

**Student Identity Work and the Micro/Politics
of 'Special Educational Needs' in a Girls'
Comprehensive School**

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Abstract

This thesis is an account of an ethnographic study of the meanings and practices around what has come to be known as ‘special educational needs’ (SEN) in a girls’ comprehensive school in London. Using a feminist post-structuralist approach, I look at how specific students, formally identified as having SEN, use these meanings and practices in the process of making sense of themselves as school students: a process I call ‘identity work’. I discuss how this complex process is nuanced by multiple axes of difference, including gender/sexuality, social class, ethnicity, religion and physical appearance.

I argue that the identity work of the girls and young women takes place within a policy, micropolitical and microcultural context that positions them as ‘intellectually subordinated’. Current educational policy and school micropolitics work together to construct a micro/political contradiction. On the one hand, the competitive standards agenda privileges a dominant discourse of normative success based on examination results that are largely inaccessible to the participants of this research. On the other hand, the drive towards ‘inclusion’ appears to require other kinds of values, producing what I argue is a consolation, or deficit, discourse of success. Student microcultures, and student identity work, are produced in relation to this contradiction. This thesis suggests that current rhetoric and reforms associated with ‘inclusive education’ have acted to complexify, but not necessarily to ameliorate, the intellectual subordination of the ‘special needs student’.

I use participant observation and interviews, augmented by reflexive and interactive methods, to think with the girls and young women about their experiences of schooling, and about their understandings of themselves as school students. I also use this data, and my analysis of it, to examine the current limits of a feminist post-structural approach, and to suggest possible directions for further theoretical work.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Introducing the Research Questions

Aqsa: Sir he nice teacher, only tells off bad girls, girls who not do their work, innit. Sir he nice to me, because he know if I don't get good mark is not my fault, he not shout at me. And Chantelle and Tana they go [kisses teeth and demonstrates 'adolescent flounce'] and is very very rude. Is stuff everywhere, is all over the floor, here and here and here [points]. And Sir he gets angry, his face is all red, like he very very angry, he very, very angry, and he shouts, "Is all Year Eleven doesn't care about their GCSEs". [pause] Some teachers they say we the worst Year Eleven, but is not true, is some very rude girls but is not everyone, is not everyone. Sir he very angry, and he say to Chantelle, "Is you want me to tell everyone your mark what you got in Year Ten exams? Is you want me to read out to everyone? Is it you want?" He say like that, to Chantelle he say, "Is you want me to tell everyone? No, you not want me to do that because is you be shamed, because is lowest mark in the class". And, Miss, I am so, so happy, innit, because I think is me get the lowest mark in the class, first, right, I think he make mistake, he not know I am worst in the class, and I going to say, "Sir, I get lower mark than Chantelle, is me with the lowest mark", but I not want to say because I shamed, innit. But then I think must be true, is not me is the most stupid, because Chantelle she get lower mark than me, so must be true. I'm so happy, and she was born here, is even she not have to learn new language, speak English. I'm so happy...

From interview 3/11/99

Chantelle: So, like, we wound him up something bad, and we was bad mouthing him - *Sir* - he don't usually have to put up with that sort of thing, you could see, um, he didn't know what to do, he didn't know *what* was going on, it ain't probably happened to him before, "Girls, girls, this is *me* you're mouthing off to" it was like. So Sir, right, he gets all red in the face, it was really funny, Miss, you had to be there to see it, to believe it, to see it and *believe* it, and we're la-la-la-la-la nothing out of the ordinary is going on here, and Sir he couldn't believe his eyes, his little red ears, and we're just la-la-la-la-la. It was *worth* it Miss. It was *well* worth it... So Sir he shouts and he shouts and he shouts and we're all quiet at the end, the stuff's cleaned up, we're all sitting up good like little primary children on those stools - them ones really hurt your bum - and Sir he brings it all out. He's got the weapon of destruction, yeah, "Chantelle" he goes, "Chantelle, do you want me to tell everyone your mark what you got in the Year Ten exam?" And I'm like, not looking at everyone, especially Tana, it was like I didn't know, what was I supposed to *do*? I mean what are you supposed to *do* when that happens? Cause all lesson, it was like about pretending not to be scared of Mr. Evans, cause it was how we was

ruling the lesson, and what am I supposed to *do*? So I just sits there, and I'm not looking at Tana, right, and I'm not looking at Sir [pause]. And Sir's going chatting on and on, giving us lot all grief about the exams, making out we don't care, *as if* - I mean, as if *anyone* gets to be Year Eleven in this place and don't care about their exams. *As if*. And Sir, right, he goes, "I bet you don't want me to tell you out loud what you got in the Year Ten exam. Cause you got the worst mark in the whole class", well, Miss, right, I could've died, and I mean died, there in the lesson.

From interview 10/11/99

Aqsa and Chantelle are in their final year as students at 'Meadway School for Girls' (not its real name). They know me primarily as a learning support teacher. Their two differing accounts of the same Year Eleven science lesson raise the questions that are at the heart of this thesis. Both students are fifteen years old, and both have been formally identified as having 'special educational needs' (SEN). But, in their accounts of the science lesson and their relation to it, they produce themselves as very different versions of the subject 'special needs student'. Running through both accounts are issues of power, linked to questions of 'success' and 'achievement' in a specific micro/political context. For Aqsa, the public humiliation of a 'very rude girl' by a 'nice teacher' is a double-edged source of joy. She rescues herself from what she understands as her own ignominious position at the bottom of the class, whilst simultaneously confirming her investment in dominant versions of success, here encoded through examination results. Chantelle finds herself with no room for manouevre when what started as an enjoyable wresting of power from the hands of a customarily authoritative teacher turns into public humiliation. The teacher effectively trumps her through deploying the dominant discourse of success in his successful bid to re-assert his control, and she has no way of answering back.

This introductory chapter outlines the concepts and contexts that frame this thesis, and raises some of the issues with which I will be engaging. I start by presenting my research questions, using the example of Aqsa and Chantelle to explain why these questions are salient. I go on to look at the crucial, and hard-to-resolve, set of questions around representation. In particular, I raise the well-documented problem of 'SEN' terminology, in the context of the political and theoretical dilemmas that underpin the search for alternatives (Ervelles, 1996). In the middle part of the chapter, I outline my theoretical context. I explain what I mean by 'identity work' and look at

how such a concept is framed by feminist post-structuralists and others. I interrogate the post-structuralist endeavour to theorise ‘beyond binarisms’, and suggest some of the implications of such an endeavour in my own research. I go on to provide a brief introduction to the school, by way of introducing the micropolitical and policy context in which I am working. Towards the end of the chapter, I look in more detail at my own personal/political/professional position in relation to this research, through a brief ‘autobiography of the question’ (Miller, 1995). Finally, I provide an overview of the thesis, briefly setting out what is to be found in each chapter, and how the argument progresses through the thesis.

When Aqsa and Chantelle, cited above, produce themselves as different versions of ‘special needs students’, they use understandings of ‘success’ and ‘achievement’ that have been produced in a discursive field that is itself produced by its specific political and micro-cultural context, and which is nuanced by multiple and cross-cutting indices of difference. In this thesis, I set out to explore how a group of Meadway students who have been formally identified as having ‘SEN’ use understandings of ‘success’ and ‘achievement’ in their identity work. I explore this through a number of inter-related questions:

- What understandings of ‘success’ and ‘achievement’ are explicitly and implicitly encoded into student microcultures and school micropolitics? How do these understandings interact with current schooling policy?
- How do students ‘do power’ in relation to (dominant and other) versions of success; how do they use notions of success and achievement in positioning themselves and each other in formal and informal micro-cultural work?
- How do students who have been identified as having ‘SEN’ describe themselves? What discourses of success and achievement do they use in positioning themselves in relation to the (academic) learning process?
- How are ‘failing’ positions on the ability continuum articulated with other systemic axes of difference - principally here ‘race’/ethnicity, religion, nationality, social class, sexuality, physical appearance and command of the English language?

- How do students operate discourse and practice in ‘SEN’ in conjunction with the different modalities of femininity available to them?

Aqsa’s and Chantelle’s accounts also exemplify a fundamental contradiction embedded within English/Welsh educational policy, and especially as it relates to students with ‘SEN’. For, whilst the New Labour government insists that the ‘inclusion’ of students so identified is a priority, it has privileged a competitive, examination result-led culture of schooling. Individual teachers and schools are required to examine their practices in order that they may become more inclusive, so as to reduce the ‘barriers to learning’ (Saleh, 1999) experienced by specific groups of students. Meanwhile, an ever-growing reliance on examination results as delineators of ‘achievement’ inscribes a dominant version of success to which a substantial proportion of students do not have access. I would not want to deny the importance of encouraging mainstream schools and teachers to take responsibility for identifying excluding practices and taking steps to change them. But it is not enough. I will argue that, at a systemic level, some students are effectively being ‘included’ into a discursive field and a set of practices which produce them as marginal. My concern here is with those students who are not going to achieve what have been nationally constructed as the benchmarks of success. How do they live this contradiction, of being included in a system which simultaneously excludes them?

In this research, I have not attempted to look at the full range of students in Meadway who have been identified as having ‘SEN’. As I will outline below, amongst its other shortcomings, the SEN terminology is too broad and reflects too many competing sets of interests to make this possible. My focus is on those students who, up until recently, would have been identified as having ‘mild to moderate learning difficulties’, and on those who are autistic.

What’s In A Name? Representing ‘Special Needs Students’

A notice attached to a machine in the computer room at Meadway reads ‘Priority Use for Special Needs Students’. It does not take a big leap of imagination to replace this grammatical impossibility with the older terminology of educational sub-normality.

When the language of ‘special educational needs’ replaced the language of sub-normality and handicap in the UK in the early 1980s, it was intended to bring about an attitudinal shift in which failure to make progress at school would be constructed as occurring in the interplay between the pupil and the educational experience provided for that pupil: it was no longer to be understood as intrinsic deficiency (Warnock, 1978; Dyson, 1987; Gipps, Gross and Goldstein, 1987; Swann, 1987; Welton, Wedell and Vorhaus, 1990). But, as signs such as the one in the computer room at Meadway reflect, there has been a certain amount of slippage here, and, in many instances, the student with ‘special educational needs’ has become the ‘special needs student’, a distinct subject position that specific students are required to inhabit.

This raises several problems for me, both in this thesis, and in my work as a learning support teacher at Meadway. I would want to distance myself from a model which produces students as inherently deficient, in the way the categories that pre-dated the 1981 Education Act undoubtedly did. But, equally, I would not want to claim that intellectual impairment (the term preferred in disability theory) is nothing but a social construction, although its attendant meanings and practices assuredly *are* socially and politically constructed. The language of SEN is unequal to the challenge of engaging with this problem, and does not give sufficient explanatory purchase towards illuminating the inequalities and oppression in which it is both embedded and implicated¹. Corbett remarks that ‘there is the sentimental language of ‘special need’ which is embodied in the imagery of protection, care, tenderness and love... This language needs to be examined and revealed for the sugar-coated poison that it is. Secondly... there is hate. The language of ‘special needs’ has always been composed of words and images which foster mistrust, loathing and hostility’ (Corbett, 1996, p3). In Chapter Two, I will look at the discursive history of these distinct strands. For now, it is enough to note that the language of special needs presents itself as neutral, located within a liberal pluralist perspective of ‘equal but different’: a perspective that I will

¹ I will return to the problems associated with ‘SEN’ terminology throughout the thesis. Its critics have pointed out that ‘SEN’ continues to operate variously as a means for excluding and marginalising some pupils, whilst serving the purposes of a market-led and socially unjust culture of entitlement in which resources disproportionately accrue to specific groups. For a fuller discussion of the development of ‘SEN’ as an authorising narrative, and of the many (often contradictory) interests it serves and has served, see for example Swann (1987), Rogers (1988), Norwich (1993), Bines (1995), Fulcher (1995), Hill (1995), Riddell, Brown and Duffield (1995) and Potts (1998).

later argue is a dangerous fiction. This alone means that the special needs discourse is produced through an investment in concealing the power imbalances with which it is at the least complicit, and for which it is often responsible (Tomlinson, 1982). This, again, is explored in more detail in Chapters Two and Four.

As I hinted at earlier, the broadness and non-specificity of 'SEN' terminology (Lunt and Norwich, 1999) presents me with another problem in describing the participants of my research. I am not concerned with the full range of students who have been identified as having 'special educational needs' at Meadway: in particular, I am not concerned with those who are described as having 'behaviour as a priority concern'. Norwich examines the SEN discourse through its critics: on the one hand, there are sociologists who consider the social functions of the discourse, whilst on the other there are inclusive educators who attempt to 'do without difference categories' (Norwich, 1993, p44). He argues that 'the concept of special educational needs is a category itself, just a broader superordinate one, rather than the more specific categories used pre-Warnock' (ibid. p45). For my purposes, this superordinate category is too broad, since it encompasses almost every way of failing to make progress at school within normative terms². I need a more clearly delimited difference category in order to examine the meanings associated with that difference.

The terminology developed from within the disability movement and associated with the social model of disability is also unsuitable for me here. Most of the students with whom I work at Meadway, and who are the subjects and participants of this research, cannot be described as 'intellectually impaired' and thereby offered a recognisable position within the disability movement. Their difference is only marked and categorised in the context of schooling. Fifteen years ago, many of these students would have received their formal education in segregated schools for children and young people with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) whilst others would have

² In the months since I finished fieldwork at Meadway, the profile of the 'social exclusion' agenda has been heightened. 'Special needs' is increasingly used to refer to those students who disrupt classrooms to the point where they have been, or are at risk of being, excluded. A glance through the pages of advertisements for learning support teachers in the educational press confirms the growing domination of 'social exclusion rhetoric' (Farrell, 2000), with complicated effects for those students whose special needs are not primarily in this area.

been educated, as now, in mainstream classrooms. They are the students who, in terms of the National Targets For Learning will not 'reach the expected standard for their age' (DfEE, 1999b). They are listed on Meadoway's SEN register as students who have 'learning as a priority concern'. How, then, am I to describe them without constantly resorting to the cumbersome 'students who have been formally identified as having SEN'? As I will explore more fully in Chapters Four and Six, the students do not apply SEN terminology to themselves, usually choosing to use an apparently much more pejorative vernacular or none at all. Nor was it possible for me to work with them to explore alternative terminology, again, a theme to which I will return. Whilst I would not presume to invent terminology on behalf of a group who experience an oppression to which I am not personally subject, it has been necessary to find a way of grouping the students and, very contingently, of naming that group.

As an interim solution to this problem, I have developed the notion of 'intellectual subordination'. This implies the inscription of school students into relations of subordination through their inability to achieve normative levels of 'success', and through the meanings that have come to inhere in such inabilitys. It is not an unproblematic solution. The notion of intellectual subordination contains within itself an ambiguity over to what extent a student's 'inability' is inherent, and to what extent it is socially and culturally produced. This ambiguity is, I would argue, necessary at this stage, since the means of identifying (through testing and assessing) intellectual ability are produced through socially-situated instruments that are themselves part of a knowledge/power apparatus (Slee, 1995; Allan, 1996; Allan, 1999). To complexify matters still further, there are instances throughout the thesis when I do use the terminology associated with 'SEN', and, in particular, the phrase 'special needs student'. Where I do this, it is in order to explore how such a subject position is produced, and how it is lived by those students who have no choice but to position themselves in relation to it.

Identities at Work - the Theoretical Context

More social descriptions of our common sense practices are essential for those
TEXT REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES



(Apple, 1995, p37)

It is tempting to read Aqsa's and Chantelle's accounts of the Science lesson and seek to apportion blame. Was it the teacher's fault? After all, he failed to maintain adequate control of the lesson in the first place, and then resorted to a strategy of public humiliation of a relatively powerless student. Or was it the fault of Chantelle and her friends? They had pushed the teacher beyond all reasonable limits, and possibly at the expense of other students who might have wanted order to be restored so that they could learn some Science. Neither explanation is adequate, though there is truth in both. Rather, what is going on is a much more complex and dynamic set of processes, in which a known reservoir of resources exist to be drawn upon by all the participants involved in the negotiation. When Chantelle and her friends antagonise the teacher, they are drawing from identity resources that have been locally produced in a much wider socio-political context. These resources are profoundly shaped, in this instance, by 'race' (all of the young women involved in the disruption are African-Caribbean), by gender and sexuality and by social class as well as by perceived academic ability. They are also generated in the ongoing identity and micro-cultural work³ that these specific young women have been undertaking in relation to each other and the formal school since they joined it. As they take up active or audient positions in the unfolding drama, each person in the room performs her own identity work, producing herself (or, in the case of the teacher, himself) in relation to the existing discursive field, and shaping that discursive field in the process.

In exploring the dynamic nature of social identities as produced at school, I have drawn largely on a set of theories and tools associated with feminist poststructuralism. For me, an analysis of the Year Eleven Science lesson requires an engagement with the way a specific set of meanings around perceived academic ability is deployed in the

³ I use 'microcultural work' to refer to the interpersonal negotiations through which the girls and young women position themselves relative to student micro-cultures and, in so doing, re/produce those cultures. Other groups in school – including, of course, teachers - partake in their own microcultural work.

struggle over power in this lesson. A feminist analysis which questions taken-for-granted knowledge from a position of commitment to ‘analyse the hidden and the marginal’ (Gordon, Holland and Lahelma, 2000, p3) both enables and makes imperative such an engagement. Kenway and her colleagues note that ‘Post-structuralism... is concerned with the way in which meanings are made, the way they circulate among us, the way they are struggled over, the impact they have on our identities and actions. Post-structuralism is particularly interested in the connections between meaning and power’ (Kenway et al., 1997, pxix).

Chantelle and her friends had been ‘ruling the lesson’ through, amongst other things, their refusal to recognise the teacher as authority figure, reducing his status to that of a (male) plaything, his embodied discomfort (marked by his little red ears) to be looked at and delighted in. Her re-telling of the story is in itself a performance, in which she re-inscribes his insertion into an embodied and sexualised discourse, with herself and her friends in predatory roles (Kehily and Nayak, 1996), thereby opposing the formal positioning of teachers within a solely intellectual, and not embodied, discourse (Epstein and Johnson, 1998). But the teacher has ultimate recourse to a greater, systemically embedded power which, as a last resort, he is able to call upon. He can invoke a dominant discourse of success which produces Chantelle, as I will argue in a later chapter, as a nothing, or a nobody. In the face of this institutionally and systemically-located power, Chantelle falls silent and immobile. It is the ‘weapon of destruction’ which she cannot, in this instance, resist.

It is important, though, not to overstate the case of the cultural construction of power through meaning. Kenway and her colleagues note that ‘the politics of discourse is often over-determined by the power relationships which exist beyond the moment and the specific locality’ (Kenway et al., 1994, p190). Power is also produced in this example, and throughout school life, through a set of institutional and societal practices which have very material locations and effects. The discourses and discursive practices around perceived achievement in circulation at Meadow are strongly related to students’ future life-chances and also have present-time material implications. As students progress up the school, to be intellectually subordinated means to take up a

promised future of low-paid jobs or of no work at all. As Apple, above, reminds us, the inscription of common-sense meanings through everyday actions is never neutral, but is part of the production of what he terms ideological hegemony. When the Science teacher falls back on an act of humiliation made possible by Chantelle's ongoing intellectual subordination as a 'special needs student', the competitive, examination-performance oriented system in which someone has to be last, is inscribed, once more, as common-sense and as irrefutable. Although this teacher is not responsible for the existence of that system, nor solely responsible for Chantelle's intellectual subordination, his recourse to a discourse to which all the students in the room are subject allows him to reposition himself, once more, as the authority figure. Weedon argues that 'it is the need to regulate disparate forms of subjectivity in the interests of existing power relations that motivates the language of common-sense' (Weedon, 1997, p94). And, as I will argue in more detail later, the regulation of Chantelle through this particular common-sense is one of the keys to her present and future subordination as one of the losers in the capitalist labour market (Levitas, 1998).

It is necessary to uncover the disparate forms of subjectivity at play in formal and informal contexts at Meadoway, in order to interrogate how these are regulated, and in whose interests. Here, again, it is vital to note the embodied and spatialised nature of identity work at school (Armstrong, 1999), and how bodies function as both objects and agents of practice (Bordo, 1993a; Bordo, 1993b; Connell, 1995). Gordon *et al* note that 'Space is social and mental, and constrained but not determined by the physical' (Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma, 2000, p4). Sometimes the regulation is subtle: when students are required to sit up 'like good little primary children' on stools that 'really hurt your bum'. Sometimes it is more obvious, when students are physically detained by a teacher, or sent to the 'Duty Room' to work under the watchful surveillant eye of a member of the senior management team. Students' (and teachers') occupation of space, is, like the language they use, seldom neutral. When Chantelle and her friends make a mess in the Science lesson, they are, amongst other things, extending the amount of space available for their own use, asserting their right over the physical environment. They produce themselves as 'very rude girls' as much by this appropriation of space as by their utterances. Key to the teacher's ousting them from

this position of power is his ability to produce these disruptive students as ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1975), occupying space in the way he wants them to. Throughout the thesis, this theme of occupying space is one the students constantly invoke in their accounts, as they go about demonstrating how their positionality is negotiated both physically, and through language.

To sum up, then, I am using the term ‘identity work’ to mean a version of ‘politics-in-action’: the ongoing process of performing, contesting, re-producing and re-configuring power relations in contexts contingent on prevailing micro/political conditions, but not (necessarily) determined by them. As this might imply, I am working with a model that perceives structure and agency not as polarities, but existing in symbiotic relationship with each other. I do not have space here to rehearse in any detail the debates over structure versus agency: later in the thesis, I will be exploring how and where the students are produced by, and produce, the discursive and material structures in and through which they ‘perform’ (Butler, 1990) their identity work. In attempting to theorise from such a perspective, I am necessarily trying both to interrogate and to go beyond the dominant binary system of thought.

Beyond Binarisms?

Hall charts the rise to pre-eminence of a binary system of thought from its origins in Renaissance Protestantism and capitalism, to its ascribed zenith in the Enlightenment. He notes that ‘the Enlightenment centred on the image of rational, scientific Man, freed from dogma and intolerance, before whom the whole of human history was laid out for understanding and mastery’ (Hall, 1992, p282). The binarism of man/nature was (and is) reflected in other key binarisms, notably man/woman, rational/irrational and thought/matter. Crucially, these dualisms are organised hierarchically: rationality, associated with maleness, has been constituted as a site of normative power, and has constituted irrationality as its negative other (Kenway et al., 1994).

Using insights associated with feminist post-structuralism, I will briefly outline three inter-related derivations of binary thought which have particular relevance for me in this thesis. Firstly, I will look at how binarisms, and especially the opposition of

rational by irrational, are implicated in the reproduction of relations of subordination and domination. Secondly, I will look at how the rational/irrational binarism works through schooling, and in particular, how it is deployed in discourses of school effectiveness and school improvement. Lastly, I will point to some of the concepts associated with a post-structural approach that attempts to move beyond binarisms, in order to explain some of the concepts that I will be using later in the thesis.

Pateman (1988) usefully links the system of binary thought, in which rational Man endeavoured to use natural science to know and master the Universe, with the legislative emergence of modern patriarchy through the social (and, as she argues, sexual) contract. She traces how the ‘fiction’ of social contract arose from the opposition of Man with Nature. This brought in its wake a social, cultural and political system in which relations of domination and subordination were inscribed and legitimated within a discourse of (male) freedom and rights. She observes that ‘the civil state and law and (patriarchal) discipline are not two forms of power but dimensions of the complex, multi-faceted structure of domination in modern patriarchy’ (Pateman, 1988, p16). Thus, from its inception, binary thought was linked to the production of material power. In the rational-irrational opposition, mastery was the property of educated, rich, white men. Identified with irrationality were women, children, non-European or European-derived ‘races’, disabled people and the working classes. Only the male elite were endowed with rationality and, through it, access to the economic, social and political capital it attracted (Cohen and Bains, 1988; St Pierre, 2000).

Rational Man’s posited endeavour to understand and master the Universe was a uniquely individualised one. Hall explains the contribution of Descartes to the emergence of this individual, rationally-developing self: ‘Things must be explained, he believed, by reducing them to their essentials - the fewest possible, ultimately irreducible elements. At the centre of ‘mind’ he placed the individual subject, constituted by its capacity to reason and think’ (Hall, 1992, p282). Linked to the notion of the rational (male, white, adult, able-bodied and upper- or middle-class) individual was a specific notion of freedom and democracy. In what has been called the

‘democratic fantasy’ (Walkerdine, 1988; Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989), regulation, and, through it, the enduring reproduction, over time, of relations of subordination and domination, came to be normalised. Over time, the origins of the rational, choosing self have been obscured (Giddens, 1991). As this individualised subject gained more ‘rights’, so the regulative functions of a discourse generated by and in the interests of industrial capitalism and hetero/patriarchal imperialism became subtler and harder to uncover.

When compulsory mass schooling began in the UK in the 1870s, it operated both to produce the appropriately skilled and motivated workforce needed by industrial capitalism, and to re-inscribe the rational-irrational binary together with the modernist project of the incrementally-developing self. Beck argues that ‘The expansion of nation-state produced and affirmed individualisation, with doctrines of socialisation and institutions of education to match’ (Beck, 2000, p166). Arguably, this modernist/humanist project of ‘the choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life’ (*ibid*, p165) is still at the heart of schooling today. This in itself would be enough to marginalise those who are deemed to have ‘SEN’: learning difficulties, in particular, are constructed as oppositional to the rational, incrementally-developing child of psycho-educational discourse, who progresses according to a linear, normatively-produced model (Walkerdine, 1988). This rich, white, male-derived discourse privileges a certain model of learning and view of schooling. As I will be explaining in more detail in Chapter Two, a meritocratic ideal, in which those pupils of ‘ability’ were allowed (‘irrespective’ of class and later of race and gender) to progress through their own achievement and effort, was built into this model. Thus ‘success’ in schooling became equated with the deserved right to individual social and material advancement for a few individuals into the dominant class, an ideal still present in many of the legitimating discourses of schooling.

Current New Labour policy brings to this humanist and meritocratic model the technicism and new managerialism now associated with the school improvement approach. The reduction of human endeavour to its essentials (as Hall, above, notes of

Cartesian philosophy) is writ large in school improvement. Underpinning the search for what ‘works’ in schooling, is the assumption that children’s and young people’s educational experience can be measured through their examination ‘performance’, and that schools will become more effective if the results of that performance are quantified, calibrated, mapped, and used as a spur to continuous improvement. The instruments used to achieve this – inspection, league tables of results and numerical targets - together with the discourses that legitimate them - the rights/consumer entitlements of parents and children, the market principle, and the desirability and possibility of continuous improvement - are also underpinned by the rational-irrational binary (Morley and Rassool, 1999).

Put crudely, the school improvement agenda is inscribing the notion that education can be reduced to an indeterminate number of bland taxonomies, and that these taxonomies can be used to regulate ‘producers’ of schooling, in the interests of the rational, choosing individual. The technicist fiction of school improvement is thus a direct derivation of a much older, heavily gendered discourse, and one that is deeply implicated in the production of social and material inequalities. From Chapter Three onwards I will examine in more detail how students and teachers live the school improvement fiction, and how it contributes to the enduring reproduction of relations of domination and subordination, especially those of class and capital. What I want to highlight here is its origins within a discourse that was and continues to be derived from a gendered and ‘raced’, as well as classed, apparatus of control.

One aspect of the school improvement fiction does require brief exploration here. Morley and Rassool (*ibid.*) show how the agenda has borrowed, from Japan, the notion of ‘kaizen’: the necessity and desirability of striving for continuous improvement. In a Western context, this philosophy is little short of disastrous, and may have catastrophic consequences. In the Western world, and in a consumer capitalist context, improvement has come to mean ever-increasing spirals of production and consumption. Binary thought and humanist individualism, (which indissolubly link knowledge with mastery), together with the capitalist competitive ethic, mean that improvement must always be at someone else’s expense (Kenway et al., 1997).

Improvement must be demonstrable through increased volume, or speed, of production. In education, this means (amongst other things) an intensification of workload for everyone. Teachers and schools must produce better and better results, and more and more data about those results, as the competition to stay ahead of the field heats up. Children and young people must work harder and smarter to secure improvements in their performance or face ‘social exclusion’ in the face of ‘qualification inflation’⁴. Parents are made responsible for choosing the right school, and for supporting their children in the schooling business. So, whilst school improvement may bring about some benefits for some groups, there are terrific costs involved.

Perhaps the best way to exemplify some of the costs of such a model of continuous improvement is by looking to the environmental movement and the concept of sustainability. Improvement, where improvement means constant growth in production and consumption, is simply unsustainable over time. The earth has finite resources, and we are all living with the reality that the misuse of those resources (or, put another way, the results of rational Man’s endeavours to know and master Nature) could mean the end of human (and most other) forms of life on the planet. In some parts of the world the costs of this misuse are clear. Shiva notes that ‘In a world of globalised, deregulated commerce in which everything is tradable and economic strength is the only determinant of power and control, resources move from the poor to the rich, and pollution moves from the rich to the poor. The result is global environmental apartheid’ (Shiva, 2000, p112). In other words, continuous improvement for some means, in global capitalist terms, severe impoverishment for others in the short term, and ultimately destruction for all⁵. Even in the rich world, we live with the knowledge of the consequences of the systemic over-consumption in which we are (differentially) implicated. The same is true of a ‘continuously improving’ education system in which some pay the costs of other people’s apparent gains in the short term, and in which

⁴ Such phenomena also reflect the marketisation and commodification of education, which, in the UK, are the legacy of New Right reforms of the 1980s and 1990s.

⁵ It has been argued that ‘increased transnational capital mobility produces new waves of short-term immiserisation and long-term environmental degradation’ (Boswell and Chase-Dunn, 2000, p12). The development of global capitalism, and its winners and losers over time are discussed in Dunn (1995), Kirk (1995), Modelska and Thompson (1996), Robinson (1996), Taylor (1996), Boli and Thomas (1997) and Haseler (2000).

there are long-term costs to everyone (Lucey, 2000). In a theme to which I will return in Chapter Ten, I want to explore whether there is a version of sustainable change that could enable a move beyond the winner/loser binaries inherent in and produced by current school improvement discourses.

What has a polarised view of the rational subject left out? In examining this, I do not want necessarily to exalt the realm of the non-rational: the feeling, intuiting (female) self often posited as the binary opposite of the (male) rational self⁶. Nor do I want to be drawn into a detailed engagement with the psychic world, since this thesis is concerned with meanings that are socially made and negotiated. Feminist post-structuralists have developed a number of concepts which I will be using in the thesis to examine what Davies (1997) has called the ‘self in process’. She argues that:

TEXT REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES



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This self-in-process is, in the context of schooling, a rational, choosing self (since schools produce their students through discourses that privilege such a project), and much else besides. It is also a feeling, intuiting self and an embodied self. Meadoway School, like many others, is a site in which students and teachers are constantly involved in the work of positioning ourselves in relation to prevailing technicist, and older humanist and radical, understandings about learning and teaching. We do this as feeling and intuiting, as well as thinking people. The act of taking up a position in discourse, and thereby producing ourselves as specific versions of ‘teacher’ or ‘student’ is one that is thought about and is also deeply felt.

Later in the thesis, I will be working with a number of conceptual tools – principally interpellation, investment, struggle, and the production of desire, fear and shame - in

examining such processes. Again, I do not have space to examine each of these conceptual tools in detail, but I would want to explain how I am using them. To return to Aqsa and Chantelle, cited in the opening of this chapter. Aqsa describes how the teacher of the class recognises her as a ‘good girl’ by not telling her off. She constructs the teacher himself as a ‘nice teacher’ by recognising his understanding of her. Through such recognitions, she is interpellated into a discursive position as a ‘sweet little girl’ (see Chapters Six to Ten). She *could*, in theory, resist such a position, but such (mutual and self) recognitions make this unlikely. As she recounts the teacher’s remarks to Chantelle, and her response to them, she describes and re-inscribes her investment in examination success. The fact that she is not, as she had thought, at the bottom of the class, makes her, in this exchange, happy. Chantelle describes the struggle with which power was negotiated in the lesson. She remarks that she and her friends could only rule the lesson by pretending not to be scared of the teacher. She also presents her own struggle when control had been re-gained by the teacher. When he humiliated her through pointing out her failure within the dominant discourse of success, she did not know how to respond, or with whom to express solidarity: should she look at her friends or at the teacher? She goes on to show how she has come to want – to desire – both examination success *and* micro-cultural success amongst a group of what Aqsa has positioned as ‘very rude girls’. For her, such desires are contradictory, and place her in a position that she describes as unviable. Implicit in the accounts of both young women is the fear and shame engendered through their failure to achieve normative versions of success. Desire, fear and shame thus function as key mechanisms through which interpellation takes place and investment is produced. As the thesis progresses, I will be showing how these processes are nuanced through the indices of systemic difference referred to earlier.

Before moving on, however, I would want to introduce a note of caution. There is a danger that, in attempting to go beyond binarisms, we construct theories that act as if those binarisms do not exist. Paradoxically, in doing this, we may also be setting up a new binarism. As a lecturer at the college of Higher Education where I did my first

⁶ Boler (1999) gives an example of the possible hazards associated with this. She examines how the ‘Emotional Intelligence’ discourse apparently privileges the ‘feeling’ polarity, but in a way that encourages individualisation of social processes and enhances self-policing by individuals of their

degree remarked to me fifteen years ago, “There are two types of people: those who recognise that binary thinking is bankrupt, and those who do not”. Such new polarities are not likely to be helpful. Allan (1999) argues for the importance of ‘acknowledging the binarisms of special/normal or disabled/able-bodied in order to speak against them’ (p116). The task here seems to be one of naming the meanings associated with existing binarisms and of developing theories that will enable an interrogation of the material consequences of those meanings, without constructing new polarities as a result. In the context of ‘racial’ identity, Hall (1990) argues for a ‘strategic essentialism’ in which binary points of identity are understood as ‘not an essence but a positioning’ (p226). As Mort (writing about sexualised identities) explains, ‘Within such an understanding, identities are concrete and material, but they are not innate. Hence identity politics becomes a matter of contingency, organised around a strategic rather than a naturalised essentialism’ (Mort, 1994, p218). In parts of this thesis I will be drawing on such notions of strategic essentialism, although I will also, in Chapter Two, be outlining how they do not quite meet the explanatory demands made in this context.

As has long been noted in the women’s movement, neither the liberal pluralist ‘equal but different’ argument which attempts to do away with binarisms through writing them out of the picture, nor the attempt to reverse a binarism through privileging its opposite polarity, is sufficient. Weedon (1997) notes that ‘it is not ultimately helpful merely to reverse the rational-irrational opposition. It needs to be thoroughly revised and reconstituted’ (p28). In this thesis I attempt to engage with the social and political production and consequences of a specific set of binary differences, whilst also wanting to venture beyond them, to alternative, more equitable and sustainable versions of ‘difference’.

Introducing the School

Meadway School for Girls is a medium-sized secondary comprehensive school in a mostly working-class London borough. There are nine hundred students on roll, aged from eleven to sixteen. At sixteen, students take the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations, after which most leavers progress to one of three

emotional worlds. She reveals this attempt at reversing a binary to be a strategy for regulation.

local further education colleges. Meadway is situated in an ethnically diverse locality, as is reflected in its student population. Approximately half of its students are from Asian (mostly Pakistani) families. This is a somewhat higher proportion than might be expected, and is usually accounted for by the fact that many of these families are observant Muslims who prefer single-sex education for their daughters. A further twenty per cent of students are of African-Caribbean heritage. The remainder is made up of students from many backgrounds, principally indigenous white, African (mostly from Somalia and the countries of Western Africa), Greek and Turkish Cypriot, Eastern European (predominantly from the former Yugoslavian states) and Irish.

A ‘mixed economy’ of ability grouping, commonly found in UK comprehensive schools (Clark et al., 1999), exists in Meadway. The students are grouped when they enter the school in Year Seven into tutor groups of thirty. These are initially used as teaching groups for most subjects. There are six tutor groups in each year, carefully mixed for ability on the basis of the girls’ test results in the Key Stage Two (Year Six) Standard Assessment Tests. As the students move up the school, they are grouped differently in more and more subjects. In English, Technology, Arts and Humanities, student grouping is resolutely mixed-ability through to the end of Year Eleven. In Maths, the girls are setted according to attainment from the beginning of Year Eight, into eight sets, with movement between the sets when a student’s progress suggests she would be better suited to a higher or lower set. This movement becomes more difficult from Year Ten, when separate curricula are studied by groups expected to enter for Higher, Intermediate and Foundation GCSE examination papers respectively. In Science, the students are broadly banded into Higher and Foundation divisions (the Intermediate paper only exists in Maths): each division is then split into four parallel groups. In Modern Languages, students are setted according to ability in Year Ten.

Meadway enjoys a good reputation locally, the consequences of which I will examine in Chapter Three. It is a school which prides itself on its strong Equal Opportunities ethos, and publicly affirms its anti-sexist and anti-racist commitments. Its motto, adopted when the school began in 1910, is ‘neglect not the gift that is in thee’, and this motto appears on all literature associated with the school. Its aim, ‘Quality Education

for All Girls', is re-stated on public occasions such as staff meetings, assemblies and the annual presentation of examination certificates.

Meadway has a teaching staff of about sixty, including part-time teachers (of whom I am one). About two-thirds of the teaching staff are women, and a similar proportion of the total are white and are of UK origin. The non-teaching staff is about half that size, and includes special needs assistants (all of whom are women), caretaking staff (all of whom are men), administrative staff (women), cleaners (women) and school meals assistants (women). The non-teaching staff come from a range of ethnic/racial backgrounds that broadly reflect that of the immediate locality. Indeed, most of them live locally, unlike many of the teachers, some of whom travel long distances (often from more middle-class districts) to Meadway. The staff is managed according to a pyramidal structure that would be recognised in most UK schools. At the top of the hierarchy is a white woman headteacher: the headteacher at the time I carried out my fieldwork retired and was replaced by another white woman in September 2000. She 'line manages' the two deputy heads, one of whom in turn line manages the three senior teachers (re-named 'assistant headteachers' after the amendments to the Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act came into force in September 2000). The senior teachers line manage the heads of faculty, heads of year, and heads of non-teaching staff respectively. The heads of faculty line manage the heads of department, who in turn manage the unpromoted classroom teachers. Thus are all members of staff held by a chain of power and accountability in which nobody is (or can be) overlooked.

I first entered Meadway on the day of my interview for a post as learning support teacher in December 1997. The main building is Edwardian, and I was shown into a once-grand, but now rather shabby and dark lobby to wait. Through the double doors I could see the school hall, honours boards around its walls, the body of the hall full of folding desks arranged in ranks. GCSE 'mock' exams were taking place. As I was shown around the school, I was struck by its orderly atmosphere. At one point, the bell sounded, and the corridors filled with laughing, chatting girls in bottle-green uniforms. A small woman, later introduced to me as Ms Cashmere the headteacher, stood at the bottom of one of the main staircases, directing the 'traffic': I later found out that, in a

version of the Panopticon, she would vary her monitoring point, so that students never knew on which staircase they might encounter her.

Other things impressed me that day. The humanities corridor was ablaze with displays relating to Black History Month, the music noticeboards contained work that challenged commonsense perceptions that all great composers and performers were and are men, and the school's equal opportunities policy - handed to me on arrival - was the most comprehensive of its type I have ever seen. In my first few weeks at the school I was made welcome by friendly and helpful colleagues, and welcomed especially into those social spaces that were inhabited by the most politicised of them. On the whole, Meadoway has provided me with an enjoyable context in which to work, and few personal axes to grind. Nevertheless, over the three years in which I have taught there, it has become harder to maintain the spaces within the school for sustained critique of the many new initiatives that have characterised the schooling systems of the UK.

From Equal Opportunities to Inclusion

The 'Gender and Achievement' section of the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) website chronicles what it calls three distinct phases of concern (DfEE, 2000). The first of these it calls the 'equal opportunities phase' which was 'marked by concern mainly about girls' experiences within male-dominated structures' (ibid.). This gave way to the equity and social justice phase 'where the interplay of issues of gender, class and ethnicity were highlighted' (ibid.). Lastly, there came the 'achievement-oriented phase' in which whole-school approaches 'endorsed the professional responsibility of schools to base their interventions on analyses of their own performance data' (ibid.). The DfEE makes it clear it supports this last, presenting the earlier phases as preparatory for this current phase.

At Meadoway, discourses associated with equal opportunities, social justice, and achievement co-exist, but their relationship to each other is not always as seamless as the DfEE website might suggest. Although it is not in a part of London that constituted the Inner London Education Authority, the ILEA's 'Race, Sex and Class' initiative (ILEA, 1983a; ILEA, 1983d; ILEA, 1983e; ILEA, 1983c; ILEA, 1983b; ILEA, 1985)

was important in Meadway's development in the 1980s⁷. Discourses and strategies that characterised this initiative are still in circulation at the school. As one example, an ethos of positive discrimination lives on in Meadway's celebration of International Women's Day, in which the experiences and contributions of women to a male-dominated world are explored and celebrated, and girls are reminded of feminist struggles worldwide. Meadway continues to claim Equal Opportunities as a strength, and its policy and policy guidelines in this area reflect much of what the DfEE has called the 'social justice phase'. In reality, this means that Meadway has committed itself to a version of equal opportunities that goes beyond the 'holy trinity' of race, sex and class. The policy guidelines (which run to twenty pages) provide practical examples of how students can be unfairly disadvantaged, and suggestions of ways in which members of the school community can work against social injustice.

Increasingly, though, these concerns are re-worked into the standards agenda which characterises what the DfEE refers to as the 'achievement-oriented phase'. Sometimes this can look like an unproblematic co-optation. For example, Meadway's Equal Opportunities Working Party often spends its meetings 'analysing' examination results in the interests of promoting the 'achievement' of students from what might be thought to be disadvantaged groups. In such meetings it is hard to pose questions about how this might have costs for other disadvantaged groups. This is a theme to which I return in Chapters Three and Four. At other times, the imbrication of radical equal opportunities discourses with those of new managerialism is contested. In one example of this, the listing of Year Ten students in order of their examination results for the purposes of data analysis and subsequent professional intervention has been and continues to be a matter of internal controversy.

Recent months have seen Meadway begin to re-formulate its Equal Opportunities concerns as concerns over (social) inclusion, again in line with New Labour priorities. As I noted earlier, a managerialist, school improvement-led emphasis on 'inclusion' can serve to make schools and teachers responsible for their own exclusionary

⁷ The Inner London Education Authority researched and introduced this initiative as a radical response to the inner-city uprisings of the early 1980s. Schools and teachers were encouraged and required to address inegalitarian practices through strategies such as curriculum reform and positive discrimination.

practices, but also serves to construct them as *solely* responsible for those practices. Likewise, a liberal pluralist ‘equal but different’ view of inclusive education leaves intact the systemic production of relations of subordination, often inscribing an individualising perspective. There *is* a body of work in inclusive education that takes, as its starting point, the imperative to move beyond the construction of the ‘special needs student’. Such work stresses the importance of de-categorising children and young people, and points out that, when everybody is included, the ‘special needs child’ becomes an obsolete subject position (Allan, 1999). But this work needs to be (and some, although not all, of it is) politically situated: if not it both avoids and rules out the possibility of questioning the nature of the system in which children and young people are supposedly included. Ainscow (1999) notes that, in addition to the work that individual teachers and schools must do, ‘there is the major problem of how to redesign a system of education that still bears many of the features of the purpose for which it was originally formulated, that of educating those who will take on elite roles in society’ (p99). I would want to distance myself from any work on ‘inclusion’ that suggests that the processes and practices of intellectual subordination begin and end with individual schools and teachers. In the current climate, I have mostly attempted to avoid the terms ‘inclusion’ and ‘inclusive education’, since they have become saturated with exactly this de-politicised set of meanings. In Chapter Four I will explore this in more detail.

Autobiography of the Question

There are many contexts for the production of knowledge in a PhD thesis. I have introduced the theoretical context, the policy context and the micropolitical school context. What I have yet to do is look at another set of contexts that have produced this thesis: my own personal and personal/political narratives and discursive positionings. Miller (1995) describes the importance of starting research from the ‘autobiography of the question’. In this section, I will look at how some of my stories, as teacher, as pupil, and as political activist, have produced my own investments in narratives of ‘success’ and ‘failure’, and the positions from which I understand the processes of intellectual subordination.

When I entered teacher training, it was with explicitly political objectives. After I had left school, I lived for several months at Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, then in its second year of existence outside the gates of the USAF cruise missile base. It was there that I learned about the imbrication of macro- and micro-politics, within a context of commitment to feminism, socialism and anti-militarism. I had my first experiences of what I now think of as group process, and learned about the realities of the struggle to achieve non-hierarchical, consensus-based, caring and non-violent decision-making structures. Central to our common political purpose was the creation of microcultures in which the 'serious' political aims of peace, nuclear disarmament and ending hetero-patriarchy could be lived in ways that were creative, imaginative and life-enhancing. Non-violence was intended to be fun. Sitting in front of lorries, arms linked with other women and singing loudly, I learned how to do things that were frightening and how to make a noise while doing them.

Looking back, I find it all too easy to criticise the lack of sophistication that sometimes inhered in Greenham politics at that time: in particular, the tendency to essentialise and romanticise around what it meant to be a woman and, certainly, to essentialise and vilify what it meant to be a man (Roseneil, 1995). Other aspects of the way we existed there have by contrast become so embedded into the way I think and act that it is difficult to remember learning them. These include the convictions that competition is unsustainable, that hierarchies and hierarchical relationships are necessarily violent and oppressive, and that there can be other and better values by which to live. By the time I left Greenham, I was certain that working in a politically-informed way to establish sustainable, non-hierarchical relationships was a necessary and key part of the struggle for peace and justice. Primary school teaching seemed to me to be a way in which I could usefully work towards this objective.

The late 1980s were not, perhaps, the easiest of times in which to begin teaching. Thatcherism was biting hard, the ILEA was being disbanded and the National Curriculum, with its attendant leap in demands on teachers, was waiting in the wings. I started work in a primary school in a Labour-controlled London borough at a time when concerns around social justice and political transformation were

metamorphosing into their more managerialist form. In my third term of teaching, the local Labour administration was replaced by a Conservative one, and the Equal Opportunities advisory staff found themselves locked out of their offices, their files confiscated. During the four years I spent at that school, working conditions changed irrevocably, and with them, the way in which I thought about children and schooling.

As managerial practices entered our everyday lives, political questions about the nature of power seemed to become an irrelevance to the ‘real’ work of educating pupils to achieve high levels in the new Standard Assessment Tests (SATs). As a novice teacher, who had yet to establish my credibility, I was to an extent swept along by this change. It was very seductive: I would be able to prove that I had done the best for the mainly working-class and materially impoverished population of my classrooms by pointing to ever-improving SATs results. Seductive, too, was the promise that I could end the doubts and fears associated with agonising over the complexities of power in favour of the certainties of measurable, quantifiable outcomes. Through the intensification of managerialism, I could take up a ‘good girl’ position. My schemes of work were the most detailed, most clearly referenced to the National Curriculum and the first to be handed in, always to headteacherly approval. I worried in public about attainment targets, about the quality of my record-keeping and about whether the standards reached by children in my class were high enough. I worried in private (and sometimes tried not to think at all) about how I, as a teacher promoting a competitive agenda, was complicit in the production of hierarchies of ‘achievement’.

From the outset, I was able to construct myself as a ‘successful’ teacher. My strengths were in areas that are highly visible: in teaching singing to packed hall-fulls of children, in teaching reading, and, (perhaps more embarrassingly), in crowd control. Parents liked me, as their children were usually happy in my class, and their reading improved. My inability to structure a science topic or to teach any kind of technology was much less noticeable, and seemed to matter less to parents. Within a year of starting teaching, it was clear that I was most successful with the least successful children. My commitment was always to the children on the margins, and to those who were not reaching what was then called the ‘average’, and is now called the ‘expected standard’. Perhaps I find failure more interesting than success. Perhaps I needed to be

needed. Perhaps it was an instinctive empathy with the underdog. I liked Jonathon, a survivor of foetal alcohol syndrome, the size of a four-year-old at the age of eight, barely able to write his name and so proud of learning to count to ten that he wanted to do nothing else all day. I liked Joshua, the second in a family of seven children, his older brother at an MLD school and his mother refusing to allow any other of her children to be sent there: as a child, she had attended the same special school herself and had hated it. And I liked Desta, timid and shy in a way that could be read as sullen and was probably going to cause her problems as an African-Caribbean girl. She was already convinced that she was a failing reader, and was heading towards producing herself as a ‘black girl with attitude’. Almost in spite of my ‘good-girl’ intentions, I was much less interested in the confident children or in those who achieved the highest standards. So, after four years of trying (with some success) to make myself care about SATs, I left for the special education sector.

It was there, as a class teacher of the primary/secondary transition class, that I learned about the complexity of the growing debate on the inclusion of pupils with ‘SEN’. In my class one year was Ari, one of the sweetest boys I have ever taught. ‘Sweet’ is the aptest description I can think of for him. Patronising though it sounds, he was completely adorable. But with severe dyspraxia, and considerable learning difficulties, he fell, in psycho-educational terms, a long way short of ‘normality’. His parents wanted Ari to be transferred to a mainstream school, and they were determined to get him there. Middle-class and articulate people, they knew how and where to lobby, before embarking on their campaign. They saw that the headteacher would not be the best place to start, so they sought my support, and that of the deputy head. We gave it. Ari’s mother also knew how to mobilise outside of the school. She made contact with an ‘inclusion guru’, and was part of a group of parents committed to inclusion who set up their own pressure/support group. I went along to two of their meetings, once out of interest, and once to speak. By the end of the summer term, Ari had a full-time placement in a mainstream primary school.

That same year, my class contained Andrew and Michelle. Michelle had been in special education since the age of eight, when her ‘behaviour’ in mainstream had become ‘unmanageable’. Now, she was a ‘good girl’, so it was time, according to the

headteacher, for her to return to the mainstream sector. Neither Michelle, nor her mother Louise, wanted this. Michelle's experience of mainstream school was of failure, and she reproduced this in every placement that was set up for her. Louise was constructed, through Michelle, as a failing parent: Michelle's refusal to attend the mainstream placements arranged for her was explained in staffroom narratives as Louise's failure to insist on her attendance there. Eventually, I came to share the failure accrued in this story, by supposedly 'colluding' with Louise's weakness in allowing Michelle to remain in special education. I could not bear to insist that Michelle leave a school in which she was happy and successful, and go to a school where she was clearly unhappy. So Michelle remained in my class.

Meanwhile, Andrew had been in a mainstream primary school until the age of ten, and he transferred into special school and into my class because there were concerns over how he would fare in a big secondary school. Andrew was a gentle giant of a boy. On the playground he was timid, and liked to play with much younger and smaller children, preferably girls. This was not at all conducive to masculine microcultural success (Thorne, 1993; Mac An Ghaill, 1994; Jefferson, 1996; Epstein, 1997; Warren, 1997; Raphael Reed, 1999). His speech and language difficulties were becoming more and more marked as he got older, and the disparity between himself and children of his own age had become increasingly obvious. His support teacher in junior school, whom I met when Andrew came on his preliminary visit, described Andrew as having 'learning difficulties' although this was inaccurate, and infuriated his parents. They were ambivalent about his placement in the special sector. Neither of them liked the idea in principle, but Andrew had been increasingly miserable at his junior school, and was moving in the direction of school refusal. In addition, they believed the mainstream staff did not adequately understand Andrew or his 'differences'. Andrew settled into the school and into my class within weeks. Whenever he talked about his previous school, he described it as 'smelly and horrible', and said he would never go back. His parents were delighted at his 'progress'. He was happy to come to school (which made a very material difference to their family life), and they read the sophisticated language with which special school professionals could describe Andrew and the work we were doing with him, as a reassuring measure of our expertise.

I emerged after four years in the special education sector with a somewhat contradictory position on ‘inclusion’, caught in many ways between idealism and pragmatism (Croll and Moses, 1998; Croll and Moses, 2000). I had to find a way to work in an educational world that is not the one I would choose to inhabit, should such a choice exist. On the one hand, it is clearly unjustifiable to go on segregating a small part of the child and adolescent population from the majority of their peers on the basis of professionally-constructed differences. I want to support the argument that, where a young person is ineducable in the mainstream sector, it is the mainstream sector that must change. But if children and young people have to suffer for the argument to be won, then the cost is too high. Andrew and Michelle, and many others like them, were and are desperately unhappy in mainstream schools. The daily experience of being a ‘failure’ in all but name, whether in a special, mainstream or elite school, is not one I would want for any child.

At the outset of the research, I thought I was asking the dual question: what counts as success and what does success count for? Inescapably, though, I have found myself thinking about failure, and the part played by the experience of failure (whether it is spoken or silent) in students’ identity work. This is not because I am interested in failure for its own sake or because I want young people at school to be set up to fail. But I do undoubtedly find myself intellectually, politically and personally drawn to an engagement with what goes on in the process of being constructed as failing, and with the ways in which different positions associated with ‘failure’ and ‘underachievement’ are taken up and incorporated into relations of domination and subordination. On all sorts of levels, from the acutely personal to the globally-political, there are questions to be asked about who gains and who loses when failure is air-brushed out of the picture. So where, and how, does academic failure feature in my own set of stories?

At the age of eleven I started life at an academically elite girls’ independent school. I spent the long, hot summer of 1976 looking forward to going there, and feeling excited about learning strange new subjects with grown-up, important-sounding names. In my first week we were duly inducted into the world of Chemistry. Dressed in regulation ‘butcher-blue’ overalls, we divided into pairs to practise using a Bunsen burner. Our

homework was to write up this ‘experiment’. Eager to please, and wanting to do well, I spent all evening on my homework. I wrote about my excitement before the lesson as we queued outside the lab, and about my anxiety when we were divided into pairs - would anyone want to work with me? I wrote about the pleasure of being allowed to play with fire. I described the whooshing sound of the air through the pipe of the burner when we opened the air holes. I painted word pictures of the colours and shapes of the flame. I speculated on the mystical nature of fire, on its power and its beauty, on its appearance as if from nowhere, and on its potential to enhance and endanger life. I wondered about where the flame went when the burner was turned off. I really enjoyed that homework. I loved writing, and such a piece of reflective prose would have delighted my primary school teachers. The next week my book was returned to me, with red lines drawn through it and graded ‘C-’. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before. Most mystifying of all was the teacher’s single comment at the bottom: ‘always use the third person’. Who was this third person? I was sure we had been told to do the experiment in pairs, not in threes. Asking was unthinkable: everyone else in the class seemed to know what to do and how to do it, and I was much too timid to approach the teacher. As the weeks passed, my tally of C and D grades grew: not just in Chemistry but in other subjects too. Ashamed and humiliated, I began to dread going to school.

This was a new and devastating experience for me. School had always been the place in which I had felt myself to be most successful. I was the younger, and very much the quieter, of two sisters. As a ‘good girl’ (Walkerdine, 1989; Rossiter, 1994) I was heavily invested in producing myself as industrious and unassuming. Inside the primary school classroom, teachers were happy for me to be quiet, helpful and hardworking, and I liked and was good at the reading, writing and maths which were the staple fare of my primary school curriculum diet. Thus produced as a high-achieving and hard-working girl I had an automatic right to a place within the ‘good girls’ micro-cultural group. In this (at the time) all-white and overwhelmingly Jewish part of London, almost all of the highest-achieving children were Jewish girls like me. I have no recollection of ever worrying about, or feeling sympathy towards, those children whom we excluded from our ranks. The good girls group to which I belonged

occupied a high status position within the classroom (where our ‘help’ would be sought by both teachers and classmates) and a middle ranking position in the playground where the highest status was accorded to the noisier, naughtier and more athletic groups of whom I was scared.

It was taken as read that I would in due course proceed to the borough’s one remaining selective girls’ school: a grammar school a short bus ride away from where I lived. Instead, I won a scholarship to a prestigious girls’ independent school just outside the borough, and a rather longer bus ride in the opposite direction. I entered its entrance examination as a ‘practice’ for the grammar school exam which I was due to take the following month. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. The school itself was stunning. Set in acres of parkland, and based in a Georgian house with modern extensions and separate buildings for Art and Music, it felt to me a bit like the girls’ boarding school stories to which I was addicted. An eighteenth-century English imperialist idyll, complete with cedar trees, terraces, and an avenue of lime trees. And, although I missed the symbolism at the time, a walled garden for keeping out the unwanted - anyone not clever enough, not white enough and not middle-class enough - and for preserving privilege. To this day, walled gardens fill me with an unspeakable sadness shot through with envy and a sense of outsiderness.

Within weeks of starting at this new school, my investment in being good through being clever and high-achieving had become intensely problematic. I was clearly one of the lowest achieving girls in the class. The knowledge I had on one level - that simply achieving entry into the school meant I was one of a select few - counted for almost nothing beside the daily experience of being at the bottom of the pile. Winning a scholarship had promised me, to use today’s word (though it was not fashionable at the time), ‘inclusion’ into an elite. What I got was seven years of exclusion, lived in ways that were beyond my comprehension.

Lack of success in the classroom also meant there was no place for me amongst the ‘good girls’. I was clearly one of the lowest achievers in the year group. There was no overt or easily recognisable snobbery, but the school’s formal and informal curricula

taught everyone where she belonged very effectively. Teachers setting homework would request us to 'look this up in the encyclopaedia when you get home'. Not only did this mean I was unable to do the homework, I was also constantly constructed as 'other' and inferior, for coming from a home where these and other resources were not readily available. Casual mentions of ski-ing holidays in Switzerland and days out to places of interest in London and elsewhere re-inscribed this sense of outsiderness, and made me long for (and know that I could not have) what looked like a life of excitement beside which mine seemed increasingly tedious and dull. I soon became aware of the differences between mine and other girls' homes and home relationships, and stopped inviting anyone over to my house. As the child of working-class parents whose formal education had ended when they were fourteen, I found it almost impossible to negotiate this environment in which the overwhelming majority of pupils (and teachers) belonged to a middle-class tertiary-educated elite. I became embedded more and more deeply into cycles of self doubt through what Skeggs, drawing on Bourdieu's work on taste, calls 'the emotional politics of class' (Skeggs, 1997, p90). But I had never heard of the emotional politics of class. I just thought I was inferior.

As at primary school, the highest status in the classroom went to the good girls, with Jewish good girls groups and non-Jewish groups co-existing in parallel. These were the Oxbridge aspirants, who were usually also the shining stars of hockey teams and the school orchestra, liked by teachers and mostly the daughters of senior civil servants or university academics. The highest status outside of the classroom went to the bad girls, and here there was slightly more mixity between Jewish and non-Jewish groups. These were the girls who were (or claimed to be) heterosexually active and who held drugs parties on the school roof but who somehow managed to do these things without jeopardising their academic attainment and assumed university futures. They were very much the focus of teachers' time and attention. I belonged in neither place. So I settled for the shifting solidarities operating amongst those of us who occupied the no-woman's land of what was known as the 'thick Maths group'. We were the eleven lowest-attaining girls in the year group: we were not able to be actively compliant with the school's demands for 'excellence' and we were mostly too scared to be actively transgressive of them.

Kenway and her colleagues observe that

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(Kenway et al., 1997, p34)

It is the question of what is to count as ‘success’ that is at the heart of this thesis. How do some versions of success become the dominant ones, and who is enabled to produce themselves as successful in dominant terms? Equally pressing, though, is the question of how schooling produces failure, and of whose interests are served by the preservation of ‘regular winners and losers’. In the current climate, it is fashionable to talk about success for all, and engagement with failure can sometimes seem impossible. But it is with failure that I find myself most wanting to engage. For seven formative years, I experienced the inhuman face and inhuman consequences of being at the bottom of an (albeit very exclusive and elite) educational heap. Some years later, I work with girls and young women who may be experiencing something equally inhuman, though differently constellated, as they struggle to produce themselves through discourses that do not make dominant versions of success available to them. In my own case, what counted as success was clear potential to enter Oxbridge, and I was left in no doubt that I was not amongst the chosen. The thick Maths group was not about partial success, it was about failure. The girls with whom I work mostly know that they will not achieve the five A*-C grade GCSEs which have come to signify dominant versions of success in English and Welsh secondary schools today. In this thesis I want to look at how this knowledge – the knowledge that they are failing in all but name – is lived by these students.

Overview of the Thesis

In this chapter, I have outlined the theoretical, policy, micropolitical and personal contexts through which the remainder of the thesis is produced. Central to the

conception of my research, and of this thesis, is the process of using theory to explore, explain and critique data, and data to explore, explain and critique theory. For this reason, I have decided not to undertake a separate review of the literatures on which I draw. These literatures - primarily those associated with feminism, post-structuralism, inclusive education and, to a lesser extent, disability theory - are embedded into the arguments that run through the thesis.

The main body of the thesis begins with a discursive history of intellectual subordination in the UK from the middle of the nineteenth century until 1994, when the Special Needs Code of Practice was introduced into schools. The 'special needs student', whilst apparently a 1980s invention, is, in fact, a descendant of the 'idiot child' of the 1850s, and these older discourses have been imbricated, but never eliminated, in her production. When mass compulsory schooling was introduced in the 1870s, Victorian Britain had to resolve one of the paradoxes it created. For, whilst mass schooling was arguably introduced to support the needs of the developing industrial capitalist economy, it also drew upon and re-inscribed the modernist project of the rational self. How were the group of children who would not be employable, and who could not be produced as incrementally and rationally-developing individuals be explained and provided for? Chapter Two examines the changing responses to this paradox, in their political context.

Chapters Three and Four move on to discuss the current micro/political context. I have chosen to focus on school micropolitics, not school culture (although these share much conceptual and analytical territory), since the term 'micropolitics' foregrounds the political nature of conflict and contestation in school policy-making, and compels an engagement with the formal hierarchies through which these conflicts are enacted (Ball, 1987; Reay, 1998; Skidmore, 1999a). As is suggested in the title of the thesis, I have not wanted to draw too solid a line between policy and micropolitics: my use of 'micro/politics' in specific places is intended to foreground the inter-relatedness and mutual construction of national policy-making and school micropolitics. Chapter Three looks at how Meadoway is produced, and produces itself, as a 'successful' school through its priorities as configured through New Labour policy. It looks at the

production of successful subjects - students and teachers - and at the consequences and possible costs of such productions. In similar vein, Chapter Four looks at the production of 'failure', or, as I will argue, its elision. For failure is something that cannot be named or engaged with at Meadoway. The school's official discourses slide past failure in a remediation discourse which suggests that everyone can succeed. This discourse exists as part of a complex double-bind which both requires universal success and precludes it.

Taken as a whole, these three early chapters explicate the nature of the contradiction embedded in New Labour schooling policies: policies which apparently require all 'normal' school pupils to be average or above. They examine in particular detail the contradictory spaces opened up between the standards agenda, and the move towards 'inclusive' education. The three chapters foreground class and capital in their analysis, sometimes at the apparent expense of other indices of difference. This surprised me initially, and I considered re-writing the chapters. On reflection, there seemed to me to be two compelling sets of reasons for retaining them in their present form. Firstly, the evidence cited in the chapters suggests that the macro/political context of global capital and its concomitant imperative to re-produce the competition that will be the spur to greater growth is over-determining the kinds of policies that governments can adopt (Modelska and Thompson, 1996; Ellwood, 1998; Shiva, 2000). This does not mean that I want to argue that schooling policies are not lived in ways that are nuanced by other systemically-located differences. But, and this is the second reason for not exploring them fully in these three chapters, these processes are more easily explored through the ethnographic analysis which forms the remainder of the thesis.

Chapter Five outlines the research methodology and methods. It outlines what I did, and with whom, and gives a rationale for choosing ethnography as the most suitable research approach. In this chapter I also look at some of the implications involved in doing what was, essentially, practitioner research. This is a theme that is further referred to and developed in subsequent chapters.

Chapters Six and Seven introduce the ethnographic analysis. In Chapter Six, I explore the ways in which some Year Seven students live their first months as Meadway's 'special needs students', and look at the sense they make of the school and their place within it. I introduce the three positions – 'sweet little girl', 'big bad girl' and 'lazy girl' - that the students tend to take up, and explore how they do this. These three subject positions are developed in Chapter Seven, which examines how they are taken up by the Year Eleven students, in relation to other students, teachers, and dominant versions of success. Whilst wanting to retain the notion of students having a degree of agency in positioning themselves, I also interrogate the amount of room for manouevre they actually appear to have, suggesting that in many instances they have few choices.

The remaining three substantive chapters look again at how dominant versions of success are produced and re-produced in Meadway's formal and informal micropolitics and student microcultures. In Chapter Eight I use some of Foucault's ideas to explore the examination process. I look at the role played by the examination in constructing dominant and deficit versions of success, and its role in winning for those versions of success the consent of students who seem to have little to gain from them. In Chapter Nine I look at the inclusion experiences of two autistic students: one whose inclusion was deemed to be a success, and one whom the school was unable to retain. I suggest that a third, 'really disabled', discourse of success is differentially deployed in relation to these two students. Through examining how these students are positioned by the school, I look both at the implications for policy, and at some of the limits to the explanatory power of current post-structural theory.

Chapter Ten describes and analyses a classroom project, designed and implemented in collaboration with a teacher of English, through which we attempted to provide conditions in which a class of Year Nine students could interrogate common-sense notions of what counts as success and explore alternatives. This chapter foregrounds the notion of sustainable change as an alternative to continuous improvement, and complexifies the notion of socially just pedagogies. It is both a departure from the rest of the thesis, in that it explores how things *might be* as well as attempting to account for how they *are*, and a natural progression of the argument of the thesis, which seeks

(with all necessary caution) to theorise *for* as well as *about* change (Kenway et al., 1994).

In this chapter I have set out the contexts - theoretical, material and personal - that have framed this thesis. I firstly introduced the set of theories, associated with feminist post-structuralism, through which I have sought to explain my data, and which my data have given me the opportunity to critique. In the middle part of the chapter, I introduced Meadway School, by way of a brief 'biography' of its organisation and its communities. I went on to present my own autobiography of the research question, and to look at how I relate personally, professionally and politically to the arguments in this thesis. I have ended with an overview of the remaining substantive chapters. In a sense, this chapter is a foretaste of the story I am about to tell. Writing this, I am reminded of the daily radio programme, 'Listen With Mother', that I loved as a young child. The storyteller always opened the programme with a few – just a very few – tantalising tasters of the story to come. Then would come the theme music, and those immortal words, 'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin'. As I am unable to supply this thesis with theme music (much though I would like to do so), I must hope that words alone are a sufficient invitation into the main body of the story.

Chapter Two

From 'Idiot' to 'Special Needs Child': The Historical Production of Intellectual Subordination

Changing Discourses, Stabilising Meanings

The last one hundred and fifty years have seen successive re-inventions of what has become known in the United Kingdom as 'learning difficulties'. This chapter explores how the parameters of what can be considered as a learning difficulty have undergone successive changes, and traces changing notions of what constitutes appropriate (educational) provision for those so identified. It looks also at the continuities. Social relations of capital, produced through class, gender/sexuality and 'race' and through perceived ability, have endured throughout the period. In this chapter, I will interrogate both the continuities and discontinuities in the discursive practices associated with what I will call 'intellectual subordination' in the context of multiple indices of difference.

Whilst the discourses and the practices that they legitimate have arguably become increasingly humane, I will argue that those discourses hold in place a binarism grounded in a normative version of individual-as-productive-labourer. The advent of compulsory education, at the beginning of the period in question, was predicated both on the needs of industrial capitalism to reproduce an appropriately-skilled workforce (with the definition of appropriateness changing over time) and upon the humanist ideal of schooling as the producer of 'civilised' individuals for a civilised society. Those children and adults who were never going to be able to compete in the labour market, and who were never going to be able to produce themselves as the liberal humanist version of learned individuals, became marginal to the endeavour of compulsory schooling from before its inception. Arguably they have remained so.

One of the problems with writing about learning difficulties is of knowing how to name the phenomenon and the people about whom one is writing. This problem has been in evidence throughout the past one hundred and fifty years. There can be no absolute notion of what constitutes a learning disability, since the means of coming to know about it is historically and socially situated. Unlike some physical and sensory

impairments, a learning or intellectual impairment cannot be discerned in the absence of instruments of normalisation. This is not to argue that learning impairments, whatever we choose to call them, do not exist. But the means of separating those who can be said to be intellectually disabled from the general population has been produced through a discursive field in which the imperative to separate out the economically unproductive from the productive has prevailed.

The progressive re-definitions of 'learning difficulties' reflect this dominant interest. What has been held in place throughout the discursive shifts has been a set of meanings through which people have been positioned in crucial ways as less than human (Yeatman, 1995) and inscribed into relationships of subordination grounded in perceived lack of intellectual ability. Alterations to the means of knowing and naming the phenomenon have undoubtedly brought about improved conditions for and more liberal attitudes towards people identified as learning impaired. But none of these successive changes could change the meanings connoted and connected with intellectual subordination in a capitalist society. Each successive re-naming became associated in time with the connotation of in-humanity from which it sought to distance itself. Indeed, these changes of nomenclature may paradoxically have been part of those discursive shifts that have allowed ameliorations in material conditions and attitudes, but have held the fundamental binary in place.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century we have inherited two means of naming the phenomenon and the people. We can use the rhetoric of 'special needs' and we can further specify what we mean by using the language of 'learning difficulty'. Both are fast becoming unsay-able. Behind these apparently neutral terms lie one hundred and fifty years of changing names and enduring (sometimes even static) meanings. To examine the discursive field that has brought this about, I will look at the policies and provision for the education of the people now known as 'children with learning difficulties', and at the discourses that have underpinned these policies. For the sake of convenience and readability, I will use contemporary terms in which to describe the concerns of each era without qualification, although I would of course want to distance myself from the application of names and labels that I believe are beyond reclamation.

I have divided the period into sections on the basis of major pieces of education legislation. These divisions of time are not-quite-arbitrary markers around which to develop a way of conceptualising incremental and continuous change, and they do not signify any major step-changes in and of themselves.

I will be focusing on state policy and provision which, in the case of educational provision means policy for England and Wales. This necessarily means I am concentrating, (almost completely in the earlier part of the period in question), on the production of the working-class child with learning difficulties. The children of the middle classes were not to be found in great numbers within the state system until the second half of the twentieth century, and private provision, whether in schooling or otherwise, was the norm for the least academically able middle class children. Arguably, in the earlier part of the period, middle-class children had an assured place in the social relations of capital almost irrespective of their perceived intellectual ability (Cole, 1989; Hendrick, 1990), although this operated differentially for girls and boys (Purvis, 1991). They therefore constituted neither a financial nor an ideological problem for society, and did not have to be accounted or provided for in public policy (Hurt, 1988). To an extent, this is a division that has endured, and must be read into any analysis of the production of intellectual subordination.

1850-1899: Christian Philanthropy and the Charity/Tragedy Discourse

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the ‘idiot’ was re-invented as the object of Christian pity and charity. Whilst some members of the British ruling classes strove to ameliorate the emiseration of working class women and children, others chose to demonstrate their Christian philanthropy through a commitment to providing more humane conditions for idiots. The popular image of the ‘natural’ – the village idiot as object of scorn, revulsion and fear – was overlaid as pioneering Victorian writer/philianthropists sought to differentiate their society from earlier, crueler times. Unlike the more politicised efforts of those who were working, for example, to reduce the working hours of children, there was a tendency for the re-invention of the idiot to be de-politicised. Blame for the predicament of the idiot was laid at the door of a supposed past ignorance, and not at the door of a capitalist economy. Lamenting the

materialism (ungodliness) of 1860s England, Greenwell argues that 'in Humanity we may perhaps have gained something that removes us a long way from the days when, as in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, idiot children were frequently thrown to perish in the forest by their parents' (Greenwell, 1869, p19).

The efforts of pioneers in the mid-nineteenth century were directed towards establishing that idiots, along with the rest of humanity, were God-created beings. And so a contradiction arose. On the one hand, industrial capitalism recognised humanity in those who were able to contribute their productive labour towards the generation of wealth. Idiots, along with members of other groups who were unable to insert themselves into the social relations of capitalism, could not be fully recognised as human. On the other hand, a more liberal, Christian-inspired agenda, operating from the moral high ground, became more and more insistent on a humane treatment, underpinned by the recognition of humanity. As the century wore on, this more liberal position gained in popularity. Writers and educators set out to reconstruct the idiot as a tragic and pitiable figure. The humanity of the idiot was recuperated in the outwardly optimistic assertion that idiots would be able to make limited progress towards normality, if they were correctly cared for.

The care of idiots was promoted as Christian duty towards the most unfortunate members of society, and, as such, set out to make itself apparently unarguable. Much of the writing of the period is in the form of poetry, designed for its popular moral appeal. It is worth quoting fully from an example of such a poem, as the construction of the charity/tragedy discourse is rooted in the linguistic address of the genre.

A mental blindness seals his eye
To this fair earth of ours;
He sees no brightness in the sun
No beauty in the flowers.

Sweet sounds that gladden other hearts
He seemeth not to hear,
The melodies of singing birds
Touch not his untuned ear.

Yet not upon him may we gaze

With cold despairing eye,
'Tis not decreed the idiot born
Must a poor idiot die.

Yes, 'tis a blessed charity
The fetters to unbind,
That hold the dull imprison'd soul,
The dark and hidden mind.

And God will surely give to those
His blessing and His love,
Who rightly use their better gifts
Affliction to remove.

(Unattributed, 1856 p4)

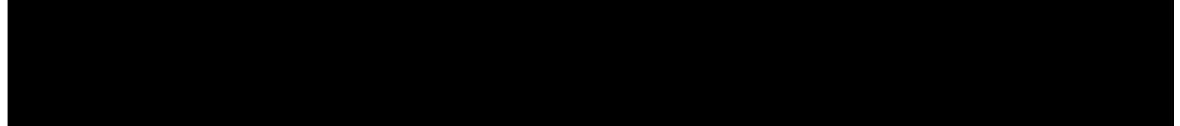
Much of the writing has an explicitly gendered address, appealing directly to women's supposed maternal concern for the 'poor little idiot children'. This appeal was intended to be translated into fund-raising, the object of which was to support institutions for the care of such children. One of the earliest of these, the Earlswood Mental Asylum, was founded near Redhill in Surrey in the early 1840s. It was the first asylum devoted to the care of idiots (as opposed to lunatics), and it took both adults and children, though they were cared for separately. Following its success, an asylum for children – Essex Hall in Coseheter – was founded. A later asylum, in Lancaster, was apparently modelled on Earlswood. All three were the subject of numerous 'penny pleas', through which members of the public were invited to give a postage stamp to help sponsor the care of a nominated idiot child within their walls. The penny pleas used Christian-inspired ideas about philanthropy, expressed through poetry and through descriptions of the suffering (and 'torment') of named individuals. E.G. (1862) notes that, as of 1862, 'three different "penny pleas" have been at different periods issued, and though many hundreds of each have been circulated, the kind request for more is as frequent as ever' (p96).

The surviving literature refers to the figure of '50,000 idiotic and weak-minded persons' who were thought to live in the British Isles in the 1850s and 1860s (Greenwell, 1869; Parkinson, 1869). I have not been able to locate the source of this statistic, or the means by which it was arrived at. Definitions of what was considered as idiocy are comparatively vague and inconsistent, but appear to serve the practical

function of differentiating (permanent) idiocy from (temporary) lunacy, and of emphasising the childlike-ness of sufferers. Greenwell (1869) argued that 'An idiot is one who is never strong enough to cast off the swaddling bands of infancy, and who lives bound round with them from head to foot, until he exchanges them for the cerecloths of the grave' (p10). In the same year, another writer, describing his day's observation of the Earlswood Asylum, writes that, 'Idiocy cannot be defined. Weak organisations, mental and physical; faculties unbalanced even when abnormally developed; an incapacity for the everyday duties of life; and a childishness which instruction and tender guidance may modify but can never remove' (Parkinson, 1869, p3). The charity/tragedy discourse was thus underpinned by a sense that the suffering of these helpless individuals defied precise definitions: that such suffering could never adequately be described because it must always remain unimaginable to those who were required to feel pity and give charity.

Incorporated into the charity/tragedy discourse were the revulsion and disgust that it ostensibly sought to replace. The act of caring for idiots could be considered and promoted as supremely charitable because these individuals were not just helpless, but also disgusting. And so the conditions of the asylums, and the moral character of those who worked in them, were romanticised and eulogised. These were the Christian heroes, who could work acts of transformation, with the (financial) support of those who had no stomach for the work. The helplessness of the inmates of the institutions was re-inscribed through descriptions of their transformative journeys from repugnant creatures to viable human beings, made possible by the pioneers and social philanthropists of the time. Reverend Edwin Sidney, an educator at Earlswood, gave numerous examples of such work in his public lectures.

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(The Rev. Sidney, 1854 p193)

In the popular literature of the penny pleas, the transformation of idiots, particularly idiot children, through the heroic devoted Christian care of their teachers, was expressed poetically.

But honour! honour! be to those
Gifted with patience rare,
Who make the helpless idiot child
The object of their care.

An idiot child! Oh, who can tell
Of anything so sad?
A heart without a pulse of joy,
A mind in darkness clad.

To win that heart to feel and love,
To nerve a listless mind,
Is in itself a work of love
Of more than human kind.

And more than human, too, will be
The teacher's rich reward,
To meet the object of his care
Before the throne of God.

Meet him before the throne of God
And hear the Saviour's voice,
Proclaim another soul has come;
Rejoice with me, rejoice...

Thou dids't it to the helpless one,
Thou dids't it unto me;
Thy work of love on earth is done,
In Heaven thy rest shall be.

(Unattributed, 1856, p21)

With the introduction of compulsory schooling in the 1870s, the contradictions between the industrial capitalist version of humanity, and this Christian philanthropic version, became more evident. Paradoxically, though, the resources generated in the contradictory space worked to uphold both versions. The primary purpose of mass schooling was to produce an appropriately skilled workforce, differentiated according to gender, to fulfil the requirements of late Victorian industrial society (Midwinter, 1970; Lawson and Silver, 1973; Gomershall, 1997). Appropriate skilling meant the preparation of large numbers for unskilled labouring and domestic work on the lowest rungs of the capitalist ladder (Wardle, 1976). Education at this level never was the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, since this was only provided for those children whose destiny lay within the ranks of the leisured classes (Simon, 1974). Those

children who were not considered able to benefit from instruction at this level were excluded from it, on the grounds that resources would be wasted on them. They would never make productive workers, and so had no claim on schooling resources. The supposed universalism of the law regarding elementary schooling effectively constructed these children as sub-human, since they were outside of the 'all children' specified by the education regulations. The asylums, although they emphasised the humanity of idiot children, in many ways worked to uphold the exclusion of them from mass schooling, through emphasising their helplessness and lifelong childlike-ness.

In addition, the provision of apparently universal schooling drew another kind of attention to the existence of groups of children supposedly unable to benefit from it. Until the 1870s, one category of mental deficiency – idiocy – had sufficed. The advent of mass, and then compulsory, elementary schooling brought with it the perceived need for finer categorisations. A means for excluding the least able working-class children (whose failure to make progress would both inhibit the smooth operation of the school and hold down the salaries of their teachers) was needed. This was found in the introduction of mechanisms for separating children into those who were, and those who were not, deemed able to benefit from instruction. This meant that other terms had to come into common usage, in recognition that there were children who, whilst they could be deemed unable to profit from elementary schooling, could not be considered as idiots. The terms imbecile and feeble-minded were at first used interchangeably with idiot, and did not consistently denote any difference in the degree of impairment (Pritchard, 1963). This began to change in the late 1870s, when the arguments for inventing ways of categorising people gained ground. In 1886, the Idiots Act provided for the care and control of idiots and imbeciles. This both marked the difference that had been established between the two groups, and made it necessary to develop increasingly sophisticated ways and means of differentiating between them.

1899-1921: Statutory Provision and the Rights/Protection Discourse

The Defective and Epileptic Children Act of 1899 established the 'feeble-minded' categorisation and gave local authorities the right to provide education for feeble-minded children if they so wished. This Act both drew impetus from and gave impetus to the growing body of regulations regarding the differentiation of mental defectives.



By the beginning of the twentieth century, children categorised as mentally defective were divided into the four classes of idiot, imbecile, feeble-minded and dull. There was an additional category of moral feeble-mindedness that encompassed those who were not mentally defective in its strictest sense, but who were thought to be unable to help themselves from degenerating into a life of criminal activity and/or prostitution. It was no longer considered adequate to rely on philanthropy alone for the provision of care and control. Debates about what kind of provision (including education) should be made for members of these groups, and enquiries into existing provision, led to the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913.

The 1913 Act had at its heart the clarification of certification procedures (through which people could be consigned to institutional 'care'), and the juridical inscription of the feeble-minded category. Its definitions were framed by a protection discourse: protection of both mental defectives and of 'society', (which thus, by implication, did not include mental defectives). Idiots were identified by the Act as those who were 'devoid of any understanding' and, as such, 'unable to appreciate the commonest dangers' (Hollander, 1916, p143). Imbeciles were said to be cognisant of major physical dangers but unable to manage their affairs. Moreover, 'if left to themselves, their instincts and manners become so repulsive that it is impossible to live in their society' (ibid p45). Feeble-minded children were defined in relation to the norm. They were the children who 'suffer from such an incomplete cerebral development that they are behind other children, at the same age and station in life, in mind and conduct, and do not profit by their environment and by education to the same extent as average children. They cannot be taught in public schools' (ibid p46).

By 1910, mentally defective children (and, to a lesser extent, adults), seem to have been effectively established as unfortunates. The battle to convince the 'public' (in other words, the non-defective population) that these pitiable creatures should be provided for had largely been won. And so the charity/tragedy discourse gradually merged with a version of a rights discourse, both legitimated by the meta-discourse of protection. Mentally defective people were increasingly perceived as having the right to care and provision, although this 'right' was constructed as a form of charity, since they would be cared for out of the public purse, with no expectation that they would

contribute to the cost of their own upkeep. The question was about who should have these 'rights'. The 'community' too had rights. They had, above all, the right to protection from the unsavoury habits and potential moral corruption of the mentally deficient. So the legislation that provided for growing numbers of mentally defective people set itself twin goals: their care, and their control.

In the years immediately leading up to, and in those following, the Idiots Act of 1886, it had become a commonsense that idiots should be confined to institutions. The debate in the early twentieth century was over what constituted efficient and necessary care for imbeciles and, more controversially, for the adult feeble-minded. Should this last group be the recipients of statutory residential care, and what degree of compulsion should be enforced?

Prior to the year 1913 the laws of England regarding the care and control of persons suffering from amentia were far from satisfactory. Idiots and imbeciles, it is true, were provided for by two statutes – namely the Idiots Act of 1886 and the Lunacy Act of 1890. The education of mentally defective children was sanctioned by the Defective and Epileptic Children Act of 1899; but the largest and most important class of all – that of the adult feeble-minded – was not recognised, and the absence of any legalized provision for their systematic care and control caused no little hardship to the defectives themselves, besides being a source of danger to the welfare of the community.

(Tredgold, 1914, p424)

The moral high ground belonged to those who advocated the confinement of the adult feeble-minded on the grounds that this group was especially vulnerable and that it was over-represented amongst those convicted of crime and prostitution. The advocates of such confinement – the direct inheritors of the philanthropic social reformers of the 1850s and 1860s – argued that it was cruel to feeble-minded individuals to allow them to sink into crime and prostitution when this could be avoided through certification and institutionalisation. They won a partial victory. The 1913 Act did provide for feeble-minded adults to be confined, but feeble-minded children of school age could be exempted from residential care. Some groups continued to argue for the compulsory confinement of these children, and for the provision of 'colonies' similar to those in North America, in which girls could be systematically trained for laundry work and boys for farm labouring, alongside adult inmates. They argued that although schooling

for feeble-minded children had been sanctioned, it was not compulsory, and that provision varied according to what local parishes and Poor Law Guardians considered was necessary. In 1907, of the 9,082 children in special schools in England, rather more than half were in London (*ibid*). Concern over this variation in provision led not to compulsory confinement of feeble-minded children, but to the less expensive option enshrined in the 1914 Elementary Education (Defective and Epileptic Children) Act. This charged local authorities with the duty of providing day and/or residential schooling for feeble-minded children, and made that provision statutory.

Another key debate was around questions of heredity. Drunkenness and sexual disease were seen as the primary breeding grounds of mental deficiency. Hollander (1916) writes that 'Idiocy, as well as imbecility, has defective heredity as the most frequent background for its development' (p30). In the endeavour to provide scientific proof of heredity, the skulls of mentally defective children and their (working-class) families were measured, so that medical practitioners could work out the size of their brains and thus determine mental capacity (*ibid*.). This debate was located within wider debates on heredity and eugenics, which sought to prove that members of non-dominant groups were subordinated due to inferior brain size and capacity, and that some groups were less deserving of life, and less amenable to 'civilisation' than others (Gould, 1981).

As the eugenic position gained popularity, it was used in the debates over appropriate provision. The perceived need to protect society took on a commonsense eugenic twist, since 'the veriest tyro knows that if the useless thistle is not kept within bounds and prevented from spreading its kind broadcast, it may do untold harm and involve a far greater expenditure of time and money than if efficient measures for controlling it had been taken from the first' (Lapage, 1911 p45). The liberal oppositional discourse was again deployed by those philanthropists who advocated compulsory institutionalisation as opposed to forced sterilisation (then known as 'asexualisation'). At the Augsburg conference of 1901, attended by eminent members of the HMI (Inspectorate), the argument that the 'degeneration of the advanced European races would ensue' as a result of the propagation of the feeble-minded was used to justify the establishment of residential colonies along the lines of the American model (Cole,

1989 p43). Lapeyre (1911) comments that 'the disadvantages of such a procedure as asexualisation are great, and lifelong supervision, which, though more costly, is so necessary for other reasons, should, if efficient, be an equally good safeguard against the propagation of the taint to future generations' (p237).

Both the advocates of eugenic measures, and the liberal opposition, held it as self-evident that 'society' would be at risk of being overrun by mental defectives were they allowed to propagate freely. Both, therefore, were situated within a master-race ideology that sought to use the politics of fear and disgust to establish non-dominant groups as the verminous, parasitic Other about to overrun 'civilised' society and take over the world for its own ends. Underpinning the judicial requirements for the protection of 'helpless' mental defectives then, was their construction as eugenic, moral and economic threat to Western capitalist society (Soder, 1984).

The multiple contradictions of the period were strongly nuanced by class and gender. The mental defective whose care and control was the subject of the 1913 Act was implicitly working-class and impoverished: the mentally-defective offspring of the rich middle classes would be provided for in the relative comfort of a family, or privately-run, home. The mental-defective-in-danger discourse was one of childlike, asexualised femininity. This was the construction which continued to evoke pity and its cousin, physical revulsion. The mental-defective-as-danger discourse was of aggressive, violent, physically powerful masculinity, and of non-respectable, out-of-control, promiscuous femininity. This was the construction that evoked fear, moral censure and a politicised version of disgust.

In the 1913 Act, there was recognition, although not official certification, of 'backward', 'dull', and 'feeble-minded' children. These terms, as yet undifferentiated, were used to identify the children who, whilst they could apparently benefit from instruction in ordinary elementary schools, would, it was thought, make little progress there. Their identification involved their insertion into the existing charity/tragedy and rights/protection discourses. Hollander (1916) notes that:

Boys, then as now, were over-represented in this category. Tredgold (1914) observes that 'it is interesting to note that the proportion of dull and retarded boys is greater than that of girls' (p177). But, in the years following the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act, it was impossible to measure with any degree of accuracy the numbers of children receiving special provision, or failing to make progress in ordinary schools, since no mechanism for enforcing educational requirements of the Act had been established.

1921-1944 Science and the Medical/Psychological Discourse

This perceived shortcoming was rectified by the Education Act of 1921 which required local authorities to ascertain exact numbers of dull, backward and feeble-minded children living within their jurisdiction. The 1920s and 1930s were characterised by incremental refinements to the markers of mental deficiency. Where descriptive markers had sufficed, numerical calibration, based on 'scientific' and 'objective' measures, was now required. The emotional, feminised language that had produced the pitiable idiot, and the emotive, masculinised vernacular that had produced the threatening, dangerous defective, became imbricated with the scientific 'objectivism' of post Great-War psychology. And where the medical profession had been uniquely responsible for diagnosis and certification procedures, psychologists now began to assert their professional claims to diagnostic expertise. The medical hegemony lingered, though: it was still only 'medical men' who could actually issue the certificate of deficiency, and, in the institutions, mental defectives were still referred to as patients, subject to educational and other 'treatment'.

The 1927 Mental Deficiency Act defined mental deficiency in relation to idiocy – presented as the absence of intelligence. The protection discourse was strengthened

and reconfigured. Now it was the mentally deficient who were to be protected (from their own inability to recognise danger, or earn a living). The protection of society as a legitimizing narrative was omitted from the wording of the Act, thus legitimising incarceration as an act of benevolent caring by a society that was financially secure. Idiots were categorised as ‘persons in whose case there exists mental defectiveness of such a degree that they are unable to guard themselves against common physical danger’ (Tredgold, 1947, p60). Imbeciles were ‘persons in whose case there exists mental defectiveness which, though not amounting to idiocy, is yet so pronounced that they are incapable of managing themselves or their affairs, or, in the case of children, of being taught to do so’ (*ibid*, p147). And the feeble-minded were ‘persons in whose case there exists mental deficiency which, though not amounting to imbecility, is yet so pronounced that they require care, supervision and control for their own protection, in the case of children, that they appear to be permanently incapable by reason of such defectiveness of receiving proper benefit from the instruction in ordinary schools’ (*ibid*, p153).

From 1921, local education authorities (LEAs) were required to ascertain the numbers of feeble-minded children of school age in their districts, so that they could be provided with day or residential schooling in special schools for the mentally defective (MD schools). But there was increasing concern at the wide variations in the proportions of children so ascertained by different LEAs. In 1926 a Joint Mental Deficiency Committee was set up to inquire into this. The committee set a figure of 1.2 per cent of the school population (higher in rural areas) whom it considered would be mentally defective. This convenience figure was based on the proportion of children already receiving special educational provision in London, and on the provision that the committee thought it was reasonable to demand of other LEAs. Charged with providing a more precise means of calibration that would ensure a degree of consistency, the committee looked to the work of French psychologist Charles Binet, and his tests for calculating mental age and mental ratio. The ‘objective’ tests that he devised calculated mental age, and then related this to chronological age: a child of ten scoring a mental age of five would be said to have a mental ratio of fifty per cent, whilst a child of ten with a mental age of three would be said to have a mental ratio of thirty per cent. In the following decades, the method of testing and calculation

remained largely unchanged, but the term 'mental ratio' was converted to 'Intelligence Quotient'. The child with the supposed mental ratio of fifty per cent became the child with the IQ of fifty, in a means of calibration that was set to last for several decades.

In 1929, the joint committee report set out maximum mental ratios for each group of mental defectives, based on lines of demarcation drawn according to the capacity (and projected capacity) of special education. Idiots were henceforth those who had a mental ratio of under twenty, later equated to an IQ of less than 20. Imbeciles were those with a mental ratio between 20 and 40, later revised to an IQ of between 20 and 50. And the feeble-minded were those with a mental ratio of up to 60, to be revised as soon as provision could be made available to 70, and later equated with an IQ of 70 (Burt, 1935). These were the markers, arising from administrative requirements, that became enshrined as the true, objective delimiters of mental deficiency. As the 1930s wore on, the old descriptive markers passed out of common educational usage, to be replaced first with mental age, then with mental ratio, and finally with IQ. The new, enlightened, scientific times sought to distance this scientific practice from the old days of idiosyncratic identification and patchy provision (Burt, 1937).

There seems to have been consensus that, where the three categories of idiot, imbecile and feeble-minded were concerned, the deficiency was inborn, whilst the question of heredity was still a matter of debate. There also seems to have been unquestioned consensus that children classed as idiots, imbeciles and feeble-minded were ineducable in ordinary schools. There was less certainty about the area of backwardness, or dullness. Different educational provision was thought to be necessary for the innately dull (who could not be fixed) and the merely backward (who could be repaired and made useful through the appropriate scholastic treatment).

No grindstone can make a good blade out of bad metal; and no amount of coaching will ever transform the inborn dullard into a normal child. The pupil who is merely backward forms a different problem. He is a knife without an edge – good steel that has never been sharpened. He hacks away at his daily loaf; but will never cut true or smooth until he has been sent off to the repair shop to be whetted and sharpened.

(Burt, 1937, p9)

It is in such metaphors that the old contradiction between the need for schooling to produce a useful workforce, and the imperative for a caring society to protect its most vulnerable members lived on. The notion that a proportion, at least, of mentally defective children could be fixed and made useful replaced the pre-1920s social Darwinism with an optimistic view of the ability of schooling to remediate and ameliorate the problem of mental deficiency. Pedagogy, hand-in-hand with the scientific apparatus increasingly associated with psychology, was to lead the way to a more orderly, more rationalist future for mentally defective people and for the society in which they lived.

Backwardness was increasingly perceived as a social problem and, in the optimistic 1920s, as one that could be scientifically fixed. The category of moral backwardness gradually disappeared as a discrete class, whilst the link between intellectual deficiency and delinquency was strengthened. A survey of educational provision in Southend found that,

Children who could not obtain satisfaction through their schoolwork were directing their energies into other channels. More than 50 per cent of juvenile delinquents who came before the Juvenile Court were school misfits: inside the school there was a distaste amongst the teaching staff for work with 'C' stream classes.

(Hill, 1939, p9)

Increased testing showed that girls continued to do better than boys throughout the state schooling system, but this was apparently not a cause of great concern. Having noted that 'at almost every age the girls outstrip the boys', Burt (1939) comments that 'with boys, the slower onset of puberty and the added stimulus of freedom, fresh work and the earning of a wage, that comes when they change from pupils into workmen, place the date of their final mental spurt just beyond the period of school life (p192). It was accepted as common-sense that children from the 'lowest stations' would score lower marks than their more affluent counterparts in any form of testing, and Burt and his colleagues stressed that like should be compared with like: it would be unfair to compare children from the slums with children from the suburbs, and diagnoses of dullness or backwardness should be accordingly adjusted.

Provision for dull and backward children (the two terms were used interchangeably in practice, despite Burt's efforts to distinguish between them) was intended to be located in special classes in elementary schools. The school leaving age for pupils in such classes could be extended, at the discretion of the LEA, to 16. However, the economic downturn of the 1930s acted as a brake on such developments within special education (Cole, 1989). Where such classes did exist, they were seen as examples of best, most enlightened, practice: as the application of scientific pedagogy. Teachers in special classes were encouraged to keep their pupils' innate capacity for learning at the forefront of their minds when planning work, even to the extent of pinning a chart detailing pupils' IQs on the classroom wall. This information was to be kept from the pupils. It was constructed as knowledge that could only be relevant and useful to professional experts.

The children show little curiosity about the number beside their name and are quite incapable of understanding how a number could be a measure of how clever they are. If by any chance they should show curiosity they have merely to be told it is a number which teacher has given them in her book and now it is entered on the sheet.

(Hill, 1939, p88)

And so the 1920s and 1930s re-inscribed another of the contradictions at the heart of the discursive production of intellectual subordination. Enlightened, progressive opinion was that less severe forms of deficiency could and should be fixed by the application of scientific rationalist forms of assessment and pedagogy. But if the fixing of mental deficient individuals was the obvious 'solution', this left intact the implication that severely deficient children and adults were an enduring problem. Fully human status remained entwined with an individual's perceived ability to contribute to the nation's economy, and to take up a position within the social relations of capital. Within this irreducible problematic, education could not be perceived as a solution for people who were positioned as ineducable. Furthermore, in times of financial difficulty, (which the 1930s undoubtedly were), the schooling system had to make manifest a hierarchy of deficiency based on who might be made economically productive: a hierarchy which arguably was implicitly present all along. 'Acute financial problems... hampered the development of special education and led senior

officials at the Board of Education to draw up a list of priorities a the head of which was the education of the deaf and blind, and at the bottom was help for lower-grade mental defectives' (Cole, 1989, p90).

1944-1981: Shame and the Self-Esteem Discourse

The elementary school system established in 1870 had been under growing pressure since the beginning of the twentieth century. It no longer fulfilled the functions of producing an appropriately skilled workforce, or of producing educated individuals, particularly since the requirements of industry had changed, with the massive expansion of numbers working in the clerical sector (Lowe, 1988; Lowe, 1997). In 1944, the Education Act (also known as the Butler Act) established the tripartite system of secondary schooling, which derived from, and re-inscribed, the notion that intelligence was fixed and immutable, and that the best way to provide for children's educational progress was to sort them according to ability. The rationale of the Act was drawn both from the science of psychology, and from progressive notions of meritocracy, in which the 'best' education would supposedly fit the most able children for the most demanding (and most prestigious) occupations, irrespective of the class background from which they originated. The tripartite system implicitly and explicitly re-inscribed the equation of academic ability with power and future individual and national wealth, and the lack of academic ability with powerlessness and the prospect of poverty.

The 1944 Butler Act did away with the old terminology of mental deficiency (which passed into the pejorative vernacular) and established the new category of 'Educationally Sub-Normal' (Ministry of Education, 1951). One of the other new categories of handicap established by the Act was that of 'maladjustment', which replaced moral imbecility. The idea that society had to be protected from ESN children disappeared from the official legislation, since the moral threat with which they had been associated was displaced onto maladjusted children. However, within the terms of the Act, ESN children still needed, by implication, to be protected from the demands of normal schooling and society. That protection was to take the form of exclusion from mainstream schooling. The tripartite system was predicated on the

notion that everyone could be fitted into a school commensurate with their academic ability. It grew out of, and firmly embedded, a hierarchy in which grammar schools were clearly superior, in which secondary moderns were a deficit model of grammar schools, in which schools for ESN children were inferior to secondary moderns, and in which severely sub-normal children did not even rank as educable.

One of the intentions of the 1944 Act (which, like every other piece of legislation that preceded it, presented itself as the voice of enlightened modernity) was to reduce the shame connoted with mental deficiency. There was to be no more certification of school-age children. The job of assessment and diagnosis was to be placed in the hands of school psychologists, as soon as these could be trained. LEAs were to be required to ascertain which children now fell into the broader group of educationally sub-normal, a group which included children previously known as 'dull' and/or 'backward'. Cleugh (1957) describes some of the contradictory effects of this change.

Prior to 1944, the transfer to an M.D. school of Charlie, who was a nuisance, but whose intelligence quotient was relatively high, could be challenged on the ground that he was not mentally defective, but now (unless the circumstances were quite exceptional) he would be fairly sure to come under the E.S.N. umbrella.

p7

On the one hand, the benevolent humanitarianism of the Butler Act aimed to make effective educational provision available to a group of children who had previously suffered educational neglect. On the other hand, however, LEAs were given increased powers to assess, calibrate and superintend the perceived 'abilities' of a much greater tranche of the school population. The new terminology was soon associated with the old stigmas of mental deficiency, and a new binary construction, the 'ascertained child', came into being (Segal, 1949; Cleugh, 1957; Townsend, 1958).

In an attempt to de-stigmatise the MD schools, they were re-designated as 'special schools'. Cleugh (1957) argued that 'in the long run, the only way of getting rid of the stigma is by the excellence of the work of the ESN school, so that it really does provide what is implicit in its title, *special education*' (p28). There was debate over just who should go to these schools. Some argued that all children ascertained as ESN

should go there, whilst others argued that only the more pronounced cases – those children who would previously have been certified as feeble-minded, together with those whose behaviour as well as their IQ were problematic – should be sent to special schools.

Children found to have a low Intelligence Quotient are sent to Special Schools, colloquially known as “Silly Schools”. These children, however, are trained, so that when they leave school they can take their place in society. This being the objective of Special Schools, it would be better for those children of low I.Q., who show no behaviour problems, to remain in the normal school. They should, however, be relegated to a class for special methods of tuition. Only children who cannot fit in with games and the social life of the school should be segregated.

(Segal, 1949, p15)

Such arguments highlight the contradictions embedded in post-war optimism. Special ESN schools were simultaneously constructed as places to be avoided whenever possible, and as institutions capable of providing excellent education. They were required simultaneously (and unrealistically) to provide for those children who would disrupt the smooth running of normal schools, and also to act to remove the stigma associated with sub-normality.

To accommodate this contradiction, strenuous efforts were made to establish a positive view of ESN schools and their pupils. These efforts, however, drew heavily on the charity/tragedy discourse in which the ESN child remained the object of pity. As idiot, imbecile and feeble-minded gave way to educationally sub-normal and remedial, the meanings that had brought both the outdated and updated terminology into being remained stable: sub-normality continued to equal inferiority, and the inscription into discourses of powerlessness and material poverty. This construction was most easily visible in the debates about severe sub-normality. The earliest calls for severely sub-normal children to be educated in special schools were met with the argument that special schools would be tainted by their presence. ‘The only way to cut through the vicious circle is for all children who are known to be ineducable to be excluded’ (Cleugh, 1957, p70). Educable ESN children were to be helped to feel good about themselves and this could seemingly only be done by distancing them from the ‘ineducability’ associated with severely sub-normal children. Questions of self-esteem

entered the frame, and the issue of special school placements for educable children was accordingly recast. Alongside the imperatives of administrative convenience, the question was asked: what would be most damaging to a child's self-esteem? Was it more humiliating to be ascertained and sent to a special school, or to remain in a normal school experiencing daily failure? Whilst this question may look like a humanitarian improvement on what preceded it, it left in place the set of meanings that constructed educational subnormality as something shameful, to be manouevred around.

But this recognition of the shame attached to educational sub-normality paradoxically made it harder to talk about. In the late 1940s, Cleugh was able to make this observation. 'It is wise to take all reasonable steps to minimise the children's feelings of being 'different', but if they *are* different and can best be helped by a procedure which varies from the normal, what then?' (ibid. p47). Since the 'difference' associated with educational sub-normality seemed inescapably to connote deficiency, the answer, for many educationalists, was to reduce the emphasis on difference, and recuperate as many educable children as possible into versions of normality and sameness. At the same time, the growing emphasis on questions of self-esteem began to make it possible to understand the deficiency connoted by sub-normality as an individual psychological problem, and one that could be professionally identified and remediated.

Postwar stirrings of the nature-nurture debate had similar contradictory effects. On the one hand, there was concern for the educational and psychological costs to children of material and familial deprivation, disrupted schooling and continued poverty. But the discourses deployed in operationalising this concern could be reactionary as well as progressive. The maternal deprivation argument, for example, was used to exclude women from the workforce. And the suggestion that failure to achieve in school was socially- and institutionally-produced led on the one hand to arguments that children could be 'fixed', and on the other hand to the greater marginalisation of severely sub-normal children who were positioned outside of the social construction arguments.

The construction of severely sub-normal children continued also to draw on the idea of perpetual childhood. There was a sharp distinction between children who were designated as educable and those who were designated as ineducable. The cut-off point for ineducability was an IQ of less than 50-55: the point at which the boundary between feeble-mindedness and imbecility had been established for institutional efficacy in the 1930s. After 1944, children categorised as ineducable were consigned to the care of the medical, not educational, authorities. The existence of larger-than-hitherto expected numbers of such children had been exposed during the War, when mothers, drafted into work whilst their husbands were away fighting, had been obliged to seek residential care for their children. One of the inferences that can be drawn here is that the certification process had been unpopular and ineffective, and that large numbers of parents – mostly those who could afford to make alternative arrangements for their children – had managed to avoid the process and its resultant stigma (Hurt, 1988; Cole, 1989). It also highlights the classed nature of the discourse, and the efforts that middle-class parents would both want and be able to make in order to avoid their children's certification. Post-war efforts were directed into making the institutions more humane, and into tightening identification and admissions procedures so that 'genuinely ineducable' children did not slip through the net and so that educable children were not wrongly institutionalised.

In the 1950s, the moral high ground still belonged to those who advocated expensive residential provision for the severely sub-normal, in much the same way as it had belonged to the Christian philanthropists a century earlier. Those who argued against such provision were at first represented as penny-pinchers whose aim was to remove the right to care of these vulnerable and needy perpetual children (Loewy, 1955). However, partly as a result of the growing expense of such provision, the 1959 Mental Health Act required local health authorities to set up Junior Training Centres for school-age children who were severely sub-normal, but who were not considered to need hospitalisation. The word 'ineducable' was removed from the statute books, and there was debate about what was meant by educability.

There is no question that, at the lowest end, looking after idiots who are entirely confined to bed is a matter for hospitals and nursing care, i.e. is a

medical question. Similarly, there is no question that at the upper end, the provision of grammar school places is an educational matter. Somewhere in between is a no-man's land which is claimed in turn by the medical and by the educational auxiliary.

(Cleugh, 1957, p72)

In the 1960s, this common sense was eroded. From the distance of two decades, the Department of Education and Science could look back and criticise the 1944 provisions. A DES survey in 1964 found that 'some teachers were not bringing forward slow learners for ascertainment because of the attached stigma' (Cole, 1989, p107). The separation of severely sub-normal children into medical institutions was partly blamed for this enduring stigma. A British Psychological Society report, quoted in the Plowden Report of 1967, had found that, in a study of 155 testable children in a hospital for the subnormal, '23 per cent had IQs over 50, 14 per cent over 70, and four per cent over 100' (Hurt, 1988, p192).

Throughout the 1960s, progressive special educators, headed by Segal, pursued the 'No Child is Ineducable' campaign. They argued that the 1959 legislation, as well as humanitarian good sense, had made it imperative for education authorities to take over the provision for severely sub-normal children, and that such provision should be in schools, not in hospitals (Stratford, 1981). In 1970, the Education (Handicapped Children) Act put schooling for severely sub-normal children on the statute books. Control of the JTCs was transferred to the DES in the first instance, whilst the LEAs made plans for the 145,000 children thought to be awaiting school places (Hurt, 1988).

These changes represented an undoubted gain for severely sub-normal children. But they were legitimised by discourses that continued to re-inscribe negative meanings about educational sub-normality. The indefensibility of the residential institutions rested largely on the fact that many children were wrongly placed in them: effectively, the argument was that some of these children were really quite normal. In 1967, the Plowden Report also recommended that the term 'sub-normal' be discarded in favour of 'slow learners', to emphasise the similarity between these children and those in normal schools (Rogers, 1988). The amelioration in conditions for severely subnormal children was thus paid for in the elision of difference. Continuing the trend from the 1944 Act onwards, this particular difference became progressively harder to talk about,

since it was increasingly impossible to do so without connoting deficiency and shame. In the official rhetoric, and in the language increasingly used by schools, ‘slow learners’ were not *different* but *special*. Sub-normality became the terminology of insult and derision, as idiocy and imbecility had previously done.

The 1970 Act left in place the IQ score of 70 as the cut-off point between special and mainstream education. But as the 1970s progressed, the objectivity of intelligence testing was called into question, and the old benchmark of 70 went fuzzy around the edges. It became widely accepted that intelligence testing gave only a partial, and possibly inaccurate, reading of a child, and was susceptible to environmental influences. ‘Limited ability may be mistakenly assumed. It is insulting to describe someone as ‘dull’. It may also be incorrect’ (Davie, 1971, p9). Resistance to the stigmatised special schools remained constant, whilst in mainstream schools, the question of whether to provide special full-time classes or a system of withdrawal for remedial lessons was hotly debated (Jones Davies, 1975b).

Such organisational debates were developed in tandem with the self-esteem discourse. If slow-learning children could not actually *be* normal, they must be made to *feel* normal. Edwards (1975) instructed that ‘staff of any remedial set-up must avoid any reproachful remark about, or hint that the pupils they teach are in any way inferior or different’ (p83). Reminiscent of the 1930s, he goes on to state that ‘children are told of their improvements but *never* their attainment ages of course’ (*ibid.* p92). Advocates of both segregated and integrated provision now deployed the self-esteem discourse, located within a discourse of benevolent humanitarianism, in order to claim the moral correctness of their respective positions.

ESN children in special schools exhibit a positive self-concept and a level of self-regard comparable to the mean of the general population. This would suggest that the children benefit from comparing themselves not with the external higher standards of the mixed ability schools but with the lower standards of the special school in which they find themselves. The protective and supportive environment of the special school safeguards the child from widespread denigration.

(Jones Davies, 1975a, p21)

On the other hand, it was argued that referral to special schools and classes brought about the child's feeling of inadequacy, and it was precisely those feelings of inadequacy that impeded the child's academic progress. What all of these arguments shared was the construction of self-esteem as the problem of the individual child, to be remedied by the cleverness of individual teachers and institutional arrangements in obscuring that child's inadequacies. 'Often the butter of success has to be spread thinly. Every remedial teacher has to resort to subterfuge, and sometimes pretend there has been a success, while searching discreetly but frantically for means of really helping a failure' (Edwards, 1975, p94).

Concurrent with the development of the self-esteem discourse, the changing educational and political landscape of the 1970s was responsible for a climate in which arguments against segregated schooling could claim a different kind of morality (Jones, 1981; Tomlinson, 1981; Hegarty, 1989). A number of enquiries questioned the existing methods of identifying slow learning children, and began to suggest that up to 20% of children in mainstream schools might belong to this group (Rutter, Tizard and Whitmore, 1970; Kamin, 1974). At the same time, the National Association of Remedial Educators (NARE) conferences of 1975 and 1977 saw the development of the argument that it was the curriculum, and not the child, that needed remediation (Widlake, 1977; Gains and McNicholas, 1979).⁸

Framed by an egalitarian discourse, the Education Act of 1976 set out to make integrated provision the norm, with the onus on LEAs to demonstrate financial non-viability in exceptional cases. The Warnock Committee was established and asked to investigate how the Act could best be implemented. When the committee reported, in 1978, it called for the creation of the concept of educational needs. These 'needs', supposedly common to all children, were based on the liberal humanist concepts of independence and imagination: these, postulated Mary Warnock, were what every child needed to learn in order to live 'the good life' (Warnock, 1978). The Warnock Report grouped the principles underlying special education into three headings:

⁸ The educational picture of the mid- to late 1970s was further complexified by the beginnings of the standards agenda, whose origins can be traced to the speech made at Ruskin College by the then prime minister James Callaghan. Ball (1990b) presents an overview of these early stirrings of the standards agenda, and how they became implicated in the New Right reforms of the 1980s.

principles concerned with the *nature* of special educational needs, principles concerned with the *rights* of children with special educational needs, and principles concerned with the *effectiveness* of identifying those needs (Goacher et al., 1988). Out went the language of slow learning and remedial education, and in came the language of special educational needs. Out, too, went the notion that children could be neatly fitted into the categories of handicap originally established by the 1944 Act and revised in the intervening period. Instead, the Warnock Report was underpinned by the notion that special needs operated in a complex and interactive way, and need not be located within the individual child. The committee recommended that special educational needs be understood as a continuum, and constructed in the relationship between individual children and their relationship to schooling (Stratford, 1981; Gipps, Gross, and Goldstein, 1987).

1981-1994: Learning Difficulties and the Entitlement/Access Discourse

One of the first actions of the incoming Conservative government in 1979 was to repeal Section 10 of the 1976 Education Act, which had advocated the integration of all children into mainstream schools as soon as reasonably possible. Instead, in 1981, a new Education Act was passed, enacting many of the reforms suggested by the Warnock Committee. Children with Special Educational Needs, whether they were placed in mainstream or segregated settings, were to be the subject of assessments leading in some cases to 'statementing', not ascertainment. There were mechanisms for parental (and child) participation in the statementing procedure. The categories of ESN(M) and ESN(S) were abolished in favour of moderate learning difficulties and severe learning difficulties (MLD and SLD respectively). Like all the pieces of legislation that had preceded it, the 1981 Act was part of the continuing trend for more children than ever to come within the special needs remit (Barton and Tomlinson, 1984). In spite of the fact that the Warnock Committee had favoured integrated provision, by 1987, 1.44 % of the school population were in special schools, compared to 0.98% in 1967 and 0.81% in 1957 (Cole, 1989).

The 1980s policy context was dominated by the New Right priority to reform all aspects of the provision of state services. The rationale and the running of the education service came in for particular attack in the years leading up to the Education

Reform Act (ERA) of 1988. Just as the growth of the clerical sector in the first half of the twentieth century had necessitated a re-evaluation of the purposes of schooling, now the explosion of the managerial and information technology sectors, and the United Kingdom's economic decline relative to the 'tiger economies' of South-East Asia forced a similar rethink (Lowe, 1997). Underpinned by a neo-Conservative back-to-basics agenda that sought to undermine social justice priorities as the misguided priorities of left-wing metropolitan local government (Simon, 1988; Cooper, 1989; Sanders and Spraggs, 1989), and a neo-liberalism that sought to strengthen the link between schooling and national economic growth (Tomlinson, 1994), the Conservative government set about creating a climate in which major structural reform would be possible. As the standards agenda gathered momentum, the perceived need to publicly delimit the parameters of what could count as normal 'achievement' at given ages became central to policy-making. The outcome of years of 'discourses of derision' (Kenway, 1987; Ball, 1990b; Kenway, 1990) was a climate in which the marketisation of schools came to be seen first as possible, then as necessary, and then as the only way forward. The marketisation of education heralded by the ERA had wide-ranging effects on the provision of education for children with learning difficulties. These effects can be broadly grouped around the overlapping themes of resourcing, provider accountability and access to the new National Curriculum.

In the context of overall cutbacks to the education service, schools were made responsible for a large part of their own budgets, which were delegated to them under Local Management of Schools. This made the provision for children with SEN in mainstream schools very vulnerable, since funding for children who were not statemented was often the first to be cut (Lunt, 1990). The outcome was a situation in which the notion of SEN as relative could not be sustained in the face of schools' needs to acquire funding in order to meet those needs.

The problem is how to resource a continuum of need. Clearly it is administratively much easier to identify, categorise and 'pigeon-hole' pupils for resource purposes. It is also administratively easier to define need according to categories which, by definition, mean a break in a continuum as one passes over a threshold into a different category of need and resources. Yet identification in this manner also involves labelling and breaking the continuum... the so-called 'borderline' needs of those with moderate learning

difficulties or emotional and behavioural difficulties are those which pose the greatest problem in terms of provision and for whom the break in the continuum is likely to be the most arbitrary.

(Lunt and Evans, 1994, p39)

Linked to the delegation of funding was the notion that individual schools should be accountable to their 'customers' - the parents of current and prospective students. This was to be achieved by injecting market discipline into the schooling system. Riddell and Brown (1994) comment that the government of the time 'emphasised its determination that the new agenda of competitive individualism would replace former concerns with equality and social justice. Education professionals were seen as an impediment to progress' (p14). Schools and teachers were re-invented as the providers of education who had to be policed by the state in the interests of consumers. The rhetoric of parental choice - in reality the choice of a limited group of socially advantaged parents (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995) - was used to legitimate rationalist measures such as the league tabling of schools according to their pupils' exam results and the introduction of a punitively surveillant inspection regime under the newly-formed OFSTED. Pupils with learning difficulties were vulnerable in such situations. On the one hand, if they could be statemented, then extra resources could be allocated to the school to enable it to meet their needs. But such pupils, especially if they could not be statemented, could also be positioned as a liability, as they would adversely affect a school's overall exam results and potentially make it less attractive to prospective pupils and their parents.

Rational testing programmes and league tables of school results create anxiety about the impact of pupils with learning and/or behaviour problems on the school's public image, and hence on its future pupil numbers... The concept of a 'market' in educational services may create some limited choices for those who have the power to make choices, at the expense of those who lack that power. Maintaining and improving pupil numbers will in large part be dependent on the school's appeal to the small but influential section of the population.

(Armstrong and Galloway, 1994, p175)

Provider accountability was to be ensured through the National Curriculum, also introduced by the ERA. The National Curriculum was to apply to all pupils of compulsory school age, whether in mainstream or special schools, and teachers were

charged with making it accessible to all pupils. The National Curriculum was to be the entitlement of every school-age child and young person. It was constructed according to a developmental, ten-stage model. Contrary to its stated intent of being accessible to all, the ten stages were presented in terms of what pupils should be able to do in each year of schooling. Norwich (1990) notes that 'any consideration that some areas of learning do not lend themselves to the ten-level scheme did not seem to be given serious consideration' (p24). Pupils' attainment according to the National Curriculum in English, Maths and Science, was to be tested at ages seven, eleven and fourteen, and their test results made public in the league tables. A normative and tightly-policed version of what constituted acceptable academic standards for individual children was thus established.

These structural reforms had contradictory effects. For some groups of students, the rhetoric of choice, entitlement and access was enabling. In particular, the dyslexia lobby, consisting mainly of articulate middle-class parents, were able to use the legislation to establish enhanced provision for their children (Corbett, 1998a). But the pupils with more global learning difficulties, who could not be 'empowered' to achieve within the normative range constructed by the National Curriculum, were effectively re-inscribed in discourses that continued to produce them as deficient. The first published results of the tests taken by seven-year-old children in the early 1990s showed that twenty-seven per cent of children failed to achieve Level Two, the benchmark for a 'typical' seven-year-old. This was reported by tabloid press as the failure of schools to teach children to read, and the failure of pupils to learn this crucial skill. In order to legitimate this 'failure', schools identified ever-growing numbers of 'special needs children' who were deemed to require extra funding, and/or exclusion (Barton, 1993).

By the early 1990s, the old humanist/economist dialectic of education as producer of a skilled workforce, and as distributor of knowledge (Lowe, 1997) had been re-constituted. On top of the humanist tradition, and on top of the social justice concerns of the second half of the twentieth century, was overlaid the notion of knowledge as a consumer good, reducible to a set of packages that could be accrued for individual benefit: a benefit that would supposedly work its way back into the national economy.

Pupils with learning difficulties were the insiders and the outsiders of this discourse. They appeared within it as the exceptions for whom the National Curriculum had to be ‘differentiated’ in order for its mastery to be made ‘accessible’. More fundamental, though, was the old contradiction that continued to run through the rationale behind the ERA. At its heart was the need for the education service to produce a workforce who would be skilled in the managerial professions and in the new technological industries, so that the UK could continue to compete in the increasingly global marketplace. Children with learning difficulties were the least likely to grow into individuals who would be skilled enough to further this development. The massive expansion of the higher education sector, which was intended to facilitate the production of an appropriately skilled workforce, saw an acceleration of ‘qualification inflation’ in which young people leaving school without academic credentials were increasingly marginalised. Children with ‘unfixable’ learning difficulties remained one of the subordinated groups of rapidly-globalising capitalism.

Back to the Future?

The past one hundred and fifty years of what is now known as special educational provision have been characterised by contradiction and by a fundamental distrust of diversity. We may look back to the 1850s and wince at the terminology used to describe the children who we now consider to have learning difficulties. We may look back in pride at the discursive and policy shifts of the twentieth century, and sigh with relief that numbers of children are no longer certified and sent to spend their lives shut away from society, in asylums and long-stay institutions. These are notable improvements, and I would not want to deny them.

But the dilemmas of special educational provision at the beginning of the twenty-first century reveal some unpleasant continuities with the past. The growing un-sayability of ‘learning difficulties’ and ‘special educational needs’ (Corbett, 1996) points to the enduring negative meanings that continue to inhere in the phenomenon and in the group of people so identified. Where have these meanings originated, and why are they so difficult to dislodge? Perhaps we need to consider three underlying principles. Firstly, that fully human status in the United Kingdom has been, and remains, contingent on an individual’s perceived ability and willingness to take up a

recognisable position within the social relations of (now global) capital. Secondly, that there exists a perceived binary between the human and the non-human world which can no longer be upheld. And, thirdly, that the purposes of schooling may need to be reconsidered if we are not to go on re-inventing a terminological wheel which will enable the machinery of intellectual subordination to continue to run smoothly.

The first principle is clearly demonstrated in the last one hundred and fifty years of policy and provision. Where possible, (and bearing in mind that the parameters of what is considered possible have shifted), education has sought to ‘fix’ whatever learning deficiencies it can and for whoever it can. Special education, whether in mainstream or segregated settings, has had the twin goal of producing (through remediation) people who can contribute to the nation’s economy, and of identifying those who definitively (according to the requirements and understandings of the time) cannot. Barton and Tomlinson argue that ‘special education … is now a more important mechanism than it has ever been for differentiating between children and allocating some to a lifestyle that – if not as stigmatised as in the past – will almost certainly be characterised by dependence and vulnerability’ (Barton and Tomlinson, 1984, p1). While the main goal of the education system remains the production of people with marketable, employable and credentialisable skills and knowledges, it is difficult to see how this could be otherwise. Children and young adults going through a supposedly universal schooling system which valorises human attributes which they do not possess, will irretrievably be positioned as marginal, and in key (but not always obvious) ways constructed as less-than-human.

In the distinction between fully-human and less-than-human lurk the remnants of a politics of fear and disgust. The discomfort and profound sense of shame connected with people who have been intellectually subordinated has to be associated, in part, with the expulsion of all things irrational from the Enlightenment world picture. ‘Man’ was conceptualised as a rational being, and the relationship between ‘man’ and the Universe was conceptualised within the prevailing capitalist (and hetero/patriarchal and imperialist) ideology, as a struggle for domination. This man-at-the-centre-of-the-universe discursive field was founded on a perceived superordinate binarism between human and non-human. Arguably, this binarism always was unsustainable. Now, as

the struggle for domination over the non-human world combines with a previously unimaginable scale of industrial and technological consumption, it is more obviously unsustainable than ever. Looking back at the past one hundred and fifty years might well illustrate the ways in which people have been intellectually subordinated through being positioned as less-than-human. Many other groups once similarly positioned – women, the working classes, people of colour, Jews, socialists, physically and sensorily disabled people, travellers, lesbians and gays and others – have at least partially re-inserted themselves on the human side of the binary divide (Yeatman, 1995). But the divide, although modified, has remained in place. Perhaps then, the most crucial question that can be derived should not be concerned with the re-insertion of a subordinated group into discourses of full humanity, but around how to reconceptualise the human/non-human polarity.

Meanwhile, special educational provision is in the midst of a terminological crisis of its own. We are running out of terms that can serve the purpose of describing the people with whom we work, without constituting them as deficient. Strategic essentialism does not quite work in this context, because every past act of naming has become associated with the shame and less-than-humanness of people who are not clever enough to be inserted into the social relations of capital. As teachers, we are faced with the task of doing something that is fundamentally cruel, in as compassionate a way as we can. We are contradictorily required to enable through inclusion and to gatekeep through surveillance. But the last one hundred and fifty years show us that the amelioration of conditions for people who have been intellectually subordinated has gone hand-in-hand with the intensification of a set of rational procedures which have worked to compound that subordination. The now popular techno-rationalist methods of identifying and assessing children perceived to have special educational needs may be much more benign than those of the past. But they leave intact the meaning, linked with capitalism's need to produce a suitably skilled workforce and liberal humanism's need to reproduce civilised Man, that cleverness is superior, and intellectual impairment is something to be feared and derided.

This chapter has traced the intransigence of the meanings associated with intellectual subordination. Although I have characterised specific periods of time according to the prevalence of specific discourses, the reality is, as always, much more complicated. The very prevalence of these discourses in the literatures of their respective ages speaks also to their deployment in the construction of common sense, a process that I have and will continue to argue is contested. And I would not want to appear to suggest that, at the end of each period, the discourses fell into complete disuse: they may have been overlaid, but they have not been replaced. As we move into the twenty-first century, shades and strains of the charity/tragedy, medical/psychological, self-esteem and entitlements/access discourses live on. They can be discerned in the discourses that shape understandings of success at Meadway today, and certainly play a role in producing the subject ‘special needs student’. I have presented what is necessarily a very broad sweep of educational policy in its social and political context. In doing so, I have had to lose much of the complexity that would enable an analysis of how other indices of difference were imbricated in the construction of the various discourses, and of what they meant for those who lived them, at the time of their living them. Such a project would be fascinating, but is well beyond the scope of this thesis. My purposes in this chapter have been more limited. In providing an historical context, I have sought to explain how the meanings associated with intellectual subordination have remained largely negative, through politically and socially situated discourses and discursive practices that appear to have changed over time. This argument - of changing discourses but stable meanings - is central to the argument of the thesis.

Chapter Three

Policy and Micropolitics – Beacon Schooling and the Construction of ‘Success’

In this chapter I will be examining how Meadway is positioned, and positions itself, relative to the ‘standards agenda’ that I will argue is coming to dominate the educational policy picture. I will start by placing Meadway within the macro-political context. I will go on to explore how this context produces a set of discourses and discursive practices in relation to which Meadway constructs the subjects ‘successful student’ and ‘successful teacher’. I will look in detail at Meadway’s implementation of the ‘Excellence in Cities’ initiative of 1999, which requires schools to identify and provide for ‘gifted and talented’ (G&T) pupils. Through this, I will be interrogating how some versions of success come to dominate, where they come to dominate, and what locally-produced versions of success are able to co-exist alongside dominant ones.

Meadway and the Standards Agenda

It is the beginning of the Spring Term. Today’s whole-school Training and Development (T&D) day is on target-setting. The consultant/facilitator, immaculately power dressed in skirt with matching jacket opens with a suitably girlie, ‘emotionally present’ post-Christmas anecdote. She tells us that for years she has struggled to lose weight, looking (or is it my imagination) at the white women in the audience for empathic nods of recognition and fellow-feeling. She has tried many diets, none of them successful. The reason? Her targets were not SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-framed) enough. Had she devised sufficiently SMART targets, she would have been able to stick to her diet and achieve the body she tells us she wants. Before anyone can so much as whisper ‘Fat is a Feminist Issue’ she moves seamlessly on to show how her example can be applied to schooling. The girlie-ness disappears from view as she takes us through overhead after overhead of evidence as to how target-setting is that way to effective learning for all (emphasis on the all) pupils for which we, as teachers, have been searching. Is this an add-on to the liberal fantasy that anyone can achieve anything if they want it enough and work hard enough - now they have to have a SMART enough target? We are taken through the national learning targets for 2002, and how they will be filtered down (via our ‘information-rich’ education system) through LEAs and schools to individual teachers and students. Touchy-feelie meets punitive surveillant policing in pursuit of the unsustainable.

Fieldnotes 06/01/99

Meadway is known and respected locally (and knows and recognises itself) as a ‘successful’ school. The single most important discourse in the production of

Meadway's success is the standards agenda. Every year, when the league tables of examination results are published, Meadway vies for top place with the other local girls' comprehensive school. This is a contest fought out on the battleground of percentages of sixteen-year-old leavers achieving at least five GCSE examination passes at grades A*-C. In the academic years ending in 1998, 1999 and 2000, close to sixty percent of Meadway's leavers have attained this 'benchmark' of externally-recognised success. Such a figure is above the national average, and is ahead of the National Learning Target of fifty per cent of sixteen-year-olds achieving this standard by 2002 (DfEE, 1999b). In the 'performance and assessment data analysis' document (the PANDA), Meadway itself scores an 'A' grade when compared with 'similar schools nationally': that is, comprehensive girls' schools in which over thirty per cent of the students are eligible for free school meals.

Meadway enjoys other external markers of success. Following a glowing OFSTED inspection report in 1997, it was awarded Beacon Status, and subsequently applied for, and secured, funding as a Beacon School. This means that key departments and aspects of work – English, Science and Equal Opportunities – have been recognised not only as strengths of the school, but as strengths from which other schools and teachers can learn. Meadway has been constructed, and has taken up a position, as a 'market leader' in these areas. Beacon status has brought with it not only validation and approbation, but also material rewards in the form of extra funding. A further official marker of Meadway's success is the Investors in People status, which Meadway achieved in 1998, and which was re-awarded in a review in 2000. This makes available a set of understandings around what it means to be a successful teacher, constructed through a managerialist matrix. In the set of official stories that Meadway tells itself about itself, success within the parameters constructed as desirable by New Labour is a recurrent theme. Meadway presents itself as a confident, successful school, in which new initiatives are embraced and taken forward for the good of its students.

These external markers of success perform many functions, not the least of which is the production of a measure of stability in an uncertain and rapidly-changing climate. Its success means that Meadway is routinely over-subscribed, and has a waiting list of

girls who have not been allocated places. Meadway can therefore rely on secure funding, knowing that numbers in each year group will remain constant: when one student leaves, she is replaced by another from the waiting list within days. But it is not only the student population that is shaped by Meadway's success. As a popular school, Meadway is attractive to teachers, since standards of discipline and attainment are high, and especially so when compared to those of neighbouring mixed comprehensive schools. It has a relatively stable staff and, until September 2000, was unaffected by the spiralling teacher shortages in London. In times of uncertainty and change, then, it is Meadway's success that has acted as a buffer, enabling security and continuity of funding and population.

But this stability is dependent on Meadway producing itself as a school undergoing continuous improvement, in order to maintain its success in league tables and under the scrutiny of OFSTED. There is a moral discourse underpinning this apparent zeal for continuous improvement. Meadway's tales of its own confidence and success are framed as equal opportunities imperatives. Many of the staff, including the headteacher, are passionate about girls' education as a means of working against women's disadvantage. This commitment provides the legitimating narrative behind what can look like a wholesale embracing of the standards agenda. Meadway's staff have lived (as teachers and in many cases, pupils) the English education system and some of its profoundly inegalitarian aspects. From such a standpoint, enabling girls (many of whom are from ethnic minority families and most of whom are working class) to achieve good exam results can be understood as one way in which to promote equality of opportunity. So Meadway tells itself a caring, as well as confident, set of stories about itself. That caring, and that passionate belief in equality of opportunity, are re-cast as targets that can be set and must be met. Meadway's stability is prized but precarious, and target-setting is one way in which the continuous improvement on which that stability depends can apparently be brought within the control of individuals, groups, and the school's senior management. Paradoxically, target setting generates its own sets of instabilities, incorporated into and enacted through student and staff micropolitics and identity work.

The facilitator of the training and development day gave us a recipe for success. In her account, certainty was ours for the taking if only we got our target-setting right. She stood before us embodying the inadequacies of her own argument as she reduced the complexities of human social action to a set of technicist behaviours to be rationally understood and controlled. Eliminating the social and political context from consideration, and disregarding the irrational and idiosyncratic may be one way to seek to reduce uncertainty. But when the production of success is made to depend on such elisions, and the real conditions of the work of embodied students and teachers are airbrushed out of the debate, the result is an increase in anxiety. The attempted removal (it is never quite accomplished) of that which cannot be reduced to bland taxonomies – the rich, complex world of social and interpersonal relations – generates a toxic mix of fear and hope, conflict and collegiality, optimism and pessimism at Meadway. The result is a permanent sense of instability and impending doom.

Sennett (1998) comments that ‘What’s peculiar about instability today is that it exists without any looming historical disaster; instead it is woven into the everyday practices of a vigorous capitalism. Instability is meant to be normal’ (p31). Linked to the normalisation of instability is a discourse of education as risk management strategy. Levitas (1998) notes that ‘Security has been discursively constructed as something individuals achieve through employability, and employability as an individual obligation’ (p121). It is in this context – the normalisation of instability and the individualisation of risk management – that the construction of success, and the production of successful subjects at Meadway School, has to be understood.

Successful Schooling and Can-Do Capitalism

In the run-up to the 1997 general election, Tony Blair famously declared his three priorities to be ‘education, education and education’. Within weeks of coming to power, the New Labour government elected on this platform made it clear that ‘standards not structures’ were to be the key targets of educational reform. In July 1997 (two months after the election) a White Paper was published, promising ‘zero tolerance of under-performance’ (DfEE, 1997c). School effectiveness became the grand narrative upon which New Labour’s construction of the continuously improving

school - achieving high standards and always aiming higher – was predicated. A version of equal opportunities was embedded into the new managerialism through which this continuously improving school was to be brought into being and maintained. As Morley and Rassool (1999) note, ‘Previous discourses of effectiveness have been hijacked, with an added dimension of social justice lost during the Thatcher and Major years’ (p114).

Rustin argues that a core feature of New Labour’s re-invention of itself is in its mode of address. Where unreconstructed Labour spoke to and for ‘we the oppressed’, New Labour speaks to and for ‘we the current or future beneficiaries of the new world order’ (Rustin, 1999). Seen thus, the New Labour project is one of enabling those who are currently excluded from the benefits of global capitalism to become successful competitors in the global marketplace. The ‘socially excluded’ of New Labour’s rhetoric are those who need to be helped to enter and to become successful inhabitants of consumer society. This has profound implications for education. Definitions of ‘success’ in schooling are tightly defined and policed through a battery of coercive measures, as well as through discursive struggle. In distancing itself from ‘Old Labour’, much has to be left out of the New Labour agenda. In particular, the debate over what constitutes egalitarian schooling - the site of allegations of ‘loony-leftism’ and ‘out of control political correctness’ throughout the Conservative administration - has to be carefully controlled. Where the prevailing political imperative is to insert as many ‘disadvantaged’ pupils as possible into global capitalism as its successful subjects, other visions of educational equality have to be made unthinkable.

Contained within the standards agenda, then, is an unproblematic acceptance of the inevitability and desirability of global capitalism. The purpose of schooling is equally unproblematically constructed as the need to produce ‘employable’ subjects with the skills to compete in the global labour market and the desire to do so⁹. In New Labour’s vision of schooling, the only questions that can legitimately be asked are around how

⁹ The concept of ‘employability’ has been central in the Labour Party’s re-invention of itself as ‘New Labour’ (DfEE, 1997a; DfEE, 1998; Blunkett, 2000a; Blunkett, 2001). Arguments originally deployed in the ‘education for employability’ agenda re-emerged as ‘lifelong learning’ discourses, in which individual obligations to progressively re-skill are presented as entitlements to an undisputed good. See for example Levitas (1998) and Rustin (2000).

the continuously improving school can produce more and more successful players in the game of global capital. To this end, schools are inundated with more and more data about the examination results of their students, since it is these results that determine how successful a student is seen to be. Student success, measured by examination performance, becomes in turn the determinant of individual teachers' success, which becomes the determinant of school success, local education authority success and, ultimately, governmental success. Where the outgoing Conservative government left in place league tables of 'raw data', schools now have a welter of information in the form of comparative data of 'value-added-ness' on which to base future targets for improvement. This is what the facilitator of the training day at Meadway celebrated as 'our information-rich education system'. In a cynical staffroom conversation, one Meadway teacher observed that education was a 'sure-fire winner' for the government: if schools 'improve', then governmental policy has been successful, while if schools do not 'improve', teachers have failed.

The Construction of the Subject 'Successful Schoolchild'

The outgoing Conservative government established clear and reductive criteria for what was to count as student success. The 1988 Education Reform Act paved the way for the introduction of a National Curriculum, embedded into which was a set of expectations for 'typical' academic achievement for pupils at ages seven, eleven, fourteen and sixteen. To facilitate the government's New Right vision of a marketised education service, pupils in years Two, Six, Nine and Eleven of compulsory schooling would be tested, and their examination results collated to enable the publication of league tables of schools¹⁰. The National Curriculum itself enshrined the notion of linear progression via a ten-point scale according to which pupil attainment could be calibrated and compared with national norms. When the first published test results of seven-year-old pupils at Key Stage One in 1992 revealed that, unsurprisingly, one quarter of them had scored below average, there was press outrage at the 'failure' of

¹⁰ The Education Reform Act was a major piece of legislation, heralding a wave of New Right educational reforms based on the principles of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism. For a fuller discussion of these reforms (in the UK and elsewhere) and their implications for equity issues, see, for example, Goacher et al. (1988), Jones and Mahoney (1989), Norwich (1990), Johnson (1991), Arnott (1992), Barton (1993), Epstein (1993), Lunt and Evans (1994), Tomlinson (1994), Apple (1995), Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995), Griffiths and Troyna (1995), Kenway (1995), Apple (1996), Delhi (1996), Hey (1996), Kenway and Epstein (1996) and Lowe (1997).

one-quarter of the nation's children. Success, it followed, had to mean at least average attainment according to a norm-referenced curriculum, specifically constructed to facilitate competition within and between schools.

The New Labour government, far from dispensing with this version of success, has built on and refined it. The National Curriculum levels originally conceived as representative of 'typical' pupil attainment are now referred to as the 'expected' standards. A version of the subject 'successful schoolchild' now progresses diligently and unproblematically from one SMART target to the next in the pursuit of continuously improving examination performance: a construction that calls to mind Walkerdine's hard-working but uninspired girls of earlier decades (Walkerdine, 1988; Walkerdine and Girls into Mathematics Unit, 1989). Perhaps the masculinised language of targets, goals and zero tolerance represents an attempted masculinisation of this construction of (feminine) diligence in the wake of waves of panic over boys' 'under-performance'. Walkerdine's brilliant, 'naturally' clever boys live on in New Labour's optimal model of the subject 'successful schoolchild': the 'gifted and talented' pupil. These 'G&T students', introduced to us through the 'Excellence in Cities' programme, are the ones for whom extra resources must be made available in order that they may progress further and faster through the National Curriculum to a point where they can perform successfully in 'world class tests'.

Of the many educational initiatives introduced by New Labour, 'Excellence in Cities' (EiC) is one of the furthest-reaching for Meadway. One of its many effects has been its construction of new possibilities for 'doing successful student' at the school, as well as the staff micropolitics that the construction of these possibilities has entailed and necessitated. In the EiC document, published in April 1999, New Labour sets out its vision for the transformation of a well-worn New Right construction, the 'failing' inner-city school (DfEE, 1999a). Its starting point, as the document makes clear, is the poor GCSE examination results of inner-city sixteen-year-olds, when compared to cohorts in suburban and rural areas. In its introduction, the document explains that 'excellence must become the norm' (*ibid.* p2). The construction of the subject 'schoolchild' within the pages of the EiC document is an entirely managerial one.

Children are the raw materials to be processed, developed, sorted and quality-tested (assessed) for added value at regular intervals. They are creatures who have 'needs' that must be met, and 'talents' that must be unlocked. Or, to be more precise, 5-10% of them have talents and gifts that must be provided for. The subject 'schoolchild' has very little agency in her or his own educational activity. She or he is entirely the product of other people's aspirations and expectations:

Schools which take a large part of their population from deprived city areas struggle to meet all of their pupils' needs. And there is a real danger that, in the face of setbacks, the will to succeed is undermined. Before long, people begin to expect failure. Expectations fall and results follow. We must reverse this downward spiral. We must transform this culture of fatalism.

(ibid. p5)

Commenting on what they call the 'effective schools movement', Rea and Weiner (1998) note that 'the 'revivalist' tones of ESM appear deeply attractive to [teachers], offering salvation with a litany of redemptive recipes' (p23). There is indeed a strongly revivalist flavour to the EiC document:

While problems exist, there are also many success stories in the cities. There are children, schools and other educational services which perform well... They overcome what others would tell them are children's disadvantages in income, language or experience. We must create a climate in which this 'can do' approach can prosper. We must learn from those who succeed and spread their culture and achievement more widely.

(DfEE 1999a p5)

Maybe it would be more apposite to talk about the construction of the object 'schoolchild' rather than the subject in this instance, since the schoolchild is produced here as the educational construction of other people's efforts. The schoolchild is reduced in this analysis to a set of variables to be controlled for (Rea and Weiner, 1998). Those variables are carefully described as 'disadvantages in income, language or experience': differences of class, race, gender, disability and all other structural sites of oppression are completely elided, as is the concept of oppression itself, redolent as it is with unreconstructed socialism.

EiC is explicitly part of the government's project to 'drive up' educational standards. The middle four pages, entitled 'Standards in the Cities', explain how 'we' intend to

do this. There are three indicators of pupil performance to be taken into account: proportions of students gaining at least five A*-C grades at GCSE, proportions of students gaining at least one A*-C grade, and proportions of students excluded from school. The subject 'successful schoolchild' is thus one of a body of people who is enabled to perform certain tasks to measurable levels at required intervals, and one of a body of people who is enabled to be sufficiently compliant with their school's agenda to be institutionally included. But this successful subject does not count, and is not counted, as an individual. It is how her performance relates to the overall performance of students nationwide that is to be judged. The successful schoolchild is not the one who gets to Point A, but the one who succeeds relative to others. This is what Kenway *et al.* (1997) have called the 'zero-sum' game of success. The successful schoolchild can only exist in relation to the failing schoolchild. Both are necessary subject positions in New Labour educational discourse.

At the end of the 1999 Autumn term, Meadway held a staff meeting to prepare everyone for the operationalisation of the EiC reforms.

Dorothy [the head] stands up to introduce EiC. It's her usual pep talk. The school motto – 'neglect not the gift that is in thee' - and the aim – 'quality education for all girls' - are on an OHP. EiC is to be one more way of achieving our aim, and improving our service, especially to girls at either end of the ability spectrum. Meadway is to participate in two strands. There will be a learning mentor whose brief will include home visits. This person will be working with, for example, the three Year Eleven girls who were absent for the mocks, and with disaffected 'children' lower down the school - an extra professional person to give some support to the girls who need it. There are nods of agreement. The other strand is the G&T – Gifted and Talented. The silence becomes a tense one. Expressions harden as people prepare to disagree. Dorothy directs us to the first aim of the school - to ensure that students reach the highest academic standards of which they are capable - and the first bullet point of the home-school agreement, which is similar. This initiative is going to be adapted 'as we at Meadway always do' to improve education for all girls. It is to mean curriculum enhancement for all our girls and our very able girls...

Sue [the newly-appointed G&T co-ordinator] talks about the huge amount of government money. The G&T strand will be national in fifteen months, and will be inspected by OFSTED. For us, it will improve standards for all students as the discussion around differentiation will percolate down and benefit everyone. It is, in her account, a question of Equal Opps - the G&T students have a right to be stretched, and after all, research shows that there is a high suicide rate amongst Oxbridge

students who haven't learned how to fail. So G&T students have the right (by implication, like all other students) to be stretched until they fail...

Fieldnotes 13/12/99

The introduction, via EiC, of Learning Mentors was uncontroversial. This is not surprising, given Meadway's tradition of attention to strategies of challenging inequalities and oppression. But the G&T policy required much more hedging around. Both the construction of 'brilliant student' and the notion of providing extra resources for such students were likely to encounter resistance. Threaded though the stories that Meadway tells itself of itself is the recuperation of those models of learning traditionally associated with girls. The diligent, hard-working girl has been thus recuperated, and (masculine) effortless brilliance, whilst admired, has been painstakingly prevented from taking up a central position. The idea that some girls can be identified as 'G&T' – as 'naturally' brilliant – is not one that could have automatic appeal in Meadway. Additionally, Meadway is invested in an anti-oppressive version of Equal Opportunities. Advertisements for teaching and other job vacancies still proudly proclaim the school's tradition of anti-sexist and anti-racist work. Whilst such understandings of Equal Opportunities can be co-opted within a version that valorises successful examination performance by previously under-performing groups of pupils, the attempt to re-position G&T students as needful of extra resources was, at the point of the meeting, a discursive jump too far. Except, perhaps, for those teachers who are positioned as senior managers, and who have specific interests in promoting compliance with policy directives.

We go into faculty groups... We have a piece of sugar paper, and have to record our concerns on one side, and anticipated benefits to the school on the other. We start with concerns. What about the students who identify a talent, but aren't picked out to join the register – "they don't think I'm talented, and it's my best subject" says Steve. Steve and I are soul-mates in this discussion. We share the same cynicism about happy-clappy stuff - I remember this on the target-setting T&D day. Will there be an elite group? Will that elite group be monitored, for class and race bias? What about parents who want their daughters to join the register? Will our top 5 - 10 % equate with the other cluster schools (which include William Morris SLD)? What about girls who don't want to be on the register? And what will be the position of the (orthodox) Muslim girls, whose parents tend not to be keen on extra-curricular activities at school, and who certainly wouldn't let their daughters participate in mixed-sex extra-curricular sessions? Pam [Head of Faculty] has had enough before long, and wants us to note down some benefits. This effectively stops the discussion. She puts down some

of the points made by Sue in her presentation. We get back to concerns. What are the implications of the staff sorting out the G&T? Will we ever get away from the hierarchies in our heads? Steve nods at this. Pam doesn't write it down. She is determined to fill the benefits side...

Back in the staffroom, the usual people gather... Conversation turns to the G&T. More difficulties are raised... Sue gets out the pieces of sugar paper. I long for a notebook to write down the conversation, but I really think I shouldn't. Most of the concerns are about how and whether the girls and their parents will be notified, and the dangers of categorisation. Nadje is uneasy with the idea of labelling and thinks that the G&T girls will not want to be picked out in this way. We laugh at the prospect of parents putting pressure on their daughters to get onto the G&T list. But it's not that far-fetched a prospect. Bozena wants to know exactly how the nine students identified by each faculty will be correlated with the seven G&T areas. What about Jeanette, who ran for Essex ladies, but whose talents were more or less confined to sprinting - Bozena doesn't rate her as talented when compared to Kerrie who could do well at any sport, though not to regional level. That is what Bozena calls talent. The English faculty have written elaborate mind maps. Every faculty has written more concerns than benefits. On the benefits side of our faculty's list, almost empty last time I saw it, Pam has written in big capital letters, "GREAT! WE THINK WE CAN REALLY GO WITH THIS".

Fieldnotes 13/12/99

The resistance of Meadway's staff (including myself) speaks to a profound distaste for 'naming and acclaiming'. Contained within that resistance is the implicit recognition, so obvious it does not need to be voiced, that the school's small group of white middle-class students are likely to be disproportionately represented on the G&T register. If there are extra resources coming in, none of the 'rank and file' members of staff want them used on this already advantaged group. But also contained within the resistance is the recognition that identifying 'gifts' and 'talents' cannot be reduced to a matter of ticking boxes. Contrary to the construction of EiC's successful student, Meadway's staff want to hold onto a construction of giftedness and talent that is relative and is culturally and socially situated. Where benevolent humanitarianism can be invoked to do the work of legitimating the normative categorisation of 'SEN students', Meadway's senior managers cannot quite manage to insert it into the G&T programme.

Meanwhile, outside the staffroom door, lives a much sexier version of the subject 'successful student'. She is produced and produces herself through imbrications of New Labour's target-driven high-performer, Meadway's confident pro-feminist young

woman, post-modernism's multi-skilled and multiply-positioned new millennium girl, and student/street culture's girl with attitude. She is typically high-achieving, of high micro-cultural status, hetero/sexually attractive (and possibly active, although she keeps that information to herself), good at sports and arts as well as academic subjects, and popular with the teachers for her friendly, outgoing, and co-operative demeanour. She knows, or appears to know, where she is going in life, and is able to make use of school and student cultures to help her get there. She is likely to be black, of African-Caribbean origin. I think of her as one of Meadway's 'starlets'.

Amina and I go to 102. Some of the nice, clever black girls - the starlets - are there. They are quite noisy, confidently discussing Spanish exams and practising with each other, in a relaxed kind of way. I know that if I asked them to be quieter they would comply, as a favour to me, whilst remaining in charge of the situation. Amina and I get stuck in to Spanish conversation. She wants to practice the basic questions - the date of her birthday, her age and where she lives. She has been learning these for three years. I wonder if she's getting bored with answering the same questions yet. Another starlet comes in, fresh from the exam. The others ask how it went. "Miss" has told her she is the best she has heard all day. There are screams of approval, and one girl hugs the new arrival. She has an examination tale to tell. She told the examining teacher that she helped with the housework. As a follow-up, the teacher asked when she was going to clean the house. The starlet, misunderstanding, and thinking she was being asked when she was going to leave home, answered that she would do so in three years. This story is greeted with yells of excited approval and laughter. Amina doesn't understand the joke. She asks the starlet a question about the exam. The girl comes over, and explains to Amina, in a very nice, gentle way, what she wants to know, not seeming to mind when Amina's questions make little sense.

Fieldnotes 24/11/99

Is the confidence that the starlets apparently exude a function of their taking up positions as 'successful' students, or is it a function of being 'the best'? This is an important question, since on it hinges on the relationality of success. In many ways, the starlets embody a femininity of which I approve. They are 'critical readers of their lifeworlds' (Kenway et al., 1994), they are resistant to injustice and they treat more vulnerable students with respect, care and kindness. In some ways, they call to mind those of Connell's successful boys who have so much undisputed high-status masculinity in the bank that they can afford to perform non-hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell, 1995). The starlets can afford to delight in a mistake made in an examination, since it does not threaten their status as 'the best'. They can turn that mistake into a story that confirms and re-inscribes them as successful. Amina could

not have told such a story, nor did it even seem to make sense to her. Success does not appear to be in jeopardy for the starlets. Nor is the solidity of their friendship group, which can delight in each other's achievements, because there is plenty of success to go round. A solidity that can permit its members to be 'kind' to those who, like Amina, are positioned as micro-cultural as well as academic losers, and of whom middling girls steer well clear.

Two of Meadway's starlet leavers of 1999 returned to the school in October 2000, to speak publicly to the Year Eleven cohort. One of them spoke about her athletic prowess, which had led to the realisation of her dream to win the local schools' sprint championship when she was in Year Nine. She told the audience that she had gone on to prioritise her GCSE work, as opposed to her athletics, and had emerged with a clutch of A* and A grades. Addressing her audience as 'beautiful young women of the new millennium', she told them that they could all achieve their dreams if, like her, they set ambitious goals, believed in their ability to attain them, and worked with determination, using the support provided by Meadway's teachers. The address of the other starlet returner was similar in content, describing a process of converting dreams into targets and making use of all available support in attaining them. Embedded in their speeches was the fundamental contradiction which lies at the heart of depoliticised versions of Equal Opportunities. Enabling these talented, clever young women (both of them of working-class, African Caribbean origin) to do superlatively well within a competitive culture has also enhanced the continuance of that competitive culture. As members of a group that is often disadvantaged, these young women, and others like them, have been given an opportunity to climb rungs of a ladder that they might not otherwise have been able to climb. The ladder, however, remains in place. In the speeches of the starlet returners, the relationality of success within a competitive culture has been elided, and the fantasy that everyone can insert themselves into successful subject positions within global capitalism has been confirmed.

If school effectiveness is a 'feel-good fiction' (Hamilton, 1998), this re-casting of dreams into targets that can be set and met, and the promise that success is there for

everyone who works hard enough and SMART enough, are central to the plot. Meadway's starlets have apparently learned to dream the dreams that global capital makes available to them, and are able to produce themselves as successful subjects of meritocratic fantasy, but at what cost? Boler comments that 'Meritocracy enforces the internalisation of discipline and desire for reward, thus incorporating democratically engineered individualism... Meritocracy places success and failure squarely on the individual, decontextualising the student from any mediating factors of social or cultural context' (Boler, 1999, p47). Since equal opportunities are central to Meadway's official, micropolitical and social life, the fiction of universally attainable success has to be maintained. The starlets – girls from social backgrounds that are traditionally thought of as disadvantaged – embody the contradictions inherent in the fiction. When they stand before the school assembly, exuding confidence and speaking their success, they are both the proof that 'anyone can do it' and the reason why everyone cannot. They are not merely 'successful' students, they are 'the best' and, by definition, that is a position available to few. For the starlet position to exist, it has to be unavailable to most.

Interrogating the position taken up by Meadway's starlets does not imply that I would want a return to other, perhaps more traditional, versions of success more closely tied to traditional elitist educational practices. Neither do I want to pathologise a group of young women who, starting from positions of systemic disadvantage, use every resource on offer to them in order to take up the better life that they have been promised. I do, however, want to centralise two questions: what are the costs of current versions of success, and what possible versions do they displace? These questions can perhaps best be illustrated by considering the occasional non-dominant versions of success that Meadway makes available to its students, and the conditions of that availability.

One occasion stands out. In 1996, two feminist teachers made the case for a whole-school celebration of International Women's Day. They were able creatively to deploy discourses around achievement and standards in establishing a politicised celebration that would engage with women's issues worldwide. Although these two teachers have

since left the school, there was enough support for this counter-hegemonic initiative to continue. On the Friday closest to International Women's Day, the school timetable is suspended, and replaced with a programme of activities, visiting speakers and external visits. The school comes alive with excitement, and there is little talk of targets. Although the day is meticulously planned, there is space for spontaneity. Last year, at lunchtime, an enterprising group of young women¹¹ in Year Eleven facilitated a concert, with individual and group 'star turns'.

A group of Asian girls, in Year 10 I think, come onto the stage and start to dance. The hall erupts with whooping, clapping and stamping. I don't think it's that the dancing is particularly brilliant (which it's not). It seems to be more an atmosphere of excitement and appreciation of each other that's caught on. At the end of the number, the girls in the audience roar their approval. A woman I don't know – one of the day's many visitors I think – comes onto the stage, with a drum which she starts to play. The audience scream and clap. Then another woman leads the Year 11 girls onto the stage. There's about 20 of them, including some of the shyest, quietest young women in the school. I feel quite tearful seeing them up there. The audience continue to whoop and stamp. I wonder when people like Aneesa and Kareema have ever been the focus of 400 cheering, adoring fans. And if they ever will be again. I think everyone should be able to do this at least once in their lives. I spot Aqsa and Hafsa on the back row – I've never seen them at the centre of attention before. The audience are ethnically mixed – it's not just other Asian girls enjoying this show, but black and white and Middle Eastern as well. I'm relieved to see Asian-ness on centre stage. Asian-ness is so often missing from the success stories the school tells itself about itself.

Fieldnotes 10/3/00

Kenway *et al* (1997) remark that 'teachers invariably walk a tightrope between encouraging students to succeed in conventional terms and encouraging them to succeed differently – always with the knowledge that difference seldom wins out over dominance' (p35). Occasions such as the one above are rare at Meadway. During the period of fieldwork, this was probably the only incident I witnessed in which a different version of success came close to momentarily displacing the dominant one, and in which the students with whom I work were publicly positioned as 'successful'. I have included it here as it indicates how counter-hegemonic work can be possible, even when the standards agenda appears at times to over-determine what exists to be

¹¹ When I asked the students whether they would rather I described them as 'girls' or as 'young women', the Year Eleven participants were unanimous in preferring the latter. The Year Seven and Nine

done. Meadway's celebration of International Women's Day is explicitly linked to a political context beyond the school. The standards agenda in particular, and school effectiveness in general, demand that schools be viewed as complete micro-cultural entities disembedded from wider socio-political contexts (Lauder, Jamieson and Wikely, 1998). When that wider socio-political context was written back into the picture, and social justice issues were extricated from their managerialist and instrumentalist packaging, discursive space for the construction of non-dominant versions of successful student was opened up.

The Construction of the Subject 'Successful Teacher'

New Labour's policies on the 'modernisation of the teaching profession' – especially those on performance-related pay – explicitly link pupil attainment with teacher effectiveness (DfEE, 1998; Barber, 2000). The construction of the subject 'successful teacher' is imbricated at many levels, formal and informal, with the construction of the subject 'successful student'. Such a linkage has a long history. When compulsory mass education was introduced in the 1870s, teacher salaries were based on the number of pupils promoted from their teacher's class. This system was widely criticised, and abandoned in 1891. Nevertheless, many understandings of the linkage have persisted in various common-senses and popular mythologies. The 'Mr. Chips' version of the dedicated public school teacher and his sister, the wise, scholarly spinster headmistress, the committed and progressive young radical who wins the hearts and minds of the local toughs in the working-class comprehensive, the warm, motherly infant teacher and the stern disciplinarian with the heart of gold all stand in the shadows of today's 'effective' teacher¹².

The school year customarily begins each Spetember with a staff training and development day. The major item for discussion on this day is always the school's examination results. The Senior Teacher in charge of examinations spends the final two weeks of the summer holiday collating GCSE results, and tabulating them in a

participants, however, said that they are only addressed as 'young women' when they are being told off, and would therefore prefer me to write about them as 'girls'. I have resepcted their respective wishes.

¹² These images are, of course, thoroughly gendered. For a discussion of the construction of school teaching as a feminised profession, and of women as teachers see Acker (1989), Acker (1994), Blythman (1996), Copleman (1996), Miller (1996) and Coffey and Delamont (2000).

number of ways. Attention is focused on the numbers and percentage of students scoring five or more passes at grade C or above, since this is the 'expected level' and the benchmark for externally-recognised success. It is also the measure used in compiling the league tables. Additionally, there are analyses of students' results once their passes have been converted into the points system used in national comparative data.

Dave passes round the list of results from the top point-scorer to those who have scored no points at all. The room is full of exclamations – 'I knew she could do it!' 'Only three Cs for Zina!' 'Farhana got more than Karen!' and the like. I turn straight to the last page to see if Cassandra got any grades. She didn't get English Literature (which is no surprise) but she got an F in Textiles. No-one else on my row seems interested in the last page. We don't get long to look. Dave hands the next one round. It's the comparison of the faculties, with each other and with their results from the last three years. English is top again, pushing onwards towards seventy per cent A-Cs, followed by Science. Technology is bottom again. I feel bad for Kate. Languages have improved by nearly ten per cent, a fact to which Dave draws our attention. Then comes the point-by-point comparison. Every student's average point score is listed, alongside the points actually awarded in each subject. These are compared not merely across faculty, but also across teaching groups. The room is now silent and tense. Every faculty will have to draft a report this afternoon explaining its improvement, or lack of it. Every head of faculty will have to account for the performance of students in specific teaching groups. More especially, they will have to account for any 'underperformance' by students taught by particular teachers. It's the usual back-to-school ritual.*

Fieldnotes 4/9/00

The subject 'successful teacher' at Meadway works purposefully towards the examination success of her/his students. This is the bottom line, below which no teacher can produce themselves as successful. It is a competitive bottom line. The successful teacher must enable all students in their teaching group to perform at or above their average in their other subjects. More than that, s/he must be continuously improving, and that continuous improvement must be demonstrable in the improving examination results of her/his teaching groups. The successful teacher produces students who are desirous of dominant versions of success, and, as such, are governable. In producing such students, the successful teacher also produces her/himself as desirous of those same versions of success, and as governable according to the rules of the same game.

The official construction of ‘successful teacher’ at Meadway, like the construction of ‘successful student’, draws on a new managerialist version of equal opportunities. This version of equal opportunities serves to legitimate the regime of surveillance imposed on individuals and groups of teachers through the examination results confessional, by framing it as democratic accountability. Those teachers who embrace surveillance are cast as the ones who really care about their pupils, since they are willing to subject themselves to what is presented as a regime of self-examination ‘for the good of the students’. Reay (1998) notes that ‘it is pupils who are conscripted by management as ‘a stick to beat teachers with’’ (p181). At Meadway, the discourse of ‘for the good of the students’ is enlisted in the project of making desirable a version of self-policing, ‘successful’ teacher. League tables and numerical data are the instruments of self-examination, disliked perhaps, but tolerated. Equal opportunities is the authorising narrative that secures the consent of teachers for the process. School effectiveness discourses link the two. Morley and Rassool (1999) note that

teachers are now reassured that their interventions make a difference. They have targets, goals, visible indices of their efforts. There is a new classification and value creation machinery, based on a moral authority, backed up with quantification and a series of sign systems which represent educational excellence.

p134

At Meadway, discourses of school and teacher effectiveness make desirable a version of successful teacher who deploys the machinery of surveillance in the interests of traditionally disadvantaged students. The successful teacher is co-opted into the school effectiveness discourse, and takes up a (supposedly) active, agentic position within it.

New managerialism, equal opportunities and the ongoing micropolitical struggle for power, prestige and the resources they accrue, combine to do the discursive work of co-optation. It was this combination which allowed the unpopular introduction of G&T to go ahead.

The work of maintaining the G&T faculty noticeboards will be done by faculty G&T reps, each of whom will be allocated half a responsibility point [a salary enhancement]. These will initially be allocated on a fixed term basis, for the three

years that the EiC initiative is planned to last. There will be T&D attached to the posts, so they will present an 'excellent professional development opportunity'. Sue tells us that these responsibilities will make their holders 'very attractive' as the initiative is set to go nationwide after that time. I don't think SEN responsibilities make their holders similarly attractive. Not only is this, in Sue's account, a professional development opportunity, it is a fantastic opportunity to raise the achievement of all our students.

Fieldnotes 13/12/99

The successful teacher takes up professional development opportunities since, in current terms, the good teacher is the developing teacher, always on the ready for new initiatives that will improve their own 'performance' and thereby that of their students. Taking up professional development opportunities is also key to producing oneself as a successful teacher with a career plan and a set of personal targets in mind. A very particular kind of seductive appeal inhered in the newly-created posts of faculty G&T coordinators. If the successful teacher is indissolubly linked with the successful student, it is only a short step from linking the brilliant, going-places student with the brilliantly effective, going-places teacher. Within days of a resistant staff meeting, a new subject, the 'G&T student' had been constructed through some intensive micropolitics and allied teacher identity work.

It is probably true that most of Meadway's teaching staff were co-opted into what appeared to be active compliance with the G&T policy. But what were the choices? No active, agentic forms of resistance were on offer, since the government and the local authority had decided the school would participate. Senior management cannot be seen to be sceptical without damaging their own career prospects, since progression through the managerial chain requires 'positive responses' to new initiatives. Faculty heads, directly responsible to senior management, are held to account for the positive operationalisation of those new initiatives, and cannot afford to be seen to jeopardise them. Non-compliance on the part of faculty members is regarded as personal disloyalty, as well as disloyalty 'to the firm' (Reay, 1998). Despite the micropolitical realities here, the new managerialist construction of 'successful teacher' cuts across school hierarchies, addressing teachers as if their interests were identical. A blend of coercive measures that rendered resistance futile together with incentives that made

co-optation appealing, interpellated most of Meadway's teachers into subject positions as successful implementers of a policy with which they had initially disagreed.

The construction of the subject 'successful teacher' is the production both of historical understandings of what it means to be a teacher, and of the re-invention of the subject 'worker' as flexible specialist. New Labour has inherited an inglorious tradition of eighteen years of teacher derogation by the Conservative administration (Cooper, 1989; Ball, 1990a; Chitty, 1999). Onto the resultant image of lazy, incompetent teachers who care only for ideology and/or an easy life, New Labour has grafted a new version of the teacher: one that has more in common with the flexibly specialised corporate worker than with older notions of the autonomous professional. For the introduction of the G&T policy to work at Meadway, teachers' consent must be won. When equal opportunities arguments proved unconvincing, and coercion unpalatable, the appeal was made to teachers' new understandings of ourselves and our purposes. To turn down, or to appear to encourage others to turn down, a professional development opportunity in these days of flexible specialisation is inadmissible. The successful teacher at Meadway embraces new initiatives and uses them for career enhancement, in much the same way as the successful student sets goals and uses the resources around her to achieve those goals. Meadway's successful teachers are positioned as superb technicians, asking searching questions about how best to operate new initiatives to the benefit of Meadway's students and their own careers. What they cannot do is ask questions about why, and in whose interests, those initiatives are being introduced.

We want to improve school performance by developing the effectiveness of staff, both as individuals and as teams. The evidence is that standards rise when schools and individual teachers are clear about what they expect pupils to achieve. That is why performance management is important. We will implement our performance management arrangements on the basis of ... Equal Opportunity. All staff should be encouraged and supported to achieve their potential through agreeing objectives, undertaking development and having their performance assessed.

From Meadway School Performance Management Policy, 2000

Meadway's performance management policy is a curious document. Nowhere does it mention that performance management is a government directive, linked to teachers' pay and promotion, and a new statutory requirement. The casual reader might think this was something that Meadway's staff had collaboratively decided was a necessary absolute good. Morley and Rassool (1999) argue that 'schools produce action plans, mission statements, targets, strategies and visions as a matter of symbolic compliance or legitimisation' (p66). The successful teacher is required to identify as effective through active participation in the construction of these symbols of compliance, completing a circle of moral authority which operates by deploying new managerialist discourses of empowerment, inclusion and professionalism. In much the same way as surveillance in the examination room must remain unremarkable to function at its best (see Chapter Eight), the coercion of teachers must be made to masquerade as co-optation, and governmental surveillance and control in schooling must be elided. It is successful teachers who do the work of elision, and performing that elision is a prominent means by which to do 'successful teacher'.

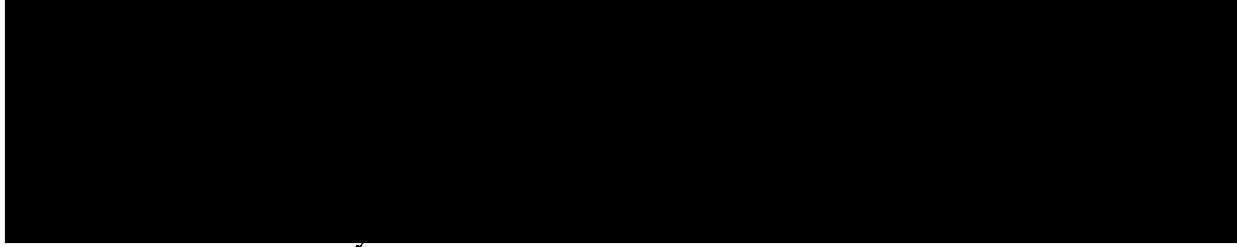
Success and the Standards Agenda

Meadway is the product of a competitive system of schooling. Fortuitous circumstances and the hard work of individuals and groups enable the school to recognise itself and to be recognised as successful within the parameters constructed by that competitive system. There is much serious engagement within the school about issues of equity. This engagement can be understood within a framework of the current expectations for schools to be self-interrogating, and continuously improving. But it also is representative of the legacies of more radical, politicised discourses of educational reform. Current discourses of success come under constant challenge but ultimately, given their systemic location, these dominant discourses, however fragile they may appear to be, are the ones that nearly always determine who can be recognised as successful, and the terms on which that recognition can take place. This pessimistic analysis contains its own ray of hope. The fact that the strategies used to enforce hegemonic versions of success are so multifarious, suggests also that the standards agenda is struggling for survival, albeit in very unequal conditions. The four hundred whooping, stamping girls who participated in the International Women's Day

lunchtime concert, and the teachers who watched, delighted, from the back of the hall, know that there is more to life than target-setting, and recognise that there is more to global justice than examination success. Day-to-day life at Meadway, however, mostly obscures such perceptions and de-legitimises their articulation.

For most of the time, success at Meadway can only be recognised in relation to the standards agenda. All versions of success exist in relation to this dominant version. New Labour's drive to improve standards has a ring of inevitability about it. To voice disagreement with the standards agenda is, on the one hand, to proclaim oneself against an unquestionable good, much like arguing against peace, or mother love. It is also to declare oneself a dinosaur, with a politics so irrelevant and untenable as to be extinct. Levitas (1998) remarks that 'the New Right naturalisation of 'markets' is replaced by appeals to the inevitability of 'globalisation'' (p113). The perceived inevitability of the standards agenda stands in direct relation to the perceived inevitability of globalisation. It presupposes that the over-determining purpose of education is to produce the successful subjects of global capitalism. Making his 'case for change' in education, Blunkett has stated that

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(Blunkett, 2000b, emphasis added)

The standards agenda operates as if standards are absolute, and the legitimating narrative operates as if those absolute standards can be made accessible to everyone. The ultimate aim of the successful, continuously improving school is to produce entire cohorts of students who attain the national average standard or better. Such an aim is cruel, as well as being manifestly nonsensical, since an average standard, by its nature, requires half the population to fall below it. Towards this end, however, Meadway's successful teachers routinely stand in front of classes exhorting students to work hard towards their exams. The fiction, that everyone can be successful if only they work

hard enough and their teachers are effective enough, is reinscribed lesson-by-lesson. The costs of continuous improvement remain largely unspoken. When ripples of concern do surface, as they did at Meadway in the debate over the G&T policy, a complex and impermeable blend of coercion and co-optation operationalised through micropolitics and identity work forces them back beneath the glossy waters of the standards agenda pool. This chapter has examined some of the complexities of this process: a process in which the local production and reproduction of discourses of success takes place in relation to the prevailing macro-discourse of the standards agenda.

Chapter Four

Policy and Micropolitics – ‘SEN’, Inclusion and the Elision of ‘Failure’

In this chapter, I look more closely at what happens to notions of ‘failure’ in the successful comprehensive school that Meadway perceives itself to be. As in the previous chapter, I examine how prevailing macro-discourses are operationalised through micropolitics and identity work. In particular, I look at the way notions of ‘inclusive education’ are co-opted via school effectiveness models into a version of the standards agenda, and the implications of this. I then look at Meadway’s production of ‘special needs students’, both in relation to prevailing discourses and discursive practices, and in relation to older historical models. I move on to look at my own department - the learning support department - and the micropolitics of learning support provision for students. I bring these arguments and examples together in a case study of a final-year student writing her valedictory statement, and suggest that what is going on is not the production of ‘failure’ but something potentially far more harmful: its elision.

What’s Wrong With Inclusion?

I used to like the term ‘inclusive education’. I knew what I meant by it: policies and pedagogies that explicitly set out to make anti-oppressive schooling available to all students, and which engage with the politics of identity and difference in creative and challenging ways. Over the past three years I have become increasingly sceptical about the term and its more recent social connotations, to the point where I am now reluctant to use it. In part, this has to do with my own intellectual development: theories which once seemed adequate now appear to slide past the ‘need to theorise carefully the role of identity and difference in institutional social relations’ (Slee, 1998b, p446). But my unwillingness to use the term ‘inclusive education’ without a great deal of qualification is largely produced by developments on the macro-political stage. There has recently been a political sleight-of-hand in which ‘the oppressed’ have become ‘the excluded’. The increasingly hegemonic solution to this version of exclusion seems to be the insertion of supposedly excluded people into global capitalism (Rustin, 1999; Rustin, 2000). Once ‘the excluded’ have been ‘empowered’ to become the successful

producers and consumers of global capital, it is implied that there will no longer be a problem¹³.

Similarly, inclusive education has (though not uniformly) been co-opted (Lloyd, 2000). There is a growing tendency for policy debate on inclusive schools to be located within the (highly reductive) school effectiveness paradigm (Lunt and Norwich, 1999). As such, it gives rise to, at best, bland debate about ‘valuing diversity’ in which the politics of difference are cast as irrelevant, and into which dominant disabling discourses can be absorbed (Slee, 1997). It has no way of engaging with the competitive nature of the standards agenda, or of interrogating the politics within which the standards agenda is located. At worst, it upholds the fiction that dominant versions of success can be universally possible. Clark and her colleagues express concern at ‘the beginnings of what may be a flood of ‘how to do it’ guides, reducing the complexities of organisational processes to a few handy hints and examples for senior managers’ (Clark et al., 1999, p174). Moreover, whilst the term ‘inclusion’ was always supposed to preclude the construction of a new binary subject position (Allan, 1996; Allan, 1999), recent slippage between inclusion and social inclusion has enabled politicians, educators and others to produce the ‘excluded child’ as the subject and object of concern and provision (Smith, 1999).

In this chapter, I will examine the production of ‘the special needs student’ at Meadway in the context of current debates around inclusion. I will examine in detail the Green Paper ‘Excellence for All Children’ (DfEE, 1997b) and show how, in failing to address what Lloyd (2000) has called the central issue of ‘genuine access to an equal educational opportunity’ (p135), the Green Paper has contributed to a fundamental policy contradiction. Barton and Slee (1999) point out that ‘It is the broader political, economic and cultural context that needs to be engaged with in any serious attempts adequately to understand and explain failure within the educational system’ (p7). I conclude this chapter by arguing that the micropolitical production of ‘special needs’ at Meadway, and the policy context in which this production is

¹³ Levitas (1998) notes the shift in New Labour rhetoric from ‘the poor’ to ‘a new workless class’ in speeches reported during 1997. She cites, for example, Tony Blair’s speech, reported in *The Guardian* 27 September 1997, saying that this ‘new workless class’ must be ‘brought back into society and into useful work’ (*ibid.* p.138)

situated, explicitly rule out any such engagement. In consequence, a framework for understanding and engaging with student failure has not been developed, and failure itself becomes elided through complicated narratives of remediation and ‘banal and vacuous’ versions of ‘inclusion’ (Wilson, 2000).

Levitas (1998) notes that ‘Exclusion appears as an essentially peripheral problem, existing at the boundary of society, rather than a feature of a society which characteristically delivers massive inequalities across the board and chronic deprivation for a large minority’ (p7). It is in the context of a schooling system that delivers similarly massive inequalities that I want to interrogate the micro-production – or, as I will argue, the elision – of failure at Meadway school, in its macro-political context. The students with whom I work are not enabled to produce themselves as successful according to dominant discourses. This is a function not of their own failure, or of the failure of specific teachers, but of a system that, in setting some up to win, also requires losers.

After break, we go into separate faculty groups to work on our targets. This is supposed to give us ‘ownership’ of them. I think I am supposed to feel empowered by this, but I don’t. My head of department is on paternity leave, and his temporary replacement is a competent administrator who can be trusted not to see the ‘bigger picture’. We have been provided with copies of the school’s overall targets for the next three years. The SATs targets have no apparent relevance for the Learning Support department. Our Year Nine students will not be amongst those reaching the ‘expected standards for their age’ which is what counts in the statistics. Our Key Stage Three students don’t then exist in official terms; their built-in failure has rendered them invisible. The head of department is pleased. We don’t have to bother with SATs targets. Maybe we can go home early. When it comes to Key Stage Four, we have only one set of targets to concern ourselves with. The percentage of students getting at least one A-G grade. The other targets - the five A*-Cs and the five A*-Gs are equally inapplicable. We have finished by lunchtime. In the afternoon, we try to fill the time with desultory discussion on IEPs and target-setting for individual students.*

Fieldnotes 6/1/99

Students who have been identified as having ‘special educational needs’ are at the sharp end of the standards agenda. Many discourses of school inclusion require that these students are educated in mainstream schools and, at best, that mainstream

schools adapt to value the diversity such students supposedly embody¹⁴. Meadoway, with its emphasis on education for *all* girls, takes seriously its responsibility to provide as well as it can for these students. But this involves accommodating multiple contradictions. On the target-setting training and development day, we in the learning support department were exempted from setting departmental targets for improvement, since our students are not amongst those who are expected to succeed in dominant terms. Given everything that I have written about the shortcomings of targets, perhaps I should have been relieved by such an exemption. Partly, I was. That exemption, though, was not allowed to challenge the legitimacy of the target-setting process, which remained intact. I am loathe to argue that the 'SEN students' were excluded from the process, since this side-steps the question of what they were to be included in, and suggests that what already exists – in this case, target-setting – is unquestionably right, and the only remaining problem is how to make it accessible.

The Key Stage Three students with whom I work have already been allocated 'failing' positions by the standards agenda. They are not going to reach 'the expected standard for their age' (DfEE, 1999b; Wearmouth, Edwards and Richmond, 2000). The response of the learning support department is to give them targets of their own, since questions around the legitimacy of target-setting have been ruled out. These individual targets, incorporated into their Individual Education Plans, are part of Meadoway's route to inclusivity. But Meadoway is not, and does not claim to be, an 'inclusive school'. Student achievement, in the form of comparative examination success, is one of the stories it most likes to tell itself about itself. The presence of intellectually subordinated students, who are not going to perform the dominant versions of success on which the school's identity as a successful school depends, throws up all sorts of practical and discursive difficulties for Meadoway. The standards agenda demands that Meadoway produce itself as a continuously improving school. This means that the proportion of students achieving whatever benchmarks are set has to be continually growing. Taken to its extreme, there is a eugenicist implication here. Are the

¹⁴ It is, however, important to note that there is not consensus over the meaning of 'inclusive education', even within governmental organisations. Judith Wade of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority has publicly distanced herself from a definition of inclusion which 'is concerned with the attendance of disabled pupils in mainstream schools' in favour of an 'approach which will help to raise standards for all pupils' by 'securing appropriate opportunities' (Wade, 1999, p81).

‘underperforming’ students to be eliminated? This is not as far-fetched as it may seem. Already they have been eliminated from the Key Stage Three statistics. Incorporated into official discourses and micropolitics is the tacit knowledge that, if these students were not present, Meadway would have no problem in placing itself at the top of the league tables. Happily, Meadway’s attention to equal opportunities discourses, even within their present managerialist cast, does not permit such solutions to be officially entertained. But there remains the implication that the noblest and most useful function of the learning support department is to ‘get rid’ of its students by enabling them to be absorbed within the target-reaching majority.

The Micro/Political Production of the ‘Special Needs Student’

Procedures for identifying students with perceived ‘learning difficulties’ at Meadway are clear, and operate within the framework set out by the Special Needs Code of Practice (DfEE, 1994), itself derived from the 1993 Education Act¹⁵. When Year Seven students enter the school, all those whose Key Stage Two SATs results were below the ‘expected standard’ of Level Four, take the local education authority’s adapted versions of the Salford Reading Test and the SPAR (spelling assessment record) test. Those who achieve a reading age of less than nine years are allocated additional funding from the LEA, in order that the school can make additional resources available to meet their ‘special educational needs’. These students’ names are entered onto Meadway’s SEN register.

Students with the lowest reading ages (below seven and a half years) are put straight onto Stage Three of the Code of Practice, which attracts a higher level of funding, and may trigger statutory assessment towards a statement of Educational Needs should the student make little or no discernible progress at a later date. These students receive five to six weekly hours of in-class support, and are withdrawn from class for one-to-one reading help three times each week. Students with reading ages between seven and a half and eight and a half years are entered at Stage Two of the Code of Practice, and are allocated three to five hours of in-class support. Students with reading ages

¹⁵ Riddell and her colleagues provide a useful analysis of the political context of the 1993 and 1996 Education Acts, and the discursive field through which the Code of Practice was implemented in schools (Riddell et al., 2000).

between eight and a half and nine years are entered at Stage One, and are allocated two weekly hours of support. Each year, the students on the special needs register are re-tested and moved up or down (or even off) the stages of the register accordingly. Some students enter Meadway at Stage Five of the Code of Practice, and therefore have a Statement of Special Educational Needs. For these students, levels of support will already have been agreed by the LEA, and these are monitored and updated through the Annual Review process.

Students at Stages Two, Three and Five of the Code of Practice (Stage Four is largely notional, for those students undergoing statutory assessment who in practice are retained at Stage Three) have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). On the IEP is a set of targets for the student, together with a strategy through which the school will enable the student to achieve that target. In most cases, these targets are formulaic: it is standard practice to require a student to raise her reading age by six months over the course of the academic year, or to learn a particular multiplication table. It is the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) who is responsible for administrating these targets. Given the number of IEPs that the SENCO is expected to write and oversee during the course of the year, their formulaic nature is understandable and inevitable. Through the IEP targets, students' failure to make progress according to national norms can be re-configured as personal achievement. Whilst six months' progress in reading age over an entire academic year might more usually be considered as 'under-achievement', the IEP will present it as success. Whether this success has currency in anything other than a deficit discourse is questionable. It is a question to which I will be returning throughout this thesis, particularly in Chapters Eight and Nine.

The SEN register, a copy of which is kept in the staffroom so that it is available to all staff, lists registered students by year groups. Each year group list is headed by the Stage Five (statemented) students, followed by those on Stage Three, down to the long list of Stage One students. Just over one fifth of students in each year group are listed on the register, with twenty-two per cent of the student body over the school as a whole appearing there. This is very slightly above the national average of twenty per cent of students in secondary schools identified as having 'special educational needs'

(Dean, 2000). Each list is sub-grouped according to the ‘priority concern’. The longest lists are those of students who have ‘learning as a priority concern’. There is a smaller group who have ‘behaviour as a priority concern’, and occasional students who have ‘medical’, ‘sensory’ and ‘language impairment’ as priority concerns. As well as priority concerns, some students are deemed to have difficulties in other areas, which are listed under the student’s name.

For as long as a student remains on the Special Needs Register, she is subject to the reading and spelling tests at the beginning of each academic year. Based on her progress as measured through these tests, she can be moved up or down the stages of the Code of Practice, or off the list altogether. If a teacher considers that a student not already on the Register is not making progress in her/his subject, or that a student’s ‘behaviour’ is a serious cause for concern, s/he can alert the SENCO and request that a concern form be circulated to all of that student’s teachers. The concern form is returned to the SENCO, who decides what action to take. Based on this, a student might be added to the SEN register. This happens rarely, perhaps only two or three times in a year.

Whilst it is comparatively straightforward to add a student to the SEN register on grounds of learning difficulties – if her reading age falls within the designated range – it is much more slippery to add someone to the register for ‘behaviour as a priority concern’. Whilst reading ages can be sharply, and apparently objectively, delineated, this is not the case for ‘behavioural problems’. There is often dissent over whether or not a student’s ‘behaviour’ is of sufficient concern to merit her addition to the list and, conversely, over whether a student’s behaviour has improved to the point where her name can be removed from it. Since it is even harder to make the case to the LEA for resourcing on these grounds, the school is very unlikely to add a student to the register, except in the case of school refusal. And, in the case of a student for whom funding has already been secured, Meadway is often unwilling to hand back such resources, since it would be doubly hard to make the case for additional funding should her ‘behaviour’ deteriorate again. The question of what counts as a ‘behavioural difficulty’, as opposed to ‘naughtiness’ is an interesting and fraught one, impacting as it does on teacher identities and perceived competence. It is an area I do not really

have the space to explore fully here, except in its implications for the production of neediness versus intentionality. This is something I will return to in Chapters Six, Seven and Nine.

Following the assessment of the incoming Year Seven students, letters are sent home to alert parents and carers when a girl is put on the SEN register.

Pam comes over to give Tony a message. Sereena's mother has phoned to say that she 'doesn't want her daughter to have special needs'. We laugh. Other anecdotes surface. Quratulain's parents have objected that she was put on the register because she made three mistakes on the reading test. Daisy's mother has told Tony that on no account must Daisy 'be special needs'.

Fieldnotes 15/10/99

Within the official stories that Meadway tells itself of itself, there is no place for the suggestion that a stigma, born out of inherited meanings and structures, still inheres within the designation of 'special educational needs'. The conundrum of whether and how to position various kinds and extents of special educational needs as socially constructed means that Meadway, with its attention to social justice and its imperative to achieve success in normative terms, has to negotiate multiple contradictions. One of the overriding imperatives in this process of negotiation is for the school to position itself as acting in the best interests of its 'SEN students'. Nearly twenty years ago, Tomlinson (1982) noted that 'Special education is permeated by an ideology of benevolent humanitarianism which provides a moral framework within which professionals and practitioners work' (p5). Ten years later, Norwich (1993) wrote that:

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p53

At Meadway, the discourse of benevolent humanitarianism is refracted through the managerialist version of equal opportunities to construct a contradictory view of SEN and of 'special needs students'. 'Divergent discourses' of learning difficulty appear to co-exist (Skidmore, 1999b; Skidmore, 1999c). On the one hand, the school's SEN

register exists to provide for individual students the help they apparently need to succeed on the same normative terms as other students. One measure of the school's success in SEN provision is how many students it manages to remove from the list on the grounds that they no longer require extra provision. Tales of such removals of students' learning difficulties can be added to Meadway's collection of stories about its effectiveness, and imply a social constructionist view of learning difficulties. On the other hand, the register exists to provide legitimation for a student's apparent failure to make the 'expected progress for her age' by defining her as a 'special needs student' and therefore intrinsically unable to achieve this standard of performance. The very designation, often heard in the staffroom, of 'special needs student', speaks not only of the cumbersome way in which these students are now officially categorised, but also of the residual understanding that 'special needs' are intrinsic to the student. There is a clear attraction in this. The current surveillant 'blame and shame' culture in schooling means that someone (be it student, parent, teacher or administrator) has to be blamed for below-average examination performance. Designation as a 'special needs student' is one way to avoid institutional blame.

One of the functions of the special needs register, not admissible in public discourses at Meadway, is to calibrate students in terms of their distance from the norm. To this end, the reading test, as a delineator of 'objective' measurement, can be invoked seemingly unproblematically, to justify the provision of additional resources. As such, it is impossible to argue against, and the idea that a parent can argue with the resulting designation, or that there can be any reason to argue with that resulting designation, is so ludicrous within staffroom discourse that it elicits laughter. Weedon (1997) comments that 'it is the need to regulate disparate forms of subjectivity in the interests of existing power relations that motivates the language of common sense' (p94). In staffroom common sense, the existence of the subject 'special needs student' is so obvious as to render these parents' objections ridiculous. The converse is also true: in responding to these parents' objections as if they were ridiculous, we re-inscribe and thereby regulate the existence of the 'special needs student' and her location on the special needs register. Through what in effect is a re-statement of institutional common sense, we make other functions of the register – the positioning of some students as 'needy', and their inscription within a set of discursive practices that have worked to

materially and socially disadvantage those so designated – marginal to the discourse of benevolent humanitarianism that still pervades. Partly, though, the language of common sense is invoked as a way of dealing with the perplexing dilemma in which Meadway finds itself in relation to those of its students who will under-perform according to national norms. The subject ‘special needs student’ *has* to exist in order for Meadway to account for those students, whilst simultaneously she *cannot* exist since her existence proves the impossibility of the fiction of universally accessible success.

The hegemonic refraction of benevolent humanitarianism through a lens of managerialism has further functions and effects. It constructs the process of identification and assessment of ‘SEN’ as an entirely rational and technical enterprise, in which the irrational, the emotional and the interpersonal are factors to be objectively noted, monitored and controlled. Whilst the Code of Practice has perhaps ensured that certain minimum standards of provision are met, it has also produced an understanding of ‘SEN’ as a phenomenon that can be objectified and quantified with the most effective set of techniques and apparatus. The apparent rationality of the stages model both suggests that it can be applied identically in every local context, and obscures the terms and the nature of its own social and political construction. One of the problems with any apparatus used to measure learning difficulties is that it is inescapably the product of the machinery of constructing relations of dominance and subordination. Such relations are not constructed without struggle, but the form of the Code of Practice, and the interventions it legitimates, conceal these struggles by the use of ‘neutral’ terminology within a techno-rationalist discourse. Such struggles are the subject of the rest of this thesis.

Inclusive Education and the Standards Agenda: Some Policy Contradictions

New Labour’s policies on provision for pupils and students with ‘SEN’ are outlined in and informed by the Green Paper ‘Excellence for all Children’ (DfEE, 1997b). This document reflects an uncertainty, similar to the one that perplexes people at Meadway, about how to frame ‘special educational needs’ and how to represent those pupils who are considered to have such needs. The introduction gives a twin definition. Pupils are considered to have SEN if they have ‘learning difficulties’ or disabilities that mean they cannot use resources commonly provided in mainstream classrooms *and* they require

special educational provision over and above that required by pupils who do not have such needs. In other words, students have special educational needs not because of *either* intrinsic deficiencies *or* institutionally located ones, but because of a combination of *both*. This take on causality is fine, as far as it goes, in that it allows that both factors are necessarily associated with the production of ‘special needs students’. What it does not do is interrogate the meanings held in place by the identification and assessment of pupils and students considered to have SEN, or the social and material consequences for individuals who are categorised in this way.

In his foreword to the Green Paper, David Blunkett sets out his rationale for promoting inclusion, which is in this context defined as the education of children considered to have SEN in mainstream schools. He explains that ‘The great majority of children with SEN will, as adults, contribute economically; all will contribute as members of society’ (ibid. p4). In many ways this represents a step forward from benevolent humanitarianism, in that it starts by positioning people not as needy, but as contributors. Children with SEN are to be included not primarily because they have something to gain, but because they have something to offer. Blunkett finishes his foreword by stating that ‘Where all children are included as equal partners in the school community, the benefits are felt by all’ (ibid. p4). As a statement of principle, this again is positive. It challenges the normative function of schools and problematises the assumption that it is solely the pupils with special needs who stand to gain from their admission to mainstream provision. It is in keeping with much of the writing on inclusive education, which draws attention to the fact that it is in the interests of all pupils for mainstream schools to function in ways that celebrate diversity and a diverse range of talents and abilities (Bailey and Furby, 1987; Hulley et al., 1987; Thomas, Walker and Webb, 1998; Ainscow, 1999; Dyson, 1999).

To promote the inclusion of pupils and students with SEN in mainstream schools, Blunkett writes that his government ‘shall remove barriers which get in the way of meeting the needs of all children’ (DfEE, 1997b, p5). Again, this is in keeping with much of the writing on inclusion which increasingly addresses barriers to participation. I am attracted to the notion of barriers to participation. In the case of pupils and students who experience physical and sensory difficulties, I think the phrase is wholly

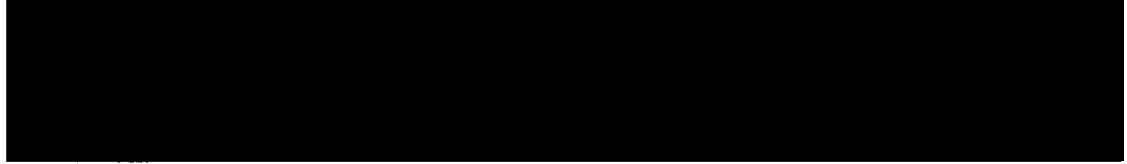
appropriate, and I can understand the rationale for applying a similar term to those experiencing learning difficulties. But because the social and political meanings still attached to 'learning difficulties' are overwhelmingly negative, the notion of removing barriers is inadequate. It implies that schools, as complete micro-systems, are able to manage their communities so as to change these socially and politically situated meanings. Whilst I would not want to argue that schools or teachers are powerless in the process of the construction of meaning, it is a mistake to think that the meanings they construct can float free and independent of the discursive matrix within which they are embedded. The meanings that schools are able to make available, and the practices they can legitimate, necessarily exist in relation to those of the society and communities beyond the school gates. To suggest otherwise is to set schools and teachers up for failure.

Later in the Green Paper, the theme of removing barriers is expanded. 'Inclusion is a process, not a fixed state. By inclusion, we mean not only that pupils with SEN should wherever possible receive their education in a mainstream school, but also that they should join fully with their peers in the curriculum and life of the school' (ibid. p44). I would want to agree in principle with much of this. But, again, the issue of what 'pupils with SEN' are to be included in has been side-stepped. What does it mean to 'join fully with their peers in the curriculum and life of the school' when 'their peers' are engaged in the formal work of pursuing the competitive standards agenda and the microcultural work that dominant versions of success make possible? For students who are not going to succeed in dominant terms, the standards agenda is instrumental in constructing barriers to their participation. Here lies one of the most fundamental contradictions at the heart of New Labour's educational policy. The kind of full inclusion process apparently promoted in *Excellence for all Children* implies a set of values about intrinsic human worth which has effectively been overruled by the competitiveness of the standards agenda.

For the source of this contradiction we have to look again at the underlying imperative, obscured in the Green paper, behind what New Labour means by inclusion. Levitas (1998) traces how New Labour has moved away from a re-distributionist discourse to

draw on combinations of moral underclass and social integrationist discourses. She argues that:

TEXT REDACTED DUE TO THIRD PARTY RIGHTS OR OTHER LEGAL ISSUES



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Educational policy, like other areas of New Labour policy-making, is similarly designed to legitimate the overall pattern of inequality necessary for the reproduction of global capitalism. When Blunkett cites the World Bank's observation that the keys to the world's treasures belong to the educated (see page 96), he not only de-problematises unequal distribution, but inscribes it as right and proper, and an unarguable good. Where the standards agenda and the drive towards 'inclusive education' work together is in their colonisation of the moral high ground. Both present themselves as if they were egalitarian in intent and effect. But a closer look at some part of the Green Paper already cited shows that this morality is, in fact, a utilitarian argument. Levitas (1998) notes that 'The case against exclusion is cast in terms of its consequences for the wider society: it undermines social cohesion and, in so doing, imposes an economic cost. It is a utilitarian, rather than a moral, argument' (p35). When Blunkett describes children with special educational needs as 'contributors to society' he is making this utilitarian argument as if it were a moral imperative. This toxic mix of utilitarianism and morality cast as common-sense and presented in 'can-do' language obscures, at a practical and theoretical level, the relations of dominance and subordination it continues to reproduce. Looking at the discursive practices that produce and are produced by the 'inclusion' of 'special needs students' is one way in which these relations can be made visible and interrogated.

At Meadway, the standards agenda inscribes such students into relations of intellectual subordination through inserting them into deficit discourses. Students on the special needs register are positioned in one of three ways, and their 'neediness' defined accordingly. Those who are situated closest to the intangible border at which 'learning difficulties' merge with 'normality' are positioned as needing help in order to get as

close as possible to normative versions of success. Most are positioned as needing help in order to achieve their personal best, since normative versions of success are clearly beyond their reach. And a further small group is identified as 'really disabled', and needful of help not to make academic progress, but to be socially included in the life of the school. Whilst all three positions can be legitimated (and, as a learning support teacher, I am in the business of legitimating them), these deficit discourses also serve to position intellectually subordinated students outside of the dominant versions of success that the school works so hard to make desirable to the rest of its students. This is a theme to which I will return in later chapters.

The Micropolitics of Learning Support

The standards agenda requires Meadway to make above-average examination success available and desirable to a continuously increasing proportion of its students. The inclusion agenda appears to require Meadway to provide schooling for students of all abilities and inclinations, irrespective of whether they are going to be able to perform at average level or above¹⁶. These apparently contradictory imperatives are transmitted to students in many ways. One key site of this transmission is the learning support department, via which the school's micropolitical response to policy and discursive contradiction is enacted.

The learning support department is part of the pastoral faculty at Meadway. It consists of the head of department (Tony), two part-time teachers covering a full-time post (Barbara and myself) and three learning support assistants (Saima, Caroline and Simone). The head of the pastoral faculty (Pam) does some support teaching within the department, creating an unusual management situation. As head of faculty, Pam is Tony's line manager, but he is responsible for overseeing her work in the learning support department. In parallel with the learning support department is the ethnic minorities and traveller education grant (EMTAG) team, of approximately the same size. The EMTAG teachers and support assistants are based in the school, but paid directly by the authority, and so have a slightly different relationship with Meadway's

¹⁶ An additional policy contradiction is highlighted in the literature on school culture (Carrington, 1999; Corbett, 1999; Zollers, Ramanthan and Yu, 1999; Alton-Lee et al., 2000; Bines, 2000; Kugelmass, 2001). Whilst the standards agenda enshrines a competitive, individualised version of success, the creation of 'inclusive cultures' appears to require a more communal model.

line management system. In April 2000, a learning mentor (Ariadne) was appointed to a two-year post funded by Excellence in Cities. Ariadne is line managed directly by Pam and, like the EMTAG team, she works in parallel with the learning support department. Her post has been created specifically to promote the inclusion of 'disaffected' students who are at risk of 'social exclusion' and its continuance is subject to Ariadne proving that she has had a direct influence in reducing numbers of student exclusions. Ariadne's post is an example of a post-1998 shift in the official construction of 'inclusive education'. A glance at the jobs section of the *Times Educational Supplement* reveals that learning support is increasingly directed towards and defined in terms of students who are 'at risk of social exclusion': that is, those whose effects on classrooms is often disruptive. Official linguistic shifts notwithstanding, Meadway has continued to refer to these students as 'disaffected'. Students with 'learning difficulties', not those who are disaffected, remain the primary concern of Meadway's learning support department.

In general terms, the policy of the learning support department is to offer support to students in subjects with a high literacy or numeracy content. This means that support is usually allocated when students are in an English, Maths, Science or Humanities lesson. The exception to this is for students who have statements of educational need specifying other support requirements. A support teacher or learning support assistant will usually support two or more students in any one class. There is a long-running dispute about this apparently rational allocation policy. Teachers in some faculties, and in particular the Creative and Performing Arts (CPA) faculty, believe that they are disadvantaged, and their curriculum areas marginalised, because of it. Meadway is officially committed to offering all of its students a 'broad and balanced curriculum'. The head of the CPA faculty (Lesley) argues that she is not able to offer such a curriculum to some students because of lack of support. Underlying this argument is the sense that subjects such as Music and Drama, which form part of the CPA grouping, are being positioned as less important than the more 'serious' subjects. As a former teacher of Music, and as a friend of Lesley's, I tend to be perceived as her ally in this argument and often find myself taking her part in staffroom debate. That debate can get very heated. Ball (1987) comments that:

The talk is of winning and losing, and the person and the personal are part of the conflict and the 'stake'. This is no cool rational process; it is a conflict between persons, groups and ideologies. It is a matter of confrontation, influence or the lack of it, and emotions. It is micropolitics.

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Tony's view is that we are supporting the student, not the faculty, and that a student's gains in literacy are transferable across the curriculum. Lesley (and I) argue that students are as entitled to have access to Music and Art as to literacy-based subjects. The ideological and the personal are entwined and between them construct the debate. Although it appears to be about contrasting notions of what constitutes 'right' provision for students on the special needs register, this argument is as much about the power and prestige of 'recreational' subjects as it is about student entitlements. There is a seldom-voiced personal dimension to Lesley's apparently rational argument, which is about how she is positioned as a music teacher and head of CPA if her subject and her faculty are positioned as relatively unimportant. Lesley's strongly-held views about the purpose of learning support provision, and the moral and ideological base for that provision are, in large part, produced through her own struggles for power and prestige.

If this is true of Lesley, it is certainly true for those of us in the learning support department. Arguments that 'professionals and practitioners have vested interests in the expansion and development of special education' (Tomlinson, 1982, p5) which run through sociological writing in special and inclusive education have what I believe to be a partial ring of truth at Meadway. As a professional and a practitioner, the notion of professional vested interests is a thought with which I find it hard to engage, and one that I always want to complexify. Undoubtedly we have an interest in listing students on the special needs register. By doing so, we justify our own jobs at the school: funding from the LEA for special needs provision is delegated according to the number of students on the register. If students do not get registered, our jobs do not get funded. We also have an interest in lobbying for the school to become more inclusive. When Meadway admits students whose learning difficulties are perceived to be beyond the experience of most of the subject teachers, those of us in the learning support department who have the required experience are positioned as experts, and our advice is eagerly sought. The ideological commitment to moving towards inclusion, which is

held by many of us in the learning support department, is thus produced in the context of the personal/professional implications that more flexible admissions policies would have for us.

Whilst the micropolitics of special needs support are played out on the personal/ideological stage of allocation and admissions debates, they are also played out, day-by-day, in classrooms. Whilst Meadway's policies on the provision of classroom support may appear highly rational, and challenges to them constructed through the ideological debate of what is perceived to be best for the students, in fact the provision of such support, and its take-up by students, can be far from straightforward. The operationalisation of Meadway's in-class support policies is fraught with interpersonal complexities for both students and adult workers. In Chapter Seven I will look at student responses to support, and the kinds of identity resources that the act of offering classroom support makes available to students. Here, I want to explore some of the adult identity work that produces, and is produced by, the in-class support context.

English next. Sana wants me to come to her lesson, but I'm supposed to be with Aneesa in Larry's class. I'd much rather go with Sana as I don't like Larry's lessons. I tell her I'll ask Mr. Hill [Larry] if he needs me. When I get there, he's deep into negotiations with some bad girls. I can't face negotiating my presence with him, so I sit down next to Aneesa. Actually, I'm supposed to be supporting Bridget, but she would have a fit and tell me where to go if I sat with her. I think Larry has forgotten that I'm supposed to be with Bridget. Anyway, she sits next to Laura, who's perfectly capable of giving any help needed. Larry attempts to allocate parts for Macbeth. Several students refuse to read, so he will take the parts not filled. Aneesa is given the third witch: Larry always gives her a part to read when I am there. He wants there to be a 'stage' in the middle of the classroom. First and second witches take up their places. I ask if we can do our part from where Aneesa is sitting – I would be completely mortified if I had to go and stand on the 'stage' in front of the class, although Aneesa probably wouldn't mind. We take advantage of Larry's struggle for the class's attention to practice the first line Aneesa will say. When it gets around to her turn, she has forgotten it, and we stumble through, with me telling her every other word. I'm hot with embarrassment and feel like I should be doing a better job. The lesson seems to go on forever. Larry keeps saying that he's not going to let anyone else spoil the lesson, and that he will exclude from English the next person who talks. But he doesn't. At one point he threatens Bridget with the duty room. She has just returned from her temporary exclusion, and is on a contract, so this is visibly effective. She argues that she wasn't the only one making a noise, but doesn't push her luck just in case. I would feel terrible if she were to be excluded from a lesson in which I was supposed to be supporting her. I hope no-one finds out.

Fieldnotes 5/1/00

Just as failure is elided for students, so it is differently elided for those of us who work with them. In this lesson, Larry and I have a tacit agreement not to act in any way that might suggest we have noticed each other's failure: his to control the class, or mine to provide meaningful curricular experiences for targeted students. As a learning support teacher, I come to share in the embarrassment and shame of Aneesa's inability to decipher the text to an expected level. Even though no-one points this inadequacy out, I am acutely aware of it. I also come to share in the guilty and furtive nature of Bridget's transgressions: I, too, fear the consequences should my deliberately counter-authority abandonment of her be found out. Like the students, we as teachers have sometimes contradictory motivations. These may be partly constructed through rational arguments about how we understand our classroom purposes, but they can also be, at times, profoundly irrational. It is in the classroom that the immaculately pieced-together jigsaw of Meadway's SEN policies gets shaken and scrambled by the jostling inconsistencies of interpersonal negotiation and identity work.

Eliding Failure in the New Millennium

It is important to remember that the current New Labour government has not invented the discursive field of 'special education'. As I argued in Chapter Two, its policies on inclusion reflect inherited meanings, structures and practices in the provision of schooling for intellectually subordinated students as well as systemic inequalities in wider society and globally. I do not intend in this chapter to undertake a lengthy exposition of how students use this discursive field in their identity work, since this is the subject of the remainder of the thesis. But I would like to conclude this chapter by looking at one example of how policy imperatives and inherited meanings combined with school micropolitics to inscribe a Year Eleven student in some fairly traditional relations of subordination across multiple axes of difference through the elision of 'failure'.

Aqsa is in Year Eleven, her final year at Meadway. Early on in the academic year, the students are required to produce a personal statement for their Record of Achievement. This document, essentially a file containing a record of the student's examination results and some 'personal best' pieces of work (in practice randomly chosen) together

with any certificates the student may have gained, informs the references that the form tutor will write for colleges and employers. The personal statement is a student's own view of the transferable 'key skills' she has gained, together with her career aspirations. Local colleges always ask to see a copy of the personal statement. Writing the statement had presented multiple challenges to Aqsa, and she brought it to me the day before it was due to be finished, wanting help in writing something that would satisfy her form tutor and keep her out of trouble.

Hafsa and Aqsa collect me from the staffroom after the bell goes. Aqsa has her ROA personal statement, which has to be handed in tomorrow, and she's in a bit of a panic. I like working with the girls after school. It feels friendly and relaxed, and there's time to chat as well as work... So far, Aqsa's ROA statement consists of two sentences; 'I am not brit [bright] girl. I am v v lazy'. Somehow, within an hour, we have to construct a narrative of her life that will illustrate all the transferable skills she has acquired. We start with her educational background, reducing the upheavals and complexities of her history to a bald statement of how long she spent at school in Pakistan, France and England respectively. She has been in school for a total of seven years. The rest of the time - spent in hiding, and in refugee camps - we don't write about. We list the subjects she is currently studying. I ask what her favourites are. She doesn't like any. This won't do, and I press her to nominate two or three that are less horrible than the rest. We note these down as her favourites. Hafsa helps us construct a paragraph about Aqsa's interests. Aqsa doesn't want to admit to liking Indian films, as she thinks I will read this as 'lazy'. She feels the same about her enjoyment of Indian music. Between us, Hafsa and I talk her into writing these down. We write that she is good at cooking, since this is one of her home responsibilities, although she detests it. Interests at school are harder. We're stuck for a while, until Hafsa remembers the community party in Year Nine. Aqsa, whose English then was less fluent than it is now, had hung around on the sidelines. They talk about the experience, which neither of them had enjoyed. It turns out that Aqsa had hung someone's coat up at one point, and had also managed to hand round a jug of orange juice. We write about how she had been responsible for 'receiving guests' and 'serving drinks'. A paragraph at the end on Aqsa's future ambitions turns out to be the hardest. She wants to go to college, but thinks she is too stupid, and doesn't like to think about what she might do there in case she does not get good enough results to go at all. So we write about how she is 'not yet sure' what she wants to study, and end with her wanting a job in which she can 'use the skills I have already learned, and develop new skills'. Consumer capitalism here we come. I'm disturbed by how much of the language of corporate managerialism I've absorbed, and how easy it is to use it. And by what it leaves out.

Fieldnotes 1/11/99

The coherent, unified narrative of the skills and competencies Aqsa had supposedly accrued during her school life was in most ways a travesty. We elided not only Aqsa's failure to make the academic grade in the terms of the standards agenda. We elided the

complexities of her refugee background in our Eurocentric account of her schooling, and we de-problematised her inscription into traditional feminine domesticity. We re-wrote her, Western-style, as an individual with a portfolio of skills, aptitudes and abilities, all supposedly transferable into resources that she could use for her personal benefit.

It is unlikely that Aqsa will emerge from compulsory schooling with more than two GCSEs at grade G. She is, whatever euphemisms we might care to use, a failing student of a system that needs to produce failing students in order to produce successful ones. In this example, however, our joint task was to narrate her as if she were successful. We narrated her as if she were academically enthusiastic: the three school subjects she hates least became her 'favourite subjects'. We narrated her as if she were a corporate 'team player', milking her participation in compulsory school activities for all it was worth, teasing out what she had done, and recasting it as demonstrable competencies. And we re-presented her bleak hopelessness about what the future holds for her as an amorphous ambition to use the skills she had already learned and develop new ones. In so doing, we commodified what learning had taken place, so that Aqsa could demonstrate she had accrued some 'masteries' (Walkerdine and Girls Into Mathematics Unit, 1989) worth trading on the marketplace.

But the kinds of goods we argued she had accrued were those that could enable her to insert herself into the global labour market on its feminised bottom rung: making use of her skills in cooking and providing domestic services. I am not arguing that this institutionally-legitimated production of Aqsa's personal narrative is the only institutionally-legitimated narrative she has produced in the course of her construction of herself as 'special needs student'. In English lessons, she has produced very different versions, that arguably present a much richer account of herself. But the ROA personal statement occupies a privileged space in that it is the document a student takes forward to college or employment as her statement of entry to the adult world of work.

Aqsa left the library that afternoon beaming with a satisfaction which I think owed more to finishing a task that had been worrying her than it did to pleasure with the

completed narrative. The ROA personal statement has to be written in bright, up-beat, positive language. There is no space within the genre for the articulation of failure or of the fear of failure. Sennett (1998) writes that 'Failure is the great modern taboo... As with anything we are afraid to speak about forthrightly, both internal obsession and shame only thereby become greater. Left untreated is the raw inner sentence, "I am not good enough" ' (p118). The inherited meanings, structures and practices of the UK schooling system in general and 'special' schooling in particular privilege academic achievement and attach negative meanings and consequences to perceived intellectual inadequacy. The New Labour education reforms, building on the marketisation of education under the previous administration, have incorporated some of these meanings and consequences. Under the umbrella of 'inclusion', and using a version of social justice based on social integrationist and moral underclass discourses (Levitas 1998), these meanings and practices have been re-cast.

In today's system, where failure in education exists, it can only overtly be ascribed to teachers and schools. Since Meadway is a 'successful school' and cannot be interpellated into narratives of institutional failure, Aqsa's failure to achieve good exam results cannot be articulated as failure at all. Since the New Labour version of social justice draws on a complex blend of social integrationist and moral underclass discourses, those who, like Aqsa, fail in spite of the opportunities they have been offered are implicitly traduced as responsible not only for their own failure but for the consequences to society of that failure. At Medaway, Aqsa can be positioned as a 'special needs student', and her failure can thus be accounted for, and re-cast through her IEP targets, as personal success. In the world beyond Meadway, Aqsa has no claim to a disabled identity. She is a materially impoverished immigrant young women who, if she manages to take up a place in the labour market, is likely to find herself doing the most poorly-paid and least prestigious jobs.

This chapter has presented an overview of the ways in which government policy for SEN appears to contradict the standards agenda in its call for inclusive schooling, even as it acts to shore up the inconsistencies of the standards agenda through its location within discourses of effectiveness. Meadway's discourses of failure are similarly complicated. Drawing on an historical set of meanings in which intellectual attainment

below a certain (changing) level has been cast as irretrievably shameful, as well as on a current set of discursive practices profoundly shaped by the standards agenda, failure has become unmentionable at Meadway. Discourses of success, and discourses of SEN and inclusion slide past some students' failure to meet culturally and politically produced norms. This elision obscures the political situatedness of the standards agenda, and contributes to its daily re-inscription as common sense. The remainder of this thesis looks at the identity work required and made possible by the elision of academic failure, in the context of other indices of difference.

Chapter Five
Methodology and Methods

Volumes have been written about educational research methodology and methods, about ethnography, and about relations of power between researcher and researched. In this chapter, I do not attempt anything approaching a systematic review of these literatures, as this would be a major endeavour beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I begin by looking at the political/epistemological reasons underpinning my choice of ethnography as a research approach, and outlining how ethnography, as a means of theoretical and political engagement, enabled me to access the kinds of knowledge in which I was interested. I go on to explain in some detail my research methods: in particular I am interested here in what happens when the best epistemologically-laid plans meet both the demands of life in a busy school and the complexity of working through these as a practitioner-researcher. This is something I return to at the end of the chapter, in which I explore some specific instances of micropolitical complexity, and tease out some of their implications for the knowledge I am presenting in this thesis.

Why Ethnography?

Each new class which puts itself in the place of the one ruling before it is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, valid ones.

(Marx and Engels, 1845-6, p65)

Marx and Engels' comments on the production of (class) domination through knowledge may seem outdated and irrelevant to the twenty-first century world of multiplicities. But they echo down the centuries in Gramscian notions of hegemony and in the work of feminist, post-colonial and disability theorists, to name but a few. In all these cases, the production of critical knowledge is a political, as well as an epistemological, project, in which the production of knowledge(s) has close and reciprocal ties to a movement for social change.

My concern in this research is to interrogate the actions and meanings around 'success' in the context of the English schooling system. The New Labour government's appropriation of both the moral high ground and of the language of pragmatism, is arguably managing to present its own very specific set of meanings around what constitutes success in schooling as the only possible set of meanings. In Blunkett's terms (cited on page 96) the arguments are 'unanswerable', or, as Marx and Engels might have said, appear to be the 'only rational, valid ones' and in the interests of all groups within society. As a teacher, as a feminist and as a socialist, I have a set of questions about such a presentation of meaning. I want to know how, and in whose interests, this set of meanings about success is being constructed and made hegemonic.

An ethnographic approach appealed to me, primarily as a way of studying the imbrication of macro- and micro-political processes, and the micro-cultural and (inter)personal identity work through which educational policy is enacted in school. Above all, I wanted to interrogate the working through of schooling reforms at the level of the interpersonal, and examine the interpersonal in the context of wider social and political power relations. A full history and analysis of ethnography as method and methodology is beyond the scope of this thesis. What is of interest to me here, and worth exploring, is the construction of both a politicised methodology and a methodologically informed politics. Reflecting on why she chose to use ethnographic methods, Skeggs (1994) comments that she 'wanted a method of analysis which would make the links between structure and practice, between the macro and the micro; a method which would link everyday interaction to history, economics, politics and wider cultural formations' (p74). As a learning support teacher, I already had considerable knowledge of the reservoir of things that can be said and done in the processes of constructing success and of producing successful subjects at the schools in which I have worked. An ethnographic approach, firmly situated in the wider socio-political context, seemed the most appropriate way for me to build on this knowledge and to use it to interrogate dominant meanings of success in school.

Skeggs characterises cultural studies ethnography as 'a theory of the research process which combines particular methods in certain ways. It is a methodology which

combines theoretical positions and political intent; it informs how the different methods are combined and the way the researcher approaches issues of power, responsibility and ethics' (Skeggs, 1997, p23). Two of the theoretical fields from which I draw much of my thinking – feminist theory and disability theory – have slightly different takes on these issues of power, responsibility and ethics¹⁷. Of especial concern to me were the debates in disability theory around representation, and around who can, and cannot, speak for those who are positioned as disabled. Did I have any right to investigate issues relating to intellectual disability when I have no claim to a disabled identity myself? Moreover, as a teacher, I am in part involved and invested in the ongoing production of intellectual subordination. From a similar starting point, Bines notes that

Although I believe that most special needs are socially constructed... it can be difficult to maintain such social perspectives under the day-to-day pressure of teaching and research. ... Professional experience and culture has also made it difficult to agree with all of the sociological criticisms of professional vested interests, even though I am aware that policy and provision for special educational needs are often neglected and marginalised, and that certain professional attitudes and practices need to be confronted.

(Bines, 1995, p44)

Like Bines, I am located within a professional culture that positions me as complicit, makes some arguments unappealing and unpalatable and, no doubt, obscures for me some (though not all) of the practices with which I at times collude. From such a position, is reflexivity enough? Some might argue that it is not. Barton and Clough take an undifferentiated body of non-disabled 'researchers' to task, stating that 'it is vitally important that researchers, recognising their limitations, endeavour to be more open and self-aware with regard to their own values, priorities and processes of interpretation' (Barton and Clough, 1995, p143). I think it is important that I do not overstate the case in applying their words of caution to myself. As a research student,

¹⁷ See, for example, Stanley and Wise (1993), Cherland (1994), Fine (1994), Holland and Ramazanoglu (1995), Kelly, Regan et al. (1995), Mirza (1995), Morris (1995), Hey (1997), Bell (1998), Edwards and Ribbens (1998), Skeggs (1998), Skelton (1998) and Mauthner and Hey (1999) for a full discussion of the ethical, strategic and political dimensions of feminist research. The issue of non-disabled researchers researching those considered to be disabled, as well as a full range of ethical issues around participatory and emancipatory research, are discussed in, for example, Clough and Barton (1995), Fulcher (1995), Peters (1995), Swain (1995), Vlachou (1995), Barton (1998), Clough (1998) and Corbett (1998b).

rather than an established researcher/academic, I do not occupy a position of power relative to the generation of knowledge and theory. And as a feminist, the endeavour towards a reflexive self-awareness has long been familiar to me. To return to Skeggs' triad of power, responsibility and ethics, perhaps what is of most significance here is that I am multiply positioned in relation to all three. As a teacher, I have contractual responsibilities, I have a clearly delineated position within the hierarchy of the school, and I am subject to professional notions of ethics. These are nuanced by the fact that I am a learning support teacher, my responsibilities configured in some rather contradictory ways around the 'well-being', as well as the academic progress, of students who are, by definition, not doing well at school (see pages 182 and 183). Simultaneous engagement in a research project as a research student further complexifies my position. Hill (1995) speaks of 'the contradiction that, while belonging to one group (teachers), I was involved in pursuing the goal of another group (academics). The fact that the outlook, perception and, indeed, language of the two varied, left me in a position that was on occasions difficult' (p104).

Research Methods

Ethnography... is a combination of different methods... It usually combines certain features in specific ways: some account of context; of fieldwork that will be conducted over a *prolonged period of time*; conducted *within the settings* of the participants; *involving the researcher in participation* and observation; involving an account of the development of relationships between the researcher and the researched; involving study of 'the other'; focusing on experience and practice; having culture frequently as the central focus; treating participants as microcosms of wider structural processes.

(Skeggs, 1995, p192, original emphasis)

At the beginning of the Autumn Term of 1999, I sought permission to conduct ethnographic research at Meadway. Since Meadway prides itself both on its academic success and on its equal opportunities work, I presented the work I wanted to do as a 'study of good practice' (see Appendix One). My first ports of call were the deputy head in charge of equal opportunities, and my own head of department. They took my request to a senior management meeting, and I heard nothing for a fortnight, since the first such meeting was taken up with matters of more pressing concern. The answer, when it came, was provisional: I would have to seek permission from each head of

faculty as well as from each individual teacher in whose lessons I wanted to be present. I would also need to obtain a signed permission slip from the parent or guardian of every student I proposed to interview (Appendix Two).

The act of negotiating with heads of faculty for permission was an interesting one. By serendipitous coincidence, I had led a staff meeting about Asperger Syndrome the week before approaching them. I had been asked to do this by the head of Learning Support, as colleagues had been asking with increasing desperation for help with a newly-admitted student (see Chapter Nine). The staff meeting had gone well. What could have been for me a difficult and humiliating process – asking senior colleagues for a favour – was definitely changed by this. Where there might easily have been suspicion, none was apparent. In effect, I had established not only a claim to expertise, but had shown myself willing and able to put theoretical material to use in making my colleagues' lives easier as well as to 'improve' students' learning outcomes.

Having secured official permission, I talked to a group of young women students about my proposed research. The young women I spoke to were fifteen-year-olds in Year Eleven. My teaching experience and my research interests led me to focus my attention on this initial group who were considered to have 'learning difficulties' and who I perceived to be positioned in specific ways relative to dominant versions of success. They were a group of nine young women with whom I had a long-established good relationship. Two out of the nine have statements of special educational needs (SEN): one for moderate learning difficulties, and one for autism. Six of the remaining seven were at various stages of the Code of Practice with 'learning as a primary concern', and one was on Stage Two of the Code with 'behaviour as a primary concern' and learning as a secondary concern. All of them were keen to be involved, and all took the letter home and returned the permission slip promptly.

Working with these nine students was enjoyable, and the methods I used were derived from our established style of working together. We were already in the habit of meeting before and after school and during lunchtimes, to work on pieces of GCSE coursework and to chat about life in and out of school. They were happy to allow me

to bring the tape recorder to these sessions, and they negotiated with each other about when the tape player would be switched on and off. We agreed a set of ground rules in which anyone could erase her own comments, or switch the tape player off before speaking, but erasing another person's comments could only be done with their agreement. I did not set up any formal interviews with this group, although the questions I asked them and the directions in which I tried to steer conversations during these informal sessions were often structured by my research intentions.

I also attempted to do some classroom observations with this group of young women. There were two obstacles to this. Firstly, finding the students in appropriate lessons proved to be a logistical nightmare. I wanted to observe in classrooms in which I had a relaxed and friendly working relationship with the class teacher, so that I would not have to be too involved in my own micro-cultural work. I also wanted to observe them in lessons where they were not already being supported by another member of staff, as the presence of too many adults in the classroom was perceived by both students and teachers as intrusive. Three of the young women were very poor attenders, and would frequently be absent from lessons that I had painstakingly identified as possibilities. Secondly, in most cases, the young women were unwilling to allow me to observe them. If I was in the classroom, they wanted me to work with them, not to watch them struggle. For three lessons, I attempted to remain detached from the action, and to write in my notebook. These occasions were unsuccessful in that the young women were completely distracted from their curricular work, spending time waving to me, and coming over and reading what I was writing whenever they could. I either had to go into a governmental role, and tell them to get on with their work without me, or I had to collude with their avoidance of classroom work. Since I wanted to do neither of these, I decided a better option was to go into the lesson without my notebook, and to support the students in my more usual way. I would go straight to the staffroom and scribble down as much as I could remember afterwards.

In the Spring term, a discussion with a colleague presented a new research opportunity. Emily is an English teacher doing an MA in the teaching of English, and is one of my friends on Meadway's staff. She and I had several discussions about her proposed MA

dissertation, and she decided to look at what counted as success in her mixed-ability Year Nine Shakespeare course. The class were almost unknown to me, with the exception of one student who had a statement of special educational needs, and whom I knew by sight. We agreed that I would observe as many of her lessons as possible during the first half of the Spring term. In practice, I was able to observe three to four lessons a week over a period of seven weeks. By the end of the first week, I had identified two target groups of students. The first was a group of six who sat on a table for four and an adjacent table for two. Only one of these students had been identified as having learning difficulties, and she was at Stage Two of the Code of Practice. The remaining five young women tended to be positioned in the middle of the ability range. I chose them partly because they sat in a part of the classroom that was easily observable and audible. Partly, too, I wanted to look at the implications that efforts to change the parameters of what counted as success might have for those who customarily took up middling positions within ability hierarchies. The other group I decided to concentrate on contained the 'statemented' student, and three others, all of whom had been identified as having learning difficulties.

In many ways, the English lessons were a lot easier to observe. I did not have to juggle timetabling complexities. And since the students in the class were unknown to me, they did not make claims on my time and attention but were willing to accept me, at face value, as an observer who would one day write a book about them. I could, and did, sit in the corner with my notebook, emerging from time to time to sit at a table and ask questions, or to take photographs (later used as a stimulus for discussion with the girls). During the periods of observation, I was able to initiate conversations about matters in which I was interested. I wrote these down in as much detail as possible whilst speaking, and then added more detail in the staffroom immediately after the lesson. I also set up some semi-structured interviews with groups of students. These were harder to organise: I often felt reluctant to take them out of lessons, and I did not like to ask them to give up their free time. In the interviews, I asked the students to name the activities that they had taken part in during the work on Macbeth, using photographs to supplement their recollections. I wrote names of the activities on 'post-its' and then asked the students to stick these onto a big piece of sugar paper divided

into four areas: 'I like it and I'm good at it', 'I like it but I'm not good at it', 'I don't like it but I'm good at it' and 'I don't like it and I'm not good at it'. This activity was intended to generate discussion, and not to produce statements that could be taken at face value. Together, in the interviews, we interrogated why and how the students came to position the activities as they did. In this, the interviews supported the pedagogic intention of the work, which was designed to enable the students to question what counted as success.

My final group of participants were in Year Seven. These were the youngest girls in the school. I selected the group partly on the basis of convenience. I wanted to work with students who had been identified as having learning difficulties, and who appeared on the Special Needs Register. There were only a limited number of teachers who I felt able to ask if I could remove students from their lessons to be interviewed. This effectively limited me to students in three classes. I selected four students from each class, and gave them a permission letter. Three students from each class (eventually) returned the slip. One of the others declared herself unwilling to participate, and the remaining two did not bring their permission slips back, even after they had been given many copies of the letter. One of the students was absent from school on the days of all three interviews, and I did not feel able to re-schedule, since negotiating to take students out of class is difficult at Meadoway. This left me with eight students, to whom was added a ninth student who had a statement of SEN for autism. I was interested in her experiences, and, at the beginning of the summer term, I was asked to spend an additional half-day each week supporting her.

I planned a complicated schedule of observations, so as to be able to be present in lessons with targeted students over the second half of the Spring term and the first half of the Summer term. Observing the Year Seven students in class raised many of the same issues that had arisen in the Year Eleven observations. Although they did not know me well, these younger students were unwilling for me to sit and watch them struggle, and they would appeal to me for help. In addition, it was difficult not to intervene when observing Cheryl, the autistic student, as her actions were so frequently disruptive to the class and distressing for her.

The interviews took place over a longer period of time, from the second half of the Spring term to almost the end of the Summer term. I interviewed the girls in three class-based groups three times each. During the first interview, I asked them about their experiences as newcomers to Meadway the previous autumn. I also asked them to invent ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’ students, to describe these students and their school day in as much detail as possible, and to act ‘freeze-frame’ representations of their constructions. These, again, were intended to be talking points. At the end of that first interview I gave the girls a disposable camera each, to take some pictures of their own school lives. During the second interview we looked at the pictures they had taken, and used them as prompts to talk about aspects of their experiences at school. Each girl chose her ‘favourite’ picture and we made a captioned display for Meadway’s International Women’s Day celebrations. In the third interview, the girls used a magnetic board with their and their classmates’ names attached to small magnets (Creese et al., 2000) to talk about classroom life and micro-cultural work. I asked them to imagine they were the teacher, and to arrange the class as they wanted. We repeated this several times, imagining, for example, what a teacher in a good mood, and a teacher in a bad mood might do.

During the first half of the Summer term, I also interviewed four members of staff. I approached two of the teachers most often mentioned by students as the ones they liked and found most understanding. In my approach to the two teachers, I told them of this. The questions I asked these teachers were mostly designed to elicit their accounts about why they were liked by students with ‘SEN’ and, in the process, to find out what meanings the teachers themselves attributed to teaching intellectually subordinated students. I also interviewed a learning support assistant about how she viewed her role and her position within the school, and I interviewed my head of department about Meadway’s official SEN policies, and about the micro-politics through which these are enacted.

In the student interviews, pedagogy and research overlapped, as did my pedagogic relationship and my research relationship with the student/participants. In the case of

the Year Eleven informal interviews, research-led conversations were interspersed with work on overdue GCSE assignments. The Year Nine interviews were specifically planned as part of the teaching content of the course, and as a continuation of its pedagogic intentions. For the Year Seven girls, making a poster for the school's International Women's Day celebrations was as much a pedagogic intervention as a research-led one. In all three year groups, interviewing the students, and attempting to make meaning with them, had pedagogic, as well as research, implications. As a teacher, positioned as an authority in relation to knowledge, this inevitably produced a specific range of things that could and could not be said in conversation with me. It simultaneously produced a form of reciprocity in the interviews, through which the students benefited from extra help and teaching, whilst helping me with my research.

For many of the students, the interviews provided them with a context in which to produce themselves as authorities, a position more usually withheld from them. Sometimes the interviews were heavy going, as participants struggled for words and ways to say what they meant and I struggled for words and ways to help them. Sometimes these struggles were productive in their eventual construction of the students as 'articulate'. But in the case of two students – Cassandra in Year Eleven, and Cheryl in Year Seven - interviews were inappropriate. These two students are autistic, and they tend to make sense of the world in a way that does not make sense to me. I was unable to construct a situation in which we could jointly have explored these students' school lives, since there was not enough common ground between us in the meaning-making process. This is something I will return to in Chapter Nine. My attempts to interview them became punitive occasions in which Cassandra became upset and Cheryl became angry, and I ended both interviews within minutes because of this. As a result, the material I use in relation to Cassandra and Cheryl is gathered from observations recorded in fieldnotes. On reflection, this was not surprising. My intention had been to use the interviews to think with the participants about the reservoir of things that could be said and done in the construction of success, and to think with them about the attached meanings. Whilst Cheryl's and Cassandra's experiences and views are of importance to me, such a reciprocal meaning-making endeavour was always going to be an impossibility. I considered using their drawings

to give me an insight into these students' experiences, but, when I came to analyse them, this felt like an even greater act of mediation and interpretation of their possible reality than my reflections based on interaction and observation.

Data Analysis

In effect, I began data analysis before I had formally embarked on the fieldwork process. My long-established habit of writing down everyday experiences meant that I already had notebooks filled with what I could now consider as 'data' relating to Meadoway, dating back to my interview for a teaching post there in December 1997. When I came to write my research questions, I returned to some of the data stored in these notebooks, and wrote them up as fieldnotes. They helped me to clarify my research intentions and to formulate substantive and methodological questions.

The bulk of the data analysis, though, was done during and after the fieldwork period. At the end of each day, or partial day, of fieldwork, I returned to the computer, to which I transferred my hastily scribbled notes. In the act of doing this, I converted them into something more reflective, beginning the first stage of analysis. Writing up notes in this way was usually enjoyable, and I often spent two or more hours doing it. Towards the end of the Autumn term, I began to write a series of analytic vignettes. Typically, these would consist of a paragraph or episode from fieldnotes, which I would then expand, to begin the process of theorising about the sorts of things that might have been happening, and the sorts of meanings that might have been under construction. This helped me to clarify the direction in which the research was taking me, and informed my decisions about which observations I needed to do, to whom I needed to speak, and what kinds of questions I needed to ask.

I fully transcribed a sample of interviews: two from students in each year group, and one of the staff interviews. Whilst transcribing, I wrote reflective notes and observations as they occurred to me, in bold type on the transcript. I listened to all the other interviews, wrote notes on them, and selectively transcribed extracts that the vignettes had led me to think might be of significance. At the same time, I coded the data. I chose not to do this with a computer programme, but through re-reading the

fieldnotes and transcriptions, and physically cutting and sorting them into themes. Where a theme appeared to draw on interview material not yet transcribed, I went back and transcribed the relevant extract.

At the end of the GCSE exam period, when the Year Eleven students had officially left school, I spent two full days with some of the Year Eleven participants. We listened to their interviews and talked about what they had said and about how they now felt about what they had said. They listened with excitement, and three young women in particular wanted to re-record parts of their interviews as they had 'changed their minds'. We notated some of their key phrases and words, putting them onto cards which most of them were able to read. I talked to the young women about some of the themes that I thought had arisen. We added to these, and they sorted the cards into the themes. It felt important to de-mystify the analysis process as far as possible, and to give the young women an insight into what I was doing with their data. These occasions also provided the opportunity for some enjoyable reminiscences about their schooling experiences, and acted as a closure process. I would have liked to have been able to involve the younger students in data analysis in this way, but the demands of the timetable precluded it. The Year Eleven students also showed interest in the magnetic board I had used in the Year Seven interviews, and made known to me their reservations about the questions I had asked the younger girls. With the Year Seven students' permission, and with mutually agreed ground rules about confidentiality and use of the tape recorder, three of the Year Eleven students used the magnetic board to re-interview three of the Year Seven students, and then discussed their findings with me. The three interviewers, and the three interviewees, helped me to analyse the interviews, identifying key words and sorting them into themes.

Selecting extracts from transcription for coding and for eventual inclusion in the thesis was not straightforward. Many of the participants find it difficult to put thoughts into words and do not speak in ways that can readily be considered coherent. Important themes and insights were often incorporated into long narratives, and peppered with apparent *non sequiturs*. Since this mode of self-expression is an irreducible part of why and how the students come to be intellectually subordinated, I chose to preserve

their accounts in this form, even when they do not make for easy reading. There is necessarily a need to ‘cherry pick’ from vast amounts of data to produce a written account which has some degree of coherence. But to ‘tidy’ the participants’ spoken accounts overmuch would have been to change and diminish them unnecessarily, and to present the students as substantially different from the people they seem to me to be. It would also be heavily reproductive of dominant versions of success, in which the real consequences of intellectual subordination – in this case, the positioning of people as inarticulate – have to be hidden and, if noticed, must remain ‘politely’ unremarked.

Some Micropolitical Implications

As I indicated in the introduction to this chapter, issues of power, responsibilities and ethics were threaded through the research. They surfaced at many levels, from the ideological/conceptual, to the purely procedural. But examination of the ‘purely procedural’ level reveals its ideological depth, and the ideological/conceptual was usually operationalised through the procedural. In this section, I want to consider issues of power, responsibility and ethics as micro/politics, through some of the delights, dilemmas and tricky situations in which I found myself.

Of all the schools in which I have worked, Meadway is the one in which I have felt happiest and most productive. It is, therefore, hard to be relentlessly critical when ‘criticism’ appears to connote unpleasantness and negativity, and, in the last twenty-five years, has overridingly been associated with ‘exposing’ teacher failure. To some extent, I am a victim of New Labour. Part of me wants to tell a happy tale, in which things come out well for students, and in which my colleagues (especially those whom I count as friends) and myself have heroic parts to play. Undoubtedly, I have an interest, produced in part through personal and professional loyalties, in presenting what happens at the school in its best possible light. In some ways it is hard for me as a teacher to tell a critical story when, for twenty-five years, criticism has been systematically used to undermine and ridicule the efforts of teachers in schools. The unwritten rule of the staffroom is that criticism – the asking of hard and often unanswerable questions – is best done in private, between consenting adults.

Back in the staffroom, the usual people gather to have a good laugh about the meeting... Conversation turns to the G&T. People congratulate Sue on her presentation. She had been nervous, especially, she says, of me sitting writing copious notes. Nadje jokes that I'm going to be writing it in my PhD, and there is laughter. I feel myself going a bit red. One of my purposes in staying for the staff meeting was to get juicy data on the introduction of the G&T policy. I'm not sure whether this gentle teasing means that it really is OK, or whether me and my notebook are beginning to get a bad name. I wish I'd asked Sue's permission first.

Fieldnotes 13/12/99

Staff micropolitics were a fascinating but fraught area of exploration. If someone had an interesting conversation at lunch, my first instinct was to hunt for my notebook straight away and record as much of it as I could remember. This felt permissible in the case of the headteacher and her deputies, since their lunchtime appearances were very much in the style of public engagements. The lower down the hierarchy, the less acceptable it felt. My purpose at Meadway was not to find people out, in the style of OFSTED, but to find out how the system operated, and informal contexts were and are central in the production of meaning. But where to draw the line? Should I take my notebook to the pub after school?

In the end, I decided that I would not take 'covert' notes where informal situations with colleagues were concerned. Since everyone involved knew that I was doing a research project in the school, it seemed adequate to wave my notebook around as a signal that I was engaged in systematic recording of what was going on, and leave it to people to make their own decisions about what to say. This did not cover every situation, as people had a habit of saying the most interesting and unforgettable things when I was putting my coat on to leave, but it was my general working principle. Staff meetings were harder. In some ways, as formal, minuted occasions, they were fair game for me. But the point of staff meetings is that they are idiosyncratic and intended for their participants only. I have long been fascinated by them as key sites of micropolitical activity. In the extract above, Sue could not stop or substantially modify her presentation when I took out my notebook. Following that meeting, I realised that I should not take my 'insiderness' for granted, and I was more careful about asking the main speakers at meetings for permission to bring my notebook. Permission was never

refused, and indeed I think it would have been very hard for anyone to refuse, but I reasoned that at least people were forewarned.

The role of teacher-researcher that I was trying to take up was nuanced by the fact that the role of learning support teacher can in itself be tricky to negotiate. One problem, inherent in working as a learning support teacher as well as teacher researcher, is that of knowing how to respond when students criticise a colleague.

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Interview 9/12/99

My position as teacher gives me an ongoing access to students and makes me a part of their school lives. It also means I have an ongoing set of responsibilities – to students and colleagues - and contractual obligations by which I am bound. As a learning support teacher, there is an expectation that I will bend the rules of teacherliness, listen to students' grievances and sometimes mediate when things have gone very wrong between student and teacher. It is often hard to know how far to bend those rules without breaking them: in the students' interests, as well as in the interests of the organisation, my teacherliness and my loyalty to colleagues have to be preserved. The temptation during the research period was to let my desire for interesting nuggets of data lead my decision about how far to bend a rule. With hindsight, I can see that there were times, such as the one cited above, when my desire to keep students talking led me into some difficult situations that it would have been better to have avoided.

Linked to the difficulties of doing researcher as a learning support teacher was the issue of how I represented, to the participants, the reason I had chosen them to participate. On my letter to parents, I represented the girls as 'students who receive learning support'. It seemed like the only option available to me, unsatisfactory though

it was. Corbett notes that ‘ ‘Special needs’ is becoming a most unacceptable term. Most prefer the words ‘learning support’. However, these words apply specifically to the provision, not to the people’ (Corbett, 1996, p2). I failed to find an alternative way to account for my choice of participants to the students themselves. Mostly, they let this failure go unspoken. When they challenged me to provide an answer, I tended to fall back on their institutional location on the special needs register, or on an individualising discourse.

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Interview 7/3/00

Such responses were far from adequate, and, in many ways, re-inscribed the shamefulness with which intellectual subordination is associated. I did not have the social, cultural or linguistic resources to provide a satisfactory account to the students for my choice of them as participants. But whilst this makes my unsatisfactory response understandable, it does not make it politically viable. Riddell and her colleagues note a similar dilemma in their work with adults who have been considered to have learning difficulties. ‘Given the negative connotations which the group attached to learning difficulties, we felt that we should not impose on the group an identity which they themselves were rejecting’ (Riddell, Wilkinson and Baron, 1998, p90). Most of the students who participated in this research have not been offered any version of a disabled identity: arguably what they have been offered in its place is a vague sense of being inadequate, with that inadequacy being too shameful to speak of. Riddell et al. go on to note that:

Throughout their education, training and social activity, these people were grouped together on the implicit understanding that they had certain common characteristics and required particular types of provision. However, the basis of their social grouping and the attributed social identity which flowed from it appeared not to have been discussed by parents and professionals with those whose lives it concerned. It appeared that intellectual impairment, far from being celebrated, was too shameful to be discussed openly even with those who were being consigned to this category.

(ibid. p90)

Much of what Riddell and her colleagues say applied also to the participants in my research. 'Special needs' can be discussed in staffrooms with a degree of openness. It is much harder to discuss it with parents, and it is at this stage that professionals resort to the less shameful euphemism of 'learning support'. For students who cannot be said to be intellectually disabled, the learning support euphemism holds out the promise that their inscription into relations of subordination is temporary and can be remediated. But whilst 'special needs' and 'learning support' can be discussed with parents and carers with difficulty, they connote a shame that means they cannot be discussed openly *especially* with those who are 'being consigned to this category'. Whilst participating in the research may have enabled some of the students to interrogate some of the meanings associated with dominant versions of success, I was not able to help them to challenge the unsayability of their inscription into SEN and learning support discourses.

By far the most frequent 'procedural' dilemma was the one of knowing when to intervene in the classroom, again a familiar problem for a learning support teacher.

Theresa asks the girls to put aprons on, and come and watch her demonstrate. She's showing them how to make textured patterns on pieces of aluminium. They're going to be doing a project involving special paints, which will only work if the metal is textured. Cheryl wants to know what happens if anyone steals the special paints. Theresa tells her they're kept securely. Cheryl won't let it go. She asks what if someone broke in, found the paints, found the key of the cupboard in which they're locked up. I invoke the 'three strikes and you're out' routine. I know I'm supposed to be observing, but I can't collude with Cheryl's invasive questioning.

Fieldnotes 2/3/00

I think there is probably no right way I could have solved this question of intervention. In some settings, and especially where Cheryl was concerned, not to intervene was an act of cruelty, since she could not understand my non-intervention and perceived it as punitive. In the extract above, my collusion with her barrage of questioning would have been very puzzling for her. Similarly, in lessons where my targeted students were struggling with work or relationships, there was only so far I could maintain non-intervention. My credibility as a teacher relies on students and colleagues believing in my ability to spot problems and in my willingness to intervene to ameliorate them. For this credibility to remain intact, I could not, nor did I want to, produce myself as distanced researcher with dispassionate curiosity.

Like ‘criticism’ – for which I would want to recover positive meanings – the ‘dilemmas’ that occurred could also be sources of pleasure. They were not simply problems to be tussled with. The nature of my part-time work at Meadway means I have a certain kind of distance from the students, simply because I cannot be involved in their day-to-day lives in the way I would if I were there all week. Doing research changed my relationship with them in some unexpected ways.

We go together to Maths. I'm looking forward to seeing Cassandra as I've been thinking about her so much lately. I'm disproportionately pleased to see her. There's something about thinking and writing about people that makes me feel much warmer towards them than I'm used to. Maybe it's because I'm investing so much in them.

Fieldnotes 22/3/00

Throughout the period of the research, my concern was not to seek to dis-embed myself from the intricacies of relationship work with students and colleagues, but to participate in it and to use all the resources it made available to me in what I hope (but cannot guarantee) was a non-exploitative and reciprocal way. Any misuse of those resources had serious implications for me as a teacher, and these were a stronger incentive towards ethical actions than any guidelines could have been.

In the end it is my dual institutional location - as a critical teacher, with an ongoing responsibility towards the students and the school, and with a commitment to sustainable long-term change, and as a research student with a researcher's curiosity

and a comparative freedom from institutional demands - that has produced the data I was able to gather. In this chapter I have explicated my research methods and data analysis processes in their theoretical and micro/political contexts. Through this explication, I have examined how my dual location and my epistemological position worked together in the research methods I used and in the processes of analysis I adopted. This chapter has also given me the opportunity to highlight some of the micropolitical implications of that dual location: this is a theme that I return to repeatedly in the remaining chapters, since an understanding of my own situatedness is central to any knowledge claims I would want to make.

Chapter Six
Year Seven – Negotiating a Way In

In this chapter, I look at the ways in which the Year Seven participants negotiate their access to Meadway's identity resources. The chapter explores the identity work of these students, and begins to analyse the imbrication of societal, micro/political and microcultural discourses in that identity work. I look first at how the students do not use the term 'special educational needs'. Analysis of their accounts leads into a discussion of the construction of educational 'neediness'. I then use the girls' accounts to identify three distinct subject positions available to such students: 'sweet little girls', 'big bad girls' and 'lazy girls'. However, although these positions can be identified, this is not to say that they are water-tight, or that the act of negotiating entry into such an identity position is a simple once-and-for-all act. Such negotiations are constantly in process, they are enacted through many overlapping discursive practices, and they rely on complex manoeuvres, recognitions and power contests. And so I end the chapter with fieldnote accounts of two Maths lessons, in which I analyse some of the intricacies of these processes.

The Production of 'Special Needs Students'

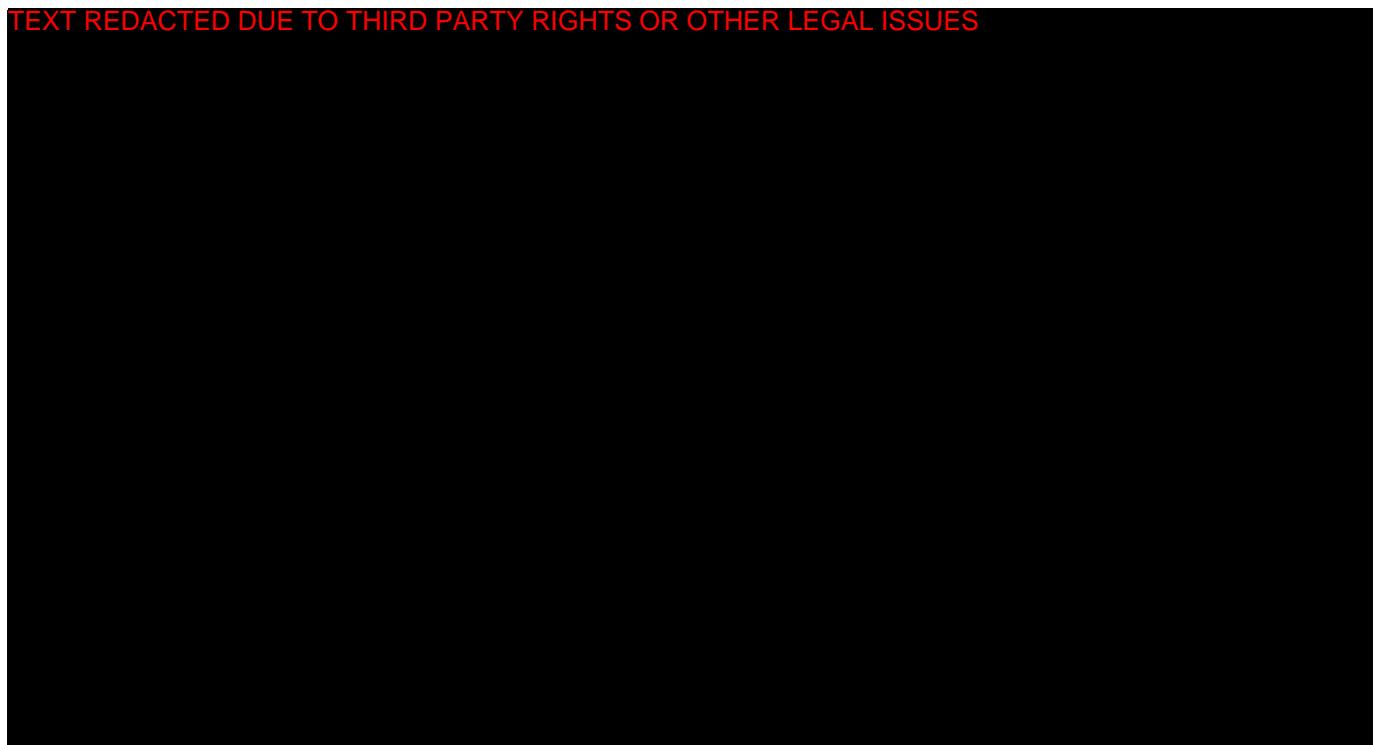
Meera: When you come to this school, you have to work hard, and my Mum said, when I got a place at this school, like that's good, yeah, cause at this school you can achieve, and so I thought when I come to this school I'd get gooder in reading, but I didn't get gooder in reading. When I come to this school, I'm not gooder in reading more than I was in Year Six, and when I was in Year Six there was these people what used to call me 'dumb' and I thought when I come to this school I would get good in reading, but I never... And I still ain't, I'm still not good in reading, even when I come to this school, not even any bit gooder, and I'm still, you know, um, if you ain't good in reading you're dumb.

Interview 4/4/00

The Year Seven participants bring with them (in most cases) a history of academic failure in their primary schools, confirmed in the SATs tests taken at the end of Year Six. In their primary schools, they were all identified as 'special needs children'. None of them, however, applied this formal designation to themselves. Each girl was told at the beginning of the academic year that she appeared in Meadway's Special

Educational Needs register. But not one of them referred to herself as a ‘special needs student’. Neither did I, at any time, use this designation in front of students, or hear any other member of staff do so, in spite of the fact that they are routinely described in this way amongst members of staff in the professional privacy of staffroom and office. Why, then, did the girls use the apparently much more pejorative ‘stupid’ and ‘dumb’ to describe themselves, when they could have used the apparently more neutral language of special needs? And why did the staff (including myself) consistently refrain from using the designation in front of the students?

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Interview 12/3/00

One reading of Shazia’s interpretation of the special needs register would suggest that she is resistant to the construction of herself as part of a deviant group, its deviance subject to heightened adult surveillance. Allan (1999) argues that, ‘surveillance of pupils with special needs enables professionals to show their concern for their welfare and acquire knowledge about their condition and the progress they are making. It also constructs them as objects of power and knowledge’ (p21). The special needs register, as maintained by Meadway and other schools, depends for its legitimacy on the acceptance of a complex web of discourses around human and educational needs and entitlements. Firstly, that people have a ‘need’ for education. Secondly, that people

under a certain age are entitled (by law) to have that need met. Thirdly, that some people are more educationally ‘needy’ than others, and that need can be objectively, or at least reliably, determined. And fourthly, that it is an act of professional benevolence and caring to meet the needs of the more needy. The discourse of educational need is worth exploring a little further here.

The authority of ‘need’ statements does not only come from their apparently straightforward descriptive quality. They also convey considerable emotive force, inducing a sense of responsibility and even feelings of guilt if they are not heeded. This power comes partly from the connotation of helplessness and passivity of any individual who is ‘in need’ and partly from the implications that dire consequences will follow if the need is not met through appropriate intervention.

(Woodhead, 1990, p63)

Woodhead queries the practice of presenting specified cultural experiences (and education would be one such) ‘as if they were intrinsic qualities of children’s own psychological make-up’ (p72). It is not hard to make a case for educational need in the UK today: a young person is strongly disadvantaged if they enter the labour market without the skills, knowledge and credentials to compete successfully. Many education professionals would probably also lay claim to a more liberal humanist version of educational need: that people need education in order to operate as the informed and caring citizens of an enlightened and just society. As I explained in Chapter Two, this was the liberal argument that framed the Warnock Report (Warnock, 1978). Both principles of educational need are arguably enshrined in New Labour’s accounts of its educational policy-making. And both principles are underpinned by the assumption that educational needs are cultural constructions, arising out of the demands of current social conditions. In this way, the discourse of educational need can claim the authority that Woodhead argues inheres in notions of human need, whilst apparently distancing itself from the dependence and vulnerability that intrinsic human need connotes.

The discourse of educational need, whilst it draws on discourses of human need, is also constructed through discourses of entitlement. The increased and increasing marketisation of schooling, in which the school is positioned as producer (or franchisee of a state-validated product), provides a site for the articulation of such a

discourse of entitlement. Educational need therefore contains on the one hand the image of vulnerability, passivity, powerlessness and dependence, and on the other hand, the image of the powerful, active, choice-exercising consumer. The question of who exercises choice in this market is far from straightforward. Although the entitlement is supposedly the student's, it is the parent who has been constructed (by policy) as the consumer (Wilkinson, 1996). So students at secondary school tread a tightrope of being precariously and simultaneously positioned as actively taking up their entitlements, whilst also acting as objects to whom schools and teachers can (and must) 'add value'.

There are some further contradictions within the discourse of educational need. The notion that some people are more educationally needy than others sits very problematically alongside the notion that educational need is a cultural construction, a liberal-humanist requirement and a consumer entitlement. Differential educational need necessarily implies a degree of inherence, and an acceptance that need arises from within the individual. It therefore represents a move back towards the dependence and vulnerability of intrinsic human need. 'Special' educational needs, unlike 'normal' (non-special) educational needs, can only be understood within the psycho-medical model of human need from which they derive, contrary perhaps to Warnock's intentions, as set out in Chapter Two. And so the precarious and unstable positioning of consumer/unit of production within the entitlement discourse is further complicated for students deemed to have 'special needs' by the insertion of a very different notion of needs and entitlements. Further, it is discursively unclear whether 'special needs students', with their intrinsic needs, are constructed as having the same culturally constructed needs as 'normal students'. Since they fall outside of dominant notions of what it is to be a rationally- and incrementally-developing child (Walkerdine, 1988), 'special needs students' are also on the margins of the economic and liberal-humanist discourses that underpin much of the current educational enterprise.

The 'special needs student' is produced as the object of governmentality and also of care. The dependence connoted through special educational needs as intrinsic to the

student is dependence on a professional (or group of professionals) who can operate the technical machinery of identification and assessment from a position of caring for the needy. The 'special needs student' is positioned as doubly needy. Her educational needs must be managed more carefully than those of other students through the rational (and therefore traditionally masculine) apparatus of monitoring and target-setting if those needs are to be met and she is to make progress. But the framework for meeting those needs is the traditionally feminine realm of care and compassion for the vulnerable.

The Year Seven girls are thus offered a subject position that is highly problematic from the outset. It is a position that carries with it the stigma of outsider-ness, since it refers to a discourse of intrinsic need that stands in contradiction to 'normal' culturally-produced educational need, and since it refers to a failure to make the linear progress associated with schooling. It is a position that also refers to failure to make academic progress according to norms set out in the standards agenda, and as such, cannot be articulated, especially in a successful school such as Meadway. And it is a position that inscribes the girls within a bureaucratised regime of governmentality legitimised through benevolent humanitarianism (Tomlinson, 1982; Slee, 1995) and a version of equal opportunities. Whilst they can and do refuse to recognise the label 'special needs student', and whilst all members of the school community can and mostly do refuse to address them as such within their hearing, the girls nevertheless have to position themselves in relation to the discursive practices that produce them, in specific sites, as 'special needs students'.

Sweet Little Girls, Big Bad Girls and Lazy Girls

The Year Seven participants are all invested, to some extent, in producing themselves as compliant, hard-working students. None of them overtly rejects what she perceives to be the academic or disciplinary aims of the school. Already, however, they are beginning to be recognisable as members of one of three distinct categories: 'sweet little girls', 'big bad girls' or 'lazy girls'. Fozia, Shazia and Ambrine tend to produce themselves as the 'sweet little girls' of the group. All are of Asian origin and are

observant Muslims. Kerry and Cheryl¹⁸ tend to produce themselves as ‘big bad girls’. Kerry is from an indigenous and secular UK family, whilst Cheryl is African-Caribbean and a practicing Christian. Meera and Sunna tend to produce themselves as ‘lazy girls’. They are from Asian Muslim families. Josephine, whose family are Jehovah’s Witnesses from sub-Saharan Africa, tends to occupy a midway position between ‘sweet little girl’ and ‘lazy girl’.

In his work with young children, Connolly (1998) notes the tendency for boys and girls of South Asian origin to be infantilised, and referred to by teachers and others as ‘little’. The three girls, all of Asian origin, who take up this position are all physically small for their age, and they manage to code themselves as child-like. They wear shoes with low or no heels, they do not use make-up, and they specialise in a shy version of a smile, whilst looking down at the floor to suggest submission and eagerness to please. Like many of the Muslim students they wear *shalwar kameez*, and Fozia also covers her head. But whereas many of the Muslim girls manage to play with the dress code, these girls present themselves as completely de-sexualised, and, in both interviews and informal conversations, made clear the distance between themselves and the hetero/sexualised Other girls.

The ‘sweet little girl’ position is in many ways an obvious one for ‘special needs girls’ to take up. The official version of ‘special needs student’ constructs them as people who are young vulnerable and ‘needy’ of help. In addition, many of these girls find the hurly-burly of the micro-cultural work that goes on amongst their peers difficult to understand and often frightening:

Fozia: They shouldn’t let you out of lessons. There’s some girls, they’re like in Year 10 and 11 they go out, they say they have to go out to the toilet, and then they go out and meet their friends and they do their hair, and talk about who’s got what boyfriend. They didn’t want to go to the toilet, but they’re in there, and when you have to go, yeah, like if you really want to go to the toilet, and you got out of lessons, and they’re all in there, and when they’re doing their hair,

¹⁸ Since Cheryl is autistic, she cannot accurately be described as a reflexive subject actively producing herself in the same way as most of the other girls. But it is probably true to say that she is recognised, by staff and students, primarily as a ‘big bad girl’ through her physical presence and through her disruptive effect on classes. I argue this in more detail in Chapter Nine.

you go in there, and it's sort of embarrassing, cause it's like they're Year 10 and 11, and you're all like "Oh no, I don't wanna be in here"

Shazia: And you think they're all looking at you, like, "What are you doing in here?" yeah, and, um, when I went out of Maths that time, and I was really like I really needed to go, and I didn't even dare go in, and I was waiting round the corner, um, in the students' bit, you know, and I'm thinking like I don't know what to do -

Fozia: And you wish a teacher would come and um, and tell them they have to go to their lessons. It would be better if they didn't let you out, cause some girls, they just do their hair, and, you know, um, talk about their boyfriends, and like where they're going after school, um, and it makes you scared to be in there.

Interview 12/3/00

High-speed, high-volume and hetero-sexually coded ways of doing girl, associated variously with 'girl power' and with transgression, appear to make these girls afraid. In their accounts, theirs is an altogether gentler, more childlike and apparently more passive version of femininity (Walkerdine, 1989; Walkerdine, 1997). But this apparent passivity can hide the fact that the girls have to work actively at producing themselves as 'sweet little girls'.

Ambrine: In Humanities, Sir he sometimes says, "Get in groups" and we have to choose, but you can't have more than five 'cause he thinks we'll all be argue, and if you've got like six friends, you're looking at the floor 'cause you want to be with the people what helps you, and me and Asma this time, in Humanities, when we was doing about the castles, when Sir said to go in groups, we was both trying to look all sad, and looking at the floor, 'cause it's Gulshan who's in charge, who's always in charge, and she would, um, would only let the person stay who was all sad and who needed help, and if you didn't have needed help, you would have to go in another group, but it was alright because Sir he came over and we was both looking at the floor, me and Asma, we was both looking all sad, and Sir he said we could both stay, me and Asma, if we all did what Gulshan said.

Interview 4/4/00

Skeggs (1997) notes that the young women who participated in her study 'usually 'did' femininity when they thought it was necessary' (p116). It is likely that something similar is happening here. The position of 'sweet little girl' is not without a certain power. These four girls (and others whom I witnessed deploying similar strategies in classrooms) have developed a means of eliciting and retaining adult and peer help, which in many instances is crucial if they are to be able to participate in routine

classroom activity. But in doing so they are also inscribing themselves in hyper-feminine discourses of vulnerability and dependence.

Kerry and Cheryl, the ‘big bad girls’, are both very tall for their age, and both are apparently strong and athletic. They both wear shoes with high heels, and both flout the school’s rules on make-up as openly as they dare, wearing nail polish and transparent or pale lipstick. Both have a reputation for making a lot of noise in class: they are frequently told off for talking or playing about, and moved away from their friends for failing to get on with their work. The position of ‘big bad girl’ is apparently an oppositional one, resisting the school’s academic ethos and its imperatives to work hard and allow others to work hard at all times. It is, additionally, a hetero/sexualised position, involving students in producing themselves as hetero/sexually active and attractive.

Whilst there is a reluctance on the part of both teachers and students to allow girls in Year seven to take up positions as ‘big bad girls’, Cheryl and Kerry nonetheless act in ways that often have disruptive effects on their classes. Kerry comes from an indigenous white working-class background, and Cheryl from a materially-impoverished African-Caribbean family. Given that most of the school’s teaching staff are white, institutionally positioned as middle-class, and academically successful, there are few, if any, identifications that Kerry and Cheryl can make with their teachers. They are the Others of the dominant official discourses through which Meadway produces its youngest students: they are Other to the construction of incrementally-developing, target-reaching student which Meadway strives to make available and desirable to most girls. They are also Other to the construction of endearing, vulnerable little girl: the position Meadway makes available to a large number of its ‘special needs students’.

Kerry and Cheryl’s positioning as ‘big bad girls’ is highly unstable, however. It is especially precarious for Cheryl, who is unable to do the micro-cultural work that would be necessary to produce herself as hetero/sexually active and attractive. Her position as ‘big, bad girl’ has been achieved more through mis-recognition of her intentions than by her active insertion of herself into the discourse. Kerry, too, is

unwilling to abandon altogether the possibility of becoming a successful student. She is aware that there may be costs, as well as benefits, in taking up an oppositional position in relation to the school's official agenda. But hers is not a rational analysis of the costs and benefits. In role-play, she presented the 'big bad girl' as both the dangerous and undesirable Other, and as a natural option for a 'girl like me':

Kerry: My girl was called Anne, and she was wearing a black mini-skirt, a black mini-skirt all the way up to here, [indicates and grimaces, apparently indicating distaste], and black tights, and shoes with heels like this [indicates]. And lipstick, loads of lipstick, she puts it on after line-up. She's bad [grimaces again]. She was in English, and she wasn't listening to what the teacher said, she was all the time writing, but it wasn't English, it was to her friend, it was about their boyfriends that evening and after school. And her friend she wanted to listen to what the teacher was saying, but she couldn't because Anne kept on writing to her a note and saying like, "Take it, take it", and her friend would have been scared if she hadn't've taked it.

SB: What did she do at lunchtime?

Kerry: In lunchtime, um, she went outside of the gates, and she made her friend go with her, even though her friend didn't want to go, and she said, "Do we have to" and Anne said, "Yes you have to come with me to where our boyfriends is". And Anne's friend she was all scared because she wanted to go to her lessons and she didn't know where their boyfriends worked – did I say that, did I tell you their boyfriends they worked in – um – they – um, their boyfriends was out at work in, um, somewhere down the High Street. And Anne and her friend, they goes out of the gate when the teacher wasn't looking. Well, the teacher was looking, it was Ms Rivers, but Anne didn't care but her friend she didn't want to get in trouble, she said, "We can't go, Ms Rivers will see us" but Anne said, "Yeah, we've got to, the boys are expecting us". Cause Anne had phoned them on her mobile phone, even though you're not supposed to, and she'd said, "We'll come and see you this afternoon, down the High Street, at where you work". And so they walked up to the gates and just walked out, and Anne's friend she was like, "Oh no, Ms Rivers has seen us, and she'll tell the other teachers, and it's Science, my favourite subject this afternoon and I wanna go to it" but Anne she didn't care, like she didn't care who saw her, and missing Science, and going to their boyfriends. Even though it's a girls' school and her Mum thought she wouldn't have a boyfriend. And her friend she didn't want to miss Science, and, um, Maths, it was Maths last lesson, but Anne she didn't care...

SB: Why did you, I mean, why do you think Anne doesn't care?

Kerry: Um, well I think she does care a bit, only she, what she really cares about is her boyfriend, and, um, don't know if I can say this, [giggles], she, um, she wants to, [pause] it, you know, Miss [giggles]. It's not like she doesn't care *at all*

about school, but, um, it's her first time and she wants to do *it* with her boyfriend. Ms Rivers isn't going to hear this is she?

SB: No, no, I'm not playing the tape to anyone at school, don't worry. So what I'm wondering, is, if Anne cares a bit about school, well, can you say a bit more about the things she cares about?

Kerry: She does care a bit, but only a bit, and, well, when she was in Year Seven, she was just a girl like me, she was just a girl like me, you couldn't tell she was failing, except she was a bit scruffy like me, but then when she got in Year Eight she got fed up of all the teachers going, "Blah, blah, you aren't getting no better at Science, you have to work more harder, you have to do good for your exams, blah, blah" like that. And it just, I dunno, it got on her nerves, cause she'd been working hard, she did work hard, well not very hard, but a bit hard, and she just said, "Well, I ain't gonna do good in exams, cause I've been all the time trying, and so I'll just get a boyfriend". And she just did, and that's all, and that's how she got like she didn't care. But in Year Seven, when she was in Year Seven she was just a normal girl like me.

Interview, 21/3/00

The 'SEN' discourse is one place in which the notion of child-in-danger meets with the notion of child-as-danger (Boyden, 1990; Hunt and Frankenburg, 1990; Walkerdine, 1997). The child-as-danger (as well as the child-in-danger) is a thoroughly classed, gendered and racialised subject: Boyden (1990) shows that one important strategy in the global export (and imposition) of the Western bourgeois version of childhood is the presentation of street children (violent boys and sexually promiscuous girls) as a threat to their communities. Walkerdine (1997) argues that:

The little working-class girl, produced by and consuming popular culture, becomes a central object of social and moral concern. She is one of the figures (along with the violent boy) who most threatens the safe pastures of natural childhood, a childhood free from adult intervention and abuse, a childhood so carefully constructed as a central fiction of the modern order, the childhood which will ensure the possibility of a liberal democracy.

p4

Current definitions of 'SEN' embrace both understandings. The child-in-danger is primarily the child with learning difficulties, who can be constructed as vulnerable. The child-as-danger is the student with 'emotional and behavioural difficulties': the student whose effect on classrooms can be disruptive, and who risks becoming 'socially excluded'. Complex elisions and distinctions are made between the two groups at different times in Meadway. But it seems fair to say that staff and students

alike go to considerable lengths to avoid recognising Year Seven students as ‘child-as-danger’. Ainscow (1999) notes that the current move towards inclusion features a group of pupils and students, who would previously have been educated at segregated special schools entering mainstream schools by the front door, whilst others are being bundled out of the back. It is the child-as-danger who finds herself in this second group, although at Meadway, the rate of permanent exclusions is very low. Pressures on schools not to exclude students, teachers’ desires not to fail any student, and the students’ desires for a measure of success in the schooling endeavour combine to make it very problematic for a Year Seven student to take up a ‘big bad girl’ position. Where the younger girls are concerned, formal identification as child-in-danger tends to override formal identification and informal (mis)recognition as child-as-danger. For a Year Seven ‘special needs student’ who has been identified as having what the school terms ‘learning as a primary cause for concern’, any oppositional activity will tend to be formally interpreted as proof of further neediness, and will often trigger further offers of support. In Year Seven student micro-cultures, it is also difficult for students who are seen to be struggling academically to access sufficient micro-cultural capital to achieve a positioning as ‘big bad girl’: even the ‘big bad girl’ at Meadway is constructed in relation to dominant models of success, as the student who may eschew formal academic success but is able to produce herself as a confident, articulate, audacious specimen of ‘girl power’.

Kerry’s ambivalent and problematic investment in doing ‘big bad girl’, containing as it does something of the quality of a moth flying around a candle flame, also appears to contain the knowledge that she will never be fully recognised as a ‘big bad girl’, and that the act of working to produce herself as such will involve some intensive changes for ‘a normal girl like me’. In her description of the role-play she and Josephine had constructed, it could be argued that she identifies both with ‘Anne’ who once was like her, and with Anne’s friend who is more obviously invested in achieving academic success, and is even able to find lessons pleasurable. Anne appears to contain the unknown and unknow-able desires which only a complete dis-investment from academic endeavour makes accessible. Anne’s friend, on the other hand, contains the longing for the safety provided by investment in the rationally know-able and (so the story goes) controllable world of working for and achieving academic targets.

The two are irreconcilable: to remain friends with Anne, the unnamed girl must abandon – literally walk out on – on her desire for academic success. And she must take a step into what is the complete unknown for both girls, the enigmatically and euphemistically-coded ‘*it*’ of hetero/sexual intercourse in a venue whose precise location remains unspecified. ‘Somewhere down the High Street’ implies a world that is both more public and more adult than the world of school. The setting is prosaic and everyday, but the ambiguity that surrounds the exact location renders it exotic and mysterious. In Kerry’s account, Anne takes with her to the High Street not only her own desires for the exotic and adult world of hetero/sexual activity, but also her friend’s desires for academic success. The episode Kerry imagines has something of the quality of a modern-day Cinderella story, a story in which a cocktail of compliance with and rebellion against unreasonable authority brings rescue, romance and fortune. Like Hey’s (1997) working-class girl who is able to imagine the public sites of domestic labour (in her example, taking the baby to the park, in this example, the High Street shops) as the setting for potential romantic encounters, ‘Anne’ and her ‘friend’ make the exotic and adult world of hetero-sexual activity geo-socially accessible through locating it in working-class female territory. But her concluding comments, in which ‘Anne’ gives up on academic achievement and gets a boyfriend instead, suggest that Kerry does not easily position herself within such a world, viewing it as both second-best to the world of academic achievement, and as mysterious and frightening. Her investment in producing herself as ‘big bad girl’ is thus configured through an intricate blend of (often contradictory) fears and desires, in relation to a number of equally contradictory discourses of childhood, academic success and femininity, worked through the material conditions of white working-class girlhood.

Sunna and Meera tend to position themselves as ‘lazy girls’. Unlike the ‘big bad girls’, they do not act in ways that can be interpreted as oppositional to the school’s formal agenda and authority, and their effect on classrooms is not disruptive. They are observant Muslims, and dress in *shalwar kameez*, but unlike the ‘sweet little girls’, they augment their uniforms with discreet make-up, and they wear shoes with heels. When speaking to adults, they usually make eye contact, so their general demeanor does not code submission. Josephine, however, does code herself as more submissive,

customarily looking at the floor, and appearing to welcome adult support. I would tend to include her in this group for three reasons. Firstly, she describes herself as 'lazy'. Secondly, she deploys a 'rescue' discourse when talking about her academic struggles. Thirdly, teachers perceive her as 'lazy', although this is often euphemized as a problem of 'low self-esteem'.

Students who take up positions as 'lazy girls' do something very complex with the connotation of helplessness and vulnerability that attends the SEN discourse. On the one hand, they appear to refuse it, and portray their struggles as arising from their recalcitrance, or an untenable situation, rather than from lack of ability. Meera, interviewed with Ambrine (a 'sweet little girl') uses the unsatisfactory secondary school set-up, and her habit of procrastination, to account for the poor academic performance that is worrying her;

Meera: It's both. Cos at first it's more it's more, it's like there's more to worry about cos you like get all this homework in one day, and you just worry about more things.

SB: Do you worry about homework?

M: Yeah.

A: I can't sleep – if I've forgotten to do something, I can't sleep, I'm like twisting and turning and I end up watching TV.

SB: Does that happen often?

A: It used to, it used to.

SB: What is it that stops you doing something? I mean, you say it's when you've forgotten to do something?

M: I'm a loafer – I procrastinate.

SB: (laughs) What do you mean when you say you procrastinate?

M: I was supposed to do something yesterday, and I end up – and I'm supposed to be doing something and I end up doing something else. It's like, say you're, it's a really sunny day, and you can't be bothered to sit in your house and do your homework, so you like go on a bike ride or something, and you're like, "Oh no, I forgot to do my homework" it's like nine o'clock in the night.

Interview 20/3/00

But whilst Meera and the other 'lazy girls' appear to resist the helplessness of the SEN discourse, they are inscribing themselves in a different version of passivity and helplessness. Alongside references to themselves as lazy, and therefore exercising conscious agency in relation to their academic struggles, the girls suggest that 'rescue' is the only solution and the only way to attain the academic success they all appear to want. All three of them express their disappointment that taking up a place in Meadoway School has not, in itself, been enough to effect the rescue. Meadoway promotes itself as a successful school, deploying in that promotion the fiction that academic success can be attained by everyone. These girls appear to have believed (or at least wanted to believe) in the promise:

Josephine: I was all excited on the first day, on the first day when I come, and I was putting on my uniform, and I was all excited. And you had to go in the hall when they read out your form group, and I was in 7T, and Ms Cashmere, I didn't listen, not the whole time. And Ms Cashmere she was talking about Meadoway, and how you all do good when you come here, and how you all get good in your work and she was saying you all get good in your work, and in your reading and your Maths. And my Mum says it's a good school here, but I've been here two terms, and it's just like in primary school, like in Year Six but it's just like Year Six. The only thing what's better is there isn't any boys, cause in Year Six they used to throw things, but anyway it's just like Year Six.

Interview 27/3/00

The 'lazy girls' accounts draw also on a version of the entitlements discourse that is daily becoming more prevalent in the educational landscape of the UK: the notion that it is schools and teachers who must be held responsible, and held to account, for 'pupil performance' (Barber, 2000). The 'lazy girls' deployment of this discourse in this way constructs their own 'poor academic performance' as something shameful that must be blamed on someone. Their accounts are replete with people and systems who appear as culprits: teachers, boring lessons, unviable quantities of homework and other students who distract them. Sometimes these culprits are aspects of themselves, such as Meera's loafing, but there is a sense in which these aspects of themselves somehow float free and they are not responsible for them. What is clear is that their understanding of academic struggle is not framed within the apparently neutral discourse of 'SEN'.

For Meera, Sunna and Josephine, their struggles are, in the words of government imperatives, ‘poor academic performance’. Poor performance connotes failure and deficiency, in which blame necessarily inheres, and which must be displaced onto someone else or a distant and disembodied part of themselves. And so the ‘lazy girls’ refusal of the SEN discourse and its attendant suggestions of helplessness and passivity appears to be inscribing them in another version of helplessness and passivity. In this version they wait to be rescued, with what appears to be a decreasing belief that rescue is possible. The accounts of the ‘lazy girls’ imply a deeply contradictory impasse, in which they simultaneously believe, and refuse to believe, in the possibility of rescue. Whilst they describe themselves as needy of such rescue, they also produce themselves as beyond rescue. This may in part be an intricate way of working out what it is possible and realistic to want (Bourdieu, 1984; Reay and Lucey, 2000), as the girls go about negotiating the contradictions in which they are embedded: caught between the promise that they, too, can get good exam results if they work hard enough, and the reality that those exam results are out of their reach.

Identity at work in two Maths lessons

The three subject positions of ‘sweet little girl’, ‘big bad girl’ and ‘lazy girl’ tell only part of the story, and I would not want to suggest that they give anything approaching a complete picture of any girl’s identity work. Students seldom enact a ‘pure’ version of any of these (or other) subject positions, and are always positioned simultaneously within a number of discourses. The discourses through which dominant versions of success are constructed have to be re-enacted and re-negotiated in every lesson. Each lesson presents a microcosm of student identity work, as students engage in the project of doing student whilst doing whatever work the teacher may have intended. This is not to suggest each lesson is a blank slate. Common rules are drawn on, existing relations of power (including those between teacher and student as well as amongst students and groups of students) are confirmed or challenged, and common histories on the macro- and micro- stages frame the current performances of identity, of academic attainment, and of identity constructed through academic attainment.

Some lessons are more fruitful than others in terms of generating observable micro-cultural and identity work. In general, the lessons taken by ‘strict’ teachers are less generative of data: these teachers have what is in many ways an egalitarianising effect, in that all (or nearly all) of the students are afraid to attract the teacher’s anger. This makes overt challenges to authority, and displays of the kind of transgressive actions through which certain kinds of micro-cultural capital accrue, very rare. In other lessons, where the teacher is more relaxed and the students have greater license, there is a lot more bidding for power amongst students. When the teacher is not so firmly in control, opportunities often arise for girls to enact struggles for power amongst themselves. It is these occasions on which student identity work is most easily observable. Jean’s and Don’s maths lessons tend to be especially juicy events for data-gathering. These two are renowned amongst the students, and infamous amongst the staff, for being amongst the least strict teachers. Additionally, Jean and I are friends, so I can pay fuller attention to the students’ identity work when observing her lessons, and not have to worry too much about my own.

In the first Maths lesson I will look at here, my role was explicitly that of observer. I knew a few of the girls by sight, but had spoken to none prior to the lesson in question, with the exception of my targeted students. What follows are extracts from my fieldnotes, with the chronological order of events preserved. Unsurprisingly, given that I was specifically looking for episodes that related to discourses of success, I found myself drawn to observing the actions of students at either end of the perceived academic ability spectrum. The obvious danger here is of fixing these meanings in what can become a somewhat polarised account, with the meanings of success in circulation amongst students who are positioned in the middle of the attainment spectrum becoming somewhat lost. The fieldnotes, and my analysis of them, do not try to give an accurate overall picture of the entire lesson. They present, instead, a series of snapshots that try to give an impression of how the identity work of two students, Fozia and Ambrine, is negotiated in the context of the lesson, and in relation with other students and the teacher.

When I get to Jean’s room, some of the girls are already settling. There are a lot of girls I don’t know. I sit with a white middle-class group, from where I can see Fozia

and Ambrine - I don't sit on Fozia and Ambrine's table, as it's nearest to Jean, and I don't want to be so near the front when she's talking to the class. I'm surprised at how easily she gets them quiet and attentive. I've not seen her manage this before. She goes over the homework, for which they have another two days. Then she reviews the work they've been doing on volume. She holds up a cuboid and asks "What shape is this?" Hands shoot up, and Aurora gives the answer. Aurora is something of a mystery to me still. A good African-Caribbean girl, adult- rather than peer-focused, about in the middle of the perceived ability range. Jean asks the difference between a cube and a cuboid. Hannah F is the only girl with her hand up. Even the gifted and talented Hannah M doesn't offer the answer. Jean talks them through it, rather than ask Hannah F. She then asks how to find the volume of a cuboid. Again, Hannah F is the only person to raise her hand. This time, Jean asks her. Having given the right answer, Jean then asks other girls to do the calculations. She asks Rosheen to calculate 4×6 . Rosheen doesn't know, and other girls on her table, including Hannah F, whisper the answer to her. They look collectively pleased when she gets it right. This doesn't seem to be about the shared construction of knowledge, more about the distribution of knowledge. Production, distribution and exchange. Perhaps knowledge can't really be exchanged, since everyone has to produce it for themselves, in a way, but perhaps the means of distribution can be made available...

Many teachers at Meadway begin their lessons with whole-class question-and-answer sessions. It is a common means of 'warming the class up'. As a way of beginning the lesson, it also serves to remind everyone of their position in semi-formal and informal hierarchies: it is an opportunity to rehearse the roles people take, and to re-state the boundaries of who can do what and say what. Although I had not previously been in this class, I already knew the names of the 'gifted and talented' girls (Hannah and Hannah) since they had been so noticeable in other classes I had visited. Jean's agenda is clear, and there is no doubt that what she wants the students to do is to listen, and to put their hands up to answer questions. Two versions of compliance are therefore on offer. The lowest order of compliance is to listen without interrupting. The higher order of compliance is to offer answers on the public stage. Students who want to position themselves as 'good girls' can do either or both of these things, but the type of 'good girl' is different. The good girl who offers answers is both 'helping' in what is being presented as the joint enterprise of constructing knowledge, and is 'not helping' in that she prevents other students from speaking up. Whilst the 'good girl' who listens quietly is both 'helping' in as much as she allows the teacher to proceed unhindered, but is 'not helping' in the collective knowledge-production project. Moreover, she is positioned as someone who 'needs help' in the form of encouragement, and, if the teacher were to have time, in the form of differentiated questioning, in order to enable

her to play an active role in the class. The eagerness to answer Jean's first question would tend to suggest that the first version of 'good girl' is more attractive to the students, but that this role becomes less and less available as the questions become more challenging. The 'good girl' who gives answers produces herself as clever in offering those answers, as well as helpful and compliant. But there appears to be a tacit understanding that the cleverness produced through answering questions is relative, and if the question is an easy one, there is not much cleverness to be demonstrated.

Jean gives out the two worksheets that they'll be working on this lesson... The first worksheet can be done using multilink, if the girls want, and Jean puts some cubes on each desk. The second sheet, with bigger units, has to be calculated using long multiplication. Which seems like a good way of differentiating. Hannah M has nearly finished the first sheet by the time Jean has finished explaining what they have to do... Fozia and Ambrine and the other two on their table are making the multilink models whose volume they must then work out. The girl sitting opposite them is called Meliha... The four girls seem to be quite happy making their models, so I go over to Aurora, who has her hand up. She wants to work out the answers without making the models, but is stuck on one of the more difficult ones. It's not my strength, either, so we try to work it out together. Is this what Swann calls co-learning? But in the end, we need to get the right answer, so I get Jean's answer sheet. We haven't got it right, but manage to work out where our mistake lies. It's a lot slower doing it this way, and Aurora has been overtaken by the others on her table who are now on the second sheet. I experience this as pressure to get on with it...

It is not only the 'SEN' students who can produce themselves as 'sweet little girls'. Arguably, this is partly what Aurora is trying to do, but there are many factors that make such a production problematic for her. Firstly, she is physically big. So although she dresses 'young' (with white socks and shoes without heels) and has a perfect version of a shy smile, it is hard for her to be recognized as 'little'. Secondly, she is of African-Caribbean origin. It is extremely hard for students with this background to be recognized as 'sweet little girls': their 'racial' background appears to connote the opposite of dependence, gentleness and vulnerability (Mirza, 1992; Hatcher, 1995; Wright, Weekes and McGlaughlin, 2000). Thirdly, she has no obvious learning difficulty, and, what is more, she appears to be invested in not producing herself as a 'special needs student'. She wants to be clever, and helpful, and give the right answers, whilst still wanting adult help and attention. Perhaps the sticking point for Aurora is the impossibility, in a girls' school, of a not-clever student being positioned as 'helpful'. So three key routes to doing a recognisable version of 'sweet little girl' –

small stature, Asian-ness and not-cleverness – are closed to her. Aurora is neither clever enough, nor sporty enough, nor popular enough, nor confident enough, to produce herself as a successful African-Caribbean student. As she cannot ‘do starlet’, she is left with a version of ‘good girl’ that is barely recognisable within Meadway’s range of micro-cultural possibilities.

Back on Fozia’s table - the ‘special needs table’ - the girls are still making models. The last questions on the first sheet involve making rather large towers, which is time-and resource-consuming. They keep having to supplement their multilink supplies. By now, almost everyone else in the class is busy with long multiplication, except for this group who are building towers. I go over to Shivaun, who is sitting on her own, and has refused to go and sit with anyone else. She is stuck with the long multiplication. I go through it with her, using the method with which I’m most familiar and find easiest. I can’t do it the way Jean usually teaches it, but she’s flexible over method. Shivaun is a sweet girl. I enjoy sitting next to her doing long multiplication...

Shivaun faces no such difficulties. She is a tiny Asian girl, who looks about seven or eight years old. She is very easily recognised as a ‘sweet little girl’, whether or not she appears to work at it actively. She does not have to produce herself as ‘needy’ in order to work on her positioning in this discourse – the position is available to her, seemingly irrespective of whether or not she wants it. Her middle-of-the-road cleverness (she is able to do long multiplication with help) appears to be overridden by her size, physical appearance and demeanour.

Fozia and Ambrine have now finished the first sheet, and have gone on to the second. There is no choice but to do the long multiplication now. Some of the other girls have finished both sheets. Jean has given Hannah F a chart, with the pentominoes investigation on it. Fozia and Ambrine are struggling. Meliha is making the last question on the first sheet last as long as possible...

Fozia and Ambrine, as ‘sweet little girls’ have dutifully worked their way through the first sheet and onto the second. Meliha, however, appeared to realise that completion of the first sheet would mean she would have to do the more difficult second one. As a ‘lazy girl’, she finds the obvious way out of this dilemma, extending the time she must spend doing the work she can understand, as a strategy of avoiding the work she can’t. This would appear to be a completely reasonable strategic approach. It is also a prime example of how she becomes re-inscribed in discourses of ‘laziness’, and of how Fozia and Ambrine become inscribed in discourses of ‘neediness’. Where Fozia and

Ambrine plough on into work that they cannot do without adult intervention and help, Meliha tries to find ways of avoiding the work that would involve her in seeking and retaining that adult help, seeming to prefer, instead, to appear ‘off-task’. In Year Seven, the discourse of ‘success’ often overlaps with the discourse of ‘hard-working’. Fozia and Ambrine, by virtue of being hard-working as well as ‘sweet little girls’ have access to a version of success through hard work: this version is situated within the deficit discourse of success which I will be exploring in Chapter Eight. Meliha, as a lazy girl, not even completing the easy first worksheet, cannot access even this second-rate version of ‘success’.

Meanwhile, Hannah M’s table have finished both sheets. They are calling Jean over, repeatedly chanting the word “Miss” to the tune of Jingle Bells. This is more like Jean’s lessons as I have known them. Jabida, next to Fozia, is trying to build a model of 30x6x15 rather than work it out using long multiplication. Over on the high-achievers table Rhivannon has made a giraffe out of multilink, and Georgia has made a mobile phone, which she is walking around, talking to. The positions are now reversed. Instead of the special needs table making multilink models while everyone else engaged with the serious stuff of long multiplication, now it is they who are struggling with hard sums whilst everyone else plays with multilink. But it has a different meaning. My girls were making models because the sums were too hard for them. Now the other girls are making models because the sums were too easy. Jean asks Rhivannon, “What’s the volume of your giraffe?” Hannah M replies, “Who cares?” Jean and I burst out laughing. She has such a good point. And because she’s making the challenge on our rational, middle-class terms, we can identify with it and accept it...

The high-achieving girls have managed, in this extract, to position themselves alongside the teacher, using their middle-classness and their successful positioning in discourses of rationality to bridge the institutional power differential that exists between themselves and the teacher. Their use of humour as a discursive practice appears to be key to this re-negotiation of power. The girls’ status as high achievers is not in jeopardy, so they can afford to indulge in what might be derided as ‘babyish’ activities, knowing that these will be read as humorous. Their undisputed success as rational, incrementally-progressing students means they do not have to worry about being mis-recognised as ‘immature’. They can go on to challenge the nature of the work with which they are engaged without positioning themselves as oppositional, and, in the process, can make the lesson fun. Fozia and Ambrine, meanwhile, have not been offered the opportunity to do this. The tasks are too hard for them to use as ‘play’

activities. Their choice is stark: either get on diligently, or refuse to do the work. As ‘sweet little girls’, the second option is unavailable to them, so they carry on with work that is difficult, and through which they are re-inscribed as needy of help.

Meliha has jumped from the first sheet to free model-making, leaving out the stage of the long multiplication sheet. She announces that she's making a “famous person in this school”. Fozia looks disapproving and tells me, “She's naughty”.

Fieldnotes 6/3/00

It is possible to look on at students taking up positions as ‘sweet little girls’ and imagine them completely passive. But, as Ambrine quoted earlier in this chapter makes clear, it is a position that requires careful maintenance: simply being an Asian girl identified as having ‘SEN’ is not enough. Fozia’s disapproving comment about Meliha’s ‘naughtiness’ is not just a disinterested piece of information for my benefit, but also constitutes a piece of identity work. Fozia distances herself from such naughtiness and, in so doing, polices the boundary between ‘sweet little girl’ and ‘lazy girl’, making it clear where she is located.

In Don’s lesson below, I had a different role. The following fieldnotes were written after a teaching day. This is not a group I usually support, but the class with whom I would normally have been working were on a school trip, and I had wandered the school looking for an appropriate lesson in which to offer support.

I end up in Don's mixed-ability Year Seven Maths class. Maths is setted from Year Eight, and the Maths faculty tend to do a lot of whole-class teaching, so support is always highly prized in the Year Seven groups. It is especially so today. Don practically falls on my neck when I appear. Karen's full-time SNA is away, and there is no replacement for her yet. Don points me in her direction, commanding to me the students who are ‘looking after her’. They welcome me with a plaintive wail of, “Miss, she's ignoring us”. Karen is sitting, head in hands, fingers in ears, looking determinedly at the table. She makes a massive effort not to greet me. Looking at the blackboard, I can see the cause of her non-co-operation. The class are doing what looks like a very interesting open-ended investigation that is way beyond her reach. I have mixed feelings. Should I do some different work with her, in which case she would be working entirely with me, and barely interacting with the group in which she is sitting? Should I help the other students to differentiate the work with her, effectively giving them a pedagogic role? Should I leave them to struggle together for a workable solution? I decide to go for the first option, the get-some-written-work-out-of-everyone route. Karen has her own Maths textbook, of a type that was on its way out of Infant schools when I was learning to teach. She is persuaded to get it out, by which time her

natural (?) sociability and her adult-orientation have taken over again, and she is friends with me. We spend the next fifteen minutes or so putting things into sets of 'what we wear' and 'what we eat'. She hasn't reached overlapping sets yet...

Karen and Cheryl are seen by staff as the two most support-needy students in Year Seven. There the similarity ends. Karen has Down Syndrome¹⁹. Her impairment is highly visible and name-able. The other girls in the year group accept her as 'different', and accept, in general, a pedagogic and governmental role in relation to her (Allan, 1996; Allan, 1999). Karen offers certain rewards to them for doing this. She is mostly sociable and affectionate, although, like most adolescents with Down Syndrome, she is now being 'trained' to withhold her affection except in normatively appropriate situations. In the absence of Ruth (Karen's Special Needs Assistant), the girls know what to do. Like Ruth, they combine the pastoral, pedagogic and punitive in trying to get Karen working. What they do not have the authority to do is differentiate the curriculum for her. Unlike Ruth, they do not have the authority to override the Maths teacher. So, in effect, they are trying to do the impossible. Even with the best Vygotskian intentions, this is a piece of work that cannot be adequately scaffolded for Karen. In such a situation, Ruth would unhesitatingly provide Karen with different work. Don is unsure of what to do. Karen's presence raises questions about differentiation with which Meadway is struggling. Which is more disabling? For someone to be potentially stigmatised by receiving different work? Or for someone to be presented with work they cannot do?

In this instance, Karen has not been sidelined from the group. She has been given an identical task, with the expectation that she will be part of the group, and that they will help her through it. But, since the demands of the task are beyond her reach, she is very effectively Othered. The girls with whom she is sitting have to position her as a recalcitrant child, who has to be coaxed and coerced into compliance. They draw largely on the charity/tragedy discourse outlined in Chapter Two, positioning Karen as the object of their charitable help. This is arguably the extreme end of the 'sweet little

¹⁹ The Down Syndrome Association of the UK has dropped the more commonly-used possessive form 'Down's Syndrome' in favour of this version, which is widely used in the USA. They argue that the possessive form is paternalistic (Finch, 1995).

girl' discourse. Karen is positioned as essentially needy and dependent, and as unable to function in the classroom without 'help'. It is hard to imagine how any of the more radical discourses around disability could have been mobilised in that particular lesson. Indeed, my decision to let her do 'her own' work failed to draw on any more radical ideas around disability. In effect, I withdrew Karen from the group, who then needed to have no more contact with her. Their caring/governmental job ended, and so did their relationship with Karen. A more equal role for her was not on offer.

The arguments that are more commonly invoked in relation to Karen are around cognitive styles. This is true of both staff and students. The question of how best to teach Karen, and the worry that they have not been trained to teach 'people like her' looms large in the staffroom. Amongst students, explanations of Karen's Other-ness in circulation often reflect the belief that 'Karen does not learn the same way as ordinary people'. The notion that there can be generalisable differences in cognitive styles between those who are 'normal' and those who are not cannot be easily separated from meanings around difference, deviance and normality that operate in the social (as differentiated from the psychological) realm. The 'general differences' model, in which pedagogic decisions are seen to be informed by common learning needs, individual needs, and needs that are distinct within particular groups, is generally associated with the anti-inclusion position (Lewis and Norwich, 1999). In contrast, the pro-inclusion position is generally associated with the 'individual differences' model, in which pedagogic decisions are understood to be informed by common and individual 'learning needs', and an understanding that all individual differences can be embraced within a common framework (*ibid*).

There are problems with both models: not least the language of learning 'needs' which operate as a common sense within both. There is an obvious danger in associating 'needs' with specific groups, and this has been used as the primary argument for segregated schooling. But there may also be a danger in not recognising that there are some aspects of learning that *can* be generalised to members of particular groups, whether these groups are constructed by gender, class, race, impairment or any other difference. This is a pedagogic variant on the poststructural theme of holding onto

difference as a means of political organisation whilst not presenting difference as deficiency or Other (Weedon, 1997). But the problem with essentialism is very differently configured in the case of disability. Whilst it is fairly straightforward to argue against an essentialised view of difference with regard to those differences that are tied to societal structures, it is much harder to mobilise anti-essentialist arguments with regard to learning difficulty/disability, precisely *because* the difference is necessarily in part an inherent one. Many groups are fighting to have their difference recognised as ‘impairment’, and as something they are born with, not as something learned or socially-constructed²⁰. But it is especially hard to work out how to not pathologise intellectual impairment, when schools are structured around the normative growth of intellectual attainment and success.

In this lesson, I went straight into a ‘dealing-with-students-with-Down-Syndrome’ pedagogic style, in the way I spoke to Karen, in the way I sought her compliance and in my non-verbal communication with her. To some extent I was over-generalising in doing this, and to some extent such an approach ‘works’ with Karen because she is so accustomed to adults acting in this way around her. But this is unlikely to be the whole truth, because the ‘reality’ of Karen’s disability is that it is constructed in the dynamic relationship between her intellectual impairment, between people’s customary responses to her as a girl with Down Syndrome, and what she does with those responses.

The only thing that can be argued with any certainty is that Karen’s intellectual impairment positions her as someone who is essentially and irrevocably ‘needy’. This is sufficient to place her within Meadway’s ‘really disabled’ discourse of success, which I will examine in Chapter Eight. But it is also of significance in the analysis presented here. If we accept that intellectual ability is on a continuum, with no sharp divider between impaired and not-impaired, then this raises the question of what kinds of Othering are going on for students who cannot lay claim to the organising narrative of impairment. In one sense, they would appear to have more room for manoeuvre.

²⁰ See, for example, the debates within the autistic movement for the language of ‘autistics and cousins’ versus ‘neuro-typicals’ (Institute for the Study of the Neuro-Typical, 1999), and also the debates, constructed in terms of entitlements disputes, that have been ongoing with regard to dyslexia in the past

The ‘sweet little girls’, ‘lazy girls’ and ‘big bad girls’ are not interpellated into those positions simply through their formal identification as ‘special needs students’. Other variables, such as ethnicity, social class, and the student’s own set of interpersonal negotiations are part of the work the students do in order to take up and use these resources, whereas Karen is recognisably impaired and as such has a secure and absolute position as ‘sweet little girl’. But alongside this (restricted) room for manouevre, the Year Seven participants still have to find ways of working with the limited resources available to people who are not ‘clever’ in the way the school makes ‘cleverness’ desirable. Are these students being left with the connotations of deficiency, without the positive markers of identity that at least would make some kind of resistance possible?

Two of the girls on the table get stuck into the investigation with a vengeance. Out of the corner of my ear I can hear them discussing its rules with commendable earnestness. I place them immediately as high-achievers. The third girl - a ‘good girl’ who I once encountered when she ratted on her classmates for disobeying a class rule - is less absorbed. She keeps looking over at Karen. I think she would rather be ‘helping’ Karen than doing work which, I would guess from the frequency with which her hand goes up, she finds far from easy. Tony comes in to check that Karen is alright. He looks at her timetable, and explains to her where she must go for the next lesson. The ‘third girl’ (I don’t know her name) is listening: she offers to take Karen to her next lesson and make sure she gets there. After Tony has gone, Karen decides she has done enough Maths. She wants to play “I went to market”. I decide she probably has done as much written work as she can productively do, so I collude. Within moments, the third girl is helping us, prompting both of us when we forget an item, and suggesting new items when Karen has trouble in thinking of them herself. I must be rather an ambivalent figure for the third girl. She isn’t quite sure whether she is welcome in this game, or whether, at any moment, I might tell her to return to work. I get the feeling she is hedging her bets a bit. She is being naughty - not getting on with her work - through being good - helping Karen. Seems reasonable to me.

Fieldnotes 1/11/99

One of the most compelling arguments for inclusion is that it offers potential benefits for all students, and multiplies for everyone the possible ways of ‘doing student’. The third girl (Kamala) is doing some interesting Third Way work here. Not being good by being good, and not being naughty by being naughty, she has found a way to do both at once. At Meadway, it is hard for a student who is not ‘clever’ to be a good girl

thirty years (Corbett, 1998a).

unless she positions herself as ‘sweet little girl’. For Kamala, helpfulness is probably the only way that she can bring herself to teachers’ notice. This is, and will increasingly be, a problem for her as she goes up the school. For one thing, there are far fewer opportunities for ‘helping’ in a secondary school than in a primary. The paints don’t have to be set out (they are always there in the Art room), the science equipment does not have to be brought from the class that used it last, and intercoms mean that students need not be sent on messages. Moreover, as students get older, ‘helping’ is something that is done by those who have proved their ability: the clever, confident students put up displays unaided and write articles for the school’s newsletter. Kamala is, and will be, positioned as needy, not as someone who meets needs. As a small Asian girl who produces herself as keen to please adults, she is likely to be (mis)recognised within the ‘sweet little girl’ discourse, except when Karen is around, because Karen is someone who is demonstrably more needy than Kamala. So Karen’s presence makes a ‘helping’ position available to her. Through helping Karen, Kamala has a rare opportunity of resisting the production of herself as ‘needy’ whilst still being able to produce herself as a ‘good’ (but not ‘sweet’) girl, and avoiding interpellation into the discourse of ‘laziness’.

This argument could lend itself to some distinctly reactionary readings. Am I arguing that the Kamala needs the presence of someone even lower in the pecking order to make her own position viable? Is Karen functioning as the instrument of someone else’s identity struggle? Is her inclusion just a sham, in which her physical presence in mainstream classrooms masks the reproduction of the very same understandings of disability it is supposed to challenge? To some extent this must be true. The charity/tragedy discourse, which marks out those who are intellectually impaired as the objects of both revulsion and pity, lives on. It has been reconfigured by more recent discourses and discursive practices, but it would be naive to suggest it has been somehow eliminated. So it is likely that Kamala is mobilising discourses that re-inscribe Karen as needy, pitiful child in order to position herself as a ‘mature’, ‘able’, ‘responsible’ and, above all, authoritative young woman, when these are such desirable and powerful things to be.

It would be a mistake to imagine Karen completely powerless in this drama. Because, just as the ‘mainstream’ students operate a regime of governmentality in relation to Karen, so does she in relation to her peers (Allan, 1999). She can offer or withdraw her compliance from their attempts at helping/coercing her: she can make herself amenable to their coaxing, or she can make herself objectionable. Crucially, she can decide who she is willing to accept as ‘friend’, when helping her has desirable, as well as demanding, potential outcomes. I would argue, though, that if Karen’s power is limited to the power derived from giving or withholding compliance, then it is a version of power that ultimately holds her locked into the discourse of ‘neediness’ and dependence as the subordinate partner in relations of dominance.

Can there be a different reading of Karen and Kamala’s identity work: a reading in which Karen is actively multiplying the range of subject positions available to students (and maybe also to adults) without herself being the object of those positions? It is hard to answer this optimistically without being trapped by the multiple hazards that optimism can offer. On one side, there is a misty-eyed, sugar-coated optimism associated with the ‘equal but different’ position which can have a certain sound-bite seductiveness, but which seldom leads to egalitarian change. On another side is an equally optimistic determination to read active productions and agency into the identity work of people who have been very effectively pinned down by some highly reproductive practices and material conditions. Is such optimism, however it is conceptualised, somehow misplaced? This is a question to which I will return in the next three chapters.

This chapter has explored how Meadway’s youngest students negotiate their entry into positions as ‘special needs students’: how their expectations of being ‘fixed’ by their new school and their subsequent disappointment relate to the standards agenda and the marketisation of schooling. It has looked at how versions of educational ‘neediness’ are deployed in relation to discourses of SEN at Meadway, and in relation to its positioning of Year Seven students. I began by looking at the students’ refusal of the ‘SEN’ label, and how this maps onto the ways in which they take up positions as ‘special needs students’. I introduced the three identifications that appear to be most on offer to them – ‘sweet little girl’, ‘big bad girl’ and ‘lazy girl’ - and considered how

these positions are gendered/sexualised, and further nuanced by differences of 'race'/ethnicity, religion, class and physical appearance. In a discussion of Jean's maths lesson, I showed how these positions are re-negotiated and always in process. In Don's maths lesson, I looked at how this process is lived when the presence of the recognisably disabled Karen both alters and reifies the discursive practices around perceived academic ability. The next chapter takes up the theme of the three identity positions, whilst Meadway's production of a 'really disabled discourse' and the identity resources it makes available to students is explored in more detail in Chapters Eight and Nine.

Chapter Seven

Year Eleven – Negotiating a Way Out

Like the Year Seven girls, the Year Eleven participants can also be recognised as ‘sweet little girls’, ‘big bad girls’ and ‘lazy girls’. This chapter looks at the responses of these three groups of young women to the learning support they are offered, and at how this maps onto their production of themselves as specific versions of the subject ‘special needs student’. After examining this in some detail, I go on to look at some of the practices located around the borders of Meadway’s SEN discourses. I consider the positioning of two young women who, whilst they have not been formally identified as having SEN, produce themselves in a particular context as needy of help. The chapter ends by revisiting some of the theoretical problems that are thrown into relief by the attempt to explain what goes on in the ‘SEN borderlands’.

The Disappearance of ‘Special Needs Students’

By the time they reach Year Eleven, the young women who appear on Meadway’s special needs register mostly describe themselves in terms of their institutional location, as students who ‘get learning support’. As cited earlier, Corbett (1996) notes that “‘special needs’ is becoming a most unacceptable term. Most prefer the words ‘learning support’. However, these words apply specifically to the provision, not to the people” (p2). By Year Eleven, the ‘special needs student’ has largely disappeared: even the staff do not use the designation. Learning support staff talk of ‘our girls’²¹, and other members of staff talk about ‘learning support girls’. In some situations, when the whole cohort’s projected exam results are up for discussion, these students are collectively described as ‘the tail’. In many ways, the struggle over who is a ‘special needs student’ has taken place long ago. By Year Eleven, everyone knows who has, and who has not, been officially identified as having ‘special educational needs’. It is a matter of common knowledge that has passed into common sense. This combines with the sense of shame associated with ‘not-cleverness’ to make the designation ‘special

²¹ Belanger (2000) explores how such ‘ownership’ of specific students by learning support teachers is implicated in the positioning of both teachers and students and in the micro-cultural construction of ‘special needs’.

needs student' a completely un-sayable one: it *need not* be spoken because it is so obvious, and it *cannot* be spoken without implying failure.

The young women in Year Eleven continue to describe themselves as 'stupid' and as 'thickos', although they mostly take care not to be heard doing this by members of staff. In more public and formal settings, they are more likely to position themselves around the designation of 'getting (as opposed to *needing*) learning support', and in relation to their response to whatever support is offered. The 'sweet little girls' are generally positive towards learning support and towards its providers, often going out of their way to ask staff for help during lunchtimes and after school. They are popularly referred to by the learning support department as 'support junkies'. The 'big bad girls' tend to be strongly resistant to leaning support, and publicly repulse it, except where it is offered by high-status teachers or in times of exceptional urgency. The 'lazy girls' have an ambivalent response to learning support. They alternately repulse and seek help, often making appointments but failing to keep them, to the annoyance of learning support and other staff.

'Support Junkies'

The 'sweet little girls' amongst the Year Eleven participants are Aqsa, Sana, Hafsa, Aneesa, and, more problematically, Cassandra (see Chapter Nine). The first four are young women from observant Muslim families, and they are part of the same extended family. Aneesa has a statement for learning difficulties, Sana is on Stage Three of the Code of Practice, Aqsa is on Stage Two, and Hafsa is on Stage One. Aqsa arrived in this country three years ago, and entered Meadway in Year Nine, at which point her command of the English language was very limited. The others have all been in Meadway since Year Seven, and went to the same local primary school. All four routinely stay behind at the end of the school day for help with their homework, and to chat to me or to any other member of staff who is willing to help them. During one conversation after school, I tried to find out how Aqsa understood herself as a recipient of learning support.

Aqsa: Support, after school, teacher help you - in this school, right, there are some teacher who help you, like there's called Room 5, first lesson, er, those who

don't understand proper English, like me, I doesn't know when I come in this school, and when I come to Room 5, there is teacher called Ms Mahmood and Ms Hussein, who helped me, and is one very, very, very nice teacher, who is called Ms Benjamin...

SB: (laughs)

Aqsa: who help me as well. I found her later but she's very nice to me. Is true I found you later innit Miss? And we hope to - and we have to – and we have to do our courseworks when is too difficult, learning support helps you with your courseworks so you not get in trouble, innit, and is learning support to help you, when you go there, when you want help with your courseworks, is to help

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SB: Why do you need help with your coursework? I mean, what, what makes you decide to get help with your coursework?

Aqsa: Is you get help when you not know how to do your courseworks, like in Science, Sir he get angry when you not do your courseworks, and one time, you remember Miss, innit, when I had all subjects, subjects, subjects, all lots of subjects, and I keep come to learning supports, and we didn't do Science because we was all other subjects, and Sir he say to me, "where is your courseworks?" and I go all red, and he tell me off, but is not my fault, because I doing learning support with all lots of subjects, is when you decide to get learning supports, is when you have all subjects, subjects –

SB: You might think this is a funny question, well it is a bit of a funny question, but you said you go to learning support for help with coursework, but is there any other reason you go, I mean, apart from getting your coursework finished? Does that make sense?

Aqsa: Is I go learning support sometimes because is Sana and Hafsa is there, and we is all talking, with you innit, Miss, and we is all talking, talking, and at home, is boring, I have to do all courseworks on my own, I have to look after my little brother, I have to do cookings, and is no-one there, but in learning support is Sana and Hafsa and Aneesa, and we can have good time with Sana and Hafsa, and we can be talking and at home is more boring innit, is only my brother.

SB: Right – so it's a way of passing the time before you go home, that's right?

Aqsa: And is also I go learning supports in lunchtime, in breaks and in lunchtime, because is fun, you not have to go outside, you not have to be – have to be, like where me and Sana and Hafsa is we stand, innit Miss, we stand, you know, outside the new building, and is more fun in learning support, you can be with Ms Benjamin and you can be talking and is no-one come in, innit. And when we is standing outside new building, is lots of girls, and they is make very noise, is make lots of noise and they sometimes is be very rude, and is more private in learning support, and is you not have to worry about - there is very

rude girls sometimes, you know, in Year 11 innit, there is very rude girls in my year and is not in learning support, is more private.

Interview 24/11/99

The 'sweet little girls' tend to position teachers as allies. In some cases those allies are constructed as strict, and the young women are afraid of them, but even frightening teachers are regarded as having the best interests of the students at heart, their strictness brought about by the desire to enable the young women to achieve high academic standards. In many cases, the 'sweet little girls' construct their teacher allies as caring, supportive, and above all, 'nice'. 'Niceness' appears often in their accounts, as the quality most appreciated in teachers. Aqsa positions 'nice' teachers as her allies against the demands of strict teachers, against the loneliness and compulsory domesticity of home, and as providers of refuge from the reviled 'very rude girls'. There is a pro-teacher, pro-school culture, through which their designation, now unvoiced, as 'special needs students' can be configured as an advantage through which they can access the teacher time and help that they have come to enjoy and find rewarding.

Whilst it is important to recognise the positive outcomes for the students of taking up positions as 'sweet little girls', it remains important to question some of the less positive outcomes, namely their re-inscription into traditionally feminine discourses of helplessness and vulnerability. It appears significant that a high proportion of the 'sweet little girls', including the four participants here, are from (often orthodox) Muslim Asian backgrounds. Indeed, such students are over-represented on Meadoway's SEN register, as well as amongst the 'sweet little girls' of that register. The link between some traditional versions of femininity, Asian-ness and 'sweet little girl-ness' is one that needs to be explored. It could be the case that Asian Muslim 'special needs' students are too readily recognised as 'sweet little girls', and that adequate room for manoeuvre does not exist for them to explore alternatives. In the case of these four young women, and possibly of others within the school, it is also important to look at the nuances of class in this picture. Aqsa, Sana, Hafsa and Aneesa are all from families who were powerful and wealthy under Benazir Bhutto's government. Although all four of them currently live in materially impoverished circumstances, all four come from families who are invested, to some extent, in the norms of middle-class

professionalism. In her study of Asian Muslim girls in two single-sex secondary schools, Haw (1998) found that:

As Pakistani immigrants in Britain, these girls face multiple barriers from within the community and from the host context. The socio-educational structure and system in Britain present certain barriers to the educational achievements of Muslim girls in Britain, but these are also embedded into deeper issues of female role and status within Islam and the current practices within the community which further influence the schooling of these girls.

p150

The resulting complexities were too intricate, in Haw's study, for the non-Muslim school to pick its way through. As outsiders, the staff at 'City State' were not able to appreciate fully the complex positionings of Muslim girls. Nor were they going to be trusted by the girls or by their families to provide a space in which the students could explore pluralism without having to repudiate their religion and their community. Haw concludes that, 'in City State, the Muslim students needed a more complex set of discursive responses than it could offer' (ibid. p172). At Meadway, where Muslim girls are over-represented on the SEN register, and there is concern that they will not be able to take up positions on the G&T register, perhaps this is part of what is going on. Perhaps the school is just not able to provide a space in which Muslim girls can have room to manoeuvre around the complexities of what it means to be a young Muslim woman in an economically disadvantaged community in a plural city (Bhatti, 1999). Also bearing in mind that at the same time, some of those students are dealing with very complex class positions. Perhaps the discursive field at Meadway is not broad enough to make 'not sweet' positions easily available to Muslim students, and especially to those for whom academic learning is a struggle. And perhaps the only permissible and recognisable response for some of the young women is to take up positions of dependence and vulnerability, in which they increasingly look for and demand help, and are consequently positioned as ever more 'needy'.

'Support Repulsers'

The 'big bad girls' in Year Eleven are known for their antipathy towards the provision of learning support. As such, few of them would consent to be interviewed: the potential losses, for a 'special needs student', in being seen to spend time with a

learning support teacher, are too significant. Chantelle, a young woman from a working-class African-Caribbean background, was the only ‘big bad girl’ in Year Eleven who allowed me to interview her. By Year Eleven, some of the young women whose special ‘learning needs’ were identified in their childhood have well-developed strategies for repulsing learning support. These are often manifested in overt hostility. Occasionally a young woman will manage to produce herself as so oppositional that her official designation will be changed from ‘learning as a primary cause for concern’ to ‘behaviour as a primary cause for concern’. This, however, is very much the exception. For most of the young women who struggle to repudiate their ‘neediness’ in this way, their very transgressions are interpreted by the staff as further evidence of ‘neediness’, and attributed to lack of confidence and poor self-esteem.

What the young women *have* managed to do, in many cases, is repulse offers of learning support in ways that are unpleasant and often intimidating for whoever is offering that support. This is especially the case with learning support assistants, themselves at the bottom of the staff hierarchy: the ‘big bad girls’ would risk serious loss of face if they were seen to accept help from one of these low-status women. The acceptance of help from the head of faculty (a formidable woman of whom nearly all of the students are scared) has a different meaning, and one that does not threaten a student’s production of herself as ‘big bad girl’ in nearly so obvious a way. As a result, these students are more likely to be offered support by high-status teachers, rather than low-status assistants. The job of supporting ‘big bad girls’ in class will typically be allocated to the head of the faculty or department. On occasions, qualified but unpromoted teachers will be asked to support such students, but this is recognised as potentially problematic.

Sarah [the teacher] is punctuating her talk to the class with exhortations for silence. Tana, Ijenyah and Chantelle are wearing their coats. This is a fairly standard challenge to authority: it means, ‘I’m not going to be a good girl’, and is used with teachers who are seen as a relatively soft touch. If the teacher tries to challenge the challenge, the girls bring out a well-rehearsed stock of complaints about the cold, lack of hanging space, and so on. Sarah is not risking a public confrontation today, but everyone in the room knows that the coat-wearing gauntlet has been thrown down, and it is unlikely to be a trouble-free lesson...

The three girls on my table (their usual place in the corner) make heavy weather of their graph... Meanwhile I'm aware of, and vaguely wanting to listen to, the bad girls' conversation. Tana, Ijenyah, Vicki and Chantelle are talking loudly about boyfriends. They have their books open in front of them. Sarah has managed to persuade all of them to take their coats off, but they are making it clear they intend doing the lesson their way. When Sarah tries to reconnect them with the task, they protest loudly that they are doing their work, and it is true, to a point. Of the four, only Chantelle has a blank sheet of paper in front of her. Sarah takes advantage of this, and moves Chantelle to the table just behind us, on her own. Chantelle continues to talk to the others, only more loudly, as she is no longer at their table. I have a bit of a dilemma. I know that Chantelle can't do the work, but I don't want to embarrass her in front of her friends by offering help. I decide there's not a lot I can do about her for the moment. If I were to try to intervene, she would probably tell me where to go in no uncertain terms, as she is deeply involved in the micro-cultural work going on. I don't think Science, or me, could compete at the moment. So I stick with Aqsa, Sana and Hafsa, and their attempts to get the graph done...

Sarah stops everyone about five minutes before the bell. She wants to tell them the overall game plan for Science, after the mocks are finished. Again, the bad girls interrupt, talking loudly and making a show of putting their coats on. Sarah begins to lose patience, and says she will keep in anyone who talks, or who tries to pack their things away, before the bell. Aqsa, Sana and Hafsa talk quietly throughout, and pack their things away unseen. It is not actually the packing-away that Sarah is objecting to. It is the performative nature of the packing-away, and whether the performance is intended as a challenge to authority... As the girls leave, I ask if Chantelle will 'do me a favour' and stay and talk with me. Her bag is on her shoulder, and she hesitates for a moment, looking as if she is about to storm off. Her friends disappear, making derisory sympathetic noises.

Fieldnotes 10/11/99

Chantelle is undertaking some very hard identity work in this extract. She knows I am on the next table, and I am one of the people who most threatens her successful production of herself as 'big bad girl'. I am not a special needs assistant, and as such, I cannot be relied upon to keep a respectful distance. She knows I am not sufficiently scared of her, and that I might intervene at any time. Equally, I am not of such high status that I could be seen to intervene without diminishing her own highly precarious and unstable power base. I think I was right in my on-the-spot prediction of a probable hostile response, were I to have offered my services. But her intense involvement in the micro-cultural work of the lesson was not simply in producing herself as 'one of the bad girls' as I thought at the time. She faces multiple challenges in producing herself as one of the young women in charge of the lesson: how can someone be simultaneously 'needy' and 'in charge'?

This is a problem for Chantelle, especially in the middle part of the lesson, where the young women's strategy for controlling the lesson is not accessible to her. The amount of work they do is sufficient to enable them to demonstrate a particular contingent compliance to the teacher when necessary: a compliance that would make her look ridiculous if she tried to take them to task. But Chantelle is not able to do the work, flagging her 'neediness' to all those around her. Chantelle's response is to intensify her 'badness' by talking loudly, (which also signalled to me that I had better keep away), so as not to intensify her 'neediness'. The two are in direct conflict at this point. For Chantelle to take up as position as 'big bad girl' she has additionally to produce herself as tough and anti-education. This is not a position she especially wants to be interpellated into, as she explained to me afterwards:

Chantelle: Aw, come on miss, you know I never did no work in that lesson. [kisses teeth] So Tana and them lot, they was taking it easy, you know, a bit of work, a bit of chat, a bit of work, a bit of chat, that's how it goes. Me? (laughs) Not me. I do the bit of chat, but then I can't do the work, so I do a bit more chat, play with pencil - la, la, la, la, la - a bit more chat, then comes Miss, "What's going on here girls?" And who is it with the blank sheet? Well, it ain't Tana and them, that's for sure. So who does Miss move? Well, she ain't got no reason to move Tana, or she'll get backchat - and I mean real - heavy - backchat – we're not talking fun and games you know. So who is it has to go? Yes, it's me. And then what'm I supposed to do? Can't do no work, that's for sure, so it's a bit more chat, nice and loud, you know sort out the old social life a bit - well, you've got to haven't you? - and a bit more chat, and a bit more chat, and then - no more lesson - bingo!

SB: I'm interested in that. I mean, how you kind of took the blame?

C: Aw, just think about it, Miss, just think about it one little minute. If you had these two people in front of you, right, if you had these two people, Ms Connor and Tana in front of you, right, who would you be scared of? And I mean the *most* scared of?

SB: Well, I think it's different for me. Cause, I don't have to be scared of Tana, because if she's rude to me, or really goes over the top, if it came to it, I could just send her to the Duty Teacher. And if it was really bad, she could get even excluded. OK? So it's different.

C: Yeah, Miss, *exactly*. See, you said it yourself, exactly. Cause I can't go off running to no Duty Room. See, you can go running to the Duty Teacher, or Ms Cashmere, "Help, save me, save me, Tana's coming to get me" and poof! no more Tana! In a puff of smoke. Yeah, just like that, in a puff of smoke. You go running to the Duty Room.

SB: (laughs)

C: But me, there ain't no puff of smoke for me. I've gotta *live* with it, yeah, I've gotta *live* with her, and I'm telling you Miss, I ain't ready to die yet. No, no way. I've gotta *live* in this place, and you think I can do that without I take a bit of care of Tana? If you think that, Miss, you're wrong, you've got it *badly* wrong, let me tell you. So Ms Connor tells me off in Science? I can live with it. What's Ms Connor to me? But *Tana*? You think I can piss her off and live? You've got it *badly* wrong, you think that.

Interview 10/11/99

Chantelle positions herself within a culture that is in many ways anti-school and anti-teacher, but not anti- the educational enterprise itself (Wright, Weekes, and McGlaughlin, 2000). Her anti-school and anti-teacher friends are crucial to what she sees as her survival at Meadoway. Teachers are mostly constructed as 'boring' within the 'big bad girls' microcultures, and the challenge is one of alleviating that boredom through acts that are transgressive enough to be exciting, but not so transgressive that they threaten the young women's desires for academic success. If Chantelle were compliantly to take up a position as 'needy' she would almost certainly lose the respect and friendship of her peer group, and she appears also to fear reprisals from them. Where Chantelle differs from her friends is in the fact that they are able to produce themselves as 'big bad girls' without having to be seen to reject completely the dominant ethos of hard work.

C: Yeah, so time goes on, and it ain't Year Seven no more. And then it's Year Nine SATS and all of a sudden it's, "Get on with your work, girls, in the Hall, in rows, no talking, no looking around you, no breathing" and Ijenyah and that, they don't want to be shown up. See, they don't want to get no Threes. So you know, Miss, Aqsa and Cassandra and that, they get Threes or worse, and all of a sudden Ijenyah and that they think they're gonna be Threes if they don't get on with it. So they starts working. Not all the time, not in every lesson, but a bit. And who is it ends up a Three? You're looking at her, and Ijenyah, she makes like it's cool, but I'm telling you, there ain't nothing cool about being a Three. Not in Year Nine, no way. Then it's GCSE, and they're still doing it. Workchat, chatwork, workchat, chatwork, that's how it goes. Me, I do the chat. Not the work. No way. And you know what Miss? You know what, tape recorder? What'm I gonna get in the mocks? You've guessed it. Zero. *Zero*. Forget threes. We're talking zero. I've been here five years, and we're talking zero.

Interview 10/11/99

Chantelle is well aware of the losses to her academic progress of producing herself as ‘big bad girl’. There is a sense in which, by Year Eleven, the *real* ‘big bad girls’ demonstrate their grown-up-ness not just through hetero/sexual activity but also through a degree of investment in academic success – or at least in credentialisation. Chantelle has to choose between the lesser of two evils: either she demonstrates her ‘uncoolness’ and powerlessness through taking up a position as ‘needy’, thus accessing a measure of help that may (or may not) help her to improve her exam grades. Or else she has to demonstrate the ‘uncoolness’ and powerlessness associated with poor grades, at the same time producing a version of herself as tough and anti-education.

The ‘big bad girls’ of the SEN register are overwhelmingly of either African-Caribbean or white working-class origin. They tend to position teachers not as actual enemies, but as Others who must be kept at bay. Where more middle-class, or higher attaining girls, (such as the high achievers in Jean’s Year Seven maths lesson), can at times position themselves alongside teachers, the ‘big bad girls’ of the SEN register have few resources with which to bridge the institutionalised power chasm. Their characterisation of teachers as ‘boring’, contains an active Othering of teachers as out-of-date, out-of-touch and either asexual or sexually undesirable. Their anti-teacher-ness and anti-school-ness is lived largely in and through their production of themselves as hetero/sexually active and attractive. In Year Seven, the ‘big bad girls’ were faced with the challenge of demonstrating their ‘maturity’ through the production of themselves as hetero/sexually attractive and active against a formal school culture that positions its youngest students as rationally-developing, target-achieving children. By Year Eleven, this is not the case. Common-sense understandings of young women as gendered and sexualised subjects permeate both formal and informal cultures at Meadway. If anything, it is the ‘sweet little girls’ who have become Other to these readings of what it is (and must be) to be a young woman. The formal and informal cultures in circulation at Meadway enable the production of differing modalities of sexualised young woman. There is the ‘starlet’ version, through which academically successful students can produce themselves as confident, assertive, attractive and audacious young women. There is the ‘dangerous’ version, through which students

who are not positioned as ‘needy’ can produce themselves as streetwise and rebellious. Then there is the version, most available to the ‘big bad girls’ of the ‘SEN’ register, in which students, through apparent investment in the ‘dangerous’ version, are positioned instead as ‘girls-at-risk’: the focus of current moral panics around teenage pregnancy and the target of Social Exclusion Unit intervention (Bullen, Kenway and Hey, 2000).

‘Support Butterflies’

By Year Eleven, the ‘lazy girls’ appear to be maintaining their ambivalent position in relation to learning support. Amina and Suleika, young women from Somali Muslim backgrounds, are classic support butterflies. They appear to want, welcome and actively seek out help one moment, only to repudiate it the next. During the course of their time in Year Eleven, they made numerous appointments for help with particular pieces of coursework outside of school hours, only to break the appointments with no explanation. This exasperated many members of staff, (myself included), many of whom had no hesitation in declaring Amina and Suleika ‘lazy’ and ‘unmotivated’. Passivity looms large in the accounts these young women give of their school experiences.

Suleika: And we’re just sitting there, and so we don’t do, we’re just sitting there

Amina: And another thing, yeah [laughs], no, I mean it, we didn’t know what to revise for our exam, and there’s not much, there’s seams, and there’s industrial processes, and there’s fabrics, yeah, like those tests. And I said to Miss, “Miss, what do I have to revise?” and she just says, she goes like, “Everything”. “Everything!” I mean, that doesn’t help me, how does that help me, there’s so much, you can’t just do *everything*, you wouldn’t do any other subjects, [pause], you’d just be like Textiles, Textiles, all day long and all night -

S: You’d just be sitting there, and I’d be crying, cause, like, you don’t know where to start, and then I can’t get my brain going, cause I’m just sitting there and I don’t know what to do first - erm - and all the time, I’m thinking, when I’m starting on one thing, I’m thinking “Supposing it doesn’t come up”, yeah, and I’m worrying in case it isn’t the right thing, and I’m thinking should I be doing something else -

A: And you get - you know - you get like you just wanna forget it all, and you’ve got other things to do, it’s not like your life stops just for exams, just for coursework, your life doesn’t stop just cause of Textiles, and you get like you

wanna do something else, cause, like when I'm trying to revise, my brain it wants to do something else -

S: Yeah, even you can be just sitting there, and it's like your brain doesn't wanna be there, even you can be just sitting there –

Interview 9/12/99

The accounts of the 'lazy girls' are saturated not just with ambivalence towards the schooling enterprise, but with apparent disconnection from it. The rescue motif is present, as it is in the accounts of the Year Seven girls. Here, there is more anger when whoever has been set up as rescuer does not play their part. Amina is clear that it is the Textiles teacher who is to blame for not responding adequately to Amina's request for information. There is a sense in which Amina has cast the teacher as the all-powerful holder of the knowledge to which she needs access in order to effect the rescue²². When the teacher apparently withholds that knowledge, Amina can feel justifiably aggrieved. Her objection can be understood within a schooling system that overwhelmingly casts the teacher as the giver (and therefore potentially the withholder) of knowledge. It can also be understood, more specifically, in relation to the standards agenda, which requires teachers to act in ways that emphasise the necessity for students to acquire and master pre-determined measurable units of knowledge, and thereby intensify their positioning as knowledge source.

The discourse of teacher-as-giver-of-knowledge and the concomitant student-as-seeker-of-knowledge, combined with both the apparatus of 'special needs' and the reality of years of experiencing struggles with academic work appears to be locking Amina into a cycle of dependence which ultimately results in her disconnection from academic learning. Suleika's disconnection is equally apparent. Her recalcitrant brain has apparently made an escape from her essential self, which has been left 'just sitting there'. But it is not only Suleika's brain which must be dis-avowed. The 'lazy girls' typically perceive themselves as hetero/sexually inadequate, and they evince the longing to escape from their 'unattractive' bodies.

²² At this point, some of the conceptual tools associated with psychoanalysis - such as splitting and projection - could be used to open up what would probably be a generative line of enquiry. Since my primary focus here is on identities in the social, and not the psychic realm, I have chosen (with some regret) not to pursue such a route.

Amina: And we was all standing by the gates, that time, remember, when that girl in Year Ten got her boyfriend and his mates –

Suleika: Yeah, she got her boyfriend, that girl did, um –

A: and his mates, and we went out there, cause everyone was shouting –

S: oh, I remember that time. Everyone was shouting, and you could hear them, everyone was shouting

A: and everyone was shouting, like “There’s boys at the gates” [laughs], I mean it. I don’t know her name, that girl.

S: And we went cause everyone was shouting, they was all shouting -

A: We both went too –

S: and we went to see, cause that girl in Year Ten, she’s *so* pretty, not like just pretty, but *so* pretty, and I wanted to see, um, but I wanted to be really pretty, not like this. And me and Amina we started to go the gates, but then we didn’t go, we just stayed by the wall, we was just standing there –

A: Have you ever seen her Miss? She’s really pretty. She’s got loads of boyfriends –

S: She’s like not just pretty, she’s *so* pretty, and we both went, but I was thinking like I wanted to be pretty like her, not just pretty but really pretty. And if I was like her, and not like me, I’d be really pretty, oh, I don’t know, um. And if I was like her, if I didn’t have to keep being like this, [pinches her arm] then I’d have loads of boyfriends when I go to the gates –

A: and if we had loads of boyfriends they’d come, like, um, they’d come to the gates, and everyone would be shouting, “Did you see Amina’s boyfriends?” [laughs]

S: Yeah, they’d all be shouting, “Did you see Amina and Suleika’s boyfriends”

Interview 1/12/99

Suleika’s narratives describe a passivity in which both her brain and her body have fled leaving an empty shell behind, ‘just sitting there’ or ‘just standing’ by the wall. On the one hand, she describes her desire for the evidence of success. She apparently *wants* to do the ‘right’ revision for her exams, and she *wants* to be one of the hetero/sexually successful students who is ‘pretty’ enough to attract boys at the gate. What she is left with is the evidence of failure. She is left ‘just sitting’ in the exam

room because she has done the ‘wrong’ revision and her brain has escaped. And she is left ‘just standing’ by the wall, because her body is not ‘pretty’ enough even to take her to the gates, much less to meet a boyfriend there. Her descriptions evoke for me the image of the countless lessons in which I have sat, worrying about ‘my students’ who so often appear to be ‘just sitting there’, faced with work they cannot do: the hard evidence of their inadequacy.

As ‘special needs students’, Suleika and Amina seldom get into trouble for their perceived ‘laziness’. In much the same way as the ‘big bad girls’ production of opposition will be read as further proof of neediness, the ‘lazy girls’ production of laziness tends to be read as another manifestation of ‘SEN’. In Meadway School, with its pride in its own success, there is considerable investment in discourses that allow for individual remediation. So the ‘lazy girls’ amongst the ‘special needs students’ will often be read within a discourse of low self-esteem, (Kenway and Willis, 1990; Renshaw, 1990) and teachers will work hard to remedy this perceived lack of self-belief.

Sarah: I’d just give them a sheet of A4 cause they couldn’t, they *really* couldn’t do the test at all. I’d give them a sheet of A4 with some very simple questions on, and I’d say, “Right, *try* and do the test, but when the test is up, when you’ve finished everything on the test, do this sheet that I’ve added on the back”. Er, they would have been, they would have looked at the test, and if they hadn’t had that sheet, they would have looked at the test, and you know, “waaaaah, oh I’m useless,” but they, they looked at the test, did as much as they could, got about two or three marks between, um, each, and then they went on to the simpler sheet and they got a lot more out of doing that, because I suppose I’d made it even simpler for them, and asked them, asking them sort of questions that maybe I’ve already asked them in class, so there was stuff there that they could answer. And then when they got six out of ten for that sheet there, it made them feel, it gave them a little bit more self-esteem inside, if they got three out of thirty for their original test, but then they got six out of ten for their next test, and that gave them a bit more sort of self-esteem in themselves, which was a good idea.

Interview 6/4/00

Of all the teachers in Meadway, Sarah is one of the most positive about teaching ‘special needs students’. Her analysis draws on a Warnock-like view that ‘special needs’ arise in the relationship between a student’s inherent difficulties with learning, and the curriculum that they are offered. She is positive about taking steps to change

her pedagogic practices in the interests of enabling ‘special needs students’ to ‘access the curriculum’ (Fletcher-Campbell, 1994; Thomas, Walker, and Webb, 1998; Dyson, 1999). Whilst I do not want to derogate her efforts, or present her as anything other than a caring, reflective and committed practitioner, I think it is important to note that any attempt to remedy the perceived low self-esteem of students such as Suleika and Amina is unlikely to be successful. Suleika and Amina take up positions as ‘lazy girls’ in response to being positioned as ‘needy’. Reading this response as a measure of lack of self-esteem further inscribes them into cycles of ‘neediness’. Moreover, the self-esteem discourse implies that their problem is one of *feeling* powerless in relation to school, and that, if only their feelings could be changed, they would become empowered. In reality, though, their problem is that they *have been positioned* as powerless (Davies, 1994).

A curriculum that is constructed through what Slee (1998a) calls ‘curricular fundamentalism’ is premised on producing a hierarchy of students according to their ability to demonstrate their mastery of it. Meadway’s emphasis on success, together with its strong Equal Opportunities ethos, constructs a fiction that mastery of this curriculum is available to everyone, so long as they work hard enough and long enough. Whilst this fiction contains the knowledge that such demonstrable mastery must be hierarchically-ordered and differentially available, it also contains the imperative that this knowledge must be masked and euphemised (Apple, 1995; Apple, 1996). It is the ‘special needs students’ who most challenge the continuance of the fiction: none more so than the ‘support butterflies’.

‘Support junkies’ and ‘support repulsers’ both appear to operate as if the promise of success for all were true. The ‘support junkies’ take up the offer of help that is officially supposed to move them towards demonstrable mastery of the curriculum. The ‘support repulsers’ repudiate that help, and in doing so, construct themselves as tough and anti-education, their failure the result of their attitude and, in many cases, home background. But the ‘support butterflies’ appear fundamentally to disbelieve the fiction, even while they may contradictorily appear to be the most invested in promises of rescue. It is this ambivalence – between desperately wanting to be rescued from their educational ‘neediness’ and tenaciously holding onto the impossibility of rescue –

that constructs them as passive occupiers of the middle ground, not wanting to repulse learning support, but not being able to make good use of that support. And, as such, it interpellates them into a very subordinated, ‘victim’ version of femininity.

Whose Educational Needs Are Special?

However, to suggest that the notion of ‘special educational needs’ is entirely fixed and located within particular students would be not quite accurate. It is true that the young women in Year Eleven are well aware of who is on, and who is not on, the special needs register: who ‘needs’ support is a matter of public knowledge. ‘Sweet little girls’ and ‘lazy girls’ have mostly established relationships with ‘their’ support teachers, and ‘big bad girls’ have established relationships of resistance to adult help and intervention. It is unlikely that any student will be formally identified as having SEN, and added to the special needs register, during Year Eleven. But even so, some fluidity still exists.

After school it's History Club. Amina and Suleika get there before me. Anna meets me on the way over, and explains that she and some of the girls who have finished the coursework are going over to watch ‘bitesize’. Lisa directs me to a girl I don't know, whom she's asked to sit with Amina and Suleika as she might need extra help. The young woman, whose name I don't remember, looks very worried. In fact, with drooping mouth and drooping shoulders, she's coding misery with every fibre of her being. I think Lisa thinks I'll give her some TLC as well as basic history, while she gets on with the girls who aren't so ‘needy’. I know all the girls on the SEN register in Year 11, and this young woman isn't one of them. Perhaps being unhappy is enough to position her as in need of special help.

Fieldnotes 16/2/00

Amongst the staff, a common-sense appears to prevail that learning support teachers operate within a discourse of self-esteem. We are seen to be in the business of enhancing students’ capacities to learn by working some kind of pastoral magic that will enable failing students to feel good about themselves as learners. We are also positioned, by staff and students, as benevolent ‘aunties’. We have access to the authority that is inherent in our institutional position. At the same time, there is an understanding that we are ‘on the students’ side’ as much as possible. We are expected to take the part of students who are in trouble. Even though the head of the learning support department is a man, we are expected to operate the traditionally feminine

skills of empathic listening and comforting the needy (Martin, 1985; Urwin, 1985; Bines, 1986; Davies, 1989). We care. Despite attempts to masculinise the enterprise of SEN provision through IEPs, monitoring and other techno-rationalist managerial strategies, our academic role is usually, I think, perceived as secondary to our caring one. This is not to say that other teachers do not also have a 'caring' role, or that they are necessarily 'uncaring' towards their students. But I think it is true to say that an assumption operates that most teachers will put 'discipline' first - in its curricular and governmental senses (Slee, 1995). By contrast, there is an assumption that learning support teachers will put 'discipline' second.

Like all social and micro-cultural constructions, these starting positions are enacted in a multitude of ways by different members of staff. They are nuanced according to a range of individual and structural phenomena, such as personal disposition and inclination, and position in the formal hierarchy, as well as class, race and gender/sexuality. Nonetheless, the infantilisation that inheres in the 'special needs' discourse serves to interpellate learning support teachers into a positions within that discourse as 'care-givers', in which our primary roles are perceived to be about taking care of the most needy, and not about disciplining the majority.

Whilst it is true that the surest way for a student to get support is through the official route, some students can, if they want and conditions are right, position themselves as 'needy' and access support in a more informal way. A student who wants adult help has more chance of procuring it if she positions herself as needy in relation to a caring discourse than if she positions herself as needy in relation to an academic one. The common-sense, informal understanding of support teachers as caring aunties can swing into operation much more easily than the bureaucracy involved with formal identification of quantifiable learning 'needs'. In addition, it is in many cases much less problematic and far-reaching for a student to position herself as needing to be listened to, than it is for her to produce herself as stupid.

Saida (the 'unknown' young woman in the above extract) appeared to want more help than Lisa, busy with the huge group of 'middling' students, was going to be able to offer. And one way to get it was by producing herself as unhappy, in need of care and

a boost to her self-esteem. This is not to imply that she was not genuinely miserable: I think she was. But she was also taking up a position in discourse as needy of care, which brought her into the learning support fold. Perhaps the caring discourse of SEN was operating to interpellate her into the momentary take-up of a ‘special needs student’ position, always with the knowledge that misery is or can be a temporary phenomenon, and that she could withdraw this version of herself by ‘cheering up’.

I'm about to leave, when Nafisa, who's sitting on her own in the table in the other corner, asks me to check her work. I'm surprised at how good it is. Nafisa usually comes to lessons with her homework not done, and she often copies surreptitiously from the work 'my' students have done with me. I've secretly wondered if she is, in fact, 'one of us'. But if this is an example of her independent work, then I think not.

Fieldnotes 16/2/00

What does it mean to be ‘one of us’, when ‘we’ are the special needs students and teachers? I like Nafisa. She sits on a table with Aqsa, Sana and Hafsa in History lessons. Muna is the fifth member of their table. They often speak Urdu together, and seem to share many of the same interests. From time to time, I have taken the four girls I support out of the lesson, and Muna and Nafisa have wanted to come too. Lisa usually refuses them permission. She thinks that they are lazy, and that their presence would mean that the ‘really needy’ students would not get the help they deserve. Nafisa occasionally asks me for help with both History and English, and has joined us a couple of times in the Library at lunchtime. But she seldom seems very concerned about her work. She does not customarily position herself as in need of care, and her production, read as ‘laziness’, is probably the least likely to occasion any form of adult intervention beyond the odd telling-off. She does not position herself as miserable or likely to be made miserable about work. So there is no sense in which she produces herself as in need of a boost to her self-esteem. Neither does Nafisa position herself as rebellious/resistant, which is a key strategy for tapping into the ‘needy of care’ discourse (even though this might not be what is intended) under the ‘EBD’ banner.

She is ‘simply lazy’, seemingly in need of nothing but a dose of reality and stern words to get her working. Nafisa’s production of ‘laziness’ does not appear to contain the same set of messages as are contained within the ‘lazy girl’ version of ‘special needs student’. What is read off from Nafisa’s construction of herself is lack of interest and

motivation, not lack of self-esteem. And where poor self-esteem is understood as worthy and demanding of some kind of remediation, lack of interest and motivation is regarded as within a student's control, and therefore her own responsibility to change or not to change. Thus when Nafisa takes up the discourse of 'laziness', she does not (and can not) produce herself as 'needy'.

To an extent, though, when I have wondered whether she is 'one of us', what I have been wondering is whether I can perceive her as 'academically needy'. I have wondered whether she is *really* struggling, and whether I should have been doing more to help her. Significantly, my sympathy for her plight underwent a transformation when I saw the standard work of which she could be capable. I found myself feeling irritated by the inference that an able ('not needy') student had been taking things easily, and accessing 'help' to which she had no right. I found myself thinking that Nafisa could not be 'one of us' because she was not sufficiently 'needy', and therefore not properly deserving of help. 'My' students are the ones who have been pushed to the margins through intellectual subordination: through their inability to learn in the way that psycho-educational discourses have constructed as 'normal' and through micro/political responses to this inability. They are not the students who have 'voluntarily' taken up marginal positions because they could not be bothered to do anything else. Or so I found myself thinking.

Can laziness be understood as a position in SEN discourses? How voluntary is Nafisa's production of herself as 'lazy student'? At the times when I have wondered if she is 'one of us', I have in effect been wanting to rescue Nafisa from the charge of wilful laziness, and to critique laziness as a subject position. But the attempt to 'rescue' students from the charge of 'laziness' through trying to establish them as 'needy' is not a generative one. Discourses of 'neediness', as I have argued, limit a student's room for manouevre in her identity work, and render a very constrained set of resources and recognitions available to her. In any case, that attempted 'rescue' is unlikely to succeed: Nafisa would have to be formally designated as 'needy' in order to allow her 'laziness' to be read within the discourse of 'special educational needs'. It is not a production she can access on her own, or through the informal intervention of

a teacher. So the 'rescue' attempts that I have at times found myself wanting to make are not recuperative ones. Such attempts would not be unlikely to allow Nafisa, or other students like her, to produce new readings and forms of identity work that could challenge dominant meanings of success, or the relations of power through which they are constructed.

Saida's and Nafisa's identity work is of relevance here since it shows that, in practice, the implication that the 'special needs student' is an absolute binary position is false, even though the 'SEN' discourse most usually operates as if it were true. In this case, neither young woman is placed at an extreme position of the SEN continuum. Nafisa could be positioned, quite uncontentiously, as 'underachieving'. In that sense, it could be argued that she has 'special needs' because with the 'right' kind of intervention (and the SEN discourse is predicated on the efficacy of professional intervention) she could achieve more than she is currently doing. And it could also be argued that she is intellectually subordinated since, for whatever reason, the existing curriculum and conditions in which it is delivered are not sufficiently accessible to her to enable her optimal learning. But her needs are not 'as special' as those of some of the other students since she is capable, when she really has to, of doing the set work more-or-less independently. And she is not 'as intellectually subordinated' as some since, if she makes enough effort, the curriculum and the demands it makes can come within her reach. This analysis leaves us with many problems, not least with voluntarism. For example, in Amina's case, the curriculum and conditions of its delivery are always going to be beyond her. She is not able, no matter how hard she tries, to make independent sense of what goes on in History lessons. This constructs a very passive, and always 'needy' position for her in relation to mainstream schooling. Again, much of the problem seems to be associated with the demands of the curriculum. Even though Nafisa demonstrates here that 'SEN' is a continuum, not a polarity, the curriculum, as both tool and product of the standards agenda, acts to push students towards one or other end of that continuum, to a place that operates as a binary divide, and from where specific students can be intellectually subordinated.

Like Nafisa, Saida could also be positioned as ‘underachieving’. With her, it is not laziness, but ‘lack of confidence’ and anxiety that are perceived to be the root causes of her distress. And again, with the ‘right’ professional intervention (care and reassurance) her underachievement could, in theory, be put right. Much of the SEN rhetoric (if not the reality of its deployment) is based on the understanding that special needs can be ‘met’ by skilled and caring professionals, following which those needs will not be ‘special’ any more.

The young woman I don't know [Saida] is in a complete tangle over Question Two. Not surprising. It's a compare-and-contrast, between a black historian's description of the purposes of black education in the 1970s, and a section of the Bantu Education Act. The two don't lend themselves to a comparison, and the passage from the act is very hard to deconstruct. I more-or-less let it go with my students, and got onto something more manageable, but, knowing nothing about this girl, I wonder if I should help her have more of a go at it. I ask her what mark she's hoping for overall. Her eyes fill with tears. She wants a C, but has been predicted a D. We should really have a go at the question, then, as she won't get a C unless she makes a reasonable attempt at it.

Fieldnotes 16/2/00

It could be said that the particular demands of this subject and this piece of coursework have constructed Saida as intellectually subordinated. She has, for very understandable reasons within the current micro/political educational climate, come to want a C grade for her work, and her realistic fear is that she will get only a D: a grade that does not really count as success. This has pushed her to the margins, where she has taken up an subordinated position. Again, her needs are not ‘as special’ as Amina’s, and they are not perceived to (and in my view, do not) require official mechanisms to be put in place. Her misery is enough to position her as, momentarily, a ‘special needs student’, but she is not invited into an officially-inscribed, signed-and-sealed identity as such. When it comes to intellectual subordination, she certainly *feels* miserable (and possibly dis-empowered) in relation to the institutional grading scheme in place. But it could also be argued that her misery is also a form of resistance to subordination, since it is that very misery which has enabled her to access the ‘help’ that just might result in a better grade.

But still there are problems with this analysis. I appear to be arguing that, for Saida and Nafisa, their ‘special needs’ and their ‘intellectual subordination’ are social and

political constructs: almost nothing *but* social and political constructs. These students, and others like them, are not readily positioned at the extreme end of the continuum, and so they have room for manoeuvre in relation to the positions they take up. They can inhabit the distinctions that mark out SEN and intellectual subordination with some degree of creativity, if not exactly choice. Whereas for Amina and most of the young women with whom I work, ‘special needs’ and ‘intellectual subordination’ are not so much social constructs as material realities. Their ‘neediness’ defines who they can be and aspire to be at school. And a degree of ‘real’ intellectual impairment underpins the social and local construction of these young women as ‘needy’. They have to inhabit these categories, not just because they have been categorised, but because they ‘really are’ less academically competent, and less able to acquire mastery of the curriculum, than those students to whom normative levels of academic attainment are accessible.

One of the problems here is the implication that the degree of social construction present in the formal and/or informal designation of ‘special needs’ varies according to how impaired a student’s intellect can be said to be, and according to how far her intellectual abilities are perceived to fall short of the norm. A post-structuralist reading of this implication might suggest that ‘SEN’ operates as a discursive field in which the degree of agency available to any individual student engaged in the project of producing herself and re/producing the discourses contained in the field, correlates strongly with her (perceived and material) academic ability. To make use of such a reading requires us to hold on to two discourses normally posited in opposition to each other: that intellectual ability below the normative range is both socially produced *and* has a material base. I would want to argue that much of what counts as success in schooling is socially and politically constructed, and that a plethora of social conditions and differences are implicated in its production. But I would also want to argue that this does not paint the entire picture, and that intellectual ability is, to some degree, inherent.

It is not my intention here to attempt to tease out, or to try to separate, the ‘real’ from the ‘discursive’. Instead, I am interested in how they produce each other, and I would suggest they cannot be reduced to their component parts. As soon as we begin to think

about, and to measure, perceived intellectual ability, we use conceptual tools and instruments derived from politically located discourses, and in order to examine the discursive practices around intellectual ability, we have to study their material effects. This chapter has examined such practices and effects through discussing the identity work of a group of students who are, in part, engaged in negotiating their way out of the school and into the institutions of young adulthood. In the first part of the chapter, the young women's accounts demonstrated how their inability to access dominant versions of success is worked through the material practices that surround the provision of learning support. Their accounts showed how differential responses to the provision of such support is a crucial part of these students' identity work, embedded as these responses are in student microcultures. In the second part of the chapter, a discursive analysis of the 'borders' (Johnson, 1997) of the SEN discourse demonstrated how multiple understandings of special educational neediness can be kept in play. But these understandings are not endlessly fluid, as I will show in the next chapter.

Chapter Eight

Making the Grade

Where the previous chapter argued for a multiplicity of meanings around ‘SEN’, this chapter looks at the limits of that multiplicity. I use the examination, and the discursive practices it produces and through which it is produced, to analyse how and where this posited fluidity around notions of achievement and academic progress becomes solidified. I start in the examination hall itself, looking at how the examination process produces students and teachers. I then look more widely at the identity work that the examination makes possible in the context of student microcultures and school micropolitics. Central to this is the discourse, constructed through schooling policy and Meadway’s response to policy, of a deficit version of academic achievement: a discourse that may at first glance look humane but in fact operates to reify the subject ‘special needs student’ and to close down the discursive spaces available to her.

The Examination

There is a sense in which exams are ever-present at Meadway. Teachers routinely invoke them as a ‘motivational’ strategy when they exhort students to work hard. Students are often represented in terms of their exam marks, real or projected: the Americanism of ‘she’s an A* student’ is increasingly used. Teachers too are measured and represented in terms of how their students perform, or are expected to perform, on the big day. The examination is the site at which student and teacher ‘performance’ is monitored, quantified, and made tangible in the form of a grade. The omnipresence of the examination means that it generates identity work on a multiplicity of fronts, material and symbolic. The moment of public examination functions as one very important site of such work.

I walk down the aisle, conscious of every sound I make. The floorboards at the back creak, and I’m horribly aware of it. I feel obliged to do some patrolling. The rows of desks are just about far enough apart for someone to walk between, with care. I don’t like patrolling along them. As well as all the ideological objections, I keep thinking I’m going to bump into someone. Dave’s in charge. A fifty year-old white man in charge of rows and rows of mostly ethnic-minority young women, and of the older women who are supervising under his direction. Bentham’s panopticon flashes through my mind. I don’t like being a jailer. It’s the English Lit exam. A girl I don’t

know asks if I will spell 'sarcastic' for her. I tell her I can't, I'm not allowed, but then I talk her through it anyway. We smile in comradely fashion at each other, momentarily united against adversity, and I go on down the row. Danielle has drawn a work of art in her anthology – she's obviously given up on English. Time drags. I try not to look at what 'my' girls are doing. I just hate seeing them sitting in isolation at their desks, not able to do the paper, and not able to ask for help. I'm supposed to stay in the hall next lesson, and when the bell for break goes, Dave asks me to go into the dining hall, to keep watch in case anyone should have the temerity to try to use it during break... When I get back to the hall, Lesley has taken over in charge. She sees me re-entering and rapidly patrols her way towards me. Once there, she starts to whisper the latest in the Jane saga. Jane is, apparently, being a drama queen. She is seeing the woman from Skye of whom Lesley assumes I have already heard. Maybe she's told me and I've forgotten, the saga is a very complicated one. Anyway, Lesley feels this proves I was right to warn her about being a straight woman's experiment. This is a very odd conversation to be having in the middle of an exam. But it makes the time pass quicker. Most of the girls have finished. We cannot let them leave. Vikki asks to go the toilet. We have all been given express instructions not to let her. She will stay in the hall, under surveillance, whether she likes it or not. As the hands of the clock creep towards finishing time, the rustle of papers becomes a roar. At some point, I think the majority of the girls must have realised that too, and it seems as if they are resisting in the only way they can. Spirit Of the Blitz-like, they rustle in collective chorus. They know they can do this with Lesley in charge. It would be different with most of the other superintending teachers.

Fieldnotes 6/12/99

It is hard to know how to start to deconstruct a piece of examination theatre. It is both a bizarre, and a common-sensical schooling event, and a very familiar part of the schooling process with which I grew up. It can appear to defy questioning. *Of course* public exams must be rigorously supervised to prevent cheating, and *of course* this has to be done by responsible adults. But rows and rows of young women sitting working in silence, when the hundred-or-so of them who are crammed into the hall could so easily be ungovernable must surely look strange to the outsider. And, as such, it is worth asking a few questions about how such a situation is maintained, and about how the consent of these young women has been won.

The physical arrangement of the hall might be a good place to start. It had been set up as rows of desks, in precisely-ordered ranks. The desks had been placed far enough apart to satisfy exam regulations and the need for aisles wide enough for supervisors to patrol. They were also close enough together to meet the administrative need to squeeze one hundred and eighty young women into two rooms so as to minimise

disruption to the rest of the school. On the platform, facing the students' desks, was a desk wide enough to accommodate three teachers. Behind the students' desks and to the side of them were a scattering of chairs, intended for teachers' occasional use as we undertook our patrols of the hall. Every student had to be visible at all times from a variety of angles. Two blackboards at the front of the hall showed the school's name and number, and the starting and finishing times of the exam. A clock stood above each blackboard. All of this can be justified as being eminently reasonable and a good, sound, common-sense response to the demands of the examination board. But the practical reasons for setting the hall up in this way should not obscure the other meanings that can be read off from such a division of space. Foucault (1975) argues that:

Disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed. One must eliminate the effects of imprecise distributions, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation.

p143

The fact that sitting each student at a desk from which she can be seen from a variety of angles is a practical necessity does not mean it is not also a technology of power: it simultaneously functions as both. The magic of surveillance is such that its power operates (or must be seen to operate) to regulate students in the known absence of any members of staff of whom they are especially afraid. This is a 'practice' (not a 'real') exam, so none of the direst penalties for cheating would be invoked, and yet, even when Lesley is left in charge, none of the students act in ways that have been expressly prohibited. But at the same time the regulatory power of surveillance is not total. The collective rustling at the end of the exam was an implicit challenge: you can regulate our bodies, but you can't stop us finding creative ways to resist with our minds. It would have been inconceivable for Lesley to have made a public announcement, during the exam, about excessive rustling. The paradox of the surveillant power of the examination room is that it has to be seen to be total. If Lesley had issued a directive about rustling, she would, in effect, have been pointing out that discipline was not absolute. To disrupt the fiction of total surveillance in this way would have been unthinkable. So the examination room cannot be understood as the perfect panopticon, but it needs to operate as if it were. The 'state of conscious and permanent visibility'

that assures the automatic functioning of power' (Foucault, 1975, p201) hasn't *quite* been achieved here (although it very nearly has): it would need to be supplemented by the actual embodied presence of an individual who will evoke fear.

One of the challenges that the fiction of total surveillance cannot allow is the challenge of someone physically removing themselves without permission. Of all the young women sitting in the hall that day, Vikki alone was willing to make what on the face of it, was an entirely reasonable request, to go to the toilet. In many ways it is outrageous that one person should be able to refuse another the right to go to the toilet. For children and young people at school, going to the toilet is of particular significance. In schools, (as in many workplaces), the toilet is the most surveillance-free space²³, and student toilets are the place for escaping adult supervision.

At Meadoway, the girls' toilets are girls'-only spaces. If a female member of staff wants to go there for any reason (and few beneath the rank of senior teacher would risk it), she always calls out that she is about to enter. A request from a girl to go to the toilet has potentially multiple meanings. She may have a pressing physical need – perhaps her period has just started. She may have an equally pressing need to be on her own for a few minutes. She may have a micro-cultural need to meet the friends with whom she has agreed a particular rendezvous for the purpose of friendship work. Or she may need the breathing space of a walk there and back, free from direct surveillance. All these might appear to be perfectly legitimate reasons for wanting to go to the toilet. Then there are the reasons that are less easy to be unjudgmental about. A student may need the use of a least-surveillant space to re-do her make-up, an activity officially frowned on as a frivolous waste of time and which unofficially connotes an impermissible highlighting of heterosexualised femininity. She may be using the space to pass on drugs, or to commit abusive and/or violent acts. Any one of these could have prompted Vikki to ask to go to the toilet that morning. We had no way of knowing: the whole point of a least surveillant space is that those in authority have to not *know* why someone is going there. Authority can speculate, but it does not, and cannot, know. In the context of an exam, all reasons for leaving the room are equally

illegitimate and regulated against. Vikki's request, to leave the school's most-surveillant space and go to its least-surveillant, was never going to be allowed. Simply making the request was enough for her to produce herself as a 'bad girl'.

The inadmissibility of Vikki's request points to further readings about power and control in the examination room. Vikki is, by official and unofficial consent, one of the most oppositional young women in what is regarded as an especially oppositional year group. And yet, without the required permission, she does not so much as stand up, much less leave the room as she had requested. In many contexts, Vikki is constructed, and produces herself, as someone who wants attention. Surely, in the silent examination room, she could have had all the attention she wanted. She only had to stand up and speak, and more than one hundred people's attention would have been hers. This is often the way she operates in ordinary classroom situations. But the examination room does not produce any possibilities for this kind of individual resistance. Foucault (1975) argues that compulsory visibility, which he likens to the Panopticon, produces docile bodies which then enact a non-corporeal version of 'discipline'.

He who is subject to a field of visibility and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power: he makes them play spontaneously upon himself: he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. By this very fact, the external power may throw off its physical weight; it tends to the non-corporeal.

p202

In the examination room, Vikki presents an extreme example of how power and control, and perpetual visibility, combine to make transgressive acts unthinkable. The fact that she will not leave the room without permission is only remarkable when considered in the context of her generally oppositional response to schooling in general, and towards authority in particular. So it is important not to exaggerate the power of the examination room to regulate in every instance. Although the examination, and the prospect of the examination, produces students as docile bodies

²³ This is almost always the case, although some schools have installed or are considering installing CCTV in their student toilets, to prevent illicit and illegal activities such as drug-dealing.

containing consenting minds, the extent to which this production carries over outside of the examination room varies considerably. It is important, too, to bear in mind that the power produced in perpetual visibility is deeply felt, as well as embodied. Exams typically produce fear in students, and the prospect of shame and embarrassment. In this context, it is highly unlikely that a student will want to further individualize and visibilise herself by acting in a non-docile way. Added to this are the very real material consequences of the examination process. At the end of Year Eleven, the young women will leave school with a clutch (or not) of credentials that will bear very direct relation to the options that will be open to them, and to the standard of living that they can expect. These, too, form part of the apparatus of power that compel the attendance and compliance of the young women, and make impossible a request to leave the room.

The physical presence of teachers is equally compelled. I thoroughly dislike supervising the exams. Apart from anything else, it is very boring. But it would be unthinkable for me to refuse to ‘invigilate’, or to subvert the exam by not supervising (or not being seen to supervise) ‘properly’. This can be explained in large part by my contractual obligations. I am contractually obliged to be in the hall as and when directed to, and I am equally obliged to invigilate in the directed manner. I would not be allowed to sit in the hall and read a book. Even as I write this, however, I am aware that I have never asked, on grounds of conscience, to be released from this unpalatable aspect of duty. It has never occurred to me to ask. Foucault again:

although surveillance rests on individuals, its functioning is that of a network of relations from top to bottom, but also to a certain extent from bottom to top and laterally; this network ‘holds’ the whole together and traverses it in its entirety with effects of power that derive from one another: supervisors, perpetually supervised.

1975, p176

In the examination room, I am careful to do enough patrolling so that I will be seen to be doing my job: seen by whichever teacher is superintending, and, to a lesser extent, by the students themselves. I tell myself I have no alternative. So what consequences can I imagine were I to ask to be released from invigilation? Senior management would, I am sure, enter into a discussion with me, and not just dismiss the request out

of hand. But questions would be raised about my loyalty. I would be positioned as ‘not a team player’ for letting down my colleagues, and forcing them into a disproportionate share of supervision. I would equally feel bad about this aspect. Probably, questions would also be raised about the ‘luxury’ of the position from which I can afford to challenge perfectly reasonable demands. In all probability, I would not like these or any other of the consequences, all of which would be in the nature of penalty for disrupting the network Foucault describes.

But this is not the whole story. The management of exams at Meadway is in many ways a metaphor for the management of the school. In modern management terms, the power and the undisruptability of the network relies on a combination of power not being seen to be seen (although we all recognise that we recognise it) and of this unspoken phenomenon (which we may not talk about because it cannot be known that we know about it) unquestionably operating in the interest of the greater good. It is not quite that power – dominance – is operating so cleverly that we are unaware of it, more that we have too much to lose by naming it. It is as if the un-remarkableness-ness of power means it cannot be challenged, or organised against. How can you organise against something that does not exist, and anyway, if it does exist, exists only to make everyone happy and the organisation function effectively? And if we even think about thinking about power as dominance, we risk positioning ourselves as dominating and dominated: something which would be officially unthinkable within the prevailing discursive field at Meadway.

This means that in a sense what exists in the hall cannot be named as power, and certainly cannot be conceived in terms of dominance and subordination. The unwilling supervising the unwilling becomes a function of common-sense and good administration. What, then, is going on, when the superintending teacher uses the surveillant space to catch up on a good ‘gossip’? Again, there are good practical explanations for this. Lesley and I usually see each other only once a week. Lesley has a dwindling pool of known allies who are safe to gossip with so she has to make the most of every opportunity. And we were both bored. There is a somewhat politically-incorrect, essentialist (or maybe just historical) gendered analysis that comes to mind here: women have traditionally passed the time, when engaged in boring work, with

gossip. There are other analyses to be made. Perhaps we were doing our micro-cultural work. Lesley and I share the membership of various counter-culture minority groups within the staff: we are both political and politicised lefties, out lesbians, classical music lovers (which I think is counter-culture) and school-improvement resists. Perhaps we have a mutual expectation of each other to act in counter-culture and counter-authority ways. For a moment, though, the dominating 'Other' becomes the exam system, with us as its unwilling perpetrators, since we are demonstrating to each other our (partial) resistance to it. In much the same way, the system becomes Other when I help a student to spell a word, although here it is even more noticeable since we are differently positioned by surveillance, but nevertheless colluding against it.

I've spoken, I think, to all of my students. They're all writing something now. This is the only exam which they're all taking, so it's keeping me busy. I go back to Cassandra. She's drawing Pokemon characters on the rough paper. She still doesn't know what to write. I re-read the question to her. She keeps saying 'don't get it'. There is a passage from Animal Farm, and then a question about Snowball. Inspiration strikes. I ask her to find Snowball's name in the passage. She does. I ask her what it says. She reads it out to me, in a whisper. I feel sorry for the young women sitting nearby. All this whispering must be distracting. I tell Cassandra to copy out the sentence she has just read, then underline, and copy out, the other sentences about Snowball. She nods and beams, and starts to write. This is much too much help to be giving someone in an exam. I suppose I think it's all right, as Cassandra won't get a grade anyway. But I can't help being worried. Will I be 'found out' (or shopped) and officially reprimanded – or worse?

Fieldnotes 7/6/00

The penalties that can be incurred by helping in a 'real' (public) exam are considerable. The student can be disallowed from all her exams, and the board reserves the right to make that ban indeterminate. A teacher putting a student in that position would certainly face internal disciplinary procedures and quite possibly external ones too. Cassandra and I both had a lot to lose, although Cassandra was probably less aware of this than I was. But I would not have intervened to this extent with any other of the young women sitting in the room. I would not have dared to act in this way if I had thought it really counted as cheating. Nor would the young women sitting nearby have let me get away with it. But helping Cassandra did not count as 'cheating' because of the common-sense that she was only entering the exam as a matter of form, and would not get a grade. In the name of equal opportunities, all of the students in

Year Eleven are required to take one or more GCSE exams. I was part of discussions in which it was decided that Cassandra (and many other ‘SEN’ students) ‘deserved’ the opportunity to take English Literature. I worked with several of them on a programme of learning by heart a model essay for each section, so that they would know what to do in the exam²⁴. Even though I was aware, or perhaps because I was aware, that Cassandra would not get a grade, I was strongly invested in her producing something that would count as English Literature in the hall that day.

My helping Cassandra in the exam did not have the same meanings around shared resistance to surveillance as it would have carried with most other students. Cassandra was not in the exam room for the same reasons as everyone else. Ostensibly, she had been put there to make her ‘feel like everyone else’, but her presence in many ways highlighted her difference. Alone of the young women, she could be seen to be receiving help without its being seriously questioned. And that help could amount to her being given a different task, one that may have had a logic in it for her, but that would result in work which would not score any marks in the exam. She was also the only young woman in the hall that day for whom there was no hope of the morning’s work resulting in an exam grade. As I will argue in Chapter Nine, Cassandra is not positioned within a discourse of academic progress, and the requirement for her to succeed in an examination is absent. Her presence in the examination room serves many purposes, one of which is to perpetuate the fiction that examinations are egalitarian, allowing all hard-working students the chance of success.

GCSEs have a privileged place in the construction of what counts as success in Meadway, since they are the exams that determine the options open to any student when she leaves school. But they are not the only public exams the students take. At the end of Year Nine, they take SATs in English, Maths and Science. And in 2000, for the first time, Meadway’s Year Seven cohort took the Cognitive Attainment Tests (CATs), as a form of ‘baseline assessment’ for the school to use in its measurement of ‘value-added’. These tests are non-statutory, and take the form of a ‘battery’ of

²⁴ The work of a learning support teacher in a mainstream school is fraught with pedagogic problems. This is a good example of how the attempt to make an activity meaningful for students can in fact involve evacuating all the meaning from it: stripping away its layers of complexity to leave a minimal,

assessments of verbal, numerical and spatial skills. They are marked by computer, and the results arrive back in school as a list of student attainment, ranked in order from the highest attainers at the top of the list to the lowest at the bottom. Also supplied is a profile of each student's supposed strengths and weaknesses, and a projection of that student's expected GCSE results in each National Curriculum subject. Puzzlingly, the threshold of 'attainment' at which the test starts scoring, is the mysterious 'attainment age 10'. This suggests that most of the 'SEN students' would not score on it at all, since their mastery of the curriculum is below that of an 'average' ten-year-old. The flawed nature of the tests and the even more flawed nature of the arguments underpinning them was not lost on many of my colleagues.

Helen asks me if I think the test will tell us anything worth knowing. She thinks what they are measuring is very narrow... She tells me that "we stopped doing the optional SATs in Technology for the same reason: they didn't tell us anything we didn't already know, or couldn't find out, and they didn't make sense from a teaching point of view".

Fieldnotes 22/3/00

This, however, was not the dominant story that was told about the CATs tests. The official managerial picture was that the tests had gone well – much better, in fact, than had dared been hoped for. The reason for this was the 'excellent behaviour' of the girls. Even the most disruptive Year Seven students had produced themselves as eminently governable (Foucault, 1988) during the tests. This was felt to have the positive consequence of making officially desired exam behaviour (such as lining up in silence, and not looking around whilst in the hall) normal and unquestionable from the students' first year in the school.

7Q line up in register order and walk across to the hall in silence. My primary days flood back, as I wait at strategic points to make sure they're all in line, then carry on walking. Their primary days are presumably near enough for them to remember and respond to this kind of treatment. Pam sees them into the hall, marking them off on her register as they go in. She's much smilier than she was yesterday. When 7Q come in we talk publicly about them being the best form. I'm not sure whether they still like this or not... Today's tests are the "Quantitative Battery". The instructions are unbelievably complicated. I'm looking at the CATS book, but I can't really follow. Simone is with Cheryl. I hover around the girls who are doing this for the first time, in case they need help following. At last Pam reaches the end of the instructions. The girl I was helping has no idea of what to do. We work it out together. I go on patrol. Not

mechanical task. Sadly, this is an aspect I am unable to explore in any detail in this thesis.

that you really need to, it's not like GCSE where you have to walk up and down, but I think some of the girls find it harder to put their hands up than they do to catch my eye as I walk past them. Several girls ask for help when I go past. Natelle wants to know why there's a number before a bracket with no sign as to what to do. I whisper to her that it means she's to multiply it – “I shouldn't tell you this, but it means times”. Simone tells me that Cheryl has bitten her nails down so far that they're bleeding, and she has been to get her a plaster. The test only lasts for ten minutes. Then Pam asks them to put their pencils down, and begins on the next set of instructions. These are even worse. They go on for a good fifteen minutes. It's all scripted. There are practice tests to be taken through. Cheryl doesn't know where to put the answers for the practice tests. I don't know how Pam is keeping a straight face through this lot. The head of Maths, who's also invigilating, whispers to me that most of this work hasn't been covered in Maths yet. There's a whole long spiel in the script about “parentheses” and whether to multiply or add first. It's like a big classroom, with ninety students listening in silence to Pam, irrespective of whether or not they understand. Natasha puts her hand up on the second practice test. She doesn't know why the answer is what Pam has said it is. I explain briefly and unsatisfactorily. I don't want her to get behind in the last set of instructions. When Pam finally gives the word to begin, a forest of hands goes up. Amna prefaces her question with “I was listening, but I didn't understand”, as if she thinks I will tell her off for not having paid sufficient attention. This test is too hard for most of the girls sitting in the hall. That's if the instructions didn't put them off altogether. Cheryl tells me she is “guessing them all”. Simone and I are feeling solicitous around Cheryl, and we both stay near her. There are twelve minutes allowed. Twelve minutes for most of the girls to sit and know they are inadequate...Pam ends by telling the girls they have been 'fantastic – so responsible – even more grown-up than Year Nine'.

Fieldnotes 22/3/00

For the Year Seven girls, the examination is constructed in ways that draw upon their experiences as primary school subjects. The familiar assemblage of primary school-style directives – walking silently in line, and receiving public and collective praise for being ‘good’ – are reformulated as a secondary school-style imperative towards self-control and displays of responsibility. As the youngest and newest students in the school, these girls are in many ways the easiest to control and coerce. Their compliance in the exam room is fed back to them not in terms of how obedient they have been, but in terms of how responsible and ‘mature’ they were in producing themselves as docile bodies. The message is a complex and contradictory one. The reality in which they did as they were told became a fiction in which they did as they wanted, but crucially in that fiction they wanted that which authority wanted. It is a complex form of enforcing consent and compliance, yet it is a familiar and much-used strategy in Meadway and other schools.

When the dominant story of the success of the CATs tests was told, it was the girls' apparent consent that loomed large in the telling. The deduction that was made from this was that, having been won, the girls' consent for the examination process could henceforth in their school careers be taken for granted. It would not have to be struggled for in the Year Nine SATs or in the Year Eleven 'mock' GCSEs.

The hall had been set out as it always is for exams, with rows of desks in serried ranks. In the GCSE exams, and in the SATs, a blackboard is used to delineate starting and finishing times. In the CATs, time is much more sharply divided, and much more within the control of authority, seen to be embodied within the form of the superintending teacher. She may appear to control the passage of time, but as all of us in the hall are aware, the regulations about the divisions of time have been set down by the examining authority, and she is merely carrying out their directives, on behalf of the headteacher who wants this test carried out in the prescribed way. There is no escape from the passage of time as an organising narrative in the CATs tests. Foucault (1975) remarks that:

Discipline... poses the principle of a theoretically ever-growing use of time: exhaustion rather than use; it is a question of extracting, from time, ever more available moments and, from each moment, ever more useful forces... the more time is broken down, the more its subdivisions multiply, the better one disarticulates it by deploying its internal elements under a gaze that supervises them, the more one can accelerate an operation, or at least regulate it according to an optimum speed.

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The sharply delineated passage of time within the CATs tests served a number of purposes. It ensured that the responsibility for the correct administration of the test remained with the superintending teacher. It focused us all on her, at given intervals, for instructions on how to proceed. It established the CATs tests as somewhat different from the daily run of school life, in which time is usually divided into rather larger chunks of time marked off by the bell: for those taking CATs tests, the bell could be ignored as an irrelevance. This served to dislocate those in the hall from the normal passage of time as constructed by the school day. The delineated nature of time in the CATs tests provided some alleviation, at least, from what was a boring (and, for some, unpleasant) set of tasks: although each set of boxes-to-be-ticked was tedious, and

distressing for those students who were unable to work out what to do, no set lasted very long. There was the constant promise of a new set of questions, and perhaps a set that might be more interesting or more feasible. This may not seem very relevant here, but it is undoubtedly true that the alleviation of boredom and unpleasantness is a force to be reckoned with in winning students' consent to any activity. All of these taken together meant that the control of time in the CATs test helped to construct a finely-controlled reality. This reality was one in which students were obliged to produce themselves as governable. Their governability could be read, (and could be read back to the students) as consent.

Whilst the dominant story of CATs was one of governability, the achievement story could only ever come a poor second. At the moment of examination, the girls' academic 'performance' was (for the superintending teacher at least) a secondary concern in relation to their performance of compliance and consent. And so asking for help, something that would normally be encouraged and read back to a student as praiseworthy involvement in the learning process, could be read as non-compliance. There was some confusion for the girls about whether or not they could in fact ask for help. In some ways, this had an equalizing effect. Many of the girls, not just those who had been identified as having 'SEN' were positioned as 'needy' by a set of barely-comprehensible instructions, and by the ambiguity that surrounded asking for help. Nearly all were constructed as deficient in relation to a set of questions relating to work they had not covered. Moreover, the demands of the test tended to position them as comrades united against adversity, even when they had consented to the conditions of adversity imposed.

But this should not obscure one of the main purposes of the tests. The production of what Foucault calls 'docile bodies', and what I prefer to think of as consenting subjects inhabiting consenting bodies, may have been (or may have functioned as) the paramount concern at the moment of examination. But the rationale behind the tests, and the organising narrative that legitimated their administration, was the need to measure the girls' academic 'performance' and map it, according to an ages-and-stages developmental model. The map produced charted each student's projected path

through to GCSE, and, perhaps more significantly, produced a hierarchised list, from the top achiever to the bottom.

Consent was enlisted not just to embodied docility, but to a means of measuring 'cleverness' that will be used to produce girls at differently-able students for the next four years of their school lives and beyond. Through giving (or being positioned as if they had given) their consent to this examination process, the girls implicitly consent to their insertion into discourses of rational and incremental development towards (differential) mastery of the curriculum. Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) present such processes as part of the regulative fantasy of liberal democracy.

The democratic fantasy holds that power gained through reason rather than coercion is good, reasonable power. In psycho-educational discourse this is the power gained from discovery and proper conceptualisation. It is the mastery of reasoning... This transformation of power into mastery understands it as a possession and therefore implicitly denies it as regulative at all. Right at the heart of it is another fantasy, of omnipotent mastery over a universe which acts according to the laws of reason.

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The CATs examination room produced girls as consenting subjects in consenting bodies in relation to a given discursive field. That discursive field is one in which the organising narratives of reason and mastery predominate, and in which learning is understood as a technicist enterprise. The CATs tests are part of a process in which students' consent is secured for a system that Hamilton (1998) has called 'eugenic because it privileges the desirable and seeks to eliminate the negative' (p13). The students who have been identified as having 'SEN' will occupy the lowest positions on the chart the CATs tests will produce. At best, the tests will produce these girls as needy of help and intervention, in order that their 'special needs' may be fixed. At worst, the tests will produce them as the failures that SATs tests have already shown them to be, destined for failing grades at GCSE and a lifetime of poorly-paid jobs or no jobs at all.

Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway

The promised deferred gratification of exam grades that count as success are not the only way in which students' consent to the examination process is secured. Fear plays

a crucial role in securing that consent. Before they even arrive at Meadway, most girls know that the success or otherwise of their schooling will be measured and officially signed, sealed and delivered through the public examination process.

Meera: Um, my um brother and sister right, um, this was in Year 6, before I done my SATs, my brother and sister goes, ‘those SATs don’t matter as much as in Year 9 SATs and your GCSEs’ and they said loads of stories, only I can’t remember any of them.

Ambrine: I can remember one, if you don’t do your GCSEs, if you don’t do well in your GCSEs you have to start back in Year 7 again, I was like, “Oh no”, like you’d be so old, and I thought I’d have to start back in Year 7 again, and I was like, [sigh] and my sister’s like “You should start revising now” and I was like suicidal, cos you’ve got all this homework to worry about, and now you’ve got to start worrying about your GCSEs in Year 7

M: And that’s when you start losing your hair.

A: My sister’s losing her hair.

M: Yeah, that’s from stress in the mocks, it was like gunks of it all coming out, not loads but, it was like she was losing her hair.

SB: That’s awful.

A: My sister’s *worried* worried.

Interview 22/3/00

Most of the Year Seven students can tell horror stories about the stress and worry generated by public exams. Entry to secondary school seems to make the distant prospect of GCSEs much more real. Twice a year there is a period of several weeks in which the school hall is arranged for examinations, when students are forbidden to walk past it, and when notices around the corridors remind everyone that they must be quiet because ‘GCSE exams are in progress’. For the Year Seven students, it appears to be the process that generates anxiety, not the potential outcomes. They compare the prospect of GCSEs with the SATs they have already taken. And, like teachers discussing an OFSTED inspection, they agree that the build-up to the surveillant moment is much worse than the moment of examination itself.

SB: Were you scared of SATs when you did them?

Ambrine: Yeah, I was.

Meera: Not really.

A: I was.

M: The day before SATs I went Pizza Hut, and that got me relaxed.

A: It's like. They was gonna be so hard, it's like they was something to do with secondary school, like. It wasn't that hard, it was sort of hard. It's like in Year 6 you go over more, but then when actual SATs comes they're just easy.

M: In Year 4 – this is something to do with SATs – in Year 4, I mean in Year 3, I thought that when you do your SATs it was, it was like whether you pass or you don't pass, and if you don't pass you have to re-take Year 6.

A: I was really scared of my SATs, you know.

M: And, um, in Year 5, my Year 5 teacher, whatever we do, she's like "*In* your SATs you can't do that, *in* your SATs you have to do that, *in* your SATs you have to remember that," and that went on from Year 5 to Year 6, and that was really annoying.

Interview 22/3/00

The production of fear in relation to the examination process should not be underestimated. On the face of it, Meadway's public examinations appear to function as a means of co-optation, in which students' consent is secured through a process of re-casting their enforced compliance as voluntarily given. In this way, the fiction that students consent to the examination process and its outcomes can function as truth (Foucault, 1980; Walkerdine, 1990). But the centrality of fear in the process of ensuring compliance might suggest another reading: that exams are functioning as a means of coercion as much as of co-optation. This may be part of the reason why 'special needs students', who appear to have so little to gain in a system that will officially position them as deficient, apparently collude with, and consent to it.

What Counts as Success?

The examination system at Meadway produces young women who, by and large, consent to a process that sorts them out according to dominant notions of success. Emblematic of that success is a 'C' grade in the GCSE exams. The fiction contained within school improvement literature is that everyone can, with hard work and good teaching, aspire to membership of the five A*-C elite. At Meadway, the current target

is for 60% of the Year Eleven cohort to obtain five A*-C grades. This leaves 40% who are, implicitly, the failures of the system. And amongst those will be the ‘special needs students’, some of whom will obtain, at best, a few F and G grades.

Two distinct discourses are deployed by staff in relation to the construction of this group as potential examination failures. The first of these is the dominant discourse, in which these students’ examination ‘performance’ is judged to be sub-standard. Strenuous efforts are made to help students raise their grades, since, within this discourse, the higher the grade the better. Teachers deploying this discourse make constant reference to the importance of exam results for future success. It tends to be a discourse that distances itself from the past, and within it, students can aspire to dominant versions of success despite whatever they may have done before. However, a second discourse can be invoked in relation to many ‘special needs students’, as a kind of consolation prize. This discourse is a cousin of the self-esteem discourse: it produces students as inherently unable to aspire to reach the grades that count as success for the majority, and values their individual progress, even though such non-normative progress cannot be recognised within dominant notions of ‘success’. Teachers deploying this discourse typically refer to a student’s progress by comparing her present achievements with those of her past. It tends to be a discourse that does not take the future into account. Perhaps this is because, in the discursive field constructed by exam performance, bright futures cannot be imaginable for those students whose performance does not reach ‘expected levels’.

It is worth citing again the observation of Kenway and her colleagues (1997) that, ‘Teachers invariably walk a tightrope between encouraging students to succeed in conventional terms and encouraging them to succeed differently – always with the knowledge that difference seldom wins out over dominance’ (p35). In practice, the two discourses – of dominant versions of success and of individual progress – have to co-exist side-by-side. It is an uneasy match, and one that opens a contradictory space.

Two young women I don't know arrive in the room with their Maths things. We all know they are here because they did so badly in the mocks that they can't now be entered for the Intermediate paper. Some of the young women commiserate loudly, mostly with irony, somewhere between teasing these new arrivals for their poor

performance and sympathy for their plight. Don tries to retrieve the situation, saying there is nothing wrong with being in the Graduated Assessment group. They are the girls who need to “take things more slowly”, not girls who are destined for failure. Asma asks why, then, they will be taking the Foundation paper, which has a ceiling of a ‘D’. Don tells them it is merely a first step, and they can re-take Maths to a higher level in college. He then goes on to congratulate Almaas who has done well enough to move up (if she wants) to the Foundation Assessment group – a move that could mean, if she does well enough, that she will be able to take the Intermediate paper, and possibly get a ‘C’. The young women scream their congratulations at her. Almaas looks undecided. She risks losing her position as the ‘clever one’ in a group in which she does not have to work particularly hard to keep up, and in which her friends contrive to have fun through subverting the teacher’s agenda whenever possible. She stands to gain a position as a struggling student in a class working at a level that will challenge her to keep up, and in which hard work will have to be the order of the day. She is not the only one who is confused. I am wondering about Don’s message to the class. If there is no disgrace, and no attached connotation of deficit in being part of this ‘slower learning’ group, why congratulate Almaas for deserving to escape from it? It’s really hard.

Fieldnotes 28/1/00

Most of the time, in the Graduated Assessment Maths group, the consolation discourse around exam performance is allowed to predominate. Students in this group will, by definition, not be able to aspire to the ‘C’ grade benchmark. So, most of the time, the dominant discourse of exam performance must be ignored, and the consolation discourse of individual progress must be deployed in order to provide these young women with a reason for continuing to work. But the arrival of two demoted students, and the possible promotion of Almaas, bring the dominant discourse into the room.

In its wake come some contradictory understandings of what the young women and the teacher are doing in that room. Are they preparing for an imagined future in which the dominant version of examination success is within their reach, albeit a little later than they might like? Are they working with reference to a past against which their individual incremental progress can be measured and celebrated, even though the outside world will never value it? What does membership of this group mean when escape from it is presented as a cause for celebration? Almaas’s ambivalence about whether to move up (which was later resolved in the decision to stay where she was) contained within it the profound confusion associated with this particular contradiction.

Almaas: I don't know really, I don't know if I want to move up.

SB: What is it you're unsure of?

A: All my friends are in this group. And Mr Tudor helps you when you don't know something. In the Foundation group, you can't muck about because if you miss something Ms Williams won't tell you later. I don't think I'd be able to do the work, and then I wouldn't get any grade for my GCSE. At least in this group, Sir says I'm good and I can get a 'D'. Which is better than no grade at all, which I might get in Intermediate.

SB: You don't think you could do well in Ms Williams' group?

A: The good thing about going up is I could get a 'C' maybe. But I don't think I could, because in Ms Williams' group, you've got to be one of the best ones to go in for Intermediate. Some of them do Foundation, you don't automatically do Intermediate when you're in that group. I wouldn't be one of the ones who did Intermediate, not when I've been in Mr Tudor's all this time. So I'd have all the extra work for no reason. There's no point. I can stay in this group and have a good time with my friends and still get the same grade, so there's no point in moving up.

SB: Sounds like you've decided to stay in this group? Is that right?

A: I don't know. In some ways it would be good to be in Ms Williams'. At least people think you might be going to get a 'C'. You might be going to do Intermediate. But I don't think I'm good enough for Intermediate, no matter what class I'm in.

Reconstructed from notes 28/1/00

Caught in the contradiction, Almaas cannot let go of the possibility of an Intermediate exam entry, and of a 'C' grade, even though she (realistically I think) appears to see it as highly unlikely. In making her overall decision about whether to stay in her present group or move up to the next, she has to take the micro-cultural consequences into account. Present experience as well as future success have to be weighed against each other, but since they are measured according to different currencies, this is far from easy. On the one hand is a group in which she can have some fun alongside her friends, but in which the 'C' grade is necessarily out of reach. In the Graduated Assessment group, her performance can be judged successful, even if only according to the consolation discourse. On the other hand is a group in which she thinks she will not have fun, but in which the possibility, however remote, of a 'C' grade can remain intact, and in which the outside world will perceive her as potentially performing

according to 'expected standards'. However, in the Foundation Assessment group, Almaas's performance can only be judged as successful if she succeeds in dominant terms, as the consolation discourse is not available to this group of aspiring 'C' students. Finally, Almaas decided that the possibility of success in dominant terms was too remote, and that she was not prepared to risk her success within the consolation discourse in favour of almost certain failure within the dominant one.

The possibility of transfer into a higher Maths group is not one that need concern most of the 'special needs students'. Most of them will not be offered that option: they are destined to remain in the Graduated Assessment group until the day they leave school. In their accounts, the Year Eleven 'special needs students' are often well able to distinguish the two discourses around exam success. Although many of the young women have come to realise that examination success within the terms of the dominant discourse is unavailable to them, they mostly continue to aspire, or continue wanting to aspire, to dominant versions of success. They recognise these versions as the ones that really count.

SB: It's about why C is important. Why do you think C is more - why are you choosing C as [unclear]

Hafsa: It's – it's a grade where you can pass, really. It's a grade where you can get certain jobs if you get a C, you can get certain jobs. But with a D you've got – you can't – you can get certain jobs, depending on your other grades, you know, how you do well in Science and English and Maths - these three subjects are really, really important and any, like, I don't think D is a great, is a great show of achievement, like you can only get that in Foundation. You can't get higher than that and I don't think that's right, I think you should get a C - erm - because if you don't do that in science - if I don't get a C, because I can get that, I've been entered in foundation. If I get a C, right, that's great, I'd be really, really surprised if I can get a C and, you know...

SB: So, what does C count for that D doesn't?

H: Erm - well D, (pause) I don't know really, I think C's a higher grade and a D? Well, I personally think it's a low grade - erm – there's a lot of difference in between them - a lot of difference. Well like - erm – it's difficult - erm, well personally I wouldn't feel really, really great if I got a D. I think C makes you proud, it makes you proud of like you're getting something, and C, well, like I think it's my ambition, my ambition is to get a C. I dunno - cause it's like basically when you're at secondary school and you've learnt the basics and you're going to college, and you, you, you, when you get to college, there's no

point retaking it, is there? Because if I don't have that C in, in my secondary school, all the work that I've done, and everything, If I don't get a C, there's no point me doing a retake in year - erm - in college, I dunno. Cause she - cause my cousin she got a D. And she retook it again and she got D again. So I think that you've gotta have the basic knowledge. You've gotta work hard to get - I think that they should - they should change the system and make it like so you can get a C in foundation. Like in science we can get a C so they don't have to retake it - like if it was a *really, really* bad mark like an E or a U I think then they should retake it, but I think they should, they should have a C system, where you can get a C in foundation. Oh, it's rubbish I'm talking –

Interview 24/11/00

Complex identity work is going on here. For Hafsa, who is likely to get 'E' and 'F' grades at best, this investment in dominant versions of success is as worrying as it is understandable. In some ways, she is refusing to be seduced into one of the commonest plot lines of the success-as-individual-progress story. She does not see successive re-takes at college as a solution to the problem of low exam grades at school, and thus refuses the construction of herself as someone who is learning slowly, but will get there in the end if only she has enough patience. She wants the good grades now, in Year Eleven, and is not prepared to believe that she will get them in college if she fails to get them while at school. In her account, she is referring to the future, not to the past, and to her projected opportunities once she has left school. The backward-looking consolation version of success, which celebrates students' achievements in comparison with those of their past, is of no use to her in the project of envisaging a future. The forward-looking dominant version of success is potentially of use to her in this project, but she is working with the knowledge that this version does not readily make a successful position available to her.

Hafsa is a 'sweet little girl' and her sense of herself draws heavily on her position as a recipient of learning support. One of the explicit rationales of learning support is that it exists to remediate and to 'fix'. Although this rationale is contradicted by most of the practices of learning support, it remains intact as a way of legitimating the identification of 'special needs students'. Hafsa is taking up one of these explicit legitimizers: that 'special needs students' can have their needs 'met' and can thus be enabled to perform according to national 'expectations' in public exams. To produce herself as 'sweet little girl' she must, to some extent, take up the promise that she can be 'fixed'. For Hafsa, believing in the promise means investing in the possibility of

examination success, despite considerable evidence in practice exams that this version of success is not available to her. Continued belief in the prospect of exam success also means continued belief in the promise that hard work at school will bring that success and the material rewards associated with it. Hafsa does not have the incentive nor the micro-cultural location that will enable her to produce herself as oppositional, so she is invested in remaining positive towards the schooling enterprise. And in Year Eleven, a positive orientation towards school necessarily means an investment of some kind in the dominant story in which hard work leads to examination success which leads to material reward.

Perhaps the last word on the subject should go to Chantelle. As a ‘big bad girl’, her orientation towards exam success is much less stable than Hafsa’s. Where Hafsa will make every effort to read herself into the dominant discourse of examination success, Chantelle has less to lose in exposing the contradiction between the two discourses: between whether it is normative success or individual progress that really counts. In exposing this contradiction, the consolation discourse is likewise exposed as a deficit discourse, only making sense as the poor relation of the dominant discourse, however benevolent the intentions of the teachers who deploy it. Following a Science test in which her mark of twelve per cent – an outright failure in the terms of the dominant discourse – was read back to her as a measure of individual improvement, her response was to name and describe the contradiction. The well-intentioned attempts by the class teacher (and by me) to construct a space for her could not work. The space contained within the contradiction appears to be an empty one, and we were not able to fill it.

Chantelle does not want to go so far as to reject the educational enterprise itself, but within the discursive field of the examination, there do not appear to be any readings that would be both available and desirable to her. She cannot read herself into the dominant discourse: to do this she would have to suspend disbelief in her examination results to date, and she would be obliged to take up the offers of learning support that so threaten her construction of herself as ‘big bad girl’. And she will not read herself into the deficit discourse of success, because she knows that, in the end, it does not count, and will bring few rewards, material or otherwise. She wants what appears to be available to so many of her friends: a successful position in the dominant discourse,

which would bring the prospect of examination success without the loss of her anti-teacher micro-cultural status. It is as if the two discourses around examination success pull away from each other, and the contradictory space between them is a void, with nothing positive to fill it. The obvious candidate to fill this empty space is the word 'failure'. But this is a word that has been made unsayable (Sennett, 1998), and so the space remains empty. For Chantelle, this void seems to have become part of her sense of herself.

Chantelle: And you know what Miss? You know what, tape recorder? What'm I gonna get in the mocks? You've guessed it. Zero. Zero. Forget threes. We're talking zero. I've been here five years, and we're talking zero.

SB: Chantelle, I don't really know what to say to you. Um - let me just think a minute... [pause] - I think it's that I don't know - I mean I'm not sure I know what you mean when you say we're talking zero. I mean, I've seen your exam results - some of your test results - and I don't - you didn't actually *get* any zeros. I mean, I know the results weren't good, but I don't think - I don't remember any actual zeros. So I'm kind of wondering what you mean. Yeah?

C: ... Well, you can call it twelve percent, yeah, you can call it twelve percent if you like, but inside, it's a big fat zero. I mean twelve percent – it's a zero, whatever you call it, it's a zero, and that's what's inside of me. Zero, zero, zero.

Interview 10/11/00

This chapter has considered the examination as a site of the production of intellectual subordination. It has looked at the examination as event and as discursive production, in relation to prevailing policy, micropolitics and microcultural practices. I have suggested that the examination plays a crucial part in securing students' consent for the processes of intellectual subordination, winning from them their consent to a dominant version of success from which they have little to gain. This chapter also considered the examination process as productive of two distinct versions of academic success. In the dominant, future-oriented model, students are positioned as desirous of examination success according to normative benchmarks because of the future opportunities successful performance opens up. In the consolation version, students are encouraged to look back and compare present achievements with those of the past. This version may appear to have something to offer, and to be kinder and more humane than the dominant one, but it works to inscribe students as needy, and has nothing to say to

them about the futures to which they can aspire. It is a deficit discourse of academic success, and it works both to close down certain options for certain students, and to reinscribe the borders of 'special educational needs'.

Chapter Nine
'Success' and the Autistic Spectrum

The dominant discourse of success at Meadway constructs the subject 'student' according to her curricular/examination performance measured against national norms. The deficit discourse constructs the subject 'student' according to her performance measured against her previous personal record. Both discourses could be understood as mainstream: they operate to define 'normal' success, and to make contingent, consolation versions of success available to those who find themselves in and around the borders at which 'learning difficulties' blend into 'normality'.

This chapter looks in detail at the experiences of two autistic students, Cassandra and Cheryl, and at the discourses through which they are produced as distinct versions of the subject 'special needs student'. I argue for the existence of a third, 'really disabled' version of success which is deployed in relation to a small number of Meadway students. This version of success is located within the charity/tragedy discourse, and is similar to the 'personal tragedy model' identified by Alton-Lee and colleagues (2000). In this chapter, I look at some definitions and understandings of autism, in relation to medical and social models. I go on to look at the discourses through which Cassandra's placement at Meadway could be narrated as 'successful' whilst Cheryl's could not. Threaded through the chapter is an engagement with some of the theoretical problems that arise in the attempt to use feminist post-structuralism to explain the subjectivity of these two participants in my research.

Disability and Success: The Third Discourse

Increasingly, Meadway is providing for groups of students who have not, in the past, been considered able to benefit from mainstream schooling. Amongst this group are two autistic students, Cassandra and Cheryl. A distinct discourse of success operates in relation to these students. This discourse apparently floats free of academic progress. It is a discourse that simultaneously *allows* students to be different by valuing non-academic (or non-credentialised) success, and *re-inscribes* them as different by exempting them from requirements relating to academic performance. This discourse

produces what is in many ways the most progressive and humane of the formal versions of success in circulation at Meadway. But because it is only applied in relation to a group who have historically been marginalised and oppressed, one of its functions is to police the borders of a binary division.

Cassandra and Cheryl did not have an assured place within this third discourse. As students with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder, and not an intellectual impairment, there was room for contestation over whether they could be regarded as 'really different'. Their placements at Meadway were closely tied to perceptions of success. If Cassandra and Cheryl made progress according to the third discourse, then the school and, in particular, its learning support department, would be able also to claim success. If they did not make progress, then the school would be understood as failing. There were, accordingly, very intense feelings about these students and their success, and many members of staff worked long and hard to support both of them. In particular, elaborate Individual Education Plans were written for Cheryl and Cassandra. SMART targets were put in place to try to ensure their progress according to a rational linear model. But it is hard, and, I would suggest, inappropriate, to attempt to evaluate the success of autistic students in a wholly rational and linear way.

The Reflexive Autistic Subject?

Cheryl is in Year Seven and Cassandra is in Year Eleven. They have been identified as having 'Asperger Syndrome', and both have statements of special educational need. Cassandra's placement at Meadway has been judged to be 'successful', whereas Cheryl's has been judged 'unsuccessful' and came to an end shortly before she was due to move into Year Eight. What does success mean in the context of these two students, and how is it constructed? What resources have been made available to Cheryl and Cassandra in carrying out their identity work? But more fundamentally, perhaps, does it even make sense to position these two autistic students as reflexive subjects of late modernity, actively engaged in the project of constructing a sense of self out of the identifications on offer to them?

Unlike most of the girls and young women who participated in this study, Cheryl and Cassandra can be understood as recognisably disabled. Autism, unlike learning difficulties, has an assured place within both the medical and social models of disability. According to the social model, autism is an impairment, around which a disabled identity can be configured, and which may involve an individual experiencing conditions that will be handicapping. It is an impairment which, like many, is currently undergoing a degree of recuperation in some contexts. There is a growing movement of 'autistics and cousins' who identify the rest of the world as 'neuro-typicals' or 'normies', and campaign for their own right to be different (Institute for the Study of the Neuro-Typical, 1999). Arguably, it is the individuals who are at the very 'highest functioning' end of the spectrum who lead this movement: many of its leaders identify as 'cousins', claiming only a few of those characteristics thought to define autism.

Interestingly, the medical and social models can appear to share more ideological ground with regard to autism than they do with regard to many other impairments. Perhaps this is because, in order to claim a right to be different, groups representing autistic individuals have to assert an organic, inherent base to that difference, a base that cannot be explained by social construction. And so the medico/psychological establishment, and autistic/autistic cousin activists become, to some extent, allies. Both groups share the perspective that autism is an atypical way of understanding the world, and that it is not socially produced, nor can it be pedagogically or therapeutically cured.

When, during the 1950s and 1960s, the medical establishment did seek a social and relational explanation for the existence of autism, they looked to parenting styles in infancy. Kanner (1957) drew on the concept of 'emotional refrigeration' and what followed were two decades of blaming 'refrigerator parents' (or, more commonly, refrigerator mothers) for their children's atypical behaviour (Bettleheim, 1967; Howlin, 1998; Jordan, 1999). However, since the 1970s, the medical and psychological debate about the actual causes of autism has shifted back into the biological realm, and links have been made with various genetic conditions such as fragile *x* syndrome, and neuro-fibromatosis (Jordan and Powell, 1995). Whilst these

links remain a matter of debate, the medical world is united in asserting that the causes of autism are organic, and that earlier emphases on parental inadequacy were flawed. Autistic activists join the medical professionals in those assertions. Where the two tend to part company is in their conception of difference, in the deployment of the term 'autistic' and in their recommended management of autism.

Social model activists and thinkers insist that autism is a 'different' way of understanding the world, not a disordered one, whilst the medical and psychological professions are more likely to describe autism as a 'developmental disorder'. There is a growing call, originating in activist circles, for the need to deploy the term 'autistic' as 'a signpost, not a label' (Jordan, 1999). Meanwhile, the commonest forms of management of autism still tend to be the medical and psychologically-conceived programmes of early intervention along behavioural lines (Jordan and Jones, 1999; Nye, 2000). Autistic activists and their supporters are often critical of such programmes, maintaining that people should not have to become 'less autistic' in order to keep existing notions of normalcy intact.

Asperger Syndrome is a comparative latecomer to the world of autism. Both Kanner and Asperger were Viennese physicians, and both wrote papers in the 1940s describing groups of children who would come to be known as autistic. Kanner, however, had emigrated to the United States, and his work became widely known, disseminated and developed, especially in the English-speaking nations. Asperger had remained in Second World War Austria, and his work languished until it was rediscovered in the late 1970s and 1980s. The children identified by Kanner were those who would now be described as 'low functioning autistic': those whose autism is part of a constellation of intellectual delays and difficulties, and who characteristically have little spoken language (Kanner, 1943). The children identified by Asperger would today be classed as 'high functioning autistic': these are the people who cannot be said to have significant intellectual impairment, and who may be able to use spoken language with apparent proficiency. In former times, many of them would have been recognised as '*idiots savants*', and their perceived impairment achieved notoriety in the 1980s Hollywood film 'Rainman'.

During the 1980s there was debate amongst professionals (and, increasingly, amongst autistic individuals and their supporters) as to whether this group should be identified as autistic at all. Other favoured identifications included 'pervasive developmental disorder' (or PDD), semantic-pragmatic disorder, and, occasionally, even into the 1980s, infantile or juvenile schizophrenia (Wing, 1980). The breakthrough did not come until the middle of the 1990s, when Wing and her associates began to talk about 'Autistic Spectrum Disorders', known as ASD for everyday purposes (Wing, 1996). ASD is now the favoured term of many professionals and of some groups of activists, and it can encompass many different ways of being autistic.

The autistic spectrum is usually described in terms of 'the triad of impairments' (Aviss, 1999; Jordan, 1999; Jordan and Jones, 1999). The triad refers to the areas of social interaction, communication, and flexible thinking. Taken together, this triad of impairments presents a problem for a post-structuralist view of the process of constructing a sense of self. The triad combine to produce a child or young person who does not readily generalise meaning from experience and, as some have argued, does not have an experiencing self in the way it is usually understood. Jordan and Powell (1995) contend that:

The lack of an experiencing self has a profound effect at all stages in the processing of information. At the perceptual stage, events are experienced but in a non-subjective way. That is, individuals with autism are aware of what is happening, but not aware that it is happening to them.

p96

What does this imply for the active post-structuralist subject, the 'self as a verb, always in process, taking its shape in and through the discursive possibilities through which selves are made' (Davies, 1997, p274)? Are Cassandra and Cheryl undertaking what could be called identity work, when their reading of the social world and their understanding of themselves as actors in the social world are so untypical? And when their ability to use language with any kind of flexibility, and their ability to abstract meaning from experience, is so limited, does it make any sense to consider Cassandra and Cheryl as post-structuralist selves in process?

Weedon (1997) argues that ‘‘Subjectivity’ is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world’ (p32). Meadway, like all schools, is in the business of producing the subject ‘student’. The students themselves play an active role in how they negotiate the discursive positionings on offer, as they produce and reproduce student identities. This process is relational, and both constitutes and is constituted by the multiple and developing social relations in which all of us at Meadway are embedded. The tacit understanding here is that everyone has a reasonably similar way of making sense of experience. It implies that, whilst no two actors’ perceptions will be identical, there is enough common ground for us to understand ourselves as participating in a mutually comprehensible process of making sense of the world. This may not be the case for Cassandra and Cheryl. They are social actors, and they are feeling and thinking people, but they appear to make sense of themselves in a way that does not share the common ground that characterises the relational process of identity work.

Perhaps the point here is that other people respond to Cassandra and Cheryl as self-conscious subjects of late modernity (Giddens, 1991), even if they do not, and maybe cannot, operate as such. According to a post-structuralist reading of late modernity, both students are produced through discursive practices, and they are read as active subjects, even though they may be unable to bring reflexivity to their own discursive positionings. This presents something of a paradox, of which the only solutions could be understood to be variants of a deficit model. Either Cassandra and Cheryl are read as competent, active subjects, which means they will then be read as intentionally transgressive when they act out of accordance with the usual rules that govern social action. Or they can be read as limited and incompetent subjects, in which case their untypical actions will be understood as difference, but as a difference arising from an inherent lack of ‘normal’ abilities.

The social model analysis of autism also constitutes, and is constituted by, a similar paradox. Its insistence on an organic, material cause means that it has to identify real, discernible differences between the way autistic and non-autistic individuals make

sense of the world. I am not convinced by the apparent solution offered: an insistence on difference without disorder. It is impossible to describe that ‘difference’ without recourse to the aspects of social life that an autistic person will find difficult and bewildering, and without reference to the things an autistic person cannot do. The insistence on difference not disorder is theoretically situated in the ‘valuing diversity’ set of arguments. These draw on a de-politicised version of liberal pluralism that often serves to obscure, rather than to illuminate, inequalities. It also implies an easily identifiable demarcation between those management strategies that are designed to ‘normalise’ an individual, and those that are intended to help an individual manage their own condition whilst still preserving their right to be different. In practice, this demarcation is far from obvious, as Cheryl’s and Cassandra’s experiences of mainstream schooling illustrate.

Cassandra – A Successful Placement?

Cassandra is a young woman from a Greek Cypriot family. Her primary schooling, and her first year of secondary schooling took place in a local special school. She entered Meadoway in Year Eight (at the age of twelve), and remained there until the end of her compulsory schooling. At the end of Year Eleven, she was offered a place at a sixth form college, studying Art and Design. I first met Cassandra when I began working at Meadoway, during her second term in Year Nine. I very much enjoyed working with her, and was considerably invested in her success and her continuing placement at Meadoway. Unlike my colleagues there, I had substantial experience with autistic young people, having worked at a special school in which autistic children and young people were a large minority group. They had been the children and young people in whom I was most interested, and with whom I was perceived (and perceived myself) to have the most ‘success’. Within days of my arrival at Meadoway, I had read the ‘autistic signpost’ and was responding to Cassandra accordingly, as someone I would like and be able to work with productively. Predictably, I was quickly positioned by colleagues as the nearest available thing to an expert in autism, and for the following two-and-a-half years they brought me their concerns, problems and anecdotes about Cassandra. My reading of Cassandra is thus produced through a relationship in which I was more closely involved

in her 'progress' and more invested in her 'success' than was perhaps the case with the other participants in this study.

Cassandra is a gentle, timid young woman. Despite being tall and well-built, she tends to be positioned as a 'sweet little girl'. She 'does autism' in ways that are likely to be read as endearing and charming, and are likely to evoke tender feelings in other people. The aspects of social life that often frighten and bewilder autistic people – such as changes in routine, apparent rule-breaking and perceived unkindness – frighten and bewilder Cassandra. Her response is to cry quietly, with her fists jammed into her eyes in the attempt to stop tears running down her cheeks. Like many autistic people, she speaks in an untypical and stylised way. In her case, it has meant adopting a high-pitched, child-like voice, together with frequent reversals of noun and verb order. She has a fixated interest in cartoons, and, during her time in Year Eleven, would spend entire lessons drawing Pokemon characters. She was thus inscribed into traditional discourses of hyper-femininity in which she could be read as a vulnerable and rather charming 'child' in need of help.

I go to lunch. There's a huge crowd in the corridor, which I fully intend to ignore by going through the hall. But Cassandra comes up to me, with her mouth turned down at the corners. She's been trained to know what the different feelings look like, and hers often look unnatural. She tells me she is "feeling sad". I ask why. She can't get to the till to buy her lunch token. She asks if I will take her with me. I do. The crowd of Year 11 girls is almost impenetrable. There is no way Cassandra could have managed it on her own. We hold hands, and I make my way through, Cassandra behind me. I'm not sufficiently high in status for the young women of the crowd to melt away as I pass through. But I'm high enough for individuals to allow me to push them aside. And Cassandra is 'special' enough for them not to protest at her coming with me. I ask someone why the crowding is so bad. There are new staff on duty, who haven't got the hang of the system. We get to the till. There is a little corner behind it, where I install Cassandra while I buy her token. Again, there are no protests from any of the waiting young women in front of whom we have pushed. I don't think they would have been nice enough to let Cassandra through on her own, but Cassandra, who they know is vulnerable, plus me in my authorised position as her protector, evoke their 'niceness' sufficiently to allow us this special privilege. Cassandra rewards me with one of her beaming smiles.

Fieldnotes 21/3/00

In many ways, this extract can be read as an instance of very good practice around disability. Cassandra has been correctly read as 'different', and because of that difference, we 'normies' have modified our own actions so that the environment

becomes more accommodating and less disabling for Cassandra. The situation, of the corridor being unwontedly crowded and a lunch token not being as readily available as expected, is one that could reasonably be expected to threaten the composure of an autistic student. The fact that Cassandra seeks help and verbalises her distress, rather than panicking, speaks well for the progress she has made at Meadway, and for the work that has been done with her. The other students' contingent willingness to make way for Cassandra indicates both their understanding of her difference, and points to the work that still needs to be done if they are to recognise and act on this understanding without prompting. Whilst there is undoubtedly much truth in this reading, there is more besides.

The recognition of Cassandra as different in this instance goes beyond the notion of 'any old difference' to imply a binary. There are many students in the school who find jostling the crowds unpleasant, and would prefer not to have to. But they are not deemed worthy of special recognition. Somehow, Cassandra has crossed the line between 'different but normal' and 'really different'. And it is perhaps impossible for that recognition not to contain remnants of the charity/tragedy discourse, when what we are asking the other students to do is to suspend parts of their usual struggle for power in order to show special consideration for Cassandra. It is certainly possible, and very attractive, to understand the students in this extract as being 'nice'. Their actions do contain an element of just that: unselfish niceness, and the ability to consider someone else's needs. But doing 'nice girl' involves more in the way of identity work than is suggested by unselfishness, however problematised that notion becomes (Francis, 1997; Francis, 1998). It also involves, in this instance, a measure of distancing oneself from the identification with disability. Cassandra is not just positioned as different: she is positioned as 'not-like-us', and such an act is charged with power.

Many of the girls in the crowd that day had their own investments in doing 'bad girl', or at least in distancing themselves from the sensible/selfless model of young woman student. Such young women are unlikely to be afraid of me, so it is highly unlikely that they made way for Cassandra out of fear of authority. What, then, was going on? In the student micro-cultures that operate in Year Eleven, it has become unacceptable for

anyone to be seen deliberately to frighten Cassandra. She has become so established as 'not-like-us' that acts of meanness towards her have been ruled out. This could be said to have the much-desired effect of helping all members of the school community to understand and value diversity, to accept people for who they are, and to act towards them accordingly. And Cassandra is not just *positioned* as vulnerable: she is genuinely vulnerable, inasmuch as the social world operates according to rules that do not make sense to her. But the effect seems to be to reify the students' (and adults') notions of what counts as *real* disability. Far from enabling everyone to benefit from a wider notion of what constitutes personhood, the discursive field that constitutes Cassandra as 'not-like-us' appears to demand that 'normal' students distance themselves from her. This is especially true of the Year Eleven 'special needs students', who are concerned to mark out the distinctions that constitute Cassandra as 'not-like-us'.

Suleika: Like, [the Textiles teacher] she's never helping people, and Cassandra, I don't want to be mean, don't get this wrong, but Cassandra she can't do nothing if Miss doesn't tell her what to do, and Miss never goes over to her, and Cassandra, like every lesson, she's just sitting there, [pause]. She's just sitting there, and she isn't doing nothing, and Miss doesn't even notice, she doesn't even see ... And like Cassandra as well, she's just sitting there, and, don't get this wrong, it's like some people they say, "Oh, it's only Cassandra, it doesn't matter, she won't get no GCSE's anyway". But that ain't fair, and when it was Ms Corby, Ms Corby was all the time, "Are you OK Cassandra, do you understand, Cassandra?" and Cassandra she could do it, like she wasn't just sitting there, and you should've seen this - what did she make - what was it?

Amina: Oh, I know, I remember that - it was like this thing for a uniform, like a coat what you wear and it hasn't got no sleeves, and it was all red -

S: Yeah, right, and she made this coat thing, and it was really good, you should've seen it Miss, it wasn't like it was just good for Cassandra, it was really *good* -

A: And now, she don't make nothing no more, and she - erm – it's not like it's her fault, she doesn't understand what to do, how can *she* understand what to do? And Miss she doesn't even care, just as long as Cassandra's not bothering her, she doesn't even care if she knows what to do, and I don't think that ain't even fair.

Interview 9/12/99

It appears that Suleika and Amina's principle intention in this extract is to demonstrate the inadequacy of the new Textiles teacher. Within the discursive field that constitutes

meanness to Cassandra as unacceptable, this teacher's actions have crossed the boundary between ordinary, run-of-the-mill teacherly neglect, and absolute inadmissability. The two young women are illustrating their own grievances against the teacher by referring to Cassandra. This teacher has often left them 'just sitting there', and they resent this. But the teacher's actions in leaving Cassandra 'just sitting there' are qualitatively different in their account. It is reprehensible of the teacher to leave Suleika and Amina 'just sitting there'. But for her to leave Cassandra in this way is an act that is comparable to taking away Tiny Tim's crutches. The depth to which this teacher has apparently sunk is illustrated by her lack of caring towards this most vulnerable of their classmates.

What Suleika and Amina leave out of their account is that Cassandra herself always enjoys being left alone: she appears to be at her happiest when she is allowed to draw cartoon characters in her pocket notebook. But they are concerned to monitor her learning. They adopt a caretaking role in relation to Cassandra, in which they can express outrage at the teacher's neglect of her curricular progress. They are able to make judgements about that progress themselves: Suleika's surprise at Cassandra making a garment that was really *good* (as opposed to just good for Cassandra) contained an element of motherly pride as well as surprised approbation of both Cassandra and the facilitating ex-teacher. This effectively establishes a distance between themselves and her. As they perform this piece of identity work, they are re-inscribing the borders between themselves and the 'really different' Cassandra. In this 'borderwork' (Thorne, 1993) account, they additionally exonerate Cassandra from any kind of blame for her inability to understand: it is obvious that Cassandra's disability means that she will not know what to do, for, as Amina rhetorically asks, how can *she* be expected to understand?

It is not only the students who customarily position Cassandra as 'really different'. Indeed, the Textiles teacher incurred Suleika's and Amina's disapproval for her failure to recognise Cassandra's difference and give her special treatment. As I outlined in the previous chapter, the public setting of the examination hall is a place where teachers (including myself) can be seen to treat Cassandra very differently from her peers.

In the Chemistry exam... Cassandra is fiddling with her hair. I check she has carried out the starting instructions, which she has. I leave her. Sue draws my attention to the fact that she is still fiddling with her hair. I know perfectly well that she will continue to fiddle until her hair is done to her satisfaction, but I feel obliged to be seen to be talking to her again, as if I can make her start the Chemistry paper... Cassandra finishes in about half an hour. She puts her pen down, and leans back in her chair, looking pleased with herself. John comes over to me, and asks if we should be doing anything about her. I know there's nothing we can do, but I agree to go over and have a word. As if I have a privileged expertise that enables me to talk to Cassandra, and that stops any other member of staff from doing so. Cassandra is pleased with the work she has done, and has no intention of doing any more. She knows it is the rule that she remains in the hall until the end, and is not bothered by it. I give her some paper to draw on. It will give her something to do, and keep the other teachers' attention away from her, so long as they don't look too closely.

Fieldnotes 6/12/99

Cassandra's atypical way of doing the exam causes consternation amongst the teachers in the hall. There is a limited repertoire of ways in which to do student during an examination, and Cassandra's activities do not fall within this agreed repertoire. If any other student was seen to play with her hair, or to finish the paper in less than half of the time available, any one of the invigilating teachers would have intervened. But the teachers are reluctant to intervene directly with Cassandra, and, I think, with good reason²⁵. She has a well-known reputation for becoming distressed when faced with demands that do not make sense to her. None of the teachers want to distress her, and risk an upsetting scene in the middle of an exam. Neither do they want (or be seen) to make her cry. So they bring their concerns to me, as someone who might be expected to know how to make those demands in a way that Cassandra will understand, or who might be able to reassure them that Cassandra is acting quite normally 'for Cassandra'. In reality, I do not know how to make the demands of an exam make sense to Cassandra, and I do not think it is possible to do so. But I want to be seen to be 'doing something' to remedy the situation, both in terms of my own credibility, and to 'protect' Cassandra from possible interventions. Like the students in the corridor, in effect I am both modifying my actions to take account of Cassandra's difference, and keeping intact a reified notion of that difference as 'really different'.

²⁵ Many writers have drawn attention to the de-skilling of mainstream teachers in relation to students who are perceived to be 'different', and to the part this process has played in perpetuating segregated schooling. For an overview see Bines (1989).

Overall, Cassandra's placement in Meadway as its first ever autistic student has been deemed to be 'successful'. The dominant stories that are told about Cassandra cast her as someone who has made progress at the school, and whose needs Meadway has been able to meet. Where concerns are raised, they are in relation to her academic progress, but this is usually judged to be of secondary importance to the opportunities she has had to 'socialise' with mainstream students.

I try to start Cassandra off, but she's busy sorting money out, and I know she will insist on finishing this task before she will consent to do any of the past paper. I would stay and talk to her about what she's doing, but it's hard when others are clamouring for help. In this class, there's always someone waiting, stuck, and asking for attention... I go around, always meaning to come back to Cassandra, but not managing it... By the end of the lesson, I still haven't managed to return to Cassandra, and, typically, she has done none of the past paper. I feel the need to be apologetic about this to Don. He replies that Cassandra is able to do the work, and, if he sits next to her, she gets it done. I apologise again. That's what I'm supposed to be doing in these lessons. I have a very un-politically correct thought. I don't think the abstractions of Maths GCSE can be made accessible to Cassandra. In which case, why do we make her go through the motions? Why can't she do something that we can make accessible? But that goes against many of the principles of inclusion and the National Curriculum, which is supposed to be about equal entitlement. It's hard. Equal provision doesn't - and shouldn't - mean identical provision. But where does differentiation blend into low expectations, blend into some people being given an inferior, watered-down version of what others are getting? And if we really had students doing very different things, wouldn't that have to mean the end of mixed-ability grouping?

Fieldnotes 16/2/00

Counter-hegemonic stories about the ways in which conventional academic success cannot be made available to Cassandra are seldom told, except, as here, in the privacy of the classroom, between two unpromoted teachers. Don's insistence that Cassandra can only do the work if a teacher sits with her not only positions me as failing in my duty, but also positions Cassandra as incapable of the meaning-making that will lead to independent work. The tacit understanding that what goes on within the formal world of the curriculum is meaningless for Cassandra is an understanding that cannot make it into any of the public stories about her. It would challenge too many of the basic foundations upon which the notion of progression according to an equally available curriculum is constructed.

The Maths curriculum (like most of Meadway's curricula) does not appear to make sense to Cassandra. She cannot make the linear progress which is the only kind of progress that a linear, developmentally-based curriculum can make admissible. For Cassandra, yet another discourse about success has to be invoked. Where the dominant version is about GCSE A*-C grades, and the SEN version is about individual (curricular) progress at individual rates, another discourse has to be deployed in relation to Cassandra. Her 'special needs' must be differentiated from those of the other 'special needs students' and the discourse of individual progress similarly differentiated. Where ordinary 'special needs students' are recuperated into a discourse in which they do make academic progress, but supposedly not as fast as the dominant majority group, Cassandra does not have to be seen to make individual curricular progress. For her, it is enough to succeed on what one colleague called 'the social side'.

Sarah: I haven't given up on Cassandra, but I've more, I've more or less taking her, you know, trying to teach her social rather than Science now, because she understands, she's very limited as understanding's very limited but I think it's important that she gets relationships with adults. So I talk to her, and when she's doing a practical, I try and pair her up with someone who knows what they're doing, so that they can guide her, but I go over and I talk to her, and I ask her how she's doing. So I try and be a little bit more social with Cassandra. But it was really nice like when you came in and you did the experiment with her. Cause it took the pressure off – that class, there's just so many that need help, it took the pressure off me a bit, and let me go off with the other, the other students. Cause she is a *real* – she *is* someone who needs, who needs, [pause] well she really needs, she really needs somebody following her round the school, basically, in every lesson sort of.

Interview 6/4/00

Again, this teacher's position can be understood as modification of practice to take account of and value diversity. But she is also positioning Cassandra as someone who, unlike the other 'special needs students', is *really* different. In some ways, the discourses deployed in relation to Cassandra are those I would want to support. Sarah has decided that relationships are an arena in which Cassandra can be helped to make meaningful progress, and in which she can be given an enjoyably successful experience. I would want to agree with her in this analysis. I would want to deploy differing notions of what could count as success, and not depend on the dominant curricular-success-is-the-only-recognisable-success notion.

But the problem is that, of all the students in Year Eleven, Cassandra is the only one in relation to whom this more flexible account of what counts as success is applied. Cassandra's presence does not appear to enable different versions of success to circulate to the benefit of all students. To the contrary, her presence establishes the borders of normal success and of normality and, in many ways, strengthens and preserves them. Meadway has to understand Cassandra as successful, because she is in many ways a diligent and hard-working student: or, at least, she is one who does not act in ways that can be configured as challenging. An earnest, well-meaning student has to be read as successful in order to preserve the story that hard work brings success. But the version of success that is ascribed to Cassandra both allows her difference, and at the same time re-inscribes her distance from the norm.

Cheryl – An Unsuccessful Placement?

Cheryl is a girl from an African-Caribbean family. She lives with her aunt and her cousins, one of whom is in Year Nine at Meadway. She entered Meadway at the start of Year Seven. She had a long history behind her of what had, for a long time, been considered as very difficult behaviour and attributed to family problems. She is the child of a 'feckless mother' (Goodey, 1998), and class and race, as well as disability were key determinants of the stories that could be told of her as a young child. It was not until she was nine years old and in Year Five that she was diagnosed as autistic. Her primary education was spent in a number of mainstream schools, at which she never remained long enough for a thorough investigation of her difficulties to be carried out. Since moving in with her aunt, her home life has been more settled.

When Cheryl entered Meadway, very little information was given to staff about her disability. Her statement had not been completed, and she arrived with what is known as a 'note in lieu': an interim device intended to give some background information but which has no standing in law. Her completed statement was received during the course of her first term. The head of the pastoral faculty (Pam), initially decided not to divulge the contents of the 'note in lieu' to staff, in order to give Cheryl a fresh start. As a member of the learning support department, I did not know until I met Cheryl that an autistic student had been placed in Year Seven.

Cheryl is a big, boisterous and energetic girl. She seldom sits still for more than a few moments. The aspects of the social world that typically frighten and bewilder autistic people frighten and bewilder Cheryl, in the way they do Cassandra. But where Cassandra responds in ways that evoke 'maternal' feelings in those around her, Cheryl panics and tends to lash out. She usually shouts, often using abusive language, and sometimes hits and kicks, or runs away. Although she is not intentionally aggressive, her actions tend to be perceived as threatening, and are more likely to evoke anger than tenderness. Like Cassandra, Cheryl speaks in a stylised way. She uses the vocabulary and inflection of rap music, which also serves to position her (albeit problematically) within discourses of big, threatening African-Caribbean girl.

Within a few days of the beginning of term, Pam's decision to withhold information about Cheryl was being questioned. Those members of staff who taught her were astonished that a new Year Seven student could have such a disruptive effect on their classes, at a point in the year when the new intake are customarily at their most subdued. During a learning support meeting early in the term, we were told of Cheryl's diagnosis, and this information was passed on to the rest of the staff. Heads of faculty were soon involved, as Cheryl's effect on lessons was such that subject teachers quickly began to refer her to their heads of faculty to take disciplinary action. Cheryl became the frequent subject of staffroom conversation and formal meetings. About four weeks into the term, I was asked to lead a staff meeting to give information about Asperger Syndrome, and to suggest practical strategies. This had many implications for me and for my relationship with Cheryl. As had already happened with Cassandra, I was positioned as expert in autism, and members of staff talked to me formally and informally about Cheryl and their difficulties with her. Later in the year, I was asked to work an additional half-day each week to support her and the teachers who taught her. So, as had happened with Cassandra, I became invested in Cheryl's success at Meadway, and my own credibility with my colleagues was linked to my ability to work productively with her.

Students whose effect on classes is often disruptive tend to be identified as 'EBD'. The dominant official discourse at Meadway is that 'EBD students' need to be enabled to become responsible for their own behaviour, through positive expectations reinforced by clear target-setting based on reasoned discussion of their actions. Pam's decision to withhold information about Cheryl drew directly on this discourse. Cheryl was to be allowed to make good at her new school, not hampered by low expectations because of previous 'behavioural' problems. In effect, Pam was initially reading her, despite her diagnosis, as 'bad, not mad'. Cheryl trod a much finer line than Cassandra when it came to being positioned as recognisably disabled. As a big, athletic, African-Caribbean girl, she was likely to be read as naughty, not helpless. She towered over most of the Year Seven girls, and over many of the teachers. Her temper tantrums were frightening: although I knew quite well they were the outward sign of panic and not of aggression, I could find myself feeling afraid when they suddenly erupted. Many of the students found her very frightening, and others responded to her with anger, reading an intentionality into her perceived violence and aggression. But perhaps what was most damaging was the day-to-day, unremitting sense of profound annoyance and apparent powerlessness which Cheryl's mode of operation tended to evoke in those around her.

After break it is Humanities. Cheryl arrives late as usual. She sits down next to me, in her appointed place, but moves her chair as far away from me as possible. The others are already doing their work on their 'Castles' books. Cheryl hasn't brought hers. I give her a piece of paper, but it is not the kind she wants. She creases it up, and says she cannot use it because it is too creased. She goes to get some more. She biffs people hard on the head as she moves around the class. Most of the girls try to ignore her. A few say "ow", some cringe, and Natelle whirls around as if to hit back, then thinks better of it. Cheryl returns with some paper. She does not want to do anything related to castles. She wants to draw a picture of Dana. I try to persuade her to copy a castles picture. She makes four false starts, each time crumpling the piece of paper. I feel bad about the waste. She decides she hasn't got the right colours, and grabs Dana's felt tips. Dana tries to take them back, but Cheryl at first holds onto them, then throws them to the floor. I give her 'first warning'. The others on the table know what is coming next, and hurriedly put their pens into their pencil cases, to hide them. Dana moves onto another table. Cheryl takes Esin's entire pencil case, laughing loudly. She opens it, and throws the pens, one-at-a-time, to the floor. Esin looks at me in desperation. I tell Cheryl she must give the pencil case back, or it will be 'second warning'.

Fieldnotes 31/3/00

Cheryl presents much more of a challenge to good governance than Cassandra. Cassandra evokes feelings of tenderness, and members of staff typically find themselves wanting to protect and look after her. By contrast, members of staff find ourselves drawn into another kind of protection discourse around Cheryl. We want to protect other students from her. She was simultaneously positioned both as 'in danger' and 'dangerous'. At the same time, most of us felt as confused and unable to understand her mode of making sense of the world as she must feel in relation to ours. This profound confusion and complex discursive positioning led often to an immobilisation of other people around her. Her position as someone 'really different' implied that we should treat her with the tenderness that we showed to Cassandra. But this was extraordinarily difficult in the face of her often disturbing effects on virtually everyone with whom she came into contact.

Cheryl and I have agreed that I will not sit next to her so long as she gets on with her work, but if she does not get on, then I will sit with her on her table... When Cheryl gets really outrageous – wandering around the room, and playing with someone else's pencil case, I go over, and tell her to sit down and go on with her work, which she does. I could probably get away with sitting with her, but I decide not to try it. I rationalise that I might wreck Martin's lesson if I try. But really, I think I'm taking the route of least resistance. And the other girls are so much nicer. Really, they are. Later, I think about just how damaging Cheryl's disorder is. If someone like me, who usually prefers to spend time with marginalised students, and who usually prefers the peculiar to the nice, can be pushed away so easily and effectively.

Fieldnotes 24/3/00

The governmental procedures that are invoked in relation to 'special needs students' are in many ways hyper-rational ones. The Code of Practice appears to construct a techno-rationalist reality in which struggles of any kind can be objectively qualified and quantified, and a solution found. If only we get the targets right, and the provision right, then the 'special needs student' will make the kind of linear progression that rational, developmental models demand. And so difficulties in learning are measured, mapped and evaluated and remedial measures put in place to alleviate the effects of those difficulties. But those of us in Meadway who carry out those governmental procedures and operationalise those remedial measures do not do so in a hyper-rational way. We respond, as one person to another, in a relationship that is always changing and developing, and, in Cheryl's case, is characterised by heightened emotions in

response to the difficulties she presents. In deciding that Cheryl is to receive classroom support, her own preferences have been over-ridden. This is apparently necessary, as the procedures of identifying her support 'needs' and the means by which those 'needs' are to be met are presented as rational choice-making exercises in which costs and benefits are objectively weighed up. As an autistic student this process does not make sense to her. But does it make sense at all?

I tell Cheryl that I am there to help keep her on task, and that if she doesn't want me to sit with her, she must show me she doesn't need me by getting on with her work. I use the example of the first Humanities lesson, when I worked mainly with Sunna and Fozia, to illustrate what I'm saying. She doesn't want me in the same room. I say this isn't an option. Now, I'm thinking about all the disability theorists who might argue that so-called 'normal' children don't have to prove themselves in order to be left alone, so why should someone who's been labelled disabled have to do so? And the orthodoxy (which often is merely lip-service) that young people have choices and options in how their 'special needs' are to be met. In this instance, I'm taking away most of Cheryl's choices. But how is an autistic student to make those choices, when the nature of her impairment makes the rational, choice-making exercise something of a mystery to her, and one of the things she can't really do?

Fieldnotes 24/3/00

Perhaps one of the discourses that needs interrogating here is the one that constructs 'special educational needs' according to a hyper-rational framework. What was really at issue with Cheryl was not her autism, but the fact that she does autism in a way that renders the network of social relationships around her, including relationships of power, unviable. My first thought, that Cheryl was unable because of her autism to take part in the rational decision-making process at which she was apparently the centre, told only a fraction of the story. What was going on was much more than a rational decision-making process: it was a complex negotiation, and what (in my view, quite understandably) was at the centre of it was whether the other members of the school community would be able to co-exist with Cheryl.

Versions of rights, entitlements and equal opportunities discourses were used in weighing up the tenability of Cheryl's placement (Corbett, 1998a). These were posited in opposition to each other. On the one hand was placed Cheryl's entitlement to a place in a mainstream school, and the obligations of the school to provide an environment in which she could learn effectively. On the other hand was placed all the

other students' rights to a schooling experience in which their learning would not be disrupted by Cheryl, and in which they need not fear her constant low-level and occasional high-level abuse. These discourses were very much configured in terms of curricular entitlements, as the other students' right to learn. Meadway's assessment procedures appeared to rule out discussion of what seemed to me to be at the heart of the difficulties associated with Cheryl - the realm of the non-rational.

I sit behind the screen to watch what group B are doing. They're arguing. Julie is trying, desperately, to chair, but she can't be heard above the noise. Cheryl is shouting at the top of her voice, and the others have to shout to be heard above her... She wants to be a mad man in the café. Dana incorporates her into the drama, making reference to, "That mad man over there, I don't like him". The group want to move the drama on, past the café scene. Cheryl now insists on being the bus driver. She yells, "I wanna be what I wanna be". They can't get on without her shouting at them. I really don't know whether to try to intervene – it's a fieldwork day, not a work day, and I so want to see what happens when I don't try to play Superwoman. But can I let her wreck the lesson? She is particularly going for Aurora... Catherine [the teacher] takes Cheryl out for a moment. When she comes back, she looks for Dana, then announces to everyone, "I'm gonna be the friend, right, so you can't boss me around"... Eventually the two groups get back together. Group B show theirs first. Esin and Mehwish start off, on their own playing Nadia and the stranger. They are very credible. They are soon interrupted by Cheryl, first in the role of bus driver, shouting out the destinations, then in the role of mad man in the café. She dominates the space so that it is difficult to act around her. I feel like she's not so much being included within a learning experience so much as preventing everyone else from learning. The position of knowledge creator is not one she can take up – and I don't think it's just because she has been positioned as 'SEN'. I don't know how she could really be included in what the teacher is trying to achieve. The best we could hope for, probably, is that she doesn't disrupt. But would that be inclusion? They get as far as the end of the café scene. Then Aurora, not wanting to prolong the agony, says "It's finished". This doesn't please Cheryl, who had wanted to improvise the next scene, in which she would have played the friend. She calls Aurora "stupid idiot", and lunges towards her. Aurora is saved by the bell, as Cheryl picks up her bag and belts out of the room, without waiting to be dismissed. Catherine looks at me. I think she is relieved to see Cheryl go.

Fieldnotes 21/3/00

When I wrote these fieldnotes, I noted that they were written 'after a bad day with Cheryl'. My own annoyance and frustration with Cheryl as a social actor, and my own sense of not knowing what to do, are writ large within them. What I intimate is a problem about the way in which Cheryl's presence inhibits the curricular experience of the other students is also produced through and by my difficult feelings towards her on

that particular day. This is not to say that there are not very real problems about what Cheryl's presence prescribes and proscribes for the students in the drama lesson. It is very hard to see how she could be included in a lesson that is concerned, amongst other things, with complexity in human relationships and complexity in how those relationships are enacted. Perhaps this is another case of 'curricular fundamentalism', and of an understanding of equal opportunities that does not work in practice. This is a lesson that cannot be made accessible to Cheryl, but equal opportunities appear to demand that the teacher differentiate it so that Cheryl can access it. Perhaps this is an impossibility. But it is an impossibility produced both by a curriculum that is inadequate for the purpose, and by a set of procedural expectations that operate as if the complex feeling and embodied responses that Cheryl evokes can be reduced to the anodyne rhetoric of IEP targets set and met.

Cheryl's Annual Review took place just before the summer half-term holiday. Her continued placement was always in doubt: officially because she had not made sufficient progress in terms of her IEP, and unofficially because she was ungovernable and because people's goodwill towards someone who enacted her difference in demanding ways had been exhausted. Two days before her Review was scheduled, she was part of a 'serious incident'. She had been in a fight with another girl who then involved some friends, one of whom made fun of Cheryl. Cheryl panicked, and began to hit and kick the girl, shouting that she would kill her. The girl (who was known to have her own struggles in constructing a viable set of social relations at Meadway) ran off, and Cheryl made to follow her but was forcibly detained by three male teachers. The teachers took her into the school office (the nearest room available) where she caused considerable damage to property before the three men and myself as a witness could coral her behind a desk. She continued to shout, accusing one of the detaining teachers, a recently bereaved husband, of killing his wife. Eventually Cheryl's uncle arrived to take her home. She was not allowed back on the premises.

At her Annual Review, Cheryl's placement was formally terminated, and a placement in segregated special provision recommended. Mine was the only report at her Annual Review to comment positively on her time at Meadway. I explicitly referred, in my

report, to liking Cheryl, and to enjoying working with her. There was an overall truth to this, although it was far from an accurate representation of the emotional roller-coaster that had been my working relationship with Cheryl (Jordan and Jones, 1999). None of the other reports made reference to personal feelings, but underlying all the rational comments about lack of progress and deleterious effects on other students' learning lurked a strong sub-text of dislike and despair. That sub-text spoke of wanting Cheryl to go elsewhere: of wanting her to become somebody else's perplexing, worrying and seemingly insurmountable problem.

Whose Diversity Can Be Valued?

Could there have been another way? Along with the relief that accompanied Cheryl's departure was a feeling that everyone involved had failed. It would be easy to slip into a critique of Meadway, and to suggest that it is the failure of mainstream schools adequately to value diversity that is the problem here. But that apparent failure to value diversity has to be interrogated in the context of the schooling system in the UK. It is very difficult to see a way in which Meadway, itself under a techno-rationalist regime of surveillance, could have offered anything very different to Cheryl. The social model of disability recommends accepting the 'difference' that is inherent within autistic individuals, whilst also enabling them to develop strategies to help them manage a non-autistic and autistic-unfriendly world.

For Cheryl, the autistic-unfriendliness of Meadway lay less in the intentions of individuals, and more at the heart of its mission. As a successful school, it has to make dominant versions of success available and desirable to as many of its students as it possibly can. And those versions of success are underwritten by, and re-inscribe, the hierarchical, competitive and linear model of rationality which itself shores up the inconsistencies and inhumanities of global capitalism. Meadway, like other schools, has to work a fundamentally inhumane system in the most humane way it can. It also has to present the complex and often deeply emotional processes of learning as if they were a single, simply understood, unitary process. The presence of both Cheryl and Cassandra flagged up some of the fundamental contradictions inherent in such an endeavour.

Cassandra does her autism in a way that can leave at least some of these contradictions intact. We (the staff) could feel that we were doing something compassionate and humane in relation to her. And she made a version of progress, albeit not the dominant one, which allowed us to think that she was learning to manage her autism and learning to exist in a non-autistic world. As caring people doing a difficult job, the staff needed to feel this. And as young women with formal and micro-cultural struggles of their own, the other students needed to feel this too. But Cheryl's mode of doing autism left none of the contradictions undisturbed. In the challenges she presented to both staff and students, none of us could feel that we were doing anything remotely humane in relation to her. She appeared to make no progress of any sort, and, indeed, appeared to be 'getting worse'. It is difficult to envisage how other students – eleven- and twelve-year-olds themselves faced with the demands of finding a path through dominant versions of success and an unfamiliar micro-cultural world – could have constructed viable social relations with someone to whom rationality makes no sense.

I overhear Maggie [a PE teacher] telling Lesley [her head of faculty] about how rude Cheryl was to her at breaktime. Lesley pulls me into the conversation. She clearly wants me to deal with the situation. Cheryl has built up an obsession in which Maggie is her enemy. Today at breaktime, she threatened to set her relations on to Maggie. This was said in a rude and aggressive way. I can well imagine. And it builds on a history of Cheryl sneering and being rude whenever she passes Maggie. In Maggie's account, it all stems from a time she told Cheryl off for pushing past her on the stairs. Lesley is indignant, not so much at what Cheryl has said and done, but that the staff have been given no guidance, other than the staff meeting I led, about how to handle these kinds of situations. We go together to look for Cheryl. We can't find her. On the way to her form-room, we pass Cassandra, who's sitting outside the office wrapped up in a scarf. She's not well. Lesley tells me that a supply teacher put her in the duty room yesterday. We share indignation at how anyone could be inhumane enough to put Cassandra into the duty room. She was in floods of tears apparently. I can well believe it. Later, I think how similar Cheryl and Cassandra are. But no-one feels sorry for the boisterous Cheryl when she gets sent to the duty teacher. She hasn't got the 'Ahh factor'.

Fieldnotes 17/3/00

Cassandra's version of apparent success at Meadway is configured both by current techno-rationalist imperatives and by the desire of the people – adults and students –

who work at the school to recuperate some kind of humanity into the system. In many ways she came to represent the feared Other of rational discourses: the student who does not make linear progress. But, as that Other, a version of progress could be constructed around her, so that she could be valued in a non-dominant way for the progress she appeared to be making in her social relationships. She was also a vehicle around which a discourse of caring and compassion could be constructed. As someone who was not going to make anything approximating to the dominant version of progress, Meadway's staff and students could relax our usual demands, and allow ourselves to look after someone who we had produced as vulnerable. In doing so, we did draw on the notion of valuing diversity, but we also drew on a long tradition of feeling pity and charity towards the child-like and not-quite-human figure of the irrational and therefore helpless 'defective'. Cheryl's version of apparent failure was configured by those same techno-rationalist imperatives. Like Cassandra, she was the student who does not make rational, linear progress. But she was a student who cannot exist in mainstream schools today: she was a student who seemed to make no form of progress whatever. There were no reachable targets on her IEP, and staff had not been given a rule-book of strategies through which to manage her 'behaviour'. And, far from Cheryl's presence facilitating the deployment of a discourse of recuperated humanity, she found herself positioned as a very, very bad girl, a position nuanced by her African-Caribbean background and her physical size and strength. She was so bad a girl that she could not be reasoned with, and this constructed her as outside of all the formal stories that can possibly be told about student badness at Meadway.

So whilst Cheryl's 'failure' cannot be attributed to her 'inadequacy', neither is it quite fair to attribute blame to the staff and students at Meadway. The problem is much more systemic than that. At the same time, Cassandra's apparent success needs to be unpacked. What actually went on in lessons for Cassandra was often not successful, except in that she presented no problems to good governance. Again, I would not want to argue that this was the 'fault' of the staff and students at Meadway. I would want to suggest that the instances in which Cassandra's success was contingent, and Cheryl's non-existent are in fact pointers to how the schooling process could have been made more productive for all of Meadway's students.

Don gives out a past paper. He's altered it to make it into a non-calculator version. He's angry that non-calculator papers have made a comeback, and he bristles with indignation on behalf of this, the graduated assessment, group, who thus may be barred from achieving a grade. I'm determined to spend most of this lesson with Cassandra. At first, all goes according to plan. There's a tally graph, which she can do. I sit with her while she does it. Then there's a bar graph. By now, lots of people are asking, with the usual note of desperation, for help. I can't resist it any longer. I check that Cassandra knows what to do, then go to Saadet. By the time I get back, Cassandra has drawn a few Buzz Lightyears, but no bar graph. I admire the drawings, then bring her attention back to the bar graph. She's quite happy to do it. There's concern that, in the exams, she will spend the time drawing, or, as it's usually put, "doing nothing". Except in Art. I manage to spend most of the lesson working with Cassandra, although I do spend some time with other students. Most of the work is beyond them. I'm sure inclusive education is not supposed to mean everyone being given the opportunity to do the same work, irrespective of whether they can learn from it. I'm feeling irritated by a morning spent trying to 'make the curriculum accessible' when it manifestly isn't. I say as much to Don. We get on to our respective soapboxes. He says that it's very obvious what would raise standards - smaller classes and fewer of them. I say it's very stupid to try and make every student average or above. We let off steam for a few minutes.

Fieldnotes 22/3/00

One of the problems with ‘valuing diversity’ arguments as they are often deployed, is that ‘diversity’ is located within certain groups or individuals. The standards agenda demands a certain homogeneity in its construction of academically successful students. It implies that one curriculum can be made to fit everyone, and that, with the correct teaching, every student’s ‘needs’ can be correctly assessed, measured and, if necessary, remediated. Students and teachers in schools struggle with the daily reality that this implication is profoundly flawed, and that many students experience no success within it. None of the young women in Don’s Year Eleven group can use the Maths non-calculator curriculum to produce themselves as successful. Meadway tries to reconcile the dilemma of a prescriptive set of curricular demands on the one hand and its commitment to equal opportunities and attainment for all on the other, by identifying a few students as ‘really different’ and then appearing to value the diversity they bring.

But this diversity can only be valued for as long as it leaves intact the common-sense contradictions upon which Meadway publicly constructs its values and its explicit

sense of purpose. Very few students can be allowed to be diverse, if that diversity implies inability to access dominant versions of success, according to either normative or individual discourses of progression. This means there is a real problem with diversity. If only specific students and groups of students are valued for diversity, whilst everyone else is valued for what essentially is a form of conformity with the hyper-rational rules of the standards agenda, then diversity operates as yet another binary. It becomes another way of distancing a group from the norm, and a device for establishing and reifying boundaries.

Cassandra and Cheryl are profoundly affected by this. Their ‘difference’ cannot be understood in neutral terms. When difference, or particular versions of difference, are only permitted to a few, then that difference has to be understood in terms of social relations of domination and subordination. These social relations cannot be explored through an unpoliticised call to value diversity. For the placements of Cassandra and Cheryl to have really worked for them and for the other students in the school, something radical would have had to have happened around understandings of diversity. Everyone would have to have been recognised as different, and ways of interrogating those multiple differences in terms of the social relations they construct and are constructed by would have needed to have been in place. These are things that ‘curricular fundamentalism’ (Slee 1998a) and the demands of the standards agenda do not make possible. Credentialisation, and the later material rewards associated with it, mean that differences that significantly impact on a student’s ability to perform according to dominant norms cannot be understood as neutral differences.

‘Normalisation’ discourses and practices are much critiqued within the disability movement, but it is hard to find the spaces within the techno-rationalist standards agenda where Cassandra and Cheryl could have been helped to live in a non-autistic world without an emphasis on normalisation. Their task was one of having to find ways to exist both inside and outside of a non-autistic walled garden to which rationality, or the understanding of rational discourses, holds the key. Other students could come and go with more or less facility, and more or less success. But Cassandra

and Cheryl were simultaneously trapped both inside and outside the wall, according to how they were positioned in discourses that made no sense to them.

Does feminist post-structuralism provide another account of how things could have been? An account that, unlike the valuing diversity argument, can illuminate the unequal relations of power that produced Cassandra and Cheryl as disabled students, and can point to more radical practices? Kenway et al. (1994) argue that, 'feminist work for change must be predicated on an expectation of tension, ambiguity, instability, contestation and resistance' (p197). The formal discursive world at Meadway is rather short of space for these qualities, predicated as it is on the expectation of consensus, clear and consistent goals, linear 'improvement' and SMART targets. The expectations for which Kenway and her colleagues argue certainly exist in Meadway's micro-cultural spaces. If they had been brought to bear in the official accounts of Cassandra and Cheryl, then space for interrogating the unequal relations that characterised the experiences of these two students might have been constructed.

But there is still a basic problem. When they come to suggest practices arising from a feminist poststructuralist pedagogy, Kenway et al. contend that, 'one fundamental purpose for a feminist pedagogy for girls must be their production both as informed and critical readers of their life worlds and as informed and visionary agents for a better world' (*ibid* p201). The degree to which Cassandra and Cheryl are going to be informed and critical readers of their life worlds is always going to be limited. It is configured through a triad of impairments that severely restrict their ability to understand themselves in relationship to the social world, to understand themselves as actors in that world, and to generalise meaning from experience. Whether or not we call this a 'different' way of understanding the world or an 'impaired' one, we need to take on board that the ability to produce oneself as a critical reader of one's own social world, like all abilities, is not equally distributed.

Cassandra and Cheryl assuredly resist and take up positions in discourse. But reading too much intentionality into this is damaging and unrealistic: it would be unhelpful and

inaccurate to read Cassandra as actively taking up a position as a ‘sweet little girl’, or Cheryl as actively taking up a position in ‘big bad girl’ discourses. It is these students’ mis-reading or non-reading of the social world that produces them as vulnerable, often renders their actions contextually inappropriate, and identifies them according to a binary difference. Could there be a feminist post-structuralist pedagogy for girls and young women that produces them as differentially-able readers of their social world, without pathologising those who are less able, or virtually unable, to construct such readings? This is a question to which I return in the next chapter.

In this chapter I have discussed Meadway’s ‘really disabled’ discourse of success. This discourse shares common ground with the ‘sweet little girl’ position available to some of Meadway’s ‘special needs students’, and Cassandra could be positioned and recognised fairly unproblematically within both. But the ‘really disabled discourse’ cannot work alongside the ‘big bad girl’ positioning, and so Cheryl presented more of a discursive conundrum for all of us. We could feel we were doing something humane in relation to Cassandra, and she could be perceived to make social progress, holding in place a notion of valuing diversity. Cheryl could not be understood to be making progress in any recognisable way, she met no targets, and her placement was considered to be a failure. She troubled the valuing diversity arguments, since hers was a diversity that could not be valued: it was *too* diverse. I have argued here that the valuing diversity argument itself works to police a binary divide, between the majority group who are valued for their ability to succeed according to the linear curriculum of the standards agenda, and a small minority who are valued for something different.

This chapter also raises some theoretical problems. What is feminist post-structuralism to do with the subject who cannot be understood to be self-reflexive? Does a theory of the knowing subject who actively positions and repositions herself in relation to available discourses fit Cassandra and Cheryl? It has been tempting, at some stages of the research, to try to make these two students fit the theories with which I have been working. But the data will not fit the theories, suggesting it is the theories that have reached the limits of their explanatory power. This does not mean I want to let go of feminist post-structuralism completely, but I would need to augment its existing

resources with additional conceptual tools, perhaps from other disciplines. Such work is beyond the scope of this thesis, but the work done here is an indicator of where the limits of a post-structuralist approach currently lie, and of the some of the directions in which feminist post-structuralist theory could usefully develop.

Chapter Ten
Teaching for Different Versions of Success

This chapter is both an extension of, and a departure from, the rest of the thesis. I am concerned here primarily with pedagogy, and with the pedagogical implications of the analysis of previous chapters. Weedon (1997) notes that 'feminist appropriations of poststructuralism tend to focus on the basic assumptions, the degree of explanatory power and the political implications which a particular type of analysis yields' (p19). In my introduction to the thesis, and again in the previous chapter, I looked at some of the basic assumptions and the explanatory power of the theories with which I work, to explicate and then to interrogate them respectively. In this chapter I move to looking specifically at their political implications.

The chapter starts by looking at what is arguably the foremost political implication of the theories with which I have worked: the application of sustained critique in schooling. I begin by looking at this premise, and what it, in turn, implies for pedagogies. I go on to explain the design of a classroom project which I undertook with a classroom teacher. This project was rooted in another political implication of the analysis presented throughout this thesis: that we work with a multiplicitous notion of sustainable change, rather than the uni-dimensional school improvement agenda. I go on to examine the project, which was designed to make alternative versions of 'success' available to a class of Year Nine students working on Macbeth. I examine how the students used (or appeared to use) the project in terms of their inter-related curricular, identity and micro-cultural work. At the end of the chapter, I evaluate the success of the project as micro/political and pedagogic strategy.

Is This a Dagger? Pedagogy and Sustained Critique

Weedon (1997) contends that feminist poststructuralism 'is a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change' (p40). As a theory and a practice, then, and as a political project, feminist poststructuralism is produced by and produces sustained critique of the social world. One of the problems with the application of this kind of sustained

critique in classroom work is that its effect can be to immobilise, rather than to mobilise, in the short term at least. It demands time for reflection, and time is an increasingly scarce commodity for teachers. By way of contrast with what Hamilton (1998) has called the 'feel-good fiction' of school effectiveness research, sustained critique seldom provides the kind of easily-quantifiable and demonstrable rewards that can motivate short-term effort to improve day-to-day classroom life.

Sustained critique can lead to a sense of the social world of the classroom as too complicated a social site for any individual attempts at making change to be effective: not least because the definition of effectiveness is itself a matter for critique. It can also lead to a reluctance towards implementing attempts to bring about change, since these attempts will only be critiqued in their turn. This is not an entirely bad thing. Managerialism's can-do culture, with its 'don't bring me problems, bring me solutions' quick-fix approach, needs to be challenged as thoroughly as possible, and one of the ways to do this is to emphasise complexity. Sustained critique of the standards agenda and of its effects in schools presents one such challenge. But a form of critique that only immobilises does not serve the purposes of teachers in schools, since teachers' daily work requires an enacted response to policy and micro-politics.

I am looking in this chapter at one attempt to deploy sustained critique to classroom work in the interests of political mobilisation for social change. A principled politics – one that seeks to promote sustainable, egalitarian change - might demand that teachers who are critical of the schooling system work to undermine it in every possible way. A practical politics might urge caution, and the necessity for teachers to deploy strategies that will, at the very least, keep themselves in the job. A compassionate politics requires teachers to bear some responsibility for the good of the students they teach in their classrooms, and to work to ensure those students' educational and personal well-being. All demand action. So, where schools are concerned, the endeavour of sustained critique has to be able to inform pedagogic action as well as be informed by it. One starting point is to ask the questions about what kinds of pedagogies can be associated with a principled, practical and compassionate politics?

Towards the end of the Autumn term in which I was doing my fieldwork, I started a conversation with a colleague, Emily, who teaches English at Meadway. I wanted to observe students in one of her groups. We discussed the work I wanted to do, and areas of common interest emerged. At the time, Emily was planning her forthcoming unit of work on Macbeth with her Year Nine class, 9X. She wanted to use the unit as the basis of a piece of action research towards her MA in teaching English. We talked about her aims for the group and for her MA studies, in the context of the work I was doing. We decided that we shared enough ground to be able to work productively together.

What emerged was a unit of curriculum work in which we would seek to problematise what counted as success, and in which we would seek to enable the students to problematise what counted as success. Our aim was to raise the status of counter-hegemonic (non-dominant) versions of success, and to enable students who generally struggle with the curriculum (mostly, though not exclusively, 'special needs students') to experience success within it. To borrow, for a moment, from the lexicon of managerialism, we wanted to 'make a difference'. But we were conceiving the difference we might be able to make, in the words of Lingard and colleagues, 'as the potential to interrupt the reproduction of inequality and the production of homogenized subjects' (Lingard, Ladwig and Luke, 1998, p97). My job was to support Emily in the application of sustained critique. I took the role of observer in the classroom, writing copious fieldnotes. Emily and I discussed these, and they informed ongoing planning. I also interviewed groups of students during the half-term over which the unit was taught, and their thoughts and insights were incorporated into the work.

Specifically, we wanted the students to ask questions about what counts as knowledge, in order to be able to ask what counts (and who counts) as a successful knower (Lather, 1991; Skrtic, 1991; Cherland, 1994; Skrtic, 1995; Assiter, 1996; Ellsworth, 1997). Emily is an expert at using popular media in the classroom, and she was keen to enable students to bring their own expert knowledges of their media cultures into the work on Macbeth. We wanted to make it possible for the students to use Macbeth, accessed through media to which they related in their everyday lives, as a vehicle for

exploring their own social and relational lifeworlds, and particularly for exploring the power relations that produce them as young women in the classroom and beyond. We aimed to provide conditions in which all of the students, not just those who are able to succeed in terms of the dominant discourse of success, would be able to take up positions of agency in relation to the curriculum. Our underlying assumptions, then, were in direct opposition to those of the curricular fundamentalism (Slee, 1998a) of the standards agenda, in which it is mastery of pre-determined skills and knowledge that count as success. In this, we were deploying a principled politics, and one that draws heavily on feminist poststructuralism as a theory of egalitarian social change.

The unit of work, which lasted half a term, was also produced by the fact that it is externally assessed, as part of the Year Nine SATs. At the end of the day, Emily had to make sure that, however counter-hegemonic her intentions, the students knew the required material well enough to enable requisite proportions of them to perform according to the dominant version of success. She would have to answer to the head of the English faculty, who in turn would have to answer to the headteacher, were her class to underperform significantly in the SATs. The unit of work was also constructed by the students' knowledge of the fact that they were going to be tested on Macbeth. Their anxieties about the testing process, and their knowledge that, in the end, it was going to be their accretion of mastery and the performance of that mastery that counted as 'real' success, shaped their responses to the challenges we wanted them to make about knowledge and success. And so the unit on Macbeth was of necessity produced with a practical politics in mind.

Any form of social change is complex, and will have unexpected and often contradictory effects. One of the many problems with the school improvement discourse is its implication that change is unitary and simple, that it benefits everybody in the same kind of way, and that it can take place incrementally, year-on-year. The point about sustainable egalitarian change is that some people may benefit, in ways that are relatively easy to see. For others, the benefits may not be immediately noticeable, or may be embedded in a complex network of costs as well as benefits. And some people may lose out, or appear to lose out, or experience themselves as

losing out, particularly those who benefit disproportionately from the *status quo*. Redistribution can be painful. Emily and I aimed to pay attention to the multiple effects that our attempt to modify the curriculum might have, and to enable the students to pay a similar attention. We did not want our act of centralising the experiences of generally marginalised students to create new marginal spaces that others would then be obliged to occupy. This, we felt, was best done by making the concept of marginalisation known and exploratory within the curricular work. As teachers, we felt this was the most sustainable means by which to attempt to safeguard the well-being and continued learning of the students, both in the classroom and beyond. A compassionate politics required, we felt, that we should not try to pretend that change has no costs: rather it should make ways of understanding those costs available to everyone involved.

Reading *Lady Macbeth*

Such a commitment was easy to make in principle, but proved hard to live up to. Many of the lessons within the unit were in many ways characterised more by the reproduction of existing meanings than by the production of new ones. Dominant readings of success were not (and are not) easily disrupted. An early lesson aimed to give the students the chance to explore Lady Macbeth's first speech, to look at how she is produced by the text, and how the text produces her. At the beginning of the lesson, Emily read the speech to the class in three differing styles.

Next, the girls are going to read the letter speech in table groups in four styles - excited, interested, scornful and bored. Sabina's table get right into discussing who does what. She is keen to start; "Let me do the excited first". There is a buzz in the room, of the speech being read by lots of different people. I go over to Michelle's table. Things are not going so smoothly. Ameena is reading. Her reading is slow and halting, and I can't tell which of the four styles it is. Lisa and Anne are talking to each other while she reads. When she reaches the end, it is Michelle's turn. She doesn't start. Lisa and Anne remind her, in a very ungentle way, that it is her go, addressing her as "you" - "You - oy - you - it's you now". Michelle refuses to read. I really don't like the way they're talking to her - it's as if she's not a proper person. I decide that I really can't sit there, allowing them to talk to her in what seems to me to be an abusive way, so I suggest that Anne goes next. I don't especially want to go into teacher role, but I think I have to. Anne, however, is also reluctant to read.

Fieldnotes 18/1/00

In the corner from which I started observing the class, they looked like a model group: everyone interested in what she was doing and working collaboratively for the greater good. All of the students appeared (and most of them probably were) 'on task'. One reading might suggest that a 'good girl' position been made available and desirable to most of the girls. But somehow it felt, sitting in that classroom, as if there was more going on. It seemed as though reading Shakespeare in the way required by the teacher was perhaps not coterminous with doing 'good girl' in that moment. It is tempting to do a very easy, even behavioural, analysis in terms of motivation and task-appropriateness here. The task was fun, and there was more to be gained (more of a pay-off) in doing it in the required way, than could be gained through being uncooperative. There is probably something in this.

Another reading could visibilise the micro-cultural work that the task made possible in and of itself. This particular collaborative task could only be performed through micro-cultural, as well as 'academic' work: both the negotiation of who did what, and the performative nature of the task itself made a whole world of performative femininities (remembering that the speech was Lady Macbeth's) potentially available to the young women. There appeared to be plenty of space for critical and deconstructive, as well as imaginative and playful, readings of this text in the context of the semi-public, real-life world of the table group. Many of the students later described this activity as 'fun', and enthusiastically taking part in a 'fun' activity, even if it is in the classroom context, does not necessarily involve students in producing themselves as 'good girls'. Students did not have to be 'good' to enjoy reading Lady Macbeth in such a space.

But that space was not accessible to everyone. The micro-cultural work on Anne's table centred less on ways to perform Lady Macbeth and more on ways to avoid doing the task set. I felt very sorry for Ameena, doing her best to read a passage that contained many unfamiliar words, with that unfamiliarity seeming to act as something to be struggled over, not enjoyed, whilst nobody appeared to be listening to her, or sharing that struggle. Ameena was producing herself as the 'good girl' of the group, carrying on with what she had been told to do, in spite of the other students on her table, and in spite of a difficult and possibly unrewarding task. This was in contrast with other groups in the class, who seemed to be working together, supporting each

other's struggles and endeavours. The young women on Michelle's table did not appear to be able to access the material itself - the written speech - as a micro-cultural opportunity. 'Good girl' positions were, therefore, much more sharply delineated for them, and Anne and Lisa were perhaps invested in resisting their interpellation into such positions.

This lesson was intended to offer the students the opportunity to read a text in the context of a critical reading of their lifeworlds. But it was the (conventionally) least successful girls who were too busy struggling with the mechanics of the task - the deciphering of print - to be able to enter the space of deconstructive and critical play. This is the crux of what most worries me about a form of radical pedagogy that requires young women to become critical readers. We replace one form of practice that sorts students according to their competence, with another form of practice that sorts students according to their competence. Whilst some of the habitual relations of power may be disturbed by this, a hierarchy of competence is still left intact.

Just as [Anne] is getting started, Emily stops the class. She is going to ask Scarlett to read. But first, she asks Michelle to read out the four styles from the board. Michelle begins to read out the question, slowly and haltingly. As Emily stops her and points out the words she is supposed to be reading, someone else calls them out at speed. Michelle says, "That's them, I don't have to", but Emily makes her read them anyway, praising her for her efforts. What have we done to the versions of success on offer? There is a version, most available to the clever girls, in which they say or do something that moves everybody else on in academic terms - when someone gives an answer or makes a point that other people haven't thought of or had forgotten. Then there is a more carefully-engineered version, made available to the struggling students, of being allowed to say or do something that everyone else already knows, and beyond which everybody else has already gone. The first is situated within a discourse of collaborative learning and student autonomy, positioning students as respected generators of knowledge. The second, which is what's being made available to Michelle, is located within a more therapeutic discourse of self-esteem, and positions students as vulnerable beings who are in need of special care and attention to make them flourish. A special needs discourse.

Fieldnotes 18/1/00

Michelle's struggles with literacy presented something of a paradox for Emily in this lesson. We wanted students to be involved as active producers of knowledge. But the kinds of knowledge we wanted them to construct relied on their previous mastery of basic literacy. In order to read a text critically, a student needs to have the skills to

decipher that text. It would be nice to think that collaboration might mean the sharing of such skills: students who are skilled at deciphering print could put those skills at the service of the entire group, for everyone's benefit. But, in a schooling system in which literacy skills become a prime determinant of 'cleverness', mastery of literacy cannot be separated from the construction of dominant versions of success, nor can it be separated from relations of dominance and subordination. Every act of demonstrating that mastery (or the lack of it) is a micropolitical act, and each such act carries a wealth of social meanings.

True collaboration also demands that the task be one to which everyone can genuinely contribute. In reality, Michelle could contribute little to this section of the lesson, predicated as it was on skills that she had not mastered. She clearly did not want to be 'encouraged' to participate, but her reticence was read as a lack of confidence which we, as teachers, often find ourselves wanting to remedy. It is always hard to leave a struggling student sitting silently at her table, apparently unable to find a way into active participation. But Emily's intervention at this point, whilst it allowed Michelle to appear as a more active participant, served also to demonstrate her failure to master basic literacy skills. The self-esteem discourse into which Michelle was inserted performed a number of functions here. It served the apparently benign purposes of the 'valuing diversity' argument in that it constructed Michelle as 'needy', and positioned other students and the teacher as understanding of those needs. It served also to obscure Michelle's failure in a cloak of partial success in relation to her previous performance, thereby inscribing her into Meadway's deficit discourse of success. It is perhaps here where it does the most damage. The endeavour to hide the fact that someone is failing in relation to dominant versions of success leaves dominant ideas about what constitutes success intact, and re-inscribes failure to succeed in dominant terms as something shameful. Towards the end of the lesson, I talked to Michelle.

Michelle: I think it's boring, when you have to read out loud. It was boring, when we were in our table groups.

SB: I noticed you didn't want to read when Ms Hamilton picked you. Is that right?

M: Yes. I hate reading out loud.

SB: Are you able to tell me why you hate it?

M: Everyone looks at you, and you go all red in the face.

SB: Do you think everyone in the class feels like that?

M: No, some of them like it. But I just get bored when other people read. When Joy and Cerise read, they go on and on and on, and Ms Hamilton goes on and on about how good they are, and I lose the place and it's boring.

SB: Have you any idea what might make it more interesting?

M: I don't know. I think reading's always boring. It would be interesting if we didn't have to do it. People can read to themselves if they want, I don't mind. But it would be better if we didn't have to read out loud.

Reconstructed from notes, 18/1/00

Michelle appears to be very alienated from the process of reading aloud. This is eminently understandable, given that reading aloud situations highlight her own lack of mastery and perceived failure to make progress. She gives an account of herself as embarrassed when she is called upon to read aloud, and so to perform her incompetence publicly. But even listening to other students alienates her, seemingly underlining their relative competence, evoking what she understands as the teacher's *genuine* approbation and also making the curriculum work hard for her to follow. As teachers, we need to recognise that our best attempts to make counter-discourses of success available will often be read, by students, in terms of the hegemonic discourses in which they are embedded.

Shakespeare and Students' Media Cultures

Anne and Lisa, as well as Michelle, are 'special needs students', although their 'needs' are not perceived to be as acute as Michelle's. They customarily position themselves as 'big bad girls'. They maintain a high status in 9X's student micro-cultural world, unlike Michelle, who remains something of a micro-cultural outsider. Anne is from a 'mixed race' family, whilst Lisa and Michelle are of indigenous white backgrounds. All three are working class, and Michelle wears the badges of material poverty, dressed in clothes that are often scruffy, dirty and sometimes torn. During the holidays

immediately before the Macbeth work, Anne had had 'flu. Michelle was reputed to have 'stolen' her boyfriend and to have slept with him whilst Anne was ill. Stories abound about what Michelle actually did when she slept with this boyfriend. How much truth there was in any of them is a matter of conjecture, but they served to position Michelle as a 'slut' in the micro-cultural work that was taking place simultaneously with the work on Macbeth, and they united Anne and Lisa in opposition to her.

This opposition to Michelle was underscored by the fact that Michelle occupies a borderline position in relation to the 'really different' discourse. Anne and Lisa accordingly have multiple investments in distancing themselves from Michelle, and positioning her as a potential 'pollutant' (Thorne, 1993). In micro-cultural work, Anne and Lisa put a great deal of energy into deploying discourses related to Michelle's unkempt appearance and her 'stupidity' as well as her sexuality, in maintaining and reproducing this construction of Michelle as not-respectable (Skeggs, 1997). Michelle appeared to have limited understanding of the rules of this classed, gendered and sexualised game of power²⁶, and this rendered her even less able to resist the discourses into which she was daily being inscribed.

Emily explains the idea of dramatic irony - the audience knowing something a character doesn't know - then asks the girls to think of TV examples. They talk in twos, threes and fours, while Emily turns to write something else on the board. Joy and Cerise are playing a clapping game. Michelle is something of a wannabee. The girls to her left are not talking, so she looks across to the group of three on her right. They are having a very animated conversation, with lots of laughter. From the fringe, she looks on, smiling slightly when they laugh, not seeming sure whether she is part of their group, whether she is wanted or not... When she finishes writing on the board, Emily gets them back together as a class. She addresses her first question to Anne and Lisa since they're "on a roll today". They are very pleased to share their example, from Eastenders. This moves the discussion onto student territory. When Emily asks if a particular character is a goodie or a baddie, everyone(!) wants to talk at once. Well, not quite everyone perhaps, but it's noisy. In a popular media discourse, the authoritative voice in the public arena doesn't belong to Emily by right. Perhaps the students are more likely to position themselves as authorities in relation to a text that they perceive addresses them directly.

Fieldnotes 14/1/00

²⁶ There are intermittent periods of concern at Meadway about the 'underachievement' of white working-class girls. In this thesis, I have not looked specifically at 'whiteness' and its relationship to intellectual subordination. This would be an interesting theme to follow up.

The view that students are expert knowers of certain genres of popular media has much to commend it. One of the caveats that needs to be borne in mind is that what can be brought into the classroom are *student* media cultures. These are, of course, related to young people's media cultures, but they are not identical to them. Like other classroom cultures, student media cultures are produced in relation to what can be said and done in the surveillant space of the classroom, and in relationship with specific teachers. When students' media cultures are made a part of the curriculum, the boundaries of authority and expertise can be allowed to shift, (although the extent to which this can happen is infinitely variable), and the teacher is not necessarily the expert knower²⁷. But in some ways, this can exacerbate, or at least highlight, the micro-cultural inequalities and power imbalances that are already in play. Michelle was not able to take up an authority position in relation to the matter under discussion, partly because she is of very low micro-cultural status. Anne and Lisa, on the other hand, could use both their knowledge of the media, and the other students' apparent willingness to recognise them as micro-cultural authorities, to take up powerful positions. They could take up those positions as active creators of knowledge that are usually withheld from them as 'special needs students'.

There are some more examples. Anne is very keen to talk about a Simpsons example, but Emily wants another group to be given a turn. Someone else talks about the Simpsons. Joy and Cerise look at each other and resume their clapping game, looking studiously disinterested. I still haven't seen the programme, so it's all lost on me, but Emily explains in an aside to me that the students know she likes the Simpsons. I wonder if Emily's modelling a rather pomo position - enthusiastic about Shakespeare and about the Simpsons. Popular and 'high' culture aren't allowed to be either/or in this setting. Polarisation is the only thing that's disallowed. Perhaps that's how you would do 'bad girl' in these lessons - by polarising cultural genres.

Fieldnotes 14/1/00

Anne and Lisa customarily oppose teacher cultures. One of the ways in which I have seen them do this is by challenging the teacher's authority. Emily, though, had set a small, but key, part of her claim to authority aside for the time being, and had invited

²⁷ The field of media studies education in schools has its own extensive literature, some of which engages with issues of power and knowledge in the classroom. For an introduction to the field, see Alvarado et.al. (1987), Alvarado and Boyd-Barrett (1992), Bazalgette et.al. (1992), Emerson (1993), Fleming (1993), Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994), McLaren et.al. (1995), Buckingham (1998), Hart (1998), Richards (1998) and Piddock (2000).

the students to position themselves as curricular authorities. One of the effects of this was to interpellate some of those students who have a high micro-cultural status – many of whom customarily oppose or resist teacher authority – into an authority position from which they could be seen to work in accordance with the teacher's agenda without relinquishing their claim to 'badness'. For Anne and Lisa, who usually take up 'big bad girl' positions within a 'special needs' discourse, this was a departure. They were positioned as experts and simultaneously as micro-cultural high fliers.

It was Joy and Cerise, 9X's 'starlets', who took up 'bad girl' positions in this lesson. As 'starlets', they are able to position themselves as successful in relation to the dominant discourse. As 'starlets', they can also, if they so choose, position themselves as successful in relation to a popular media discourse, largely because they occupy positions of high micro-cultural standing. But here, they chose to perform disinterest and to demonstrate their intention of following their own agenda. Joy and Cerise do not need the teacher's attempt at broadening what counts as curriculum knowledge in order to produce themselves as successful. Popular media *and* 'high culture' are amongst the resources to which they have access in constructing themselves as 'starlets'. They can exercise choice in deciding how and when to take those resources up, or to refuse to take them up. Perhaps their performance of disinterest in this lesson contained an implicit critique of the way in which knowledge was being constructed in the lesson, and of the view that readings of popular culture and 'high culture' can inform each other. Perhaps it contained an impatience with Emily for not getting on with what they perceived to be the business in hand: the mastery of a Shakespeare text, and the accretion of testable skills and knowledge. Perhaps it contained a degree of resentment that their classmates were being positioned as experts alongside of Joy and Cerise themselves, when they are more accustomed to a more exclusive access to positions of curricular authority.

There is some more discussion of bad-guys. The girls know that Macbeth is planning to kill Duncan, so he can be considered a baddie. Emily asks how the baddie enters. She asks Michelle to demonstrate. Michelle looks mortified. Other girls suggest Shabana, saying that she can do it really well. Emily joins in with the persuasion. Shabana stands up, to cheering. Emily invites Michelle to be the good guy, so that Shabana has someone to act with, but Michelle resolutely gazes at the floor. Shabana

is getting ready to start. Emily asks them to do a countdown. They appear to love doing this. On the word “action”, Shabana comes in, with a swagger that could be mistaken for a very exaggerated limp, her hips veering from side to side. Her baddie is something of a parody of male sexuality - there is no mistaking the gender of her construction. She walks around the circle, then sits down, again to loud cheers. Emily asks about how she made her acting decisions. Lots of girls try to answer and things get a bit chaotic; perhaps when sexuality enters the classroom discourse, it functions to problematise authority in much the same way as popular culture. Shabana has used the streets as her example, and adolescent street culture belongs much more to the students than it does to any of the adults sitting watching.

Fieldnotes 14/1/00

Emily made another attempt in this lesson to include Michelle in the action. But even though this lesson contained no (written) literacy demands, there was still no position as active generator of knowledge open to Michelle. To act in front of the class demands a leap of faith, in which the actor needs to know that she will have everyone's support, and will not be laughed at. She also would need a sense of herself as especially competent. When the girls volunteered Shabana for the job, they constructed her as outstandingly good at acting. They demonstrated their support of her before she took up the position of expert actress. No such support would be forthcoming for Michelle, as we all tacitly recognised. The most she could hope for would be the kind of ‘niceness’ that would oblige the other students to at least applaud politely. Their support of Shabana was based on a genuine appreciation of her outstanding competence, not on an indulgence towards her incompetence. Depending on the other students’ goodwill, then, Michelle could either be laughed at, or could be positioned within something closely related to the self-esteem discourse. Far from offering her a position of recognised expertise, both situations would highlight her lack of competence.

The problems inherent in acting a sexualised role are also embodied ones for Michelle, because she inhabits a body that has been constructed as ‘not respectable’. It was permissible for Shabana to parody male sexuality, since her hold on respectability is beyond question. For Michelle, with her unkempt appearance and her reputed hetero/sexual over-activity, such a representation would not be permissible. It would be read within the discourses that are producing her as outsider. Michelle appears to have a limited understanding of why the other students position her as ‘sluttish’, but her experience of their production of her is enough to want her to keep herself out of

the public eye. She does not want to be looked at. In a later conversation, Michelle referred back to this lesson.

Michelle: Acting isn't as boring as reading. But sometimes it can be very embarrassing. I don't like it when you can't practice it before you show it.

SB: What's embarrassing about it?

Michelle: Sometimes you have to do things to make everyone laugh. Like the time when Shabana did the baddie. I didn't want to do it when Ms Hamilton asked me. I'd be too embarrassed. But because it was Shabana, everyone thought she was good.

SB: Did you think she was good?

Michelle: Yes, I thought she was funny. It was funny watching her. But I wouldn't have been able to do it. I'd have been too embarrassed. I don't like it when everyone looks at me.

Reconstructed from fieldnotes 18/1/00

When the teacher relinquishes some of her authority to define what counts as knowledge, something has to leap in to fill the gap vacated. The knowledge that could be constructed by these lessons was produced through networks of power just as it is when the teacher retains a larger share of the control. Student media cultures, and student cultures of sexuality, contain multiple social meanings, and it was these meanings, as well as our curricular intentions, that produced versions of success. It was these meanings, as constructed through student micro-cultures and as informed by official micro/politics and the multiple axes of structural inequality, that both displaced dominant readings of success from their usual central position, but also served as 'gatekeeping' narratives in relation to Michelle. Whilst it is probably true to say that Anne and Lisa were enabled to position themselves as successful, Michelle was unable to use student media cultures to produce a successful version of herself without a different kind of intervention.

As the weeks progressed, Emily and I thought, talked and wrote about what was happening. We interviewed students and discussed our findings. In the process, other kinds of interventions became thinkable and possible.

There is a real buzz in the classroom, with lots of talking and planning going on in the different corners of the room. Joy's group are talking earnestly, with occasional bursts of laughter. Michelle and Ameena are sitting silently, with Fatima and Asli – their group from before – sitting on an adjacent table. Sabina's group get up and stand in a line. They say, in chorus, "Welcome to our version of Macbeth – a tragedy", and then break into singing "Tragedy"... Emily goes over to Michelle and Ameena, drawing them into a foursome with Fatima and Asli. She goes outside to rehearse with them... Emily comes back in and stops everyone. There are various expressions of dismay. I don't know if this is because some groups don't feel ready to perform, or whether they were enjoying themselves so much they don't want to shift into another modality. Maybe both... Emily asks Michelle's group to perform first... Before Michelle's group start, Emily tells the audience they are going to have to join in: when she shows them the thumbs up sign, they are to cheer, and when she shows them the thumbs-down, they are to boo. The class practice this a few times, building up a sense of anticipation as they do so. Emily gives the clapper-board to Michelle (as 'director') and writes on it, 'The Macbeth Show'. The class does a countdown, and they start. This is the Jerry Springer version of Macbeth. The audience laugh when they realise what is happening. Fatima is the host, welcoming Duncan, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. I don't write down very much, as I'm trying to take pictures. The rest of the class seems delighted to enter into the spirit of the thing, booing and cheering in the appropriate places. The actors stumble over their words sometimes, and have to remind each other what to do and say, but in this context it doesn't seem to matter - if anything, it adds to everyone's enjoyment. Lady Macbeth does a wonderful cut-throat sign at the end, to vociferous and enthusiastic booing.

Fieldnotes 26/1/00

All four of the students in this extract have been identified as having 'special needs'. Fatima is Pakistani in origin, whilst Ameena and Asli are from Somalia. These three tend to take up positions as 'lazy girls', and mostly occupy low-status positions within the class micro-cultures. They are typically quiet in class, and often appear to be alienated from the work going on. They do not overtly seek out each other's company, and they do not seem especially to want to work with one another. But they often find themselves together, by default, as the young women with whom no-one else wants to work.

During the early part of the extract, the four students were effectively positioned on the periphery of what was going on. In contrast to the lively activity all around them, they sat passively at their tables, not even moving to sit together so that work could begin. The following day I asked them why they had shown such reluctance.

SB: When all the others were practising, I noticed that you stayed at your tables, and you didn't get into your group. Can you tell me why that was?

Asli: I don't remember.

Fatima: I don't know. I couldn't be bothered to move.

Michelle: I was sitting here, with Ameena.

Ameena: We were waiting for them, but they didn't come.

Fatima: *We* were waiting for *them* to come to *us*.

Ameena: We were just sitting there waiting.

SB: You were waiting for each other?

Asli: I didn't know what to do.

Ameena: We were just sitting there, because we didn't know what to do.

Michelle: I didn't know what to do.

Fatima: I couldn't be bothered to move. I thought we were just going to do rubbish.

Ameena: I thought what we did would be rubbish, so I just waited for them.

Asli: I couldn't be bothered because I thought everyone else's play was better than ours.

Reconstructed from notes 27/1/00

Their account is similar to the accounts of the 'lazy girls' in Years Seven and Eleven. They indicate a similar perceived lack of agency. These students had literally been immobilised, by being unable to envisage a way through the task ahead of them, and by their perception that, even if they did manage to achieve something, it would be not merely inadequate, but 'rubbish'. The effort of moving appeared to outweigh any likely benefits of doing the work: why bother, they seemed to be saying, when their achievements at the end of it would probably be 'rubbish'? So they sat, apparently passively, at their tables, awaiting a rescue in which they did not really believe.

But in this lesson, the ‘rescue’ was effected. It is unlikely that Michelle, Fatima, Ameena and Asli would have thought of doing a Jerry Springer version of Macbeth on their own. It took Emily’s intervention to make this possible for them. Her intervention not only made active participation available to the girls, but it also made available a version of genuine success, in which the rest of the class would appreciate, and not merely encourage, their efforts. Emily’s intention for this part of the module was to establish links between Macbeth and popular media through which students could explore, in particular, the inter-related themes of gender and sexuality. In effect, she was making use of this group’s work to move the entire class on. Michelle, Fatima, Ameena and Asli were given the opportunity to model the skills that Emily wanted the rest of the class to acquire. They were therefore offered positions as expert knowers and do-ers, able to advance the other students. The other students were offered positions as supporters of this group: not in order to build the four students’ self-esteem, but in order to facilitate an experience from which they could all learn and which they could all enjoy. In this context, a different interpretation could be read into the four young women’s ‘special educational neediness’. When they stumbled and halted over words, it was read more as part of the learning experience and part of the fun and less as a badge of shame and embarrassment involving complex manouevres around loss of face.

Fatima: It was good when I was Jerry Springer, and I came on and everyone shouted, “Jerry, Jerry” and they clapped.

Ameena: Everyone was clapping and shouting and it was fun. I didn’t know what to say at first, and then when Fatima asked me questions I did know what to say.

SB: How did you know what to say?

Ameena: I don’t know. I don’t remember what I said, only that every time I said things, everyone clapped and shouted.

Fatima: I liked having the microphone. I was watching, and if Ameena hadn’t known what to say, Ms Hamilton told me to take the microphone away, as if I was snatching it away like in the real Jerry Springer. It was good acting.

Michelle: She did that to me. When she asked me the question and I didn't know what to say, she took the microphone away and everyone thought I was doing good acting. [laughter]

Ameena: She did that to me too. But I did say things.

Fatima: Everyone boo-ed Asli because she was Lady Macbeth. Michelle was Macbeth, and they all went, "Go Macbeth, go Macbeth" when I gave her the microphone.

Asli: It was good when everyone went "Boo" when Fatima gave me the mike. It made me laugh, and then I couldn't speak. I was laughing too much. And at the end, when I went [makes a strangling sound] everyone laughed and went "Boo".

Reconstructed from fieldnotes 27/1/00

Parody and humour, as curriculum resources, tend to be most available to the clever students, who are able to deploy them (if they so choose) without challenging the teacher's authority. They are also resources which can be found within the pages of girls' and young women's magazines (McRobbie, 1994), and so have a micro-cultural resonance. It had been relatively straightforward to position the micro-culturally successful students as sufficiently authoritative to use these resources in the Macbeth work. It took much more in the way of recuperation to enable Michelle, Ameena, Fatima and Asli to use parody in their classroom work. Part of this involved making explicit some of the rules that constitute humour: Emily had explained some of the things they could actually do, and which would make an audience laugh. Part of the recuperation involved establishing the expertise of the four students so firmly that the audience's respect for them as expert knowers, and their desire for skills they were enacting, could be allowed to momentarily override their reading of them as micro-cultural losers and curricular no-hoppers.

Partly, thought, this recuperation involved opening the dominant discourse of academic success to parody and deconstruction. A complex set of things appears to have been happening here. In Michelle's account, the audience believed, when they saw the microphone being taken away, that it was an intentional part of the acting. But in reality, most of us in the audience knew, when Fatima removed the microphone from one of the silent and blushing participants, that she had done so because the participant was lost for words. Although her action and its context were perceived as

funny, no-one attributed it to good acting, as Michelle apparently thought. In a sense, then, the audience were reading the action as a parody of 'cleverness' and 'stupidity'. Being lost for words did not have to be read within the dominant discourse of success, and therefore did not have to connote shame, embarrassment and failure. It could be read within a parodic discourse and could connote expertise and fun. But were the students engaged in deconstructing the dominant discourse of success? Perhaps some of the audience were, in their laughter at the re-assemblage of meanings around not knowing what to say. But I am less convinced that Michelle, Ameena, Fatima and Asli were using humour and parody to deconstruct and to become critical readers of this key constituent of their lifeworlds. Perhaps this does not matter. Perhaps it was enough that they experienced themselves as successful, and as the desirable expert knowers of the class for once. Their expectation that their work was inevitably 'rubbish' had been challenged, and they had been able to re-cycle that 'rubbish' into something that they and others could use, enjoy and grow from.

I am ambivalent about suggesting that this was sufficient. It is tempting to argue that these four students have a limited ability to become informed, critical readers of their social and relational lifeworlds, if such critical readings necessarily involve complex understandings within the realm of rational thought. In which case, the definition of what it means to be an informed, critical reader needs work if it is not to set up its own hierarchies and relations of dominance in relation to what, and who, can count as successful. On the other hand, maybe there could be a point of recuperation, above and beyond that which was reached here. From such a point, these students *could* have been able to bring critical deconstruction to bear on their understanding of how and why they came to take up the successful positions that generally elude them.

It seems a stark choice, and I do not know how to make it. Either we work with the limitations of some of the students, and work to change the social meanings and material consequences that are embedded in perceived and actual competence. Or we take a position that refuses to understand students as limited, and work to find ways of enabling them to become competent. Much though we might say (and I find myself wanting to say) we want to do both, the two imperatives are in many ways in discursive opposition.

All the World's a Stage

All six of the Year Nine classes study a Shakespeare text in the first half of the Spring Term. Each year, in the week before the half-term holiday, Meadow holds a lunchtime Shakespeare festival in which each Year Nine class presents the text they are studying.

9Z are next. They're doing Twelfth Night. They're presenting the scene where Malvolio appears cross-gartered. They're playing it absolutely straight, from the text, word by word. It is the cleverest girls in the class who are performing. Megan does a brilliant performance as the strutting Malvolio, but the audience are getting restless... There's a stir when 9P stand up. They're doing Romeo and Juliet in the style of Goodness Gracious Me. Romeo and Mercutio are the Bangramuffins, and Juliet is Smeeta Smitten. Rebecca is the priest, the bogus Holy Man, complete with a set of finger cymbals. It's very funny, but, again, it's the clever girls taking the lead roles. The audience laps it up... Then it's 9X's turn. The whole class stands, and the students take up their places, some on stage, some at the back of the hall. Cerise's friends in the audience evidently know that she is Macbeth, and there are chants of "Go, Cerise" as 9X prepare to start. Everyone has a part, and most of them have at least a few words to say. They are the only class in which everyone is on stage.

Fieldnotes 16/2/00

Emily and I were delighted that all of the students in 9X wanted to perform. The Shakespeare festival, we felt, proved that the students had been able to use the resources we had wanted to provide. Every student took up the opportunity to take an active role in the festival, and no-one seemed to want to be left out. The students had enjoyed the experience of acting Macbeth in a range of genres. It was cool, it was fun, and it was within everyone's reach.

Iram: Acting was my best thing in the whole thing.

Sana: Mine as well. It's, like, it's, like, um, well, it's sort of fun, I don't really know how to say it. It's not like, it's, well, it's fun, but it's fun where you're learning as well, and you can do it with your friends, or in the class. I liked it best when we were all together on the stage.

Iram: At first I didn't think I was going to like it on the whole stage, I didn't think I would. I thought it would be, "Oh my god, everyone's looking at me", but then it wasn't like that, it wasn't like that at all.

Charlotte: It wasn't like that at all.

Sabina: I liked it best when we were in little groups, in, um, in our table groups, when it was just us lot, and I was Malcolm, that play. When we sang “We are family” and Sana was Duncan. That was my best thing...

Sana: Mm, it was good, cause, like, it was fun, but all your friends were looking at you, and usually when people look at me it's like they're all going “look at her”, you think they're all going “look at her” and you think “why are they all looking at me?” But when you were acting, it was like it didn't matter, cause it wasn't really you, it was you being Duncan or Lady Macbeth or that.

Charlotte: It wasn't really you when you were acting.

Sabina: Yeah, and when I was Lady Macbeth and everyone had to yell at me, it was nice, cause everyone hated me, but I wasn't me, and they was my friends, and it was exciting, not like just sitting in the classroom reading it out of a book.

Interview 9/2/00

In these students' accounts, it was the opportunity to perform that they had most valued. The work on Macbeth had allowed them to be at the centre of attention, and to be looked at, without being scrutinised. Young women such as these four, who do not produce themselves as hetero/sexually 'attractive' in conventional ways, could enjoy the pleasures of being looked at without the anxiety of possibly being judged as inadequate: after all, 'it wasn't really you'. They describe two levels of identity work. In one sense, the Macbeth unit had given them the chance to try out new identifications, including those they would not normally come across in their everyday lives. In another sense, the work on Macbeth had provided the vehicle for what they describe as some pleasurable friendship work amongst the class. The impression they give is one of a group of young women valuing and appreciating each other's efforts, and collaborating in providing a safe and non-judgmental but exciting space in which to perform.

Toil and Trouble: The Micro/Politics of Pedagogies for Sustainable Change

In the Summer Term, the students in 9X took their SATs. They took up their places, in the hall, in rows, to be examined on the work they had done on Macbeth. Or rather, on some of the work. They were required to decipher written questions, and to formulate written answers. Those answers were intended to demonstrate the extent of their mastery of those aspects of the text that the policy-makers and their key informers had

felt it necessary for students to master. The students, unsurprisingly, gave their consent to the process: a process designed to quantify a different kind of performance from that which Emily had been trying to promote. Based on that quantification, the students would be sorted into a hierarchy based on their competence, and on their accretion of mastery, as demonstrated through their examination performance. The data that will be gathered about that performance will be tabulated and used to measure Meadway's 'value-added'. It will be included in the comparative statistics of the PANDA, and will be used in the report of Meadway's next Ofsted inspection.

It is therefore important not to be naïve about the ways in which the unit of work in Macbeth was produced through the dominant version of success and in which the work was obliged to reproduce that dominant version of success. It is equally important not to become misty-eyed about student micro-cultures, and to see them as the source of all opposition and resistance to this dominant discourse. Throughout the Macbeth work, dominant and deficit versions of success worked in conjunction with student micro-cultures to nuance what could count as success, and who could count as successful. Formal and informal cultures were imbricated in a complex process which sometimes worked to reproduce existing meanings and relations of power, sometimes worked to produce new ones, and sometimes both produced and reproduced new and old meanings and relations simultaneously.

As political strategy, the Macbeth unit probably represented the best that we could do in the prevailing circumstances. The micro-political climate at Meadway is not supportive of those strategies of innovation that arise from and give rise to sustained critique. Meadway is committed to the presentation of itself as a successful school within the framework of the standards agenda. In this context, sustained critique is not popular, since it does not produce the current version of quantifiable improvement to which Meadway is committed. For Emily, more than for myself, this had costs. Her faculty colleagues regard her MA in English as something of a luxury, since it does not enable her to make a direct contribution to the standards agenda. This may have consequences for her career, as well as having consequences for her in her relationships with other staff. Whilst people are generally happy to allow me, a (very) part-time teacher in the marginalised area of learning support, to be 'off-message',

Emily stands to make herself unpopular. The sustained critique to which she is increasingly committed positions her as a potential threat. At the same time, Emily faced potential personal costs in allowing me to work with her. She opened her classroom to me, knowing that I would pay close and relentlessly critical attention to the (curricular and identity) work that was going on in there. Setting up such a project is a risky business for a teacher. When the orientation at Meadway, in line with the prevailing governmental imperative, is about engaging with solutions rather than problems, Emily risked being immobilised by a view of change that required both of us, and all of the students, to engage with problems rather than solutions.

Paradoxically, though, it was sustained critique that mobilised us, as teachers, in our attempts to teach for sustainable egalitarian change. Paying critical attention to the imbrication of formal cultures and informal micro-cultures, and to their construction through systemic networks of inequality and oppression, meant that we could never feel we had ‘got it right’. But our attention to the contradictoriness of change and to the power relations through which classroom work is produced both enabled and obliged us to keep trying. In the complex and multi-layered process of classroom learning, teachers can never get it right for everyone, for all of the time. One of the problems at the heart of the standards agenda, as I argued in Chapter Three, is its rootedness in a uni-dimensional theory of change, and its assumption that there can be a version of improvement that benefits everyone equally. Such a theory can never be adequate in informing pedagogies for sustainable change, because sustainability cannot be achieved in the absence of engagement with the complexities that change throws up for individuals and groups.

The contradictory space constructed between the standards agenda and the drive towards inclusion can be difficult for teachers, as well as students, to inhabit. The kind of engagement with sustained critique to which Emily and I committed ourselves is one way of occupying that space. It provided us with, amongst other things, a step-ladder up to an attractive piece of high moral ground, and it would be disingenuous to deny the pleasure of the climb. Such an engagement also allowed us to construct a piece of work in the light of a theory/praxis that was eminently more interesting and rewarding for us than the standards agenda generally allows. While Emily and I

attempted to provide conditions in which students could produce knowledge, we ourselves were also engaged in a creative act of knowledge production. This theme, of teachers as producers of knowledge beyond the ‘what works’ genre (Atkinson, 2000), is one to which I will return in the concluding chapter.

I would not want to suggest a toolbox of resultant strategies arising from the work we did, because the entire point about the work on Macbeth was that it was constructed through a process of continued interrogation of specific relations of power. Equally, I would not want to make grandiose claims about what we managed to achieve in the work: it is probable that we did not have a great deal of impact on Meadoway’s official culture, or its micropolitics, nor any lasting effect on student micro-cultures. For a time, though, we pushed back the borders of what could be said and done in the name of ‘success’. If we did not quite manage to remove the dominant version of success from its common-sense pedestal, we momentarily created the possibility for a handful of young women to unsettle that pedestal in carrying out their identity work.

In this chapter, I have looked at one classroom project, designed in part as a pedagogic response to the arguments of this thesis. I have looked at some of the political implications that a feminist post-structuralist analysis of ‘success’ might be thought to bring to bear in classroom work, and explained how, together with another teacher, we translated these into pedagogic practice. I analysed some of the micro-cultural and micro-political work made possible by the project, and through which the project was made possible²⁸. I ended the chapter by looking at the effects of the work, as politicised pedagogy, and as micro/political strategy. In some ways, this has been a strange chapter to write. The actual classroom work was planned and took place during the middle period of fieldwork, when the analysis presented in this thesis was at an earlier stage. If I were to plan such a project now, I might do it differently. I like to think that I would have been able to engage the students in thinking about the consequences of repositioning meanings, as opposed to people, relative to competence, instead of leaving the ‘competence conundrum’ (see page 261) not just unresolved but

²⁸ I have not presented an analysis of the formal curricular work here. Emily subsequently used data from the project in her MA dissertation, which focuses on the teaching of English, and I enjoyed talking through some of the issues with her, but there is not space for me to include them in this thesis.

also unspoken. I might also have chosen to be much more ‘up-front’ with students about the progress of the research: I hope I would have involved them more in data analysis, the way I was subsequently able to do with the young women in Year Eleven (see page 131). Such, I would argue, is the nature of classroom work that involves, and makes possible, sustained critique. It opens up new lines of enquiry, rather than looking for solutions that close those enquiries down. This is not to argue for an ‘anything goes’ pedagogy. In this chapter, I have suggested instead that changing what counts as success in classrooms is an ever-evolving process, in which what counts as knowledge, and who can count as a knower, are the explicit subjects of analysis.

Chapter 11

Conclusion

In September 2000, after I had finished my fieldwork, and when I was in the middle of writing up my thesis, a new headteacher started at Meadway. This new head, Ms Foster, brought with her some (now quite distant) experience of teaching in what had at the time been called a 'remedial unit'. She consequently positions herself as someone with expertise in the teaching of 'special needs students' and she has kept up with developments in the field. A few weeks into the term, at the end of a teaching day and as we sat waiting for a staff meeting to begin, my head of department took the opportunity to introduce me to Ms Foster. He explained that I was a part-time teacher, doing a PhD for the greater part of the week. She asked me what my research was about. One eye on the clock, and feeling somewhat under pressure, I answered that I was looking at 'special needs in mainstream schools'. With a knowing, professional-to-professional look of insider solidarity, she remarked, 'Oh yes, partnership teaching never quite works, does it?' I nodded vaguely, not quite knowing how to respond, and she moved to sit elsewhere, murmuring that I must come and talk to her about my PhD sometime.

Why was I so singularly unable to give a meaningful account of my research to someone who had good reason on many levels to be interested in it? The possible explanations of my inability, like the research itself, are located in policy, micropolitics and identity work. In educational policy, what counts as legitimate research, and especially what counts as legitimate *practitioner* research, is work that can confirm, and can operationalise, the standards agenda (Reynolds, 1998; Tooley, 1998; Atkinson, 2000). In micropolitical terms, Ms Foster occupies a position of considerable seniority relative to myself. But as a new headteacher, one of her most important managerial tasks is to secure the support of the staff and win our consent to her direction. As a junior member of the teaching staff, I do not have institutional power on my side, and it is in my interests to secure the good opinion of the new headteacher. It makes micropolitical sense, then, for us to collude in positioning each other as allies. These conditions are also the context of our identity work in this

exchange. Ms Foster needs to produce herself as ‘good headteacher’. In this instance, the subject ‘good headteacher’ is one who shows an informed interest in current theories of special needs pedagogy, and who demonstrates her interest through a remark about what works in practice. I wanted to produce myself as a version of ‘good teacher’, but the subject ‘good teacher’ in which I am invested is not easily recognised within schools today, since it is grounded in notions of sustained critique which are hard to maintain in the present climate. And, framing the conversation, was the ever-present politically- and locally-produced shortage of time. I gave an inadequate description of my research topic because my perception was that a more accurate one would require discussion of complexities for which time could not be made available.

What do I wish I had said to Ms Foster? Given as much time as I would have wanted, and the interest of someone who is able to exert considerable influence on the direction of Meadoway School, what account of my research would I have wanted to present? This conclusion to my thesis is my part in the conversation I would have had with Ms Foster had conditions been different. In this one-sided fantasy conversation, I explain my research intentions, and tell the story of how I reached the conclusions I was able to reach. I point out to her what is of interest and relevance, and highlight those places where there is a need for more thinking and more research.

I want to begin the conversation by enlisting the help of one of my Year Seven research participants, in explicating how and why I came to the research topic, and the position from which I started.

Shazia: Why do you want to know what we think, Miss? I mean, ‘cause we don’t know nothing, we’re just all the stupid girls, we don’t know nothing to say, there’s lots of girls in my class, they know what to think, you should talk to them.

Interview 12/3/00

Shazia’s observation, already cited in Chapter Six, is worth a second outing here. This thesis is concerned with the perceptions and views of ‘all the stupid girls’: its argument is that the identity work of these students takes place within a policy, micropolitical and microcultural context that positions them as intellectually subordinate. Shazia’s surprise that I want to talk to her points to the many ways in which such students are

produced as 'knowing nothing', since their knowledge does not appear to count within dominant discourses of success. This thesis argues that those dominant discourses of success are produced and reproduced locally but always in relation to wider societal discourses. It suggests that current rhetoric and reforms associated with 'inclusive education' have, in the main, acted to complexify, rather than ameliorate, the subordination of those school students to whom dominant versions of academic attainment are inaccessible. My thesis examines such complexities.

The starting point of this research was my own dissatisfaction, as a learning support teacher, with the discursive practices through which those students with whom I work are marginalised by a system which presents itself as egalitarian in intent. As a teacher in the UK state school system, I am contractually obliged to implement the standards agenda. As a learning support teacher in a comprehensive school, I am required to work around the edges of that agenda. School micropolitics require me to make complicated accommodations on the behalf of students who stand to jeopardise both the school's perception of itself as a successful school, and its performance in local league tables. My intention in this research was to use my position as insider to examine, through my own contradictory investments, the discursive resources available to some of the 'special needs students' in one girls' secondary school. I wanted to join in, as far as I could, with the sense-making of those students, and to learn about how they used those discursive resources in producing themselves as students. I wanted to think with the girls and young women who, in Shazia's account, do not 'know what to think', and to see if, together, we could make some kind of social, political and theoretical sense of their student identity work.

This research has, in essence, been a process of making explicit and dis-embedding some of the implicit and common-sense understandings embedded in day-to-day experiences at Meadoway School. My research questions as explained in Chapter One translated into one workable dual question, which I kept in the forefront of my mind throughout the fieldwork period, and around which I was able to focus observations and conversations. What counts as 'success', and what does 'success' count for? During my time in school, this question acted as a channel, leading me towards further

questioning of social processes I might otherwise have taken for granted, and preventing me from being swamped by the mass of questions that undoubtedly could have been asked. Keeping detailed and reflective fieldnotes about my own day-to-day experiences was a crucial part of this. These fieldnotes became the tool with which I began the process of teasing out the mass of meanings inherent in discourses of success at Meadway. I used them also as an intermediary device between the conversations I had with participants, and the theories and literatures through which I sought to contextualise those conversations.

The thesis is saturated with stories ‘from the field’ and with the accounts of participants. I have used these stories and accounts not just to exemplify the arguments I want to make, but also to tell a bigger story: the story of how I came to arrive at those arguments. When writing up the thesis, I became aware of a tension in work of this kind. The research was a complex and ongoing process, and yet I have had to present it as a finished product. I have necessarily been involved in producing and presenting closures where in fact none existed, on many levels. My relationships with the participants have, in most cases, continued well beyond the fieldwork period. There have been instances in the last few months that I would dearly have liked to have been able to include in the thesis. One such would be Meadway’s formal presentation evening, held in the January after I finished fieldwork and when I was in the final stages of writing up, when the previous Year Eleven cohort returned to school to collect their GCSE certificates. About half of the participants in my research (compared with four fifths of the cohort as a whole) returned, and I spoke to them at length afterwards. The evening would have been worth a chapter of its own. In other instances, I have met with the young women who left school last July, and talked to them retrospectively about their schooling experiences. Again, I have not been able to include those insights in the thesis, although they form part of my overall impression as I bring the thesis to its conclusion. Aside from these specific examples, I would want to emphasise that every story, every conversation, and every thought articulated by a participant or by myself, was part of the ongoing context that produced it.

Bearing these caveats in mind, what, then, are the foremost stories I would want to tell? Which are the stories that make sense of the other stories? There are three of them, each of which I will re-tell very briefly here. Firstly, there is the story of the contradictory space that exists in the intersection between the standards agenda and the historically, socially and politically produced drive towards 'inclusion'. This is the policy story. Secondly, there is the story of the interpersonal contexts and power relations that are produced in that intersection, when policy on paper finds its way into school life. This is the micropolitical story. Thirdly, and most importantly in this thesis, is the story of what students do with those contexts and relations. It is the story of how those specific relations of power interact with other locally and systemically constructed indices of difference to produce identity resources, and of the multiple ways in which students use those resources in constructing their sense of themselves as school students. It is the story of student identity work and it can only make sense in the context of the first two stories. It is also, as I have argued, the story that makes sense *of* those first two stories, since it illuminates and explicates them, and, perhaps above all else, disrupts any notion that either of them can paint a complete, linear or simple picture of reality.

The policy story is framed by the normative terms of the standards agenda, which constructs school students as, amongst other things, units of production, to which schools must 'add value'. The means used to determine added value is the proportion of students reaching 'the expected standard for their age' (DfEE, 1999b). For secondary comprehensive schools such as Meadway, this benchmark standard is the proportion of Year Eleven students attaining five GCSE passes at grades A*-C. The standards agenda is enforced through a battery of coercive and co-optive measures, including inspections whose results are made public, league tables of schools according to their students' exam results, and, perhaps most significantly, through the targets on which David Blunkett has staked his reputation. Alongside the standards agenda runs the drive for the 'inclusion' of certain groups of children and young people within mainstream education. In the policy story, 'inclusion' has increasingly come to connote 'social inclusion', in line with some of New Labour's other policy priorities (Blunkett, 2001). As I argued in Chapter Four, the meanings of 'inclusive

education' are open to many interpretations. One commonly found assertion is that inclusive education should enable the removal of 'barriers to learning and participation'. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the normative and competitive standards agenda is itself central in the production of some very intransigent 'barriers to learning and participation'. I have suggested that the standards agenda positions students to whom normative versions of success are not accessible as marginal, thus producing the conditions of exclusion within a system that claims to be moving towards inclusion.

The policy story is produced in part through its history. In Chapter Two I examined the historical production of the subject 'special needs student'. It is important to remember that current discourses of normative and non-normative learning contain residual meanings inherited from older discourses and discursive practices. I looked at aspects of the discourses that have produced intellectual subordination as a key component of schooling in the UK: in particular, the charity/tragedy, rights/protection, medical/psychological, self-esteem and entitlements/access discourses, and the practices through which they were produced. I sought to show the location of these discourses in the social and political landscapes of their times, and examined how they were implicated in the enduring reproduction of unequal relations and the unequal distribution of wealth. Such an examination shows us that, whilst the technicist regimes through which children and young people are currently identified as having learning difficulties may be much more benign than those of the past, they leave intact some much older meanings. In particular, they leave untroubled a set of meanings, linked with the capitalist imperative to produce a suitably skilled workforce and liberal humanism's need to reproduce civilised Man, that cleverness (of certain kinds) is superior, and intellectual impairment is to be feared and derided.

Chapters Three and Four situated this historical construction of meaning in present-day policy and in practice at Meadway School. In Chapter Three, I looked at the construction of successful schooling as narrated in the policy story, whilst in Chapter Four I suggested that the policy story elides failure in ways that can be unhelpful, especially to those students who experience failure in all but name. To explicate and

elucidate the policy story, I told it in tandem with the micropolitical story. Meadway produces itself as a successful school. Central to this production is its success in local league tables of schools, in which its sixteen-year-old leavers routinely ‘out-perform’ the leavers of other schools. Or do they? The reality, as always, is more complex. To position itself as ‘successful’, Meadway needs to be ‘continuously improving’: league tables now show a school’s improvement, year-by-year, in terms of its examination results. To maintain its position as market leader in which Meadway’s staff are, for very understandable reasons, invested, Meadway has to enable an ever-increasing proportion of its students to score the coveted five A*-C grades. Its target for this year is that sixty percent of its students will do so. This leaves forty percent who will not. Amongst these are many of the ‘special needs students’, for whom such an aspiration is out of reach.

Meadway’s sense of itself as an institution is also characterised by its attention to equal opportunities issues. A version of an equal opportunities discourse is used to legitimate its investment in examination results, and works also to make normative versions of success desirable. This discourse is premised on the notion that it is academic success, evidenced in good exam results, that will enable Meadway’s students, many of them from materially disadvantaged backgrounds, to overcome such disadvantage. This discourse operates together with the standards agenda, and with the simultaneously surveillant and ‘can-do’ culture of new managerialism, to produce the subjects ‘successful teacher’ and ‘successful student’. The presence at Meadway of ‘special needs students’ enables these discourses to work, as their presence provides a reason, extraneous to the school, for the existence of the forty percent of students who have not made the normative grade. But that presence also works, in a contradictory way, as proof that the dominant and legitimating discourses of success are fictions. For this reason, as well as for reasons of benevolent humanity and good management, ‘special needs students’ cannot publicly be positioned as failing. Meadway’s students and teachers are addressed, and address each other, as though success were attainable for all. A public admission of failure would be a criticism of the normative and competitive nature of the standards agenda, and an admission that the standards agenda is essentially egalitarian. For Meadway’s staff, invested as we are in egalitarian and

humanitarian understandings of our work, such an admission is, if not unthinkable, certainly unsayable.

Whilst the policy and micropolitical stories are crucial to the argument of this thesis, it is student identity work which has been my primary focus. Chapters Six through to Ten examine how the subject ‘special needs student’ of policy and school micropolitics is produced and produces student microcultures, and they look at how this subject is variously taken up by different students and groups of students. It is the students who I have called ‘intellectually subordinated’ who live the political and micropolitical contradictions outlined above and in the thesis. The can-do culture of school effectiveness sets them up to want and expect the choices associated with examination success, and to believe that they will have those choices so long as they work hard and are effectively taught. But the daily reality of their lived experience, and the micro-cultural complexities of that experience, demonstrate to them the impossibility of ever being, or becoming, ‘successful’ young women.

In Chapters Six and Seven, I suggested that it is possible to make three (necessarily provisional) distinctions in the way that ‘special needs students’ are positioned at Meadway. Such students tend to take up positions as ‘sweet little girls’, ‘big bad girls’ and ‘lazy girls’. Each of the three positions is thoroughly gendered, and is, in addition, nuanced by ‘race’, social class, sexuality, religion, physical appearance and command of the English language as well as by perceived academic ability.

The ‘sweet little girl’ position appears to be far more available to girls and young women from Asian families, especially those who, in Meadway, are orthodox Muslims. I argued that this position is an infantilising one. It draws both on hyper-feminised discourses of child-in-danger, connoting vulnerability and over-compliance with adult authority, and on the charity/tragedy model of disability, connoting dependence and neediness. To successfully insert themselves into the ‘sweet little girl’ position, the girls and young women have to distance themselves from hetero/sexualised activities, taking up modes of dress and body language suggestive of youthful innocence. They tend to remove themselves from much of the high-status

student micro-cultural work, preferring to spend time with teachers rather than in solely peer-centred negotiation. The position of ‘sweet little girl’ brings with it the power to attract and retain adult help and attention: these are the girls and young women who routinely ask for teacher assistance, to the probable benefit of their academic progress, and to their apparent enjoyment. Its flip side is their inscription into hyper-feminine discourses of ‘neediness’ and into cycles of dependence and vulnerability.

By contrast, there is the ‘big bad girl’ position. This draws on a discourse of child-as-danger, and connotes opposition to adult authority. It appears to be much more available to girls and young women from African Caribbean and indigenous white working-class families. Characteristically, girls and young women who take up positions as ‘big bad girls’ are invested in demonstrating their achievement of adult status through producing themselves as hetero/sexually active and attractive. Indeed, this is the feminine version of child-as-danger, in which the errant girl is constructed as promiscuous (Boyden, 1990; Walkerdine, 1997). Many of the ‘big bad girls’ are resistant to adult help, which, in the case of ‘special needs students’, is something of an impossibility, since a refusal of such help is perceived as a further problem, and as further proof of their special neediness. These students tend to be heavily invested in student micro-cultural work, and can occupy high-status positions which, as I argued earlier, are often hard-won and involve ongoing struggle.

Where the ‘big bad girl’ can experience a measure of micro-cultural power due to her successful production of herself as hetero/sexually active and attractive, and the ‘sweet little girl’ removes herself from the micro-cultural game through professed hetero/sexual disinterest, there is a third position, that of the ‘lazy girl’. The ‘lazy girl’ is located as a micro-cultural, as well as an academic failure. She is typically invested in discourses of hetero/sexual activity, but appears to be unable to insert herself into them. Like the ‘big bad girl’, the lazy student tends to resist adult help and attention, but will do so through perceived passivity, not through active aggression. Lack of agency is a recurrent theme in the ‘lazy girl’ positioning, with girls and young women describing themselves as passively awaiting the actions of others (teachers and

students) to rescue them from the boredom of ‘just sitting there’. Of the three positions, this is the one in which girls and young women talk about themselves (and are talked about in the staffroom) in overwhelmingly negative ways. Students who position themselves as lazy tend also to describe themselves as physically unattractive, unpopular and powerless.

What all three positions have in common is reference to a deficit discourse. Where they account at all for their academic ability, all of these girls and young women talk about themselves as ‘stupid’, ‘thick’ or ‘dumb’: the language of ‘special educational needs’ appears to have no relevance or usefulness for them. To explore the production of this deficit discourse, it is necessary to look at the imbrication of macro and micro-discourses, and to stitch the policy, micropolitical and identity work stories together again. In Chapter Eight I looked at the examination, and practices around the examination, as a site of the production of this deficit discourse. I suggested that two separate discourses of academic achievement co-exist in Meadway. The dominant discourse of success relates to national benchmarks as enshrined in policy. But there has to be another discourse, in order for Meadway to make sense of and for those students who are not going to be able to achieve according to this normative version. The answer is a deficit discourse of academic success, where it is individual progress that is measured. This discourse may look (and in many ways is) more humane than the dominant one. But the fact that it is only deployed in relation to students who are failing in normative terms means that it works more to shore up, and not to challenge or unsettle, the dominant discourse. Moreover, its deployment in relation to ‘special needs students’ draws on the self-esteem discourse which, as I argued in Chapter Two, serves to individualise academic failure, and to obscure the production of social relations of subordination in which it is implicated.

The deficit discourse of success is one of individual, not purely normative, academic progress. But it does not account for all of Meadway’s students. In Chapter Nine, I identified a further discourse, that of the ‘really disabled student’, in which it is personal and ‘social’, not academic, progress that is valued, measured and acclaimed. At present there is a small number of students at Meadway in relation to whom this

discourse is deployed: local and national policy changes mean this number is steadily creeping up as students who would until very recently have been educated in special schools are now being placed in Meadway. Chapter Nine considered the ‘inclusion’ experiences of two autistic students. The placement of Cassandra was narrated as a success. Cassandra was able to occupy a version of the ‘sweet little girl’ position, nuanced by her successful insertion into the ‘really disabled discourse’. By contrast, Cheryl’s placement was considered to have been unsuccessful, and was abruptly and prematurely terminated. At a discursive level, Cheryl tended to be positioned as a ‘big bad girl’, but such a position cannot co-exist with the ‘really disabled discourse’ at Meadway. Staff and students were able to position themselves as humane and benevolent in relation to the often puzzling but manifestly needy Cassandra. But both staff and student members of Meadway felt not just puzzled by Cheryl but also frightened of her. She did not produce herself as vulnerable, and there was very little space for anyone to take up a position of power in face-to-face relation with her.

I suggested in Chapter Nine that Cheryl’s and Cassandra’s experiences highlight some of the inadequacies of liberal pluralist arguments about ‘valuing diversity’. The standards agenda, in which Meadway’s dominant discourse of success is embedded, values a bottom line homogeneity. This homogeneity forms the bedrock of curricular and managerial policies through which students experience schooling and make sense of themselves as students. Meadway tries to reconcile the dilemma of a prescriptive set of curricular demands on the one hand, and its commitment to equal opportunities on the other, by identifying a handful of students as *really* different, in most cases in relation to their prior assessment and calibration as ‘disabled’. At the presentation evening to which I referred at the beginning of this chapter, the ‘diversity’ that Cassandra was perceived to have brought to Meadway was valued in her award of a new prize, the ‘Governors’ Special Prize’. Where other students received cups and certificates for attainment in various subjects, Cassandra’s achievement in lasting the course at a mainstream school was celebrated. In many ways, I would want to support this. But I would also argue that valuing Cassandra’s diversity in this context acted also to leave the homogeneity of the standards agenda in place. When only specific students and groups of students are valued for diversity, whilst everyone else is valued

for what is essentially homogeneity and conformity, then ‘diversity’ operates as another binary. It becomes yet another way of marking out and distancing those who are identified as ‘different’ from the norm.

The case studies of these two students presented me with a theoretical problem, in that it demonstrated the limits of feminist post-structural theory in explaining the subjectivity of two young women who do not make sense of the world in ways that make sense to me. At times it was tempting to try to make the data - and the two students - fit the theory. But this would be to do them a great injustice, and to miss one of the potential contributions of this thesis. Perhaps feminist post-structural approaches do not yet have sufficient explanatory power to make sense of ‘autistic’ subjectivities. I would want to argue that previous applications of feminist post-structuralism to educational change have not engaged with this very real theoretical limitation: one of the contributions of these case studies, and of this thesis, is in its testing of the current theoretical and political limits of this approach.

In Chapter Ten, I engaged further with the question of feminist post-structuralism as a theory *for* as well as *of* change (Kenway et al., 1994). I described and evaluated a classroom project which aimed to use some of the theoretical insights associated with feminist post-structuralism, together with the insights my research was generating, in work for classroom change. In collaboration with a classroom teacher of English, we aimed to use a compulsory study unit of Shakespeare’s Macbeth to make alternative understandings of ‘success’ available to a group of Year Nine students. We found that, in contrast to the bland and reductive taxonomies suggested by school improvement-led understandings of learning and teaching, we were all involved in minute-by-minute negotiations of power and control, in which curricular and micro-cultural work were intertwined. Benefits for one student or group of students were often perceived as losses for another student or group of students: groups who are customarily positioned as successful according to the dominant version of success were understandably unwilling to interrogate it.

Thinking about Chapter Ten also leads me towards some of the questions my research has raised. One pivotal point of these questions is around the relationship between

feminist post-structural theory and classroom practice, and about how such theory can be of use in the project of egalitarian change in schooling. Were this concluding chapter to be a real conversation with new headteacher Ms Foster, this is the point at which I would want to enlist her help. I have argued throughout this thesis that intellectual subordination is systemic, and is enshrined within current schooling policies which themselves owe much both to larger economic and societal conditions, and to meanings and practices inherited from the past. Whilst I would not want to blame teachers for this state of affairs, I would want to think that teachers and the teaching profession could play a part in changing it. Amongst Meadway's staff are teachers who are firmly committed to social justice, and who entered teaching as a means of bringing about egalitarian change. I would want to think with Ms Foster about ways in which this group of people, many of whom are deeply sceptical about the standards agenda, can be supported in developing informed and theorised criticism of it. Historically, those who take daily responsibility for classroom teaching in state schools have been separated from those who produce knowledge about the conditions, contexts and processes involved (Gitlin and Russell, 1994; Blythman, 1996). There are many questions to be asked about how this process has been and continues to be classed and gendered, and about how teachers could be repositioned as theoreticians and knowledge producers, as well as practitioners.

Notwithstanding (or perhaps in addition to) this set of questions about the practical and strategic application of feminist post-structural theory, I would want to argue very strongly for the unique contribution such an approach can make to the understanding of intellectual subordination in classroom contexts. As I have shown in this thesis, a feminist post-structural analysis, with its attention to the complexities of the politics of difference together with its commitment to egalitarian change, can enable the kinds of nuanced understandings often missing in 'inclusive education' debates, and certainly absent from the standards agenda. Such an approach makes it possible to uncover the layers of meaning embedded in the social and political processes of intellectual subordination, and compels detailed attention to the production of meaning and practice by individuals, groups, institutions and systems. This kind of contextualised and multi-layered understanding will be crucial in moving the debate on. Equally, this

thesis demonstrates that feminist post-structuralist theory can itself be productively developed through an engagement with the politics of intellectual subordination

Other questions remain. There is the set of questions around naming, which I raised in the introductory chapter and at other points in the thesis. For the purposes of this thesis, I have worked with the concept of intellectual subordination. As a means of describing the social and political processes through which a distinct group of school students are inscribed into relations of subordination, this name has served its purpose. But I remain doubtful about it on two counts. Firstly, I developed the concept without the knowledge or consent of the participants. I felt I had to do so, since the meanings associated with the inability to make academic progress within the normative range are so negative that I could not discuss them openly with the students. But naming an oppression to which one is not personally subject is politically dubious at the very least, and I would not want to pretend otherwise. I would have wanted things to have been different: I would have wanted a piece of terminology to have arisen from discussion with the students. No such piece of language emerged, and I did the best I could, but the solution with which I worked was not an ideal one.

My other reservation about the concept of intellectual subordination is that it does not adequately represent, or allow for the interrogation of, the material reality of differential learning ability. This is a very difficult question, and one I would like to explore further. Throughout the thesis, I have perhaps evaded a thorough engagement with it. Arguing for a material base for 'learning difficulty' (and here, the term 'intellectual subordination' is inadequate) is a political minefield, and could easily be co-opted into some very reactionary discourses. Yet I would want to argue that differential learning ability does indeed exist. Much of it is socially- and politically-produced, but there is a materiality too. The meanings and practices associated with 'learning difficulty', and the apparatuses through which individuals are measured and their ability calibrated as distance from the norm, are undoubtedly social constructions, produced by and embedded in a set of social interests. I would want to hold onto this argument, whilst asserting that there also exist a group of people who are potentially made vulnerable because of their intrinsic intellectual limitation. I have not found a

way to say this, or to engage with it, in ways that do not connote lack, or inferiority, or, on my part, something politically much worse.

Ms Foster will not read this thesis. Nor, in all probability, will I have this conclusionary conversation with her. I might conceivably, though, have another chance to tell her, in a few sentences, about my research. What will I say? Will I start off by explicating the contradiction between the standards agenda and 'inclusive' education, and tell her that this space is a difficult and unrewarding one for intellectually subordinated students to inhabit? Will I find my way in through an anecdote of a piece of staffroom micropolitics, perhaps the analysis of examination results, and talk to her about the effects of new managerialism and the ways in which students are positioned within deficit discourses in relation to normative versions of achievement? Will I tell her about Shazia's surprise that I wanted to talk to 'all the stupid girls', and will I outline the subject positions commonly made available to 'special needs students'?

Perhaps the most, and the best, I can do will be to tell her a story about multiplicitous (though not infinite) meanings: a story in which actions and events may have many meanings, but in which the availability of those meanings is bounded by the discourses and discursive practices in play, and by the power relations through which they are constructed. It is a story of girls and young women making sense of themselves as school students in ways that are extraordinarily nuanced and complex, and which are deeply personalised at the same time as being politically situated and implicated. The story, and this thesis, suggest that the processes of intellectual subordination are located in discourses and discursive practices at systemic, institutional and interpersonal levels - indeed, these discourses and discursive practices *are* the micro/politics of 'special educational needs'. Both the challenge and the pleasure of the story is that it suggests that these processes are not amenable to simple causal explanations, or to linear and reductive prescriptions for change. In place of such reductiveness, this thesis argues instead for a sustained intellectual and practical engagement with the micro/politics of difference.

Appendix One
Letter to Heads of Faculty

Friday 10 October 1999

Dear

As part of my doctoral research, I am doing a case study of good practice at MSFG in relation to equal opportunities and the experiences of students with 'special educational needs'. For the rest of this term, and into the beginning of next term, I am working with selected Year Eleven students. I will then work with selected students in Years Nine and Seven. My intention is to accompany the students to lessons, to observe them, and at times to work alongside them, in the way that I would if I were supporting them. This will involve my being in lessons when I am not timetabled to be in them, on days on which I am not usually at school. The names of the staff in your faculty who would potentially be involved are listed below. With your permission, I would like to approach these teachers to see if they would be willing to accommodate me! I would stress that the privacy of students and staff will be protected. Please ask me if you would like more information, or a copy of my research proposal.

Yours sincerely,

Appendix Two
Letter to Parents/Carers

Monday 1 November 1999

Dear Parent/Carer

Research Into the Experiences of Students With Additional Educational Needs

In connection with my work at the Institute of Education, I am researching the experiences of students who, like your daughter, receive learning support at Meadway School for Girls. I would like your permission to interview your daughter about her experiences as a secondary school student. Her views and opinions are of great interest to me in my research, and may benefit students at Meadway and other schools in the future. The interview/s will not involve any disruption to your daughter's normal lesson timetable. If you would like more details about the research, please contact me at the school. If you are happy for your daughter to be interviewed, please complete and return the permission slip. Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Ms. S. Benjamin
(learning support teacher)

Student's name: _____

I give permission for Ms. Benjamin to interview my daughter.

Signed: _____

Appendix Three
Glossary of Abbreviations

CATs:	Cognitive Assessment Tests (non-statutory tests, taken in the first year of secondary schooling)
DES:	Department of Education and Science (until 1991)
DFE:	Department for Education (1991-1994)
DfEE:	Department for Education and Employment (from 1994)
EAL:	English as an Additional Language
EBD:	Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (statutory term for children and young people whose effect on classrooms is often disruptive, from 1981)
EiC:	Excellence in Cities (a governmental initiative to raise standards of pupil performance in designated inner-city areas)
EMTAG:	Ethnic Minority and Traveller Education Grant
ERA:	The Education Reform Act 1988
ESN (M):	Educationally Sub-Normal (Moderate) – one of eleven statutory categories of handicap established by the 1944 Education Act and abolished in 1981
ESN (S):	Educationally Sub-Normal (Severe)
G&T:	Gifted and Talented (introduced under the EiC initiative)
GCSE:	General Certificate of Secondary Education (examination for 16 year-olds at the end of their period of compulsory schooling)
HMI:	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools
IEP:	Individual Education Plan
ILEA:	Inner London Education Authority
JTC:	Junior Training Centre (for 'severely subnormal' children 1959-1970)
LEA:	Local Education Authority
MD:	Mentally Defective (designation for special schools and their pupils between 1921 and 1944)
MLD:	Moderate Learning Difficulties (statutory description, established 1981)
NARE:	National Association of Remedial Educators

OFSTED:	Office for Standards in Education
PANDA:	Performance and Assessment Data Analysis (comparative statistics compiled by the DfEE for every school, statutorily included in School Improvement Plans)
SATs:	Standard Assessment Tests (statutory tests taken by pupils aged seven, eleven and fourteen, at the end of Key Stages One, Two and Three respectively)
SEN:	Special Educational Needs
SENCO:	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (teacher with managerial responsibility for SEN provision)
SMART:	Targets for improvement that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-framed
SLD:	Severe Learning Difficultites (statutory description, established 1981)
SNA:	Special Needs Assistant (non-teaching support staff in schools)
T&D:	Training and Development (formerly known as in-service training)

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