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“LOW ABILITY”, PARTICIPATION AND IDENTITY IN DIALOGIC PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

Teachers are increasingly called upon to use dialogic teaching practices to engage active pupil participation in academically challenging classroom discourse. Such practices are in tension with commonly held beliefs about pupil ability as fixed and/or context-independent. Moreover, teaching practices that seek to make pupil thinking visible can also make perceived pupil “inarticulateness” and/or “low ability” visible, with important implications for pupil identities. This article explores how teachers in a dialogic teaching intervention managed the participation and identities of “low ability” pupils. We use linguistic ethnographic methods to analyze three different case studies in which teachers seek to include underachieving pupils' voices in the discussion, and discuss implications for dialogic pedagogy and for the study of classroom social identification processes.

Keywords: classroom discourse, dialogic pedagogy, identity, linguistic ethnography, pupil ability, pupil participation

“Low Ability”, Participation and Identity in Dialogic Pedagogy

Talk-intensive pedagogies are gaining in popularity. Though the various designs differ from one another in context, scope and ambition, fundamental to all is the cultivation of an inclusive classroom community engaged in academically productive discourse. This expectation sits uneasily with commonly held beliefs about pupil ability. On the one hand, such pedagogies rest on the assumption that children learn best through participation in rich and challenging classroom discourse, and therefore require that all pupils be encouraged to participate actively in class discussions. On the other hand, prevalent in Anglo-American education is another ideology, according to which pupils have inherent, fixed, context-independent abilities (e.g. Oakes, Wells, Jones & Datnow, 1997) – e.g. “bright” and “articulate” versus “low ability” and “inarticulate” – and only the former are considered capable of participating productively in dialogue. Moreover, talk-intensive pedagogies, which seek to make pupil thinking visible (e.g. Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011), can make pupil perceived “inarticulateness” and/or “low ability” visible as well, thereby publicly identifying pupils in potentially harmful ways.

In this paper we explore questions raised by the tension between dialogic pedagogy and prevalent views of pupil ability: What are the implications of teachers’ views about ability for their appropriation of dialogic pedagogies? How can and do teachers manage the demands of dialogic pedagogies (which include cognitive challenge, inclusivity and the fostering of supportive relationships) in interactions with perceived “low ability” pupils? What consequences do views about ability (both teachers’ and pupils’) and pedagogical philosophies (such as dialogic pedagogy) have for processes of identification in the classroom, affecting the way pupils are positioned and how they access opportunities for learning? We explore these questions in an analysis of episodes in three different classrooms in which teachers nominated a so-called “low ability” pupil to speak. Each episode

highlights different ways in which teachers addressed the tensions between perceived ability and dialogic pedagogy, with different implications for pupil identities.

The article contributes to theoretical understanding of the complex relationships among widely circulating ideologies about pupil ability, reform pedagogies, classroom discourse and pupil identities. We show the mechanism through which perceived “low ability” pupils can be marginalized, and also ways in which teachers and pupils can disrupt this problematic dynamic. We argue that prevalent ideologies about ability as fixed and/or context-independent can be an impediment to the enactment of dialogic pedagogy, and indeed a critical constraint on its promise for addressing the urgent challenges of equity facing educational systems around the world.

Dialogic Pedagogies

Interest in talk-intensive or dialogic pedagogies has grown rapidly in the past two decades. Numerous approaches have emerged, including, for example, Accountable Talk (Michaels, O’Connor & Resnick, 2008), Exploratory Talk (Mercer & Littleton, 2007), Collaborative Reasoning (Reznitskaya et al., 2009), the Paideia Seminar (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002) and Dialogic Teaching (Alexander, 2008b). This trend is motivated by a number of developments: the popularity of sociocultural psychological theory, according to which discourse and social interaction are intimately related to learning and cognitive development (e.g. Sfard, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991); awareness of and dissatisfaction with prevalent, traditional classroom discourse structures (e.g. Cazden, 2001; Mehan, 1979); accumulating evidence for the effectiveness of alternative, dialogic teaching strategies (Resnick, Asterhan & Clarke, 2015); and democratic concerns with pupil voice, empowerment and preparing pupils for active, critical participation in deliberative democracy (e.g. Fielding, 2004; Hess & McAvoy, 2015).

While the various instructional approaches proposed differ in scope, ambition and emphases, all seek to “exploit the power of talk to engage and shape children’s thinking and learning” (Alexander, 2008a, p. 92). For the purposes of the current paper (see Lefstein & Snell, 2014, for a more comprehensive discussion), we define dialogic pedagogy as teaching and learning processes in which (a) pupils and teacher address authentic problems and play an active and agentic role in the joint construction of knowledge and negotiation of meaning; (b) pupils are empowered to express their voices, resulting in the interaction of multiple perspectives; (c) pupils and teacher adopt an open and critical stance toward knowledge claims; (d) the classroom community is characterized by respectful, supportive and caring relationships and inclusive and reciprocal participation norms. These different features are in tension with one another, for example, a critical stance toward pupil knowledge claims can conflict with care for pupils’ face. Moreover, these features are not always fully achievable in current classroom conditions and policy environment. For this reason, in our work with teachers (discussed below) we discuss dialogic pedagogy as a problem space – a set of issues and concerns to attend to – rather than a “best practice” prescription (Lefstein & Snell, 2014).

Even as evidence for the effectiveness of teaching through classroom dialogue accumulates (Resnick, Asterhan & Clarke, 2015), dialogic instruction is rarely enacted in classrooms, especially in schools serving socially and economically disadvantaged pupil populations (e.g., Applebee et al. 2003). Numerous challenges confront practitioners of dialogic pedagogy, and reformers who seek to promote its enactment. First, are structural issues: limited time and space for discussion; a crowded curriculum that encourages breadth at the expense of depth; high-stakes, standardized tests and other policy and political pressures (Alexander, 2015; Burbules, 1993; Skidmore, 2006). Second, the shift from traditional school practices to more dialogic pedagogy involves a radical shift with regards to

how teachers – and pupils – think about knowledge, authority and learning (Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013). Third, irrespective of teacher and pupil beliefs, classroom practice is relatively durable because of its co-constructed and habitual nature (Lefstein, 2008). Fourth, dialogic teaching places considerable demands on teacher knowledge and flexibility (Alexander, 2015). Without in any way detracting from the importance of the above issues, in this article we add a fifth consideration: the interaction between dialogic pedagogy and pupil identities, in particular the identities of perceived "low ability" pupils.

Classroom Discourse, Learning and Identity

Our approach to classroom discourse is grounded in the view that meaning is co-constructed in interaction and that this involves not just the negotiation of propositional information but simultaneously also the negotiation of status and social position, the establishment and maintenance of social relationships, and the creation and recreation of knowledge, power and identities (Snell, Shaw & Copland, 2015). This approach builds upon interactional sociolinguistics (e.g. Gumperz, 1982), the ethnography of communication (e.g. Hymes, 1972), linguistic anthropology (e.g. Duranti & Goodwin 1992) and Goffman's theories of social interaction (e.g. Goffman 1974, 1981), as well as the work of educational researchers who have applied these ideas to the study of classrooms (e.g. Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto & Stuart-Faris, 2005; Cazden 2001; Gee, 2000; McDermott & Gospodinoff, 1979; Wortham, 2006). In line with this approach, we see the issue of who participates in classroom discourse and in what ways as being consequential for pupil identities. By identity we mean the way an individual is recognised by themselves and others as a certain “kind of person” (Gee, 2000, p. 99). We view identities as emerging in interactive processes and developing over time, rather than reflecting fixed and stable properties of an individual, located deep in the psyche (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, pp. 585-6). In the classroom context, this means that pupils' identities are co-constructed as they interact with other people; they are a

product of the pupils’ own behaviour and the ways in which they are identified by their teachers and peers (e.g. Gee 2000; Greeno 2002; Maybin, 2006; McDermott & Raley, 2008; Mehan, 1996; Wortham, 2004, 2006).

The critical importance of identity for learning is increasingly recognised in learning theory and in studies of classroom practice. In short, pupils who are identified (and come to identify themselves) as competent and productive members of the classroom community are likely to feel more valued in classroom activities and have a more positive experience of learning than pupils who have been identified as incompetent or otherwise problematic. A growing body of work has examined the specific processes through which learning and identity connect. We outline here the work of three scholars who similarly focus on the co-construction of identity in interaction and offer helpful perspectives on how this relates to learning.

Greeno (2002) posits the idea of “intellective identity”, that is, how individuals are “entitled, expected, and obligated to act with and toward each other” and “toward the subject-matter content of the class” (p. 3). Central to the notion of intellective identities are pupil *competence*, i.e. how individuals are positioned as being either competent or incompetent through classroom practices, and *authority* and *accountability*, i.e. the extent to which individuals are afforded authority and held accountable in the process of knowledge construction. Where pupils are positioned with competence, authority and accountability, they are encouraged to exercise “productive agency in their learning” (p. 6). This requires interactions between pupils and teacher that presuppose pupils have their own ideas, are capable of independent thinking (rather than requiring them to reproduce the teacher’s or textbook’s ideas), and have responsibility for contributing to each other’s learning. Interactional positions are fleeting, but over time, they may constitute more enduring identities. For example, pupils who are consistently positioned with competence, authority

and accountability are likely to develop identities as productive learners. Recognition of such identities depends on teachers and pupils having access to more widely circulating norms and expectations, such as what it means to be a “good pupil”.

Wortham (2004, 2006) theorises this articulation between interactionally evoked and publicly circulating identities by attending to processes of social identification at multiple timescales. His analyses take account of the sociohistorical development of identity categories (e.g. over decades and centuries), their local contextualisation and adaptation (e.g. over months and years), and moment-to-moment events of social identification in which socio-historical and local identity categories are used to identify individual persons. An act of social identification occurs when some utterance, characteristic or behaviour is interpreted as a sign of a recognizable identity. Such behaviour may be explicit, as when a speaker directly assigns an identity label to someone (e.g. describing them as a “slow learner”), or, more often, implicit, as when a set of co-occurring signs in interaction suggest that a particular identity category is relevant (e.g. when a teacher praises a pupil “for trying”) (Wortham 2006, p. 37). Social identification always involves contributions from both the identified pupil and others (i.e. the teacher and/or other pupils), but the specific ratio of these contributions will vary from event to event (Wortham 2006, p. 36).

In his ethnography of a school adopting the Paideia programme, Wortham (2006) demonstrates how specific themes from the curriculum can become resources for both social identification and learning. In the cases he studied, curricular themes fed into and shaped events of social identification, and social identification processes that emerged in participant examples – a pedagogical strategy favoured by the teachers he studied – helped pupils to understand curricular themes. In one example, Wortham shows how the concept of a “beast” or “outcast” became central to students’ exploration of the theme of individualism versus collectivism, and through participant examples, how it also shaped the emerging identity of

one black male student, Maurice. As the school year progressed, Maurice found it increasingly difficult to be both a “good student” and a “respected male” in this classroom because the socio-historical identity categories of race and gender had developed into the local identities “promising girls” and “disruptive boys”. The teachers made use of Maurice’s precarious position in participant examples, where he appeared as a “beast in the woods”. These examples helped students to understand curricular themes (e.g. individualism versus collectivism) and related concepts (e.g. Aristotle’s concept of a ‘beast’), but they also simultaneously reinforced Maurice’s identity as an “outcast” in the classroom.

Wortham’s attention to identity processes across multiple timescales is instructive in interpreting other studies of learning and identity. For example, Black (2004) finds that pupils’ social class background has an impact on the extent to which they participate in “productive” versus “unproductive” interactions with the teacher, which subsequently shapes their opportunities for learning. In her study, the pupils who participated most often in productive interactions were middle-class children who had inherited the “right kind of cultural capital” (p. 47) The teacher perceived this symbolic cultural capital as evidence of high ability and formed high expectations of these pupils, affording them communicative rights that highlighted their role as legitimate participants in the classroom (in Greeno’s [2002] terms, positioning them with competence, authority and accountability). Alternatively, the teacher had lower expectations of pupils who did not possess the same kind of cultural capital and perceived the need to take greater control in her interactions with them. This resulted in “unproductive interactions” in which the pupil played a relatively passive role, offering at most monosyllabic contributions. Black argues that not only does this kind of interaction prevent a pupil “from actively taking ownership of the meanings under discussion” but it also “signals to everyone involved that her/his identity is one of non-participation” (p. 49). In Black’s study, then, social class (a socio-historical identity category)

is locally contextualized in the classroom as “high achiever” versus “low achiever”, and these local categories are applied to individual pupils in specific acts of identification where teachers adopt more or less controlling forms of communicative behaviour, positioning pupils as having identities of either full participation/competence or non-participation/incompetence (on gender see e.g. Myhill [2002] and on ethnicity see e.g. Biggs & Edwards 1991, Cazden 1990, Larson 2003).

Other studies support Black’s findings that perceptions of children’s ability (whether held consciously or unconsciously) may influence what teachers expect from certain pupils, and these expectations can affect the decisions that teachers make in the classroom, how teachers interact with pupils deemed to be “low ability”, and the level of structure and control they apply (Brophy & Good 1970; Black 2004; Cooper & Baron 1977; Good & Nichols 2001; Myhill 2002; Rist 1970). Moreover, preconceived ideas about ability may lead to a vicious cycle in which teachers implicitly communicate their low expectations to perceived “low ability” pupils, pupils respond by becoming less interested in classroom activities, and this in turn reinforces their teachers’ perceptions of their low ability or unwillingness to learn (Black 2004, pp. 49-50; see also Rist 1970). These interactions further impact negatively on the pupils’ identities (as perceived by themselves and others), which in turn impacts negatively on their learning (Reay, 2006a; Varenne & McDermott, 1998; Wortham, 2006).

This issue of pupil participation, and its implications for pupil social identification, is highly salient in talk-intensive pedagogies. Teachers enacting dialogic pedagogy are expected to encourage all pupils to participate actively, and to subject their ideas to critical examination, pushing pupils to justify their arguments. In mixed-ability classrooms, however, some teachers may also feel the need to differentiate their instruction, protecting perceived “low ability” pupils, who are seen as incapable of responding positively to cognitive challenge. Our aim in this paper is to explore the questions raised by this tension between

dialogic pedagogy and dominant views of pupil ability and the consequences it poses for pupil identities and learning. Building on the theoretical framework set out above, we ask: What are the implications of teachers’ views about ability for their appropriation of dialogic pedagogies? How can and do teachers manage the demands of dialogic pedagogies in interactions with perceived “low ability” pupils? What consequences do views about ability (both teachers’ and pupils’) and pedagogical philosophies (such as dialogic pedagogy) have for processes of identification in the classroom, affecting the way pupils are positioned and how they access opportunities for learning?

Research Site and Methods

The tension between the inclusivity of dialogic pedagogies and the perceived inability of some pupils to participate in challenging classroom discourse emerged as a central issue for teachers participating in the Towards Dialogue study (see Lefstein & Snell, 2011a, 2011b, 2013, 2014; and Snell & Lefstein, 2011 for more details about this study). This linguistic ethnographic study investigated processes of continuity and change in classroom discourse and interaction as teachers at “Abbeyford Primary School” attempted to enact dialogic pedagogy. Abbeyford Primary is located in a London borough with a low socioeconomic profile – the majority of the pupils in the school come from white working class backgrounds – though the school is on a relatively more affluent edge of the borough, and is attended also by pupils from a neighbouring authority. We chose to work in this area, in part, because we hoped the research would have wider relevance with regard to the pressing problem of how to raise educational achievement in such settings. More significantly, the Local Authority had a long-standing interest in classroom talk and a history of developing and implementing pedagogical innovations. Abbeyford had been among the higher achieving schools in the Local Authority, as reflected in standardized test scores, but its position had slipped in the two years prior to the research. The school was ranked 5th out of 35 schools in the ‘league

tables’ comparing local schools in 2006, but fell to 29th in 2009. School management and teachers were under considerable pressure to reverse this downward trend, and success in the standardized assessments task (SAT) tests were a major concern for all.

The study encompassed two related strands: (1) a professional development programme designed to promote interactional awareness and sensitivity, and (2) lesson observations and recordings to study processes of continuity and change in classroom interactional patterns in the wake of that intervention. Practically this meant that we visited the school two to three days a week over the course of the 2008-2009 school year, collaboratively planning literacy lessons with the Year 5 and 6 teachers (pupils aged 9 to 11), and observing and video- and/or audio-recording these teachers’ literacy lessons ($n=71$). We also conducted fortnightly “reflection workshops” ($n=12$) in which seven participating teachers reflected upon and discussed video-recorded excerpts of their own practice as a means of developing their awareness and understanding of classroom interaction. One of the researchers facilitated these discussions, probing participants’ ideas and drawing out the interactional and pedagogical implications of their interpretations. These meetings were audio-recorded and documented in fieldnotes, and were themselves subject to detailed analysis.¹

Participating teachers brought with them a range of expertise and experience, which is exemplified by the teachers who appear in the three case studies we present in this article. Ms Leigh was the Head of Year 5 and also served as assistant headteacher and literacy coordinator. She had been teaching for 11 years. Mr Robbins taught Year 5 classes alongside Ms Leigh. He came to Abbeyford immediately after completing his teaching qualification, six years prior to the start of the research. Ms Alexander was beginning her first full year as a qualified teacher (having just completed her Newly Qualified Teacher year at Abbeyford). The teachers started the programme with different levels of experience with dialogic

teaching, commitment to the underlying ideas, and willingness to experiment in their classrooms. Generally speaking, Ms. Leigh, who also served as liaison for the programme, took on the ideas more readily than the other teachers. Both Ms Leigh and Mr Robbins had participated in previous interventions on dialogic pedagogy, including the *Teaching Through Dialogue Initiative* (Alexander 2008b). All participating teachers, pupils and their parents or guardians gave informed consent to participate in the study.

We documented additional aspects of the school experience in detailed field notes composed after each visit to the school. These together with the video and audio data formed the basis for discussion at weekly research team meetings. Pupil ability emerged in our discussions as a key issue for the teachers and a “rich point” (Agar, 1986) for us, i.e. a gap between researcher cultural expectations and phenomena encountered in the field. Field notes relating to reflection workshops recorded our collective sense that teachers’ views about pupil ability often derailed workshop discussions. We discuss these views in more detail below. References to pupil ability also recurred in field notes documenting lesson observations. One pupil in particular, Hugh, stood out to us as being “low ability” despite this label never actually being attributed directly to him. Hugh was a pupil in Mr Robbins’ Year 5 class. Our conjecture that Mr Robbins identified Hugh as “low ability” was confirmed when we consulted the official literacy targets he had set for the pupils in his class. Hugh’s target was 2c according to National Curriculum levels, which placed him in the bottom ten percent of his class, and very far from the national target level for Year 5 (age 10) of between level 3 and level 4. We wondered how this fact had been (implicitly) communicated to us during lesson observations. One possibility, supported by fieldnotes, was that Hugh had been positioned interactionally as low ability. After visiting Mr Robbins’ classroom eleven times over the course of the school year, one of the researchers documented: “This pattern repeats

itself over and over in Mr Robbins’ classes: he asks Hugh a question. Hugh doesn’t answer. Mr Robbins moves on to someone else”.

We subjected our ethnographic impressions to scrutiny through detailed linguistic analyses of key episodes. We searched our fieldnotes for references to Hugh and returned to the original recordings, transcribing in detail relevant events (i.e. events in which either explicit statements or implicit interactional cues indexed Hugh’s ability, in line with Wortham’s [2006] approach). We then turned our attention to the other classrooms we had observed. We used school achievement data to identify pupils who had literacy targets similar to Hugh’s and located episodes in which those pupils were nominated by their teachers to participate. In this paper we present a detailed account of the emerging identity of Hugh across the school year and compare this with contrastive cases involving so-called “low ability” pupils from two other classrooms.

The methodological frame for our analysis of this classroom data is linguistic ethnography, an emerging school in social science in the United Kingdom that seeks to integrate ethnography’s openness and holism (among other advantages) with the insights and rigor of linguistics (Rampton et al., 2004; Rampton, Maybin & Roberts 2015). What this means in practice is that we adopt an ethnographic perspective and use ethnographic tools to study particular aspects of everyday life, drawing upon the theories and practices of anthropology and sociology (Green and Bloome 1997, p.183). Additionally, we use systematic linguistic analysis to extend our ethnography into smaller and more focused spaces, drawing analytic attention to fine detail and shedding light on small (but consequential) aspects of social practice. Specifically, with regard to the focal episodes we examined for this article, we engaged in detailed micro- and multi-modal analyses. Micro-analysis involved moving slowly through the transcript and video-recording, analysing the interaction turn-by-turn, asking at each moment, e.g., “What is the speaker doing?” “Why

that, now?” “What else might have been done here but wasn’t?” “What next?” (Rampton, 2006; ten Have 1999). By replaying and reanalysing the video without audio, we also focused on nonverbal communicative resources such as seating arrangements, body postures, gesture and gaze in such a way as to bring into view those pupils whose participation in the lesson was less vocal (and were thus relatively absent from the transcript) (Bezemer and Jewitt 2010). This micro- and multimodal analysis enabled us to attend to the moment-to-moment unfolding of identity in interaction. At the same time, we also drew upon our ethnographic knowledge of events outside of the immediate speaking context, taking into account that speakers may be drawing upon past actions and experiences as well as reacting to preceding talk (Gumperz 1999, p. 461). We used ethnographic fieldnotes and other recordings to check the relevance of our analyses for the culture and practices in each teacher’s classroom and in the school as a whole, as captured in the rest of our data set.

Dialogue, Ability and Identity at Abbeyford Primary

We discussed principles of dialogic pedagogy with the teachers at Abbeyford Primary, while also explaining that we believe that the translation and adaptation of these ideas into classroom practice will and should differ depending on the particular context of their enactment. While the participating teachers all espoused a commitment to dialogic pedagogy in theory, many pushed back on concrete proposals for how to make their practice more dialogic. Most suggested that only some children – the high achievers – were capable of participating effectively in classroom dialogue. For example, the following comments were recorded in interviews and professional development workshops:

“You just know that you’ve got to have lower expectations for those children, which is not a good thing, because you should always expect the most, but you plan your lessons, you do your lessons, and then, you know, you simple it down for them. (Ms Cane, Interview, 5th December 2008)

“Well, it depends on the ability of the children. You’ve got two children who are quite bright and articulate, but you’ve got a lot of the class that are not. And asking them to take over, you wouldn’t get the same sort of dialogic [teaching and learning] going on.” (Ms Anderton, PD workshop, 23 February 2009)

“The conversation skills that [the low ability pupils] need are just so far out of their rein.” (Ms Lightfoot, PD workshop, 23 February 2009)

“If this was all about long-jumping, there’d be some kids who would be good at long-jumping and other kids who’d be useless. I mean, it’s just, you know, distribution curve, isn’t it? [...] Whatever you do, some people will be no good at long-jumping. I’m not saying that you don’t try, but, for however long you do it, there’ll be some people who just won’t be able to. (Mr Johnson, Headteacher, PD workshop, 23 February 2009)

“I think they’re all capable. I think there are some that are obviously, you know, low achievers, and I wouldn’t expect certain things from them – not that I tell them that – because I try to keep my expectations realistic” (Ms Alexander, Interview, 3rd June 2009)

These comments – and the discussions from which they are taken – speak to the conflicting ideologies shaping these teachers’ work. On the one hand, the school was committed to developing dialogic pedagogy, with its emphasis on inclusion, voice, reciprocity and participation. On the other hand, the teachers’ comments echo a widespread understanding of pupil ability as fixed and/or context-independent, and the idea that “low ability” pupils lack the linguistic and cognitive resources to participate in and benefit from cognitively challenging, dialogic teaching and learning.

The view that ability is an inherent, fixed, context-independent attribute has deep intellectual roots (e.g. Gould, 1981), and is institutionalised in the English education system

through the testing regime, target-setting, and exhortations for teachers to differentiate their instruction according to ability levels (e.g. DfEE 1998, p96; DfES 2003, p39). It has at least three important ramifications within classrooms. First, as documented above, perceptions of children’s ability may influence teachers’ expectations and communicative practices. Second, pupils who internalise their ability assessment, and come to think of ability as fixed rather than malleable, are less likely to persevere with tasks they believe are beyond their reach (Dweck & Leggett 1988). Finally, a competitive culture emerges among pupils, who are well aware of the ability hierarchy and the educational and social consequences associated with their relative ranking in it (Reay 2006a). This culture was evident in pupil discourse at Abbeyford Primary. For example, during a debate on whether or not secondary schools should be streamed by ability, a Year 6 pupil (who was *for* streaming) explained the futility of integration with a view that he expressed with certainty, as if to suggest that it was self-evident: “If they ain’t clever, they ain’t clever” (see also Reay, 2006b, p. 300).

“Say you- in your SATs [Standardised Assessment Tasks], and in your whole life, you were like doing level threes and everything, you’re not going to make them a good job because you’re not- they’re not capable. If they’re not capable you can’t just say, oh sorry I feel sorry for them oh sorry we’ll give you the job just because we feel sorry for you, and they’ll do- they’ll do the job wrong. You’ll get someone who’s clever, done their work, and give them a good job, and the other people, if they ain’t clever then they ain’t clever. (Aaron, lesson in Ms Alexander’s class, 23rd February 2009)

The competitive nature of classroom life that is evidenced in this quotation (and elsewhere) has been criticised as detrimental to pupil motivation, self-esteem, willingness to participate in class, and the development of classroom solidarity (e.g. Black & Varley 2008; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Kohn, 1986; Reay 2006b; Varenne & McDermott, 1998).

We align with researchers who criticise the idea that ability is context-independent and associated classroom practices. In this line of research, “ability” is a product of an individual’s interaction with their environment, and intelligence is multi-faceted and dynamic (e.g. Davies & Hunt 1994; Gardner, 1983; McDermott & Gospodinoff 1979; McDermott & Raley 2008; Mehan, 1996). During our intervention at Abbeyford Primary we used such arguments to challenge teachers’ views about ability. In later reflection workshops, we introduced video clips that showed so called “low ability” pupils contributing productively to classroom discourse. In our discussion of these clips we sought to advance the idea that pupil abilities and identities are co-constructed in interaction, and thus vary from context to context. The teachers mostly resisted our position, however. For example, the following interaction took place on 23rd February 2009 after one of the researchers drew attention to a positive contribution from Phillip, a “special needs” pupil:

- 1 Mrs Anderton: Phillip isn't actually a good example
 2 because he likes to act
 3 but a lot of our special needs children -
 4 Mr Johnson: Wendy Lacey and Caron
 5 Mrs Anderton: don't have-
 6 they don't want to-
 7 they hide in class
 8 Ms Cane: Rebecca would
 9 I can't get anything out of her
 10 she just sits there and no matter how hard I try
 11 and ply her with all these questions
 12 she really just
 13 I don't think she has the capacity to make an opinion

In this case, Phillip becomes the exception that proves the rule: the teachers argue that “special needs” children *in general* cannot participate productively in classroom discussion

and do not have “the capacity to make an opinion”, regardless of the teachers’ actions. Moreover, Phillip gives only the appearance of such participation because he “likes to act”. Our attempts to generate discussion around the particular context that may have facilitated Phillip’s participation were unsuccessful.

The teachers at Abbeyford Primary did not all share the same views about ability – there were differences in the extent to which ability was conceived as innate or environmental, fixed or malleable – but our discussions with them repeatedly returned to the idea that there were certain “low ability” pupils who were simply not capable of participating productively in dialogue. We contend that it was difficult to change this view because it is related to categories and ideas that have developed historically and are deeply entrenched. In Wortham’s (2004, 2006) terms, the socio-historical category of “unintelligent” or “slow” has developed over the past hundred years in psychology, assessment, and educational theory and practice. This socio-historical model was adapted and locally contextualised in Abbeyford Primary to produce local models such as “low achiever” and “linguistically deprived” child (see also Luke 1986), as evidenced in comments made in teacher workshops and interviews, including those quoted above. Further thematic analysis of interviews, planning meetings and workshops revealed that another socio-historical category, social class, influenced these local models. While the teachers did not talk explicitly about class, they often appealed to aspects of their pupils’ social background as an explanation for their lack of achievement, and especially, for poor linguistic skills (see also Larson, 2003, p. 92). The Deputy Head Teacher’s views on this were consistent across the period of fieldwork, as the following quotations demonstrate:

“We have some children who have such limited language skills, that trying to get something from them is so difficult. And, to be fair, in a lesson, you’re kind of trying to draw out an answer, you keep on with one child but you lose the rest of the

class, so, I think that’s a reservation, because you do have some children- I mean, obviously, nothing goes on at home, at all, and they really do struggle.” (Ms Anderton, 5th December 2008)

“The children come in with a very low baseline in this area, with the language skills. I mean, they’ve got other issues. You’ve got children coming into the infants with nappies [diapers] on and things [...] And they may just like sitting in front of the television, not have the kind of talk going on. You notice that in their story writing, the language is very limited, so, they don’t have the kind of richness of vocabulary and extended language that you can get in other kinds of areas. Not all children, I’ll say that, but we have, kind of, a vast proportion of our children come in, and their English is quite poor.” (Ms Anderton, 3rd June 2009).

In these comments, Mrs Anderton highlights limited linguistic skills as an impediment to dialogue. For her, these language problems arise as a result of children’s social background in which a “language gap” (Avineri & Johnson, 2016) opens up between pupils who experience lots of talk at home and those for whom “obviously, nothing goes on at home, at all”. In the second quotation, limited linguistic skills appear alongside other examples of poor parenting or neglect, such as children being in nappies [diapers] when starting school at age four (thus having missed out on a crucial stage of development) or being left to sit in front of the television (rather than receiving more productive forms of stimulation). In England, such practices are stereotypically associated with low socio-economic class. We should stress that we did not observe any overt class bias in the classrooms at Abbeyford Primary, but views about pupils’ ability did often overlap with perceptions of their social background, a relationship that Luke (1986) argues can be found throughout the history of schooling (see e.g. Larson, 2003; Rist, 1970; Reay, 2006b; Sharp, Green & Lewis, 1975).

Socio-historical models of class and ability were “resources” that teachers and pupils drew upon to build locally inflected models of identity (Wortham 2006, pp. 10), such as “low achiever”. In the next section we consider how local models of identity were applied to three individuals – Hugh, Hayden and Mark – in specific moments of identification.

Engaging “Low Ability” Pupils in Dialogue: Three Case Studies

In what follows we present one detailed ethnographic case study and two contrastive cases to explore how teachers manage the multiple demands of dialogic pedagogy in interactions with “low ability” pupils, with varying implications for pupil identities.

Differentiated Instruction (1): “Easy” Questions for “Low Ability” Pupils

In our first case, we track the emerging identity of Hugh as he participates (or not) in interactions in Mr Robbins’ Year 5 classroom. We observed and video recorded eleven lessons in this class. Hugh appeared by name in fieldnotes documenting five of these lessons – a relatively high proportion given that there were 30 pupils in the class – and often prompted additional commentary (e.g. “Hugh rarely speaks in class, and never by choice”, Fieldnotes 3rd April 2009). It was clear from our observations and informal discussions with Mr Robbins that he was keen to ensure that all pupils participated in class discussion, but his focus on inclusivity often came into conflict with other aspects of dialogic pedagogy, such as cognitive challenge and the fostering of respectful relationships. This becomes clear in our analyses of his interactions with Hugh, who takes on the identities of “non-participant” and “low ability pupil” across the school year. We present here our analysis and commentary on all of the events captured in our data in which either explicit statements or implicit interactional cues index Hugh’s ability (Wortham, 2006, p.37).

During our second visit to Mr Robbins class, on 17th December 2008, there was already evidence to suggest that the teacher rated Hugh’s ability as below average. Pupils had been asked to work in pairs to write a short recount about their swimming lessons. At the end of

the lesson the children either volunteered or were invited to read out their work. The first author made the following comment about this activity in her field notes:

Mr Robbins asks Mary and Hugh to read out their work, but introduces this pair to the class by explaining that “Mary and Hugh sometimes forget about full stops [periods],” so they weren’t thinking about long sentences (like the other pupils who had been asked to construct compound and complex sentences), they were “just thinking about getting one idea in one sentence.” In contrast, when the next pupil, Megan, volunteers to read her work, Mr Robbins tells the class that they should listen out for “some really good description.”

In this moment, Mr Robbins explicitly differentiates between Mary and Hugh on the one hand, and Megan and the rest of her classmates on the other, who were completing a task much more complicated than simply “getting one idea in one sentence”, and in Megan’s case, had done so with some success. Mary and Hugh are thus positioned as having a different level of competence to Megan and are identified as being at the lower end of the class ability hierarchy. Neither Mary nor Hugh appeared embarrassed or otherwise affected by this. It is unlikely that such differences in status went unnoticed by their peers, however; and in fact there is specific evidence for this in later lessons. Extracts 1 and 2 are taken from a lesson on story writing recorded on 12th January 2009. The children had written timed stories earlier in the week, and in this lesson, they are asked to consider sample stories from two pupils in the class, Justine and Carl. Prior to Extract 1, Mr Robbins had projected Justine’s story onto the whiteboard and drew attention to the end of the story, asking the pupils to talk in small groups about why this is a good paragraph. Mr Robbins then collects responses from the class, and as part of this interaction, he calls upon Hugh.

Extract 1

1 Mr Robbins: er Hugh what do you think-

2 what other things are good about these three lines

3 Asha: *((passes Hugh the piece of paper the group have been*
working on))

4 Kiera: *((whispers something to Hugh))*

5 Hugh: how- she described (how the tree fall down)

6 Asha: *[((speaks directly to Hugh, appears to be disputing his*
answer))

7 Mr Robbins: *[((looks back at the story on the white board))*

8 *(xxxxxxx okay)*

9 Hugh: [well that's what she said *((pointing at Kiera but*
addressing Asha, sounds frustrated))

10 Asha: *[((takes the sheet of paper the group have been working on*
then raises her hand and addresses Mr Robbins))

11 can I say it then

12 (1)

13 well we liked it [because-

14 Hugh: *[((smacks pencil down onto the table))*

15 Asha: *((turns to looks at Hugh and gives disapproving look))*

16 Hugh *(leans forward))*

17 Asha: *((still facing Hugh, points to the paper))*

18 *((turns quickly to face the teacher))*

19 we liked it because erm

20 she used a connective at the start [a:nd

21 Mr Robbins: [yeah

22 Asha: she described what part of the car

23 like

24 was stuck under the tree

Mr Robbins begins with an open question to Hugh on line 1, but then makes it more specific on line 2, narrowing the line of enquiry. Group members Asha and Kiera make attempts to

help Hugh by passing him the group’s notes and whispering in his ear (lines 3-4). In doing so, they appear to accept collective responsibility for responding to Mr Robbins question, but at the same time, they also potentially position Hugh as lacking the competence or authority (or both) to speak on behalf of the group. The latter interpretation is reinforced when Asha disputes Hugh’s answer on line 6 and makes a bid to represent the group herself (line 11), offering her own response on lines 13 and 19-24 (and thus making clear that Hugh’s response was in need of repair). Hugh appears to be frustrated by the interaction, attributing the “incorrect” answer he gave to Kiera (line 9) and showing signs of irritation during Asha’s turn (line 14). The disagreements within the group demonstrate both a lack of cooperation (lines 6, 10-18) and a lack of personal accountability (lines 9), indicating a learning environment in which pupils are not “entitled, expected, and obligated” to treat each other with respect and to take responsibility for contributing to each others’ understanding (Greeno 2002).

Twelve minutes later Mr Robbins reads out Carl’s story, which consists mainly of dialogue between three characters, and projects it onto the white board. He asks the class to work in their groups to think of words that might be used to describe the characters, based on their speech. Extract 2 begins after five minutes of group work.

Extract 2

1 Mr Robbins: we were talking about Carl’s story being mainly dialogue
 2 mainly speech
 3 your task was to try and think of descriptive words
 4 for the characters
 5 that you can work out from (.) the speech in the story
 6 so what have we come up with
 7 [what bits of description (.) can you tell us
 8 [(Asha and Whitney, who are on opposite sides of the

room, raise their hands))

9 Mr Robbins: how would you describe the characters

10 I'm amazed only one hand is up *((pointing at Asha))*

11 *((two more girls visible to the camera raise their hands))*

12 Asha: *((lifts Hugh's arm))*

13 three hands

14 Hugh: *((immediately drops arm, smiles))*

15 Mr Robbins: *((laughs))*

16 Asha: two

17 Mr Robbins: right we'll start with Penny

18 Penny: *((gives a 10 second response which isn't visible or
audible to the camera))*

19 Mr Robbins: okay

20 now you've got all of that

21 just from what he says

22 is that right

23 *(.) ((appears to have been a positive response from Penny,
but not visible))*

24 just from the words that were spoken

25 *((turns to face opposite side of class))*

26 erm Hugh your hand was up

27 Hugh: (no it wasn't)

28 Asha: *((laughs))*

29 Mr Robbins: no *((questioning intonation))*

30 okay Justine

When Mr Robbins expresses disappointment with the number of pupils willing to participate (line 10), Asha (who had already signalled her own willingness to speak) forcibly raises Hugh's arm. The action appears to have been received in jest – Hugh smiles (line 14) and Mr Robbins laughs (line 15) – but in addition to injecting humour, Asha's action and the

resulting laughter reinforce a recurring identification of Hugh as being a reluctant participant or having nothing valuable to say. On line 26 Mr Robbins recasts the action as a genuine bid for participation by Hugh, perhaps capitalising on the humour as an alternative strategy to encourage Hugh to participate. Hugh declines to answer, however, thus inhabiting the identity of reluctant participant that Asha and others have ascribed to him. Mr Robbins moves swiftly on to Justine, signalling to Hugh and to the rest of the class that he accepts Hugh's identity as non-participant.

Extract 3 is from a lesson on *Charlotte's Web*, which took place on 4th March 2009. The majority of the lesson is spent reading the final chapter of the book. Mr Robbins interrupts the reading periodically to raise questions and generate discussion. For example, after reading that Charlotte's web had been blown away by a warm wind, he asks the pupils whether they see this as a happy or sad sign. Extract 3 begins after Mr Robbins has already elicited a number of responses.

Extract 3

- 1 Mr Robbins: I used the words happy and sad
2 that's probably two very poor adjectives
3 can anyone think of maybe a different word
4 that describes (.) like your emotions
5 when Charlotte's web's gone
6 but you know spring's just around the corner
7 or just started and the eggs are (ready)
8 (3)
9 what do you think Hugh
10 would you use happy or sad
11 or can you think of a better word
12 that might mean a bit of both
13 Hugh: erm

14 (6)

15 Mr Robbins: I tell you what

16 you have a think about a word that describes how you feel

17 knowing that Charlotte’s eggs are going to hatch

18 but her web’s gone

and I’ll come back to you in a moment

Hugh does not answer the question posed by the teacher on lines 9 to 12. He may be genuinely confused as to how a word can be both happy *and* sad. Or he may be unwilling to hazard a guess lest he should get it wrong. After all, Mr Robbins has indicated that he is thinking of one word in particular, a word that means both “happy” and “sad” (lines 10-12). This is confirmed in the minutes following Extract 3 when several pupils offer words (such as “devastated” and “crushed”) that do not satisfy Mr Robbins, signalled by the lack of feedback they receive. At this point, Mr Robbins tells the class “I thought maybe the word ‘hopeful’ might be an idea”. Presumably this is the word he had set out to elicit from the outset (though it is not entirely clear how the word “hopeful” can communicate both happiness and sadness).

After six seconds of wait time (line 14), Mr Robbins tells Hugh to have a think and he will come back to him. He does return to Hugh a couple of minutes later, but Hugh declines to answer once again, and again, Mr Robbins moves swiftly on (as he did in Extract 2). Given the public nature of these interactions and the fact that there are consequences for getting the answer wrong (determined not only by the teacher but by peers too, as seen in Extract 1 and elsewhere), it seems sensible for pupils like Hugh to adopt the strategy of non-response (see also McDermott 1993). If teachers accept this strategy by moving quickly onto another pupil, however, they may (inadvertently) reinforce this behaviour (Good & Nichols, 2001, p. 121) and reify identities such as “low ability” and “non-participant”.

The final extract is from a lesson on the narrative poem, *The Highwayman*, which

took place in Mr Robbins class on 17th June 2009. In this lesson, the class work on the first stanza of the poem, defining the meaning of new words and considering the use of metaphor. In the minutes leading up to Extract 4, the pupils have highlighted words that they do not understand and have found and discussed dictionary definitions, including for the word “torrent”.

Extract 4

- 1 Mr Robbins: do we think (1) *((walking to the whiteboard))*
- 2 'the wind was a torrent of darkness' *((reading from the poem))*
- 3 bearing in mind torrent means
- 4 something that is fast flowing
- 5 do we think that it's very windy
- 6 or just a gentle little breeze
- 7 hands up if you think very windy
- 8 *((most pupils, including Hugh, raise their hands))*
- 9 Mr Robbins: okay (1)
- 10 Hugh which word do you think
- 11 means it's very windy
- 12 which word in this bit
- 13 'the wind was a torrent of darkness'
- 14 tells you that it's very windy
- 15 (6)
- 16 Hugh: *((shrugs shoulders))*
- 17 Mr Robbins: you're not sure
- 18 Ashah: *((raises hand))*
- 19 Mr Robbins: what do you think
- 20 Ashah: erm
- 21 torrent
- 22 Mr Robbins: the word torrent

23

okay

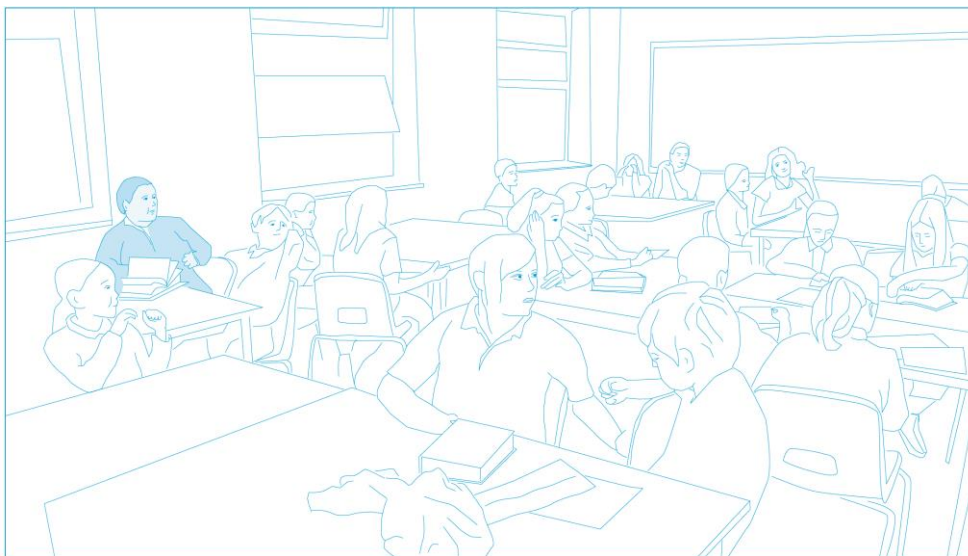
24

so we think it's very windy

The extract begins with Mr Robbins addressing the whole class in order to check their understanding of the word “torrent” in relation to the poem’s metaphor, “the wind was a torrent of darkness”. He asks for a show of hands in favour of “very windy”. Most pupils raise their hands, including Hugh who is amongst one of the first to signal agreement. Mr Robbins appears satisfied with the response. He then pauses before asking another question, this time directed specifically at Hugh (on lines 10 to 14). He asks Hugh which word in the first line of the poem indicates “it’s very windy”? This is a closed question: the teacher has one correct answer in mind (as in Extract 3). Moreover, given the activity that had occurred prior to this interaction (in which one pupil read out the definition of “torrent” from a dictionary), given Mr Robbins’ utterance on lines 3 to 4 (in which he reminds pupils again that “torrent” means “something that is fast flowing”), and given the pupils’ show-of-hands response on line 8, the correct answer appears to be obvious. We might wonder then why the teacher asks this question, particularly in light of the fact that such “closed”, “test” (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur & Prendergast 1997), or “known-information” (Mehan 1979) questions have been shown to stifle productive dialogue in the classroom. A likely explanation is that Mr Robbins wants to involve Hugh in the class discussion in line with dialogic expectations for inclusion, but based on past experiences (which have reinforced Hugh’s identity as a “low ability” pupil) fears the prospect of either no response or an incorrect response (note that his pause on line 9 indicates some hesitancy). To give Hugh the best possible chance of success, he therefore asks a cognitively undemanding question, one that requires a single word response and demands only that Hugh reanimate information that has already been established in the preceding interaction. Hugh does not answer, however. He pauses for 6 seconds before shrugging his shoulders to indicate that he does not know, or rather is “not

sure” (this being how Mr Robbins chooses to interpret the shrug, perhaps to save Hugh’s face). In summary, the teacher poses to Hugh (whom he perceives to be low ability) an easy, known-information question, in order to give him the chance to participate. When Hugh fails to answer, the teacher moves on quickly, in order to save Hugh’s face, but in doing so, he inadvertently positions Hugh as lacking the competence to move beyond recall questions, and indicates that not everyone in this classroom is to be held accountable for developing a shared understanding of the focal text (Greeno 2002).

Figure 1. “Line drawing of scene at line 15 (Hugh is shaded)”



During the lengthy pause on line 15, the other pupils do not look at Hugh or otherwise acknowledge the situation (see Figure 1). Even those pupils who were previously attending to the discussion look away from Hugh, some busying themselves with desktop props (e.g. dictionary, ruler, pencil case), others staring at an alternative focal point (e.g. the teacher, the whiteboard). Ashah glances across just in time to witness Hugh’s shrug and then seizes upon the opportunity to answer the question herself. There are at least two possibilities as to why the pupils do not look at Hugh. The first is that they already know the answer to the question and thus are not particularly interested in his response, though even in this situation we might expect their body language to follow the verbal interaction; after all, pupils are generally

expected to demonstrate ongoing attention to class discussion and to attend to each other's contributions. A second possibility is that the pupils do not expect Hugh to give an answer, or at least not the “correct” answer. This interpretation seems most plausible given Wortham's (2006, p.18) finding that robust local models, expectations and presuppositions that develop across a school year come to constrain how teachers and pupils identify and behave towards each other. During our first visit to Mr Robbins' classroom on 17th December 2008, Hugh was highlighted by the teacher as being at the lower end of the class ability hierarchy. In January 2009, he responded when invited to contribute by Mr Robbins, but showed signs of frustration when he wasn't able to provide the “correct” response (Extract 1). In March 2009, he declined to participate verbally (Extract 3), and in June 2009, his participation was further reduced to a passive shrug of the shoulders (Extract 4), demonstrating the vicious cycle described by Black (2004, pp. 49-50) (outlined above). All available evidence indicates that Hugh's identity as “low ability” had solidified across a chain of events in which he was consistently positioned by others as low ability and a non-participant and came to inhabit this identity himself (Wortham, 2006, pp. 18, 46-48). There is further evidence to suggest that, while resigned to it, Hugh became unhappy about his position in this classroom. The actions of Hugh and his classmates in Extract 5 must be interpreted against this background.

Differentiated Instruction (2): Pupil Support for their “Low Ability” Peer

Our first contrastive case is taken from a Year 6 SATs (Standardised Assessment Tasks) revision lesson on reading comprehension in Ms Alexander's class, recorded on 27th April 2009. We visited her classroom twelve times across the course of the school year. The focal pupil here is Hayden, whose literacy target was similar to Hugh's, placing him in the bottom 10% of his class in terms of literacy ability. Our field notes make three references to Hayden, but in only one of these was he involved in an extended interaction. It could be that

Ms Alexander rarely attempted to include Hayden in substantive class discussion and that this was another way in which he was positioned as “low ability”. We lack a sufficiently detailed data set to confirm or reject this interpretation, and focus instead on the extended interaction we recorded, which is represented in Extract 5. Our analysis of this extract highlights how several local models of identity can become available in relation to one pupil. Hayden struggles in his interaction with the teacher, but some of his peers ensure that he does not merely take on the identity of a low achieving pupil: Daren by identifying him as knowledgeable, and Ash by offering him an alternative, socially acceptable non-participant identity.

At the beginning of the lesson, the pupils were given time to work individually to read and annotate a poem, *Owl* by Pie Corbett. At the end of this task, Ms Alexander, asks the pupils for their first impressions of the poem. One pupil says that she didn’t like the poem because she couldn’t understand it. The teacher probes (“what did you find difficult to understand”) and, in the ensuing discussion, tries to facilitate pupil understanding. Extract 5 begins towards the end of this discussion.

Extract 5:

- 1 Ms Alexander: erm guys how about the end
- 2 how about the end
- 3 [owl flew who who who who
- 4 Daren: [owl flew who who
- 5 Ms Alexander: what might that mean
- 6 [that- that’s a technique
- 7 Charlotte: [(xxxxxxx) ((raises arm at the same time as speaking))
- 8 Ms Alexander: a very clever technique
- 9 Aaron: [I know I know I know ((raises arm while speaking))
- 10 Charlotte: [(puts arm down and pats the desk with her hands))
- 11 Ms Alexander: a very clever technique

12 [used

13 Charlotte: [*((puts arm in the air and waves it around, also*
stamping her feet))

14 Aaron: [because it (xxx)

15 I know

16 Ms Alexander: Hayden do you have any idea

17 *((several pupils turn to face Hayden))*

18 Ms Alexander: what that might mean

19 in any way

20 [anything

21 Aaron: [miss I know

22 Ms Alexander: anything basic

23 shshsh *((to Aaron))*

24 Aaron: because it (don't)

25 Ms Alexander: you like owls

26 [you're into animals

27 Charlotte: [*((waving her raised arm energetically))*

28 Hayden (yeah)

29 Ms Alexander: so what might it mean

30 owl flew [who who who

31 Ash: [*(in an animal world) ((singing, looks up and*
turns to Hayden))

32 Aaron: because it (don't tell you xxxx)

33 Hayden: [*((smiles at Ash))*

34 Ms Alexander: [oh are you Hayden *((directed at Aaron))*

35 Ash: *((turns again to sing at Hayden))*

36 Ms Alexander: give Hayden a chance

37 Hayden *((puts head down))*

38 Ash: it wasn't me *((looks at Hayden and raises his*
eyebrows in conspiratorial manner))

39 Hayden & Ash: *((laughing))*

40 Ms Alexander: nothing

41 you have no idea

42 Hayden: no

43 Aaron: I do

44 Ash: *((turns around and glances briefly at Hayden))*

45 Ms Alexander: Daren you said something earlier [okay

46 Charlotte: *[((puts arm down))*

47 Ms Alexander: you said something

48 what did you say about that last line

49 Ash: *((looking at the camera))* I'm scared *((looks at
Hayden))*

50 Daren: noise the owl's making

51 Ms Alexander: good

52 [it's like

53 Ash: *[((looks at Hayden, laughs and pulls a funny face))*

54 Hayden: *[((Hayden smiles at Ash))*

55 Ms Alexander: doesn't it sound like-

56 when you listen to it or

57 when you read it

58 doesn't it sound like (.) the noise an owl makes

59 Hayden: (no)

60 Daren: Hayden *((turns to face Hayden))*

61 [what [does it sound like

62 Ms Alexander: [the who who who

63 Ash: [it says who who who who who who who *((directed to
Hayden))*

64 Hayden: (xxxxxxxxxx)

65 Daren: Hayden says no (.) [Hayden says no

66 Ash: [(xxxxxxxx the owl) *((directed to*

Hayden)

67 Daren: Hay[den says no
 68 Ms Alexander: [now it does because you've got twit twoo alright
 69 that's how-
 70 [you would say that's how an owl sounds
 71 Ash: [twit (.) twoo not twit who ((directed to Hayden))

On lines 1-3, Ms Alexander addresses a question to the whole class using the informal vocative “guys” (the informality designed perhaps to create a more relaxed environment in which pupils might offer their initial thoughts). In elaborating her question, she points out to the class that the poet has used “a very clever technique” (line 8, repeated line 11). Aaron indicates that he knows what this technique is on lines 9 and 14-15, and Charlotte signals that she too is keen to answer by raising her hand, waving it round and stamping her feet. Rather than call on either Aaron or Charlotte, however, Ms Alexander redirects her original question to Hayden (though he did not raise his hand). In line with prevailing views about inclusivity, teachers generally encourage all pupils to participate in class discussions rather than call only on the few who are consistently keen to respond (such as Aaron and Charlotte), so Ms Alexander’s utterance on line 16 does not stand out as particularly unusual (though we might ask why at this particular moment Ms Alexander opts to ignore Aaron and Charlotte when in other situations she accepts their bids). By structuring the interaction in this way, Hayden is potentially identified as someone who is reluctant to participate in class discussion.

On line 16, Ms Alexander’s “any idea” suggests that the answer she is looking for is not difficult and that she would be happy for Hayden to take a guess. “Any idea” then becomes “any way” (line 19), then “anything” (line 20), and finally, “anything basic” (line 22). There is mounting evidence, then, that Ms Alexander identifies Hayden not just as a reluctant participant but also as a pupil whose ability is at a “basic” level. Like Hugh in

Extracts 2, 3 and 4, Hayden is unresponsive, but Ms Alexander stays with him, drawing upon her knowledge of Hayden’s outside interests – that he has a pet owl – to personalise the question and help Hayden access the information relevant to answering it. This ethnographic detail helps to clarify why Ms. Alexander had not accepted the bids from Aaron and Charlotte in this instance (and methodologically is an example of ethnographic fieldwork “opening up” language-focused analysis (Rampton et al., 2004, p4)). By personalising the subject matter, Ms Alexander is potentially positioning Hayden as having the authority of an expert; at the very least, she indicates that he has interest in and extra-curricular knowledge of the topic that others (including herself) do not. She gives him the space to formulate his answer by quieting other pupils (on lines 34 and 36), and thus signals that this interaction is not about getting quickly to the right answer; it’s about creating space for a different pupil’s voice to be heard. Hayden still does not answer, however, and the possibilities inherent in “any” and “anything” (lines 16 to 22) become “nothing” (line 40) and “no” (lines 41, 42). Like Hugh (in Extract 4), Hayden emerges from this interaction with the teacher as a pupil who is unable to answer a seemingly simple question. However, unlike in the preceding case of Hugh, the other pupils intervene to position Hayden differently.

When Ms Alexander suggests that “who who who” sounds like a noise an owl makes (line 58), Daren makes an appeal to Hayden’s superior knowledge of owls (lines 60-61). He acts as “animator” (Goffman, 1981) of Hayden’s voice, providing evidence that pupils in this classroom attend to each other’s contributions, rather than relying solely on the teacher (Greeno, 2002, p3). Daren then uses Hayden’s knowledge to challenge Ms Alexander (lines 65, 67), indicating a learning environment in which it is appropriate for pupils to question interpretations offered by other members of the classroom community, including the teacher (Greeno, 2002, p 3). Daren positions Hayden as a knowledgeable animal enthusiast rather than a low ability pupil and draws his voice back into the discussion (though Hayden is still

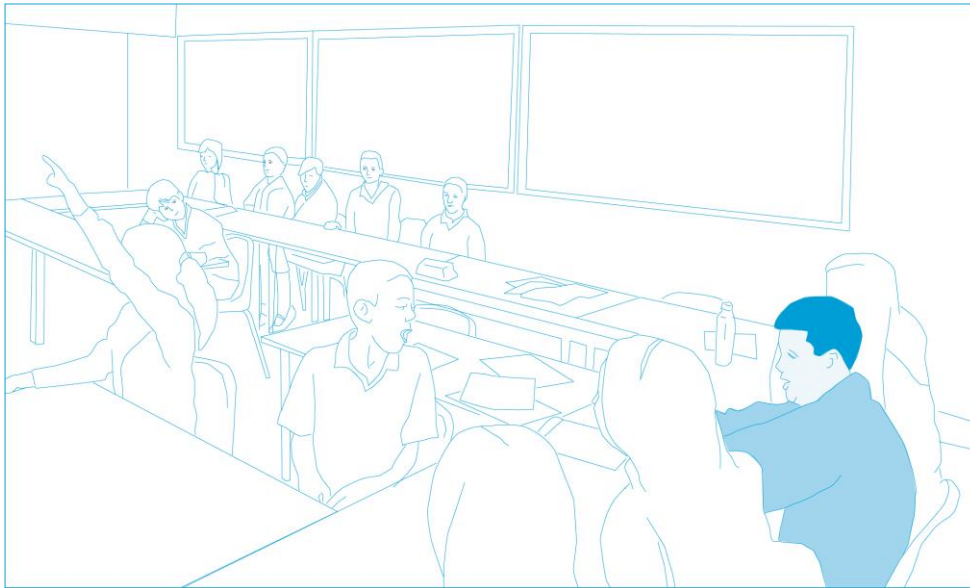
positioned interactionally as a weak pupil who needs others’ support to participate). The disagreement between Daren and Ms Alexander (arguably facilitated by Hayden) might have led to a dialogic exchange in which the pupils contested alternative interpretations of this line of the poem, the effectiveness of the literary technique being used by the poet, and ultimately, the authoritative status of different sources of knowledge (e.g. text versus personal experience). That this does not happen is likely due (at least in part) to pressures related to the upcoming SATs tests (see Segal, Snell & Lefstein 2016 for a more detailed discussion of this teacher’s experiences of the tensions between dialogic teaching and high-stakes testing). In the context of a SATs revision lesson, the SATs answers booklet becomes the ultimate source of authority. Ms Alexander shuts down dissenting voices in order to guide pupils towards the interpretation authorized by this booklet.

Ash, who is sitting next to Hayden, further complicates Hayden’s identification as “low ability”. Throughout the lesson, Ash works hard to demonstrate his disinterest in the discussion by singing, making side comments to the pupils sitting around him, and pulling faces at the camera. His oppositional behaviour may signal his desire to construct a “cool” anti-school identity (Myhill, 2002, p. 345). This was Ms. Alexander’s perception of him. She told us that he was one of the more “dominant” individuals in the class but that there were others who similarly struggled with their behaviour:

“I would say 40% of my class can be difficult, and, you know, they struggle with behaving well, because I think they see it as, ‘if I behave well, I’m going to be classed as a geek, I’m going to be classed as a nerd,’ you know.” (Interview, 5th December 2008)

Based on other observations in this classroom, we know that Ash managed to maintain this persona of misbehaving boy while also paying attention to the lesson. In an analysis of a much longer segment of the lesson from which Extract 5 is taken, we see Ash’s body

movements, responses and gaze following the flow of the lesson, even while he overtly misbehaves, a kind of pseudo-nonparticipation (see Lefstein & Snell, 2014, pp. 146-7). As a result, Ash is able to do well at school without appearing as “a nerd”. Of most relevance to this article is the influence his behaviour has on other pupils, specifically Hayden. When Ms Alexander asks Hayden “so what might it mean, owl flew who who who?” (lines 29-30), Ash moves around to face Hayden and sings to him (see Figure 2). The teacher turns her attention away from Hayden momentarily in order to reprimand Aaron, who is sitting on the other side of the room (line 34), at which point Hayden responds to Ash with a half laugh and a smile. When the teacher’s attention turns back to him, Hayden puts his head down (line 37), but Ash gets Hayden’s interest again by turning to him and saying “it wasn’t me” while raising his eyebrows in a conspiratorial fashion (line 38). Both boys now laugh together, perhaps to signal their shared stance against the teacher’s authority. It is at this point that Ms Alexander gives Hayden one last chance to answer the question (“nothing, you have no idea?”, lines 40-41), and Hayden responds with a firm “no” (line 42). Ms. Alexander likely interprets Hayden’s response in relation to the local identity models “low ability pupil” and/or “uncooperative pupil”. Another local model of identity – “resistant male pupil” – has also been made salient by signs in the interaction that Ms Alexander has missed. Hayden appears uncooperative, but there exists the possibility that he does so, at least in part, to identify with Ash and collaborate in projecting a rebellious masculine identity (Myhill, 2002, p. 345).

Figure 2. “Line drawing of scene at line 30 (Hayden is shaded)”

Non-differentiated Instruction: Positioning Pupils as Competent Members of the Classroom Community

The final case comes from Ms. Leigh’s Year 5 classroom. We recorded her classroom 13 times during the study. The focal pupil here is Mark, whose target for literacy, 2A, places him, like Hugh and Hayden, towards the bottom of his class ability hierarchy. Extract 6 takes place around 45 minutes into a lesson on *Charlotte’s Web*, which was recorded on 27th January 2009. Pupils had been put into small groups to discuss the themes emerging from the first five chapters of the book. Each group had a specially appointed team captain who had been given a “secret mission” by the teacher. This mission was to make sure that every member of his or her own group spoke at least twice during the group tasks. Ms Leigh told us that team captains were selected on the basis that they often dominated discussion. In this lesson, she wanted these pupils to learn how to listen and allow others to share their thoughts. The learning activity had thus been organised at the outset to position students with competence, authority and accountability, emphasising that the group’s achievement in this task depended on the contributions of *all* of its members, and investing authority in the group leaders to facilitate this (Greeno, 2002, pp13-15).

As Extract 6 begins, the teacher attempts to draw together the groups’ ideas. She had overheard one of the groups talking about suspicion as a theme, and picks up on this idea at the start of the extract, turning to Mark for further explanation. As Ms. Leigh interacts with Mark she positions him as authoritative, competent and accountable to the classroom community. The other pupils follow her lead. They turn to face Mark, signally that they are ready to take his contribution seriously, and follow the ensuing discussion with apparent interest (contrast with Extract 4).

Extract 6

1 Ms Leigh: actually you’ve had a good idea here about (.) erm
 2 what we thought of friends
 3 but you came up with the word suspicion
 4 and suspicion was a theme that kept on appearing in the text
 5 do you want to tell us more Mark
 6 Mark: erm
 7 (1)
 8 so it was like
 9 Templeton yeah
 10 just like wants to get the eggs and then eat them
 11 because it’s like
 12 it’s like this
 13 because- because the-
 14 because Templeton told the goose that erm
 15 that Fern has like the collection of like stuff
 16 yeah
 17 and then
 18 goose said it to Fern
 19 and then Fern like says that ain’t true
 20 and then
 21 Templeton is trying to get the goose attention (xxxx friend)

52 actually can we trust them a hundred percent
 53 even though they’re trying to make friends with other people
 54 and trying to be around other people
 55 can we give them our hundred percent trust
 56 or are they going to do something terrible

Figure 3. “Line drawing of scene at line 6 (Mark is shaded)”



The way Ms Leigh opens this interaction presupposes that the pupils have made good progress with the group task and have hit upon a “good idea” (Greeno, 2002, p. 13). The “you” in lines 1 and 3 is directed at the whole group, but Ms Leigh restricts the scope of her final question on line 5 to Mark. The question (“Do you want to tell us more”) is meant to elicit the group’s ideas about the themes of *Charlotte’s Web*. Ms. Leigh had talked to us informally about this “tell me more” strategy as something she was trying out in order to elicit more detailed pupil responses. With this kind of question, there is no single correct response (as there was with the teachers’ questions in Extracts 3, 4 and 5), and the teacher relinquishes control of the discussion to the pupil. Other pupils turn around to direct their attention to Mark (see Figure 3) and he begins a rather lengthy response – 45 seconds – which stands out against the average length of pupil response in this school of 5 seconds

(based on systematic discourse analysis, documented in Snell & Lefstein 2011). Mark’s response is highly expressive, almost conversational, with lots of hand gestures and discourse markers such as “like” and “so”. This discourse style, together with the content of the utterance, makes Mark’s answer potentially confusing for the listener. Ms Leigh might be forgiven at this point for bringing in another pupil from his group to shed light on the issue. She might have selected Tamara (sitting opposite Mark), for example, whom she perceived as the brightest pupil in the class. But Ms Leigh stays with Mark. Moreover, she draws attention to the unclear relevance of Mark’s response and pushes him to clarify: “So how was that suspicious?” (line 26). In this line of questioning, there is not only a presupposition of pupil competence, but also of accountability – Mark is positioned with responsibility for clarifying his ideas and for contributing to others’ thinking (Greeno, 2002, p. 5). There follows a 10 second pause punctuated only by Mark’s “because” on line 29. During this time, another pupil, Olivia, raises her hand, but Ms. Leigh’s gaze remains fixed on Mark. Silence is not interpreted here as a signal that the pupil is unable or unwilling to contribute to the learning process, but rather that he is making progress and requires some time and support to clarify his thinking (compare Hugh’s silence in Extracts 3 and 4); Mark thus maintains his identity as a competent member of the class (Greeno, 2002, p. 4). Ms Leigh eventually breaks the silence by asking a more specific question, one which draws upon her personal knowledge of Mark: “would you trust a friend who tried to steal your toys...maybe your baby brother?”. The question elicits laughter and would be a safe place to end the interaction (especially as Olivia is still bidding for a turn), but Ms Leigh continues to probe Mark on lines 37 to 39: “okay does that appear somewhere else- because somebody else earlier mentioned another character was suspicious as well?”, and so the interaction continues.

The kind of follow-up probes evidenced in lines 26 and 37-39 were typical of Ms Leigh’s interactional style, and overall, Extract 6 is typical of the discussions we witnessed in

Ms Leigh’s classroom.² Based on our observations and analyses, Ms Leigh does not treat Mark any differently to how she usually treats his higher achieving peers. As a result, we were not aware of his position in the ability hierarchy until we consulted the teacher’s literacy targets. Ms. Leigh provides support to Mark where it is needed (e.g. on lines 31 and 33 after Mark stalls in lines 27-30), but she stays with him, making it clear that his contribution is valued. There were several moments when she could have legitimately extricated herself (and the class) from this interaction, on lines 25 and 36 for example, but she maintains a lengthy interaction with Mark working hard to clarify the theme of suspicion and the two characters most connected with it, and Mark behaves in accordance with the positive communicative role afforded to him (Black, 2004, p. 42).

Discussion and Conclusions

The teachers at Abbeyford Primary were actively involved in an intervention designed to facilitate their enactment of and reflection upon dialogic pedagogy. Each experimented with dialogic ideas and practices in different ways, and with different degrees of success. To a certain extent, we observed in the school the sort of hybrid enactments, in which teachers combine new and existing practices, that have been documented elsewhere (e.g. Cohen, 1990; Lefstein, 2008). The particular reasons for the gaps between intended and enacted practice undoubtedly include many of the challenges reviewed in the beginning of this paper: the pressures of curriculum coverage and high stakes testing (see Segal, Snell & Lefstein, 2016); demands on teacher knowledge and flexibility; epistemological shifts; and teacher and pupil embodied, habitual behaviours. In this article we have uncovered another challenge, which has heretofore not been attended to, namely the tensions between the dialogic imperative that all pupils be encouraged to participate in rich and cognitively challenging classroom discourse and a prevalent ideology according to which pupils have fixed, context-independent

abilities, and only those children who are bright and articulate can participate in and benefit from cognitively challenging, dialogic teaching and learning.

The roots of this ideology extend well beyond Abbeyford Primary, but we have shown that teachers and pupils at the school drew upon this ideology to develop robust locally inflected models of identity, such as “low ability pupil” and “linguistically deprived child”, which were applied to individuals in specific ways (Wortham 2004, 2006). These identity categories circulated in both teacher and pupil discourse throughout the school, though they were more present in some classrooms (such as Mr Robbins’ and Ms Alexander’s) than in others. In Mr Robbins’ classroom, another local model of identity – “non-participant” – developed over the course of the school year to accompany the model of “low ability pupil”. Both of these models were available for specific acts of social identification, and were consistently applied to Hugh, who became a prototypical low ability pupil, one who switches off from work, rarely participates in class, and thus is perceived as beyond dialogue, and beyond help. In this case, the teacher’s strategy of differentiated instruction according to perceived ability had negative consequences for the pupil involved, in line with outcomes reported elsewhere in the research literature (e.g. Black, 2004; Myhill, 2002; Reay, 2006b; Rist 1970).

We found alternative scenarios within the same school setting, however. While the model of “low ability pupil” also circulated in Ms. Alexander’s class, pupils resisted its application to Hayden. They worked to ensure that other, more positive identity categories were available for Hayden in Extract 5. This example illustrates the important role of the peer group in co-constructing pupil identities in the classroom and in ensuring equal participation for all class members, regardless of ability. Daren took Ms Alexander’s lead in appealing to Hayden’s out-of-school knowledge and in doing so made identities such as “knowledgeable animal enthusiast” available for Hayden. It is worth noting that this kind of pupil intervention

and the intellectual authority it embodied would likely not be possible in all classrooms – a particular, dialogic environment had been cultivated in this classroom, in which pupils felt confident enough to speak up in order to challenge received knowledge and pose their own questions. In Mr Robbins’ classroom, authority was vested in the teacher and in institutionally sanctioned texts (such as the dictionary) and pupils were “limited to animating information for which they are not the source” (Greeno, 2002, p3). In contrast, in Ms Alexander’s classroom, there is some evidence to suggest that pupils were given greater authority and accountability for the knowledge they constructed (Greeno, 2002, p5), though there were limits on the extent to which Ms Alexander could pursue pupils’ ideas due to the pressures of standardised testing.

A different kind of environment again emerged in the third case study, where the local model of “low ability pupil” was not publicly invoked or made interactionally relevant. Ms Leigh did not appear to subscribe to the dominant views about ability that circulated at Abbeyford Primary (at least we did not find evidence for this in transcripts of teacher workshops, planning meetings and interviews or in field notes documenting our informal discussions with her). It appears that her views on ability were less clear-cut, and this showed in her instructional practices, which were less clearly differentiated according to perceived ability. As evidenced in Extract 6, Ms Leigh used probes to challenge pupil ideas and test their merit rather than offering ritualistic responses, and as a result she created an atmosphere of mutual respect, which is a critical condition for classroom dialogue and supports identities of pupils as competent and accountable members of the classroom community. The learning environment in Ms Leigh’s class (and to a lesser extent in Ms Alexander’s) was organised in a way that afforded different intellectual identities to those afforded in Mr Robbins’ class (Greeno, 2002, p8).

The three case studies offer us an opportunity to reflect on the relationships between instructional strategies and pupil identity. In his study of teachers’ implementing the *Paidaea* programme, Wortham (2006) showed that learning and identity are inter-woven in classroom activity, but he did not explore how the identity models circulating in the classrooms and school affected teachers’ thinking about instruction. For example, how, if at all, did teachers’ ideas about pupils affect how they enacted (in the case of his study) the *Paidaea* seminar principles? In short, how do ideologies about pupil identity affect teaching practices? Our study suggests that ideologies about pupil identity – in this case related to sociohistorical models of class and intelligence – shape teacher appropriation of instructional philosophies and are thus highly consequential for teaching practice and its improvement.

Likewise, pedagogical philosophies – such as dialogic pedagogy and ability differentiation – are critical for local contextualisation of identity models. As Alexander (2001) argues, pedagogies include discourses about pupils – their abilities, motivations, in short, what kind of people they are – and these discourses influence teacher practices in the classroom. In turn, our study suggests, these discourses and associated practices have implications for social identification. Teachers who believe that everyone should participate in classroom discussion but that only certain types of pupil are able to handle cognitive challenge are likely to direct demanding questions only to those pupils perceived as high ability and easy questions to those pupils perceived as low ability. Such differentiation of instruction is also a differentiation of what counts as “competence”, and for whom, and “directly impacts the kinds of opportunities to learn that are presented to students, and thus both the content and practices with which they can engage” (Gresalfi, Martin, Hand & Greeno, 2009, p. 68). Moreover, such teacher differentiation positions individuals as certain types of pupil: “bright” and “articulate” versus “low ability” and “inarticulate”. Pupils who are consistently positioned as academically weak may become discouraged by low

expectations, switch off from learning (replacing active participation with a passive shrug or one-word response), and thus continue to fulfill the identity of low achiever attributed to them. We should emphasise, however, that these relationships are not simple, linear connections in which causal links can be drawn from pedagogic beliefs to teaching practices to pupil identity, but rather pedagogic beliefs are conflicting, pupils influence their enactment, and within the same school three teachers produced markedly different classroom cultures vis-à-vis perceived “low-ability” pupil participation.

Dialogic pedagogies, in particular, have complicated implications for classroom identity work. On the one hand, they call for an inclusive, egalitarian, caring, non-competitive environment, but on the other hand they emphasize cognitive challenge and give prominence to pupils’ authoritative voice and accountable participation, which together can be perceived as very threatening for so-called “low ability” pupils, and indeed may be experienced by them as such. These tensions exist in all (English) classrooms, but dialogic pedagogy likely amplifies them and makes them harder to ignore. This problem has received little attention in discussions of dialogic pedagogy, yet the cases discussed here suggest that it is an important factor shaping the enactment of dialogic pedagogy, and one that needs to be actively confronted for such practices to take hold. Confronting these ideologies requires a radical shift in the way we think about pupil ability and identity: from individual psychological models of pupil ability and identity to the social constructionist perspective that who a pupil is is a function of the particular situation, which is co-constructed by them and the others present.

In the Introduction to a recent volume on the promise of academically productive talk, Resnick, Asterhan and Clarke (2015) argue that “dialogic teaching has the power to break the cycle of low demand/low performance too often experienced by children from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds” (p. 3). Our study shows that dialogic pedagogy’s potential as

a lever for equity and social justice can only be realized if it is enacted within an ideology that views ability as dynamic, context-dependent and socially constructed.

1. In Lefstein & Snell (2011a) we scrutinise our own role in these workshops, subjecting transcripts of those workshops to the same kinds of detailed linguistic ethnographic analyses we apply to classroom interaction in this paper.

2. Systematic discourse analysis of Ms Leigh’s lessons revealed that 38% of Ms Leigh’s questions were probes, compared to a school average of just 23% and a national average of 17% (see Snell and Lefstein 2011 for details of this analysis). See Lefstein and Snell 2011b and Lefstein and Snell 2014, Chs 5 & 6 for further detailed analyses of Ms. Leigh’s classroom.

Appendix: Transcription Conventions

(text)	- Transcription uncertainty
(xxxxxxx)	- Indistinguishable speech
(.)	- Brief pause (under one second)
(1)	- Longer pause (number indicates length to nearest whole second)
(())	- Description of prosody or non-verbal activity
[- Overlapping talk or action
[
<u>text</u>	- Emphasised relative to surrounding talk (underlined words)
te:xt	- Stretched sounds
sh-	- Word cut off
>text<	- Speech delivered more rapidly than surrounding speech.
TEXT	- Shouting

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