptualised. I understand the term *race* to be a social construct with significant social effects (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Gillborn, 2015; Singh, 2021). Race, even when understood as a social construct, has been associated with physical features such as skin colour, given meaning in a sociocultural context (Reynolds, 1997). Race overlaps with and is often included in conceptualisations of ethnicity (Patel, 2009). Concepts of ethnicity can incorporate a wide range of aspects, including cultural values, geographical origins, language, physical features, religion, ancestry and more (Connolly, 2003). Although ethnicities are recognisable social realities in terms of how people identify, are identified, group and are grouped, they are not objective or uncontested cultural subsets with unchanging boundaries. Rather, ethnicity is constructed and socially situated, coming to matter differently according to context, time and relationality (Fenton, 2010).

It is important to situate the children in terms of race and ethnicity because, as Rankine (2020) puts it, if you don't see race you don't see racism. Using the information available to me, I situated children by a combination of (apparent) geographical origin, language, skin colour and religion, while recognising that religion can both cross ethnicities and be ethnically defining, depending on context. Choosing the language to situate the children individually has proved complex. While I might describe a child as Black or White, this omits groups that may not identify with either, including the children of South Asian heritage in my study. The term *Brown* might be used and has been reclaimed politically, often in the lowercase, by some groups, such as Latinx in the US and some South Asian people in the UK.[24] Yet, I don't feel it is right for me, a White woman, to use B/brown when many People

[23] The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) is a government tool for measuring relative levels of deprivation in different geographical areas based on income, employment, education, health, access to services, crime and housing. https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-index-of-multiple-deprivation-2020/

[24] See, for example, the use of 'brown' in Burnt Roti, a magazine showcasing the work of South Asian people in the creative industries (https://www.burntroti.com), also in *Brown Girl Like Me* (2022) by Jaspreet Kaur and *Burning my Roti: Breaking Barriers as a Queer Indian Woman* (2022) by Sharan Dhaliwal. The use of 'Brown' is also extensively used in US educational research to signify Latinx people but this has also been challenged because of the Latin American racial groups it ignores, such as Afro-Latinx and can contain anti-Blackness (Busey & Silva, 2020).

of Colour would not use it in relation to themselves. Instead, I use the phrase, People/Children of Colour, because it is more widely used even if still contested.[25]

Ideally, rather than ascribing such terms, people should be asked how they describe themselves (Alonge, 2020). I have come late to consider the complexities of identification of race and ethnicity that I discuss in this section, one consequence being that I did not ask the children the questions around ethnicity I might now ask them. Yet, self-identification may also have been more difficult with young children as they may or may not have identified themselves racially, ethnically or nationally. Children from minoritised ethnic groups may be used to others identifying them by the colour of their skin, ancestry or cultural heritage, while, as Fenton (2010) remarks, the ethnic majority in Britain, who he describes as silent, are "barely conscious of itself as 'ethnic' at all". White children, for example, may not identify as White but given the unequal power imbued in Whiteness it is important to name it in the study. Additionally, a child who was born in Pakistan and moved to Scotland, aged 4, could not recall the name of his country of origin, instead referring to it as "that place I was". Yet, the importance of his cultural heritage was clearly discerned in the way he spoke of places, people, the language of Urdu and religion of Islam. I could describe him as Scottish Pakistani, as his home is now in Scotland, but this may not be how he would identify himself. He may describe himself as Scottish, as Pakistani, as Pakistani and Scottish.

Bearing in mind these complexities in identification, I have chosen to refer to ancestral heritage, rather than nationalities that might not be claimed. In this there is always a danger of misrecognition, of failing to know multiple heritages [26] and I did not ask the school for a list of children according to ethnic group or language. In this omission, I also acknowledge the racialised assumptions I made by imagining that all the children who I read as White were White.[27] So, when I situate children in terms of, for example, Pakistani or Scottish heritage, it is with the acknowledgment that I could have misrecognised this, and that a child's heritage could be different or more various than I knew. The intention throughout is to be able to identify how imbalances of power around race, ethnicity and languages, do and do not play out in ability-grouped reading.

[25] See Kim's (2020) piece in the New Yorker, on July 29th, The Perils of "People of Color" for a nuanced consideration of issues around the term. https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-activism/the-perils-of-people-of-color

[26] It has been only when writing this that I have been aware of my racialised assumptions that misrecognised all White children in the study as having Scottish heritage unless I knew otherwise, and possibly misrecognised the children with Pakistani, Polish or Slovakian heritage as not having Scottish or other heritage.

[27] *The Vanishing Half* by novelist Brit Bennett about two light skinned Black sisters, one who is read as White and the other Black, reminds me of the potential inaccuracy of my perceptions as well as being a reminder of the socially situated nature of 'race'.

With the above caveats in mind, I will now give as accurate account as I can of the ethnicity of children in the study. Most children in St Jude's I read as White, of Scottish heritage, with English as their first language. Two children in the study had Polish heritage, were White, and spoke Polish as a first language. Most of the children identified as Catholic. Fairfield was ethnically more diverse than St Jude's. In the participating class, Kelvin, most children I read as White, of Scottish heritage, with English as their first language. Three children were Children of Colour and had Pakistani heritage; two spoke Urdu as a first language and one had Sindhi-speaking parents but had grown up speaking only English. One White child had Slovakian heritage and spoke Slovak as a first language. The three children with Pakistani heritage also spoke of their family's Muslim faith. None of the White children mentioned religion.

As well as race and ethnicity, in the chapters that follow I will sometimes talk about children as working or middle class. The children in my study did not identify themselves in class terms and this raises similar methodological issues to those encountered by Skeggs (1997) in her study of women on care courses. She locates the women as working class using various 'objective' markers of class, such as parental employment and housing. This location allows discussion of women's disidentification with the class to which they are ascribed. I too use 'objective' markers of class as I explain below but, like Skeggs, my aim is not to categorise but to help explore what class did in children's reading lives. It has been an emotionally difficult and messy process as classed differences in culture and disposition, including accent and embodiment, are not framed as a benign 'difference' - the working classes, however heterogeneous, are pathologised (Lawler, 1999; Tyler, 2020). I am aware of this and afraid that in talking of class habits and culture, it may re-pathologise working-class children. But to understand how class matters in reading hierarchies it is necessary to talk about class in cultural terms.

Information was gathered from the children talking about their lives, and from headteachers and teachers. My subjective identification of children's class position is adapted from Savage's (2015) Bourdieusian groupings based on economic, social and cultural capital. Savage measures economic capital in terms of household income, savings and house value. Since I did not have access to this financial information, I drew partly on children's eligibility for support through the Pupil Equity Fund.[28] The local authority also provided anonymised

[28] The Pupil Equity Fund is allocated by Scottish Government to schools, via local authorities, based on the number of families whose lives are impacted by poverty. Its intended purpose is to help close the poverty-related attainment gap.

data on families' economic circumstances based on eligibility to school clothing grants and free school meals for the older class in St Jude's.[29] Some parental occupations, mentioned by children and teachers, also suggested levels of economic capital. Social capital, for Savage, was measured in terms of the social status of respondents' connections. Again, I knew little of the families' social connections but identified some of the out-of-school social connections between children, such as the sharing of books during lockdown.

Savage understands cultural capital by the composition of interests declared by respondents, categorised as 'high-brow' and 'low-brow' cultural pursuits, and by their level of educational qualifications. In terms of cultural pursuits, I included the centring and decentring of book-based literacies along with the space taken up by other pastimes such as spending time with extended family and playing outside independently (both borrowed from Lareau, 2011). Some children spoke about their parents' education, often when parents had degrees or higher qualifications. I assumed, with great potential for inaccuracy, that if children did not talk about their parents' education it may be because higher education had not featured significantly in their lives. These assumptions were combined with information on parents' work since some jobs required a higher qualification while others did not.

For Savage, occupation was not used directly as a class identifier. Rather he identified seven class groups based on the above economic, social and cultural capital; then linked occupations with multiple class groups. I did use parental employment (and unemployment) as part of my identification of children's social class when jobs fell into traditional categories of working-class and middle-class occupations. These included low-paid work as refuse workers, cleaners, carers and delivery drivers and middle-class identified jobs such as lawyers, doctors, journalists and television producers.[30] Other jobs fell into more ambiguous class territory such as nurses and administrative office-based work.

Accent and the use of Scots[31] also influenced the assumptions I made about children's class position although these assumptions could be inaccurate when considered with other aspects of children's capitals. I assumed one boy to be working class by his accent before learning that his father's job was often located in the hazy middle between working and middle class, and that the boy owned a horse, a pet I associate with the middle classes.

[29] All children up to the end of P3 (Avon & Kelvin) were eligible for free school meals regardless of economic circumstances.
[30] I identify 'low-paid' as receiving close to the minimum hourly wage for Scotland, which in 2022 was £9.50 for workers over the age of 23. According to the recruitment agency, *indeed*, the average hourly rate of a delivery driver is £10.53, a refuse collector, £10.48, a care assistant, £10.81 and a cleaner, £9.91.
[31] Although the Scots language has varied status in class terms, it is often ridiculed in popular media as 'bad English' and as a working-class language or dialect (Lowing, 2017).

Locating class through accent is also troubled when children speak English as an additional language. Their accent could be inflected by accent in their first language, with which I was unfamiliar, and they were also perhaps more influenced in the first two years by the accent of those they spent most time with at school. I learned this in London, as an EAL teacher,[32] when children who had recently arrived from Chile, spoke their first words in English with a Scottish accent like mine.

Notwithstanding the inconsistencies of perceiving class through accent, if children spoke with an accent and dialect that rooted them in their locality, and which sometimes I found difficult to understand, this informed an assumption they were working class, but only in combination with other capitals. If their accent was a closer match to standard written forms this would contribute to locating them as middle class. In one conversation, for example, a boy talked about a book, "The Stink Afore Rismas".[33] When I didn't understand, another boy interjected with "The Stink Before Christmas", his speech closer to 'standard' English. Through this exchange, though not alone, I assumed the first boy to be working class and the second, middle class. The confidence displayed by the second boy, assuming I would understand when *he* articulated the words, I also perceived as an embodied middle-class disposition in Bourdieusian terms.

All of the above highlights the difficult, subjective and partial nature of classed and raced categorisation but my attempts have been rigorous and considered. Added to the difficulties in locating the children in terms of class is the way class categories have become less distinct, as Chapter 1 discussed. Of Savage's seven 'new' classes, only the elite and the precariat appear clearly distinct from other classes. There is an unclear 'middle', which I call a 'hazy middle' made up of the traditionally working and lower middle classes, and it was in this unclear middle that I would situate several children.

Finally, in terms of gender, 22 girls and 40 boys participated in the study. No children said they identified as non-binary or as a gender different to the one assigned at birth. At Fairfield, boys outnumbered girls by two to one. At St Jude's, in Avon, girls outnumbered boys by the same ratio. In Clyde, there were almost three times more boys than girls. I was told this by one of the girls who, when asked what that was like said, "*You know*, nightmare!" Her words reflected frequent comments by staff about the greater challenges and high energy

[32] An EAL teacher was a teacher whose priority was to support the learning of children who were at various stages of learning English as an additional language.
[33] 'Afore' in "The Stink Afore Rismas" is an example of Scots.

of the class because of this gender composition. Such perceptions highlight the ways in which particular gendered characteristics become ascribed to, and possibly enacted by, boys and girls. In this case boys were assumed to be harder to manage, less compliant and more boisterous.

In the thesis, gender is understood from a feminist poststructural perspective as something that is produced through our actions and how others position us, within structuring cultural discourses, and not as something one 'naturally' is (Pascoe, 2007; Renold, 2004). The doing of gender can be understood as a 'performance' composed of repeated actions, both conscious and unconscious, which become inscribed in the body and psyche (Butler, 1999; see also Renold & Mellor, 2013). Within this production, children are understood as active agents in (re)producing gendered identities in their everyday social and cultural activity. While Renold reminds us there are no fixed gender norms, recognisable characteristics become attached to 'masculinity' and 'femininity', and from there, to the bodies of girls and boys, even if these are disrupted, resisted and adapted. I uncouple gender from bodies in the thesis by using Renold's terms, "doing boy" and "doing girl", to refer not to boys and girls per se, but to children's affective dispositions, relationships and interests that more closely align with dominant discourses of either the masculine or feminine (though of course children 'do gender' in more complex and unstable ways than this binary suggests). In this way, for example, a girl may be described as "doing boy" in her dispositions, interests and relationships. How the children in the study did gender came to matter at different times in how they talked about themselves as readers and how they coped with being positioned as a 'top' or 'struggling' reader.

Recruitment, Data-Sharing and Slow-Turning Wheels

Recruitment to the study became sensitive to the local context through working with my collaborative partner. Initially, for example, I proposed that participating schools should have 'outstanding' literacy practice, but this language changed when education managers suggested the term 'outstanding' was not the frequent qualifier in Scottish education that it was in England.[34] The key selection criteria became that schools practised ability-grouped reading and were interested in trying out mixed-attainment reading instruction. An email

[34] The usage is specific to England where all schools are graded by the inspection service, Ofsted, and the highest grade is 'outstanding'.

advert went to all primary schools in the authority, which received one response (see Appendix 3). Only St Jude's was keen to participate, and they fulfilled the selection criteria. The education managers suggested extending my fieldwork to a second site[35] and helped recruit Fairfield to the study. The teacher at Fairfield had been a vocal advocate of ability grouping but was now curious to investigate this and alternative approaches.

Prior to the recruitment I had received ethics clearance from the University but as the study was collaborative, an information sharing agreement was required between the local authority and the university. This took a further eight months to complete, as issues around indemnity and data security passed between lawyers. The agreement was signed in time for the research to begin in earnest at the start of a new school year, with a short orientation period in the summer term prior at St Jude's (Fairfield couldn't accommodate an orientation period).

In order to inform the children, parents and teachers about the study and seek written consent to participate, I first organised meetings with teachers and parents, as well as producing participant information sheets in English, Urdu and Polish.[36] The information sheets and consent forms outlined the types of data that would be collected, how it would be stored, and the uses to which it would be put (see Appendix 4). Parental consent for their child to participate was sought first, following BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018), followed by children's consent. I ensured the children could discuss the project just with their parents and discuss the project just with myself and the teacher (Flewitt, 2005). By doing this I hoped to carve out space for autonomous decision-making however partial. Children spend much of their time willingly and unwillingly complying with the routines, expectations and values of adults and this presents an extra dimension to the power relationships between researcher and research subjects (Atkinson, 2019; Blaisdell, 2019; Mandell, 1988). I took extra care to make it clear children could choose whether to participate in the study, and three children at St Jude's chose not to consent. Although their absence calls attention to whose stories get to be told and what remains untold, I needed to remember that their experience is not in my gift.

[35] St Jude's was known to practice mixed-attainment 'reading for pleasure' and, because of this, the education managers felt the contrast between the two phases of my research may not have been so pronounced in that school.
[36] At the time I did not know that there was a Slovakian family who may have appreciated the information sheet in Slovakian. Although the parents gave consent, the child later said he was the most fluent in English in his family so the omission to produce it in Slovakian may have limited their access to the details of the study to which they gave consent.

When discussing the project with the children, one worried about computer viruses and another feared the data could be lost in a fire. I explained that the data was stored securely in more than one location across the university servers. The rest of the discussion centred around pseudonyms. Two children did not want pseudonyms but university ethics, which I described, would not allow children's real names to be used. I made the decision at this point to invite children to choose their own pseudonyms, hoping it might restore some choice to them, which they welcomed. A teacher specified they had to choose a 'normal' first name for their pseudonym, "no footballers, superheroes or princesses". One boy chose Lionel, a famous footballer's first name, and from his smile I imagined him pleased to subvert the 'no footballers' rule. Another chose Chewbacca, despite the frustration he expressed in spelling it, because he and his dad watched Star Wars together. A girl chose Puzzle because it was part of her on-line gaming name. Although pseudonyms personalised by the children felt positive, some choices obscured facets of their identity. When I first presented my work at a conference, despite me introducing her as 'she', the gender-neutrality of the name Puzzle prompted participants to misremember her as a boy because of her interests and the way she spoke of them. This misrecognition proved instrumental in my analysis of gendered reactions to being in the so-called bottom reading group in Chapter 5. However, the choice of Western non-Muslim names, Lewis and Tom, by the two Muslim boys of Pakistani heritage erased aspects of their heritage.

I regard written consent as provisional since consent is best viewed as constantly negotiated, which is particularly important when working with children, as they may not envision all that will be involved (Flewitt, 2006; Warin, 2011). I reminded them they could choose when to participate and tried to attune to changes of heart and boredom. Parents and teachers, who had more intimate knowledge of the children, were asked to communicate if a child no longer wished to participate in the study (Flewitt, 2006).

All five teachers volunteered their participation, though the recruitment of the fifth teacher proved ethically challenging. I was in the school office when, new to the school and the profession, the teacher arrived to meet her class. A conversation between me and the headteacher, in the teacher's presence, went something like this:

Headteacher: Ah, this is Jane. She's going to be the teacher in *your* P3 class.

Jess: If she would like to participate.

Headteacher: Of course, she'd like to participate. It'll be really good for her!

I felt it would be more difficult for this teacher to opt out because of the professional hierarchy and the clear indication from the headteacher that she should participate. In an effort to ameliorate pressure to participate I spoke to the teacher separately. When I explained the project, she said she would like to participate and talked of the alignment between the study's sociocultural perspective on literacy and her own, which she had recently explored in her university dissertation. Through this alignment I felt her consent was agentic rather than forced.

Ethnography: Phases and Philosophy

Two phases of the ethnography were planned, each of similar duration. The first would explore children's experience of ability-grouped reading and the second that of mixed attainment reading. Ethnographic methods planned for both periods included observation, conversations and reading with children. The original timeline for the project is shown in Figure 1.

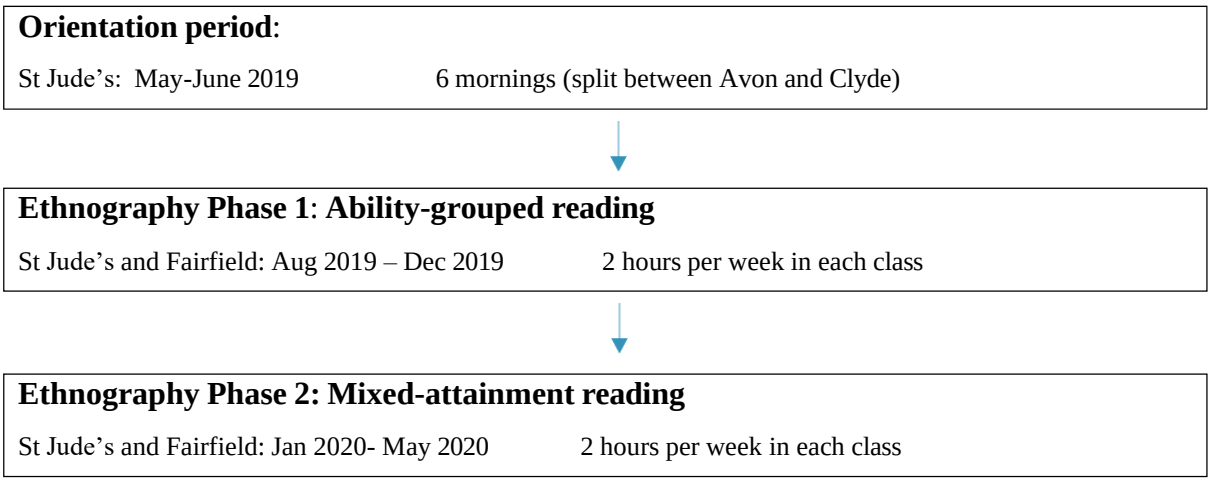

Figure 1: Original research phases and timeframes

Although these two phases did happen, they were not of equal breadth or duration, mainly due to school closures during the pandemic. This necessitated significant adjustment to the

weighting of ability-grouped and mixed-attainment reading in the thesis. Figure 2 shows the actual stages and timeframes of the fieldwork.

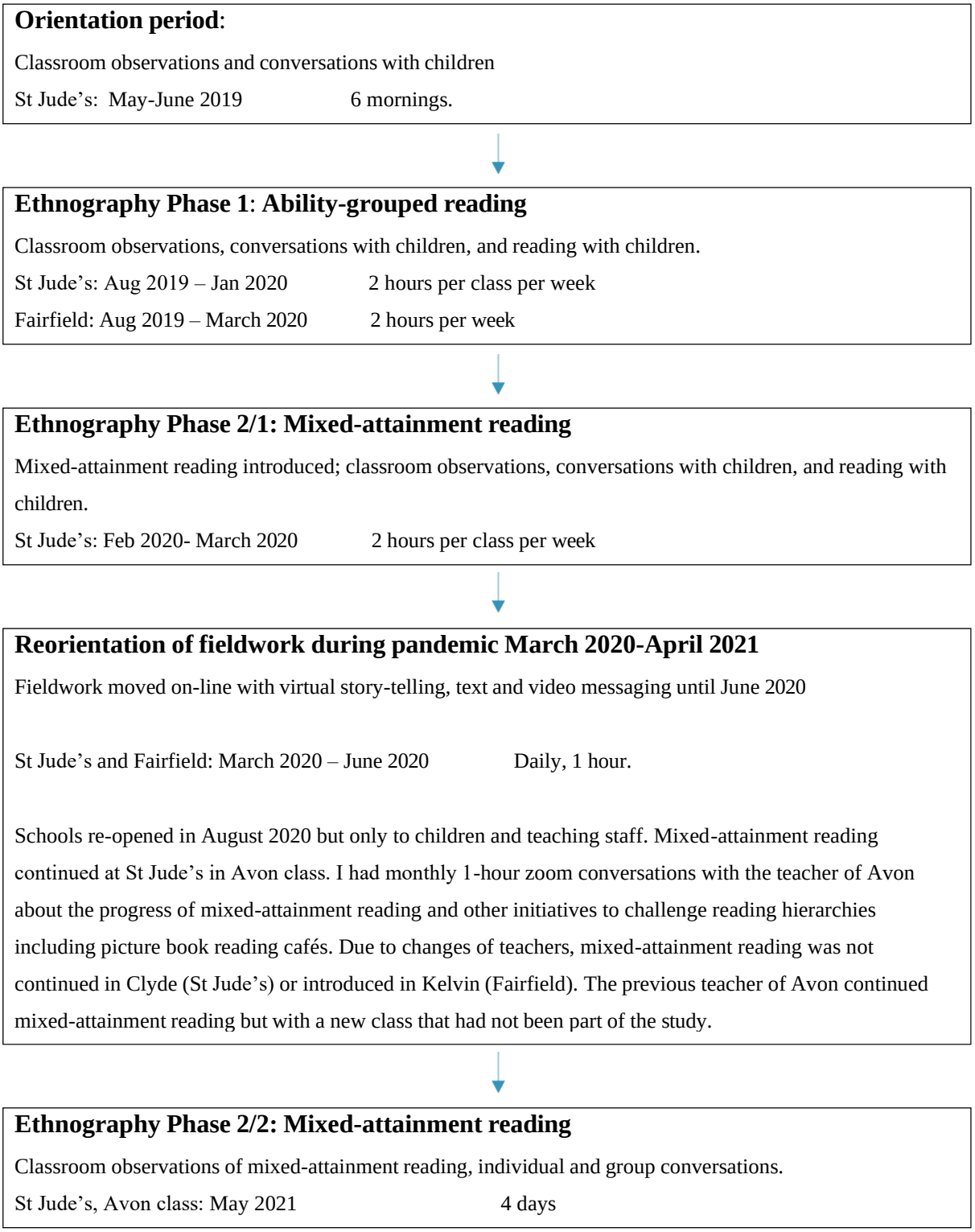

Figure 2: Actual research phases and timeframes

Prior to school closures, mixed-attainment reading had been postponed in both schools because of a delay in purchasing standardised reading assessments. My original research design had included measuring reading attainment using such assessments at the beginning

and end of a period of mixed-attainment reading. At Fairfield the delay was longer (due to staff illness) and mixed-attainment reading was not introduced before schools closed. Choosing to use reading assessments had always been difficult to reconcile with a methodology that foregrounded children's perspectives. Attainment data could, however, form an important part of the story when sharing findings with educationalists, including my collaborating partner. If mixed attainment reading improved reading outcomes it could increase its attractiveness to headteachers and policy makers who are judged on children's attainment and on the poverty-related attainment gap. Because of the delay in the tests arriving, and subsequent school closures, the collection of attainment data had to be abandoned. On reflection, attainment data was always irreconcilable with my methodology that trusted in the standpoint of children and this series of events released me from one of the missteps of the research design.

Ethnography involves extended periods of immersion, observation, and often, participation. What counts as an 'extended period' can be contested (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Shah, 2017) but it always involves enough time and patience to get know a community on its own terms (Bernard, 2017). I chose to do an ethnography for its potential to create space for children's affective, social, and intellectual experience to matter most in research inquiry (Street, 2002). Because of generational power dynamics, children's perspectives are more likely to emerge when adults immerse in children's world, tuning into what Christensen (2004) calls their "cultures of communication".

There is nothing inherently emancipatory about the practice of ethnography; its history in colonialism, for example, is testament to this (Skeggs, 2001). Yet, this ethnography has feminist intent which, argues Skeggs (2002), means researching with an awareness of power between researcher and participants, including generational power, and the multiple social positions we occupy. It involves desire to do whatever is possible to equalise power inequalities within the research. The perspectives of those less heard in society are valued more than the perspectives of the powerful, such as the educational establishment. Feminist ethnography means holding and acting on the principles of accountability, responsibility and reciprocity. It is reflexive, in ways that help me see myself in the workings of power.

Reflexivity in social science research has its origins in feminist challenges to universalism and god-like objectivity claimed by (often) masculine research (Adkins, 2002; Skeggs, 2002). Ironically, given its radical origins, reflexivity has been co-opted as tool for authoring the

(researcher) self, according to Adkins. It can become a form of "ontological egotism" that stifles or fixes subjects in place. Adkins criticises this turn and illustrates it with a journal review that compares her study of sexuality in the tourist industry with a study of masculinity and business culture. The latter's author self-consciously centres himself in the write up while Adkins does not. The reviewer portrays his study as reflexive and Adkins' as not, despite reflexivity ethically informing every step of Adkins' feminist research process (Skeggs, 2002). Reflexivity as an ethical practice, advanced by Adkins and Skeggs, keeps the focus of research on the subjects of the research so the researcher doesn't become the story. It is with moment-to-moment ethical mindfulness (Guillemin and Heggen, 2009) that the enactment of power can be more clearly revealed, ethical dilemmas recognised, and actions considered that prioritise participants' wellbeing over research aims and academic reputation.

I hope that my reflexive practice has embodied that advocated by Adkins and Skeggs. It has involved recurring interrogation of how my positions as a White woman and hybrid working/middle-class literacy specialist affect my relationships with the children and the conclusions I draw from their experience. The most challenging and valuable work I have done in the study is endeavouring to acknowledge the partialities, embedded in these positions, that misrecognise and hold children in place. But I recognise the irony that by writing about this process, as I do at various points in the thesis, I am writing myself into the story in ways that may add legitimacy to my conclusions.

In thinking through the relationships of power within my study, I considered first Mandell's (1988) proposition of assuming the *least adult role* in researching with children. If I did not want children to relate to me as a teacher, for example, I had to refuse the role of sanctioner of their actions. However, I could not participate as a child in the children's world, as Mandell proposed, because I and the children knew I was not a child. In critiquing Mandell's concept, Atkinson (2019, p.196) points to the "inescapability of subject positions" in, for example, the schools where research takes place. These inescapable positions challenge the feasibility of enacting the least adult role. Blaisdell (2019, p. 10) too found in her ethnographic study that even with concerted efforts to disrupt adult-child inequalities, there remain "barriers and tensions to the project of 'undoing' generational hierarchy." Instead, Atkinson emphasises a spectrum of roles on an inescapable adult/teacher spectrum. It was my shifting position on that spectrum that influenced the degree to which I was granted access to the children's world, as an "honorary child", to use Atkinson's (2019) phrase. Contained in this phrase, *honorary child*, is the awareness, proposed by Gallagher (2008),

that power does not purely reside in the adult, who gifts it to children - although adults retain strategic power, children exert tactical power in allowing, refusing and subverting adult authority. I took it as a sign of a little more equality when children pushed the boundaries of expected school behaviour when with me, as illustrated in the following visit to the library with Falcon, Maya and Chewbacca.

> Chatter and laughter gurgles between them as we motor along the corridors. Their rapid leg movement could just about be described as walking rather than running. I sense a glee and a glimpse of freedom from the usual constraints as they tell me they must always walk in the corridor. As I try to keep up with them, I am aware of their rule-breaking glee. The old teacher in me is both delighted and discombobulated. I know the benefits and limitations of these seemingly trivial rules and wonder/fear what other adults will make of them tearing through the school in my charge.
>
> Fieldnote, Fairfield, Kelvin

In the following section I will elaborate on how issues of power and the roles we enact were negotiated in the research methods employed in my study. The children did not stop thinking of me as a teacher but perhaps, to paraphrase Christianson (2004), as a strange sort of teacher that did not act as they expected. In that strangeness, I hope more space opened for relatively equal non-authoritarian communication.

Ways of Seeing, Hearing and Being in the Field

There were four methods employed in the ethnography: immersion/observation, audio-taped facilitated conversations, reading with children, and an intervention. I spent approximately 180 hours in school. Each school session was followed, on the same day, by writing reflexive fieldnotes from quick jottings made while observing and conversing with the children (see Appendix 5 for an example of my field recordings). I observed classroom life generally, but my main focus was on reading events, including group reading with the teacher, individual, paired and social reading time, as well as read-aloud sessions by the teacher. I noted too when reading or readers were mentioned while the children engaged in non-reading activity.

I employed a multisensory approach to ethnographic looking (Jewitt et al., 2016; Leander & Ehret, 2019; Renold & Mellor, 2013). This means I attended as closely to affect in the body as to words, the body's position, movement, stillness, gaze, posture, and to the tone, loudness and silences in speech. Observing in this multisensory way helped produce knowledge of children's experiences of reading in the situated natural, emotional and interconnected ways they occurred (Dunn, 2004). I observed how children felt or appeared to feel about reading and about themselves as readers. Patterns of sociability around reading were noted, how children positioned themselves and were positioned by others. What happened pedagogically in different reading groups was also a focus of inquiry. I was interested in how class, race and gender were lived in these reading encounters. When mixed attainment reading instruction was introduced the focus of observation was on how its introduction affected existing hierarchies around reading, feelings about reading, and the changes and challenges it prompted.

It also quickly became apparent that activities and routines not directly related to reading might be significant to the research, such as my encounter with the Pixies in Avon class at St Jude's during the short orientation period while they were still in Primary 2.[37] "They (the Pixies) are the bosses," said George, a White working-class boy of Scottish heritage. Only children who are "good", according to George, get to be Pixies. He had never been a Pixie and nor had any member of the lowest positioned reading group. George told me that if you need help you asked a Pixie, and only interrupt the teacher if there is a fire, you hear a bad word, or someone sticks up the middle finger. It became obvious through observation, however, that one the Pixies' main jobs was to help children read. As such, only the more fluent readers were chosen as Pixies. Recalling George's comment that only "good" children get to be Pixies, I feel angry that apparently innocuous initiatives like the Pixies couple reading with the personal quality of 'good'.

In terms of observation, I was uncertain how to show up as a researcher rather than teacher, as my fieldnote from day one reveals.

> I'm not sure how to position myself. What I did today didn't feel right. At first, I sat back and made notes in my notebook but that reminded me of times spent observing and 'judging' student teachers. So I put my notebook away and joined children at their desks where I was quickly recruited into helping them with their

[37] In Primary 2 (P2) in Scotland children are aged between 6 and 7.

> work. This is another familiar role but one incompatible with my intention to 'notice' and to disrupt the taken-for-granted power positions in generational, institutional and research relationships.
>
> Fieldnote, St Jude's, Avon

A more fruitful exchange in that orientation period involved the conversation with George about the Pixies. He had come over to ask what I was making notes about. When he mentioned the Pixies, I asked if he could tell me about them, which positioned him as the knower and me as the learner. This set the pattern for subsequent observation and participation sessions, though there was slippage into more teacher/pupil interactions at times. Generally, time in the classroom became balanced between sitting back and observing with participating in the life of the class and listening when children wanted to explain things to me.

I began the fieldwork by making my notebook visible to remind participants that I was a researcher (Haynes, 2019). Pascoe (2011), too, suggests the notebook acts as a reminder that research is happening, in case a growing rapport leads participants to divulge more than they would wish to for research. Pragmatically too, I made quick notes in the classroom through fear of forgetting a movement, the turn of a head, a tone of voice that may suggest an affective surge or ripple (see Appendix 5 again, for an example of how gesture etc. was captured in quick sketches). Progressively, however, the notebook's visibility felt intrusive, potentially appearing to pass judgement on children. Two children in particular would glare at the notebook when I jotted something down and it was their reaction that prompted me to leave the classroom if I wanted to make notes.

More generally, I grappled with making notes for reasons related to 'presence'. Note taking is an established feature of participant observation (Van Maanen, 2011). Yet, each time I made notes in the field I mentally and affectively flipped out of the context that I was trying to understand. I share the following reservations expressed by Brummans and Vásquez (2016, p. 120).

> Textualization entails trying to make sense of the lived experience by inscribing it, while being confronted by the fact that writing is but one form of inhabiting and knowing the world (that) may obstruct other forms of being in the world.

Certainly, each moment I paused to make notes my attention became fractured. Yet there is tension between maintaining presence and wanting to represent children's experience and context as clearly as possible. This remained a tension in the fieldwork; sometimes I popped out to do copious jotting and at other times I left my notebook to one side and concentrated on being present in the children's world. But always my time in the classroom was followed on the same day by writing up fieldnotes. By doing this I hoped to capture as much as I could before memory lost or altered what had been seen and heard. I combined observational notes with reflexion so I could see the context for the reflection. I distinguished these two kinds of writing by italicising my reflections and analytical musings. When I include extracts of fieldnotes in the chapters ahead, I retain this distinction between observation and reflection by italicising reflection. In the end my fieldnotes stretched to over 130,000 words and formed a substantial data set for analysis.

As well as observing and participating in the classroom, I engaged in audio-taped facilitated conversation with individual children and small groups. I planned to conduct two facilitated conversations about reading with each member of the so-called bottom reading group and some members of the middle and top group. This changed to a more haphazard but responsive model, as I followed up impromptu conversations and noticings. In the end I had between one and three audio-taped *individual* conversations with all members of the so-called bottom reading group (except Millie, who chose to chat to me with one of her friends) and small group conversations with them and with some members of the middle and top group. I felt a constant tension between observing in class and having these facilitated conversations. However, it proved an imperfectly fruitful combination that elicited multisensory insights into children's experience and positioning.

The conversations generally lasted between 40 minutes and an hour (see Appendix 6 for a summary of the conversations). The term 'facilitated conversations' comes from childhood researchers (e.g., Christensen, 2004; Mayall, 2008) who emphasise the need to loosen one's research agenda enough to allow conversations to develop from children's points of reference. This shares a sensibility with feminist standpoint theorists (e.g., Smith, 1997, 2002; Hill Collins, 1990). Although I asked some pre-planned questions, the fluid nature of these conversations, often led by the children, increased the possibility of eliciting stories of reading from their perspectives. Reading, for example, might play an inconsequential part in a child's life but if the questions asked focus solely on reading, its insignificance may not be conveyed to the same extent.

It is important to remember that conversations take place within classed, raced and gendered relationships of power (Lareau, 2011). As I discussed in Chapter 1, I was sometimes more aware of these dynamics in hindsight. I realised, for example, that some of the questions I asked the children were soaked in middle-class assumptions that centred intergenerational (book) reading. This centring might have delegitimised other aspects of "living literacies" (Pahl & Rowsell, 2020) . Yet despite my limitations, much of our conversation *was* free-flowing, and led enthusiastically by the children. In this way, there was more time spent talking about friendships, football, computer games, worries, home life, and gossiping than talking directly about reading. Through this I got a sense of the weight, space and shifting position that reading took up in their complex inner and outer/social lives.

I followed the advice of Phelan and Kinsella (2013) on attempting to equalise power, such as asking children where they would like to talk and offering the audio-recording equipment for them to try out first. The children invariably chose to talk in the nurture room, which was filled with sofas and soft toys.[38] I refrained from using the management techniques I had used as a teacher, but this could be emotionally challenging when children behaved in ways that would normally be regulated by adults in school, as illustrated in the following example.

> The group came willingly and excitedly out of the classroom. I invited them to use the audio-recording equipment first. The boys took to screaming into the recorder. Josh started touching my hair and asking me if it was dyed. The other boys shrieked with laughter at this. The girls tried to establish order by miming the gestures used by the teacher as 'quietening' strategies, touching their shoulders, head, pointing to eyes, then finger on lips, to no avail: the boys continued to shout and laugh.
>
> Fieldnotes, St Jude's, Clyde

I felt a mixture of humiliation, awkwardness and panic during this episode, and it reveals the challenges of 'misbehaviour' that Atkinson (2019) cites in attempting to honour Mandell's (1988) *less adult role*. I was not acting like a teacher but nor could I step out of being an adult who had set up the discussion and could call time on the children's 'fun'. I feared that other adults would judge my 'inability to control' even a small number of children

[38] The nurture room was a non-teaching room, with comfortable seating and boxes of toys, that served a nurture purpose e.g., a quiet space where children might speak to adults if they were upset.

when I was supposed to be a respected teacher-educator, and that hurt my pride. But it also did not feel a useful episode in terms of eliciting children's views on reading.

Being a researcher in school, as Atkinson again points out, involves a tricky balance between maintaining good relationships with the teachers and joining the children in disrupting established power relationships in the interest of research. The children's behaviour illustrates that power does not just reside in adults, to be 'given' to 'passive' children. The episode could be interpreted as an exertion of children's tactical power, seizing an opportunity to push back against the strategic institutional power of adults and with it, a refusal of the research techniques I planned to use (Gallagher, 2008). It is important, however, not to idealise children's agency so that all acts of disruption are viewed as benign (Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Holloway et al., 2018). Power can be exerted by children over other less dominant children or groups. In the example above from the fieldnotes there appeared a gendered domination by the boys over me and the girls, which the girls unsuccessfully tried to counter.

The third research method was reading with the children, which combined research skills with pedagogical knowledge of reading to gain insights into children as readers. I imagine that in these exchanges I was viewed particularly as a teacher. When reading with children I was interested in how they engaged with and talked about books. I closely observed what happened when they read, both affectively (in body, gesture, words and facial expression) and in the strategies they used to decipher print and illustrations. I either offered a selection of books to choose from or children brought their reading book or library book. By offering a selection of books I aimed to record which types of books they chose and why. This activity was prompted by observing that picture books appeared to be stigmatised in the classroom.

Children chose whether to read to me, us read together, or me read to them. Ensuring children had a choice in how the reading happened was ethically important. Some children, for example, did not like being observed stumbling on a word and chose not to read to me. I also spent a day at Fairfield conducting reading running records with each child in the class (see Appendix 7 for an example of a running record and explanation of how they work). The children could opt not to take part in this, though all did. Running records ascertain which book level a child can read with between 90 and 95% word accuracy. This is considered the optimum level to help maintain sense of what they read (Bodman & Franklin, 2014; Clay, 1993). The running records enabled me to see how closely children's reading book, and thus

their allocated reading group, matched their level of print fluency. Through this I identified children who were misallocated to their reading group. How social class and ethnicity mattered in these misallocations is discussed in Chapter 6.

Finally, in terms of methods, mixed attainment reading instruction was introduced as an intervention in Avon and Clyde at St Jude's, but not Fairfield due to conditions discussed earlier in the chapter. For the intervention, I worked with the teachers at St Jude's to develop a pedagogical understanding of the mixed attainment approach. The children would be brought together in random groups, discuss what they would do if stuck on a word, read aloud to themselves while the teacher coached them, and then work together afterwards to work out unfamiliar words. The teacher and I spoke to their class about how reading instruction was going to change. The following extract from fieldnotes (St Jude's, Avon) further highlights tensions between my researcher/teacher personas (words in italics are my reflective notes).

> The teacher begins by asking what they might do if stuck on a word. They have whiteboards with them (at my suggestion) and the teacher says they can write down words they are stuck on and they can work them out together at the end. This again is suggested by me. *More than at any other time in the fieldwork I am taking a more active part in the instruction. I wonder if this is ok methodologically and if it's ok with the teacher. I need to ask her.*

As the extract shows, I operated as a teacher researcher in the context of the intervention, which conflicted with my attempts to relinquish the adult/teacher role. I believe, though, that however imperfectly, there was still some space for myself and the children to step out of traditional, generational and educational power relations that have been discussed in the chapter. The teachers in Avon and Clyde continued mixed-attainment reading and I returned to observing the emotions, interactions and reading practices within this. Conversations continued with children, and explored the social relationships in the new system, how they felt about mixed attainment reading and about reading in general. These observations and conversations happened before and after schools closed due to the pandemic.

Telling Stories of Children's Reading in Hierarchical Reading Groups

Ontologically I align with feminist social constructionism, in proposing that there is no objective truth to be discovered through research. All knowing is partial, contextual, interpretative, situated in particular contexts and relationships of power (Skeggs, 2001). In the children's words and affective movements, they were the knowers of their positions, feelings and actions. They were also the known, to the extent that I was the listener, watcher and interpreter of their perspectives. I am motivated to give as faithful, plausible and rigorous an account of their perspectives as I can.

Analysing and telling stories of children's reading was as much about feeling as it was about being methodical, though I was also methodical through thematic analysis of fieldnotes, conversation transcripts and reflexive journaling. In trusting to feeling I was encouraged by Reay (2017, p. 6) who describes her analysis as "an incomplete patchwork of narratives … that owes as much to intuition and feeling as it does to scholarly rigour." Rather than beginning the interpretive process with thematic analysis, I began by composing narrative portraits of children in the so-called bottom reading group, using writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson & Adams, 2011). The term *narrative portrait* was devised by Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs to describe a composition made from selecting and reordering fieldnotes, interviews and other documents to construct narratives that, they suggest, "give more space to the actual stories people tell about their own lives" (2020, p. 613). It can interrupt the privileging of researcher analysis and interpretation. They acknowledge, however, as I do, that researchers (should) bring valuable theoretical knowledge of the subject being explored and that the deprivileging of the researcher is always partial. Narrative portraits, through selection and ordering, will still reflect the stance of the inquirer.

Early drafts of the narrative portraits preceded thematic analysis but involved slow, iterative and close reading of fieldnotes, searching them for mention of particular children, and listening again to audio-taped (and transcribed) conversations. By beginning with the individual child, my appreciation of each participant grew, and I noticed their more subtle ways of being in the world that might have been overlooked. This form of analysis and presentation aligns with life story research (Etherington, 2009; McCormack, 2004). In the thesis the portraits serve a dual purpose. Firstly, each one that appears in the thesis was chosen and developed to illustrate significant themes, told through story, that I identified in my analysis of empirical material, in conversation with Bourdieu's conceptual tools. This

approach was most strongly influenced by Lareau's (2011) germinal text, *Unequal Childhoods*. There, each chapter develops a central theme around classed and raced child rearing, told through the story of one participant and their family. As Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs (2020, p. 612) say, "Narratives put the personal and the social in the same space; in an overlapping, intricate relationship." The stories I composed tell of how class, race and gender were lived, embodied and came to matter and not matter in the experience of ability-grouped and mixed-attainment reading. Secondly, narrative portraiture provided the space for multisensory forms of communication to convey meanings rather than cutting off parts of speech from the context in which those words were spoken. That being said, participants' words convey much of how they want to present themselves to others. Following the example of Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs, I have also developed narrative portraits composed only of participants' words for narrative effect and for meaning.

Narrative portraits and other extended foci on particular children make the individual children more present in the thesis. I hope this personalisation increases the emotional and intellectual connections between the thesis and the reader. To develop this quality of presence, I also invited children to draw self-portraits, which I include for children who chose to draw them. The narratives, I suggest, have ontological significance in their own right, in their centring of emotion, spirit and agency in children's experiences of reading (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020). I have a partiality for this kind of storytelling, and the academic work that has profoundly affected, and stayed with, me often contains extended relatable portrayals of research participants (Lareau, 2011; see also Reay, 2002; Wilson, 2013). This form of academic presentation can have a similar effect to good fiction: it helps me to walk a while in someone else's shoes, and in that walking, there is the chance for empathy and understanding to bloom. However, the idea that one can, through reading, understand what it is like to be and feel as another person or animal, *can* flatten important and complex differences and set up the reader as 'judge'. Boler (1999) refers to this as "passive empathy". Empathetic reading can deepen and become more active when one's own positionality is critically interrogated in relation to the obstacles a subject encounters.

And so, narrative portraiture overlapped with, informed and was informed by the thematic analysis of the empirical material. I transcribed all the conversations with children myself, which allowed me to listen not just to the words but how the words were said, and the tone, volume and prosody of the words. The act of transcription was a reflexive process as I thought through the ethical and sociopolitical implications and limitations of representing the

children's words using standard and non-standard orthographies. When scholars grapple with the politics of transcription it is often around the representation of non-dominant classed, raced and abled voices. A tension is expressed in this literature between using non-standard orthography to challenge linguistic hierarchies and capture authenticity in all its diversity, and an awareness of how the meaning in those words may be received in a society that often delegitimises those voices (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006; Jaffre, 2002; Roberts; 1997).

While mindful of the limitations of either choice (standard or mixed orthographies), I agree with Bucholtz (2000), that my practice should be informed by the analytical considerations of my study and sensitivity to sociopolitical context of the transcript.[39] Since the thesis is concerned with sociocultural influences on ability-grouped reading and in appreciating children's individuality, I chose to evoke the character of the speaker in ways that did not flatten their linguistic differences. In this there was no attempt at a full phonological transcription, which I believe would risk losing the meaning of the words in the unreadability of the text for most readers (Roberts, 1997). In addition, Jaffre (2002) makes the point that 'standard English' is an abstraction from how *all* people actually speak, even those who are more likely to be portrayed as 'standard' speakers i.e. those who are more culturally dominant in society. The realisation that I more easily noticed local accents, the use of Scots, and the grammar differences of children relatively new to English, sent me back to the audio recordings to listen more carefully to how the 'standard' speakers expressed themselves.

While transcribing, I noted children's feeling states mentioned in fieldnotes from the day of the conversation. As such, the transcription was a multimodal process. From these observations, initial codes were identified then added to a central document containing codes from other conversations (see Appendix 8 for a transcript extract, with reflections and initial coding). In the central document the codes were grouped together in thematic clusters (see Appendix 9). These thematic clusters formed the basis of a coding structure in Nvivo, which was used to analyse the fieldnotes, revisit transcripts and my reflexive journaling. If another code was identified during this process, it was added to the existing coding framework. Approaching the coding in this way avoided a proliferation of codes on Nvivo that can obscure rather than reveal patterns.

[39] Corden and Sainsbury (2006), in a survey of researchers, found that participants had not liked the way their regional accents had been represented and this highlights a danger with the researcher's attempts at representation using non-standard orthographies. Ideally, I would have read the transcripts extracts with each child so they could say whether they were happy with the representation, but I did not consider this until the fieldwork was finished and it was too late.

Conclusion

The chapter has set out the research context, three primary classrooms, situated in two schools, within particular geographical locations and the children were introduced as the research subjects. As the study is concerned with how social class, race and gender does and does not matter in the experience of reading in primary schools, time was taken to explain how each is conceptualised in relation to the research participants. The recruitment process was explained and negotiation of consent to participate in the study was discussed. The phases of the ethnography were then mapped out within the adjustments necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research methods of observation, facilitated conversations, reading with children and intervention were discussed in the context of power and ethics. Particularly, the role of 'less adult' (Mandell, 1988) was critiqued in how I appeared as a researcher in these different research methods. The children often responded to me as a teacher, however much I tried to disrupt this. This was compounded by some of the contradictory positions I took up as a researcher. But I hope the unusual teacher I tried to be, allowed both me and the children to stretch the generational and institutional hierarchies and create more space for children to speak from their own perspectives.

The chapter also introduced the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the study, which informed the methodological approach of feminist ethnography (Skeggs; 2001). Like Skeggs, I am motivated by an ambitious desire to see all oppression end and equality take its place. Short of, but towards, this aim, the study is designed towards revelation and disruption of pedagogical actions that constrain educational progress in ways that are classed, raced and gendered. The collaborative nature of the PhD with a local education authority enhanced its sensitivity to the research context and the possibilities that the knowledge produced may inform practice as well as policy.

It is particularly helpful to explore children's experiences of reading relationally and situationally because it is in and through these relational contexts that reader identities develop and, indeed, reading hierarchies form. The ethnography has allowed close and sustained attention to the multifarious ways that the children relate and express their feelings, thoughts and perspectives. They are the knowers of reading in hierarchical and mixed-attainment reading groups. Narrative portraits, and other techniques, give as much space as possible to the children's influence and presence: I want their words to speak directly to the

reader. They are also ‘known’, by the researcher – and likely the reader - in ways they don’t necessarily see themselves. In the next four chapters I select their words, interpret their affective movements, and use their experience to develop theoretical interpretations of how class, race and gender do and don’t come to matter, and how power is disrupted in children’s school-based reading.

Chapter 4

A Feeling for Reading

Introduction

The research question, 'Does ability-grouped reading affect children's identity and feelings for reading and, if so, in what ways?', has guided this ethnography. Yet, the question still risks missing aspects of children's reading that may be obscured by the adult social scientist's preoccupations and assumptions about ability grouping. And so, this first findings chapter explores more generally how reading mattered and did not matter to the children in the so-called bottom reading group. I will explore how reading identities and reading events were felt in the body, expressed in words and in the emotional tone in those words. The chapter is primarily about children in the so-called bottom reading group, and where children from other reading groups are introduced this will be made clear.

Three themes are presented to illustrate the children's affective relationship with reading, assuming a multimodal understanding of what reading can involve (Jewitt et al., 2016; Kress, 2010; Pahl & Rowsell, 2020). The first of these themes, *Enthusiastic Lovers of Stories,* introduces the children as inquisitive appreciators of stories, stories that come in many forms including visual, oral and print. When books are referred to, it is in the specific context of stories being read *to them* in school. The second theme, *Books in the Matrix of Children's Lives,* shifts location, to how books, specifically, fitted into children's home and social lives. In the final theme, *Reading Can Also Be a Wee Bit Nerve-Wracking*, I explore how children felt and acted when they read print for themselves in school, as opposed to when others read to them. The three themes are developed through narrative portraits (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020) that exemplify rather than fragment their voices, offering a more holistic view of complex personhoods (Wilson, 2016). I attend as closely to the children's joy and agency as to their anxieties and constrictions. Towards the end of the chapter, I specifically explore the act of deciphering and making sense of printed words, and for clarity I distinguish this as *print reading*. Reading words still involves an interplay with reading visuals, such as in picture books and comics. However, deciphering the written code is such a key focus for young children's reading development that it can be saturated with particular affects.

Enthusiastic Lovers of Stories

One of the things that struck me was what enthusiastic lovers of stories the children were. This love of story is itself a less told story in much of the research literature. By beginning here, I contrast my findings with work that more often foregrounds disaffection, concealment and emotional stress around reading for children in, for example, the lowest positioned reading group (e.g., Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2018; Moss, 2007; Scherer, 2016). Children's appreciation of stories can be missed when attention is drawn to problems around reading as it is taught and organised in school.

Almost all the children in the so-called bottom reading group (N= 10 of 14) expressed delight in stories. This was observed in words, through bodies bent towards books and comics, through light in their eyes and requests for more stories. Their delight in book-based stories was particularly clear when the stories were read *to* them, by me, their teachers or friends; that is when the children did not have to grapple with deciphering print for themselves. In these contexts, they were not disengaged from books at all, fictional or factual. This finding chimes with one influential study on The Power of Reading Project run by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education in London (O'Sullivan and McGonigle, 2010). The authors reported the positive impact on children who were positioned as struggling readers when books were read aloud by the teacher. From my own study, the following narrative portrait of Jamie, a White working-class boy of Scottish heritage, is illustrative of the agency and engagement in story expressed by most children in the lowest positioned group. The narrative portrait is composed from fieldnotes and audio-taped conversation.

Figure 3: Self-portrait by Jamie

Jamie is in the lowest positioned reading group, and he loves a good story. He flags his interest in stories the very first time I read with him, in the following way. Laying out a selection of picture books, I say, “Shall we have a little read? I can tell you a bit about them if you w--” Jamie cuts me off mid-flow, with a smile dancing through his words. “There’s one book I’m staring at right now,” he says. He is ahead of me, already picking out what he would like to read. This turns out to be *Hermelin* by Mini Grey, a story of lost objects found by a small detective mouse. The following sequence captures an affective engagement with the story, expressed through unwavering attention, smiles and talk-back that was characteristic of us reading a book together. The text from the book is written here in italics, to distinguish it from our chat.

Jess: *There was Lady Chumley-Plumley talking on the phone and also dangling her arm out of the window.*

Jamie: So, I'm guessing that's her!

Jess: I think that's a pretty good guess. I would guess that.

Jamie: Wait! Does it say 'mumbling'?

Jess: It says Lady Chumley was talking on the phone.

Jamie: Awww.

Jess: But '*blah blah blah'* is like talking, isn't it? It's like pretend talking.

Jamie: It's like pretend but it's *also* like mumbling!

[The reading continues with Jamie commenting on each new event]

Jamie: That's going to fall out the windae [window]! It's even sitting on the windae ledge!

Jess: (laughs) Precarious! *Captain Potts was trying to feed Parsley the cat.*

Jamie: He's ee'in' [eating] the fish!

Jess: He's ee'in' the fish. I bet that's Parsley. *Emily at Number 33, was pouring herself a bowl of Crunchy Flakes.*

Jamie: It even *says* 'Crunchy Flakes'!

Jess: Oh so it does. *Baby McMumbo had just thrown his toast into the flower bed.*

Jamie: Aye, see wance [once]…that's just like ma big brother. 'Cause see wance, he had like a wee pen and he dropped it on the road. And he dropped it on the road because he's clumsy… I'm no clumsy and I'm seven!

Jamie, Fairfield, Kelvin

I laughed along with Jamie as he recounted his brother's clumsiness. It was such a pleasure to read with him; his enthusiasm for stories was infectious. He seemed completely absorbed in the characters and events as they unfolded, connecting different parts of the story, thinking ahead, asserting opinions, and relating the story to his own life. His intimate dialogue with the story revealed the very opposite of a disengaged reader. He was doing what engaged readers generally do according to Chambers (2011) in his important work, *Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk*. If you listen in to people's book talk, Chambers suggests, it will meander along the three intersecting paths that I picked up in Jamie's book chat: sharing enthusiasms, sharing puzzles or confusions, and making connections within the text and with things they have read, seen or experienced. In addition, reading *Hermelin* with Jamie had the conditions that Cremin (2019, p.6,8) argues are crucial for children's development as agentic readers: it was "reader-led, reader-owned … social, affective and relational". If there is value in cultivating this love of reading, and I believe there is, then adults and peers may have a vital role to play through engaging authentically with children in these intimate informal "book blethers" as fellow readers (Cremin, 2019 p. 7).

But there are many ways to enjoy a good story. While Jamie's enthusiastic engagement in sharing a book in school was not uncommon among those in the lowest positioned group, some enjoyed their stories in other ways. Puzzle,[40] for example, created her own stories through recalling and reworking stories told to her by her mum. She also incorporated elements from her computer games and her collection of small plastic characters she called *The Grocery Gang*. In one audio-taped conversation she told me stories for thirty minutes, without pausing for breath it seemed, and spent less than three minutes answering questions I asked about reading books. Her response to my question of what she thought about reading was, "it's kinda boring". In the following narrative portrait, composed only from her words, she weaves together aspects of her life into characterful oral stories.

[40] Puzzle was a White girl of Polish heritage who had moved to Scotland with her family about two years before. Although I identified her as working class, largely on the basis of her dad's manual work (her mum didn't do paid work), class identifications are made more complex and ambiguous when families migrate, that is, they could have occupied a different class position in Poland.

Puzzle: A Narrative Portrait

Figure 4: Self-portrait by Puzzle

Sometimes I play with ma toys called Grocery Gang. I can show you them. They're like cool little guys. Try not to lose them. I think this guy has poop on his head. I just call him Poop-Duck. This guy, I haven't got this guy's name yet. Mmmm, maybe Alex might do. Alex left the school by the way. This guy's called Crazy because he is *crazy*. This is a Rare. I've a secret Rare in ma house. He's so tiny. I could lose him really easily. Mustardy, Watermelon Sugar, Frankenstein, Blue Ketchup, that's all ma guys. Ma mum has like a secret bit where she'll like open her bed and there's like thousands of books. They're like ideas for her so she likes telling me them, so then I can fall asleep quicker. Reindeer at the Window, that's the best. Ma mum made it up basically when I was like four years old, sometimes in Polish and sometimes in English. There was like a reindeer out the window. I was playing the Xbox and (ma brother) wouldn't let me play the computer, then we were in a little fight and then the reindeer at the window said em, "If you fight one more time, I'll take all the stuff away and you won't get it ever again." Then there's Reindeer out the House instead of Reindeer out the

> Window. Part three is Reindeer on the Roof. Part four is Reindeer on the Toilet. That's quite funny.
>
> Puzzle, St Jude's, Avon

Re-reading my reflective journal about this conversation I was surprised to read that the focus of my attention was on the believability of her words, not because I thought children less believable but for the many social reasons people are selective in what they share (Plummer, 1995). Was she recounting her mum's stories, I wondered, or had Puzzle adapted these into cautionary tales? It seems now that this is irrelevant and misses the most interesting thing about them. The importance of her words surely lies in her as a creator of stories, in which events and ideas from many areas of her life flow together to create unique humorous tales. Puzzle's stories also point to impermanency of experience since when I returned to school a year later, Puzzle had forgotten all about the Grocery Gang. She was now an avid reader of cartoon books, specifically the *Dog Man* series by Dav Pilkey.

Cash, a White working-class boy of Scottish heritage, also told stories when we chatted and read together, about the adventures of his new pet tortoise, Micky, named after Michelangelo from *Ninja Turtles*; of flying dinosaurs called pterodactyls that he discovered through watching programmes on Netflix; and the narrative games he and his friends played in the playground, like *Zombie Apocalypse*. The words seemed to tumble out of him as he told me about these things. He also enjoyed listening to stories in books. When I asked what his favourite thing was to do in school, he told me it was reading café. In a reading café children got to choose reading material and read socially together. He said,

> I love it, and you get like a little biscuit or a drink or something too. And you can talk to like your people next to you about your book and all that. 'cept sometimes see … the teacher actually reads to us sometimes in our reading café. Like if people (have) like trouble with their reading, like you can go down to the teacher and like read a book and all that.
>
> Cash, St Jude's, Clyde

While transcribing this part of our conversation, I paused on the topic of the reading café and wondered whether Cash was telling me what he might think a book-obsessed adult like myself may want to hear. But I also hear that, just like Puzzle, there are many narrative

pathways in his imagination. Some of these were nourished by a similar sociability around reading that was heard in Jamie's story (Cremin, 2019).

Each of these examples illustrate the rich, multidimensional, and contextualised nature of children's reading that was grounded in their lives. These accounts challenge deficit portrayals of working-class language and life that explain the so-called literacy attainment gap by the "poor" early language in "lower social classes" (Siraj et al., 2021; see also Fernald & Weislender, 2015). Children's love of stories also complicates a dualistic portrayal of readers as either engaged or disengaged. How these children show up as readers depends on the context. This point is made clearly in Learned's (2016) study of adolescents positioned as struggling readers in the US. The school allocated pupils to "engaged" and "unengaged" reading classes. When allocated to "unengaged" reading classes, pupils reported feelings of demoralisation, injustice and doubt about their intelligence. Yet, when the same pupils were in cross-curricular contexts, where co-construction was embedded in the pedagogy, they enacted very different reader identities. Only in this context would they persevere to develop reading-related skills. Likewise, the intention of this chapter is to eschew any homogenising of children's experience as readers or feelings about reading. The importance of context has been emphasised in their enactment of reader identities and affective responses to reading. While this section has explored the role stories play generally in their lives, the next section focusses specifically on the place and weight that books occupied in their home and social lives.

Books in the Matrix of Children's Lives

For the majority of children in the lowest positioned reading group (N=13 of 14) books seemed to occupy a relatively unimportant place in their home and social lives. Other things, such as time spent with siblings and cousins, playing outside with friends, pets, computer games and toys took up more affective space when they talked of their lives. The following narrative portrait of Millie, a White working-class girl of Scottish heritage, is illustrative of the relationship with books that many of the children in the lowest positioned reading group described having at home. The narrative portrait is composed from fieldnotes and audio-taped conversations with Millie.

Figure 5: Self-portrait by Millie

Millie is seven years old. She has lots of friends, all girls. She likes to dance and is an enthusiastic member of the Lunchtime Zumba Club in school. Reading books is part, but not the be-all and end-all, of her rich life. In my conversation with her and her friend Ellie, I can hear how reading fits into her life as a daughter, a sister, a reader and a future adult self. Reading is neither stressful, absent or singularly defining in the way she talks about her life. She has a few books at home, some got from trips to *McDonalds*, the fast-food restaurant, and she reads them, she tells me, mainly by herself. If she is not reading it is because there are other things that she wants to do, things she sees others in her family do.

She loves her stepsisters and as she talks of them her voice becomes stronger and more effervescent, her body more animated. When they come to her house at the weekend, she would rather play with them than read a book, she says. I ask whether she thinks she will read a lot when she is an adult and her response again illustrates the comfortable non-dominant place that reading occupies in her life. She says, "Em, maybe not because when you're older … you would have

> something else that you really like. And like you might want to go out and all that, and you like to go places … When you're older you can, you'll have a car… I don't think I want to drive when… I'm really bigger so I want to when I'm a teenager because my sister did."
>
> Millie, St Jude's, Avon

Millie talks of a life full of people, activities and things she values and enjoys. Reading fits in to her life; it is just doesn't take centre-stage. Many, though not all, children in the lowest positioned reading group enacted reader identities similar to Millie's that asserted their affective disinterest in reading books at home and in their free time. The pastime of reading books was often found in the margins of their lives, off centred by their enthusiasm for computer games, toys, playing, dancing, pets and family life. It was easy for a literacy researcher like me, who brought a strong belief in the emotionally, intellectually and economically transformative power of reading books, to misperceive a deficit in these stories that is not there.

Something that underpins deficit views of working-class lives is a binary that presents books as either absent or ever-present in children's daily lives (Anderson et al., 2003). Although this will be returned to more extensively in Chapter 6, the next short section begins to complicate this binary by illustrating the flexible affective relationship that children in the lowest positioned group had with books. In turn, this flexible relationship further challenges categorisations of readers as either engaged or disengaged. I do this by sharing stories of Jeffy, a White working-class boy of Scottish heritage. Like Millie, Jeffy told me in passing one day that he would much rather play with his toys than read a book. Yet the following narrative portrait composed from field notes shows that books *do* feature in the abundant things that capture Jeffy's interest. Extracts from the book we were reading are written in italics to help you, the reader, navigate through the cacophony. What is revealed is that books can matter differently in different moments and contexts.

Figure 6: Self-portrait of Jeffy

I invite Jeffy to come and read and chat today. As we enter (the nurture room) he spots two large boxes on the floor, brimming full of toys. A bright red plastic hyper-muscled man catches his eye. He really wants to buy him, he says. We move to the couch and I ask if he would like me to read to him from the selection of books I have spread out on the floor. He chooses *Pugs of the Frozen North*, by Philip Reeve and Sarah McIntyre, which his teacher has been reading to the class. Already, writing these field notes a couple of hours afterwards I can't quite remember what order the following conversation came in. It all happened in a jumpy-about way, but it went something like this.

> Very quickly, Jeffy says, "Oh is that a puppet over there?" He goes to investigate, sees a duck puppet, and Ducky comes with him to hear the story. Jeffy tells me that he usually comes to school in his dad's van. His dad works in a garage fixing cars. He's good at fixing cars, he says. I ask if his mum works and he says she works in a big shop. She's a seller. *Meanwhile Professor Shackleton Jones has arrived to begin the race. The professor, hearing of the coming of winter that signals the beginning of the race, had gone straight to the airpor*t. "Maybe it was Glasgow airport," says Jeffy. He likes Glasgow airport. Next year, he and his family, mum, dad, grandparents and sister are going to PortAventura. They are flying Jet2. He likes colourful planes like Jet2 and Easy Jet, not plain white ones. *Now Sir Basil Sprout-Dumpling arrives*. "He's a meany," says Jeffy and Ducky's face makes a perplexed expression. "Look Jess," he says, pointing to Ducky's quirking mouth. At some point the Black and Decker workbench calls his attention. He used to have one like this, he says. His favourite things are cars. He has an ambulance station at home with two ambulances in it. He also loves egg sandwiches. He had an egg roll with coleslaw yesterday for his lunch. I ask him a few times if he would like me to read a little more and each time he says yes. I read about a paragraph at a time, before we meander off on another interesting tangent.
>
> Jeffy, St Jude's, Clyde

Far from an impoverished inner wasteland devoid of the richness of books, this extract shows Jeffy's inner life bursting with colour, ideas, and fascinations. The book did catch his attention among the many other things that capture his attention. And at times the book prompted connections with those many other things, like airports, colourful planes and holidays. The extract also reveals a relationship with books that complicates the binary of engaged and disengaged readers in much of the discourse about boys' underachievement in reading (e.g., Frater, 1997; Hoff Sommers, 2015; Whitmire, 2010). In Moss's (2000, 2007) work on children's literacy and gender, for example, she identifies three categories of readers: *can and do* readers (those who can read and chose to read)*, can and don't* readers (those who can read but don't chose to read), and *can't yet/don't'* readers (those who cannot yet read print independently). Although these categories illuminate useful patterns when exploring influences on children as readers, they may also conceal the slipperiness of interest and attention. This fluidity means that, in any moment, so-called disengaged readers can be

engaged in books and vice versa. This is an important observation because it challenges debates around boys and reading which, as Scholes, Spina & Comber (2020, p. 2) point out, "often homogenise young males as reluctant, disengaged and, at times, adversarial readers", particularly working-class boys. It is a deficit view which may conceal sparks of engagement, which if fanned, could ignite in more sustained concentration and enjoyment of books and other printed material.

Indeed, when I returned to St Jude's a year on from the pre-pandemic fieldwork both Millie and Jeffy expressed a very different feeling about books. When I visited Jeffy's class, he put his hand up and told me he was reading David Walliams' *Billionaire Boy* in bed at night. In an audio-taped conversation with Millie she spoke of two books as her favourite chapter books, giving an account of the plots and the characters who were most like her and her stepsisters. She talked of reading long into the night. What the affective responses of Jeffy and Millie illustrate is that children are not easily categorised as engaged and disengaged readers of books. They shift both within reading events and with changing times and influences. One influence on the children's shift in reader identity, among many others, could be their involvement in this study, which is all about reading. Their desire to tell me, the researcher, about their engagement with reading could reveal influence of the researcher on the researched (Oswald et al., 2014).

Encountering Bourdieu's notion of what he terms, "the cultural arbitrary" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 8) proved a turning point in how I heard children's stories of home and inner lives that did not necessarily pivot around the reading of books. Bourdieu uses the term *cultural arbitrary* to argue that what gains cultural legitimacy has *no innate superiority* but masquerades as such when asserted by the more economically and culturally powerful in a given society. As a White, university-educated woman, I fit the demographic of those most likely to read books and to proclaim their value (Griswold et al., 2005). Through misrecognition, the reading habits of this group to which I belong are elevated above other pastimes and come to signal being better, cleverer and more refined (Atkinson, 2016). It is this notion of cultural arbitrariness that underpins Bourdieu's concept of *symbolic violence*. Through assuming the superiority of certain reading habits, for example, the cultural lives of those with less economic and cultural power are delegitimised and portrayed as unworthy and trashy (Skeggs, 2013; Jones, 2014; Tyler, 2020). This delegitimising portrayal is symbolic violence. In order to appreciate the worth in children's stories of their lives I had to recognise and challenge the partiality of my own elevation of reading. In addition, I began to recognise

that categorising children as either caring little about reading, as Millie's narrative portrait might convey, or being hooked by reading as she later appeared to be, obfuscates subtle and not so subtle affective shifts around reading, which risks fixing children in place.

Reading Can Also Be a Wee Bit Nerve-Wracking

In this section I move on to look specifically at the children's emotional relationship with reading when they were asked, or required, to read print (and illustrations) for themselves. This might involve reading aloud in a group or in one-to-one sessions with the teacher or other adult as part of a learning-to-read programme. When the children were required to read, their affective responses were vivid and varied but infused with more anxiety and uncertainty than when engaging with stories in other ways. As with all patterns, there were exceptions, such as Angel, a member of the so-called bottom reading group in Clyde, St Jude's, who conveyed her confidence as a reader by declaring to her class that she used not to be able to read but could now. But Angel's confidence *was* an exception. A more common emotional response for those in the bottom reading group involved elements of anxiety.

The following narrative portrait of Lucia Jasmine, a White working-class girl of Scottish heritage, offers a feel for how reading aloud was experienced moment by moment by most of the so-called bottom reading group, in shifting sensations of anxiety, relief, hesitancy and joy. The portrait is constructed from classroom observations, incidental chats and three 40-minute sessions (two were audio-taped) in which Lucia Jasmine read and chatted to me outside the classroom. Again, words from books are written in italics. As the portrait reveals, these reading sessions were, in the words of Leander & Boldt (2012, p. 32), "sites where affect, imagination, passion and energy (were) constantly being produced". Anxiety is present, but within a constantly changing flow of emotion, connections and shifting attention.

> Lucia Jasmine: A Narrative Portrait
>
> From my time in Kelvin class, I recall Lucia Jasmine's regular refrain, "Can I tell you something Jess?" as I pass by or sit near her. "Guess if I have a brother or not." I guess that she has, and I am right. He is 11 and in high school. When she tells me she is going to stay with her aunty because it is her birthday soon, she smiles with her whole face. Lucia Jasmine often asks if she can read with me and

we have read together numerous times over the year, sometimes casually in class and sometimes for a longer session out of class. On one occasion, as we walk along the corridor on the way to the library, Lucia Jasmine skips and gives a high five to two girls passing by.

Figure 7: Self-portrait by Lucia Jasmine

In the library she opens the book she has chosen to read, *Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears*. She talks of her fears: big giant daddy long legs and big mummy long legs. On the opening page there is small relatively dense print containing a message from the author, Emily Gravett. Lucia Jasmine's body goes still, and her eyes settle on the small dense words. "This is too small," she says, "let's not read this one." Do I witness another of her fears in this moment, that of reading small dense print? She picks another, *Ten Things I Can Do to Help My World*, by Melanie Walsh. Her mum works in a florist, she tells me, and she chose the book because of the flowers inside. As she reads, she tells me stories about her mum's

best friend at the florist who isn't really a best friend. "She's actually a bit bossy," she says. She reads tentatively, each word voiced with the intonation of a question. She encounters the word '*may*' a few times and, with shoulders and voice dropping, she says, "I keep forgetting that."

On another occasion, she is reading *Nobody Got Wet,* from the reading scheme, *Oxford Reading Tree*. The book is from a higher level than the level she is currently on. "This level's a bit hard," she says but she leans over the book and applies herself to the task with a steely upbeat energy. "Oh, I haven't met this family before," she says, as she bends in and looks closely at them. Back on the print she says, "I know that word, I know that word, I know that word," jumping out of her chair, "that was in my *Jumble Sale* book!" At another point she says, "Oh I keep forgetting *down*." The image that often plays in my mind as she reads is that of a plucky girl with high hopes as she sets off to do a long jump, only to feel deflation if the jump falls short, if a familiar word cannot be recalled, or if the flow of text breaks down.

Mice reappear when she is reading *Green Eggs and Ham*, by Dr Seuss. "*Do- you- like- green- eggs- and- ham?"* she reads, pausing between each word. When she gets to the phrases '*Would you like them in a house? Would you like them with a mouse?*' she reverts to sounding out each letter of 'mouse' and comes up with "m-o-u-s-e, monster". To help, I point to the visual similarity between 'mouse' and 'house', and when I say the sound 'ouse', her affective reaction is vibrant. She shouts out, "Mouse!" She calls it out with gusto, repeats it for good measure, and then starts to clap her hands. I hear achievement in her voice and in her hands clapping.

Lucia Jasmine, Fairfield, Kelvin

The narrative portrait charts the many small elations, deflations and connections Lucia Jasmine made as she applied herself to the business of reading print. And it did feel like 'business', that reading print aloud was a task she braced herself for, and frequently stumbled in. There were vibrant moments of revelation when a word rose from the page and popped into her mind, and she knew she had it. However, anxiety was never far away, particularly when she couldn't recall a word that she knew she had read before. I heard anxiety too in the

way each word she read was phrased as a question, as if she did not feel confident enough in her knowledge to commit herself.

In the following exchange, Tom and Alf articulated similarly anxious feelings about reading. Tom is a working-class boy, a Child of Colour, with Pakistani heritage[41] and Alf is a White working-class boy of Scottish heritage. The conversation happened while I chatted and painted with them in Fairfield.

> Jess: Can I ask you a question while you are painting?
>
> [There is a chorus of 'yehs' that sound upbeat.]
>
> Jess: Can you tell me what you feel about reading?
>
> Tom: Eh, I feel a bit, ah, I feel a bit, a wee bit nervous.
>
> Jess: Can you tell me a little bit more about that? What makes you feel nervous?
>
> Tom: Oh because I don't really like to read the books. Sometimes like I get mixed up with the words.
>
> Alf: Sometimes *I* get mixed up because there's tons uh [of] words in ma book… I choosed a level book but see when I looked in it…tons uh words! [42]
>
> Conversation with Tom, Alf and Jamie, Fairfield, Kelvin

This feeling of anxiety when presented with "tons of words" reminds me of the halt in Lucia Jasmine's body when she opened *Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears,* saw dense text, and opted for another book with bigger font and less words per page. In these examples, the children were talking about reading aloud to an adult or peers in order to practise reading. To understand what may be happening in these reading encounters it is important keep in mind the intertwining of social and personal elements of emotion (Williams, 2017). In the context of reading to an adult, there is a relationship of power. The children are obliged to read, even

[41] Although I apply the same caveat to identifying Tom as working class as I did with Puzzle, given the possibility they led middle class lives in the country they had left relatively recently, I situate Tom as working class partly by the decentring of print-based literacies (in Urdu and English) in his accounts of family life.

[42] When Alf talks about "a level book" he refers to a book from the reading scheme, in which the books are levelled to match a child's reading fluency. By mentioning this I think Alf is saying he chose a book that he should have been able to read but was instead presented with lots of words.

though they may *also* want to learn to read print. It is a context in which children may feel embarrassed in front of their peers if they make mistakes.

The children in the lowest positioned reading group were not alone, however, in finding this stressful. When I returned to the school a year after the fieldwork was interrupted, Stella[43] from the middle reading group had this to say about reading aloud to a group:

> I thought that was a bit intimidating because people were looking at you and were seeing if you messed it up or something like that.
>
> Conversation with Stella, Twinkle and Horris, St Jude's, Avon

Performative reading anxiety was also expressed by Will, a member of the highest positioned reading group in a conversation with him and two friends, Bingo and Kevin.[44]

> Will: Yes, I'm not a good reader.
>
> Jess: You don't think you're a good reader?
>
> Will: nnn [his voice is quieter now and less projected than it has been throughout the chat]
>
> Bingo: But you're really clever! …
>
> Jess: So … what makes you say you don't think you're a good reader?
>
> Will: I'm not confident at reading in front of the class … I just think I'm a bad reader.
>
> Jess: … How do you feel about reading when you're just reading on your own?
>
> Will: I feel fine. …

[43] Stella is White and of Scottish heritage. I did not get to know her well and am unsure of how I would identify her in class terms.
[44] Although I identified Kevin, Will and Bingo as White middle-class boys of Scottish heritage my knowledge of their family background and pastimes was sketchy. Accent played a part in identifying them as middle class, as did some of their parent's jobs; Bingo's mum was a senior teacher, for example. Other jobs were harder to place, however, like working with machinery, and for the council. I know little of the place reading occupied at home.

Jess: Is that … maybe more to do with being a bit shy in front of the group rather than you not being a good reader?

Will: Well, I think I'm ok at reading. It's just I'm a bit, I get a bit shy.

Conversation and book browse with Will, Bingo and Kevin, St Jude's, Clyde

In this extract Will talked of feeling shy when reading aloud, while Tom, earlier, talked of feeling a wee bit nervous about reading. Although they appear in similar emotion terrain, there are wider discourses and positions operating that create different "conditions of possibilities" (Renold & Mellor, 2013) for Will, a White middle-class boy in the highest group and Tom, a working-class Boy of Colour in the lowest group. Firstly, Bingo questioned that Will could be a poor reader since he was clever. This allowed Will to occupy a position of cleverness while saying he didn't feel confident reading print. As the next chapter will argue, this position is much less tenable for those in the lowest positioned reading group because of associations made by peers between intelligence and reading in the different groups. Secondly, when I interrogate my role in both exchanges, I find that I offered Will a way of explaining how he feels that maintained his position of 'good reader' and I did not do this with Tom or Alf. I did not question it when they spoke of feeling anxious about reading perhaps because I had assumed that, being in the lowest positioned group, they *would* feel anxious.

Sometimes when the children told me that they were not good at reading this was conveyed in the body as much as in words, as illustrated by in the following example.

Jeffy and I had gone to the Nurture Room in the school to chat and browse some books I had brought along. I say to Jeffy, "Maybe you could read to me?" He stops still and turns to me. "I'm not really good at reading," he says quietly. This stillness is in contrast to his almost constant body and eye movement since entering the nurture room.

Fieldnotes, St Jude's, Clyde

Puffy, a White working-class boy of Scottish heritage, made a similar assertion, both embodied and verbal, in the following exchange, which took place during a book browsing

session. He had selected *Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears* for us to read together. The *Kipper* books he mentions in the following extract are from the early levels of *Oxford Reading Tree*.

Figure 8: Self-portrait by Puffy

Jess: So do you want to have a little read at this one?

Puffy: (quietly) Yeh.

Jess: Or you can choose any of these books and I can either read to you or --

[Puffy's next words cut in when I say 'or']

Puffy: (very quietly) I can't read.

Jess: What's that?

Puffy: (a little louder) I can't read.

Jess: You can't read, can't you?

Puffy: I only can read the Kipper ones…they're like the easy ones.

Conversation and book browse with Puffy, Fairfield, Kelvin

In both cases, the boys expressed the belief that they *can't* read print, rather than they are *learning* to read, as I would suggest they are doing. Confirming Moss's work, the pattern of

revelations around ‘can’t read’ was gendered, expressed by boys in the lowest positioned group rather than girls (Moss, 2000, 2007, 2021), a pattern that will be explored more in the next chapter. It seems so early in the reading lives of Puffy and Jeffy, two and three years respectively, to identify as someone who can’t read. In the quietness of these utterances, I hear a confession rather than an assertion, a confession that must be whispered. We need to look to the relationships and structural conditions that contribute to the dynamic, sometimes anxious, emotional dance that children in the lowest positioned reading group engage in when reading print. Dispositions towards reading such as these do not emerge from isolated individualised emotional reactions but are forged in a web of relationships and dominant cultural symbols (Bourdieu, 1984; Pahl & Rowsell, 2020). As Wetherell (2012, p. 87) suggests, “The affective pattern is … distributed across the relational field and each partner’s part becomes meaningful only in relation to the whole affective dance.” In the next chapter I will look more deeply into this dance, of how children position themselves and are positioned by others within and across hierarchical reading groups.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced children in the lowest positioned reading group by exploring themes that foreground their feelings as readers, their moment-by-moment embodied experiences with reading, and with books. By “coming alive to affect” (Leander & Ehret, 2019, p. 9) the children’s relationship with reading can be known differently than it can by attending to words alone. Affective movements can be perceived in the tone, volume and prosody of voice, in silence, in body movements and stillness, facial expression and visible inhales and exhales of breath. By drawing on definitions of reading that encompass multiple sources, including television, playground games, comics and books, the children’s relationship with stories comes alive. They are engaged and knowledgeable about stories they tell or are told to them through varied media. This interest in story challenges common portrayals of less confident print readers, particularly working-class boys, as disengaged in reading. These portrayals, as Asplund and Prieto (2018) point out, are often based on a narrow view of what counts as reading and on large scale test data that fails to capture nuanced understandings of young readers (e.g., McGrane et al., 2017; OECD, 2015; Surroub & Pernick, 2016). This chapter does a vital job in troubling these damaging myths around

reading that, as Asplund and Prieto again point out, can compound the cultural and social marginalisation of predominantly working-class boys.

The second theme developed in the chapter focused on the emotional space that books took up in the children's lives, something that will be returned to in Chapter 6. Books often occupied a relatively minor place in the rich lives of children in the lowest positioned group. This was evident in Puzzle's description of reading as "kinda' boring" while telling the most fantastic stories. It was also evident in Jeffy's preference for toys over books and in Millie's dreams of going out as a teenager rather than staying in and reading. Book reading is often legitimated as superior to other cultural pastimes, a consequence perhaps of it being a pastime favoured by dominant groups, particularly White middle-class women (Atkinson, 2016; Griswold, 2005). In asserting their preferences for toys, games and playing with their siblings I imagine the children pushing back against this arbitrary cultural dominance of reading. And at the same time, it is crucial to appreciate the fluid nature of the children's relationship with books. Towards the end of the study some who had been disinterested in books were enacting very different reader identities, including that of avid readers.

Lastly, I shifted attention to the feelings around reading when children in the lowest positioned group were engaged in reading to adults and peers in school. Anxiety was heightened in this context, compared to the other circumstances explored in the chapter. Although children in the other groups expressed similar anxiety around reading in front of others, it was a stronger and more consistent presence in the words and actions of children in the lowest positioned group. It was in this context that they said, in hushed tones, "I can't read". However, even in this context there was also enthusiastic interaction with the book as they read, and there were moments of revelation and joy when a word was remembered or worked out. Always there are multifarious factors that influence identity construction (Lawler, 2014) but hierarchical reading groups may contribute to identities such as Puffy's 'can't read' and it is to these questions of positionality that the next chapter turns.

Chapter 5

Social Positioning in Hierarchical Reading Groups

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I deliberately extended my initial frames of reference to introduce the children in terms of their feelings for reading, rather than by my specific interest in the effects of ability grouping. In this next chapter I inquire into those specific concerns, that is, how ability-grouped reading affects children's identities, agency and emotions. Following Reay (2002, 2006, 2017; Reay & Wiliam, 1999), I am critically preoccupied with the push and pull between educational practices that create or perpetuate hierarchies, and children's agency and identities as readers. I utilise and extend Bourdieu's (1984) concept of *distinction* to theorise how children relate within and across hierarchical reading groups. While Bourdieu is concerned primarily with children as inheritors of parental capital, I extend this to foreground children's agency in accruing social and cultural advantage as actors in their own social worlds.

The first section of the chapter, *Appreciation for Ability-Grouped Reading,* considers the neutral or positive reasons some children expressed for being satisfied with their place in the lowest positioned reading group. This satisfaction is then complicated by attending, beyond words, to the prosody of those words and how words are held in the movement and expression of the body. The second section, *"It's like Football Top 5": Elite Positioning in the Top Reading Group,* explores how children in the highest positioned reading group distinguished themselves as socially and intellectually superior to those in the lowest positioned group. In the third and final section, *Resistance, Accommodation and Compliance: Responses to Positioning as a Struggling Reader*, I suggest that most children in the lower group *were* aware of how they were positioned by others in the reading hierarchy. The section examines agentic patterns of accommodation, resistance, anger and refusal of this positioning and argues that reactions were, to an extent, gendered.

Appreciation of Ability-Grouped Reading

When children were asked about being in the so-called bottom reading group, not all alluded to the hierarchical organisation of groups around print fluency. Some gave practical reasons for the organisation of groups while others gave reasons why their group suited them best. These children's words expressed mildly positive or neutral feelings about their reading group. When I asked Tom, Alf and Jamie about their reading group, for example, their responses focussed on practical issues rather than positioning, as illustrated in the following conversation.

Tom: We got a reading book called A Bad Dog. …

Alf: Yeh. Cause the dog, Floppy, she's Floppy, she ate the washing, she's breaking everything. …

Jess: Can you tell me about The Triangles?

Tom: Triangles? … I don't know about them.

Jess: How do you think they might feel about reading? Can you imagine?

Tom: I think they em (inaudible word) a wee bit good. …

Jess: So why are you in these different groups?

Alf: Then, if we're not in groups, see then you have to go a giant group and go around.

Tom: And (inaudible) we don't have the same reading books.

Jess: So why do you have different reading books?

Tom: Reading books? Because em can't have the same because sometimes we have to have different books because,

Jamie: Because sometimes you can listen and then you just see what they've said.

Tom: … what they're reading about.

Conversation with Tom, Alf and Jamie, Fairfield, Kelvin

How Alf, Tom and Jamie describe their reading groups suggests some unawareness or lack of concern that reading groups were organised hierarchically around print fluency. Firstly, the boys identified groups by book name and there was no mention that these books were from different levels of the reading scheme. Rather, they were given different books so everyone could listen to different stories. Alf also gave an organisational explanation for the existence of reading groups. It wouldn't make sense to read in one huge group because it would take too long to hear everyone read. There is one small sign that Tom might be aware the groups were organised by print fluency when he said that Triangles, the highest positioned group, probably felt "a wee bit good" about reading when he'd talked earlier about feeling a "wee bit nervous". If Alf, Tom and Jamie were largely unaware of the hierarchy, the system may not be negatively affecting their self-view as readers at all.

The smallness and familiarity of the so-called bottom reading group may also have felt welcome to Tom, who had joined the school just over a year before, when his family had come to Scotland from Pakistan. His first language was Urdu and he had been learning English for about year when the study began. In the following narrative portrait, composed only of Tom's words from three audio-taped conversations, a sense is conveyed of what the group might mean to him. The portrait opens with his comments about a book on penguins we had read together.

Tom: A Narrative Portrait

Figure 9: Self-portrait by Tom

Do penguins run? Maybe they don't run but they do skate on the ice. I think the baby one's Peppy. And I want to tell you, see when last time when we was painting with you well there's a boy called Alf, and Jamie and me as well. And see the boy who called Alf, he has two sisters and one sister she called Poppy. So Poppy and Peppy. We're in Stars. I don't know about the Triangles or Circles [other reading groups] because I don't know what their book's called. I don't like books really. Sometimes like I get mixed up with the words when I get a new book, a wee bit tricky.

See the games the (other children in the class) talk about, I don't know the games. I don't understand them about the games stuff. I don't play those games because I

> don’t know what game they are, and I don’t know how to play them. I know about Minecraft but not like other games. And what do you call that thing again? Audio (recorder)? I would like one of them. But I don’t think ma dad, don’t know what o, o, recorder. Can you just write it so then I can tell ma dad about it? Just write it here I’ll just put that in ma pocket. I speak two language. I speak one English and one Urdu. My whole family speak Urdu as well. Outside I don’t because they don’t speak that language. My dad told me (to speak English). Yeh, I still need to practice ’cause I don’t know much English.
>
> Tom, Fairfield, Kelvin

My overwhelming impression when composing this narrative portrait from his words, was that, for Tom, his small reading group was a place of belonging and safety, where he knew the names of his classmates’ siblings. At other times he told me about their pets and their habits. The classroom may not always have felt such an easy place of belonging. I observed instances of casual othering, when race and religion intersected to position Tom and the two other children of Pakistani heritage and of Muslim faith as outsiders in the taken-for-granted White and secular norms of the classroom. One such episode concerned a whole class writing exercise about children’s favourite Haribo sweet. Tom had never heard of Haribos, he said, and sat quietly back in his chair as others huddled together, talked and wrote about their favourites. Haribos contain pork gelatine, which may explain why he was unfamiliar with them; eating them would be incompatible with halal practices.

Racialised othering can also be experienced in gesture and gaze, as attention slides over one child and lands on another (Rankine, 2020). In Rankine’s example, she refers to the way White teachers, on hearing trouble, can scan the room, slide over White children and land on a child who is Black. I thought on Rankine’s observation of racialised gaze in my own relationship with Tom, where conversely my attention could slide over Tom, and other Children of Colour, to land on a White child who was calling out to me. I was aware he seemed reserved with me, that when I caught his eye, he looked away, perhaps not expecting me to engage with him. But I had not recognised *my* awkwardness and othering, which was there as a White woman, in a largely White classroom, talking with a Boy of Colour, with a different cultural heritage and first language to me. When transcribing our first conversation I could hear myself clumsily concerned with ‘getting it right’ when asking him, for example, of the different language scripts his family read at home. My self-concern got in the way of

empathising with him at first when he talked about finding reading difficult – while transcribing conversations my responses seemed more clipped than when White children spoke of similar difficulties. This early awkwardness did fall away, and our relationship grew in affection when I became more interested in him than in *me* not appearing racist. But recognising and calling out this othering matters, given the authority and space that adult white skin assumes in the largely White space that Tom was navigating.

Tom collected words, like the *audio recorder* in the portrait above, to help him navigate these unfamiliar, and at times othering, linguistic and cultural waters in which many of his White peers swam easily. The comments he made about unknown computer games suggest he felt left out of this peer culture that he would like to be a part of. There were other aspects of classroom culture, like reading, that he may have been less inclined to join, when it felt hard and not particularly interesting. He gave little indication of how reading groups were organised or his positioning in it. Perhaps for him, in this moment, the comradery and belonging he found in his reading group mattered more to him than its position in a hierarchy of readers. There are, however, alternative ways of offering the kind of familiarity that Tom seemed to welcome without placing children in hierarchical groups. In the study, all children in their first two years of learning English as an additional language were in the so-called bottom reading group and not all welcomed their position there, as I will discuss later in the chapter.

As well as the comfort of familiarity, other reasons were expressed for why the so-called bottom group suited them best. These reasons sometimes centred on the reading group being perceived as a helpful place of learning. Millie, for example, conveyed satisfaction with her reading group in a conversation with her and her friend Ellie, who was in the highest positioned group. In the conversation, Millie expressed a quiet confidence as a reader. She remembers the first word she learnt to read and when she learnt it. The word was *the*, and she learnt it between the ages of 4 and 5 (in Primary 1):

> When I was in P1 that was ma first word because I was really close to finishing it. And then I was a wee bit older in P1, and then I was, em, I tried *the* again and I *got it*!
>
> Millie, St Jude's, Avon class

When I asked her how she felt about her group she whispered "good". If she had a choice of groups, she would choose it and gave the following reasons why the group helped her learn. It was the smallest group and she liked this. It also gives her practice with easier books and through this she would read harder books next year.

Millie's response of "good" when asked about her place in the so-called bottom reading group was echoed by others whose responses were either neutral or weakly positive. George,[45] for example, in Avon class at St Jude's, when asked which group he would choose said, "Eh none, any. 'cause I'm fine with any of them". Jamie, in Kelvin class at Fairfield, said he felt "fine" and thought he would always be in this group. Yet I also noted that these reasons were expressed with a stillness of body and a quietness of voice, often whispered, that could still suggest ambiguity about their position. George's words, for example, were positive but his body was completely still, his gaze fixed straight ahead, his speech clipped and quiet when he talked about reading. Millie too was still in body and her words whispered but when she, like George, talked of other things, like family, her voice projected, she elaborated, and her body was animated.

Yet the stillness and quietness in their utterances must be held in tension with agentic bursts of self-confidence around reading, and writing. Puffy, for example, had quietly told me he couldn't read but he also employed his wicked sense of humour to push the boundaries of what was permissible to read and write in school, as the following example illustrates:

> I invited Puffy to make some words using magnetic letters. I laid out some letters that I know can make short words. I said, "Could you make a word like --" but before I could say which ones, he launched into the task with gusto, searching for letters in the *unsorted* pile next to my curated set. He first found a 'p' then added 'oo' to it, smiling up at me and giggling. I giggled back. Next came '2jeT' which he called Jet2. This is the airline that's going to take the family on their next holiday abroad, he said.
>
> Fieldnote, Fairfield, Kelvin

[45] George was a White working-class boy of Scottish heritage.

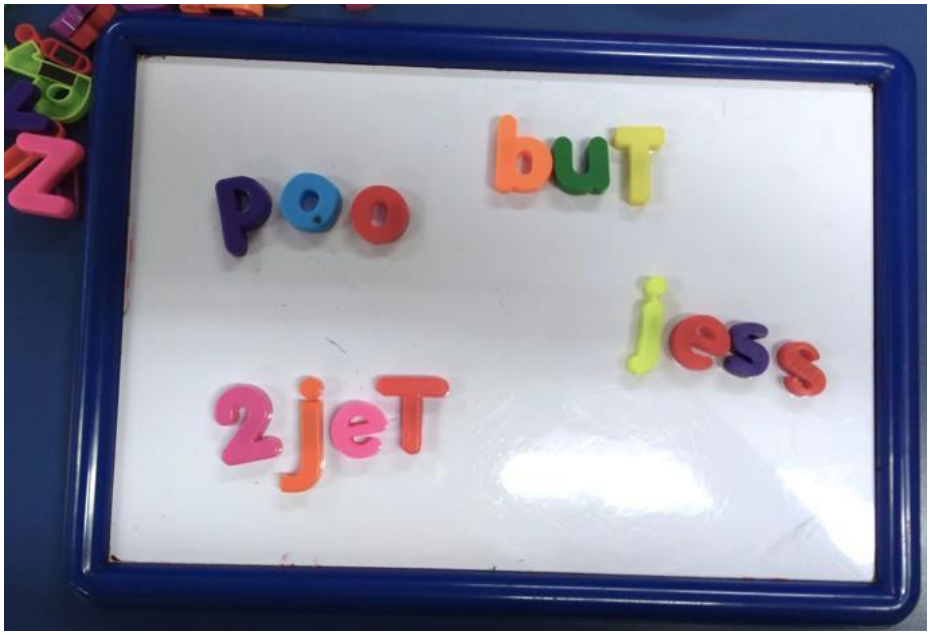

Figure 10: Words made by Puffy with magnetic letters.

Puffy agentically created words that he wanted to create but that also challenged constraints in this educational space. I hear agency and self-belief too in Millie's responses when I asked her and her friend Ellie how others might see them as readers. In the following extract, Ellie goes first:

> Ellie: I don't *know* because I'm not in other people's minds but … it's just big long words, they just get me sometimes … if they wanted me to read like *The Paper Dolls* or rhymes and all that, I would be quite good at that. They would be like *wow*. They would be impressed. Like, if I was reading, like, a big chapter book like Emma's got, a *big* chapter book, then they'd be like 'you're good at reading it's just, eh, some words' … Yeah. that's what I think.
>
> Millie: That's like the same to me. I'm not good at some words but I'm good at a lot of other words.
>
> Jess: So there's some words?
>
> Millie: Em, are tricking me, and chapters. It's a wee bit hard for me as well.
>
> Conversation with Millie and Ellie, St Jude's, Avon

In this exchange, Millie asserted her own successful trajectory in learning to read print. She didn't signal awareness that others might claim a superiority over her or her reading group. In

class I observed Millie choosing chapter books to read, which she said in the above extract were a wee bit hard for her. That said, the chapter books she chose had lots of pictures. Through this choice she could enact a reader identity that placed her with the majority of the class who read chapter books, while still choosing books she could decipher because of the pictures they contained.

So far, I have presented children's affective relationship with reading in the lowest positioned reading group as complex, illustrating the push and pull between educational practices and children's agency within them (Reay, 2002, 2006, 2017; Reay & Wiliam, 1999). The children either did not mention the hierarchical organisation of reading groups or spoke convincingly of how their group suited them. I imagine they would not know there are non-hierarchical ways of creating similar conditions they appreciated about their group. As a teacher I had not known of mixed-attainment alternatives to ability-grouped reading, for example, until the seminar I described in Chapter 1. But there is also something important in Jamie's belief, that he would always be in the same group, which suggests one's position can appear as the natural order of things. In making this observation I draw on Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) concept of "doxa"; that is, when one's place in the social hierarchy and the discriminatory conditions concealed within it appears natural rather than fashioned by power inequalities. Jamie actually had a level of fluency matching that of children in the middle and even top group, [46] yet he believed the so-called bottom reading group was where he belonged, something I will return to in Chapter 6. If hierarchical reading groups appear natural, it could limit what children in the lowest positioned group may envision for their reading life. The language used by children in the top reading group is in stark contrast to that used by the children so far discussed, and it is to the so-called top reading group the chapter now turns.

"It's like Football Top 5": Elite Positioning in the Top Reading Group

All children in the highest positioned reading group expressed awareness of the hierarchical organisation of reading groups and of their elevated position within that hierarchy. Words conveying superiority frequently cropped up when asked about their group: words like "top" "highest", "best" and words describing ascendancy like "going up". Kevin,

[46] Children's level of reading fluency was assessed in the study using reading running records. See Appendix 7 for an explanation of this process.

in conversation with Bingo and Will, described their elite position with the following football analogy:

Figure 11: Self-portrait by Bingo

Jess: You're all in the Red group?

Will: That's the top group.

Bingo: It's the best group.

Kevin: It's like Football Top 5.

Will: What? No! That's in football!

Kevin: No, like see the top five footballers like, they're like a top five group and that's the Red group, so like they're like the smartest …

Bingo: They're the best readers, kinda … And they've got the biggest book.

Kevin: I moved up!

Bingo: We've got huge chapters in the Matilda book.

Will: We've got 213 pages.

Bingo: And the Green Group, is like the lowest group down, which is basically like they have really small books.

Conversation and book browse with Kevin, Bingo and Will, St Jude's, Clyde

As well as using an elite analogy to describe their position, that of the world's best (male) footballers, the extract also includes a qualification, here represented by Bingo's "kinda". I grew accustomed to hearing such qualifications when children conveyed their elevated position to me, which I interpreted as an attempt not to appear boastful while still claiming this elevated position. The extract also highlights the way hierarchy was expressed through reading material. In my conversations with the top group there was frequent mention of the size of reading books, of who was reading chapter books, how thick those chapter books were and who were reading picture books.

Claiming distinction is always relational, only working in opposition to another social group, as Bourdieu (1984) makes clear. The social advantage of being in the top group was emphasised in the borders between groups. This emphasis was revealed when Bingo, Will and Kevin recalled Kevin moving to the top group. The boys remembered this being announced during a parents' evening although their teacher did not recall it being so publicly announced. In the following reflection I consider the possible effects of what the boys remember as a public 'promotion'.

There is a certain 'coronation' feeling when this was recalled. Each of the boys remembered it happening. Everyone cheered when he was 'promoted'. But of course, this begs the question: how do the children feel in the group he is being 'promoted' from?

Reflexive notes while transcribing conversation with Kevin, Bingo and Will, St Jude's, Clyde

The memories of cheers when a child is elevated to the so-called top reading group suggests that top-group position was something children staked a claim in. It is a form of distinction that requires two conditions for those claims to be capitalised upon. Firstly, to gain legitimacy, those making the claim need to be in possession of sufficient authority in that

field (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990a). I suggest from the examples shared, that children in the so-called top group had this authority. It was generated by their own volition, although often built on cultural capital inherited from their parents, as Chapter 6 will confirm. The second condition required for claims of distinction to stick, is the presence of others who are not in possession of the valuable commodity, in this case that of 'top reader'. Without the lowest positioned group as a "foil" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 171), reading in the top group would lack the exclusiveness that allowed them to claim it as a form of distinction. As the following paragraphs will illustrate, the children in the top group were active in patronising and portraying those in the lowest group as not as good as them. Through their words it becomes evident why it was so compelling to stake a claim in this group.

Kevin pointed to one of the reasons why membership of the top group was so valuable when he said that Red group was made up of "the smartest" children in the class. In fact, in the same conversation with Bingo and Will above, he attributed his smartness in *mathematics* directly to his promotion to the so-called top *reading* group.

> I wasn't really confident about like moving up 'cause I wasn't that smart at that time. I really knowed, like (with an audible inhale of breath) two times four and stuff like that. … And now like since I've moved up to the Red group I've like, know like three times six… I'm very good at maths.
>
> Conversation and book browse with Kevin, Bingo and Will, St Jude's, Clyde

This association between intelligence and membership of the top reading group was commonly expressed by those in the highest positioned group. Emotional dispositions were also attached to different reading groups, as highlighted in the following conversation:

Figure 12: Self-portrait by Kayla

Kayla: The Red group is the people who are like … more like confident and like mature [sound of a smile in her words, as the other two quietly giggle] … So, like *our* group is like the more confident people. We feel like, sometimes feel like the children in Green are like, aww, sometimes they look a bit sad and we feel a bit bad for that.

Jess: Why do you think they feel sad?

Kayla: 'cause like we are in the other group, and I think they really want to get to our level.

Claudia: They just, any time they do read they like, they don't show their confidence. It's like they're shy.

Conversation with Kayla, Alexa and Claudia,[47] St Jude's, Clyde

[47] I first identified Kayla, Alexa and Claudia as White middle-class girls of Scottish heritage who spoke English as a first language but on returning to the data I realised my knowledge was too sketchy to make a claim about class. All three girls talked of hobbies, like gymnastics and playing with friends, that were as typical of the cultural pursuits of the working-class as middle-class children in the study. Alexa's mum was a doctor, a traditionally middle-class occupation, but otherwise their parents' jobs did not define them strongly as working or middle class e.g., 'dad works in a kids' house'.

These excerpts illustrate how children in the higher reading group patronised and looked down on children in the lower groups. It also shows how characteristics that have nothing to do with reading, such as intelligence, maturity and even happiness become disproportionately attached to children on the basis of their reading group. In addition, a belief was expressed on more than one occasion, and exemplified in Amay's[48] words below, that those in the bottom group would grow up to be unconfident adult readers:

> Jess: Do you think everyone in the class are going to be as good readers as each other (when they are older)?
>
> Amay: Probably but they will need help at some points if they've got really really tricky books like Flying Fergus and stuff, like Harry Potter books.
>
> Conversation with Jake, Ryan, Lewis and Amay, Fairfield, Kelvin

This projection that those in the so-called bottom reading group would struggle as adult readers suggests that the stigmatisation of ability-grouped reading could have a long tail. The coupling of these characteristics with low-status readers is echoed in Duckworth's (2014) study of Adult Basic Skills learners who had struggled with dominant literacies. Her participants recalled, with emotional intensity, being labelled by teachers and peers as "thick", "stupid" and "no-hopers". Experiencing such negative labelling by those with legitimised authority in the field of education can have an enduring impact on a person's reading identity (Williams, 2017). In the course of my research, I have heard people with a wealth of social, economic and cultural capital, including award-winning authors and university professors, recount vivid, disquieting memories of being placed in the bottom reading group in school. In the case of Duckworth's study, participants described how positionings crystallised in low self-esteem, shame and feeling less adult than those who appeared as insiders in the world of dominant literacies.

When Kevin described his group as Football Top 5, he also revealed the social and emotional capital that can be accrued through membership of the top reading group. Such advantages of status and belonging were also expressed in the linking of friendship with

[48] Amay was in the middle reading group and I identified her as a White working-class girl of Scottish heritage.

reading by those in the higher groups. For example, reading is portrayed as the connective tissue in the friendship of Kayla, Claudia and Alexa:

> Kayla: We're like the girls in the class who like funny things.
>
> Claudia: This is us, like all day [making gestures that signify joke-telling and hilarity].
>
> Kayla: Like, *all* day … sometimes we like really crazy funny books.
>
> Alexa: And sometimes happy books.
>
> Kayla: Yeh but we like all the nice smooth books because it reminds us of how long we've been together. And like our friendship is like so close; that's what books make us think of … our friendship becomes bigger and bigger by books.
>
> Conversation with Kayla, Claudia and Alexa, St Jude's, Clyde

My fieldnotes recorded the girls' intimacy; as they spoke, their bodies turned towards each other, they touch each other on the arm, and gently stroked each other's hair. They defined their friendship through books. A similarly gendered story of bonding through reading was told by Lilly and Jennifer,[49] two White girls of Scottish heritage from the middle reading group in Clyde, at St Jude's. Lilly had been in the highest positioned group but finding the books difficult to read and so was moved "down", as she described it, into the middle reading group where her friend Jennifer was. Jennifer recalls reassuring her by saying: "You don't need to be scared Lilly because … you know that your bestie will help you." Talking it through with Jennifer had made Lilly feel happy, she said, and she now thinks she is good at reading.

Boys did not talk explicitly about friendship and reading as emotionally supportive and bonding, as the girls did. That said, the boys in the highest positioned reading group still appeared to generate social and emotional capital from the connections they made with others in the top group. This is evident in Bingo's response when I asked why he had selected *Captain Underpants* to read:

[49] I didn't get to know their home context well and am unsure of their class positioning. Their parents' jobs, like warden, trainee teacher, and admin council worker fall into those less defined groups that could be working/lower middle class.

I kinda' like Captain Underpants, cause the first time I watched the movie I found it really funny and 'cause like we, us three, always have to, like a laugh.
[There are sounds of agreement and mild laughs from Will and Kevin]

Conversation and book browse session with Kevin, Bingo and Will, St Jude's, Clyde

Bingo's response echoes the bonding role of humour in books that Kayla, Claudia and Alexa spoke of. Books also circulated among children in the highest positioned reading group in ways that reinforced connections between reading and friendship. At Fairfield, Cain told me one day that Kirkby[50] had passed on a book to him because they were friends. Jack, a White middle-class boy of Scottish and Irish heritage, also at Fairfield, told me he had sent a copy of his favourite *Ottoline* book to his friend Bella May, also White, Scottish and middle class, during the pandemic.[51] In return she sent him a copy of her favourite book. When Jack mentioned this, I noted that despite also being good friends with Car, a White working-class boy of Scottish and English heritage in the 'lowest' reading group, Jack had not chosen to send the book to *him*. I had learned of Car and Jack's friendship through the teacher, and it was evident in their close camaraderie when they sat together in class.

In fact, there were no examples of children in the lowest positioned reading group talking of reading as something that cemented their friendships. For some in the lowest group, reading print appeared a source of stress and something that had to be concealed, which is discussed later in the chapter. In these circumstances it may be emotionally risky to forge friendships orientated around reading. Perhaps, as was the case with Car, who was a fan of *Mr Men*, a series often associated with younger children,[52] he was not perceived as a significant fellow reading friend even when he was a friend.

Before beginning the research, I had questioned whether children who were visibly located at the bottom of a reading hierarchy might be socially ostracised by their peers, but I found this not to be the case. The children in the lowest positioned reading group often appeared popular members of the class. The following fieldnote captures the warmth of

[50] Although I assumed both Cain and Kirkby were White and of Scottish heritage, I did not get to know them well, and could not begin to situate them in terms of class.
[51] He told me of this in a video posted directly to me in the children's virtual learning space.
[52] A 'made for mums' website suggests the series for children aged 2 and above. https://www.madeformums.com/reviews/best-personalised-books-children/

welcome when Gary, a member of the bottom reading group with high footballing credentials, arrived one morning.

> Gary arrives late and is met with cheers. I can't remember the actual words, but they were positive, along the lines of 'Yeah, Gary's here!' echoing round the class.
>
> St Jude's, Clyde

Cash, a White working-class boy of Scottish heritage, also in Clyde, had friendships like Gary's, that cut across the reading groups. This was evident in the friends he played with at school and on his Nintendo Switch video-game console. When speaking about his friends, he led the conversation and spoke in a bouncy animated prosody. Yet, although children in the lowest positioned reading group had friends and popularity, they did not appear to have the prestige as readers within this hierarchical reading group structure to forge reading friendships. There was a coupling of friendship with reader identities, and an associated sense of belonging in the world of print, that appeared available only to those located towards the top of the reading group hierarchy, and this accrued valuable social capital. This is a novel finding from the study. Although connections have been made between cultivating a community of readers, and reading engagement and attainment (Cremin, 2014, 2019), the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion from this community have not previously been explained in this way.

Social capital, in Bourdieusian terms, refers to the network of social connections one has that can be capitalised upon. These social connections can elicit economic gains, such as advantageous employment. They can also elevate status in powerful fields and cultivate a sense of belonging to an exclusive club. One such exclusive club appears to be the so-called top reading group and children appeared active in fostering this social capital. With social capital comes *emotional capital* that develops from feeling connected and at home in this exclusive club. Emotional capital is not a term used by Bourdieu but has been applied to his concept of capitals (Nowotny, 1981, cited in Reay, 2004; Reay, 2004). I use the term in a slightly different way to that used by Reay. Reay focuses on emotional capital generated in the family realm through the emotional resources passed on mainly by mothers to children. I use it here to signify valuable feelings of emotional security that can come from feeling like an insider in the field of literacy education. In saying this I immediately qualify it with recollections of competition within the top group itself, over for example who reads 'proper'

chapter books. In a disagreement between Lewis and Jake[53] (Fairfield, Kelvin), the spectre of competition within, and potential displacement from, the highest reading group is evident. For example, Lewis commented, "Not really that many people in the Triangles *actually* have chapter books. I think it's only three people in the class have chapter books." Lewis was one of those three who read 'proper' chapter books. He is making a distinction here between those who had moved on to non-scheme chapter books and those in the top group who still read 'chapter' books from the reading scheme. In the rapid fire that seemed to propel Jake's response that he "did read chapter books" (albeit reading scheme ones) I read the threat Lewis's words held for Jake's identity as one of the top readers in the class. But despite these inner group tensions, I still suggest there were real emotional benefits gained from the insider status of the top group.

Accommodation and Resistance to Positioning as a Struggling Reader

Most, although not all, children in the so-called bottom reading group showed an awareness of their stigmatised positioning by those in higher groups. How they reacted to the positioning was often influenced by their gendered identities, and this will now be teased out. By gendered identities I refer to children's affective dispositions, relationships and interests that align most commonly with those associated with the feminine or masculine, those most commonly associated with "doing boy" or "doing girl" (Renold, 2004).

Moss (2000, 2007), in her ethnographic studies of gender and reading in the primary school, makes a key claim that I find helpful in examining gendered reactions to being visibly positioned according to reading groups. Writing in a historical context of concern about boys' reading, she argues that when judgements on reading are made highly visible, girls and boys react differently, in ways that affect their progress. Girls who were positioned as struggling readers often complied with teachers' instruction, including acceptance of book recommendations that held little prestige among their peers. Boys, she found, were more resistant to stigmatised positioning and consequently spent more time avoiding reading.

Moss's proposition resonates strongly with my own findings when her categories are reframed as gendered rather than belonging to boys and girls per se. This chapter opened with

[53] Lewis is a middle-class Child of Colour, of Pakistani heritage. Jake is White, of Scottish heritage but I did not get to know him well enough to situate him in terms of class. Both were in Triangles, the top reading group.

accounts of children, mostly girls, who approached their group as a place that helped them learn (as Moss suggests) and, in the case of Tom, as a source of companionship. These qualities, of learning and companionship, seemed more important to them than the status or lack of it that attached to their reading group. However, and here I diverge from Moss, despite their agentic compliance there was still a push back from the stigmatisation of ability grouping for those enacting feminine qualities. I use the following narrative portrait of Angel, a White working-class girl of Scottish heritage, to exemplify the considerable emotional work that could be incurred to maintain a positive reader identity in the lowest positioned group. The narrative portrait is composed from fieldnotes and taped conversation extracts.

Angel: A Narrative Portrait

Angel, the only girl in the lowest positioned reading group in Clyde, seemed to love reading. One day, when Jim asked her what the biggest lie was she had ever told, Angel didn't respond. She appeared totally absorbed in a graphic novel called *Far Out Fairy Tales* by Louise Simonson. When I went over to her, she didn't stop reading or acknowledge my presence. I listened as she read the text aloud to herself in what sounded like an American TV accent. This is one of many similar accounts dotted throughout my fieldnotes of Angel being absorbed in books amidst the hustle and bustle of classroom life.

A few months into the field work, I had a conversation with her, Jeffy and Gary,[54] all members of the so-called bottom reading group. When I asked them what they thought of their group, Angel expressed satisfaction, which was met with derision from Jeffy and Gary. The conversation extract that follows is alive with affective significance.

> Angel: So, the Green Group is the best group ever because it's only a six.
>
> Jeffy: (with a surprised tone) What? How is it the best group ever?
>
> Gary: No, the Red Group is the best.

[54] Jeffy is a White working-class boy of Scottish heritage. Gary, also White and of Scottish heritage, is harder to situate in terms of class on the basis of his parents' jobs, but when Gary spoke of time spent with his grandad, I imagined his mum had a working-class upbringing similar in some ways to mine, but this may not be accurate.

Jeffy: 'cause they've got thousands of people. Lionel-CR7[55] is the fastest.

Jess: But you Angel think Green Group is the best?

Angel: Yeh because Green Group always works with Miss B (the boys burst into giggles) or Miss or Miss (the boys continue giggling) …That's why the Green group is the best group…But I think the Red Group (mimes 'thumbs down'). …

Jeffy: That's not nice.

Gary: I'm telling Lionel-CR7 that. …

Jess: So what do you think of the Green Group (Gary)?

Gary: Eh, it's good.

Jeffy: I like Red group better.

Gary: It's, I like the Red group better as well.

Jess: Why do you like the Red Group better?

Gary: 'cause they get tricky words …

Jeffy: Because it's the best group and it's got thousands of people. I wish I joined.

Jess: So, if you could be in any reading group, which reading group would you be in?

Jeffy: (sings it out) Red

Gary: (at the same time) Red

[55] Lionel-CR7 is a child in the top reading group in Clyde, at St Jude's, who began the study with the pseudonym, Lionel (first name of one of the most successful footballers of all time, Lionel Messi). Halfway through the study he changed his pseudonym to CR7, the acronym for Cristiano Ronaldo (7 represents the number on his jersey). Ronaldo is the only footballer of the era to challenge Messi's supremacy. I chose to combine these pseudonyms because, together, they seem to say something interesting about the status Lionel-CR7 assumes in the classroom, that he could claim not one but two iconic footballers' names.

Jeffy: I bet Angel would stay in the Green Group (both boys laugh). Would you?

Angel: I would be in the (she pauses, as the boys giggle)

Gary: In the Green!

Angel: No, not *that* group. I'll choose one of the other two groups. I'd choose Blue.

Jess: Why would you choose Blue?

Angel: Because blue is my second favourite colour. Red is my last.

Angel, St Jude's, Clyde

This narrative portrait reveals the emotional work that can be involved in trying to maintain a positive reading identity in the face of stigmatised positioning. Angel, usually so verbally surefooted, stumbled in the face of the giggling boys when she tried to defend her group, and ultimately distanced herself from it in the comment, "not *that* group". Jeffy, in particular, seemed to accurately read how his group was perceived negatively by others. He consequently wanted out of this group, with Gary following suit, and into the group perceived as the best of all. The odds, however, of joining that more prestigious group are stacked against them, as I will argue in Chapter 6, because ability-grouped reading is more likely to hold them in place. It is interesting here that Lionel-CR7 is held up as the one who is transgressed by Angel's irreverence towards Red group. Lionel-CR7 held a position of power in the class, considered by the children to be the best reader because he reads fast. I wanted to cheer when Angel, despite ultimately distancing herself from their stigmatised reading group, refused to accept Red group's superiority. She most likely lacked the social capital, however, to dent Red group's elevated position by her dismissal of them.

The ambivalent compliance portrayed in Angel's narrative is contrasted in the following section with resistance to stigmatised positioning in two children, Puzzle and George, who I suggest were more invested in masculinised enactments, particularly that of appearing knowledgeable (Renold, 2004). Yet, while setting this up as a gendered distinction I also want to blur it. Firstly, some of the boys (Tom, for example) in the lowest position group did not convey resistance to being positioned in the so-called bottom reading group. Secondly,

Puzzle is a girl who identifies as a girl but whose interests, friendships, and dispositions frequently aligned her with common perceptions of "doing boy" (Renold, 2004).

I came to notice this alignment through sharing a narrative portrait of Puzzle at conferences. Despite me introducing her as 'she', the narrative portrait does not indicate her gender since it is composed solely of her words. I only realised this when the participants, losing sight of my introductory reference to Puzzle as 'she', invariably assumed that Puzzle was a boy. On reflection, I wondered if this assumption was prompted by her use of gendered language, like "guys", her passion for computer games that her brothers also played, her battles with those brothers, her humour about stories that involve toilets, and her disinterest in reading, which is often regarded as a feminised activity (McGeown et al., 2012; Meece et al., 2006; Millard, 1997). I also perceived a competitiveness and fury in Puzzle that echoed George's reaction at being seen as a struggling reader. Although it is important not to make too much of two children's experience, their reactions reflect Moss's (2000) larger findings on gender, reading and social positioning in schools. What follows is an exploration of the emotional work and strategies employed by Puzzle and George in resisting the stigmatised positioning that went with their reading group and the consequent effect on their progress as readers. I believe too, that Puzzle had an additional cause for fury. All children in their first two years of learning English as an additional language were placed in the so-called bottom reading group where, because of how that group was perceived, they were stigmatised, as the chapter has shown. By her group position, Puzzle, whose home language was Polish and was in this early stage of learning English, would be regarded as unintelligent. This is despite successfully navigating the triple challenge of learning to read print, in a language she was learning to speak, and with books containing many unfamiliar cultural references (Gregory, 2008).

Although a couple of children in the lowest positioned reading group expressed disinterest in reading, children still wanted to be *seen* as someone who could and did read print. This echoes findings in Hempel-Jorgensen's study (2018) of struggling readers in low SES[56] 'reading for pleasure' schools as well as in Moss's (2000, 2007) work. The desire to stake a claim as a reader is unsurprising given the social and educational status afforded to reading print in education (Bourdieu, 1979). When this desire meets negative positioning by others it can engender anger, resistance and attempts to conceal lower level of print fluency particularly for children identified with 'doing boy'. For Puzzle and George, their identity as

[56] SES stands for 'socioeconmic status' and is a term used in the article.

readers became particularly precarious in performative reading events, as the following scenarios will show. I use 'performative' as Goffman (1990) does to indicate the actions of a person during an activity which is done in the presence of observers and with awareness of the possible effect of the performance on those observers.

At various times both George and Puzzle seemed angry when I witnessed their struggles to decipher words when reading with the teacher. This raises questions about whether I should have observed them when I sensed their discomfort. Although I closed my notebook and moved away, I did continue to observe these reading events from a distance. I write about it because the events highlight how reading instruction often fails to minimise public exposure of ordinary struggles. Yet, by writing about it I am re-exposing it. For this reason, it is ethically conflicting. I perceived their anger in a freeze of their posture except for darting, piercing and unsmiling glances at me and my notebook. On occasions when I sat behind Puzzle her head jerked round and her eyes glared at me when she was unsure of a word in her book. This affective response differed strikingly to when Puzzle *chose* to read me a section of her new favourite book, *Dog Man* by Dav Pilkey:

> Oh, this is the best page ever. Wait till I find it. [She sings the text in an American TV accent]: '*We fight for our freedom and that's our duty so everybody (*smile bursting through her words*) shake your booty, ohhhh baby baby baby baby baby shake your big big booty'* (laughing). Hilarious.
>
> Puzzle, St Jude's, Avon

These contrasting reading events reveal that it mattered to Puzzle how she was seen as a reader. When she was the knowledgeable one, sharing her choice of book that she knew she could read fluently, I perceived joy and authority. When she was positioned as a learner to the teacher's instruction, struggling over a word, witnessed by me, the researcher, she appeared tense and angry at being seen to struggle. This difference recalls again the students in Learned's (2016) study who enacted very different reader identities in the segregated "unengaged reader classes" to those enacted in collaborative problem-solving contexts. Being in the bottom reading group was just one of the subordinated positions that Puzzle occupied in the classroom. Even without ability grouping she could not wholly step out of the power inequalities between learner, teacher and researcher. She could also not step out of the relationships of power that are mediated by the status of English over other languages spoken. However, being visibly marked in hierarchical reading groups as less fluent, less

intelligent and less happy incurs avoidable injury and emotional work in resisting this positioning. And Puzzle did resist this positioning. One day, during a book browsing session, I heard her mutter, "I'm not stupid, I'm really not."

George, similarly, refused the role others assigned to him as a member of the bottom reading group and he did this in argumentative affective surges. During group reading, for example, he argued with the teacher that "if there is a silent 'e' at the end of 'have' it should tell you it is silent." I *silently* cheered this fighting spirit, while simultaneously noting that his resistance was often constructed in opposition to the women and girls in the class. As a feminist, in the words of Reay (2002, p. 222), I perceived in his actions "the uncomfortable image of the familiar oppressor". This oppression is illustrated in the following incident.

> The teacher invites me [Jess] to read with Twinkle. As I go over to sit with her, George says loudly, "It's because Twinkle can't read." "Yes I can," says Twinkle in a tone that suggests hurt. Later, I am told by the teacher that in fact Twinkle reads more fluently than George.
>
> Fieldnote, St Jude's, Avon

George's put-downs of girls as poor readers and his orthographic arguments with the teacher, who was a woman, could be understood as enacting hegemonic masculinity as explained by Renold (2004, p. 66) in her study of young sexualities. It refers to:

> …a contested elusive idea that generally fails to empower the specific individual but nevertheless operates to produce 'culturally exalted' forms of (heterosexual) masculinity via domination of other men and subordination of women, femininity and other (non-hetero) sexualities.

Likewise, George's elusive claims to superiority in reading at the expense of girls continually threatened to be undone by his place in the bottom reading group and required patterns of concealment to maintain his standing as a reader. This precarious course is illustrated by an encounter with one of the Pixies, who were introduced in Chapter 3.

> While at the table, George tells me that he is up to Chapter Three in his book … He tells me nothing else about the book. When asked what the title is he is unsure. The book is often closed on his desk. In an activity, facilitated by a Pixie, in which each child has to tell the others what their book is about, George strongly asserts

> that he is not going to do this. When one of the Pixies summarises his own book, in which animals fly to the moon, George ridicules these events by saying, "That's not possible because there's no air in space so they couldn't breathe."
>
> Fieldnote, St Jude's, Avon

Pixies are afforded a prestigious 'teacher' role that requires others to act as their pupils and, in this extract, George refuses to comply with the subordinated role he is assigned. Instead, he asserts himself as more knowledgeable than the Pixie through his comments about animals breathing in space. Yet it *is* a precarious course that he is navigating. His refusal may have as much to do with fear that the activity will expose his inability to read the chapter book he has chosen. There are other clues in this extract to suggest George can't read the book he chose, such as focussing on length rather than content, unfamiliarity with the title, and the book remaining closed on his desk. Chapter books were often talked of as books children graduated to from picture books. Through his choice of book, he could be claiming status as a reader that his fluency level and group position continually denied him. This practice of 'pretending to read' high-status books rather than be seen reading less socially prestigious ones has been found in other studies of boys' reading (Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2018; Moss, 2000, 2007). It is gendered behaviour that can be interpreted as an attempt to 'save face'. *Face* is a concept used by Goffman (1971) to denote mutual respect that is maintained in interactions when the participants behave generally as expected in a given context. *Saving face* might then occur as a form of rescue when this mutual respect is threatened by someone not fitting what is expected. In George's case, it could be acting as the proficient reader that is expected and validated among his peers. As Moss (2000, p. 103) emphasises,

> Particularly where proficiency judgements were made highly visible, weaker boy readers, in contrast to weaker girl readers, spent an inordinate amount of time in flight from such judgements. They put a lot of energy into disguising their lower status and escaping from the consequences of that designation.

It is important to again hold an awareness that being positioned in the bottom reading group is only one of the subordinated positions unwillingly inhabited by George and by Puzzle. They were also subject to the teacher's authority, engaged in instructed tasks, and navigating high-stakes literacy. They were coping with the status attached to different types of reading material *and* learning to read under the researcher's gaze. In fact, Puzzle's glare mentioned above, when observed stumbling over a word, continued after ability-grouped

reading had been replaced by mixed-attainment reading. This cautions against over-simplistic optimism that elimination of ability groups might eliminate engrained reading hierarchies though it may still disrupt them. Although George and Puzzle may not like being seen as learners, rather than 'knowers', in whatever context, the hierarchical and very public nature of ability-grouped reading surely exacerbates their discomfort and anger.

Conclusion

The stories unfolded in this chapter suggest a re-examination of the deeply engrained and often unquestioned pedagogy of ability-grouped reading has been long overdue. By addressing my first research question, the chapter demonstrates that the practice does affect children's identities as readers. Most children were aware of the hierarchical structure of the reading groups and of their place in that hierarchy. How they enacted their reader identities was socially constructed, with and against others, orientated to a significant extent by their group position, and woven into the social fabric of classroom life. Those in the highest positioned group almost universally presented as insiders who occupied a hallowed place in the social world of classroom reading. Although there were tensions in the highest group about who counted as 'top' top readers, the language used to describe themselves was consistently that of superiority. Nor was it just as readers that they claimed superiority - they distinguished themselves as more intelligent, happy and confident than those in other groups. And they had the social capital to make these self-judgements stick. Conversely, as all marks of distinction are made against the 'other', those in the lowest positioned group were stigmatised not only as struggling readers but as sad and unintelligent, characteristics unrelated to reading print.

Children's insider status was also marked by the way they portrayed reading as the connective tissue in their friendships. Girls spoke explicitly about how reading strengthened the emotionally supportive bonds in their friendships while boys spoke of friendships built around sharing and swapping books. Significantly, these claims to reading friendships appeared available only to those in the higher positioned group. I argue that as hierarchical reading groups marked and separated those in the lowest group, they lacked the social capital and status as readers to forge friendships around reading. This positioned them as outsiders to the apparently thriving community of readers in the study. Research has shown the positive impact that cultivating communities of readers can have on children's reading engagement

and on socioeconomic disparity in reading attainment (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Cremin, 2019; Cremin et al., 2014). To be excluded from this reading community because of visible hierarchies may be a largely unrecognised and injurious consequence of ability-grouped reading.

These are some of the constraints within which children in the lowest positioned reading group lived and learned. They responded with agency but still faced costs. The fact that some believed they would never move groups suggests the system may have already begun to fix their reader identity in restrictive ways. And although others, often girls, believed their group would help them become better readers, and potentially move group, their responses were framed by stillness and whisper. The quietness of these utterances, when contrasted to their talk of family and other pastimes, could still suggest hesitancy in their identity as readers. This hesitancy, together with their social exclusion from reading friendships, may illuminate the emotional and social cost of being lowly positioned within ability-grouped reading. Another pattern of responses involved a refusal to occupy the position of struggling reader, particularly by those more strongly invested in appearing knowledgeable. This was a feisty but precarious course. It often involved subterfuge and avoidance of reading to stake a claim as a confident reader; a position that was denied them by those higher up the reading hierarchy. In one case illustrated, the claiming of superiority, though often thwarted, drew on hegemonic masculinity (Renold, 2014) and involved put-downs of girls and non-hegemonic boys. How children were allocated to these high-status and stigmatised groups was not a matter of luck, intelligence or even aptitude for reading print. As the next chapter will make clear, this is a classed, and to an extent racialised, process, that begins shortly after children begin formal schooling.

Chapter 6

How Class Matters in Classroom Reading Hierarchies

Introduction

In the previous chapter I presented ability-grouped reading as a practice that accrues advantage for those in the so-called top group. This chapter will argue that allocation to these reading groups is not happenchance, nor is it dependent on aptitude for reading.[2] Rather, I interrogate how social class, in particular, influences group allocation and subsequent accrual of advantage and disadvantage. The ethnographic specificity of my study in relation to reading contributes new insights to the wider debate on ability grouping and social inequity. Yet, that situated specificity also makes class more difficult to talk about. Although I use the terms working and middle class in order to keep power and privilege in view, how class is lived is messier than this binary suggests. Class boundaries are also blurry in post-industrial countries like the UK; Bourdieu's (1984) analogies of class as clouds or forests, discernible but with diffuse edges, are good to keep in mind here. Although I would situate many of the children discussed in this chapter as traditionally working or middle class, there were some I would situate in the hazy middle (Savage, 2015) and others whom I did not get to know well enough to situate in terms of class.

Organising reading instruction into hierarchical groups is neither necessary nor inevitable. There are alternative non-segregated ways of teaching reading that hold possibilities of liberation and fluidity in children's reading experience. As well as education's role in capitalist reproduction, its liberatory potential to disrupt and challenge systems of oppression has also long been advocated (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994; Luttrell, 2020). Teachers can be motivated into the teaching profession by a passionate desire to support working-class pupils (of all ethnicities) and all Children of Colour to succeed in an education system they know favours White, middle-class children. Reay's (2017) own experience as a teacher is an example of this commitment while also showing how the education system can undermine these liberatory intentions. Herein lies the push and pull between agency and constraint that is central to my study and to this chapter.

[2] In this chapter the term 'reading' will refer to the reading of words and accompanied visuals rather than wider multimodal conceptualisations of reading unless otherwise stated.

The chapter begins with *Holding Readers in Place,* exploring the reasons why children are more likely to remain in the same hierarchical reading group than to move fluidly between groups. I will discuss issues of positioning, inertia, misallocation, and pedagogy that contribute to this fixity. In *Not Down to Luck,* while mindful of the particular intersections of class with race and ethnicity in ability grouping generally, I suggest that the so-called bottom reading group is largely a destination for working-class children.[57] This section analyses what class is doing, both in the initial allocation and in children's experience of reading groups. The next section, *Family Habits, Economics and Reading Group Placement*, explores how classed habitus does and does not matter in children's experience of reading and in subsequent group placement. The final section, *Disrupting School-Based Reading Hierarchies*, explores disruptions to the constraints of ability-grouped reading, particularly mixed-attainment reading, that were introduced in the study.

Holding Readers in Place

As Chapter 5 illustrated, children in the so-called bottom reading group were often fixed in the gaze of others as struggling readers, whose struggles would persist into adulthood. There were a small number of children who were experiencing significant difficulties in reading print, and the next chapter will be devoted to their experience. However, and this point is crucial, of the 14 children in the lowest positioned reading group, more than half (N=9) showed no signs of struggling to read. In fact, they were successfully doing everything as readers that those in the middle and top reading groups were doing. To illustrate this similarity of aptitude, I will draw on my own practitioner knowledge, infused by literacy scholarship, particularly Hall's (2005) *Listening to Stephen Read*.

Like those in the top group, children in the lowest group knew that, in English orthography, print conventionally flows from left to right and is sectioned into words. They attended to each word, sometimes pointing to the words to keep track and sometimes scanning ahead to anticipate what was coming up. There were words they could recognise on sight. They knew the letters of the alphabet, and matched letter symbols to sounds. They also knew the sounds of some digraphs (2-letter sound units, e.g., *ch*). When approaching unknown words, they could use their graphophonic knowledge to blend sounds together to

[57] Because the term *working class* can be misrecognised as only White (Sandhu, 2018), I state here for the avoidance of doubt that by working class I refer to working-class children of all ethnicities.

make words. Although this kind of 'sounding out' and word recognition were their go-to strategies, their attempts often drew on the context of the sentence or story and made sense. At times they attended to the punctuation of the sentence to help maintain sense of the text. Perhaps most importantly, they were engaged in what they read, connecting events across the narrative and with their own lives, as Lucia Jasmine and Jamie do in the following extracts. Again, the words from their book are written in italics to distinguish them from their talk:

> Lucia Jasmine: *Do, you, like, green eggs and ham*? … I don't think he does!
>
> Jess: *I* don't think he does.
>
> Lucia Jasmine: No, he's like 'yeuch!'
>
> Conversation and reading with Lucia Jasmine, Fairfield, Kelvin

> *Go away! The rocket is going to take off.* That's such a mean thing to say to a dug [dog]!
>
> Jamie, Fairfield, Kelvin, running records and conversation

These comments show an engagement in and understanding of what is being read, which was typical of the majority in the so-called bottom reading group. Analysis of reading in the top group revealed very similar patterns of knowledge, skill and engagement. It is true that most in the lower positioned group appeared, much of the time, to be less fluent in applying these skills and knowledge. However, this could be explained simply by having had less practice in reading, or of reading in English, in the case of some children who were learning English as an additional language. Yet even this contrast in print fluency was, to an extent, contextual. In the following scenario, Jeffy, who we met in the last chapter, had chosen to read with his friend Mario,[58] a White boy of Scottish heritage from the so-called top reading group. In this step-out of the usual ability-grouped routine, I would have found it difficult to tell who was in the top and bottom group, as the following extract illustrates:

[58] I did not get to know Mario well enough to situate him in terms of class.

> Jeffy takes charge of the reading. He holds the book. He decides how much he reads, when to pass it to Mario, and when to take it back. He bends over it, focussing 100% on the text. When he gets to a word he is unsure of he says, "No wait," holding down the page with his hands. He takes time to work it out. One of those words is *peppermint* which he gets to "papermint" with a concerted effort at working out the sounds. I say what a good reader he is and he says, "So is Mario." Fluency-wise they appeared similar today, pretty fluid but pausing momentarily at each word, getting most of the words correct, working some out.
>
> Fieldnotes, St Jude's, Clyde

I was struck by the assertiveness conveyed by Jeffy's words and actions, taking charge of the book, for example. His acceptance of my compliment was, I interpreted, an agreement that he was a good reader, and that Mario was also good, but not better than him. It is also interesting to note just how different their respective fluency seemed in this context compared to their reading groups. In this scenario Jeffy probably had more authority because he had chosen to invite Mario along to read with me, shifting their usual positions in the hierarchy. This apparent contextual difference in fluency echoes findings of Learned (2016) in her US study of context and reader identifications in high school. Most of the time, however, there was a discernible difference in print fluency between groups in my study. At least some of this could be explained by the relative time they had spent practising reading.

Once allocated to a reading group, often early in children's schooling, the gap in fluency could be widened because of the different teaching strategies used with each group. The children in the so-called top reading group, for example, had regular opportunities to clarify and expand their vocabulary, and develop layered comprehension through group discussion. This was rarely the focus of instruction with children in the so-called bottom reading group, perhaps because their books (early levels of the reading scheme) did not lend themselves to deeper comprehension or to expanding vocabulary much. These books also contain fewer words so children in the lowest group had less reading practice with the teacher than children reading higher levels of the reading scheme or beyond it. And so, those in the top group received significantly more of what might advance them as readers, which potentially widens any gap in reading fluency (Stanovich, 2009). For one teacher in my study, her key concern about trying mixed-attainment reading was that her top group would miss out on this extra comprehension development. For others, they ameliorated, to some extent, this

disproportionate input on comprehension by also reading aloud to the class and doing related activities in mixed-attainment groups.

As well as misrecognition as struggling readers, and more limited opportunities to practice, ability-grouped reading also appeared to contain an inertia that held children in place. Fluency-wise, some appeared ready to move on in the reading scheme or, indeed, move to another reading group but instead remained in the so-called bottom reading group. The problematic issue of inertia within ability grouping in general has been noted by many studies (e.g., Macintyre and Ireson 2002, Hallam and Ireson 2006, 2007; Dunne et al., 2011). In my study, Angel's experience (White, working class, Scottish; St Jude's, Clyde) presented an obvious example of this inertia. As a relative outsider in the classroom, I perceived Angel to be an avid reader, one of the most engaged and fluent in the class. This was conveyed in her narrative portrait in Chapter 5. When she read aloud to me, she performed it like an actor in full command of her audience. Although her current, and previous, teacher had noted her progress, they had both felt a jump to the middle group was too great, potentially denting her confidence as a reader. And so, Angel remained in the lowest positioned reading group, reading much simpler and shorter books than she could comprehend. Both teachers agreed that, if it weren't for ability grouping, she could have moved more quickly through the levels of the reading scheme and potentially garnered greater fluency as she went. Instead, she left the school a few months before the fieldwork ended, still held in the so-called bottom reading group.

The inertia of being held on book levels because of perceived needs of the group was also evident in Jamie's story (White, working class, Scottish; Fairfield, Kelvin). When I read with him, he told me that he had been on Level 2 of the reading scheme for two years. He said he (and the rest of his group) had been re-issued with the same book a year on from the first time, and that he could read all those books. When I completed a reading running record with him (Appendix 7) it was evident that he could read and comprehend books at Level 7 of the scheme. This was the level of book the middle group was reading. He had also apparently mastered the art of reading upside down. One day when I was reading with Lucia Jasmine, he chipped in with the words she was unsure of, despite sitting opposite her.

But for Jamie, the issue of inertia overlaps with another concern, that of misallocation to the so-called bottom reading group based on home circumstances rather than reading fluency. Within the study, it was White working-class boys who experienced this 'downward'

misallocation. This experience recalls the many studies that have found Black and White working-class pupils susceptible to low teacher expectations that result in their over-representation in lower groups (e.g., EEF, 2016; Gillborn et al., 2016; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020). When I asked the teacher why Jamie was in the bottom group, she told me he had missed a lot of school because of his mum's poor mental health. She said that despite being clever, he was behind in his reading and writing. Yet as the reading running records had shown, his reading level matched that of the majority of the class. When I inadvertently gave him a Level 6 book, which he read with ease, I recorded in my fieldnotes that, "he smiled; one of those smiles where he kept his lips tight shut but the smile still tilted his mouth upwards." Nevertheless, when I wondered aloud whether he might skip to Level 7 he was adamant that he wanted to read all the books in the series and to stay with his reading group; he thought he would always be in this group. Only once did I hear Jamie express doubt about his reading, when I said, "You know that word. You've read it before." "I forget things really quickly," he said, sounding defeated (Fieldnotes). More often Jamie portrayed a positive identity as a reader, largely uncoupled from the stigma, expressed by other pupils, of being in the so-called bottom reading group. He maintained this not because of this pedagogical practice, which constrained his experience, but despite it.

Like Jamie, Mark (White, working class, Scottish; Fairfield, Kelvin) had been placed in the so-called bottom reading group the previous year because of family circumstances. The teacher described this as a "supportive measure" because family breakdown had affected his behaviour. When I invited him to read, he said, even before he had sat down, that his younger brother was reading at a higher level than him. Yet, when I assessed his reading level, it was higher than his brother's level. In fact, it was similar to the most fluent readers in his class. Despite now being in the middle group, when I commented what a good reader he was, he returned to negative comparisons with his brother. From his words and the tone of those words I suggest Mark's self-view as a reader had not benefited from his "supportive" placement in the regularly stigmatised bottom reading group the year before.

Children in their first two years of learning English as an additional language (EAL) were also placed in the so-called bottom reading group, as the previous chapter indicated, and I suggest that this too is a problematic allocation. The level of print fluency of bilingual learners[59] *did* match their group placement, and there was evidence that they moved group as

[59] I understand the term *bilingual* to encompass a continuum that includes children in the early stages of learning an additional language and those who are equally fluent in more than one language.

their English fluency developed. Nevertheless, issues with the practice are highlighted in literature on multilingualism and education. Firstly, it takes between five and seven years for children learning EAL to match the English proficiency of first-language English speakers, according to Cummins (2000). Therefore, if children are placed in ability groups by their English proficiency rather than their aptitude for subjects, they could be in groups for years that do not stretch them intellectually (Earnshaw, 2022). Teachers have also reported challenges in distinguishing between EAL and special educational needs, opening the potential for misrecognition (Gardiner-Hyland, 2021; Gardiner-Hyland & Burke, 2018). This could explain the over-representation of linguistically marginalised children in low positioned groups generally (Scanlan et al., 2012). While ability grouping persists, and education systems are organised around multilingualism as a deficit rather than asset, linguistically minoritised children will continue to be over-represented in stigmatised low positioned groups (Barros et al., 2021; Lucas et al., 2008).

To sum up, this section has argued, ability-grouped reading held children in place, even as they resisted or welcomed their group position. It held them in place by labelling them as struggling readers early in their reading lives (Chapter 5) and by the inertia and misallocation to which ability grouping is prone. Pedagogical action also presented greater opportunities to the top group to read more, develop linguistically and delve deeper into comprehension of text. Any initial gap in fluency therefore was likely to widen rather than close as a result of ability grouping for reading. Social class was rarely named directly in the field, but it was signalled over and over again in children's experience in reading groups as the next section will show.

Not Down to Luck: Placement and Relationship in Hierarchical Reading Groups

Classed assumptions around reading run deep in education, with damaging material effects; these assumptions show up in ability-grouped reading. This section further explores influences on allocation to reading groups, including the economic, temporal, and educational resources available to middle-class and working-class parents that impact differently the time and space available to support children's reading.

Many of the critiques of ability grouping in general (i.e., not specifically about reading groups) highlight the classed and racialised nature of placement, with working-class pupils and some minoritised ethnic groups significantly over-represented in the lower sets (Gillborn et al., 2021; Francis & Tereshchenko, 2020; Reay 2017). Bourdieu (1999, p. 423, 425) refers to setting and streaming as "… "gentle" exclusionary practices" creating "outcasts on the inside". Likewise, in my study, class struggle (while I am mindful of its intersections with race, ethnicity and language) exerted significant influence on children's likely reading group destination. Although there were working-class children in the middle and highest positioned reading groups, there were no middle-class children in the lowest positioned group. One middle-class child was kept out of the so-called bottom reading group by his teachers, despite similar levels of print fluency, because of how his parents might feel about him being there.[60]

These socioeconomic patterns of allocation most likely appear unsurprising because, I suggest, it is common knowledge that middle-class pupils dominate top groups and working-class pupils are over-represented in lower groups. However, what is less understood, and is contested, is how these classed patterns in reading groups come to be produced and reproduced. Some of this patterning I have already ascribed to classed misallocations. That said, there were more children in the study whose level of print fluency seemed to match their reading group, even if this match partly depended on reading context, as illustrated in an earlier section. This compatibility between reading fluency and group placement, for the majority of children, raised a question: what influences children's early reading fluency which then produces classed patterns of group allocation? I didn't want to ask this question because I feared it would lead me into a cul-de-sac of deficit views on working-class child-rearing.

Deficit views are commonplace in literacy research, particularly in psychology-based scholarship. Differences in print fluency are often attributed to inferior child rearing and poor literacy practices of working-class parents (e.g., Buckingham et al., 2014; Philips & Lonigan, 2007). Vellutino and Fletcher (2007) use the term "limited home background" to refer to working-class families in their discussion of dyslexia. In Buckingham et al. (2014, p. 429) "low quality home literacy environments" provide the reason for "poor children becoming poor readers". This classist disparagement of working-class lives is both common and

[60] I do not specify school or year group to help maintain anonymity.

sustained beyond education; and through this disparagement, Tyler (2013, 2020) argues, classed privilege is maintained and reproduced.

Bourdieu's concept of class habitus, combined with the notion of symbolic violence, helped me out of this deficit cul-de-sac. As Chapter 1 introduced, habitus is formed of dispositions engendered from birth that affect (but do not determine) ways of being in the world. Collective histories into which one is born are held and expressed in, and as, habitus. Despite multifarious individual differences, classed patterns of lifestyle, including literacy practices, arise from similar historical conditions of existence. Such conditions of existence include families' economic distance from, or proximity to, necessity. They also include compositions of cultural capital passed down or blocked generationally. Class works relationally within fields, such as education, whereby not all cultural heritage is equally valorised as cultural capital. Cultural capital refers specifically to cultural resources that can accrue advantage to the individual or group in dominant fields (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990b). As Tyler (2013, 2020) has convincingly argued, the cultural and communicative ways associated with working-class existence are often stigmatised within powerful fields like education. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) term this stigmatisation and delegitimisation, *symbolic violence*. I have interrogated the empirical material using Bourdieu's concepts to explain further the factors contributing to the classed composition of reading groups, as follows.

Middle-class families can experience work-related pressures on family life, yet it was only children in the so-called bottom reading group who expressed awareness of the effect that (low-paid) work and home responsibilities had on parents' availability to read with them. Jeffy (St Jude's, Clyde) told me he couldn't ask his mum or dad to read with him because of the long hours they had to work. His mum, he said, had a job in a superstore and made craft products at home. His dad had become a delivery driver during the pandemic and now got home late each evening and had only one day off per week. In his tone and words, Jeffy expressed the injustice of this. Often on his dad's day off the family drove to the coast for a walk and an ice cream. Jeffy described a loving home that was temporally and economically stretched in ways that limited their capacity to read regularly with him. His experience contrasts starkly to that of Jack (middle class, White, Scottish/Irish; Fairfield, Kelvin) who said his mum gave up her studies, supported by his dad's income as a doctor, in order to spend more time with Jack and his brother. This time included regular reading and searching for books he might enjoy.

Mothers predominantly do the work of transmitting familial cultural capital to their children (Reay, 1995, 2004). Millie's stepdad, for example, left the house early for work on a building site and did not feature again in Millie's account of their daily life. Her mum was a care worker as well as fitting in the many home responsibilities described here by Millie (St Jude's, Avon) in the following extract, constructed from Millie's words about reading at home:

> Well ma mum doesn't really have time (for reading) because she wants to keep the house clean and all that. And I don't have time for it 'cause she starts making the dinner after she's done a wee bit of work and then when I ask her to do ma homework she usually, she's always doing the washing, or dishes, or making the dinner so I don't really have time. But if she does have time, she always does it with me. I still try and do it 'cause I know I'm, eh, I'm supposed to read the books every night. I don't practise every night because ma mum never has the time. I still practise a lot. Sometimes if I don't get it done then the next day my mum does that homework with me.

The capacity to transmit cultural capital, which could include knowledge of books and reading proficiency, depends on the amount of available time for this work and not only on the nature of the capital parents possess (Bourdieu, 1986; Reay, 2004). For Millie's mum, as for Jeffy's parents, there may simply be less time available to read with their children. In her words, Millie appears caught between the school's expectations of daily home reading ("I still try and do it 'cause I know I'm supposed to read books every night") and defending her mum ("but if she does have time she always does it with me"). The effect of economic pressure on time and emotional space to read with children was highlighted recently in a survey, conducted by the National Literacy Trust (2023), about parents' reading with children during what is often referred to as the cost-of-living crisis. The report found that almost a quarter of parents and carers experiencing financial hardship felt too stressed to read with their children because of their financial worries.

But, as well as economic constraint, parents' capacity to transmit literacy capital depends on the cultural capital they possess (Bourdieu, 1986); and this again may affect their child's allocation to a prestigious or stigmatised reading group. For parents who might have substantial legitimated literacy capital, like Lewis's mum[61] who was doing a doctorate and

[61] Lewis, introduced in Chapter 5, was in Kelvin class at Fairfield, was middle class, a Child of Colour, and of Pakistani heritage.

Emma's mum,[62] a journalist, reading with their children *may* be easy, relaxing and productive. But for some parents, particularly if they have experienced reading difficulties, a very different set of emotions may come into play when sharing books with their children, emotions like stress and feelings of inadequacy (Duckworth, 2013). Some of the children in the lowest positioned reading group spoke of their mother's difficulties with reading. Car (working class, White, Scottish/English; Fairfield, Kelvin), whose mum cultivated his love of books, also spoke about the difficulties she had with words:

> Car: My dad never reads to me anymore … he's not living in ma house anymore.
>
> Jess: So, did he used to read to you?
>
> Car: Yeh and even ma mum, 'cause ma dad's a wee bit better … ma mum doesn't know some of the words … the hard ones she never knowed… Ma mum can't read some of *The Owl That Was Afraid of the Dark.*
>
> Conversation with Car, Lewis and Jack, Fairfield, Kelvin

Car seems to appreciate, with "even ma mum", that his mum reads with him, even though she doesn't find reading easy, so that he can do his homework. *The Owl That Was Afraid of the Dark* by Jill Tomlinson was the class novel, which children were required to read at home. Puffy (working class, White, Scottish; Fairfield, Kelvin) also seemed to believe his mum had difficulties with reading when he said and repeated that his mum "can't", when I asked if they had read his library book, issued the day before. Yet, she clearly had read the book with him, evident in the small details he recalled, which he wouldn't yet have been able to read for himself. He didn't articulate what he felt she couldn't do when I asked him, and I fill the space with a guess that he feels she doesn't read like school adults seem to read.

I share these examples for two reasons. Firstly, they emphasise that parents of children in the so-called bottom reading group do read with their children even when they may find it stressful. Secondly, the examples suggest that those efforts may not reap as much value for their children in terms of reading-group placement. As the beginning of the chapter argued, once allocated to a particular group on the basis of parental capital, ability-grouped reading serves to favour the reading development of those in the top spot and hold back those in the

[62] Emma was in Avon class at St Jude's, was middle class, White, and of Scottish heritage.

lower group. This seems deeply unjust. In the next section I will delve deeper into the influence that children's home life has on their reading group placement.

Family Habits and Reading Group Placement

The value judgement that 'good' parents read with their children sits within a "dominant set of cultural repertoires about how children should be raised," according to Lareau (2011, p. 4). In a review of studies mainly from the US and Europe on shared book reading, Anderson et al. (2003) suggest there is a widespread misassumption in literacy research that "non-mainstream" families do not share books with their children or if they do, they do so in the wrong ways. In a study of Bangladeshi mothers in the UK, for example, mothers reported that teachers assumed they were illiterate and advised them on how to share books with their child (Blackledge, 1999). This entrenched view of lack, Anderson et al. argue, appears impervious to the many studies that suggest most families, across cultures, race and class, read with young children. The authors also suggest that there is little homogeneity *within* cultural groups, including the middle classes, who are popularly perceived to have homogeneous book reading habits, held up as the 'correct' way to read books with children.

In an earlier draft of this chapter, I was attempting to create a binary between family reading as described by children in the top and bottom reading groups. This distinction would then be used as further evidence that ability-grouped reading favoured certain home literacy practices and was therefore discriminatory to children with less experience of shared reading at home. However, this binary felt stretched and untrue to the data. On closer examination, I found that these differences were less distinct than I first thought. What follows is, I believe, a messier but 'truer' portrayal of reading and other pastimes in the children's home lives that might affect their group placement.

Although time and resources did affect shared book reading, the children in the lowest positioned reading group also described intimate reading experiences with their parents, often mothers. Puffy, with a smile in his words, spoke of reading at night-time with his mum, and the popcorn and chocolate that was part of this ritual. His fellow reading-group member, Car, shared his love of *Mr Men* books with his mum, as the following extract describes:

> Car tells me about his family. His mum works in a breakfast club and nursery. One day it was so windy they had to bring the sand pit inside. I ask if he has any

> books at home and he says he has loads. They are all in this big cupboard. His favourite books are Christmas books. Mum sometimes reads to him at bedtime. He gets to choose between his iPad and stories. Car and his mum love *Mr Men* books, he says, and they're trying to get all of them.
>
> Fieldnotes, Fairfield, Kelvin

As I reflected on my conversation with Car, I sensed the closeness he feels to his mum, which seems in part mediated by stories she told him of her work and by a shared love of books. The children in the lowest positioned reading group described family lives that were teeming with such enthusiasms, tender moments, and cultural worth. Books are therefore present, though often decentred by a wealth of other cultural activity. Included in the enthusiasms that children in the lowest positioned group spoke of, echoing Lareau's (2011) study, was hanging out with cousins and playing outside with friends. The pleasure got from computer games was also frequently discussed. When Alf (working class, White, Scottish; Fairfield, Kelvin) told me about his favourite things they included his dog, Daisy, his goldfish, budgies, his mum and dad, and the fifteen footballs crammed under his table. He also spoke of reading his Simpson's comic book with his mum when she had time. His mum had multiple cleaning jobs, one of which had to be done in the middle of the night, according to Alf. Tender moments recounted between children and their parents often involved non-print mediums such as oral story telling (as discussed in Chapter 4), television and the internet. Jeffy (working class, White, Scottish; St Jude's, Clyde), for example, described creeping downstairs when he couldn't sleep and curling up on the sofa with his dad to watch World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). On another occasion he recounted looking up the planetary system with his mum on her phone then going to the window to see if he could see the red planet of Mars.

Conversations with children in the so-called top reading group tended to be less divergent and more focussed on their home book reading experience, which was done both with adults and independently. Some talked of favourite places where they could go and read quietly. Most reported having a large accessible collection of books close to hand in bookcases near their beds. This prominence of books echoes Heath's (1983) classic description of middle-class child rearing where bookshelves and book characters were installed "along with the crib". In my study I saw similar patterns in book geography, of where books were and how they were presented. Those in the so-called bottom reading group talked mostly about books

being in cupboards, sometimes out of reach, and of objects like soft toys, Lego, electronic devices and footballs being closer to hand. The difference in book geography could reflect different amounts of available space in different homes. Car, for example, talked about his room being very small and the space being dominated by a large inflatable ball. It could also point to the relative importance of different objects in children's lives and identities. The intentional cultivation of a reader identity, symbolised by the prominence and organisation of books, appeared more typical of middle-class homes, which brings me to the concept of *concerted cultivation*.

Lareau (2011) suggests that "concerted cultivation" distinguishes middle-class child rearing from working-class child rearing. In her study, both Black and White middle-class parents saw themselves as developers of their children's talents to serve their future economic, cultural and social gain. Concerted cultivation was apparent in parents' relentless organisation of gallery visits, sports and musical activities for their children, as it had been in Heath's (1983) earlier study. Middle-class children's language use and dispositions, inculcated through imitation and training, also prepared them to assume authority in social and institutional contexts. Although intentionally cultivated, Heath (1983) reminds us how natural these practices may seem to middle-class parents who have gained societal success through similar up-bringing.

Interestingly though, given the extensive time Lareau and her researchers spent with the families, routines of intergenerational reading (of books and other printed material) did not feature in her accounts of middle-class family life. Nor did Heath (1982, 1983) suggest that competition was a key driver in the way middle-class parents read with their children. Stretching their work, I suggest that cultivation of daily reading, and investment in and display of books, are core aspects of concerted cultivation. Indeed, studies that have interrogated Lareau's concept suggest that reading habits, more than elite cultural activities, predict educational attainment (De Graaf et al., 2000). Reading may be done to prepare children for getting ahead in education as much as to engage in an enriching and bonding pastime. This is illustrated in the following exchange from my study:

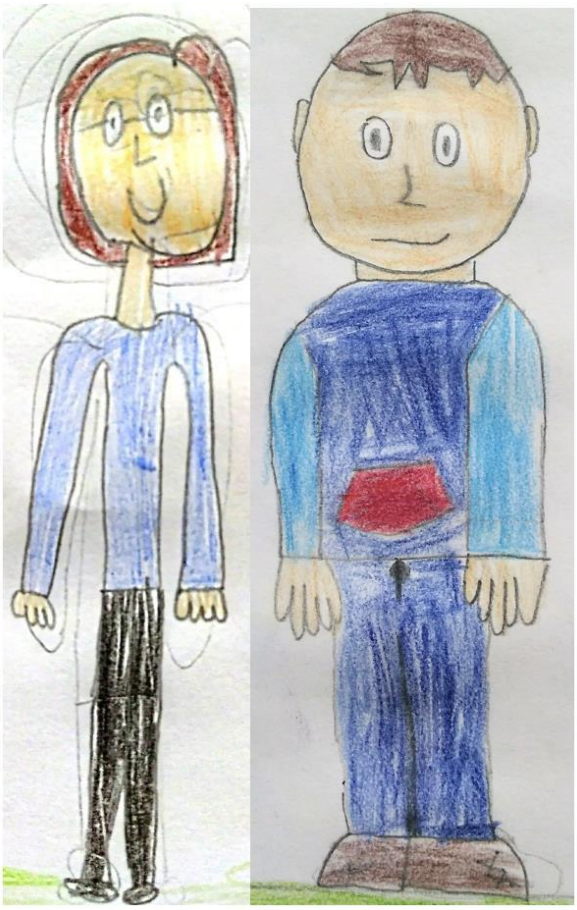

Figure 13: Self-portraits by Bella May and Jack

Jack: I used to be in a group on ma own … and I was way ahead of everyone.

Bella May: See when I told ma mum she was determined to get me over you!

Lola: When I told *ma* mum she wanted *me* to get way over Bella May.

Bella May: And so ma mum got … level four to five Biff, Chip and Kipper books to read to get over Jack (she laughs).

Jack (interjects): I was just … really good at reading when I first came to P1, so I just read a book and then it was like perfect.

Jess: …did you do a lot of practice?

Jack: Yeh, I did quite a lot of practice… ma mum read a short book for me then I just said the words out. So, it … was kinda connected to me learning words.

Conversation with Lola, Bella May and Jack, Fairfield, Kelvin

This snippet of conversation happened when I was drawing and chatting with three members of the highest positioned reading group at Fairfield. The audio recorder was on and, prompted by my questions, the conversation meandered through how they felt about their and others' reading groups. Jack (White, middle class, Scottish/Irish) describes the sustained, intentional practice of learning to read with his mum before he started formal schooling. As he spoke, Bella May (White, middle class, Scottish) burst into his words to tell him about the competitive spirit his reading skills had sparked in her mum. The upshot of this competition was a concerted effort to catch him up by purchasing and practising two levels of the reading scheme (the Biff, Chip and Kipper books). These actions speak as much to availability of time and money (to buy the reading scheme, for example) as it does to motivation. The middle-class parents of both Bella May and Jack appear (from their children's comments) to be intentionally preparing them to step confidently into the world of school and societal literacies. And they have succeeded: their children occupy a privileged educational and social position in the class hierarchy as we saw in Chapter 5. Consequently, ability-grouped reading has in this example reproduced middle-class cultural advantage, which Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, p.11) suggest is characteristic of much pedagogical action in the school system.

> ... because they correspond to the material and symbolic interests of groups and classes differently situated within the power relations, these (pedagogical actions) always tend to reproduce the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among these groups or classes, thereby contributing to the reproduction of the social structure.

The language above conveys *tendencies* rather than *determinacy*, yet social structure may 'always' be reproduced, nonetheless. There is much that seems predictable about the advantage gained through ability-grouped reading as a result of middle-class cultural reproduction and concerted cultivation of reading. Yet the language of tendency over inevitability is crucial to hold onto because class positioning can also be disrupted, resisted and transformed, even if it bounces back. An example of this disruption arose in the same conversation between Bella May, Lola and Jack. Lola (working class, White, Scottish), who also said her mum wanted her to read better than her friend Bella May, spoke at another point of having taught herself to read because her mum was too busy to read with her, as the following narrative portrait, composed from Lola's words, conveys.

Lola: A Narrative Portrait

Figure 14: Self-portrait by Lola

Nobody actually taught me to read. I just taught maself. Because ma mum was too busy with ma wee brother, and my dad and mum don't live with each other. And ma big sister only plays schools and does her make-up, she won't help me at all. Nope! That's why I don't want a sister. When I'm older I'm going to be a writer so I can help children that can't read. I read lots of books. I read in the library that's across from ma house. I don't really read them with anyone, and I just love it so much. I've got a whole stack at home. It's about to fall! I ask for them at Christmas and at ma birthday. And see at night when ma mum tells us to get to sleep, I hide under ma covers and read ma book with ma torch. *Captain Underpants*, *Emily Jane*,[63] she is a little doll that's really naughty. She even poured tea down the toy soldiers' trousers!

Lola, Fairfield, Kelvin

Lola giggled as she recalled the naughty exploits of Emily Jane. Through her words and the energy of their utterance, I sense her rollicking affective delight in reading. Despite her comment about her mum wanting her to out-read Bella May, what she describes is more akin to Lareau's (2011) concept of "natural growth", which Lareau suggests is more characteristic of working-class child rearing. The term "natural growth", as Lareau points out, does not deny the often exhausting labour involved in loving children, feeding, clothing, getting them

[63] I couldn't find reference to a book called *Emily Jane* so I assume she is a character in a book.

to school and keeping them safe when socioeconomic conditions are harsh. And, according to the school, Lola's mum was indeed navigating hard economic and relational conditions as she worked lovingly to raise her children. Rather, natural growth refers to the autonomy working-class children often have to organise their free time, according to Lareau. If they did engage in organised activities, Lareau suggests, it was generally the child who requested this rather than the result of parental orchestration. In Lola's words, I hear her navigating her own way through the reading world. Her mum supports her love of books by responding to her requests for books as gifts, and perhaps by ignoring the late-night torch reading under the covers, but the impetus seems to come from Lola herself.

And so, Lola's entry to the top group could represent a rupture to the classed allocation to reading groups. She appears to have made it into the top group by her own efforts rather than as a result of parental cultivation. Close attention to our conversation reveals, however, that her position in the top group is more precarious than those of her middle-class friends, as the following extract begins to show:

> Jess: Are you all in the same reading group?
>
> Jack: Well no
>
> Bella May: Nnn
>
> Lola: Yeh!
>
> Jack: Well, uh, well
>
> Lola: You've got *Clever Monkey* but I've got *Ella's Umbrella.*[64]
>
> Jack: Yeh (sounding relieved, an audible breath expelled) …
>
> Bella May: So, we're in the same group but we've not got the same books.
>
> Conversation with Lola, Bella May and Jack, Fairfield, Kelvin

[64] *Clever Monkey* and *Ella's Umbrella* are titles in the Oxford Reading Tree. Although the children are in the same group, the books reveal they are not on the same level of the reading scheme. *Clever Monkey* is level 11 and *Ella's Umbrella* is level 9. My interpretation of Jack's audible relief is that Lola has presented a way they can all present as part of the same group and be friends together, when in his mind he might distinguish between the children on level 11 and 9.

In the extract, Lola needs to claim her membership of the top reading group and for that to be apparently sanctioned by her middle-class friends. She also volunteered that, despite being at the top of Level 9 in Primary 2 (P2), she "went right back" when she began P3:

> Lola: I went back to *Green Island* again.
>
> Jess: Ah right. Is that still on Level 9?
>
> Lola: Yeh but,
>
> Jess: But the beginning of Level 9?
>
> Lola: Yup!
>
> Jess: Mmm. Do you know why?
>
> Lola: No!
>
> Jess: How did you feel about that?
>
> Lola: It wasn't really exciting when the same book I've read in P2…'cause I actually knew what happens.

This exchange reminds me of Reay's (2017, p. 77) words, "For working-class children, classrooms are often places of routine everyday humiliations and slights." In the absence of an explanation, it might appear that the ladder Lola climbed to get to the top of Level 9 had randomly met with a snake that had sent her sliding down the 'board'. She refuses the lower position assigned to her by the book levels, and by dint of her agency and love of reading she has established herself as a top-group reader, but her position appears less secure than that of her middle-class friends. A similar insecurity in holding a top position for Black middle-class children because of racism, is highlighted by Rollock et al. (2016). In my study, Lewis, the only Child of Colour in the top reading group, appeared to be relatively secure in his position, in that he was frequently described by other children as one of the three 'top' top readers in the class. Nonetheless, he did not appear to form a reading-friendship triad with Jack and Bella May, as might be expected from their shared 'top' status.[65] This may or may not be significant in his social positioning in the top group. A child in the middle group,

[65] See the example shared in the previous chapter where Jack and Bella May were swapping books by post during the pandemic.

Oliver, a Slovak speaker who was gaining fluency in English,[66] spoke of really liking reading with Lewis because of his kindness and friendship. I wonder if there was a shared valuable connection between the boys, influenced partly by being positioned as outsiders to the White, Scottish, English-speaking norms of the classroom.

Disrupting School-based Reading Hierarchies

So far, this chapter has presented ability-grouped reading as a pedagogical practice that reproduces, for example, classed inequalities.[67] Eliminating ability-grouped reading will not change the composition of resources parents draw on to support children's reading prior to starting school. Nevertheless, this chapter shows that by holding children in place those advantages are unfairly capitalised on, even if this is resisted and sometimes transformed. My third research question asks how children's reading and identities might change if an alternative pedagogy, mixed-attainment reading, replaced ability-grouped reading. In other words, could the constraining hierarchies seen in ability-grouped reading be disrupted? By introducing an alternative, I hoped to loosen practitioners' and policy makers' attachment to ability grouping in general. The practice has so far proved largely resistant to critiques highlighting its discriminatory qualities (e.g., Francis, 2017a; Gillborn, 2008, 2010; Reay 2017). I reasoned that if teachers and policy makers were presented with a research-informed alternative, perhaps the efficacy of ability-grouped reading would be reconsidered. However, the pandemic created its own disruptions, which left mixed-attainment reading occupying a smaller place in the fieldwork than originally intended. Despite these unusual circumstances and the smaller number of children involved, the following section offers scope for optimism and an encouragement to follow up this study with further trials into mixed-attainment reading.

As outlined in Chapter 3, the intervention involved children reading with the teacher in fluid mixed-attainment groups. Strategies to decipher words and maintain sense of what is read are discussed before children read aloud to themselves from a book that matches their

[66] Oliver was White and of Slovakian heritage. He seemed quiet in class and did not seek me out as many of the White English-speaking children did. I had only one conversation and reading session with him, which did not shed light how I might situate him in terms of class. Lewis was an English speaker who had never spoken the first language of his parents, which was Sindhi. He may be positioned as an outsider (by the White, Scottish children) by the colour of his skin and his Pakistani heritage.

[67] Ability-grouped reading also negatively positions some bilingual learners if children are placed in the so-called bottom reading group based on their English language acquisition, as Chapter 5 discussed. Over-representation of Black pupils in low groups generally, suggest that in a larger sample than mine the allocation to ability-grouped reading could also be influenced by racism (e.g., Gillborn et al., 2021; Francis & Tereshchenko, A. 2020; Joseph-Salisbury, 2020)

particular level of fluency. The teacher moves round and coaches individual children. Children can jot down words they can't work out or don't know the meaning of. In the plenary the children work together with the teacher to decipher these words in the context they appear in. What follows is a patchwork of observations, selected from various reading sessions, whose significance will then be discussed. The children's previous group is included in brackets e.g., MRG, for middle reading group:

> George (BRG) says excitedly when he sees Puzzle's (BRG) book, "I had this. I really liked this book. This is a different one, *Percy and the Badger*." The teacher begins by asking what they might do if stuck on a word. Responses include looking for a word inside the word, blending letters and, the teacher prompts, thinking about what would make sense.

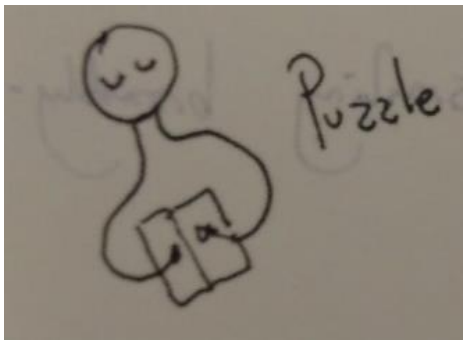

Figure 15: Field jotting sketch of Puzzle reading

> Puzzle is holding the book with both hands and her eyes follow the text. I hear her say "Percy the p-a-r park k-e-p keeper." George's book is lying flat on the table, and he places one hand on each page.

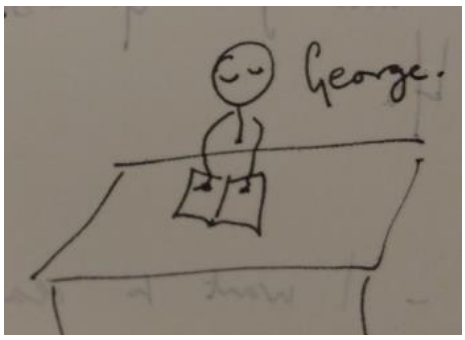

Figure 16: Field jotting sketch of George reading

> Puzzle looks over to the teacher and says "Miss, it's just clicking for me." George says, "Miss I don't know that word!" "Write it down" says the teacher. The

> teacher listens into each child reading then asks the group what words they didn't know. George has *new* written down and says he's worked it out. He noticed the Happy Birthday banner in the picture so thought that the boy would get a *new* kite because you get new things on your birthday. He is commended for his logic. Kieran (MRG) has written down *mammal*. The teacher suggests splitting the word in two, and he gets mam-mal but doesn't know what a mammal is. Emma (TRG) thinks she knows but she is describing a particular mammal, so the teacher explains it. Kevin (TRG) says, "I found another word I didn't know." Gary (BRG) is listening to these exchanges and says, "Miss I didn't know that word," pointing to his book.
>
> Fieldnote exerts, St Jude's, Avon & Clyde

These extracts illustrate a number of ways that mixed-attainment reading could disrupt hierarchy that is bound up in ability-grouped reading. Firstly, unlike ability-grouped reading, all children had access to the same pedagogical approach. The collaborative nature of strategy-sharing meant children could also learn from each other. Less fluent readers could pick up strategies from more fluent readers, but there were also examples of them working out words that had baffled a (previous) top group reader. This disrupted the idea that those from the (previous) top group would always be the 'better' readers.

In addition, the plenary provided opportunities, in a small way, to democratically expand vocabulary. Everyone, for example, participated in the conversation about *mammals*, an unfamiliar concept that had arisen in one child's book. If, as Krashen (1989, 2004) has argued, children learn more new vocabulary from reading than by any other means (which in turn supports reading development), short simple books with predictable words will not expand vocabulary or support reading development as much as more linguistically complex texts.

Through collaborative discussion about words in different children's books, children's vocabulary could be expanded beyond those that appear in their own (shorter) texts. This is, of course, only one way that reading can expand vocabulary. Teachers can also read aloud to the class from texts that children would not necessarily be able to read themselves (Barrs, 2000; O'Sullivan and McGonigle, 2010).

It is with respect to positioning, however, that mixed-attainment reading may offer the greatest promise to interrupt fixed reading hierarchies. When mixed-attainment reading was first introduced at St Jude's in the month before lock-down it appeared to have an almost

instantaneous impact on children's affective relationship with reading and with other readers. Some girls from the top group in Avon at St Jude's were visibly upset when the change was explained. While I assumed they did not want their elite position in the hierarchy disrupted they spoke later of insecurities, that if they couldn't read a word, they wouldn't be able to ask those around them as they could in ability-grouped reading (where everyone reads the same book).

But, when children sat down together there was a freedom in the air I had not witnessed before, particularly from those who had been in the lower groups. This freedom is captured in the extract above when George (working class, White, Scottish), previously so controlled in his movements and speech around reading, called enthusiastically across the table to Puzzle (working class, White, Polish) that he had *Percy and the Badger*. Puzzle, too, who would often scowl when reading in the lowest positioned group turned to her teacher in the first mixed-attainment session and said, exuberantly, "Miss, it's just clicking for me." Those less fluent readers who resisted being positioned as such (Moss, 2000, 2007, 2021) may also be more willing to be seen 'not getting words right' if they are not so marked out as 'struggling'. In this regard, I noticed, in the extract, that Gary[68] who had spent a lot of time disguising the words he couldn't read, acknowledged a word he was unsure of in the company of other (more confident) readers who were doing the same thing.

Mixed-attainment reading could also open up communities of readers to children who previously appeared excluded from them, as shown in Chapter 5. When I returned a year after schools had closed, mixed-attainment reading was well established in Avon class. By then Puzzle and Millie were enacting very different reader identities and appeared part of the 'reading gang'. Previously, they had professed disinterest in reading, and despite their popularity, reading had not defined their friendships. Both girls now spoke as avid readers and their friendships were laced through with reading. Puzzle talked enthusiastically about her friendship with Stella (previously MRG; White, Scottish[69]) and their shared love of the *Dog Man* series by Dav Pilkey. For a science experiment, they had built a Dog Man themed car together.

[68] Gary is White and of Scottish heritage. In relation to class, I would situate him in the hazy middle described by Savage (2015).
[69] I didn't get to know Stella well enough to situate her in terms of class.

Figure 17: Dog Man themed car built by Puzzle and Stella

Similarly, in an audio-taped conversation, Millie chose to invite along her two friends, Sienna and Emma (previously TRG; both middle class, White, Scottish). There was a shared camaraderie, with all three girls presenting as avid readers. Millie spoke of two particular books as her "favourite chapter books", giving an account of plots, and characters who reminded her of herself and her stepsisters. She reads long into the night, she said. Sometimes she even chooses to read rather than be on her phone. In the conversation, Sienna and Emma seemed to vie for the role of Millie's best friend.

Much of these findings echo the benefits Cunningham et al. (1991, 1998; Cunningham, 2006) found in earlier studies of mixed-attainment reading, that is, the effect that democratising the learning experience can have on pupils' motivation to develop as readers. They also found that these changes had a significant positive effect on the poverty-related attainment gap in the US. That said, children experiencing enduring difficulties in reading print were not as liberated by mixed-attainment reading and the complexities of their experience will be the focus of the next chapter. It is also important not to make too much of the positive shifts, given the small number of children involved, my limited observation opportunities, and the peculiar times the children had lived through in the pandemic. But they

suggested to me that mixed-attainment reading is definitely worth investigating beyond this PhD in the spirit of social equity, for its potential to trouble reading hierarchies.

In considering how mixed-attainment reading may disrupt hierarchy in school-based reading, it is important to think again about what kinds of hierarchies were specifically at play in ability-grouped reading. There were mechanisms within this pedagogical practice itself that created fixity in the hierarchical positioning of readers. These have been discussed in this chapter and include differentiated pedagogy that benefitted the top group, inertia, misallocation, stigmatisation and the early allocation to groups on the basis of inherited cultural capital. Mixed-attainment reading is more fluid, readers are less spatially marked by their perceived reading fluency and there is more equality in the teaching practices that children encounter. Children can progress individually as readers rather than be held on a level that is deemed best for their group.

There are other hierarchies, however, that although strengthened by ability-grouped reading do not necessarily originate in the practice and can quickly regroup when disturbed. In many societies, to be an accomplished reader and writer of dominant literacies accrues social prestige and, later, economic gain (Albright & Luke, 2010). In the study, children were involved in reinforcing such literacy hierarchies by claiming distinction as 'better' readers. Here I stretch Bourdieu's (1984) notion of *distinction seeking* in adults to that of children in the study. Being better readers was coupled with intelligence, happiness and confidence for the long term.

When mixed-attainment reading disrupted these assumptions of innate superiority, children actively reproduced the reading hierarchy. In one mixed-attainment reading session, for example, I listened in as children established who was reading at the highest level by comparing the texts they were reading. Higher levels of the reading scheme trumped lower levels. Fat novels trumped short novels, which in turn trumped picture books. Watching these hierarchies regroup, a new question arose in my mind: what it might mean for literacy pedagogy if rather than introduce one new pedagogy, there was a commitment by practitioners, policy makers and researchers towards on-going disruption of hierarchies wherever they were noticed, in the interests of social justice. This involves a radical shift from fixing (e.g., trying out a new pedagogy) to listening deeply, and iteratively responding to children's cultures of communication in order to disrupt limiting hierarchies. In the study this included elevating the status of picture books when the hierarchy around texts was

noticed. The intention was to make them cool to read by the most fluent readers. In this way, less fluent readers who benefit particularly from their visual cues do not have to choose between reading accessible material and social inclusion.[70] And so, I suggest the disruption of hierarchy as an ongoing practice rather than a destination.

Conclusions

Pedagogical actions and inaction help maintain the social order, which of course is built on the unequal distribution of power, privilege and wealth (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979, 1990). This chapter shows how, as a relational practice, ability-grouped reading can reproduce classed patterns of exclusion and inclusion in school-based literacies. Literacy capital is a valuable asset, progressively more so perhaps in post-industrial knowledge economies (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Unger, 2022). Feeling at home in this dominant literacy world can be socially, emotionally, and economically advantageous (Duckworth, 2013; Williams, 2017).

The chapter illustrates that initial group allocation sets up subsequent inclusions and exclusions in school-based reading. Based largely on reading fluency and familiarity, allocation appeared to reflect (through the stories children told) unequal distributions of economic, cultural, and educational familial capital. Concerted competitive cultivation of reading by some parents, as described by children in the top group, may also have ensured their children gained a top reading spot. The unfairness of ability-grouped reading is masked by the assumption that middle-class children will automatically outperform working-class children (Reay, 2012).

Particular interrelated aspects of ability-grouped reading then serve to maintain this classed allocation by constraining mobility and increasing differences in reading fluency as children move through school. This is not inevitable. The first of those aspects, discussed more in the previous chapter, is the contrasting social status ascribed to, and claimed by, different groups. Such judgements can have profound effects on children's learning, motivation and performance (Reay, 2017). Misallocations to reading groups also had the

[70] Shifting the position of picture books was achieved by using picture books in teaching the whole class, by introducing high quality age-appropriate picture books and having picture book themed reading cafes. Recommendations were invited, and those from high status readers carried particular weight in shifting the status of picture book reading in the class. Non-scheme picture books were also incorporated into the levelled reading books in order to soften the competition around book levels.

potential to affect children's self-view, motivation, and progress as readers. Middle-class children could be kept out of the so-called bottom reading group because of how their parents might feel. Conversely, working-class children, particularly boys, were misallocated to the 'bottom' group because of their perceived family circumstances when fluency-wise they fitted more into the middle or top group.

Greater opportunity to develop comprehension, expand vocabulary and read more text in the top group meant those children could advance more quickly, thus widening the gap in reading fluency between groups (Stanovich, 2009). The inertia within ability grouping compounded this trajectory. Individual children could be held back on a lower level of the reading scheme because the group was required to read the same book. When children progressed in reading, they could be held back because the leap to a higher group was deemed, by teachers, too large, and risked denting confidence.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) use the analogy of a game of cards to explain the relationship between structural constraints like those in ability-grouped reading and human agency. The rules of the game and the hand you are dealt are set unless the game changes. How the hand is played means the constraints do not wholly predict how children's experience will unfold. Although classed patterns appeared to reproduce, they did not do so neatly. This chapter, and the previous two, have foregrounded such tensions between agency and constraint. White working-class children claimed a place in the top reading group but found their position there to be more precarious than that of their middle-class peers. One Child of Colour was also in the top reading group when high positioned groups are often characterised by White dominance (Gillborn et al., 2021; Francis & Tereshchenko, 2020). In this particular instance, his position seemed more secure than that of the working-class White children in the top group. Yet although he was often spoken about as one of the three 'top top' readers in the top group, his reading friendships took him outside this elite group of three. This may or may not have had something to do with positioning of minoritized ethnic groups within this White dominant space.

There *are* ways of organising reading instruction, which could, to a degree, change the rules of the game and the hand that children are dealt when they arrive in school. The study investigated one such pedagogical alternative for its potential to offer more egalitarian conditions to develop as readers. There were promising outcomes in this regard despite the disruption to mixed-attainment reading caused by the pandemic. The promise came in the

changing relationship that some in the former bottom reading group seemed to have with reading and with other readers. They no longer appeared as excluded from the reading gang, though this was less true for children with particular reading difficulties.

Yet, reading hierarchies are complicated, influenced not just by pedagogical practices. Hierarchies are also perpetuated by children within an education system and society that is imbued with inequality and competition, and in which literacy holds a pivotal role. When disrupted, hierarchies can reform. In mixed-attainment reading, children quickly found ways to reassert their superiority, even if the practice itself contains more egalitarian potential. The nature of school-based reading would surely change if researchers, teachers and policy makers were committed to repeatedly spotting and disrupting hierarchy, however it is expressed, in the interest of social justice for all children. Within these disruptions, the social and emotional needs of those who find print reading hardest must be central. The next chapter will explore their experience specifically in the context of ability-grouped and mixed-attainment reading, and within dominant literacy narratives.

Chapter 7

Print Reading Difficulties and Ability-Grouped Reading

Introduction

The previous chapter consolidated the core thesis proposition that ability-grouped reading reflects and rewards classed practices, resources and assumptions, rather than necessarily reflecting greater or lesser aptitude for print reading. Yet not all children showed similar aptitude for reading print: a small number (n=5) in the so-called bottom reading group were finding reading extraordinarily difficult and this chapter explores their experience. Reading involves comprehension, connection and emotional engagement with multimodal signals, including image, colour, sound, shape and words (Kress, 2000; Narey, 2017; Pahl & Rowsell, 2020). That said, because print dominates in education and society, the deciphering of words can matter disproportionately in how readers are positioned and in the emotional, social, and intellectual experience of readers in low positioned reading groups (Maybin, 2013, Learned, 2016; Scherer, 2016).[71]

This chapter will provide a close-up, situated critique of ability-grouped reading when reading is difficult, linking to broader reproduction of privilege and disadvantage through the reification of print communication in society (Collinson, 2012, 2020). There can be both fixity and fluidity in how readers are recognised and misrecognised when the processing of print is very difficult. Reading difficulties *can* be examined and their effect on identity explored without essentialising those difficulties. That is, they can be examined without assuming those difficulties are unaffected by social, emotional or temporal conditions, and also without allowing difficulties in decoding print to occlude other aspects of children's relationship with reading. To maintain fluidity of perception while recognising how readers can become fixed in their self-view, and in peers' and educators' gaze, is the guiding principle of this chapter.

In offering this critique I will engage critically with psychological interpretations of reading difficulties (e.g., Snowling & Hulme, 2005; Snowling, 2019) by bringing them into conversation with relational perspectives on reading (e.g., Dudley-Marling, 2004; Kirk, 2001;

[71] For ease of reading I will sometimes omit the word 'print' from 'print reading' in this chapter but 'reading' will signify 'print reading' unless multimodal conceptions of reading are explicitly indicated.

Williams, 2017). Some of the writers I draw on here offer autoethnographic accounts of feeling like outsiders in the world of powerful literacies in childhood (Chapman, 2002; Kirk, 2001; McQueen, 2020; Stuart, 2021). Their stories are included, not as predictors of how children's reading will be in the future, but to point towards the relations of power within which children's reading develops; they also act as cautionary tales against seeing reading difficulties, as they present in childhood, as being fixed. I deliberately attribute as much epistemological authority to these autoethnographic insights as I do to literacy theorists writing in more traditional academic registers. Each are chosen for their thought-provoking challenges to essentialist views on reading difficulties, and for bringing class and race into the frame of discussion.

Section one of the chapter, *A Double Bind? Navigating Print Challenges in the 'Bottom Reading Group',* will explore reader identities and positioning in ability-grouped reading for children having difficulties processing print. It will also discuss the effects of replacing ability-grouped reading with mixed-attainment reading for children struggling to decipher print. Section two, *A Close Encounter with Print Reading Difficulties,* offers a detailed empirical account of the experience of one child, Cash, when engaging with print. This close analysis provides the grounding for subsequent analysis beginning with section three, *Developmental Dyslexia: Affordances and Limitations,* which interrogates the efficacy of neurolinguistic explanations for enduring reading difficulties. Section four, *Affective Shifts, Cultural Resonance and Dissonance in Reader Identities,* suggests that difficulties which appear fixed can *sometimes* prove more fluid when viewed through a prism of temporal, social and affective conditions around reading. The chapter concludes with *Symbolic Violence and the Tyranny of Print Literacy*, which reconceptualises Cash's story within the affective, sociocultural and neurolinguistic landscape of the chapter.

The process of writing this chapter, in particular, has been hesitant, deliberative and in-progress. Such deliberation has provided the reflexive space to grapple with conceptualisations that challenged my practitioner understanding of reading difficulties and to probe the close empirical material from children's reading. The process has enabled me, too, to reflect on how different experiences of reading become legitimised and delegitimised within education, work and social life. More than any other chapter, my mind has been changed through the process of writing it. I draw here on methodology that foregrounds writing as a tool of analysis and agree with Richardson and St. Pierre (2005, p. 970) that "I wrote my way into particular spaces I could not have occupied by sorting data with a

computer program or analytic induction," though I also did both. The chapter represents an evolution of my thinking towards psychological perspectives, troubled within sociopolitical and affective interpretations of reading difficulties. This epistemological decision to make visible how my knowledge has developed may help some readers to think along with me. I have chosen to write often in the present tense when discussing the children, to add immediacy to this evolution of thinking.

A Double Bind? Navigating Print Challenges in the 'Bottom Reading Group'

As Chapter 5 illustrated, children in the so-called bottom reading group were very often viewed by other children as not only less adept at reading, but also less intelligent, less happy and less confident than those in the so-called top reading group. In these perceptions, little distinction was made between those who were making sustained progress and those who were finding reading impossibly difficult. When asked, children speculated that those in the so-called bottom reading group would all struggle to read as adults. Those experiencing difficulties in processing print seemed no more or less likely to be imagined as a future 'poor adult reader' than those who were currently making smoother progress in reading. One exception to the view that less fluent readers would forever remain less fluent, was expressed by Lola (working class, White, Scottish; Fairfield, Kelvin, top reading group). By asserting that anyone could become a skilled reader with practice, she challenged the 'common sense' myth that those in the top group were essentially more intelligent or more naturally gifted at reading, a myth built on ideas of natural superiority of the middle classes. As Reay (2012, p. 593) expands:

> As long as the upper and middle classes remain invested in the belief of their own social and intellectual superiority, they will continue to associate fairness in education with their own children winning what is an extremely unfair educational contest.

Occasionally, children in the lowest positioned group distanced themselves from those perceived to be making very limited progress in processing print. This could be expressed in the claiming of higher status reading material, as Millie appears to do in the following conversation extract:

Millie: I can't really read the chapters…

Jess: So, you chose *Horrid Henry* [a short chapter book] didn't you?

Millie: 'cause it's on telly and then I know some of the stories from it… I'm also quickly look at pages because I like the ones that have pictures in it 'cause then you can know what the words in that maybe,

Jess: Does everybody choose a chapter book?

Millie and Ellie: (in unison) No!

Ellie: Some people in our class are not the *best* (her emphasis).

Conversation with Millie and Ellie, St Jude's, Avon

Millie's choice of chapter books (with pictures), despite finding chapter books difficult, may align her with her friend Ellie from the top reading group [72] and distance her from others in the so-called bottom reading group that Ellie describes as "not the best". George, another member of Millie's group, chose quite long chapter books with few pictures. His reading, unlike Millie's, was not progressing along a normative arc and he couldn't yet read the books he chose. He may have to choose between aligning with the chapter-reading majority and the stigma of reading lower status accessible texts. This is an example of the pressure to perform as a confident reader when status judgements are highly visible (as they are in ability-grouped reading), which can affect the text choices that children make.

The reading lives of those who experience difficulties in processing print is richer, however, than this chapter book/ picture book dichotomy introduces. It is also richer than a singular focus on their difficulties would suggest. Through the following narrative portrait of Alf (working class, White, Scottish) I hope to convey the joy, agency, uncertainty and constraints that can be present when children find reading difficult. This portrait is composed from fieldnotes and audio-taped conversations.

[72] Ellie is White and of Scottish heritage. Class-wise, I would situate her in the hazy middle (Savage, 2015). Millie is White, Scottish and working class.

Figure 18: Self-portrait by Alf

The children gather on the carpet in front of the teacher's chair. A chorus of voices spontaneously call out to each other what reading scheme level they are on. I hear Alf's voice buoyantly proclaim that he is on level 2; this is the lowest level for the class. Later that day, he is reading a graphic novel, *The Simpsons on Parade.* His head is bent over the book and his eyes scan across the comic frames. I ask if he enjoys reading and he says yes, "if it's too easy, if it's too hard, I can still look at the pictures." He asks if I have a favourite Simpson and when I say, "Marge," he says, "Bart, because he does funny things." He reads *The Simpsons* with his mum at home, after homework and dinner, when she gets a moment. His mum has five cleaning jobs, he says, and a big bunch of keys.

Another occasion, reading a *Dr Seuss* book, Alf wonders what a machine in the book is making. I point to the word *donuts*. He stares at the word but says nothing. I cover all but the first letter *d*, inviting him to say the sound. He is

silent, still, staring at the page, then turns to me and says, “It’s really cold today.” I agree, and we leave the book aside. The children use the ‘five-finger rule’ to choose books. Alf explains, “You start with 5 fingers up and every time you don’t know a word you put a finger down and if all five fingers are down the book is too hard for you, so you put it back.” He speaks with authority, as a reader in class who uses this system, and I ask if he could show me how it works using a book. He stops, stock still, and after a pause says quietly, “I can’t read anything.” His words feel like a confession, the stillness contrasts to the movement and glee he expresses when reading a familiar book from the reading scheme. In those moments he frequently rubs his hands together and beams a smile, like when he sees a character’s mum bringing hot chocolate. His reading connects, and is interspersed with, stories from home. “Imagine,” he says when Chip and Kipper jump out and surprise Biff, “I do that to my brother!”

I return to Alf’s comment that he can’t read anything. He is an avid reader of images, also an avid and respected on-line gamer among his peers but these may not be framed as reading in Alf’s school world. I wonder about his knowledge of letters and words. I write down and ask him to circle the letters he knows. He circles *a, e, s, k, m, x* and *o,* before saying “I’m looking for the one that goes Z,” which he draws with his finger in the air, and I realise I missed out *z*. There are many letters he doesn’t know, including *f* which is in his name. He says he doesn’t know any words but when I write out *a, is, the, in, on* he says gleefully “if you turn the *o* and the *n* it [*on*] makes *no*!” I ask if he knows *the* and he says he always forgets that one. His teacher is concerned about his memory and has requested that he be assessed by the educational psychologist. Meanwhile when he needs to log into *Roblox* on his iPad he enlists the help of the internet for the letters he doesn’t know. He demonstrates, calling across the room, as if to the computer-generated assistant, “Alexa! How d’you spell *two-player tycoon?”* A smile laces his words, as he shares his ingenuity.

Alf, Fairfield, Kelvin

Alf’s narrative suggests ways that the position of struggling reader can be ignored, pushed back but also embodied. There seemed a lack of awareness or perhaps a lack of concern about how other children might position him as a level two reader when they boasted of

higher reading levels. There was an infectious joy in his engagement with comic books, as he connected them to events in his own life that make him laugh. From other stories he told, like his budgie pooping in his dad's dinner, I imagined a household that laughs easily. There was also what I interpreted as fear or tension as his body froze, his eyes widened, and his voice quietened when his inability to decipher print was revealed. In explaining to me the 'five-finger rule' he enacted a reader identity, promoted in the classroom, of readers who could discern for themselves which books were a good level for them. Yet, this rule only works if there is some print knowledge and Alf at this stage could recognise only a few letters and fewer words. I regretted my question that prompted this exposure and the distress I perceived in his response that he couldn't read. He was also denied the identity of reader (when tightly imagined as print-reader) that multimodal conceptions of reading would have opened up through his reading of comic books and computer games (Narey, 2017; Kress, 2010; Vasquez, 2014).

When reading difficulties are experienced, the gap between a child's print fluency and that of the majority grows ever wider with the passing of time (Kirk, 2001). Children appear doubly held by emotion around their difficulties, and by messages of fixity that ability-grouped reading conveys, whether difficulties are experienced or not. As the two previous chapters have argued, ability-grouped reading encourages a view that some children naturally belong in the top group and others in the bottom group. A particularly unhelpful message for a child who fears their reading is not going according to 'plan' is that positions in the reading hierarchy are already fixed, even into adulthood (Duckworth, 2013; Kirk, 2001).

However, it is worth pausing on the influence of mixed-attainment reading on children experiencing reading difficulties, which was introduced to disrupt such hierarchy. What I observed was not the simple picture of liberation I anticipated. The reading friendships that had opened up for others in the previous bottom reading group had not opened up for those experiencing difficulties with print. Also, by breaking up ability-groups, children experiencing print difficulties worked more closely with those whose reading fluency was, by Primary 4, far in advance of theirs. In one group situation, observed when mixed-attainment reading was firmly established, George (working class, White, Scottish; St Jude's, Avon) was reading a picture book containing a few words on each page while others read weighty novels. The contrast in reading material appeared stark to me, even though picture books now occupied an elevated status in the class. Despite the initial liberation George had conveyed in the very first mixed-attainment session (described in the previous chapter) George's body and

gaze again seemed frozen when asked to read in front of his teacher and peers. He did not touch the book or tilt his head towards it.

The scene presented could, through close coupled contrasts, heighten the exposure and discomfort of being viewed as a struggling reader. Hierarchy seemed intact and viscerally present in this new context, and I had not anticipated this. If there is a call in my work to iteratively disrupt literacy hierarchies, the thesis must go beyond the binary of ability-grouped versus mixed-attainment reading to understand more deeply the construction of the struggling reader. Reading differences, perceived as difficulties, exist in social contexts and within relationships with other (real or imagined) readers despite often being individualised as a 'problem' within the child (Dudley-Marling, 2004). Acknowledging this socially constructed relationality does not ignore, as Hamilton (2016) stresses, the challenges faced by individuals whose reading does not fit societal norms. The following section delves deeper into those challenges when deciphering print is difficult.

A Close Encounter with Print Reading Difficulties

Many studies of children who struggle with reading either focus solely on decontextualised episodes of decoding print (e.g., Leppänen et al., 2012; Velluntino & Fletcher, 2005; Wagner et al., 1999) or only on the social and affective dimensions of reading (e.g., Hempel-Jorgensen et al., 2018; Scherer, 2016). An exception is Kabuto's (2016) study of the social construction of a "reading (dis)ability", which pays close attention to how print is read within the sociocultural dynamics of reading. Following Kabuto, this chapter presents a complex portrayal of Cash as a reader that attends equally to the minutia of deciphering print when this is difficult, and to the affective and social contexts of reading. By attending to both, novel perspectives on print reading difficulties can be constructed. This section introduces Cash as a reader.

Cash is a White working-class boy of Scottish heritage in Clyde class at St Jude's, who loves electronic and playground games, his little sister, dinosaurs and his pet tortoise. He is also an astute and engaged lover and interpreter of stories. In the following fieldnote I recorded his response when the teacher was reading to the class *Pugs of the Frozen North* by Reeves & McIntyre, a novel about a race to the imaginary North Pole. At one point the

contestants encounter a noodle bar run by yetis. If the contestants eat the noodles, they mysteriously decide to give up the race and stay to eat more noodles.

> Today Cash said that he thought maybe the noodles were like beer. If you drink a lot of beer, it makes you forget things and maybe the noodles were making the characters forget things [*which is pretty spot on, in my opinion*].

In this example I imagine Cash making sense of the story by interpreting events through the lens of his own experience, where adults may become forgetful around alcohol (Chambers, 2011; Rosenblatt, 1978). He also finds reading print at this point in his life very difficult. Another extract from my fieldnotes reminds me of the emotional and physical tension I perceived in him, each time I observed him read with me or his teacher.

> The teacher is reading a book about the circus with Cash. His body seems very still, upright, almost frozen, except for his hands that wring around each other under the desk. His expression seems anxious, and his eyes flit from the teacher's face to mine, and only momentarily, to the text in the book. It is the teacher who scans the print, using her finger to point to each word. It is she who leans towards the book, says each word.

In my conversations with Cash, he talked about finding reading difficult. When telling me about reading to his little sister he said, "I don't (know) how to read dead dood [good]. If I don't know a word then I just make it up." But when reading to an adult in class he seems to know that 'making it up' won't serve him. Nor will he be helped in this context by the interpretative sophistication he shows when the teacher reads aloud to the class.

When it comes to reading to the teacher, he is left frozen, with limited options, because he often can't decipher the words and, in this context, this is what he is being asked to do. He seems to have great difficulty in blending individual sounds into words, as the following extract illustrates. The letters and words from the book are italicised to distinguish them from our chat:

> Cash: (begins to read) *I* (pause) *n-i-s hiss* (pause)
> Jess: Do you know what that is?
> Cash: It's like when a cat's like angry they hiss and they do sss. And spit. I know it says *spit* in the page somewhere 'cause I've read it. I think I'm read up

to (sound of turning pages). I think I've read the whole entire book! That's how I know.

Jess: And I think you might find it. Shall we read on and see if we can find it?

Cash: (continues reading) *And s-p-i- ts (longer pause)*

Jess: Have another go.

Cash: *S-p-i- s-t-s-p-i-ts (pauses) s pis.*

Jess: What about (pointing to a section of the word), do you know that word?

Cash: *It*

Jess: *It*, so you've got '*it*'. So you don't need to do that. You can just go '*it*'. So that's a?

Cash: *it i-s –p*

Jess: *S-p-it*

Cash: *Spit, spit*!

Jess: That's it!

Read and Chat with Cash, St Jude's, Clyde

Cash knows the word *spit* is coming up, remembered from past readings, and it appears almost as the next word. And yet, knowing it is coming up *and* knowing the letters/sounds in the word, are not enough to make the word come together in his mind when he sees it. This strategy of 'sounding out words' is one that he is taught daily in an intervention group for children with reading difficulties. Breaking up words into phonemes (single units of sound) can remind me of breaking up a jigsaw puzzle in order to see the picture, especially when it proves unhelpful, as it seems to do for Cash. His mispronunciation of *hiss* as "n-i-s", before correctly saying *hiss* is also revealing. It suggests he already knows the word but breaks it up anyway. Perhaps 'sounding out' is part of the school reading game he has learned to play, even when unnecessary. However, when children find it exceptionally difficult to remember letter sounds, or bring them together to make a word, it can make reading frustrating and dispiriting. It is far from the only skill readers utilise, but it does play a crucial role in reading, given the alphabetic coding system in English orthography (Hall, 2005).

Another incident, reflected in my fieldnotes, suggests that Cash may not yet have grasped the way words work in English print. When encountering the word *cross* he paused, and I offered the first sound, *c*. He took this and attached it to another word that made sense in the context, by saying "c-angry". In the making of a non-word, *c-angry*, Cash's attempt may

again suggest compliance in a school reading game, without being quite sure what that game is. Cash wants to be able to read print and talks about this. However, despite his best efforts, in three successive years each of his teachers told me the same thing, that Cash was beginning to get to grips with reading CVC words.[73] From my vantage point, I heard that despite his effort and desire to read, little progress was being made in deciphering print. This inability to progress in print reading has material consequences, and perhaps progressively more so in global economies dominated by knowledge as capital (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Patrick, 2013; Peters, 2001). Negative impacts of print-processing difficulties on education and employment are also felt more acutely the less economic, social, and cultural capital one has to exchange (Macdonald & Deacon, 2019).

When Cash spoke, his speech contained non-normative articulation of certain sounds, unrelated to accent or dialect, which I sometimes found difficult to understand. Although *what* he spoke about was complex, knowledgeable and insightful, his speech patterns reminded me of a younger child. He often used soft, in place of hard, consonants. For example, when talking about his gran and his bedroom he pronounced them *dran* and *dedroom*. Milk was pronounced *milt*. These non-normative pronunciations may make sounding out words in reading harder. His speech also seemed to be missing some grammatical connective tissue, like in the following example:

> I can't remember 'cause we're not near the library then can't remember when we be the library 'cause it's been a long time.
>
> Conversation with Cash, St Jude's, Clyde

If, as psycholinguists suggest, readers bring their syntactic knowledge to successfully anticipating what is written, these grammatical partialities in his speech could also limit his success in reading print (Goodman, 1967; see also Hall, 2005). In the next section I begin by thinking about Cash's reading challenges in terms of developmental dyslexia, that is, of enduring phonological processing difficulties. Then, utilising Collinson's (2020, 2014) concept of *lexism* with Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) concepts of symbolic violence and the cultural arbitrary, I trouble the portrayal of reading differences as an impairment by reflecting on the relations of power always lurking within literacy practices.

[73] CVC words are three letter words that follow the pattern of consonant, vowel, consonant, such as *cat.*

Developmental Dyslexia: Affordances and Limitations

My starting position when considering specific reading difficulties, like those described through Cash's reading, was that they do exist, based on the enduring reading difficulties I observed in a small number of children in each year of my teaching career. I have taught children across spectrums of class, race and ethnicity who find deciphering print exceptionally difficult, despite sustained practice, effort, and engagement with books. I have also witnessed the emotional effects of these difficulties. Attending closely to Cash's struggles to decipher words, recalling the freeze in his upright body, his wringing hands and panicked eyes, my mind first turns to the phonological challenges framed as dyslexia in the field of developmental psychology. Indeed, Cash was diagnosed as dyslexic in Primary 5, after fieldwork had ended.

Dyslexia is ascribed to neurodevelopmental differences, often believed to be genetically inherited (Vellutino et al., 2004; see also Becker et al., 2017 for a systematic review of research into developmental dyslexia). It is proposed that the cognitive activity involved in processing language includes phonological awareness, memory, and production (Wagner et al., 1999). Phonological awareness is defined as the conceptual understanding that, for example, the words we hear are made up of individual sounds (phonemes) and groups of sounds, such as syllables (Velluntino & Fletcher, 2005). Phonological memory and production, the authors suggest, allow us to store, hear, distinguish, recall and manipulate units of sounds. Phonological processing difficulties are believed to be the key factor in developmental dyslexia, according to developmental psychologists (e.g., Snowling 1998, 2019; Snowling & Hulme, 2005). Cash appeared to have such phonological processing difficulties, illustrated by his struggles over *spit*, his attempt of *c-angry* for *cross*, and the very limited progress he had made in deciphering CVC words over a three-year period. In addition, phonological differences in producing speech sounds beyond the age children begin to read, and contained in Cash's speech, can also be characteristic of developmental dyslexia (Leppänen et al., 2012).

Cash's print and speech processing differences were similar to the other four children who were finding reading difficult in the study. The majority of children in the lowest positioned reading group did not have such difficulty processing print, and they had a conceptual grasp of how print worked that Cash seemed not to have. This conceptual

understanding included, for example, that English orthography is organised into words, with spaces in between, and that letters in words are ordered by the sounds they make in those words.

For some people the concept, and diagnosis, of dyslexia is a liberating one that challenges commonplace associations of reading differences with lack of intelligence. See, for example, Robinson's (2017) autoethnography of being a gifted Black male dyslexic in a racialised education system that failed to recognise his potential to succeed academically. Although I question the notion of giftedness upon which his analysis is based, his writing usefully highlights the empowerment, and shift in educational trajectories, that can occur when a dyslexia diagnosis is received. Drawing on critical disability theory (Reaume, 2014), he also suggests it is institutions that dis-able people by pathologising differences.

Collinson (2020, 2014) too suggests that it is society that dis-ables dyslexics but challenges the notion that dyslexics have a learning disability as Robinson suggests. It is by thinking along with Collinson and his concept of *lexism*, that has broken open my thinking about reading difficulties from my psychological starting point described above. It further challenged my own normative elevation of reading print above other mediums of communication that I have previously discussed. Collinson positions himself as a dyslexic who rejects dominant dyslexia discourses. The following quote is helpful in explaining the crucial distinction he makes between being a dyslexic and the concept of dyslexia as a condition or impairment:

> ... dyslexia can be thought of as a concept which is created, required and disguised by another set of concepts surrounding literacy which define the shape and form of the shadow it casts. The object that creates the shadow and defines its shape is what I have termed 'Lexism': the normative practices and assumptions of literacy.
>
> Collinson, 2014, p. 63

Collinson does not reject the idea that people experience biologically influenced difficulties in processing written text, a rejection which he suggests some critiques of dyslexia make. Instead, he argues that dyslexics can be described as "those whose aptitude in literacy and short-term/working memory fall below the social norms and practices of literacy; who are thus 'othered' by Lexism" (2014, p. 63). By coining the term *lexism*, Collinson points to the discrimination and pathologising of people who do not conform to the normative

practices of literacy in a society and education system that favours, and is mediated by, print literacy.

Lexism is an expression of the symbolic violence and delegitimisation of non-dominant cultural practices in Bourdieu's (1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) notion of the *cultural arbitrary*. By cultural arbitrary, Bourdieu refers to the arbitrariness of what comes to be regarded as culturally superior, as having legitimacy, and therefore exchange value, in the educational, social and economic marketplace. Cultural practices are legitimated through the power relations between groups. Legitimation always expresses the interests of dominant groups (Bourdieu, 1977). The power of symbolic violence is, as suggested by its name, symbolic. Its violence is expressed through the stigmatising of cultural practices of non-dominant groups (Tyler, 2013, 2021).

Thinking about Cash in the light of Collinson's work changes the way I think of his reading. His difficulty in deciphering print does not need to be ignored to recognise that it is normative assessments of reading, such as age-related reading speeds and accuracy, that constructs Cash as a struggling reader. This returns to the point made by Dudley-Marling (2004) that no child can have a reading difficulty on their own. It is always relative to the positions of other readers and to the legitimated value ascribed to reading print in education and society. If the norm of communication was, for example, oral and diagrammatical, then having a relatively weak aptitude for print would no more be regarded as an impairment than a limited aptitude for drawing is (Collinson, 2012).

When reading is uncoupled from print and reconceptualised as communication through images, words, situations, colours etc., then Cash's reading begins to look quite different (Hamilton, 2016; Kress, 2000; Pahl & Rowsell, 2020). He presents very differently as a reader, for example, in his insightful interpretations of *Pugs of the Frozen North* when read aloud in class. Hamilton (2016), in her study of postmodern picture books[74] and childhood reading difficulties, suggests that engaging with such books may help change perception of what it means to be a reader. In doing this, children's identity and positioning as readers could change to the benefit of those who often find themselves in the so-called bottom reading group. I am reminded of an incident when Cash was scanning a book during a mixed-attainment reading session. After struggling to decipher words under the gaze of the teacher he turned to the pictures and, as if hungry, flipped back and forward, devouring them. He

[74] Postmodern picture books are often complex and aimed at older child readers. Visual information matters just as much, if not more, than words in their non-linear narratives and self-referential devices.

then turned to me and recounted exactly what was happening in the story through information he'd gleaned from the illustrations. I am also reminded of Alf's engagement with, and sense of ownership of, *The Simpson's* comic book, where there is much to work out through the interplay of visuals, text and typography.

What if this reading of images was elevated to the same level as reading print in classrooms? If all readers were encouraged to read multimodally, regardless of their proficiency in reading print, this may disrupt literacy hierarchies grounded strongly in print fluency. This is not to minimise the difficulties and emotional impact that limited aptitude for print entails in a society still dominated by print. Nor is it to suggest that readers should be denied access to whatever pedagogy helps them to read print more easily. However, it could be that teaching children to read multimodally could balance their aptitudes, and actually be the best preparation for the world in which they live. As Jewitt (2008) points out, the knowledge economy has reconfigured ways in which information is shared, combining print with sound, and with still and moving images, in multimodal combinations. If mixed-attainment reading was also a context in which reading multimodally was highly valued, it could disrupt the hierarchy between confident and unconfident print readers that was, to an extent, left intact by its introduction.

Affective Shifts, Cultural Resonance and Dissonance in Reader Experiences

Despite my shifts in conceptualisation of reading difficulties through writing this chapter, I still held an assumption that print processing differences, like those of Cash, Alf, and others, would persist unchanged into adulthood. It is this notion of permanency I now wish to trouble by reflecting further on the (always) socially and affectively situated nature of reading (Albright & Luke, 2010; Leander & Ehret, 2019; Street, 2013). In this troubling, I do not challenge experience shared by dyslexics (e.g., Collinson, 2020, 2014; Robinson, 2017) that *some* print reading differences endure. Notwithstanding this, I suggest that there *are* differences that may appear fixed or innate in childhood but change with time and circumstance. To explore this temporality within the classed, raced and gendered landscapes in which reading occurs, I will now draw on adult experiences of childhood reading difficulties, conveyed through social stories, academic, political and artistic contemplation. This variety reflects an epistemological valuing of all knowledge that develops my understanding, whether it hails from the academic canon or not (e.g., McQueen, 2020;

Chapman, 2012; Stuart, 2021). The stories act here as cautionary tales against swift judgements that label children as poor readers and allocate them to a reading group from which it is then difficult to get out. I have no intention of mapping these adult stories onto the children in the study. Only time will tell how the children's relationship with print evolves. Nevertheless, the stories raise affective and sociological issues that are worth considering in the context of my study.

The first thing apparent in the adult stories is the emotional intensities felt when their reading did not develop as quickly as their peers and resulted in negative labelling and segregation. This experience, and its effects, are described by Chapman (2012) in a personal experience article in *The Guardian Newspaper*. Chapman describes successfully learning to read when she was 60 years old after a lifetime of keeping her print illiteracy secret. Crucially, she points to a dissonance between her (White) working-class home that did not centre reading and the school literacy culture. She recalls being bamboozled by how books worked when first encountered in school and being quickly labelled lazy and stupid rather than inexperienced in the medium of print; such negative labelling, she feels, stymied her progress as a reader. To repeat Reay's (2017) point, the capacity to learn and succeed can be significantly curtailed by perceiving that others expect you to fail. Conversely, Chapman attributes her adult success in reading not only to her own desire and courage but also to the empathetic encouragement of an adult education tutor through the slow and daunting process of learning to read. She now counts 63 things she can do because she can read print, including making menu choices in cafés, navigating journeys and reading novels. Her print reading difficulties had, certainly to some extent, been affectively, socially and culturally situated.

Similarly, Kirk (2001, p. 420) describes the affective impact of being positioned as a struggling reader in school:

> My first attempts at reading left me emotionally drained and intimidated. This was a complex responsibility for a young (White) boy from the Appalachian Mountains …with very limited experiences outside the home or literacy background within my home culture. Those failed early literacy efforts flattened my self-esteem and acted as a punishment, and left me feeling dumb, stupid, and illiterate.

The feelings he describes and the identities to which they attach, “dumb, stupid, and illiterate”, would act as brakes on his efforts to read. His story also illustrates the disorientating and corrosive effect on reading and learning when education makes space only for the dominant culture, and when it assumes a familiarity with school-based reading that not all children bring to school. Compounding these ostracised feelings was his physical segregation, first in the so-called bottom reading group and then in younger classes.

Like Chapman, Kirk cites the redemptive influence of kindness and support in changing his difficult relationship with reading. When he was ten years old a teacher’s appreciation of his artistic talents, and the self-esteem it engendered in him, helped unlock an agency to try again to decipher print. He went on, over many years, to teach himself to read, complete a PhD and become an academic. Again, what may have appeared to him and others, aged 10, as a fixed condition, changed. The effect on reading of segregation and of a culturally dissonant education system are highlighted in his autoethnographic writing. He found strategies that helped, including reading culturally resonant texts, and having the agency to keep trying.

These two stories of shift in reading experience within shifting emotional and relational landscapes speak to the tenets of sociocultural theories of literacies (e.g., Comber, 2014; Cremin et al., 2015; Street, 2002, 2013) that one’s relationship with reading and writing is always socially and culturally mediated. Williams (2017, p. 17) reminds us too that how we feel about and approach reading or writing is emotionally influenced by previous literacy encounters, which in turn affects success:

> If we feel bored, confused, resistant, anxious, intimidated, self-conscious, uncertain, we won’t do well. If we are confident, engaged, respected, safe, we will do well.

Williams’ words may not account for neurolinguistic differences on reading outcomes i.e., we may not “do well” however supportive the emotional conditions. However, it also highlights the debilitating effect that anxiety and feeling unsafe can have on learning. This view is echoed by the personal experience of Booker prize-winning author Douglas Stuart whose childhood anxiety involved coping with his mother’s alcoholism, as well as poverty and being queer in a heteronormative world. In a radio interview in 2021 (26:35), he says of reading, “To be able to read takes an awful lot of peace inside yourself and also in your environment.”

Like Kirk, Stuart's insights are also useful in pointing to the effects on reading of different classed and geopolitical positionings towards literature. Growing up in a post-industrial White working-class home in Glasgow, he reflects on how reading was situated and perceived:

> We weren't big readers, and you know I don't think that was unusual for the time and the place. And often actually we felt excluded by books. They felt like they were things that were happening for people in the south, in London. Not only were the books not talking to us directly but the culture around books wasn't talking to us.
>
> Stuart, 2021, 07:41

This sense of classed cultural exclusion from books and its effect on reading is echoed by McGarvey (2017, p. xxiii) who says, "The realm of print felt so impossibly exclusive that I developed a fear and anxiety around books despite my interest in their main ingredient: words." Reading was regarded by many of his male peers as, "either feminine or the preserve of posh people or freaks" (p. xxiii). He speculates whether reading would have felt as difficult if he'd gone to a school where being good at reading was less socially ostracising. In his words there are echoes of the psychic tension illustrated by Reay (2002) in 'Shaun's Story' of navigating the school's academic culture and belonging in his peer group.

Intricate connections between reading difficulties, emotional stress, racism, classism, and sociocultural resonance are deftly drawn by film maker and artist, Steve McQueen in his semi-autobiographical film, *Education* (2020). The film charts the traumatic and ultimately redemptive experiences of Kingsley, a Black British working-class boy who dreams of stars and planetary systems and who finds reading impossibly difficult. The film highlights the devastating impact of institutional racism on the young protagonist's reading difficulties. The casual cruelty in the classroom scene where he is forced to 'read' aloud what he can't read is emotionally gruelling to watch. In an interview a few years earlier Steve McQueen described his own harsh experience of reading in school:

> It was a very early stage of my life to see the discrimination against black and working-class people…I've never said this before, ever. But I was dyslexic. And I've hidden it, because I was so ashamed. I thought it meant I was stupid…Also, I had a lazy eye. So I had a patch. When you're in front of the chalk board, you still

> can't fucking see. So it was a terrible start. And people make judgements very quick. So you're put to one side very quickly.
>
> McQueen, in Aitkenhead, 2014

The swiftness of classed and racialised judgements that McQueen speaks of, and their fixing consequences of being put aside, echo the experiences of Chapman (2012) and Kirk (2001) above. McQueen points to the enduring effects of stigmatising conditions around finding reading hard, which have affected his identity into adulthood ("I've hidden it because I was so ashamed") despite phenomenal success in his field. But his story also highlights how the experience of reading can change when reading material and environments resonate rather than dissonate with one's cultural life. McQueen, like Kingsley in *Education*, attended a Black supplementary school[75] in his childhood, which had been inspired by the writings of Coard (1971), the Grenadian educationalist. This experience, he says, instilled pride in his African heritage, opened up his love of art and, consequently, changed the course of his life from that projected in school. Yet as well as the redemptive power of cultural resonance in McQueen's story, he believes, as does Robinson (2017) and Collinson (2020) above, that he is a dyslexic. Aspects of his reading difficulties required specific help that was not given in school, he believes (Aitkenhead, 2014). These views serve as a caution against a singular perspective of print reading difficulties as being always, or wholly, affectively, socially and culturally situated.

The effects of being ostracised and labelled as stupid when reading is difficult, is a theme that runs through each of the stories in this section. Particularly, they question the impact on reading when children's home lives do not match the school reading culture, and they ask what role classism and racism might play in reading difficulties that may appear fixed and innate. They also point to the inner emotional states that help and hinder reading development. In the next section I will return to Cash and use the themes developed from these stories to complicate my earlier portrayal of neurodevelopmental differences in children's experience as struggling, potentially dyslexic, readers in the so-called bottom reading group. I do this without suggesting that the stories can *predict* how Cash's reading might change if circumstances change.

[75] The Black Supplementary School movement in the UK was started by Black parents in the 1960s who were concerned about the impact of racism on their children's education. Classes are held in the evening and weekends to develop children's literacy, maths and science but also to teach children about Black culture and history. See https://www.nabss.org.uk

Symbolic Violence and the Tyranny of Print Literacy

In the first section of this chapter, Cash's difficulties in processing print were illustrated through the tension in his body while reading with the teacher (hands wringing and eyes darting between me, the teacher, and only occasionally, the text) and an extract of dialogue in which he struggled to read *spit* in a book about cats. The difficulties that were evident in these two reading events fitted with descriptions of developmental dyslexia; that is, difficulties blending sounds to make words, and grasping how words are constructed in English orthography. His non-normative speech sounds unrelated to accent, such as substituting soft for hard consonants (*dran* for *gran*), are again identified with dyslexia. I then troubled the concept of dyslexia, using Collinson's idea of *lexism*, while assuming the difficulties I perceived Cash having would endure into adulthood. Influenced by the social, cultural and affective themes arising from the adults' stories above, I now return to these classroom reading events with greater curiosity about the effects of the relations of power affectively enacted through them, and so consider whether his difficulties may be less fixed than they appeared. Cash, for example, described a different affective experience of reading with his little sister ("making it up", as he described it, when unsure of words) to how he appeared when reading to adults in the classroom. In turning towards power within reading events I draw on the relational within the affective turn in literacy research:

> Affective intensities are not merely experienced by an individual, as we often describe emotion in the vernacular, but are rather experienced in the warp and woof of movements involving multiple actors – the everyday movements of people and things approaching and pushing against one another, coming up alongside, making a dance-like turn, pulling apart.
>
> Leander and Ehret, 2019, p. 6

Consider the players involved in the reading events introduced in the first section, both embodied and symbolic. These players include Cash, the teacher, myself, other children watching on, the text, and the normativity of literacy in society. All are present and now, recalling the scene, I heed more the "warp and woof of movements involving multiple actors" involved in a dance. The teacher and I are leaning in and straining, forcing this scene, forcing Cash, however gently we try do it. Cash wrings his hands, I read fear in his eyes as he looks

at us, then down at the words and back to us, the freeze in his body. The teacher, Cash and I are visited by a tension, a panic; Cash's reading is not going according to the normative rules of the school literacy game. Each of us appear to know this, though it is not named.

The 'dance' feels stressful in itself and could significantly influence Cash's difficulties deciphering print, but I also wonder if stress of living filters in and makes it more difficult for Cash to settle into reading. This is just a hunch, influenced by writers who speaks of poverty-related stress and its impact on the emotional headspace needed for reading (McGarvey, 2017; Stuart, 2022). This wondering about emotional stress is also influenced by descriptions of his home life as "chaotic" by the teacher. *Chaotic* is a word I have come to interpret in the school context as a code word for 'unrespectable' working-class lives. Not that chaos is contained in one class: middle-class chaos is just easier to hide, being less likely to spill out onto the street and attract attention (McGarvey, 2018). In addition, my wondering is based on small pieces of information that may not add up to my conjecture, like his poor attendance (he missed half the previous school year), the premature loss of all his baby teeth, and his familiarity with the forgetful qualities of drinking beer, perhaps in the adults around him, when he commented on the hypnotising qualities of the yetis' noodles in *Pugs of the Frozen North*. He may also have lost, through school absence, valuable ground in learning to decipher print compared to his peers and this too could increase anxiety.

Cash *may* have neurolinguistic differences that affect his capacity to decode print but so too might his capacity to read be temporally and affectively hampered by emotional stress. It would require longitudinal time to shed light on this, which the study didn't have. The important point, however, is that reading difficulties that present as a neurological condition could also be caused or exacerbated by emotional, positional and environmental factors that can change, as illustrated through the adult stories told above. This insight could help change the way schools work with children experiencing reading difficulties, without leaving children to struggle in the ways described by McQueen (Aitkenhead, 2014).

Bourdieu's (1977) inter-related concepts of the *cultural arbitrary*, *legitimacy* and *symbolic violence* help to interrogate my, and others', steps in the dance around Cash and his reading. In the following conversation, Cash could be portrayed as internalising the symbolic violence that delegitimises some of the reality of his experience. In particular, his words do not convey the rich source of interest that non-print based mediums appear to have for him, and instead print (a source of frustration) is elevated above those other mediums:

Jess: … What do you think about reading?

Cash: Yeh

Jess: Do you think it's easy, do you think it's hard?

Cash: A bit hard for me. Yeh. 'cept like some people say … you get more things out a book. Yes, like there's more information about it …

Jess: I think sometimes if it's like, if it's a book you learn more about the characters in a book.

Cash: Yeh and all that … 'cept a book like tells you what it's all about … Books are like something else. They only, 'cause you can stop like the thing and like take a little rest, 'cept a movie like you're supposed to pause, if you want a break you're supposed to pause it and all that. Oh yeh, a book you can, don't need to like pause it or something. You can just take a breath and all that.

Jess: That's true and you can put it down and

Cash: But!

Jess: Then pick it up.

Cash: (with urgency) Yeh like 'cept like if 'cept a TV's like you don't like do any words. You don't learn anything from it. A book like you learn things about it too. And you learn how to read a little better and all that.

Jess: Mmm, so do you think it's worth really working hard?

Cash: Yeh

Jess: To get better at it?

Cash: Yeh, (I've an) idea. See when I go home, I think that if something pops up like something I'll try to read it and all that.

Jess: Pops up on?

Cash: Yeh like on a game or something or like TV, might read it or something.

Read and Chat with Cash, St Jude's, Clyde

In this conversation, metanarratives of literacy's symbolic superiority show up in the stories Cash tells of reading. He asserts the importance of reading words, which is said with urgency and energy bursting through, cutting me off with a "but". You learn nothing from television unlike books he says, despite this apparently running counter to his experience. When, on a visit to the school library, I pointed out a book on dinosaurs that we could read together, he wasn't too interested. He preferred to tell me the (much more extensive) knowledge he had about dinosaurs, learned from the internet and television programmes. Yet in the extract both he *and I* elevate reading above all other ways of finding things out and of learning. He expresses an intention to learn to read by paying attention to the words in his video games and on TV. As the listener and "coaxer" of his stories (Plummer, 1995), I hear neoliberal narratives of self-responsibility, in his expressed belief that if only he tries harder and longer, reading print won't be the hard thing it currently is. Yet he already puts enormous effort into trying to work out words from the sounds they contain.

This social, affective and political reading of the dialogue between myself and Cash also draws on Plummer's (1995) approach of symbolic interactionism in understanding how our stories are historically situated, constructed in dialogue with others, and with dominant narratives. In Plummer's research, the stories told were those of "sexual suffering and survival" in, for example, coming out as lesbian or gay. In Cash's case the stories are of readers, situated within dominant narratives which frame print as a superior medium of communication and creative expression; it is a powerful and enduring narrative (Collinson, 2012, 2020; Stuckey, 1991). When Cash acknowledges that reading is hard for him, he immediately qualifies this, and aligns himself with "some people (who) say ... you get more things out a book" than a film.

The initial reason he gives for the superiority of print, that it is more pause-able, sounds unconvincing. I wonder if this is said more to express connection with "some people" than because he experiences reading as more satisfactory, although he may do. The introduction of "some people" prompts speculation about who those people are who promote the superiority of reading. An educated guess would tell me that his teachers may promote this, and perhaps other children who hear similar things. I am here too in this conversation, reinforcing the view that you learn more from reading than from watching a film.

Listening back, with new insights into my own unquestioning narratives of print superiority, reveals the impermanency of perception. Already I would have contributed differently to this conversation with Cash because of thinking along with writers (e.g., Collinson, 2019; Kress, 2010; Bearne & Marsh; 2009) who challenge the dominant and dominating position of print literacy in print-mediated societies. Yet, the ability and inability to read words has real effects in a society where print-based literacy dominates communication in education and beyond. Considering the social, affective and political landscape in which Cash's print reading takes place, as this section has done, creates space for uncertainty in conceptualising his reading. The possibility that temporal, emotional and social conditions may affect his capacity to settle and make sense of print can be considered without discounting the influence that neurolinguistic differences may have on his phonological processing and word recall.

Writers and thinkers who are committed to equality and social justice disagree on the role dominant literacy should assume in education (e.g., Albright & Luke, 2010; Bourdieu, 1973; Kramsch, 2010). These differences reflect the paradox of literacy: that it can be at once a source of liberation and a mechanism that maintains inequality (Finn, 1999; Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994). Bourdieu (1973) claims that if schools fail to teach dominant literacy, for example, it allows this valuable capital to remain monopolised by those who inherit it domestically. To this end, Bourdieu argues, it is a mistake to seek social justice through increasing hospitality to non-dominant culture in school. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1979), some aspects of dominant literacy culture will always define "learned culture" and, as such, should be taught to those who do not inherit it. Stuckey (1991) on the other hand strongly argues that (dominant) literacy is always (symbolic) violence visited on diverse communities. It delegitimises ways of talking, reading and writing, and can only be challenged by elevating, and teaching through, diverse literacies across class, race and culture.

It is possible, however imperfectly, to go beyond such binaries of literacy as violence and the teaching of only dominant literacies (Albright & Luke, 2010). The consequences of reading differently are acutely felt in a print-based society, both emotionally and materially (Duckworth, 2013). Those consequences fall disproportionately depending on how much cultural, economic and social capital a child inherits (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). But if literacy teaching was genuinely reconfigured within multimodal conceptions of reading

where reading images is as much a skill to learn as is the reading of words (Narey, 2017), it could disrupt hierarchies that stigmatise children whose aptitude for print reading is below normative levels.

Conclusion

Identifying children as poor readers, unintelligent and sad, as ability-grouped reading seems to encourage, and also physically segregating them, must surely add social and emotional pressure to children experiencing difficulties in reading. These identifications potentially fix a belief that one is not a good reader and will never be, thus making it more difficult to persevere when reading is hard. Kirk (2001) shows both the grip and push back from these constraining positionings. It would be simplistic, however, to suggest that shifting to non-hierarchical reading would alleviate all the stress of print reading for Cash, Alf or others. Indeed, the stressful reading episode above involving Cash, the teacher, and the circus book, occurred once mixed-attainment reading was established in the class.

This chapter has gone beyond group positioning to develop cross-discipline perspectives on print reading difficulties and reader identity. Phonological-processing challenges are held within conversations about power and within affective, social, and cultural influences on reading. I neither suggest that reading differences *are* explainable biologically nor, conversely, that biology plays no part in how people read print. Rather, singular perspectives on reading difficulties are troubled, whether they are based on physiological, affective, sociocultural or political narratives. There are multiple factors that influence how we evolve, and continue to evolve, as readers, including the fixing effects of ability-grouped reading.

Some print reading differences and identities, can appear to be fixed and then change over time and context, while others are enduring, according to adults who experience them. The chapter brings attention to the affective movements within reading events, those that tense the engagement, making it difficult to progress, and those that allow curiosity and creativity to flow. This flow can be apparent when reading in a visual or auditory form when print reading is difficult. Influencing these affective movements is the stress that can arise when children are required to read to others. The effect of racism, anxiety and poverty-related stress can also affect one’s capacity to settle into reading and sustain engagement.

Also influencing these affective movements are multiple actors, including the reader, teacher, researcher, other children, and parents. These actors push and are pushed by the

demands of school-based literacy and by its legitimated supremacy as a cultural channel of communication. As Collinson (2020, 2014) asserts, differences around reading aptitude only become problematic in the context of a social system that asserts print-based dominance. Spatial symbols of that dominance, in the form of ability-grouped reading for example, emphasise one's place in the hierarchy but they are not its only source. Dominant literacy has always been a potent form of cultural capital that reproduces advantage for those most versed in it (Bourdieu, 1986). And those most versed are often the middle and upper classes. The domestic transmission of cultural capital, Bourdieu (1986, p. 244) reminds us, is one of the "best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment(s)". This does not mean of course, that middle-class and upper-class children never experience reading difficulties. The chapter concludes by suggesting that if school-based literacies were genuinely reconfigured to teach the reading of images, for example, as much as the reading of print it could disrupt hierarchies around print. It could also prepare all children more thoroughly for participation in multimodal knowledge-based economies in the future. [76]

[76] Of course, the old hierarchies can reproduce in these 'new' economies. The creative and cultural arts, as well as IT, are not known as great levellers of privilege.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Introduction

This thesis offers an original contribution to knowledge through its elicitation of complex situated realities in ability-grouped reading and its alternatives. It does so in conversation with pedagogical knowledge and stretched Bourdieusian theories of social reproduction (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, 1990; Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2017). What is not new is the shared dismay – expressed in the thesis – over the impact of ability grouping on social inequality. As Ramberg (2016) points out, few topics in education have produced more research than pupil 'ability' segregation. Much of that discussion has focussed on how the practice exacerbates social inequality and injustice (e.g., Francis & Tereshchenko, 2020; Gillborn, 2010; Reay, 2017).

However, the affective, social and pedagogical specificities of developing as *readers* within ability groups had been largely absent from this wider debate. It has been particularly scarce since the 1990s when guided reading (organised as ability groups) became commonplace in the UK and US (DfEE,1998; Fountas & Pinnell, 1998; Hobsbaum et al., 2006). This scarcity deserved the considered attention the thesis has given it. The practice of reading within ability groups deserves attention *especially* because of literacy's central role in social positioning and negotiating identities in the UK and beyond (Duckworth, 2013; Williams, 2017). The thesis has answered the following research questions. Does ability-grouped reading affect children's identity and feelings for reading and, if so, in what ways? How do social inequalities around class, race and gender intersect with the practice of ability grouping for reading development? And what effect does mixed attainment reading have on children's identity and attitudes to reading? Chapter 5 and 6 respectively answered the first two of these questions. The third was reconceptualised, through analysis, as a wider reflection on disrupting literacy hierarchies, still with a focus on mixed attainment reading (Chapter 6, 7).

This chapter is organised in four sections. Section one, *Theoretical and Epistemological Influences*, sets out the key messages I hope the reader will take away, in terms of the usefulness of Bourdieu's conceptual tools and Reay's writing in helping explain

educational inequalities. It will also reflect on the epistemological assertions I have made and how helpful they are in telling a story of reading in school. Section two, *The Bottom Reading Group: A Place of Learning, Sanctuary and Stigma*, reaches conclusions on the first of my research questions. It draws out complex perspectives on children as readers from their complicated, sometimes contradictory, experiences in ability-grouped reading. Section three, *Social Inequality and Discrimination Through Ability-Grouped Reading*, answers the second of my research questions. It argues that, despite the situated complexities, grouping readers hierarchically is a deeply unfair practice in terms of social equity. The fourth section, *Disrupting Hierarchy in School-Based Reading*, shows how my third research question expanded to include a meditation on the nature of reading itself. At its heart is the paradox of literacy as a source of liberation and of social reproduction. The section concludes that school-based reading could become more egalitarian if the disruption of hierarchy, including a shift to mixed-attainment reading, became the moral compass of literacy pedagogy. Such disruptions, evident - if embryonic - in the study, hold liberatory promise even as new hierarchies form in their wake to be further challenged.

Theoretical and Epistemological Influences

Bourdieu's writing, and feminist scholars who engage critically with it (e.g., Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2017; Taylor, 2009), provided the core theoretical lens through which my research questions have been answered. Bourdieu wrote with insistence that class still mattered amidst socioeconomic change (1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). I have reorientated his concepts to investigate and explain the *how* of social reproduction in ability-grouped reading, and in doing so, highlight possibilities for greater equity. Understanding how social reproduction continues despite many teachers' dedication to all children's educational advancement, has been an underlying theme of the thesis.

Bourdieu's work has been reorientated in the thesis in two ways. Firstly, although human agency is integral to Bourdieu's understanding of habitus as generative, social constraint can echo so loudly in his work that reflexivity, creativity and resistance can be difficult to hear. Even in his later work, such as *The Weight of the World* (1999), which some regard as more orientated towards struggle (e.g., McNay, 2004; Reay, 2004), it is the hopelessness of that struggle, the "anxious submission and powerless revolt" that is conveyed (Bourdieu et al., 1999, p. 425). In the thesis I recentred and emphasised children's reflexivity, ingenuity and

agency within the often constraining conditions of ability-grouped reading. Secondly, Bourdieu speaks of children primarily as inheritors of parental cultural capital, and of distinction-making as an adult activity. I challenged this by bringing Bourdieu's work into conversation with childhood researchers in the 'new sociology of childhood' (e.g., Blaisdell, 2019; Christensen et al., 2008; Punch, 2002) who recognise children as social actors in their own right. The thesis highlights how children built on inherited capital by actively distinguishing themselves within school reading hierarchies.

Reay's large body of work (e.g., 1995b, 2002, 2017) has provided a bright guiding light in my application and reorientation of Bourdieusian principles to my study. Through her example, I have kept the focus on children's agency within literacy practices that can perpetuate social hierarchies. As well as her academic rigour, I appreciate her sensibility and emotional investment in researching social injustice in education. I want to be affected by the scholars I read, and *Miseducation* (2017) swelled my heart and moved me to tears on numerous occasions. More importantly, it called me to action. My anger at the unfairness of ability-grouped reading found many echoes in her work. Through her example, I have been galvanised to write in ways that I hope have had an emotional as well as intellectual effect on those who read this thesis.

Shaun's Story (2002) was my introduction to Reay's work, at the very beginning of this PhD journey. Reading it, I understood the emotional and explanatory power of personalised narrative to examine complex realities and develop theoretical perspectives. Influenced by Reay and, later Lareau (2011), I chose to present my study using extended narratives of children occupying different positions in ability-grouped reading. These narratives have conveyed much more of the contextualised, relational and embodied nature of young readers' experience than their disembodied words could alone. If the thesis has come alive, it comes alive thanks to this complexity, the feistiness, joy, fears and humour of the characters that inhabit the writing. But the narratives do more than present a cacophony of individual voices. Each narrative portrait has been composed to illustrate important themes that were confirmed through a mixture of gut reaction, thematic analysis and writing as a tool of inquiry. I hope the voices stay with you, but also the themes that were developed through them. What follows are the key messages I would like the reader to take from the study.

The Bottom Reading Group: A Place of Learning, Sanctuary and Stigma

As Chapter 5 argued, the lowest positioned group (or set) in a hierarchy of school groups is often portrayed in research literature as *only* a stigmatised place, where pupils feel, accommodate and resist the weight of others' poor opinion of them (e.g., Bourdieu, 1999; Reay, 2017). Similarly, there can be a singular focus on distress and disaffection in literature about 'struggling readers' (e.g., Hempel-Jorgensen etc al., 2019; Scherer, 2016). I intentionally troubled these narratives throughout the thesis (Chapter 4,5,6,7). In the close ethnographic work of the study, I found messier, more complicated and contradictory realities in the so-called bottom reading group than much of this literature conveys.

My study confirmed the gendered patterns of reading in highly visible hierarchies that Moss had previously found in her work (2000, 2007, 2021). Some girls clearly used the so-called bottom reading group to develop as readers (Chapter 5). Perhaps, they were making "a virtue out of necessity" (Bourdieu, 1984). This was, after all, the place they had been allocated; they did not choose it. But there was something more agentic in their attitude, containing more momentum, than Bourdieu's phrase conjures up for me. The bottom reading group could also be a place of friendship and solace (Chapter 5). For some (not all) children who had joined the school and started learning English as an additional language within the previous two years, this small group could provide ballast to sometimes bewildering and othering classroom experiences. The reading group was a place where you might know and share precious details of family, pastimes and the habits of pets. In those moments the fixed, familiar and predictable nature of the reading group appeared more important than where it sat in a hierarchy of reading groups.

However, while offering learning and sanctuary for some children in some moments, the so-called bottom reading group was also undoubtedly a stigmatised place from the perspective of those positioned further up the reading group hierarchy (Chapter 5). There are other ways to organise the classroom to provide the welcome intimacy of a familiar group without placing children, including bilingual children, in a stigmatised place. As Chapter 5 illustrated, the hierarchical organisation of ability grouping, was actively reinforced by children claiming distinction from those in lower groups. The language of the top group was liberally peppered with words that proclaimed their superiority over others. Perceived superiority as readers was melded with non-reading qualities – of greater intelligence, happiness and confidence. Crucially, readers in the bottom group were imagined as likely to

struggle as readers in adulthood, suggesting that the stigma of 'struggling reader' could linger for a long time (Duckworth, 2013; Williams, 2017).

These judgements were keenly felt by some in the lower group, in anger and sometimes longing to flee the so-called bottom reading group. Those children, invested in 'doing boy' (Renold, 2004), for example, could fall further behind as readers when judgements about reading proficiency were highly visible, such as in ability-grouped reading. Some seemed propelled to perform confident reader identities by pretending to read, and this came at the expense of practising reading. Thus, overt hierarchical positioning could deny children a more comfortable space to develop as readers and to risk getting words wrong. This finding again extends Moss's work on gender and reading (2000, 2007).

The elite and stigmatised positionings described in Chapter 5 suggests social capital is accrued by securing a place in the highest positioned reading group. Social capital is one of Bourdieu's most potent concepts in explaining how social inequality is perpetuated and it has helped me explain the social dynamics of reading groups. Through an "alchemy of consecration" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 250), symbolised by congratulatory clapping when a child was 'promoted' to the top group, social advantage was gained, much like entry to an exclusive club. Likewise, friendships orientated around reading appeared only available to those in higher groups (Chapter 5). Children in the so-called bottom reading group did not or could not participate in this community of readers despite being popular members of the class. Perhaps because of their positioning, they lacked the social capital as readers to cultivate reading friendships. This is a significant finding particularly in the light of research that highlights positive connections between reading communities, reading engagement and reducing socioeconomic disparities in reading attainment (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Cremin et al., 2014; Cunningham et al., 1998). To be excluded from this reading community because of the visible marking of hierarchical reading groups may be an unrecognised and injurious consequence of ability-grouped reading.

Social Inequality and Discrimination Through Ability-Grouped Reading

With the second research question in mind and focussing particularly on social class, Chapter 6 examined the mechanisms by which ability-grouped reading reproduces social inequality. The so-called bottom reading group appeared largely a destination for working-

class children regardless of their ethnicity, except in the case of children in their first two years of learning English who were placed in the bottom group (apparently) regardless of class. This reflects patterns of entrenchment found in much of the literature on ability grouping in general (e.g., Bourdieu et al., 1999; Francis & Tereshchenko, 2020). Through situated analysis of how privileging and discrimination operate within ability-grouped reading specifically, the thesis offers an original disruptive contribution to knowledge in the field of sociology and sociocultural literacy studies. Its findings should inform both literacy practice and educational policy.

To understand how class matters in ability-grouped reading, I answered the question: what might prompt the classed allocation to these reading groups? As allocation to hierarchical reading groups often happens soon after starting school, what happens at home, and, more crucially, *how this is received in school,* is significant to the placement. Again, Bourdieu's concepts proved helpful in explaining this pattern of allocation, especially the notion of cultural capital embedded in the habitus. Domestic transmission of cultural knowledge, linguistic skills and literacy practices appeared to influence a child's chances of gaining a spot in the top reading group. Cultural transmission is one of the most valuable forms of capital inheritance precisely because it is not recognised as an inheritance (Bourdieu, 1973). Instead, it masquerades as natural ability when there is a match between a child's literacy habitus and school-based literacy (Bourdieu, 1996). It is this misrecognition as natural ability that gives ability-grouped reading its false legitimacy.

Doing this research led me to agree with Anderson et al. (2003) that much of the research on home reading misrepresents the intergenerational reading habits of working-class families and families from minoritised ethnic groups. Contrary to assumptions that these groups do not read with their children, Anderson et al. (2003) highlight multiple studies that show the opposite. In fact, the vast majority of parents in all classes and cultures (that have been studied) read with their children. Likewise in my study, most children from the so-called bottom and top groups spoke of reading with their parents, often their mothers, and sometimes with siblings. The reading episodes they describe ranged from intimate family rituals around sharing books to books read as homework tasks. There were still differences, however, in the space that books and reading seemed to take up in the homes of those in the top and bottom group. In the narratives of children in the so-called bottom group, reading was often decentred by other culturally enriching pastimes (Chapter 4,6). In the top group reading appeared more central, organised and cultivated (Chapter 6). Extending Lareau's (2011),

concept of middle-class "concerted cultivation" to reading practices, Chapter 6 showed that regular intergenerational reading was practiced as a means of securing a top spot as a reader, as well as presumably being regarded as an emotionally and culturally enriching pastime.

Class came to matter in other ways too in reading group placement. Children described very different economic conditions and their temporal effects on parents' capacity to read regularly with them (Chapter 6). As well as economic necessities, not all parents had the same educational or literacy resources to support their children's reading. None of this indicates that working-class parents care less about their children's education than middle-class parents (Lawler & Close, 2014). Rather, the study found it is variation in cultural, educational and economic capital that comes to matter in the classed allocation to hierarchical reading groups (Chapter 6).

Most children in the lowest positioned group showed the same aptitude for reading as those in the top group, and this was another crucial finding in the study. Despite similar aptitude, mechanisms within ability-grouped reading restricted, rather than enhanced, children's chances of catching up with the more fluent readers in the top group (Chapters 5,6). This holds true even though some children spoke favourably of the smallness of the group, the tailored books and the extra support in framing positive learner identities in the so-called bottom group. A key restriction was their positioning by others as struggling readers with noticeable effects on their identity and self-belief (Chapter 5). Differences in reading pedagogy practised with each group also potentially widened rather than narrowed differences in children's levels of reading fluency.

There was also inertia within ability-grouped reading that constrained children's progress in the lower group. Little movement between groups had occurred since children started school three or four years earlier, despite children making different amounts of progress in reading. There were instances of White working-class boys of Scottish heritage being misallocated 'downwards' because of their perceived family circumstances when, based on fluency, they would have been in a higher group. Conversely there was at least one White middle-class child of Scottish heritage who was kept out of the lowest group because of what their parents might think of them being there (Chapter 6). There were no examples in the study of children from minoritised ethnic groups being misallocated on the basis of reading

fluency in English.[77] Notwithstanding this, group inertia and misplacement of Black and other pupils from minoritised ethnic groups to lower sets are dominant themes in the wider literature on race, ethnicity, class and ability grouping (e.g., Francis & Tereshchenko, 2020; Gillborn et al., 2016).

The legitimacy of ability-grouped reading relies on it being misrecognised as fair and beneficial for all children. The study has shown that the opposite is true. Ability-grouped reading is exclusionary and discriminatory, with negative effects. It unfairly compounds the advantage of children who are already advantaged both economically and culturally (in the sense of *legitimated* cultural capital) and reduces the chances of others to progress as readers. As a practice, educators should be mindful of this. By illuminating the mechanisms by which ability-grouped reading reproduces social inequality, I hope the study will encourage policy makers and practitioners to reconsider its appearance of neutrality and explore alternative methods of reading instruction. As I said in the introduction to the thesis, this project has always had activist intent. My hope is tempered, however, by awareness of the tenacity of ability grouping despite countless studies that expose it as a classed and raced discriminatory practice (Francis, 2017a).

Disrupting Hierarchy in School-Based Reading

It was with awareness of the tenacity of ability grouping in the collective educational psyche that I included an intervention in my study design, that of mixed-attainment reading (Chapter 6,7). By hearing a research-informed alternative, I hope policy makers and practitioners are more likely to reconsider the usefulness of ability-grouped reading in supporting *all* readers. Despite believing in the greater equity of mixed attainment learning, my own lack of knowledge of alternatives, as a teacher, had perpetuated my practice of ability-grouped reading. Although disrupted by the pandemic, the positive impact of mixed-attainment reading on apparently fixed hierarchies was evident; in fact, in certain regards the impact felt joyful, in some of the children, and in me and the teachers as witnesses. When children from different ability groups came together there appeared a new vibrancy in the atmosphere, particularly evident in some who had been in the so-called bottom reading

[77] Although I highlighted the stigmatising issues with placing children in their first two years of learning English in the so-called bottom reading group, their *reading fluency* and that of others who spoke English in addition to other languages, *did* match that of their group placement, either in the top, middle or bottom group.

group. Pedagogy was democratised, and in the greater collaboration there was a little more risk-taking. Children who had been in the top group shared words they were unsure of, and this may have helped less fluent readers share, rather than hide, words *they* were unsure of, thus aiding progress. Reading friendships expanded to include children who had previously appeared excluded from the community of readers within the class. Again, it is worth pausing on the potential significance of this change for greater social equity in literacy outcomes (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; Cremin, 2019; Cremin et al., 2014).

In addition, a more fundamental question about reading hierarchy arose and was answered from this starting point of mixed-attainment reading. The binary stance of ability-grouped versus mixed-attainment reading belied a complexity to how reading hierarchies are produced and modified, and who are involved in their production (Chapters 5,6,7). Although the pedagogical practice of ability-grouped reading reinforces a hierarchy, it does not do so in isolation. The field of literacy education is a site of struggle, mirroring struggles in wider society. Children exist within these struggles and work to distinguish themselves from others, thus challenging, adapting and reinforcing normative reading hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984; Costa & Murphy, 2015). When mixed-attainment reading was introduced, children actively reproduced the reading hierarchy that had been disrupted by its introduction. During one session, for example, I listened in as children established who was reading at the highest level by comparing their books. There was also much talk about graduating from picture books and about the length of chapter books that children were reading. These comparisons appeared to position readers just as much as their place in hierarchical reading groups did.

What might it mean I began to ask, if the iterative disruption of such hierarchies, however they presented, became the moral compass of literacy pedagogy, rather than arriving at a single 'solution'? If taken up, this could mark a significant shift in curriculum development towards social justice, for practitioners and policy makers. It requires a shift, away from imposing change, and towards recursive reflexive listening and nuanced response. Listening must be reflexive because whoever is listening (practitioner, researcher or policy maker) needs to be aware of their own complicity in the perpetuation of reading hierarchies.

The power of reflexive situated inquiry is its ability to engage with the messiness of lived realities and to expose subtleties and contradictions in children's experience that demand further reflection and adjustment. This turn to iterative disruption of hierarchy was prompted by the example of children experiencing reading difficulties in particular (Chapters 6,7).

Those who were experiencing difficulties did not seem to gain liberation in mixed-attainment reading as others from the so-called bottom reading group had appeared to do. Nor were they any more involved in reading friendships than they had been in ability-grouped reading. Despite an initial period of exhilaration, the freeze in body and gaze for those struggling with print returned and even appeared heightened in mixed-attainment reading. This may be because the gap in reading fluency, represented by their respective texts, was accentuated by their closer proximity. For this reason, mixed-attainment reading may be a pedagogy that is most beneficial in infant classes, perhaps up to the age of 8, when differences of fluency are not so marked by the texts read by children. This is a conclusion that could be investigated by teachers who see potential in mixed-attainment reading for social justice.

To disrupt hierarchy between those experiencing reading difficulties and the majority of the class required a more fundamental questioning of the privileging of print in society and education, and curiosity about the emotional impact of finding this highly valued activity difficult (Chapter 7). Bourdieu's work is again helpful in this questioning as it understands that literacy can be both liberatory and conservative, effecting social change as well as social reproduction. The same unequal valuing of home literacy practices that influenced allocation to hierarchical reading groups is mirrored in the forms of reading that are valued and devalued in education and society (Narey, 2017; Pahl & Rowsell, 2020). Through the notion of symbolic violence, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) name the mechanism by which particular forms of literacy, and of communication more generally, become legitimated and delegitimated. When print is valued above other multimodal forms of communication it disproportionately disadvantages those who find print difficult to decipher, children who would find themselves in the so-called bottom reading group.

Conflicting perspectives exist about the space such dominant literacies should take up in education among academics committed to social justice. Stuckey (1991), for example, writes of literacy as violence, and as uniquely serving the interests of economic capital. By teaching dominant literacies, she suggests, schools are intentionally or inadvertently complicit in perpetuating this violence. Conversely, Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) argue that it would be folly to view dominant culture, which includes print-based literacy, as *only* symbolic violence. Failing to equip students who do not inherit it, with the knowledge and skills required to participate in powerful fields, would serve only to compound their exclusion.

In the interests of disrupting hierarchies that stigmatise children with reading difficulties, I agree with Albright and Luke (2010) that it is possible and essential to move beyond the paradox of literacy as violence, and as inherently valuable and unchanging. No child should be denied acquaintance with, or mastery of, powerful genres, including print-based literacies, but these can be taught critically in ways that invite demystification of the power relations within them. If print-based literacies were taught within a wider conceptualisation of the multimodality of reading, for example, then the shadow of lexism, as coined by Collinson (2012, 2020), would perhaps lose some of its discriminatory power. Lexism, introduced in Chapter 7, is the legitimising of print-based literacies above other mediums, and the resulting discrimination and stigmatisation of those with less than the normative aptitude for deciphering print.

To teach reading as multimodal, where images, words, sounds and gestures can be read, emphasises the worth of different forms of communication (Narey, 2017; Pahl & Rowsell, 2020). This is in fact more representative of how meanings are conveyed in both everyday life and in the *knowledge economy*, through speech, sound, image, film and print (Jewitt et al., 2016). Reorientating reading in this way could help reposition children who struggle with print by valorising the power of image, for example, to convey meaning (Chapter 7). This practice could in turn make mixed-attainment reading a more egalitarian space. A start was made on this multimodal project in the study when a hierarchy around picture books and novels became evident. I worked with the teachers to successfully increase the social currency of picture books on the basis that their higher status may allow those who particularly benefitted from the combination of image and text to choose them without risking social exclusion by reading them (Hamilton, 2016).

This elevation of picture books is not, however, proposed as a destination but as an example of an ongoing reflexive commitment to disrupting literacy hierarchies wherever and however they manifest. What began as an inquiry into children's experience of ability-grouped reading has opened out into a meditation on reading itself and the relationships of power entangled within it. This happened without losing sight of how ability-grouped reading operates within these relationships of power. This is egalitarian work, in which teachers could be supported by literacy scholars and researchers in replacing restrictive practices with more equitable conditions for human development (Albright & Luke, 2010). My thesis is part of this liberatory aspiration by asking what it might mean for literacy pedagogy if, rather being led by particular techniques, it is guided by the recognition and willingness to disrupt social hierarchies, like those seen in ability-grouped reading. Awareness is needed, however, that

when hierarchies are disrupted, they often mutate and require further disruption. Undertaking this work requires an ongoing commitment to inquiry, reflection and listening deeply to children.

Final Thoughts: Limits, Dissemination and Further Work

Both the limitation and the strength of this thesis lie in my assumptions. The PhD has been undertaken during a period of global and personal consciousness-raising around the many manifestations of racialised oppression and the enduring privileging of Whiteness. If I had been more aware of how this privileging operates in me while collecting data, I might have noted more intersections between race, ethnicity, class and experiences of ability-grouped reading. Furthermore, unexamined classed, and to an extent raced, beliefs around the value of reading books sometimes constrained conversations with children. This potentially left unvoiced other pastimes the children engaged in. In addition, it has been the reflexive work of challenging and partially dismantling my assumptions that has deepened an understanding of symbolic violence and how it operates in the field of literacy education. This has been critical in the analysis of how ability-grouped reading reproduces social inequity and systematically privileges and disadvantages children in the top and bottom groups. I still love reading (books etc.) but my mind has been changed about the superiority it commands in the middle-class imagination.

There were other limitations to the study that were a consequence of unforeseen circumstances, most significantly that of the global pandemic of COVID-19. School closures necessitated a readjustment to the equal balance between interrogating ability-grouped and mixed-attainment reading that was planned. Since schools closed a month after mixed-attainment reading was introduced at St Jude's and the week it was due to be introduced at Fairfield, the nature of inquiry into mixed-attainment reading had to change. There were fewer children involved in mixed-attainment reading because of the school closures, and this limits the conclusions that can be drawn from its introduction. In addition, research methods had to change since I was unable to longitudinally immerse myself in the context as I had for ability-grouped reading. This reduced the volume of multisensory data on children's experience of mixed-attainment reading. A third limitation related to the methodological incompatibility in the original research design between researching from the standpoint of the children and supplementing this with top-down attainment data. In the end that

incompatibility was resolved because attainment data could not be collected due to the late arrival of reading tests (the top-down instrument) and the onset of COVID-19. However, waiting for reading tests delayed the introduction of mixed-attainment reading: without this delay, there could have been a longer period of mixed-attainment reading before the schools closed, adding weight to the evidence available.

Despite these limitations, the study produced an original contribution to understanding how reading hierarchies, particularly around ability-grouped reading, expand and constrain children's experience, and what might disrupt these hierarchies in the interests of social justice. I advocate taking a reflexive stance towards literacy pedagogy that involves noticing when a pedagogical action exacerbates inequality. This turn to noticing rather than 'implementing' could be powerful in heralding equitable pedagogical changes. Although I have made an original academic contribution, the impact of the study will, I believe, be felt more in the field of practice and policy. Here, its impact will depend on the dissemination of the findings and how these are received. I have begun sharing the findings with my collaborative partner, the local education authority, its education managers, headteachers and teachers.

My focus for dissemination is on practitioners, teacher educators and policy makers who could use the findings to inspire a turn towards reflexivity in noticing and disrupting conditions that constrain children's reading lives. Part of this disruption could be experimentation with mixed-attainment reading. The effect of introducing mixed-attainment reading was so encouraging that it warrants a much larger study that could increase its influence on education policy in Scotland. Ability grouping, as has been said before, is tenacious. As such, an investigation might benefit from involvement from powerful agents in Scottish education, such as Education Scotland or perhaps the Scottish Book Trust. Yet this could involve compromise on methodology, with a mixed-methods approach more likely to produce the evidence that such agencies might value. I would like to be involved in this and would insist that children's voices are still heard at the centre of the study. I intend to apply for post-doctoral funding to help undertake this study. I do believe that only with more evidence on mixed-attainment reading might the tenacity of ability-grouped reading weaken. Wish me luck.

I must return to the children in these final, final thoughts on this PhD study. Without doubt they have been the most enlightening of teachers in my attempts to answers questions

about reading pedagogy and its effects on social justice and children's identity as readers. The empirical originality of the study has produced unique insights into the ways children are agentic in accommodating, resisting and at times transforming the various constraints on their reading lives. The positioning of children as struggling readers has been troubled throughout by close attention to the minutia of their experience, which stressed mobility, even if within constraining conditions. The children have lit up this PhD journey with their individual personalities and collective agency, and my last words are words of thanks to them.

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Children's Literature in the Study

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Appendices

Appendix 1: A Review of Literature on Ability Grouping

I conducted an electronic database search for empirical research on grouping children by ability for reading and also looked for links between this and social equity. The databases explored were:

- British Education Index (BEI)
- Education Abstracts (EBSCO)
- Australian Educational Index (ProQuest)

I searched using combinations of the following terms (and related extensions):

> bottom reading group, reading groups, setting, ability group, reading, guided reading, literacy, social in/equity, gender, self-perception, primary and elementary school, poverty, and mixed attainment.

Although I found a lot of literature that explores children's identity as readers and writers, and studies that examined pedagogical issues in guided reading, only three critiques came up (all from the US) regarding the practice and consequences of ability-grouped reading (Cunningham et al., 1991, 1998; Cunningham[78], 2006; Grant & Rothenberg, 1986; Haller & Davis, 1980). I became concerned that I was missing something. This prompted an issue-by-issue search of the last ten years from the ten most relevant journals. These were a mixture of literacy and sociology of education journals, as follows (impact factor, June 2018, included in brackets):

> Journal of Literacy Research (1.107)
>
> Reading Research Quarterly (2.697)
>
> Journal of Early Childhood Literacy (0.954)

[78] The papers by Cunningham et al. (1991, 1998) and Cunningham (2006) refer to the same study at different times.

Journal of Research in Reading (1.25)

Literacy (0.622)

Reading and Writing (1.63)

Reading and Writing Quarterly (0.697)

Research in the Teaching of English (0.871)

Scientific Studies of Reading (2.950)

Reading Teacher (0.77)

I found no new studies on the subject of young children's experience of hierarchical reading groups, confirming a gap in research that feels important to address. The search did, however, elicit relevant articles on the interlocking themes of identity-formation, 'struggling readers', race and class, which are discussed in the thesis (e.g., Kabuto, 2016; Learned, 2016; Scherer, 2016).

The search regarding ability grouping in general, across subjects and ages, elicited a large volume of studies. I searched and read until I felt that saturation had been achieved. Segregation by so-called ability it transpires, as Ramberg (2016) suggests, is one of the most studied and discussed of all topics in education.

Appendix 2: Experiences and outcomes for reading in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence

Reading

	Early	First	Second	Third	Fourth
Enjoyment and choice – within a motivating and challenging environment, developing an awareness of the relevance of texts in my life	I enjoy exploring and playing with the patterns and sounds of language and can use what I learn. LIT 0-01a / LIT 0-11a / LIT 0-20a I enjoy exploring and choosing stories and other texts to watch, read or listen to, and can share my likes and dislikes. LIT 0-01b / LIT 0-11b	I regularly select and read, listen to or watch texts which I enjoy and find interesting, and I can explain why I prefer certain texts and authors. LIT 1-11a / LIT 2-11a		I regularly select and read, listen to or watch texts for enjoyment and interest, and I can express how well they meet my needs and expectations and give reasons, with evidence, for my personal response. I can identify sources[4] to develop the range of my reading. LIT 3-11a	I regularly select and read, listen to or watch texts for enjoyment and interest, and I can express how well they meet my needs and expectations and give reasons, with evidence, for my personal response. I can independently identify sources to develop the range of my reading. LIT 4-11a
Tools for reading – to help me use texts with increasingly complex or unfamiliar ideas, structures and vocabulary within and beyond my place of learning	I explore sounds, letters and words, discovering how they work together, and I can use what I learn to help me as I read and write. ENG 0-12a / LIT 0-13a / LIT 0-21a	I am learning to select and use strategies and resources before I read, and as I read, to help make the meaning of texts clear. LIT 1-13a	I can select and use a range of strategies and resources before I read, and as I read, to make meaning clear and give reasons for my selection. LIT 2-13a	I can select and use the strategies and resources I find most useful before I read, and as I read, to monitor and check my understanding. LIT 3-13a	Before and as I read, I can apply strategies and use resources independently to help me read a wide variety of texts and/or find the information I need. LIT 4-13a

Figure 19: Experiences and outcomes for reading, CfE, 1 of 3

Reading (continued)

	Early	First	Second	Third	Fourth
Finding and using information – when reading and using fiction and non-fiction texts with increasingly complex ideas, structures and specialist vocabulary	I use signs, books or other texts to find useful or interesting information and I use this to plan, make choices or learn new things. LIT 0-14a	Using what I know about the features of different types of texts, I can find, select, sort and use information for a specific purpose. LIT 1-14a	Using what I know about the features of different types of texts, I can find, select and sort information from a variety of sources and use this for different purposes. LIT 2-14a	Using what I know about the features of different types of texts, I can find, select, sort, summarise, link and use information from different sources. LIT 3-14a / LIT 4-14a	
		I am learning to make notes under given headings and use them to understand information, explore ideas and problems and create new texts. LIT 1-15a	I can make notes, organise them under suitable headings and use them to understand information, develop my thinking, explore problems and create new texts, using my own words as appropriate. LIT 2-15a	I can make notes and organise them to develop my thinking, help retain and recall information, explore issues and create new texts, using my own words as appropriate. LIT 3-15a / LIT 4-15a	
Understanding, analysing and evaluating – investigating and/or appreciating fiction and non-fiction texts with increasingly complex ideas, structures and specialist vocabulary for different purposes	To help me understand stories and other texts, I ask questions and link what I am learning with what I already know. LIT 0-07a / LIT 0-16a / ENG 0-17a	To show my understanding across different areas of learning, I can identify and consider the purpose and main ideas of a text. LIT 1-16a	To show my understanding across different areas of learning, I can identify and consider the purpose and main ideas of a text and use supporting detail. LIT 2-16a	To show my understanding across different areas of learning, I can: • identify and consider the purpose, main concerns or concepts and use supporting detail • make inferences from key statements • identify and discuss similarities and differences between different types of text. LIT 3-16a	To show my understanding across different areas of learning, I can: • clearly state the purpose, main concerns, concepts or arguments and use supporting detail • make inferences from key statements and state these accurately in my own words • compare and contrast different types of text. LIT 4-16a

Figure 20: Experiences and outcomes for reading, CfE, 2 of 3

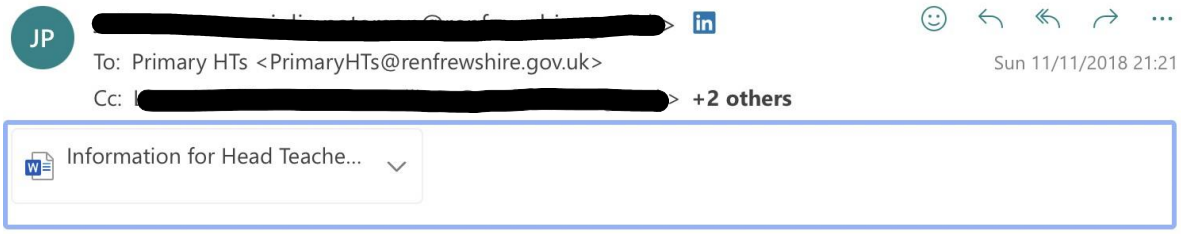
Reading (continued)

	Early	First	Second	Third	Fourth
Understanding, analysing and evaluating (continued) – investigating and/or appreciating fiction and non-fiction texts with increasingly complex ideas, structures and specialist vocabulary for different purposes		To help me develop an informed view, I can recognise the difference between fact and opinion. LIT 1-18a	To help me develop an informed view, I can identify and explain the difference between fact and opinion, recognise when I am being influenced, and have assessed how useful and believable my sources are. LIT 2-18a	To help me develop an informed view, I am exploring the techniques used to influence my opinion. I can recognise persuasion and assess the reliability of information and credibility and value of my sources. LIT 3-18a	To help me develop an informed view, I can recognise persuasion and bias, identify some of the techniques used to influence my opinion, and assess the reliability of information and credibility and value of my sources. LIT 4-18a
	I enjoy exploring events and characters in stories and other texts, sharing my thoughts in different ways. LIT 0-19a				

Figure 21: Experiences and outcomes for reading, CfE, 3 of 3

Appendix 3: Recruitment email sent to schools

Renfrewshire PhD Partnership - Opportunity for Schools



Hello,

I am writing to tell you of an exciting opportunity to participate in a doctoral research project and to invite expressions of interest. This is the collaborative doctoral study of Jess Anderson, who many of you will know. Renfrewshire Council is the collaborating partner.

Her study will take place in one, possibly two, primary schools in Renfrewshire and up to three classrooms. It will aim to explore, from children's perspectives, the experience of being in, what is commonly termed, 'the bottom reading group' and to support a trial of simultaneous mixed-attainment reading instruction.

The duration of the study will be approximately nine months, split evenly between observing children's experience with ability-grouping and mixed-attainment reading. Jess intends to blend into classroom life, become a safe and trusted non-teaching 'other adult' and be present in the school(s)/classrooms between two and three days per week for a few hours each day.

Participating schools and teachers will benefit from the stimulus of being part of a reflective research project that aims to co-create knowledge with teachers and pupils to gain deep insights into the experience of reading, learning and socialising for pupils in the lowest attaining reading group. They will also benefit from support in implementing and evaluating mixed-attainment reading instruction, with close consideration of how to ensure all children's needs are met within this system.

If you think you may be interested in being a host school, please read the attached information about what research methods will be employed and what these means in terms of commitment from the school.

Criteria for school selection:

- Schools in which 'ability-grouping' reading instruction is practised.
- Schools that are keen to trial mixed-attainment reading instruction, with support.
- Schools that have a rich reading environment with quality texts available to children.
- Teachers who are keen to participate in the study who are confident, enthusiastic, and open to trying new ideas and test approaches.

Please send expressions of interest to me by Friday 16th November with a short paragraph explaining how you feel the school meets the selection criteria and how you would hope to benefit from participation in the study.

If you would like more information, Jess is happy for you to contact her by email, jess.anderson@stath.ac.uk or mobile on [redacted].

[redacted]

[redacted]
Development Officer - Literacy
Children's Services,
Renfrewshire House,

Appendix 4: Child Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Child Information Sheet

Project: How you feel about reading and being in your reading group.

We are going to do a project in your class and in other classes in the school. We would like you to help us find out what you feel about reading, what helps you learn to read and how you feel about being in your reading group. We want to do this project to find out some of the best ways to help you to learn to read and enjoy reading. We will try out different ways of teaching you to read and we would like to know what you think of those. Jess Anderson is the project leader and she is from Strathclyde University. She will be spending time in your classroom from November until the summer holidays next year.

What you might do in the project

Jess will be watching and listening to what you do in class to help her understand what reading is like for you. She will make notes to help her remember what she sees and hears. She may also invite you to do some drawings about reading in class and at home. She might invite you to do an activity where you match emojis to pictures of reading activities to show how you feel about them. She might chat to you about reading and about other things you do in school. Sometimes when she chats to you she will ask if it is ok to record what you say using an audio recorder. We will introduce a new way of reading in class. Jess and your teacher will observe how you get on with the new way and might have conversations with you about it. The class will do some reading assessments so we can see how you are all getting on in learning to read.

What will happen to the notes, audio recordings and drawings?

The drawings you make will be scanned and the scans kept safely on the computer. Your teacher will keep the drawings safe, but you will be able to show your drawings to people you want to show them to. You will be able to take them home at summer holiday time. The notes and the audio recordings will be stored safely on the computer. We will not use your real name on them. You can ask Jess to listen to the conversation you have had on the audio recorder.

What happens after the project?

This a special kind of project called a research project. This means that when we find out things in the project we will tell other people about them, like other teachers in other schools, even in other countries. We might write about what we have learnt so others can read it and learn about what we have found out. We might talk about it at big meetings called conferences, where people go who are interested in how we help children to learn to read and feel good about it.

Researcher contact details:

Jess Anderson, PhD student, University of Strathclyde.

Email: jess.anderson@strath.ac.uk

Chief Investigator details:

Professor Yvette Taylor, School of Education, University of Strathclyde.

Email: yvette.taylor@strath.ac.uk

This investigation was granted ethical approval by the School of Education Ethics Committee.

If you or your family have any questions or worries, during or after the project, or wish to contact an independent person to ask any questions or get more information, please contact:

School of Education Ethics Committee
University of Strathclyde
School of education
Lord Hope Building
141 St James Road
Glasgow G4 0LT
Email: eugenie.samier@strath.ac.uk

Consent Form for children in the project

Name of department: University of Strathclyde

Title of the study: How you feel about reading and being in your reading group

- I understand what the project is about and what will happen in it and Jess has answered any questions I had.
- I understand that Jess will be in our class for eight months. She will be observing us at work and play. She will make notes about what she sees.
- I understand that I can ask Jess not to make notes about me and I can say I don't want to have conversations.
- I understand that I will be doing some art activities but I can say if I don't want what I do or say in them to be written about in the project.
- I understand that we will be learning reading in some new ways but I can say if I don't want what I do or say in them to be written about in the project.
- I understand that I can say yes to doing everything in the project, like having conversations with Jess and Jess making notes about what she sees but I can change my mind and say no at any time. I can tell my teacher or Jess. Then Jess would throw away any notes she had made or audio recordings we had done.
- I understand that any notes Jess makes about us won't use our real names.
- I understand that once Jess has written about the project I can't ask for the notes about me to be thrown away.
- I understand that the notes will be kept for ten years and that other writers, like Jess, might read them to learn about how we feel about reading.
- I agree to take part in the project.
- I agree to being audio recorded as part of the project.

Name:	Date:

Appendix 5: Example of field recordings

What follows is one example of my process of recording observations in the field that began with jottings while in the field, which informed the fieldnotes I typed up later (always on the same day). Reflections were written in italics to distinguish them from what was seen and heard. Names are pseudonyms. The example below is from June 19th, 2019.

Field Jottings:

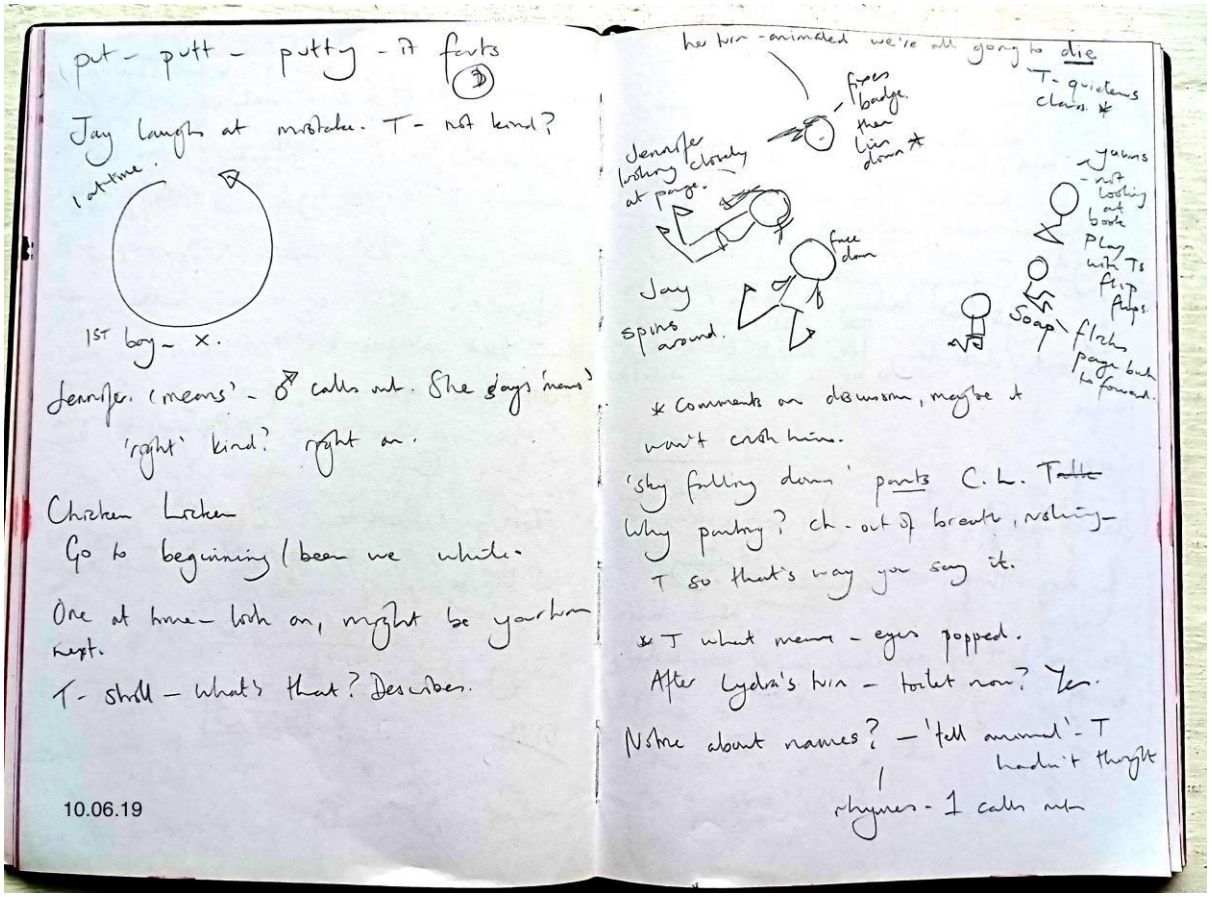


Figure 22: 2 of 13 pages of field jottings

Extract from Fieldnotes (449 of 2787 words):

The day starts in the playground with everyone lining up. It is the day that Primary 6&7 go off on school journey and the office is full of children with very big suitcases on wheels. The children in the playground, prompted by one of the teachers, chant "excellent in every way, excellent every day". Walking in with the children, JarJam tells me that the play he was in was in the newspaper. His gran has the newspaper, and she is going to give it to him, and he will keep it forever… Lydia tells me her cousin visited at the weekend… He was up from Manchester for the Spice Girls concert.

The children stand, bring their hands together, and one child leads them in morning prayers… Someone asks if the children going on school journey are going by plane. The teacher says no, by coach and boat. There are gasps when she says 'boat'. Angel's eyes widen, with the gasp. Jake says he is going on holiday in 11 days… The teacher asks if he is going to Poland. He says no. *[this prompts me to realise that although the demographic in the class is White, the children's heritage may be more diverse than just Scottish. And there may be children whose first language is not English. I had made an assumption that it was. Ask about this]*

…

The teacher asks for words with 'ug' in them ... A child says, "Dug". The teacher says yeh, smiles and looks at me. She asks the children what it means and Angel says, "Puppy". The teacher says "Yes, that's a Scottish way of saying dog." Jay says, "Can we do pug?" "Yes," says the teacher, "but do dug first." "Shuggy" another boy says, looks to the next table and giggles…[Shuggy is a Scottish working-class nickname for Hugh].

…the teacher calls for Blue Group, the middle of the three reading groups… They begin reading one at a time … She urged them to look on while others are reading "as it might be your turn next"… the children do various things but very little following of the text takes place. Jay … lies face down on the carpet for about half a minute, sits up and spins round… Jennifer takes a tissue out of her pocket and polishes her black patent leather shoes… The teacher asks the children … why Chicken Licken might be panting ... The children talk about being out of breath and rushing … Afterwards, the teacher says that because it takes some of them a long time to work out the words the others get bored. She would be grateful for any help with this (from me).

Appendix 6: Audio-Taped Conversations with Children

Codes: So-called: Bottom reading group= BRG; Middle reading group= MRG; Top reading group= TRG

Table 2: Summary of audio-taped conversations with children

Fairfield Primary, Kelvin Class			
Children	Reading Group	Date(s)	Focus
Alf	BRG	28.11.19 & 15.01.20	Reading together and conversation about reading, reading groups and pastimes.
Amay	MRG	23.01.20	Child-instigated conversation about Minecraft
Jamie	BRG	21.11.19	Book browse, reading together and conversation about reading, reading groups and pastimes.
		23.01.20	Reading together and conversation about reading, reading groups and pastimes.
		30.01.20	Reading chat and identification of reading level.
Lucia Jasmine	BRG	14.11.19 & 15.01.20	Book browse and conversation about reading, reading groups and pastimes.
Puffy	BRG	21.11.19 & 23.01.20	Reading together and conversation reading, reading groups and pastimes.
Tom	BRG	21.19.19 & 9.01.20	Book browse and conversation about reading, reading groups and pastimes.
Alf, Tom and Jamie	BRG	24.10.19	Painting session and facilitated conversation about perceptions of reading, reading groups and pastimes.

Amay, Jake, Ryan and Lewis	MRG, TRG, TRG, TRG	28.11.19	Conversation about reading, reading groups and pastimes.
Bella May, Lola and Jack	TRG	31.10.19	Drawing images of favourite texts/characters and friends to read with; facilitated conversation about perceptions of reading, reading groups and pastimes.
Lewis, Car and Jack	TRG, BRG, TRG	23.01.20	Conversation about reading, reading groups and pastimes.
Maya, Falcon and Chewbacca	MRG	23.01.20	Conversation about reading, reading groups and pastimes.

St Jude's Primary, Avon			
Children	Reading Group	Date	Focus
George	BRG	23.10.19	Book browse and conversation about reading, reading groups, friendships and pastimes.
		15.01.20	Facilitated conversations about reading, writing, and home pastimes.
		8.06.21	Conversation about reading, friendships, and feelings about mixed-attainment reading.
Puzzle	BRG	15.01.20	Book browse and conversation about reading, reading groups, friendships and pastimes.
		3.02.20	Conversations about reading and pastimes.

		27.05.21	Conversation about reading, friendships, and feelings about mixed-attainment reading.
John, Lola and Ellie	TRG	23.10.19	Book browse and conversation about reading, reading groups, friendships and pastimes.
Millie and Ellie	BRG, TRG	4.11.19	Book browse and conversation about reading, reading groups, friendships and pastimes.
Millie, Sienna and Emma	BRG, TRG, TRG	27.05.21	Conversation about reading, friendships, and feelings about mixed-attainment reading.
Puzzle, Tilly and Horris	BRG, MRG, MRG	30.10.19	Book browse and conversation about reading, reading groups, friendships and pastimes.
Sean, Tilly and Charlie	TRG, MRG, MRG	8.06.21	Conversation about reading, friendships, and feelings about mixed-attainment reading.
Twinkle and Tilly	MRG	11.11.19	Book browse and conversation about reading, reading groups, friendships and pastimes.
Twinkle, Bella and Horris	MRG	7.06.21	Conversation about reading, friendships, and feelings about mixed-attainment reading.

St Jude's Primary, Clyde			
Children	Reading Group	Date	Focus
Angel	BRG	19.10.19	Reading together and conversation about reading.
Angel, Garry and Jeffy	BRG	30.10.19	Book browse and conversation about reading, reading groups, friendships and pastimes.
Cash	BRG	15.01.20	Conversation about reading, reading groups, friendships, and pastimes.
Jake	BRG	15.01.20	Reading together and chatting about reading, reading groups and pastimes.
Kayla, Claudia and Alexa	TRG	23.10.19	Book browse and conversation about reading, reading groups, friendships and pastimes.
Kevin, Will and Bingo	TRG	30.10.19	Book browse and conversation about reading, reading groups, friendships and pastimes.
Lilly and Jennifer	MRG	19.06.19	Conversation about reading, reading groups, friendships, and pastimes.

Appendix 7: Explanation and Example of a Reading Running Record

The reading running record was devised as a diagnostic and assessment tool for reading by Marie Clay (e.g., 1993), the founder of the Reading Recovery Programme in New Zealand. It is still used extensively, including in the UK, particularly by practitioners who believe that readers use (and should be taught) a combination of semantic, syntactic and graphophonic cues to decipher words and maintain sense of what they read (Bodman & Franklin, 2014).

One of the uses of reading running records is to ascertain which level of text a child can read at between 90 and 95% accuracy. This level of word accuracy is considered to be the optimum level for children to maintain sense of what they read and still be challenged in terms of developing their reading. To ascertain the level of accuracy, the child reads an extract and the adult ticks every time they read a word accurately, as in the example below. If a word is read inaccurately the word from the book is entered and the child's attempt (called a 'miscue') is written above. The percentage accuracy is worked by doing a calculation from the number of miscues in relation to the overall words read. Miscues can also give insight into the cues that a child is using and underusing e.g., if a miscue makes sense but does not resemble the word e.g., reading 'car' when the word is 'volvo', this could indicate that the child is using semantic and syntactic cues but underusing graphophonic cues when reading.

I used reading running records at Fairfield, but not St Jude's, because I perceived a mismatch between some children's level of fluency, book level and group position that I wanted to check (on reflection I should also have conducted running records at St Jude's). On the following page is the running record I conducted with Jamie, who was in P3 at Fairfield, and in the so-called bottom reading group. He had told me that he had been reading Level 2 books for two years and was still on Level 2. When I did the running records, it was evident that he could in fact read Level 7 books with 97% accuracy and Level 8 books with 90% accuracy. From his miscues, and his comments while reading, it was clear that he was engaged and able to maintain sense of what he read at Level 8. This suggests he could have confidently read with the middle reading group and was therefore misallocated to the bottom group on the basis of fluency. The red blobs on the RRR conceal his real name. Jamie's

example was atypical of the running records conducted with his class, which for most showed a good match between their level of fluency, their reading book and group.

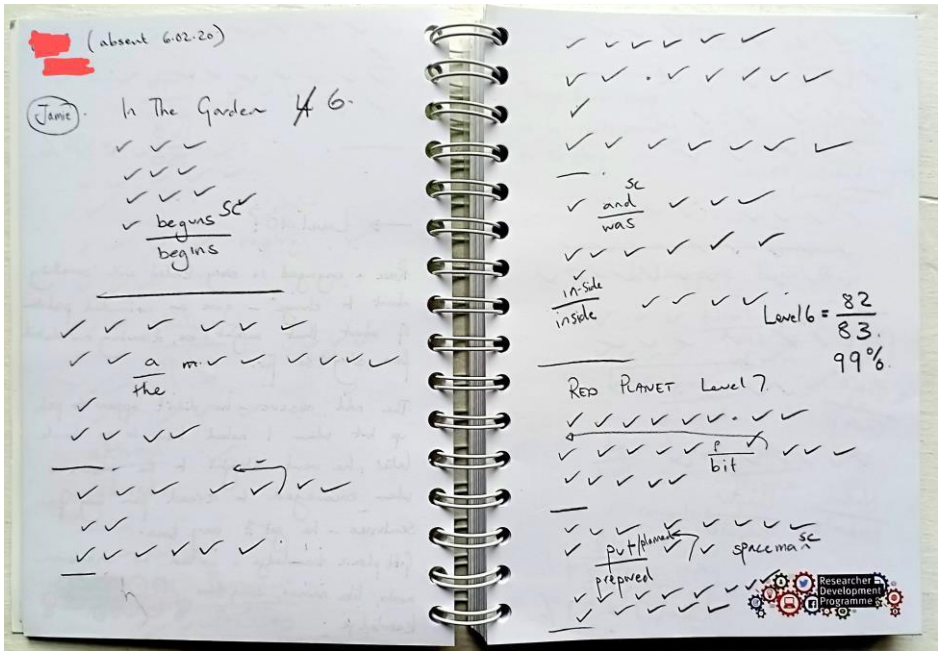


Figure 23: Reading running record conducted with Jamie, Fairfield, Kelvin, 1 of 3

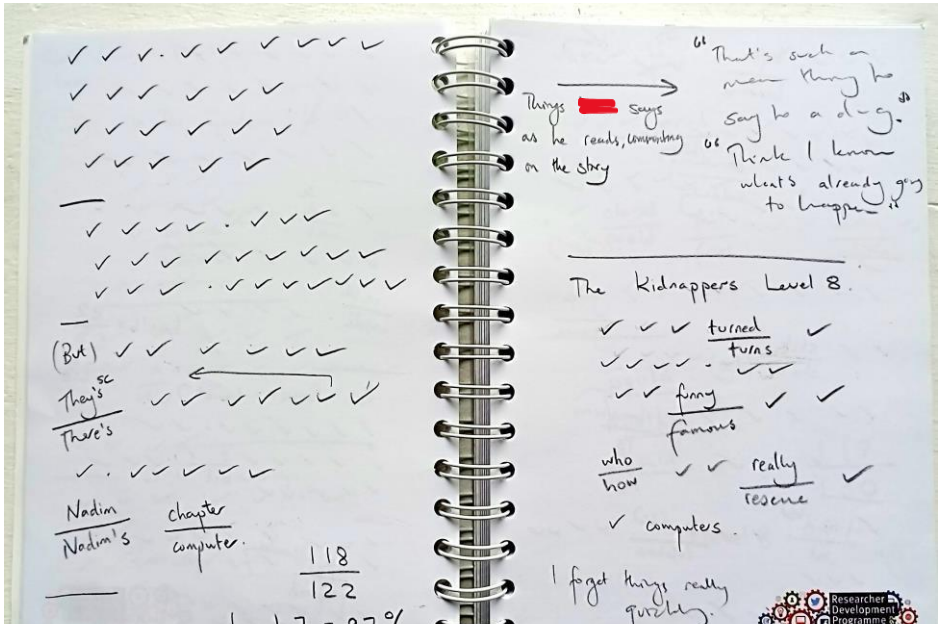


Figure 24: Reading running record conducted with Jamie, Fairfield, Kelvin, 2 of 3

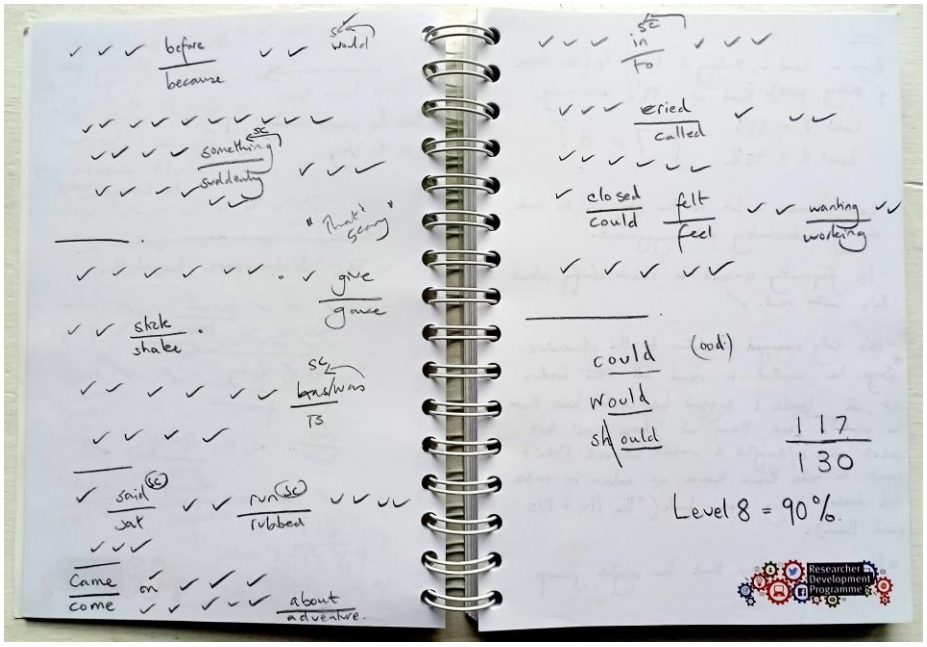


Figure 25: Reading running record conducted with Jamie, Fairfield, Kelvin, 3 of 3

Appendix 8: Extract from transcript reflections and initial coding

This is a short extract from the reflections made largely while transcribing a conversation with Angel, Jeffy and Gary at St Jude's, Clyde (280 of 3163 words). All reflections were recorded in italics to distinguish them from recaps of what was said in the conversation.

Habitus and literacy

Jeffy's mum and dad read to him and his little brother, usually at bedtime. *Again, this challenges the common narrative that children are slower to get going as readers because their parents don't read with them. In terms of the reading role models at home,* he sees his dad reading, and names a book, the biography of a John Higgins. His mum, he says, doesn't read because she is always on SnapChat. He tells her to get off her phone and read. *Is this again an awareness of tension between home realities and what is promoted as good things to do by schools?*

He hears stories but doesn't read. When I asked him what stories his parents read to him, he instead told me about a book his dad was reading. I wonder why, but don't know. It is so easy but deluded to jump to my own conclusions, that bedtime stories don't really happen because he doesn't name any books or types of books. This is what goes on in my head and I need to acknowledge this: assumptions are not facts! He helps his brother: he listens to his little brother, a year younger.

Returning to this transcript and this reflection a year later, I noticed things I had not done at the point of transcription/reflection. I noticed how my questions focussed on my own assumptions about bedtime stories, and at least partially shut down talk of other habits. Jeffy had to insist on telling me about other things, like preferring his toys. He may also have felt 'forced' to say his mum and dad read with him because of the bias of my questioning.

Initial Codes (from full transcript):

Self-view as readers.

Perceptions of different reading groups.

Agency, reading and being in the lowest positioned reading group.

The inertia of ability-grouped reading system and its impact.

Children's views about what makes a good reader.

Children perpetuating reading hierarchies.

Cultural capital and book knowledge.

Appendix 9: Thematic Code Clusters

I generated these codes while listening to and transcribing the audio-taped conversations with the children. They were used as a starting point for a thematic analysis of the fieldnotes and conversations (2nd reading) using Nvivo. In the course of the analysis on Nvivo a small number of codes were added and some of these clusters were collapsed into the title e.g., self-perceptions and identities as readers.

- Self-perceptions and identities as readers
    - Children talking about themselves as readers
    - Children presenting themselves as readers
    - Perceptions of how others see you as a reader
    - My perceptions of children's perceptions as readers
    - Reading identities and creating false identities
    - Children showing off their reading skills
    - Emotions and reading, including fear.
    - Insecurities around reading and making mistakes
    - Perceiving hierarchies within groups, including highest-attaining groups
    - Memories of learning to read
    - Agency and engagement as readers

- Affective movements, feelings about, and relationship with, reading
    - How reading is framed: work, pleasure, connection, intimacy, knowledge-expansion, transportation, imagination-firing, it's-about-words, homework, being good, supports hobbies.
    - Reading engagement: interest, curiosity, puzzling and connections
    - Engaging with books through being read to versus self-reading
    - Book conversations triggering reading and other memories
    - Affective barriers to developing as a reader
    - Emotion and learning to read/be readers, including fear
    - Reading progress and reading difficulties

- Reading to conform/comply
- Reading as relaxation and fun
- Avoidance of reading
- Opportunities to read and time spent reading
- Fear of lots of words and of small text
- Affective movements in reading events

- Linked to identities: how children talk about books
  - Talking about books: favourite books and lack of favourites
  - Aspects of books discussed: plot, themes, mood, setting, language, design, humour, message
  - Making connections to life and other reading experiences when talking about books
  - Significance ascribed to picture books, thin and chunky chapter books, and other types of books in terms of social positioning around reading
  - Gendered book choices

- Ability-grouped reading groups: self-perceptions and positionings
  - Feelings about own reading group
  - Children's perspectives on the positive aspects of ability-grouped reading
  - Positioning others by their reading group
  - Characteristics ascribed to different reading groups and words used including cleverness, talented, confidence, shyness, needing help
  - Reading, agency and being in the lowest-attaining reading group
  - How particular reading groups are perceived in terms of compositional disruption (kids who don't get on having to be in the same group)
  - Reading groups, visual hierarchies, and is said/not said about these
  - Fixing children in place because of the reading group position
  - Motivational aspects of being in different reading groups
  - Imagining children as adult readers: different perceptions across the ability-groups
  - Positioning in bottom reading group versus self-perception: when these don't match

- Movement from lower-attaining to higher-attaining groups seen as promotion, and related emotions around this.

- Issues with ability grouping for reading
  - Placing of children with EAL in the bottom reading group
  - Misallocation to groups for reasons other than reading fluency
  - Inertia of reading groups
  - Inequity of different reading instruction for different groups: What happens pedagogically in reading sessions for different groups
  - Children in low-attaining groups held in place by others' positioning of them and emotional work involved in resisting/believing this

- Social relations and positioning around reading
  - Who reads with whom?
  - Friendship and reading
  - Experience of Reading Café
  - Influence of friendship and other social relations on self-view as a reader and reading development

- Reading development: what participants do and don't do as readers
  - Strategies, knowledge of print, making sense, engaging and responding, picking up on themes, mood, character, plot, setting, language, book design, phonics and blending, remembering and word recognition, spotting chunks of letters and words within words, visualisation, re-reading, punctuation
  - Reading engagement and reading comprehension-links
  - Barriers to reading development
  - Reading difficulties and oral language development
  - Specific reading difficulties
  - Phonics: how it helps and hinders

- Methods and methodology reflections
    - Entering children's cultures of communication: gains, barriers, challenges and examples
    - Key moments that may illuminate something important
    - Dissonance between what children say, what is observed, and teachers' comments
    - Children's relationship with my notebook or audio recorder
    - Use of sketches of reading events as a reflexive tool for participants
    - Children changing the subject of conversation: what's happening?
    - Multiple truths and (possibly) non-truths in children's stories
    - Saving face
    - Researcher reflections on significance of how children speak in terms of volume, enunciation, projection, prosody, gesture, facial expression and posture, when speaking about different topics
    - Issues around pseudonyms

- Habitus, cultural capital, and how reading fits into the matrix of home and community life
    - Reading at home
    - Debunking everyday narratives of parents not reading with their children leading to poor performance in school/being in low-attaining groups.
    - Competing demands on time, including parents' time
    - Concerted cultivation and free range child rearing practices
    - Gendered patterns of home reading with children
    - Parents' literacies and lives through children's eyes: including link between social inequality and parents un/confidence in literacy, and children's identities as readers
    - Mediating between school expectations and home life realities: children's psychic work around reading
    - Symbolic violence and the legitimising/normalising of book reading over other literacies
    - Sociocultural, many literacies, their role in identity and schools' in/hospitability to these, and the dominance of book-based reading (linked to last bullet)

- Reading associations with other aspects of comforting home life
- Gaming and other non-book-based reading
- Reading versus screen time
- Intentional/unintentional exclusions from learning and classroom culture
- Children in the top group who say they don't read much at home
- Cultural capital and book knowledge
- Feelings and attitudes about things other than reading
- Parental employment and impact of time-availability to read, and read together
- Feelings and attitudes about things other than reading
- Funds of knowledge
- Hearing a deficit depends on the questions the researcher is asking and the assumptions behind those questions
- Class, power, creation of insiders and outsiders when talking about literacy events
- Habitus, reading material availability and spatial aspects of class.

- Classroom hierarchies
  - Reading groups
  - Reading material
  - School in/hospitability to home literacies
  - Hegemonic superiority of reading and reading books over other mediums of communication, pastimes and other literacies.

- Researcher reflexivity, emotional and intellectual responses to children's experience, talk and views.
  - Hearing a deficit depends on the questions the researcher is asking and the assumptions behind those questions (also in Habitus cluster)
  - Linked: Researcher bias, de/legitimising home literacy practices
  - Class, power, creation of insiders and outsiders when talking about literacy events
  - Failing to/ Entering children's cultures of communicating
  - My roles in the research including 'lesser adult' and 'teacher/manager'
  - Lack of awareness and care by researcher of issues of racial bias

- How do I relate to, interpret and portray children’s reading experience in home and school