

‘I think it helps you better when you’re not scared’: fear and learning in the primary classroom

Eleanore Hargreaves, Institute of Education, University of London, UK

The influence of fear on learning

It was exactly 50 years ago when progressive educator John Holt claimed:

Most children in school fail... they fail to develop more than a tiny part of the tremendous capacity for learning, understanding, and creating... Why do they fail? They fail because they are afraid... They are afraid, above all else, of failing, of disappointing or displeasing the many anxious adults around them (1964, 9).

This current article explores Holt’s claim that primary-aged children experience considerable amounts of fear at school and that often this fear is detrimental to valuable learning. In this article I use a broad conceptualisation of fear to include anxiety, nervousness, worry, feeling pressured, dreading things, being uncomfortably tense and panicking. Through observing and talking with primary-aged children themselves, I have attempted to grasp how fear might manifest itself today, what children fear in classrooms today, how fear might affect them and their learning, and, finally, what they and their teachers might do productively to deal with its various manifestations.

Fear was not seen by Holt as just a hazard in the lessons where it occurred, but as a factor that could have longer term influences on how children approached learning and even life more generally. During Moore’s (2013) research in a UK classroom, he observed fearful behaviours by pupils and described children’s disappointment at the lack of authentic relationship they could consequently pursue with their teachers. Fear can promote an

'individual retreat to privacy' (Lemke et al. 2011, 113) whereby pupils repress their creative or critical voices under a 'veil of compliance', as revealed in Fisher's (2011) detailed study in primary classrooms. Murata (2015, forthcoming) illustrated how when students felt threatened by the classroom, they might be less willing to go beyond what felt *safe* to learn. On the other hand, as Jackson's (2010) interview data from secondary students indicated, a further expectation led to yet more fear: the fear of being perceived to be afraid. Young people have come to understand that to be truly successful one must be able to 'handle pressure' and hide fear. These studies suggested that fear could have detrimental and potentially long-lasting influences over learning; and as such deserved further attention.

Authoritarian pedagogy

Fear is rarely written about in educational research literature and, like other emotions that children experience in classrooms, has tended to receive less emphasis than it may warrant, given its potential impact on learning (Moore 2013). This may help explain why teachers, as well as trying to reduce children's fear, sometimes also depend on it to coerce children to do what adults require (Jackson 2010). This may be because the use of fear in classrooms is taken for granted, in the same way that authoritarian pedagogies are accepted. There appears to be a close relationship between fear, coercion and the authoritarian approaches to pedagogy that are almost universal in schools. It is the fear related to these approaches that this article explores. My assumption is that where there is authoritarian pedagogy, there will be coercion as the teacher asserts his/her order *over* the pupils; and that where there is coercion, there will also be fear. Holt's (1964, 175) view seems to make sense:

The idea of painless, non-threatening coercion is an illusion. Fear is the inseparable companion of coercion, and its inescapable consequence.

Education itself has to do with the necessary tension between authority and freedom, expressed in the asymmetric relationship between adult and child (Saevi 2015, forthcoming). The learning capacity of the child can be more or less nurtured or repressed by the adult aiming to teach the child, in part depending on their use of coercion. Different scripts may exist and conflict with each other in any one classroom: the teacher's monologic script and the students' counterscripts (Murata 2015, forthcoming). The teaching and learning strategy can be constructed strongly or weakly, where strong constructions imply that teachers restrict rather than open up meanings, interpretations and actions. In authoritarian classrooms across most countries of the world, teaching and learning strategies tend to be strong so that the teacher's ultimate control of the classroom is non-negotiable:

While the degree of harshness and despotism within authoritarian schools varies from context to context and from institution to institution, in the majority of schools power over what is taught and learned, how it is taught and learned, where it is taught and learned, when it is taught and learned and what the general learning environment is like is not in the hands of pupils ... Authoritarian schools are therefore schools that reproduce and perpetrate – not only the socio-economic and political inequalities of the surrounding society, including gender relationships, but also the violent relationships that often go with them. (Harber 2015, forthcoming)

Postholm (2012) differentiated between the power of the *authoritative* versus the *authoritarian* word. The authoritative word of the teacher was based on validation

reflecting a person's best reflective judgement. The authoritarian word argued for one non-negotiable 'right' view embodied in the figure of the teacher. Different embodiments of authoritarianism are underpinned by coercion in more or less subtle ways, sometimes masking its presence. Meighan and Harber (2007) differentiated between six forms of authoritarianism, each of which allowed progressively more transformational means for establishing order in classroom learning and depended increasingly less on coercion. Their spectrum of authoritarianism included: autocratic; parental; charismatic; organisational; expert; and consultative. Teachers could exercise an authoritarian approach in any or all of these senses in one classroom. With the *autocratic* form, the link with fear – often manifested as violence - was straightforward:

Order is imposed through fear, which may be either physical or psychological. The images related to this form are those of a dictator, commanding officer or ringmaster. (2007, 238).

However, with the parental form of authoritarianism, order was obtained through a more subtle use of coercion, exercised through deference from pupils; and the related images were of father, mother, priest or village policeman. In this case, fear might occur but this was fear of disappointing the revered teacher rather than being punished by them. The charismatically authoritarian teacher might depend on fear, as their teaching relied on personal magnetism, public performance skills or emotional persuasion in a similar way to that of the Pied Piper: whose sweet music ultimately attracted children to their fate. In organisational authoritarianism, fear could be generated by an inflexibly applied organisational structure; while the expert authoritarian teacher relied, to enforce order, on being the 'primary knower' (Nasaji & Wells 2000) because of possessing superior

knowledge. The consultant authoritarian, finally, confirmed his/her legitimacy by drawing on feedback from pupils but not necessarily acting directly on this.

Lefstein (2002, 1631-2 drawing on Foucault 1978) summarized four systemic structures which embodied the authoritarian approach as a means of enabling teachers to control students' actions:

1. Distribution of pupils in particular, prescribed groupings, often to ensure pupils did not communicate with each other;
2. Teachers' control of the activity, whereby the teacher dictated the content, pace and order of pupils' activities;
3. Hierarchical observation, whereby figures more powerful even than the teacher were near at hand to enforce obedience; and
4. The normalising judgement or examination, by which pupils were labelled as failing or otherwise.

It can be hard to imagine teaching and learning without authoritarianism, since the two are so closely inter-linked. A teacher or pupil from any formal classroom will recognize the range of authoritarian manifestations, from autocratic to consultative, and the four surveillance structures that tend to accompany those. When considered from this perspective, it seems likely that fear will be operating in all those classrooms.

Murata has proposed that the *interaction model* of pedagogy is one alternative to the authoritarian model, because in the former, diversity rather than coercion is the driving force of learning (2015 forthcoming). Closely related, Mezirow (2009) defined *transformative learning* (more loosely known as *transformational learning*) as learning which involved diversification and change in a person's meaning perspectives, frames of reference and habits

of mind. Children's learning seen from this perspective could be supported and encouraged by an adult but never coerced. This is because in this approach, learning:

a) is subjectively significant in a person's life, not trivial and not imposed by someone else;

b) involves cognitive, emotional *and* social aspects of the person's being and therefore explicitly draws on emotions as crucial parts of learning; and

c) generates some substantial change of perspective in the learner's life which enables them, and perhaps others, to live in a more fulfilled way.

The two practices essential for learners in this approach are: first, critical reflection; and second, a full and free participation in dialectical discourse to validate a best reflective judgement. While the processes of the *interaction model* of pedagogy might be accompanied by some anxiety, nervousness and discomfort as transformations occur, these fears might be assumed to be qualitatively different than when produced by coercion, given that they are contained within the individual's own choices and pathways. Fear born of coercion contrasts with this because it appears boundless and out of the control of the student. It was in the concept of coercion that I searched for and found manifestations of fear among pupils in the current study.

Research design

In keeping with critical theory, my aim was to develop knowledge that was potentially transformational itself by unmasking pedagogical practices that limited human freedom. I agree with Lather (2007), that research should give a voice to those social actors who have been traditionally marginalised, and in this process start to undermine and subvert the agendas held by those with more power in the world than others. In this research, I listened to the rarely-heard voices of primary-aged pupils and how they expressed fearful feelings

about learning in the classroom. The topic of fear seems itself to have been marginalized, along with other emotions in learning. The research questions I addressed comprised:

Do the sample pupils [and teachers] believe that fear manifests itself in the primary classroom?

If so, what do they perceive happens to pupils and their learning when they feel fear?

What do they think they are afraid of?

How do they suggest that fear might be overcome or addressed?

The head teacher of the English primary school where I carried out my research, and especially the two class teachers whose pupils I interviewed, explained that they promoted transformational approaches to learning. The school was a large, state school in Surrey, to the south of London in UK, whose pupils came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. The school had been relegated to 'Special Measures' following inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), whose role as a government body was to monitor, compare and grade schools in England. This was the weakest rating they could have been awarded, suggesting that the school was neither 'outstanding' nor 'good' nor even 'satisfactory'. However, rather than encouraging the teachers to take fewer risks and follow prescriptions more closely, this negative inspection result had led to a series of initiatives which focused on increasingly transformational aspects of pedagogy.

For example, the Year 6 [10-11 year old] and the Year 3 [7-8 year old] pupils' class teachers who provided my sample interviewees, both aimed to support children's critical reflection in order to develop understanding of themselves and their role in particular contexts; of their relationships with others and their influence in these; and to develop visions for alternative

approaches to learning and being. Both teachers decried teachers' use of fear as detrimental to children's valuable learning.

Data collection and analysis

There were four triangulated data collection methods which were used in each of two classes, the Year 3 class and the Year 6 class:

- observation of classes;
- whole class drawing exercise;
- completing sentences exercise; and
- interviews.

Observations

For consistency, I made four observations of literacy in each class, prior to interviewing pupils from each observed class. I used incidents I had noticed during the observed lesson as prompts for further discussions during interview after the class. For example, I noticed that one child seemed reluctant to read out her story to the class, so later in interview I talked to her about this.

Whole class drawing exercise

The first observation I made was of the whole class drawing exercise in a Year 6 literacy class. Each of the two class teachers [Year 3 and Year 6] had made for each pupil an A3 sheet with two huge bubbles printed on it. One bubble was labelled 'what helps my learning' and the other 'what hinders my learning'. In each class, a whole-class discussion was held first and then individual pupils [N=60] filled their bubbles with drawings and/or labels. Both classes carried out similar meta-learning tasks on a regular basis so that this

exercise was not unfamiliar to them. For example, pupils were expected to identify three sources of help, when they faced a problem, before they considered asking the teacher. The research task was a similar means to investigate what factors pupils saw as helpful in learning. It also aimed to explore which elements pupils found unhelpful and whether fear was mentioned without solicitation. Those pupils who did volunteer a mention of fear in their drawings/labels were my first choice for interviewing.

Completed sentences

Following the drawing exercise, 58 sets of completed sentences were collected from the combined children of the two classes. The question-sheets were administered by the class teachers and given to me afterwards. The incomplete sentences that the children had to complete consisted of the following:

Children learn best when...

I sometimes feel afraid at school when...

When I feel afraid and then I try to learn, the result is...

The best way to get rid of fear in the classroom is...

In both the exercises that included children's free writing, when reproducing their words, spellings have been corrected but sentence structure has not.

Interviews

Eight interviews were carried out with a mixture of fourteen Year 6 children; and eight with a mixture of fourteen Year 3 children (see Table 1). Interviews lasted between eight and 46 minutes and included one, two, three or four children at a time. Children were interviewed once, twice or three times, depending on their availability, friendship groups and responses

they gave in previous encounters. All the interviews were carried out in a quiet office off the school library between May and July, 2013. For ethical reasons, all names below are pseudonyms.

Table 1 here please

It was important not to place the idea of fear into the children's minds so that its occurrence took on a magnified appearance. The word fear was therefore never used in my interviews with children, but open conversations explored classroom situations when fear was likely to manifest itself. For example, I asked, 'What is it like for you when your neighbour comments on your work? How do you feel?'

Two teacher interviews were carried out, one with each class teacher: Miss Thorn in Year 3 and Mrs Wesley in Year 6. Each of these lasted 47 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed before being analysed.

Analysis

During analysis, all four sources of data were examined separately and then together. In each data set, themes were sought from the words of the children. These were refined as the texts were re-read and investigated again. The presentation made below illustrates some key themes that found resonance across two or more of the data sources.

Ethical issues

I adhered to the British Sociological Association guidelines for ensuring ethical good practice. The class teachers gathered the written consent of both child and their guardian, having explained clearly what the research was about. I took great care not to let slip during a subsequent activity what a child had told me via a previous data collection activity. The

children were reassured on every data collection occasion that their responses would be confidential.

FINDINGS

Children's descriptions of fear in the classroom

Initially I searched the data for indications that fear actually *existed* in the classrooms. When asked in the drawing exercise to indicate what they believed made their classroom learning difficult (without any mention of fear) responses included feeling 'really, really scared', worrying, feeling pressured, dreading things, being tense, panicking and 'complete nervousness' among many others. While it is essential to bear in mind that a range of other feelings and factors were also mentioned by the children, I focus below exclusively on those related to fear in its widest sense (defined above).

It became obvious that fear was indeed one common experience of many children in the sample; and one that the teachers also recognised. The Year 3 teacher, Miss Thorn, described an all-pervasive fear experienced for example by Carl [Year 3] as follows:

Miss Thorn: He's so fearful of everything all the time...

EH: So what would his worst nightmare in the classroom be?

Miss Thorn: Coming in and not having a clue what was going on, and then not being able to do it, and being criticised for not doing it right... If they did that to Carl, he would probably run away and never come back.

Another child, Saul, was fearful '... to the point of really feeling sick, almost. He used to get tummy pains if he was worried about things'. About Anna, Miss Thorn told me:

She really worries about everything. She doesn't like that she finds things tricky, she's fearful of some of the other children on her table, she's fearful of upsetting Sue [the Teaching Assistant], she's fearful of upsetting me...

Mary, in Year 3, told me what happened when she was 'told off' by Miss Thorn:

I was really, really scared, and I cried. Luckily, it was nearly break time, and it took ages for me to calm down... I was crying so much when I was eating my apple, I was choking.

Laura, a Year 6 pupil, described how silence in the classroom made her fearful, explaining:

You feel like really lonely... I know there's, like, people around you, but it just feels like they're not really there. It's just- like there's a lot of tension in the air when it's like that.

It was Laila [Year 3] who advised: 'I think it helps you better when you're not scared'. The children explained distractedness as one outcome of feeling scared:

I lose my confidence and mess up my learning

You're too busy thinking about what has happened and there is not enough room in your head for learning

I won't be as involved in the lesson as normal.

Sapphire, a relatively tall Year 6 girl, described how one occasion of fear led to her going 'blank' and then feeling really small:

Everything just goes blank... And you just, your mind is so, not really focused, but just so focused on everyone else... Sometimes I feel like everyone's like so much taller than me... and then the teacher's like really, really big.

Children in both year groups described how their learning slowed down, their handwriting deteriorated and in general they found it harder to concentrate when they were scared. As one Year 6 respondent wrote: 'I keep getting [a glass of] water and try to concentrate but my head spins'. Anna in Year 3 suggested that sometimes fear reduced her motivation to keep trying: 'It feels like you have hit a brick wall because you don't want to go any further'. This behaviour, many of them felt, could lead to poor outcomes in class work and tests.

Children's descriptions of what they feared

Much of the fear of the 60 children in this study, including the 28 pupils interviewed, seemed to be directed towards future negative consequences in the classroom. These might be punishments or cross and disappointed words from teachers; they might be embarrassing or hostile words or actions by other pupils; or they might be consequences brought about by the perceived incompetence of the children themselves, and in this last sense related to a significant but vague sense of general fearfulness.

Fear in relation to teachers

I think they're scared that I will be disappointed in them... so I think they don't want to fail in *my* eyes [Mrs Wesley, Year 6 teacher].

Mrs Wesley seemed to regard this fear-of-disappointing as a neutral if not positive factor, rather than as an indicator of teacher coercion. But the pupils feared letting teachers down, even when teachers did not usually punish pupils. Pupils wrote in the sentences that they feared taking tests because they were afraid they would do badly and so let their teachers down.

Peter [Year 6] said explicitly that he liked reading out his work in class in order to 'impress' the teacher, again suggesting the dominance of the teacher as final judge from his

perspective. On the other hand, Anna feared upsetting the teacher so much that she would not always believe in the confidentiality I promised her during interview. These responses suggest that in some ways the two teachers were operating parental authoritarian approaches, rather than autocratic ones, using the less violent coercion of being disappointed rather than angry. However, there were still specific school-wide sanctions in place for certain behaviours, which appeared, and were presumably intended, to frighten the children - such as the punishment system of yellow and red warning 'cards' [small pieces of coloured cardboard] for bad behaviour. The red card led to having to speak to the head or deputy head teacher, of whom many children were frightened. In addition, the offense was written in the 'home talk' books for parents to see. This might be seen as a clear example of hierarchical observation, whereby the whole school system supported the teacher's means for controlling the children.

Other punishments that scared and controlled the pupils were: being moved away from friends [Evlyn, Year 6] and getting the 'mean' look from the teacher [Andrew, Year 6]. Peter [Year 6] was particularly worried about being kept in at lunchtime:

I think the only times when I feel scared *and* tense is when I'm told in the first lesson "You're staying in at lunch," so then I have like several other lessons to go through worrying about that, so I think that's a really bad thing... I just feel like collapsing.

Although they often told me that their teachers were good and patient, some children were scared that the teacher would be cross if they did not know how to answer a question. Perhaps this was associated with the teacher's perceived role as expert authoritarian or primary knower (Nassaji and Wells 2000). Sapphire described how she was scared to

answer a question in class, and asked herself: “Shall I answer? And if I get it wrong, what am I going to do?” Miss Thorn narrated how Mary [Year 3] struggled to hear any criticism:

If I wrote a comment in her book, like: “Please can you try and put in your capital letters and full stops,” something like that, she would burst into tears, because she would take it really personally that she had failed.

Carl [Year 3] became especially scared if he perceived the teacher to be ‘tired’ and therefore less patient than usual. When the teacher was experienced as the charismatic authoritarian, this dependence on the teacher’s mood could assume dramatically negative effects. In this case, Carl’s fear led him to avoid asking the teacher a question, potentially a detrimental act for learning.

The children described being frightened by shouting; so perhaps this fear was at the back of their minds whenever they did something that might be disapproved of. Mrs Wesley said she rarely shouted at Year 6 because she felt children learnt more when they were not afraid. In this case she appeared to be rejecting authoritarian pedagogy. However, other teachers in the same school still used fear to impose order. For example, the teacher in the next door classroom made Mrs Wesley’s class scared because the children could hear her shouting at another class through their wall. And of Mr Omer, deputy head teacher, Andrew [Year 6] simply stated: ‘That man is scary!’ Norbert [Year 6] called him ‘terrifying’ while Jem [Year 6] described him as: ‘Like a tiger - you have to keep eye contact with it, otherwise it pounces on you’.

The Year 3 children, in contrast, seemed particularly scared of the head teacher of the school. Mary [Year 3] said:

She really freaks me out... when she shouts down the corridor I'm like (*screams*)...

I'm scared she'll tell me off.

Nearly all the interview children advised teachers not to shout if they wanted best learning [Emerald, Mary, Harold, Geraldine, Saul, Carl - Year 3s; Delida, Jem, Norbert, Andrew, Jack - Year 6s]. Jem [Year 6] advised:

If you're telling someone off, don't be all shouty and everything. Because if you [as a pupil] hear- if there's shouting, you kind of get scared.

Fear of hostile words or actions by other pupils

Jem also showed an awareness of the increasing potential for embarrassment among older children in primary school, which was presumably something the teacher could take into account:

If you're in year four, five and six [ages 8-11], maybe, you might get scared because you're really self-conscious kind of thing. Because you think everyone's looking at yourself.... I think I feel a bit more scared in front of the girls, because they always like giggle to each other and stuff...

Norbert [Year 6] mentioned his fear of speaking out in class, in case class colleagues came to know him as the person who couldn't speak well in front of class. Andrew [Year 6] did not ask questions in class in case his peers considered him to be weak. Peter [Year 6] was afraid to answer questions in class in case he was seen to be 'geeky'. Mrs Wesley narrated how Jack [Year 6] had been so afraid to admit that he could be wrong, he had consistently failed to act on her written feedback comments. Fear of looking stupid was particularly acute for

Mona too, Mrs Wesley suspected, because she was 'at the bottom end of the [top literacy] set' in a school where pupils were separated according to their prior attainments, for mathematics and literacy.

Other Year 6 pupils told of feeling fear of bullying more generally and of nasty comments from peers which hurt, including racist comments and derogatory comments about height. Sometimes one such bad experience on the playground during break could make pupils scared during lessons, fearing impending trouble. Jem and Paul [Year 6s] were anxious to feel sure that everyone was their friend before they could concentrate properly on their work. These comments highlighted the interconnections among social, emotional and cognitive aspects of classroom behaviour, and how fear pervaded these.

Even in Year 3, Harold calculated that it took him 'about three days' to recover from his embarrassment when he had not been following the lesson and said the wrong thing: 'Everyone started laughing and I got really embarrassed and red'. During observation, I watched another Year 3 pupil, Saul, being called to the front of class to read a list off a flipchart. He was shaking, or as he described it, 'shivering' with fear. Geraldine [Year 3] said she found it particularly embarrassing reading with older (Year 5) pupils during 'paired reading' in case they thought she was 'dumb'.

Some children, then, feared being put in an embarrassing situation and would avoid this whenever possible, even when this diminished their learning opportunities. Such fear of in-class relationships suggests that non-authoritarian pedagogy was still limited in these classrooms. It seemed that the physical layout of the classroom did not lend itself to working on relationships with peers and nor did the tightly-packed curriculum that the

teacher had to cover in limited time. These seemed to support a more authoritarian approach to both, leading to particular fears.

Given the fear potential provoked by other children's views, I was interested to know how well peer assessment worked in the case study classrooms. Peer assessments were good examples of the teachers striving to operationalise more democratic and less authoritarian assessment practices. However, the following Year 3 dialogue suggested that fear could still hinder learning through peer assessment because of the children's lingering worry about being wrong in a system where diversity and critique were under-valued:

EH: Do you ever get anxious when someone's assessing your story?

Saul: I feel a bit anxious, because I don't know what they're going to write. And if they write something... that makes me anxious just in case they write something -

EH: Something negative? Something bad?... And what would happen if they did?...

Anna: Saul would probably go cuckoo (*Laughter*)...

Saul: I'd feel a bit angry with them, because it's not really a kind comment.

Anna: I just wouldn't feel confident. I wouldn't be confident in writing a story again.

All the Year 3 children worried about what their peers would say about their work during peer assessments. Harris, Harold and Rory [Year 3s] also worried about feeding back on someone else's work, in case they could not do this as they were supposed to. Harris sometimes found his peer's work all correct with nothing wrong to comment on. Harold did not understand the assessment prompts provided by Miss Thorn. Rory could not read his partner's writing – nor could he relate the assessment prompts to his own writing – but he was afraid to ask. These were good examples of where more democratic, transformational

approaches to learning were as yet under-developed and thus contributing to increasing fears rather than reducing them.

Fear of being lost

There seemed to be a fear among the sample children of being 'lost', either physically, cognitively or emotionally. The large numbers of children spending days together in an enclosed environment with relatively few adults might have contributed to this aspect of fearfulness. Such environments were constructed specifically to allow the few teachers to maximise their control over the large numbers of pupils, perhaps making an alienating environment more likely. The Year 3 children described the frightening experience of being physically lost when they first arrived at this school last autumn. The Year 6 students talked about their fears of unknown secondary schools that they were soon to enter. More generally, children felt scared when the people they were with were unfamiliar, whether adults or children, again highlighting the links among social, emotional and cognitive aspects of classroom learning. For example, children wrote that they were afraid:

When I learn with teachers I don't know

When you're on a table with no friends

[When] there is an inspector or someone monitoring my lesson.

But there was a less tangible but more intense sense of fear, related to not knowing how to be or what to do in this environment. Year 3 children described this crippling fear when:

I don't think I can do it and I don't believe in myself

I am rubbish at something and I don't feel confident.

Harris [Year 3] described how Carl [Year 3] would go red in the face and become very still when he felt this kind of debilitating fear. Miss Thorn added:

Every time he doesn't understand a concept immediately he cries, so you have to take him out... and it always needs one-to-one reassurance from an adult, always.

Andrew and Norbert [Year 6s] recognised this sense of fear in other people whom they pitied, relating it to the inflexible rules of the classroom:

Andrew: When the teacher says to someone, "Stand up!" it's someone who's about to cry because they're not doing it right. I really want to just break the rules and help them...

Norbert: When that's you, it's worse, because nobody can help you. You feel like you're trapped in a bubble.

Kath [Year 6] had noticed that if she panicked in this way, she found the learning task even more difficult. Her teacher commented that this led her not to speak in class, which would have hindered her capacity for critical reflection and collaborative dialogue. It was striking that some children brought up the topic of silence in the classroom, something that they were not familiar with outside the classroom: silence therefore contributed to this sense of panicky uncertainty. Both Clare and Jerry [Year 3s] claimed they felt uncomfortable when it was silent, while Carl [Year 3] found it 'creepy', all of which stopped them from concentrating. A legacy from the traditional classroom in which the teacher dominated in an autocratic way, silence was evidently still seen as a somewhat fearsome means for the teacher to sustain order over her pupils.

Strategies suggested by pupils for dealing with fear

The sample children and their teachers showed awareness of fear and made ingenious suggestions as to how to deal with it. There were two main sets of factors that affected how well they dealt with fear: contextual factors; and pupil actions. The pupils did not however, tend to identify particular solutions to specific fears, mainly conceptualising fear as one coherent whole, even when they had previously described a range of its different angles.

Contextual factors that helped reduce fear

In order to address that panicky uncertainty which often equated to a crisis in a child's learning confidence, the respondents suggested that evidence of success and progress in the child's work might be helpful. Mrs Wesley in Year 6 followed a programme called The Thoughtful Learner, which helped children recognise what kind of learners they were, so that they could identify and then build on their strengths. This actively promoted the critical self-awareness which would allow the pupil to assess their own situation with more integrity. Mrs Wesley mentioned that the Year 6 self-assessment portfolios were also useful, in which pupils collected samples of their best performances during the year. She explained how Mona had feared she would be stuck at the 'bottom' of the class forever, but the portfolios had supported her to 'see that clear journey' of improvement. Perhaps these portfolios gave pupils a sense of their own power and its impact on their classroom actions. It was possibly the reduction of this sense of power that contributed to fear in a hierarchical classroom.

During class time, both teachers emphasised that pupils should use the resources around them as supports for learning, making the children less dependent on the teacher's control.

Both teachers operated a 'three-before-me' system, suggesting children looked for three alternative sources of support before asking the teacher. This gradual 'fading' or 'transfer of responsibility' (Van de Pol, Volman and Beishuizen 2012, 285) contributed to transforming children from dependent to more self-critical learners. At this point, the asymmetry of the relation between teacher and pupil decreased (Saevi 2015, forthcoming), but this change was made in a supportive rather than fearsome environment.

During the drawing exercise, some Year 6 pupils [n=16] stressed the importance of being organised and having the appropriate resources at one's finger-tips, in order to become less dependent on the teacher. Children from both classes named the following resources as useful for feeling self-reliant and/or creative rather than dependent and/or lost: books, the 'stuck board' (which explicitly had suggestions for people who were 'stuck'), dictionaries, thesauruses, clear learning objectives, self-assessments, displays, films and computers; and many children mentioned the VCOP pyramid [n=23] in which reminders about grammar and writing presentation were provided. The pupils seemed to find dependence on the teacher more anxiety-provoking than directing their own learning.

In Year 6, they had a dial on the wall which indicated clearly which working mode was appropriate: "Silent," "Talking quietly," "Discussion with partner" or "Discussion in groups." This meant the children need not be fearful of talking if one of the talking/discussion options had been selected, which encouraged them to engage in critical and collaborative dialogues. However, it was still the teacher who decided which mode was selected.

Familiarity with one's context and the people in it was a key support, according to the sample children and their teachers, in diminishing their fears. In the case study school, children were strongly encouraged to collaborate and talk with peers as an everyday part of

learning. It was not surprising then, that during the drawing exercise, many pupils put their partner or friend down as one of the factors that most helped their learning [n=41]. In interview, Laura and Sapphire [Year 6s] mentioned that the 'phone a friend' strategy was reassuring (whereby a pupil may nominate a peer to help them) if someone felt fearful and thus lacked confidence. Miss Thorn described several pupils in her Year 3 class who could reduce their neighbour's fear in various ways. For example, Miss Thorn said of Harold:

He just has this really calming influence on other children and will listen to them and respond to them.

The pupils (and teachers) showed some subtle insights into the kind of support a teacher should give children in order to reduce fear. In the drawing exercise, several Year 6 children [n=9] indicated that constructive teacher feedback including praise helped boost their confidence for learning, thus reducing their fear. Laura [Year 6] explained in interview why praise was important to dispel pupils' panicky sense of uncertainty:

Just to help them feel good about themselves... Just to build up their confidence and make them happy... Not every single lesson, because they might get a bit bored of it, but just say: "Well done, you've improved."

In some senses, however, teacher praise belongs to the authoritarian rather than the transformational teacher, because whoever has the right to praise also has the right to judge negatively (Henderlong and Lepper 2002).

A critical trait for the teacher to diminish fear stemming from lack of familiarity, was their practice of listening to children and not assuming that all children think and feel the same. This suggestion for reducing fear addresses a foundational aspect of autocratic pedagogies, in which the teacher keeps his/her distance as a superior 'dictator' or 'expert'. Delida [Year

6] noted that Mrs Wesley always let her have 'her say' (even though other children had told me otherwise). Peter and Jack [Year 6s] felt that the supportive teacher 'really understands you' and 'really takes the time to not just get to know you but she really helps individuals.' On this note, Norbert [Year 6] advised teachers that a good way to improve the authority gap between pupils and teachers was:

Find out what [the children are] interested in, maybe start a club to do with that, and then you can get to know them more.

Norbert was here describing what Saevi might call "... the adult's responsible ability and willingness to dwell in a kind of a moral-pedagogical hesitation on behalf of the uniqueness of the child" (2015, forthcoming). This kind of fear-reducing teacher would not let you suffer in silence like the old-fashioned autocratic teacher. Paul [Year 6] and Adelaide [Year 3] particularly appreciated being able to ask the teacher questions on the spot as one would do at home among family. And Sapphire suggested that this kind of fear-reducing teacher would walk around among the pupils in class frequently: if they 'see that [children] are feeling down, you could just pull them over aside when it's break time'.

Teachers who were attuned to the pupil's feelings of fear could also play a role in reducing these. This surely characterises the teacher who is reducing the authoritarian aspects of the teacher-pupil relationship. Sapphire [Year 6] was able to get on with her learning when Mr Omer (the one that some people found scary) noted that she was worried about her friend who had broken her arm:

He came up to me and said, "Are you all right?" Because he could tell that I was slightly worried. And he... just helped me and I got on with the next lesson. I was all happy. I was still thinking about it, but I was much happier.

Mrs Wesley noted that it is 'just one word, or it's a hand on the shoulder', a high five or a wink that can help the child feel empowered to move on in their learning and overcome their fearful feelings, perhaps because the child now felt connected.

Pupil actions to address fear

The children in both classes had conscious strategies for addressing various fears themselves which required minimal help from the teacher, itself an indication to themselves that they were capable of acting independently. The strategies could be categorised into four inter-related sets: physical solutions; thinking about something else; talking; and making an effort to break through the pain of fear.

Physical remedies to any feeling of fear, suggested by the children, included letting off steam outside; football; enjoying bright colours; listening to calming music; taking a deep breath; drawing the fearsome object and throwing the drawing into the bin; taking it easy and taking as much time as needed; and having a break from work for a few minutes to calm down. During observation, I was able to see both teachers allowing pupils to engage in these activities when the pupils themselves regarded it as necessary. In this way they presumably minimised the time lost to learning blocked by fear.

Ellie [Year 6] suggested overcoming fear by diverting oneself through thinking about something pleasant: 'Talking about happier things, like, something that's happened that you're really happy about... Like, if you go on a day out and have loads of fun'. This strategy would help children to forget their fear, and it could be a temporary or permanent remedy. Pupils implied some effort in pushing the fear away, for example: 'I sometimes *try and ignore* everything' and '*Block it out* so you can concentrate' or '*Pretend* it didn't happen' [my

emphasis]. Perhaps for this solution to be more permanent, some root causes of fear would need to be addressed too, possibly in an open discussion.

A high proportion of children [n=18] wrote in the sentences that they found the best way to deal with fear in the classroom was talking with a friend. Your friend might cheer you up, laugh with you or might offer to sort things out. One child wrote: 'Tell someone: if you keep it to yourself, the fear will be much greater than before'. Whether this talk would include critical reflection and also involve a supportive teacher, it was unfortunately not clear. Discussions characterized by an inquiry stance would have presumably provided greater opportunities for learning that was transformational.

Some children referred explicitly to a particular frame of mind in which the learner recognised his/her fear, worked hard with it, and little by little broke through to an achievement that had seemed too difficult beforehand. This was not always through collaboration. One Year 3 sentence advised the fearful pupil:

Say in your head, 'Don't be scared! You can fight through the fear and enjoy the time you're with whoever-it-is making you scared!'

Laura [Year 6] described how from this perspective the most important thing was having a go (even though other pupils' comments had made this strategy sound challenging): 'It doesn't matter if you get it wrong or right. It's not the end of the world. It's just that you're doing your best'. In the drawing exercise, several Year 6 pupils indicated having a 'positive attitude' as one of the most useful attributes for learning [n=10]. Jack [Year 6] even saw the value in being pushed out of his comfort zone:

Because if you're challenged you can, you know - it makes you a better learner. You don't want to be just doing things that you just like doing... You don't want to just be in your comfort zone...You want to be pushed, yeah.

Providing opportunities whereby pupils choose to move from the comfort zone into the realm of potentially risky new possibilities is a key aim of transformational rather than authoritarian pedagogy. While such moves might appear frightening in some ways too, this is a fear chosen and directed by the pupil rather than the teacher.

Discussion

The results reported here suggested that the children in the two case study classes experienced a range of fears which seemed to be related to the authoritarianism of the classroom. However, this authoritarianism was infrequently autocratic and tended towards the more democratic end of the spectrum described by Meighan and Harber (2007). Indeed, at times the children displayed behaviours and strategies characteristic of some transformational aspects of learning - as explicitly desired by their two teachers. However, the fact that they experienced frequent and sometimes intense fears was indisputable; hand in hand with the school's tenacity to traditional authoritarian pedagogy (as well as the more transformative pedagogies). However, the pupils showed themselves to exercise significant independence in their capacity both to recognise and to address debilitating fear and if their teachers were able to take on board their suggestions, some important steps towards transformation in learning seemed possible. Even so, the children's comments suggested that the traditional structures of teacher authoritarianism might interfere excessively with transformational aims. The crux of the matter appeared to be the coercion these structures continued to wield over the pupils. Surprising, even shocking, as this may seem, coercion

continued to underpin nearly all classroom activities, despite the teachers' alternative aspirations. Perhaps the teachers, like many other educators, had come to accept authoritarian pedagogy as normal. But perhaps this *status quo* needs to be challenged.

For example, being coerced at times to sit in silence and away from friends could be, the pupils claimed, both frightening and detrimental to their learning. The separation between classroom and playground led to further disturbing fears of impending threats. Being kept away from friends at lunch time as a punishment led to resentment as well as fear, and perhaps interfered with the child's developing identity and sense of belonging. In Year 6 especially, these aspects of learning needed particular focus in order to support the personal identity formation that is all-absorbing for this age group (Eckert, Goldman and Wenger 1996). The pupils' suggestion that the teacher should get to know his/her pupils on an *individual and social level* would go some way to addressing fears related to the enforced distribution – and separation - of pupils.

The source of coercion – and fear – was that the teacher controlled the pace, order and nature of all the pupils' school activities. The children's choices were limited by the teacher which meant their sense of self and their own judgements were insufficiently developed. Despite overtly encouraging critical self-reflection, peer dialogue and peer assessment, and providing a range of self-help resources, ultimately the teachers called the tune. For this reason, fear of disappointing or failing the teacher affected the children dramatically. A complete re-evaluation of the role of authoritarianism in teaching and learning is therefore called for.

What became evident in this study was the children's fear of their constant surveillance by the teacher and her senior colleagues. Not only did the teacher give them the 'mean look'

when they were not working hard, but the pupils seemed to sense that they should be concentrating and understanding correctly all the time. There was little freedom for taking it easy or for thinking about what (to them) were more important issues, such as playground relationships. A slip in their attention risked causing a teacher to shout in a scary way. The children's suggestion sounds obvious but may be useful that teachers should try not to shout but to talk quietly to pupils in private, and that they should walk around the classroom to find out how children are feeling rather than to reprimand their behaviour in an autocratic way.

The teachers' hierarchical observation is linked to the normalising judgement. In its widest sense, this seemed to be experienced by pupils as a belief that they needed to become something better: that who they were and what they could do was always open to the teacher's criticism. The pupils in this sample also described their fears of tests and SATs [government-produced national tests] which compounded their sense of the hierarchical observation. And this fear of not being 'normal' in an acceptable way led to some of the most destructive habits against transformational learning: not daring to answer a question, fearing to ask the teacher a question, fearing to admit being uncertain in front of the teacher and/or peers, fearing to be in the wrong 'ability set' – which were all related to their fear of the normalising judgement. It was in some of these ways that the children failed to 'develop more than a tiny part of the tremendous capacity for learning, understanding, and creating' (Holt, 1964, 9); they failed to take risks; failed to trust their own judgments; and were constrained by the judgements of their peers as well as teachers.

In conclusion, it appeared obvious from this study that there were teacher and pupil strategies that could reduce classroom fears and increase transformational approaches to

learning. However, as schools head towards an unpredictable but surely dramatically different future, introducing strategies within the authoritarian paradigm may not be enough. A fundamental re-evaluation of the teacher-pupil relationship is necessary. This is where the fear owned by teachers needs also to be mentioned - the fear belonging to 'the many anxious adults' who care for pupils (Holt 1964, 9). Pupils, parents, policy-makers and most especially teachers themselves, need to address explicitly teachers' own fears of being reprimanded or of losing control in the classroom. This confrontation may help to challenge the *status quo* of the authoritarian classroom, along with its disadvantages for learning including fear.

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