Learner Identities, Assessment and Equality in Early Years Education

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2011
Abstract:

This thesis is concerned with issues of policy and equality in early years classrooms in England. It explores the impact of an assessment system introduced in 2003, the Foundation Stage Profile, on Reception classes of four- and five-year-old pupils.

A theoretical framework influenced by poststructural conceptions of discourse and identity, feminist and postcolonial studies and Critical Race Theory is employed to examine how circulating discourses reinforced by the Foundation Stage Profile prescribe a particular notion of 'learning' and the 'learner' which works to exclude some groups of children from positions of educational success. Ethnographic studies of two Reception classrooms in inner London are used to explore how the Foundation Stage Profile and the practices associated with it contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities in attainment in terms of several axes of identity, including gender, race, class, religion, language and urban/rural location. An intersectional analysis is used to explore how individual children are constituted through discourse as particular kinds of learners (their learner identities). It is argued that these young children in inner city schools are constituted as a whole as a "difficult intake", incommensurable with high attainment, at the very beginning of their school careers. Discourses relating to class, parenting and race are used to contrast these children with an idealised 'White middle-class' norm. However, some children in very specific intersectional positions are intelligible as good learners through complex webs of discourses relating to their identities.

The practices of assessment are discussed in detail, with a focus on how the Foundation Stage Profile legitimises a conception of 'teacher knowledge' as objective and factual, and how assessment results are influenced by the school management and local authority's expectations. I conclude that current assessment policy, classroom practices and discourses relating to educational 'underachievement' in Reception work to produce and maintain inequalities in early years education.
Declaration:

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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Alice Bradbury
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Chapter 1: Assessment and inequality in the early years

Introduction
This thesis is concerned with the issue of how assessment interacts with issues of inequality in early years education. It is a story, to put it simply, of how policy changes what teachers do, what they think is important, and how they judge children as good or bad learners. It is a story of how some children, aged four or five, will spend their first year in school being talked about and assessed as a ‘good’ learner, and some will not, and of how who they are – in terms of race, class and gender among others – will affect this. It is also a story of the inner city, where government schemes and media representations encourage low expectations. Finally, it tells a tale of teachers changing results so that they make sense within these ideas about urban schools.

I began thinking about issues of inequality when I worked as a primary teacher in inner London in the mid-2000s. The children I taught were predominantly Bangladeshi and Somali, with perhaps a small minority of White children in each class. I had chosen to teach in what were often called ‘challenging’ schools, and the idea that minoritised children had lower attainment levels was taken as common sense in my training. I assumed, naively, that issues of institutional racism in schools like these were less important – we had shown our commitment to social justice by choosing to work in these schools, hadn’t we? I knew that problems of poverty, housing and displacement, themselves racialised issues, were important for these children, but I thought of the school as a haven of equal opportunities. Over time, however, I realised that a more subtle analysis of the situation was necessary: first of all, what did our status as a ‘challenging’ school do to how we understood the children? It might give the teachers more status, but what did it mean for our expectations, and the expectations of inspectors and the local authority? I also realised that individual expectations were still affected by issues of race, class and gender. One incident has stayed with me as an example of this. One year I taught a class with only one White pupil, who I will call Hannah. A senior teacher came to visit
my class during a literacy lesson, where the pupils were sitting in five ‘ability groups’ based on their reading test scores (as prescribed by ‘good practice’ at the time). Hannah was sitting on the ‘middle’ table. The senior teacher asked me why Hannah was there, and told me that as an English as a first language speaker, she should be on the ‘top’ table. The implication was that I simply must be wrong, even though I explained how I had assessed Hannah in the same way as the other pupils. I did not move Hannah, but felt that my professional judgement had been questioned in this exchange. The senior teacher did not ask about any of the other pupils. It was through moments like this that I began to appreciate the power of Whiteness and of discourses of gender and class in classrooms.

While I was teaching, I wrote two Masters dissertations on the issue of how policies (and assessment policies in particular) legitimise ways of talking about pupils which constitute them as relative successes or failures in school; I found that language such as ‘above expected levels’ and ‘below expectations’ were important in discourses about which kinds of children will do well (Bradbury, 2007; Bradbury, 2008). These small studies were based on analyses of children’s school reports and on interviews with teachers and focused on the whole of the primary phase (age 4-11). Although there is an extensive literature on educational inequalities, I was always surprised at the scarcity of work dealing with primary schools and the early years, particularly in relation to the huge changes to assessment in the last two decades. Research on assessment in the secondary phase had found examples of institutional racism (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000), and I felt the same questions needed to be asked in primary schools. Therefore, a relatively new assessment system for five year olds (the Foundation Stage Profile), which had already garnered some attention (Gillborn, 2006c) was an ideal site for a more detailed study.
The Foundation Stage Profile

The Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) was introduced in 2003 to provide a consistent system of assessment across England\(^1\) for the end of the Reception year (the year in which children turn five). This followed the designation of this phase of education as the ‘Foundation Stage’. Previously, systems of assessment for this age group varied widely and there was no statutory requirement. ‘Baseline’ assessments were the main method used for assessing pupils when they first entered school, and these varied widely between different local authorities (Kirkup et al, 2003). The FSP was the first system to be consistent across England, allowing results to be compared from different areas for the first time and analysis of patterns of attainment by pupil characteristics. Data from the FSPs are collected by local authorities at an individual pupil level, but are not published at a school level in league tables like Key Stage 2 results. Detailed results are published by area, gender, ethnic group and other characteristics each year, and show disparities in attainment which broadly reflect patterns of attainment at later Key Stages, as I discuss further below. Results are also used to performance management processes for teachers, by local authority ‘school improvement partners’ and by inspectors such as Ofsted.

In 2008, the Foundation Stage was renamed the Early Years Foundation Stage, and the FSP was renamed the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) in order to bring together guidance for practitioners working with children aged 0-3 and the Foundation Stage guidance (age 3-5). The EYFSP included only minor changes from the FSP and the term ‘FSP’ remains in wide usage in schools as little distinction is made between the two; I use the term ‘FSP’ throughout to indicate both the original FSP and the current EYFSP. Note that I also continue to use the terms ‘early years’ and ‘Foundation Stage’ to describe provision for 3-5 year olds in primary schools as they are less cumbersome than ‘Early Years Foundation Stage’. This designation of pre-school provision and Nursery and Reception classes as an official ‘stage’ of education was an attempt to bring together the wide variety of different settings for children from birth to age 5 and ensure some consistency. Reception classes, which

\(^1\) There are different systems operating in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
has previously been loosely linked to Key Stage 1 (Nutbrown, 2006), are the most formal part of this stage.

**Early years classrooms**

As part of the Foundation Stage, Reception classrooms are guided by four main principles:

**A Unique Child**

Every child is a competent learner from birth who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured.

**Positive Relationships**

Children learn to be strong and independent from a base of loving and secure relationships with parents and/or a key person.

**Enabling Environments**

The environment plays a key role in supporting and extending children's development and learning.

**Learning and Development**

Children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates and all areas of Learning and Development are equally important and interconnected.

(from DCSF, 2008d)

As shown by these principles, the idea of 'development' alongside learning is embedded in the early years. The importance of 'enabling environments' is a key consideration in the case of Reception classes, which are supposed to provide a wide range of different activities to enable 'learning and development' in all areas of the curriculum. The majority of the day is spent in 'free play', where children can select what they want to do from a range of both indoor and outdoor activities and move freely between them. The box below gives some examples of typical activities available in 'free play' session.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indoor activities</th>
<th>Outdoor activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Role play e.g. in the ‘home corner’ which may be set up as a kitchen, a cafe, a</td>
<td>• Climbing frames, slides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doctors’ surgery, a school</td>
<td>• Riding bikes, tricycles or scooters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Writing area, with a range of implements and surfaces, plus writing on mini</td>
<td>• Drawing in chalk on a board or the tarmac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whiteboards or the class whiteboard</td>
<td>• Balance beams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Construction, e.g. lego, wooden blocks</td>
<td>• Hoops and skipping ropes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘Small world’, e.g. toy animals in a farm setting, cars on road mats, train</td>
<td>• Football/ball games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sets, dinosaurs</td>
<td>• Dressing up outfits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Painting</td>
<td>• Giant construction toys, e.g. giant lego</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sand tray and water tray with containers and toys</td>
<td>• Toy cars and spaceships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Music area e.g. tapes/CDs with stereo and also instruments to play</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Light box with different objects</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Craft, e.g. making objects from old containers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Puzzle table, with different jigsaws, word games, dominoes, maths games</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reading corner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cooking with an adult</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

During ‘free play’, the adults in the classroom either supervise and support a specific activity, sometimes working with a pre-selected group of children, or move between activities observing children. This system is based on the principle of ‘learning through play’. There are, however, some formal lessons, usually lasting less than 30 minutes, where children sit on the carpet and the teacher directs from the whiteboard. There are usually ‘lessons’ like this in maths, literacy and phonics each day, plus additional sessions on other topics such as RE. These have to be planned in advance. There is also ‘story time’ where children listen to the teacher read a book at the end of each day and sometimes before lunch. There may be no formal ‘play times’ apart from at lunchtime, with children moving in and out of the classroom as they choose, when possible, and the teachers taking turns to have a short break. The government’s fruit for schools scheme means that most classes have a mid-morning ‘fruit time’, while sitting on the carpet. Thus Reception classes are in many ways
quite different from other primary classrooms, with only limited formal teaching and a great deal of choice for the children in what they spend their time doing. This is not to say, however, that Reception classrooms are entirely aligned with the EYFS; their long-standing position in primary schools also influences their classroom practices and daily routine.

How the FSP works

The FSP is a comprehensive assessment system which covers all six areas of learning which make up the EYFS curriculum (QCA, 2008b); these are:

- Personal, social and emotional development (PSED)
- Communication, language and literacy (CLL)
- Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy (PSRN)
- Knowledge and understanding of the world (KUW)
- Physical development (PD)
- Creative development (CD)

Pupils are assessed on 13 scales, which are spread unevenly across the six areas. These are:

- 3 PSED scales:
  - Dispositions and Attitudes
  - Social Development
  - Emotional Development

- 4 CLL scales:
  - Language for Communicating and Thinking
  - Linking Sounds and Letters
  - Reading
  - Writing
• 3 PRSN scales:
  ▪ Numbers as Labels and for Counting
  ▪ Calculating
  ▪ Shape, Space and Measures

• 1 Knowledge and understanding of the world scale
• 1 Physical development scale
• 1 Creative development scale

Each scale has nine points, making a total of 117 points altogether (details of these are in Appendix 1). The final recording of each child’s FSP data consists of a positive or negative for each scale point, giving them a total for each area of learning, and an overall total figure out of 117. Points 1-3 must be given before points 4-8, and then these can be awarded non-sequentially. Point 9 can only be given if points 1-8 have been attained (QCA, 2008b). While there is no official ‘expected level’ in the Foundation Stage, a ‘good level of development’ is calculated as getting six or more points in each of the seven PSED and CLL scales and a total of 78 or more overall (DCSF, 2008a; DCSF, 2010). This phrase was changed from ‘a good level of overall achievement’ in 2008.

How the FSP is assessed

The EYFSP Handbook explains the assessment system, and is provided to all Reception teachers (QCA, 2008a). In the handbook, the principles underlying early years assessment are listed:

• Assessment must have a purpose.

• Observation of children participating in everyday activities is the most reliable way to build up an accurate picture of what children know, understand, feel, are interested in and can do.

• Observation should be planned. However, practitioners should also be ready to capture spontaneous but important moments.

• Judgement of children’s development and learning should be based on skills, knowledge, understanding and behaviour that they demonstrate consistently and independently.
• An effective assessment will take into account all aspects of a child’s development and learning.

• Accurate assessment will also take into account contributions from a range of perspectives.

• Parents and other primary carers should be actively engaged in the assessment process.

• Children should be fully involved in their own assessment. (QCA, 2008b:4)

These principles, particularly the idea that the ‘most reliable way’ to assess children is through observation of everyday activities, form the basis for the methods of assessment, which are described thus:

As a general rule, practitioners should:

• make systematic observations and assessments of each child’s achievements, interests and learning styles

• use these observations and assessments to identify learning priorities and plan relevant and motivating learning experiences for each child

• match their observations to expectations of the early learning goals. (QCA, 2008b:4)

There is little research on the introduction of the FSP specifically; the one study conducted (to my knowledge), shortly after its introduction, focused on practitioner familiarity with observation-based assessment, the training and resource implications of the FSP, and the significance of moderation of results by the local authority (Kirkup et al, 2003). The report’s conclusions were largely practical recommendations for the efficient establishment of the FSP system. A particular focus for my study is the forms that the ‘systematic observations and assessment’ described above take, and how these contribute to the construction of pupils as good or bad learners. Teachers are advised: ‘Judgements against these scales should be made from observation of consistent and independent behaviour, predominantly from children’s self-initiated activities’ (QCA, 2008b:5), and this research is concerned with the translation of these observations into the final positive/negative decisions on the 117 points at the end of the year.
Unequal outcomes

The ‘nappy curriculum’

In the media, the Foundation Stage curriculum has been caricatured as the ‘nappy curriculum’, even though it caters for children up to five years old. Some newspapers have criticised the amount of assessment required; the Telegraph (not usually sympathetic to teachers’ workload) published an article titled ‘Teachers’ reports now the length of novels’, referring to the FSP. The article quoted teachers as saying that the profile took 90 minutes per child and was ‘unworkable’ (Lightfoot, 2004). A Times article in 2004 with the headline ‘School assessments for five-year-olds “unhelpful”’ quoted Dr Mary Bousted, the General secretary of the ATL teaching union, as saying ‘This data is unreliable and unhelpful’ (The Times, 2004b). The FSP was also referred to in another Times article as a ‘disputed test for infants’ (The Times, 2004a).

However, the press has also focused on the published FSP results as further evidence of declining or low standards. These examples come from newspapers across the political spectrum and the specialist teaching press:

- One in five children unable to write their name or say alphabet (Daily Mail, 2006)
- Under-fives too slow to catch on (TES, 2006)

These articles often include examples of the FSP points (often incorrectly) which attempt to show the decline in standards. For example, a 2006 BBC News article titled ‘Fewer children able to write name’, began:

- More children than previously thought cannot write their names or recognise words like "dog" and "hat" by the age of five, according to new figures. (BBC News, 2006)

This press coverage reflects a long tradition of concern over ‘declining standards’, part of a ‘discourse of derision’ (Ball, 1990). When the FSP results by pupil characteristics have been published each January, the focus of the press reports has shifted to the low attainment of some groups of pupils, and particularly boys:
Girls beat the boys under 'nappy curriculum' Early Years results (Times)
Boys of five ‘falling behind girls in writing skills’ (Daily Mail)
Poor white boys 'not catching up' (BBC News)
At five, a third of poor boys cannot write their names, report says (The Guardian)

These examples, all from January 2010 when the results from the 08-09 year were published (the year I spent in schools), reflect a wider preoccupation with 'poor White boys' in education (Gillborn, 2009a). For example, in the 2010 results the difference between the proportions of White British and Bangladeshi pupils gaining the government benchmark was 16% (DCSF, 2010), but these differences did not feature prominently in press reports. The unequal outcomes shown by the FSP data are far more complex and represent a significant issue which this study aims to explore.

As Gillborn has discussed, results from the Foundation Stage Profile have reflected differences in attainment by race, gender, language and measures of deprivation found at all levels of education in England (2006c; 2008). The government's publication of educational attainment levels in recent years has allowed a greater scrutiny of inequalities in education: overviews such as Gillborn and Mirza (2000) and Bhattacharyya, Ison and Blair (2003) have analysed the complex and overlapping inequalities that persist in the UK education system. Within these patterns, the FSP represents an important benchmark for children beginning their educational careers as it is the first formal assessment of pupils; inequalities in outcomes at age five are likely to be maintained throughout primary school. However, these unequal outcomes in terms of assessment must be seen in terms of what they represent, not as objective facts or as accurate representations of attainment beyond what they actually measure (which is merely attainment in these particular tests, for those able to take them). Nonetheless the context for this study is a new assessment system which has raced, classed and gendered outcomes which have an impact on classroom practices and the process of assessment itself. The results from the FSP in England for the year 08-09 (the year the fieldwork took place) suggest disparities between
attainment by different groups of children consistent with previous years’ results. I outline here the differences in proportions of pupils who gain the government’s benchmark of ‘a good level of development’ (hereafter ‘the benchmark’).

There were distinct gender differences in proportions gaining the benchmark in 08-09, as in the last two years (DCSF, 2010):

![Diagram redacted due to third party rights or other legal issues]

Figure 1: Gender differences in the percentages of pupils gaining a 'good level of development' 2006-9

There were also significant disparities in the results by Free School Meal (FSM) status: of those children not receiving FSM, 55% reached the benchmark, compared to only 34.5% of those on FSM. These FSM results are often taken as indicators of class, but as Gillborn (2009a) has shown, FSM pupils and ‘working-class’ cannot be regarded as synonymous descriptions. However, a more detailed analysis of ‘class’ effects is possible through data collected in relation to Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) scores. This index measures deprivation in comparison with all other areas in order to group schools in deciles as more or less deprived. These data are collected for all schools and published nationally and by region. The FSP results for
08/09 show a strong correlation between deprivation and FSP results, both in England and in London where this study was based.

Figure 2: Percentages of pupils gaining a ‘good level of development’ by IDACI decile in England and London in 2008/09

Results by ethnic group in 08/09, as in previous years, reflected raced patterns of attainment at older key stages. There were differences of up to 20 percentage points between the proportions of higher attaining groups (Chinese, Mixed White and Asian, Indian, and White British pupils) and the lower attaining groups (Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Any other ethnic group), as shown in Figure 3.
There were also distinct differences in attainment for children with English as an additional language (EAL): 41.9% of EAL children reached the benchmark, compared to 53.6% of children with English as a first language. Overall, the FSP results show significant differences in outcomes for Reception children.

**Researching early years inequalities**

This study aims to explore the impact of the FSP and how this assessment relates to the production and maintenance of the unequal outcomes outlined above. Research on the impact of the FSP has been limited to date, with only one study conducted to my knowledge (Kirkup *et al*, 2003). However, results from the FSP have been used by Gillborn (2006c; 2008) as an example of institutional racism. He argues that previous regional assessment systems indicated a more even pattern of results by race than in assessments for older children, with Black pupils scoring highest in some areas. When
the FSP was introduced, the results produced showed raced patterns of attainment similar to those for all other tests, and yet this was not seen as a concern. The treatment of this shift as 'normal', Gillborn argues, suggest the deeply ingrained racism inherent in the education system. This viewpoint is influenced by Critical Race Theory (CRT), a body of scholarship originating in legal studies the United States, which views racism as endemic in society; this work has increasing influence in studies of race and education worldwide (Gillborn, 2006a; Ladson-Billings, 2004) and forms part of the theoretical framing for this study. This work is particularly relevant in this study as the majority of the pupils in the research schools were from minoritised communities.

However, this is not a study confined to issues of race: as shown above, the FSP outcomes are also classed and gendered. The occasional foregrounding of race in this study is based on the research participants rather than an intentional prioritisation of this aspect of identity. Overall, my analysis is informed by the notion of intersectionality, that is the idea that individual positions need to be understood as the intersections between different axes of identity. This idea has emerged from literature which has focused on the particular experiences of Black working-class women, in contrast to work which has focused on gender or race alone, and assumed that all women or all Black people have the same experience (Crenshaw, 1991; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006). This intersectional focus is also a conscious decision to sidestep debates over the relative importance of class and race in education (Cole, 2009; Gillborn, 2009b). As I discuss further in Chapter 2, intersectional analysis also allows for an examination of other aspects of identity beyond the ‘big three’ of gender, class and race; in this study, these include religion, language and ‘inner city’ identities.

Although the FSP figures are useful in measuring outcomes, this study is not merely concerned with these statistics; I examine the production of FSP results as a process,

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2 I use this term to describe individuals who define themselves as not White, given that this ethnic group forms the majority of the population in England. Terms relating to race are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.
and the ideas about ‘good learners’ that are implicit in the FSP policy. The FSP assessment is part of wider debates about how to define and measure ‘good learning’, ‘good teaching’ and educational ‘success’. This study explores how discourses of ‘good learners’, ‘ability’ and ‘development’ operate in the classroom, and how these affect everyday classroom practice. I also consider how policies such as the FSP reposition the roles and priorities of teachers within neoliberal frameworks of accountability and management. This discussion is framed, throughout, by a concern to relate these issues to the reproduction of inequalities in education.

The fieldwork for this study took place at a time when New Labour’s numerous reforms in education were beginning to have real effects on classrooms. The government’s commitment to neoliberal policies of marketisation, privatisation, and increased accountability had been shown by policies such as the introduction of the FSP, the use of public private partnerships, and the Academies programme. Alongside these there were also policies aimed at social justice and reducing attainment gaps, such as Sure Start centres for under fives, additional funding for ‘Challenge’ schools and Excellence in Cities programmes. However, as Ball argues, a discourse of individual responsibility pervades these ‘Third Way’ policies; the government is prepared to provide ‘interventions’ where necessary, but the individual ‘good learner’ is responsible for his or her success in a meritocratic system (Ball, 2008).

This individualism has had an effect on discourses relating to the impact of the home on educational attainment. During the 2000s there has been increased concern over the effects of ‘background’ on children’s attainment at school: this is apparent in Sure Start policy which focuses on parenting skills for parents of young children, and in the use of ‘contextual’ factors in school monitoring systems. Although this may have been ostensibly motivated by a concern to reduce inequalities, this discourse also has the effect of removing schools from the picture: for instance, connections between low income families and low attainment are presented as inevitable in this deficit discourse, so there is no place for the school to subvert this. This is particularly
potent in early years as the school is seen as having had little time to ‘add value’ to the disadvantaged child. The effects of teachers’ assumptions about pupils are completely obscured, and the structural forces which work to systematically disadvantage some children are ignored.

In this study I explore how these deficit discourses work to engender low expectations of some groups of children and reproduce inequalities. I explore how children are constituted as different types of learner, and how this relates to their class, race and gender identities. Throughout I consider the pressure and constraints policy and the assessment regime place on teachers, and the impossible binds they find themselves in. I focus on assessment as a mechanism for providing evidence for, defining, and reproducing success or failure. In this thesis, I hope in a small way to re-focus attention on the powerful role of teachers and schools in deciding who succeeds and who fails in school.

Organisation of the thesis

In this thesis, the issues outlined above are explored through analysis of data from two lengthy ethnographic studies of Reception classrooms in inner London. Before I embark on this analysis, I provide a detailed explanation of the context, literature and theoretical framing for the study.

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical tools I employ from poststructural theory and Critical Race Theory, and includes a reflection on the potential and problems involved in using these frameworks. I also use this chapter to define many of the terms used in the thesis, although a glossary of terms and acronyms is provided in Appendix 2.

Chapter 3 considers the policy context and the literature which form the basis for this study. I consider the long history of research into inequalities and the current issues relating to education in England. I discuss the literature relating to learner identities and how this relates to assessment, and the context of education policy in general and specific issues in early years research.
Chapter 4 explains my methods and methodology, and introduces the two schools in the study - Gatehouse and St Mary's. I also reflect on the process of collecting data and the ethical issues involved in ethnographic research.

The first of the data analysis chapters, Chapter 5, is titled 'Being a ‘good learner’ and how good teachers ‘know’ children'. In this chapter I consider the conception of a ‘good learner’ that operates in the study classrooms, and how this relates to the idea of authenticity. I argue that the FSP provides a model of what it means to be a ‘good learner’ which restricts who can be recognisable as such. I go on to discuss how the teachers use a discourse of ‘teacher knowledge’ to explain their collection of evidence and information as a neutral and scientific process, and how they also contradict this by arguing that the FSP is inaccurate and vague. These contradictions, I argue throughout, result from the incoherent way in which the FSP positions these teachers as simultaneously skilled and inaccurate.

In Chapter 6, ‘Recognising ‘good learners”, I explore how a discourse of a ‘difficult intake’ works to position all of the children in the study schools as incompatible with an idealised ‘good learner’ identity, and how this is resolved in the schools. I discuss how discourses of class, race and gender operate in the classroom, and how these relate to the reproduction and maintenance of coherent identities. I argue that these discourses interact with additional discourses of immigration, religion, language and the inner city to position these children as ‘difficult’ and as inevitably distant from ‘good learner’ identities.

Chapter 7, ‘Intelligible learner identities’, considers children’s learner identities at an individual level, and explores children’s discursive agency - how they can resist and subvert how teachers constitute them as learners. I argue that to be recognisable as a subject of schooling, a child must be constituted as a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ learner within circulating discourses relating to their intersectional identity. This works to limit the ‘intelligible space’ in which children from minority groups and working-class identities can be understood as successful in school. When children utilise their
agency to resist this subjectification, it involves risking moving outside of this intelligible space and so becoming unrecognisable as a learner. This chapter includes a discussion of how everyday classroom practices reproduce and maintain children’s learner identities, with a focus on ability groups, behaviour management strategies and different teacher-pupil interactions. I consider how these practices operate as micropractices of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1980) to regulate and classify pupils in the classroom.

In Chapter 8, ‘Assessment practices’, I provide details of the FSP results at the schools, and consider the collection of evidence for the FSP involves practices of ‘cynical compliance’ (Ball, 2003b). I explain the influences at work in the production of the final results, and the way that ‘teacher knowledge’ is used in processes of ranking children and checking results. I then consider how the way in which the Local Authority (LA) is able to define what results are accurate through processes of ‘moderation’. This is informed, I argue, by the need to make results tactical in terms of performative mechanisms of value added scores, and the need to make them intelligible in terms of dominant discourses about inner city schools.

In the concluding chapter, ‘Producing intelligible learners and intelligible results’, I sum up my findings by arguing that the discourses and practices of these Reception classrooms were dominated by the need to produce both intelligible learners and intelligible results. I argue that the Reception year involves the induction of a child into schooling, and throughout the year they are assessed on how they have become a ‘learner’, not just on what they have learnt. Discourses of race, class and gender influence how children are constituted as learners, and who is recognisable and makes sense as a ‘good learner’. In a connected but independent process, results are produced through a ‘fabrication’ (Ball, 2003b); they must cohere to some extent with individual learner identities, but are influenced more by discourses of low expectations which position inner city schools as inevitably low attaining. Results from these schools must be intelligible within this discourse in order to be accepted. I conclude the thesis by considering the wider significance of my findings in relation to
assessment policy and inequalities in early years education, the possibilities for interruption, and the potential for further research.
Chapter 2: Theoretical frameworks

This chapter sets out the theoretical tools I use to examine the complex issues involved in this study. These tools are useful in thinking about power, identity, subjectivity, agency, discourse, race, class and gender, all of which are important facets of this research. I begin by setting out the Foucauldian framework I use to explore power and discourse, locating this in the wider poststructural field. I then discuss how Judith Butler's notion of performativity can be helpful in examining issues of identity, and gender in particular, and how this can be used to consider what it means to be a learner in classrooms, and to engage with 'performative politics'. The usefulness of conceptual tools offered by poststructural feminism in studies of early years is also explored at this point. The following sections set out how theoretical approaches from both postcolonial studies and Critical Race Theory can be applied to the issues of race involved in this study, where the majority of the children in the research schools are from minoritised backgrounds. A final section considers the theoretical tensions involved in combining these tools and how I hope to reconcile these different perspectives.

Although I examine theoretical approaches related to race and gender separately in this chapter, it is important to emphasise beforehand that race, class and gender are not dealt with as separate categories in this study; instead I use an intersectional analysis, as I explain in more detail in later sections. This framing is in line with recent thinking on categories of difference; Yuval-Davis comments:

> There has been a gradual recognition of the inadequacy of analysing various social divisions, but especially race and gender, as separate, internally homogenous, social categories resulting in the marginalization of the specific effects of these, especially on women of colour. (Yuval-Davis, 2006:206)

Much of the analysis in this study focuses on the detailed positions of individual children, in terms of their class, gender and race positions, and the interaction of these with other discourses of religion, language, migration and the urban. Although I might use tools from studies based on gender or on race, I am committed to
examining multiple axes of differences together. The absence of a specific tool related to class should not be read as a denigration of this category, but rather as an assumption that class can be examined using the tools I describe below. The same applies to religion, sexuality and any other category I have not considered specifically. That said, the visibility of race as a category of difference in these particular schools foregrounds this issue throughout, and requires that I deal seriously with the complexity of ‘race’ as a concept.

**Poststructural theory**

The tools I use to think about issues of power, discourse and identity are among those offered by poststructural theory. St. Pierre and Pillow argue that the social sciences are encountering a ‘restless “post” period that troubles all those things we assumed were solid, substantial, and whole’ (2000:1). Poststructuralism forms part of this ‘post’ period; it is an attempt to move on from positivist, modernist approaches that prioritise science, rationality and objectivity. As such, it shares many aims with postmodern theory, where the ‘linguistic turn’ has focused on power and language. Differences of approach within poststructural work should not be ignored, however; Peters argues that the term ‘homogenises the differences among poststructural thinkers’ (Peters, 1996 in St.Pierre and Pillow, 2000:16). The theoretical framework for this study relies principally on Foucauldian theory, but as I explain below, related conceptual tools from Butler’s work on performativity are also useful in this context.

**Foucault³, discourse and power**

This study, like much of the work that I draw upon, is framed within a particular understanding of ‘discourse’ as productive, and as concerned with power. Discourse is described by Archer and Francis as ‘referring to the socially organised patterns/frameworks of language knowledge and meaning’ (2007:26). These bodies of knowledge have the power to govern the way that individuals act, think and can

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³ There is some debate over the labelling of Foucault’s work as ‘poststructuralist’ (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983); however, for the purposes of this study I am considering Foucault’s work to be part of poststructuralism.
be understood: they can operate as ‘regimes of truth’ (Foucault, 1980). These regimes of truth operate in society in ways that govern what it means to be part of a particular group:

[We can] identify discourses of race or gender that set out what it means to be a gender or a race, but do this as if these were natural and/or self-evident. This is a crucial aspect of Foucault’s account of discourse: while the terms of discourses may well be taken as reflecting ‘truth’, the ways things are, for Foucault these are not reflections but the very moment and means of the production of these truths (Youdell, 2006b:35 emphasis in original)

This understanding of discourse as productive as well as descriptive recognises the power of discourses about race, gender or ability, for example, in constituting individuals’ identities and governing classroom practices.

Foucauldian analyses of discourse are helpful in education because they illuminate our understanding of the operation of power within the education sector. Ball argues that a focus on discourse provides ‘different ways of looking at and beyond the obvious and puts different sorts of questions on the agenda for change’ (1994:2). He cites Foucault:

Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault, 1981:101 in Ball, 1994:2)

This is relevant in studies of policy, which aim to examine how discourses operate as regimes of truth within policy; I am interested in the ‘truths’ that emerge from the introduction of the Foundation Stage Profile to Reception classrooms because of their power within classrooms to constitute children in different ways and to regulate what happens in the setting. As Ball comments:

Discourses mobilise truth claims and constitute rather than simply reflect social reality [...] Policies are very specific and practical regimes of truth and value and the ways in which policies are spoken and spoken about, their vocabularies, are part of the creation of the conditions of their acceptance and enactment (Ball, 2008:5)

MacNaughton’s work in early childhood uses Foucault’s argument that “Truth” is linked in circular relations with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and
to effects of power which it induces and which extend it’ (Foucault, 1980:133 in MacNaughton, 2005:19) to argue that early years education in Australia is governed and regulated by the dominant discourse of ‘development’. Similarly, I am interested in the way in which this specific assessment policy works with and against discourses which dominate in the early years in England, and the political implications of this.

Foucault’s work disrupts the concept of power in that it augments traditional notions of ‘sovereign power’, held and exercised by the powerful, with the idea of ‘disciplinary power’ which is productive and formative (Youdell, 2006b:35). A particular concern here is the operation of power within the classroom. Gore (1995) uses Foucauldian theory to identify eight micropractices of power within a classroom, including surveillance, regulation, and normalisation, and MacNaughton (2005) has drawn on these to analyse the micropractices of power in early years classrooms. She argues that ‘truths’ are used in early years to define what is ‘developmentally’ normal, and to rank and define children. Micropractices such as ‘distribution’ work to physically demarcate children, for instance in groups, while ways of thinking and being are regulated by systems of sanction and reward; all of these are based on ‘truths’ that dominate.

These ways of thinking about the operation of power through discourse open up possibilities to question what is constituted as ‘truth’; they therefore have political implications. This view of the politics of knowledge challenges the Enlightenment notion of the ‘rational and coherent individual telling a rational and coherent story about themselves’ (MacNaughton, 2005:4). Which of the many possible stories are told, and who gets to tell them and when, depends on the political situation of the time; therefore ‘identifying the stories that are silenced or marginalised and then sharing them is a political act’ (MacNaughton, 2005:4). For Youdell (2006b), the historicity of meaning – that meaning is historically contingent, different at different times – and the fact that one discourse is not intrinsically more powerful than another, reveal the potential for discourses which position certain identities negatively to be challenged. A conception of discourse as operating on and through institutions is useful in any research on schools or classrooms because it allows for an
analysis of what possibilities are foreclosed by the dominance of certain discourses – what it is possible to say, and be, in a particular context. It also allows us to consider other discourses – those which ‘might be characterised as subjugated, disavowed, alternative, marginal, counter or oppositional’ (Youdell, 2006b:176) – and how these operate and open up different possibilities.

**Issues of identity**

A feminist poststructural theoretical framework provides sophisticated ways of thinking about identity and the individual as a subject constituted through discourse. In particular, the work of Judith Butler, using Foucault among others, has contributed to the theorisation of identity, and in turn has had a significant impact on work on identity in education (David *et al*, 2006). Her work is part of a wider project which questioned ‘the imperialism of a western feminist theory that purported to represent “all” women’ (David *et al*, 2006:421-2) and came to be known as ‘queer theory’. Butler’s notion of performativity has been used to question the processes by which a subject is made intelligible. Youdell explains:

> The subject is understood not as pre-existing, self-knowing, and continuous, but as subjectivated through her/his ongoing constitution in and by discourse (Youdell, 2006a:35)

Here the performative is a ‘discursive practice that enacts or produces what it names’ (Butler, 1993:241); it is through performatives that subjection occurs, although the subject appears to prefigure discourse. This work critiques the very notion of a fixed gender identity:

> There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender ... identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results (Butler, 1990:25).

Conceptualising gender as performative reveals ‘the apparently pre-existing subject is an artefact of its performative constitution’ (Youdell, 2006c:515) and thus as inherently unstable, requiring constant maintenance. Performatives may be verbal but also bodily, through gesture, dress and actions; in Butler’s words, ‘what the body says and does (or does not say and does not do) as well as how the body appears’ (Butler, 2006:533). Ways of ‘doing boy’ or being a ‘proper girl’ are only
approximations, however - Butler writes ‘against proper objects’ (1994:1). Nayak and Kehily summarise this argument:

Being a ‘proper boy’ or ‘proper girl’ is, then, a fantasy that is both hankered after and embodied through an approximation of its norms. ... [Butler] has remarked upon the everyday violence committed through the imposition of such normative phantasms. To this extent identity is also always an act of exclusion, a point of closure, the feverish demarcation of a boundary that elides the mercurial qualities of subjectivity itself. (Nayak and Kehily, 2006:465)

Part of this ‘violence’ involves the use of the ‘abject’, the ‘construction of the “not me”’ (Butler, 1990:133). The abject is not simply the Other, but something ‘unclean, impure and even immoral’ which ‘provokes the desire to expel the unclean to an outside, to create boundaries in order to establish the certainty of the self’ (Kenway, Kraach and Hickey-Moody, 2006:120). What is constituted as the contaminating threat of the abject depends on the circulating discourses of the specific context. Some research using Butler’s idea of performativity has focused on how school students use the abject to define themselves, for instance in the use of pejorative notions of homosexuality in order to project a heterosexual masculinity (Nayak and Kehily, 2006).

Butler’s work on performativity focused initially on gender and sexuality, but has been broadened out by both Butler herself and others to consider how race, class and other identities are performatively constituted (Butler, 2004a; Youdell, 2003). Butler’s work is also useful in considering how individuals are subjectivated within hierarchies, such as in Renold’s work on friendship groups based on heteronormative practices (Renold, 2006) and in Youdell’s description of the ‘hierarchy within the other’ (Youdell, 2003). Research in schools has provided empirical evidence of not only how identity is performed, but also how individuals can use their ‘discursive agency’ to bring their subjectivation into question. Within poststructural theory, agency is not inherently held by a ‘knowing’ subject but both produced and constrained by circulating discourses. The concept of ‘discursive agency’ and possibility of ‘troubling’ hegemonic discourses through performatives has meant that
Butler’s work has been linked to political projects of destabilising hierarchical relations, in terms of gender, race and sexuality. Youdell argues the case for:

[A] politics in subjectivation, in which discursively constituted and constrained subjects deploy discursive agency and act within and at the borders of the constraints of their subjectivation. By interrogating and rendering visible the subjectivating practices that constitute particular sorts of students tied to particular subjectivities and, by extension, particular educational (and wider) trajectories, we begin to uncover the potential of Butler’s performative politics or a politics in subjectivation [...] discursive interventions might enable new discourses to be rendered intelligible or enduring discourse to be unsettled within school contexts. (Youdell, 2006c:526)

Thus the alterability of identity can be used to challenge accepted hierarchies and the range of possible subject positions. Butler has written, in response to the use of her work in education, that it is through the analysis of ‘the activities through which gender is instituted’, that gender ‘stands a chance of being de-instituted or instituted differently’ (2006:529). However, this optimism is tempered by recognition of the enduring power of dominant discourses and the need to remain ‘intelligible’. This concept of intelligibility is particularly useful in this study as it relates to how children come to be seen as pupils, or what Youdell (2006c) terms ‘viable studenthood’. Butler (2004a) describes ‘variable orders of intelligibility’ and the consequence of being unintelligible as rendering an individual as ‘non-human’. Youdell has taken on these concepts to explore the issue of what it means to become a ‘student’ and a ‘learner’ and how some students can take on subject positions that position them as unintelligible within the school context, and outside ‘learner’ status (2006b; 2007). This study relates these ideas to the early years setting by focusing on the discourses about ‘good learners’ that are produced by the FSP and how different children may or may not be intelligible in this subject position.

*Alternative uses of the performative*

Butler’s work is not alone in using the idea of the performative, and it is important to make clear the distinctions between these different strands of poststructural theory. Policy sociologists such as Stephen Ball have used Lyotard’s work on performativity in relation to the marketisation of education (Ball, 2003b), with an alternative focus on
performativity as the production of knowledge as knowledge (Youdell, in press). In Ball’s work performativity is a set of practices of disciplinary power, including performance management systems and the publication of assessment scores, which can affect how schools function, and who teachers and pupils can be within them. Although there are similarities with Butler’s use of the term, Youdell argues that Ball’s work focuses on the *restraining* force of discourse, and that it is Butler’s engagement with Derrida’s idea of the performative misfire that ‘keeps open the potential for the performative to exceed these constraining meanings and effects and instead mean and make something different’ (Youdell, in press).

**Poststructural theory in early years education**

Yelland argues that ‘early childhood education is coming to be known for its openness to new ideas; the multidisciplinary nature of the field has facilitated the process of reconceptualisation’ (2005b:5). This is reflected in the growing use of poststructural theory in early years education (Blaise, 2005; see Cannella and Viruru, 2004; MacNaughton, 2005; Yelland *et al*, 2008, among others). This development owes much to feminist poststructuralists such as Walkerdine and Davies, whose work challenged patriarchal element of early education (Davies, 1989; Davies, 1993; Walkerdine, 1990), and influenced the current generation of poststructural scholars in early years.

MacNaughton’s work focuses on the operation of power within the field of early childhood education, and particularly on the concept of ‘truth’. She argues that the study of early childhood is a site where ‘inequitable relations of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and age’ can be transformed as a wider project of emancipation (2005:2). This can be done through the disruption of dominant discourses, through questioning the ‘truths’ that regulate the sector. This follows much of the poststructural work in early years, which has focused on the operation of ‘development’ and ‘developmentally appropriate practice’ (DAP) as a ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1980). DAP is regarded as a modernist, ‘scientifically’-justified discourse; its origins lie in developmental psychology. This discourse has determined the ways in which children can be understood, and therefore the practices of early
childhood education. Blaise refers to work that questions the dominant DAP discourse as ‘post-developmentalism’: ‘a broad term used to define alternative theoretical perspectives that question modernist assumptions of truth, universality, and certainty’ (2005:3). This study explores if and how these modernist assumptions continue to operate in Reception classrooms and how they are both disrupted and reinforced by policies such as the FSP.

**Intersectionality**

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, although I have already set out some conceptual tools which are useful in thinking about gender, this study uses an intersectional understanding of identity. Intersectionality is a concept which, although linked in some cases to Critical Race Theory, has wider academic origins. It is increasingly popular in many areas of research (Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006) and has been described as ‘the most important contribution that women’s studies have made so far’ (McCall, 2005:1771). The term itself was first used by Crenshaw (1989; 1991) but the concept relates to a long-standing concern with the different experiences of women from different ethnic groups and social classes. Brah and Phoenix provide this definition:

> We regard the concept of ‘intersectionality’ as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensure when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that the different dimensions of social life cannot be separated into discrete and pure strands. (Brah and Phoenix, 2004:76)

Thus intersectionality is concerned with an individual’s position in terms of multiple axes of difference, rather than with one single axis, such as race or gender. This avoids the problem of regarding ethnic groups or classes as homogenous, and essentialising the differences between them. Work which has engaged with Butler’s notion of performativity has increasingly focused on interconnecting performatives of race, class, gender and sexuality (such as Rasmussen and Harwood, 2003; Youdell, 2006b).
Intersectionality also offers the opportunity to decentre the normative centre, which has been, in the case of feminist scholarship, White women (Brah and Phoenix, 2004). It allows for the great complexity of human experience, while avoiding the simplicity of ‘additive’ understandings of disadvantage, which were concerned with ‘double’ and ‘triple oppression’ as if disadvantage could be mathematically calculated. Crenshaw’s 1991 article, for example, argues that the experiences of violence against women of colour can only be explored through an understanding of their experiences as women and as people of colour together, not as separate axes of disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1991). It is this invitation to understand the complexity of lived experience, Davis argues, that makes intersectionality such a useful concept:

> Intersectionality initiates a process of discovery, alerting us to the fact that the world around us is always more complicated and contradictory than we ever could have anticipated ... it encourages complexity, stimulates creativity, and avoids premature closure. (Davis, 2008:79)

Intersectionality has also allows for an appreciation of historical, social and political context in examining how individuals experience discrimination, and as such has been an important concept in postcolonial studies (McClintock, 1995). It has also been used to consider contemporary concerns about globalisation and ‘postmodern imperialisms’ (Brah and Phoenix, 2004:83). This is relevant in this study, which focuses on a specific moment in London in the late 2000s.

Intersectionality has been criticised for its lack of absolute, universal definition (Verloo, 2006) and the absence of an accompanying set of rigid methodological guidelines (McCall, 2005). There are debates over whether intersectionality should be understood as a crossroads, as axes of difference, or as a process, and the extent to which is a ‘theory’ (Davis, 2008). For example, Yuval-Davis has rejected Crenshaw’s metaphor of intersectionality as a crossroads on the grounds that it remains an ‘additive model’ (Yuval-Davis, 2006). There is also some debate over the nature and extent of the categories that can be used in intersectional analysis; this problem has been called ‘the Achilles heel of intersectionality’ (Ludwig, 2006:247 in Davis, 2008:76). Butler famously criticised the ‘etc.’ used by many writers after listing race, class and gender as indicating ‘exhaustion’ and the ‘illimitable process of
signification' (Butler, 1990), and there is continued debate over the number of categories that should be, and can be taken into account in any intersectional analysis, and their relative importance. Yuval-Davis contends that all categories of difference are not equal: ‘in specific historical situations and in relation to specific people there are some social divisions that are more important than others in constructing specific positionings’ (2006:203). Furthermore, she argues, categories have different ‘organising logics’ which affects how they can be analysed. Davis cites what she calls an ‘interesting compromise’ on this issue from Leiprecht and Lutz (2006) whereby race, class and gender are taken as the ‘minimum standard’ of analysis, with other categories added depending on the context and research problem (cited in Davis, 2008:81). In line with these discussions, this study focuses on pupils’ intersectional positions in terms of race, class and gender, but also weaves in other categories including religion and language where necessary.

Intersectionality is not a fixed and absolute theory with a prescribed methodology associated with it. However, I agree with Davis’s contention that ‘the vagueness and open-endedness of “intersectionality” may be the very secret to its success’ (2008:69). As discussed, intersectionality allows for the complexity of lived experience: it does not expect analysis to be simple or straightforward, or indeed to apply the same rules in different places and different times. Davis comments:

Intersectionality, by virtue of its vagueness and inherent open-endedness, initiates a process of discovery which not only is potentially interminable, but promises to yield new and more comprehensive and reflexively critical insights. (Davis, 2008:77)

For a study based in the incredibly complex world of school classrooms, I would argue that this is a distinct advantage. The children in these inner city Reception classes are constituted through complicated webs of discourse and it is through a specifically intersectional analysis that we can be open to appreciating this complexity. However, this use of intersectionality needs to be complemented by detailed exploration of the nature of the categories involved; in this case, given the high proportions of children from minoritised backgrounds, this means I need to examine the concept of ‘race’ in further detail.
The concept of ‘race’

An awareness of the complexity and significance of the language of ‘race’ and ‘racism’ is important for this study; as Gillborn writes: ‘Language not only describes an issue, it helps to define the issue: it can make certain understandings seem natural and commonsensical, while others are presented as outrageous or unworkable’ (2008:2). Thus it is imperative that the terms I use are fully explained; the result being not that these terms are made unproblematic, rather that their problematic nature is fully illustrated.

‘Race’ and ethnicity

‘Race’ is a contested term which has been understood in different ways in different times (Omi and Winant, 2004). Historically, ‘race’ has been used to refer to essentialist, deterministic conceptions of biological differences between groups: a scientific discourse linked to racial subjugation, colonisation and White superiority. In the early twenty-first century, however, this biological definition has been largely rejected, and ‘the socially constructed status of the concept of race ... is widely recognised’ (Omi and Winant, 2004:7). The conception of race as socially constructed includes an awareness of the different meanings of the term throughout history and the continued role of human interaction in re-working and changing the meaning of racial categories. This involves a rejection of the significance of physical ‘racial markers’ such as skin tone as denoting fundamental biological differences between people, alongside an awareness that some people’s perception of these ‘racial markers’ and the attributes associated with that ‘racial identity’ have significant impacts on the lived experiences of minoritised people, and that these impacts vary by location and time. This understanding of race intends to find a position for the concept which, in Omi and Winant’s phrase, ‘steer[s] between the Scylla of “race as illusionary” and the Charybdis of “racial objectivism”’ (2004:11). I agree with Omi and Winant that ‘race’ cannot be understood either as an ideological construct (for this ignores the level of experience), nor as an objective condition (for the categories used are historically contingent and incoherent in terms everyday life). Therefore I use the term to refer to race as a social construct, constantly re-made and re-
inscribed by discourses. The idea of race as a social construct is central to Critical Race Theory; Carbado explains:

Importantly, race does not exist “out there”, ontologically prior to its production and instantiation in discourses. Instead, the social processes of race are constituted by discourses – in, for example, law, politics, science, and education. These racialised discourses are deployed against, enacted upon, and given meaning through their associations with human bodies. (Carbado, 2002:181)

Regarding race as socially constructed does not imply that it is fixed or understood in the same way; it is complex and contingent social construct. This can be related to Butler’s use of performativity: Carbado and Gulati (2000a; 2000b) attempt this when they discuss ‘identity performance’ in the workplace, whereby minoritised employees attempt to engage in performatives that bring up positive discourses related to their identities. Attempting to combine poststructural perspectives with Critical Race Theory is complex, however; I discuss this issue further in the final section of this chapter.

Since the term ‘race’ is problematic, ‘ethnicity’ is occasionally used to indicate a broader understanding of difference and to move away from classifications based on biological racial groups, as is the term ‘social race’. Some argue that the use of ‘ethnicity’ as a ‘supposedly more objective category’ is ‘mistaken at best’ (Omi and Winant, 2004:7), while the latter term is unwieldy and is rarely used in recent years. The terms ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic group’ are frequently used in governmental reports and statistics, and in research. I use the term ‘race’ (and ‘ethnicity’ or ‘ethnic group’ when necessary), but with an awareness of the complexity of these terms, particularly with regard to their role in making racial differences appear normal, natural and commonsense. I also use the term ‘minoritised’ to refer to groups who are not White, as the White population forms the majority overall in the UK; ‘minoritised’ is used to show that the ‘minority’ status of these groups is dependent on context and not inherent.

The terms used to categorise different groups are also problematic: Omi and Winant describe racial categories as ‘patently absurd reductions of human variation’
(2004:10), but yet they may engender some sense of belonging - Anderson's 'imagined communities' (1991). Gunaratnam refers to what Radhakrishnan (1996) called the 'treacherous bind': the problem of the reliance on 'racial categories that are complicit with racial typologies and thinking' (2003:23). However, for ease of reading, some categories are necessary. I use the term 'Black' to refer to those who identify their family heritage as African or Caribbean. Where it is necessary to group ethnic groups together, I use the term 'Asian' to refer to people of who would identify their heritage as Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi; otherwise more specific terms are used where possible in recognition of the need to disrupt notions of groups as based solely around nationalities or geographical areas. For example, Archer and Francis argue that 'Muslim religious identities ... do not fit comfortably within previous, more static or binary notions of cultural and biological racism' (2007:29).

'Racism'

Deconstructing race as a concept leads to questions about the nature of 'racism'; this term is relevant here due to the prominence of issues of 'institutional racism' in schools in the media and research in the last twenty years. 'Racism' is a similarly complex term, with multiple meanings in terms of how it operates, how it can be identified, and what constitutes 'racism'. Most commonly 'racism' is regarded as conscious and explicit, often based on scientific conceptions of biologically different races organised in a hierarchy. In popular discourse, the term is associated with bigoted comments and offensive language from individuals – the 'rotten apple' conception of racism (Gillborn, 2002). However, research on racism in education and elsewhere has focused on a more subtle conception of racism as unconscious, implicit and more widespread. Discourses of 'culture' and 'difference' can operate as proxies for race in a less obvious form of racism: 'the presence or absence of 'racial' terms ... is not necessary to define a discourse as racist' (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000:5). Racism is identified by its effects, such as disadvantaging one group in a setting. The term 'institutional racism' describes processes by which groups of people can be systematically affected by processes and practices which are implicitly and unintentionally racist. Although the term has a longer history, the definition of
‘institutional racism’ most commonly used is from the Macpherson report, which followed the murder of Stephen Lawrence, a Black teenager, in 1993:

The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. (Macpherson et al, 1999:28)

This definition expands ‘racism’ to include all actions and processes, however well-intentioned and however seemingly innocuous, that result in minority ethnic people being disadvantaged. This is particularly useful in the case of schools, where several studies have shown how well-intentioned teachers can operate in racist ways (for example Archer and Francis, 2007; Mirza, 1992; Wright, 1992). A more sophisticated view of ‘racism’ is necessary because, although people are broadly sympathetic to criticisms of racism, it is such a strong word that it engenders a defensiveness when issues of everyday racism are discussed (Gillborn, 2008).

The prominence and visibility of race as a marker of difference in the research classrooms mean that tools from different theoretical positions are useful in discussing race discourses within an intersectional approach. I outline below two perspectives which are helpful here: Critical Race Theory, which contributes to the conceptualisation of racism as endemic but not always immediately obvious in society; and postcolonial feminism, which is helpful in examining binaries of the West/Orient and their impact on school experiences.

**Critical Race Theory**

CRT is a body of ideas originating in legal scholarship in the United States and growing in influence in many other social science disciplines, including education, worldwide (Dixson and Rousseau, 2006; Gillborn, 2006b; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). CRT arose in response to Critical Legal Studies (CLS), a legal movement which rejected traditional legal scholarship ‘in favor of a form of law that spoke to the specificity of individuals and groups in social and cultural contexts’ (Ladson-Billings, 2004:52). CLS focused on the legitimising effects of legal discourses
in terms of social inequalities, but failed to focus on the issue of race. CRT was thus born out of a concern to consider the centrality of race to the ordering of society. CRT literature goes further than discussions of unintentional racism to describe racism as endemic, ‘deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and even psychologically’ (Tate, 1997:234). Below I detail the main concepts, focusing on those that are applicable to this study.

**The main concepts of CRT**

One of the central tenets of CRT is that racism is endemic in society; it is present in everyday interactions and processes that appear neutral and benign. Racism is not limited to explicit acts of racist prejudice, but widespread and often unintentional; it is ‘normal, not aberrant’ (Delgado, 1995:xiv), and ‘deeply ingrained’ (Tate, 1997:234). CRT is concerned with how everyday ‘business as usual’ forms of racism (Delgado, 1995) operate within a system of ‘White supremacy’ (Crenshaw et al, 1995). This term is used not to refer to extreme political groupings, but to ‘the operation of forces that saturate the everyday mundane actions and policies that shape the world in the interests of White people’ (Gillborn, 2008:35). Part of White supremacy is the operation of ‘White privilege’ the ‘invisible package of unearned interests’ which comes with Whiteness (McIntosh, 1992).

In the UK, this viewpoint has been seen by Gillborn as an extension of ‘the long history of antiracist struggle and the attempt to broaden the approach to examine institutional racism that operates through subtle, sometimes unintended processes, explanations, assumptions and practices’ (Gillborn, 2008:27). Thus it has great similarities with previous work in education focused on the ways in which schools systematically disadvantage pupils from minoritised groups.

CRT uses a conception of race as socially constructed, as already discussed. Race is also seen as a highly contingent concept, different at different times and locations; who gets to be ‘White’, for example, has been shown to be a moveable issue over time (Ignatiev, 1995). Connected to this socially constructed notion of race are the critiques within CRT of ‘Whiteness’ and its consequences (although some have
questioned whether this repositions Whiteness at the centre, for example Apple, 1998; Leonardo, 2009b). As Gillborn argues, ‘Whiteness exists forcefully and is constantly re-enacted and reinforced; through endless, overlapping racialised and racist actions and discourses’ (2008:170-1). One focus has been on the advantages of Whiteness (Leonardo, 2004b; McIntosh, 1992). This work has considered the complex and unseen ways in which Whiteness accords privileges in society; McIntosh’s account of these advantages throughout a typical day shows powerfully how simple but significant many of these privileges are. However, Leonardo has argued that a focus on the privileges of Whiteness ‘obscures the subject of domination, or the agent of actions, because the situation is described as happening almost without the knowledge of Whites’ (2004a:138). Instead he argues that focus on White supremacy would result in greater progress than the current situation where ‘racial understanding proceeds at the snail’s pace of the White imaginary’ (2004a:138/141).

CRT scholarship has, at times, departed from mainstream academic conventions in its use of chronicles and story-telling (see for example Bell, 1992; Gillborn, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006). This technique aims to examine the ‘myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race’ (Delgado, 1995:xiv) through a focus on the experiences of individuals from minoritised groups. The intention is to ‘add necessary contextual contours to the seeming “objectivity” of positivist perspectives’ (Ladson-Billings, 2004:53). This focus, an approach which ‘integrates lived experience with racial realism’ (Ladson-Billings, 2006), has implications for my position as a White researcher; this issue is discussed further in the methodology chapter.

**Postcolonial feminism**

Postcolonial studies have been concerned with the legacy of colonialism and particularly how colonialism legitimises discourses which support the hegemony of those who colonised and a constructed inferiority of those who were colonised. While Franz Fanon’s work first considered the racialisation of and relationships between the colonisers and colonised (Fanon, 1967), it is Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’
(1978) which is often regarded as the origin of postcolonial studies. Said argued that colonial rule was justified by the construction of an Oriental/Western binary which contrasted the rational Westerners with the emotional/irrational ‘Orientals’, through the representation of the Other as deviant, deficient and exotic. ‘Orientalism’ remains in contemporary societies as a derogatory discourse which constructs those previously colonised as inferior.

Postcolonial feminists’ work (such as Brah, 1996; Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988) has addressed the absence of minoritised women in postcolonial studies, emphasising the importance of these women’s intersectional positions in societies formed through complex racial, sexual and class discourses. Ann Phoenix comments ‘[s]uch work has rendered visible the power relations through which minoritised women are positioned and how their treatment frequently fits with a normalised absence/pathologised presence couplet’ (Phoenix, 2009:102).

Postcolonial studies have made significant contributions to the field of education (Subedi and Daza, 2008). For example, postcolonial work on education has focused upon the experiences of individuals from ex-colonies in the British education system. Phoenix’s work on the Caribbean women’s memories of schooling in the UK considers how postcolonial ideas of ‘diaspora space’ (Brah, 1996) can contribute to our understanding of minoritised children’s experiences of school (Phoenix, 2009). She argues that Caribbean girls suffered ‘epistemic violence’ in that attending school ‘involved learning that they were constructed as inadequate learners and undesirable femininities’ (Phoenix, 2009:101), but that they also demonstrated agency in resisting their subjection as inferior – what she calls ‘de-colonising practices’. In early childhood education, the contribution of postcolonial studies has been limited, perhaps because, as Viruru argues, ‘dominant discourses in early childhood education are not open to dialogue with perspectives that question fundamental realities’ such as ‘development’. She continues ‘Postcolonial theory’s insistence on and acceptance of multiplicities and ambiguities thus stands in stark contrast to commonly accepted ideas of how children grow and develop’ (Viruru, 2005:12). Where it has been used, in work such as Cannella and Viruru’s (2004) study of
childhood and colonisation, the focus has been on deconstructing Western notions of childhood, Enlightenment conceptions of ‘progress’, and early childhood pedagogy; as such this work is aligned with the poststructural work on DAP outlined above.

This postcolonial literature is relevant for this study’s focus on the intersectional positions of minoritised children, both those whose families have been in the UK for several generations and more recent arrivals. In particular, this body of work informs the focus on specific local and historical contexts when considering identity, for example in discussions of Muslim identities in Britain in the late 2000s.

**Reconciling theoretical tensions**

It is important to acknowledge at this point that there are contradictions involved in combining some of the conceptual tools I have discussed. One issue relates to the relative importance of different aspects of identity. CRT literature often focuses on the unique importance of racism in shaping the lives of individuals. In this work, racism is not simply analogous to other oppressions, such as those based on class but is uniquely important. There is some tension between this position and the idea of intersectionality as dealing equally with multiple categories of identity, which needs to be reconciled in this study. Instead of conceptualising race as *uniquely* important in all situations, adhere to the principle that intersectional analysis should deal with the categories of relevance in any given context *together*, rather than prioritising one axis of identity. This approach coheres with CRT perspectives as there are a variety of approaches within CRT literature, including work which focuses on issues of class and race (Allen, 2009; Leonardo, 2009b; Roediger, 1991); indeed the term ‘intersectionality’ came from CRT literature (Crenshaw, 1991). Although race is foregrounded in some of the analysis, this is due to the greater relevance of this category in the context, not a theoretical position where race is conceived as more important.

A second issue relates to the tensions between using CRT and poststructural approaches. Gillborn and Youdell write on this issue:
Post structural approaches to understanding the subject and power are relatively new to CRT, but the usefulness of these to the collection of conceptual tools that CRT draws on is evident. CRT’s critique of liberal reform, for instance, might be usefully augmented by a Foucauldian understanding of disciplinary power. A rejection of race categories from a CRT perspective might use notions of the performative and subjectivation to explain how race continues to appear as ‘natural’ or ‘self-evident’. And attention to discourse might illuminate the processes through which ‘business as usual’ racism identified by CRT operates. (Gillborn and Youdell, 2009:183)

It is in these ways that my work uses the two theoretical positions: this study requires a subtle and detailed understanding of how identities are made through discourse, within a context of a racialised (and classed and gendered) society. An understanding of how certain dominant discourses operate as regimes of truth allows for a greater understanding of how everyday discourses and practices in schools systematically disadvantage minoritised pupils. Furthermore, contributions from legal CRT scholars such as Carbado and Gulati to understandings of identity and performance (following on from and in combination with Butler’s work on intelligibility and recognisability and Youdell’s work on school subjectivities) can be usefully applied to complex classroom contexts. What a poststructural politics of the performative and CRT share is a desire to uncover the taken-for-granted, the unsaid, and through this recognition, to disrupt patterns of inequality. While CRT uses ‘White supremacy’ to describe the hidden hegemonic assumptions about race and their impact on the lived experiences of minoritised people, those who use Foucault and Butler might see the same as a series of regulatory discourses which constrain who and what minoritised people can be, while still remaining, to paraphrase Butler, ‘intelligible minorities’. I would argue that a combination of CRT and poststructural theory opens up opportunities for thinking about issues of inequality and policy in schools in new and productive ways, and hope that this study demonstrates some of these opportunities.
Chapter 3: Inequality, learner identities and policy

Introduction

This chapter provides some context for this study in terms of policy and research literature. In it I argue that research has shown continuing inequalities in the education system in terms of race, class and gender which, in some cases, have been exacerbated by education policy, most recently a shift toward neoliberal notions of individualism and accountability. I also discuss how children’s complex identities as learners are affected by these policy shifts and by prevailing discourses relating to aspects of identity. I begin with a discussion of inequalities in education before exploring learner identities and then the policy context.

Educational inequalities

The disparities in FSP outcomes shown in Chapter 1 are part of a wider debate over differential attainment by class, race and gender. Although there has been a recent shift to focus on White working-class boys, there is a long tradition of debate over the significance of inequalities by race, particularly the ‘narrowing’ of the ‘achievement gap’ between White British and minoritised pupils (Gillborn, 2008; Gorard, 1999; Gorard, 2000). At a policy level, the government has engaged in a great deal of ‘gap talk’, as Gillborn terms it (2008); this is political rhetoric about how attainment gaps are closing between different ethnic groups due to various strategies and interventions. This debate, like that over class and gender differences, relies on statistical evidence of inequalities in terms of outcomes, in the form of tests and exam results. Although these results have been used to identify areas of interest by researchers, most literature on inequalities has considered education in a broader sense, including experiences of schooling and access to equal provision (such as Archer, 2003; Figueroa, 1991; Gillborn, 2008; Troyna, 1987). This section provides a brief summary of research into the role of schools in producing inequalities, before I consider in more detail some issues that are of particular relevance to this study.
Research on educational inequalities

Since Coard’s (1971) accusations of systematic racism against Black pupils, educational researchers have been concerned to explore the role of teachers in creating different educational experiences and attainment for different groups of pupils. Much of the research literature has focused on the impact of teacher attitudes and school processes to the production of differential results. Research has found that Black pupils’ attainment and experiences are affected by teachers’ stereotypes about Black pupils as academically unsuccessful and badly behaved (Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Rollock, 2007; Sewell, 1997). Asian pupils, in contrast, have traditionally been regarded in schools as hardworking but affected by ‘traditional’ home cultures (Connolly, 1998; Shain, 2003). More recently, a greater differentiation has been made between Indian pupils who are regarded as ‘model minorities’ (Gillborn, 2008), and Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other Muslim minoritised groups, who have become, in Shain’s words, the ‘new folk devils’ (Shain, 2010; see also Archer 2003). Archer and Francis’ (2007) study of British Chinese pupils found that even positive attitudes towards pupils could be accompanied by damaging assumptions about inappropriate ‘pushy parents’.

There is similarly a long history of research into class inequalities, in the UK and worldwide (Apple, 1982; Ball, 2003a; Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995; Vincent and Ball, 2007). Much of this literature also focuses on teacher attitudes: Reay argues, for example, that teachers’ idealisation of middle-class students means that working-class students have ‘an imposed, inferior and often rejected identity that is both disorientating and demoralizing’ (2009:23). Research into issues of class has also focused on the imposition of middle-class values into education (Ball, 2003a; Gerwirtz, 2001) and the growing impact of the extra-curricular activities available to middle-class families on educational ‘success’ (Ball, 2010; Vincent and Ball, 2007).

Debates over gender inequalities have shifted with the changing trend of girls’ higher attainment (Skelton and Francis, 2009); this reversal of fortunes has led to concern over boys’ achievement and a ‘poor boys’ discourse of male pupils as ‘victims’ of schooling (Epstein et al, 1998). However, discourses of boys as ‘naturally’ intelligent
and girls as ‘plodding’ hardworkers remain (Francis and Skelton, 2005). In primary and early years education, long-standing discourses of gender difference and gendered accounts of ‘development’ have been linked to different expectations and assessments of pupils (Blaise, 2005; Connolly, 2004; Dyson, 1997; Skelton, Francis and Reiss, 2003). Research on particular groups of girls, such as Black girls (Mirza, 1992) and Asian girls (Shain, 2003), has considered how teachers understand these pupils’ specific intersectional identities through discourses of femininity and home culture which position them as ‘underachieving’. Research on boys from different ethnic groups (Archer, 2003; Sewell, 1997) has focused on discourses which position masculine identities and practices as incompatible with educational success.

While this study continues in this tradition of exploring teacher attitudes and their differential effects on pupils, research literature which focuses on the interaction between education policy and educational inequalities is particularly relevant here. Gillborn and Youdell (2000) found that the pressures of league tables resulted in processes of ‘education triage’, whereby a disproportionate number of minoritised and FSM pupils were disregarded as ‘hopeless cases’ and received less attention. This study aims to investigate similar issues of teacher attitudes, school practices and pupils’ experiences in relation to the Foundation Stage Profile. This discussion is framed by issues relating to the specific context of inner London in the late 2000s, which are examined below, namely: the notions of unintentional and institutional racism; the ‘problem boys’ and ‘White working-class boys’ discourses; current issues of immigration and assimilation; and urban regeneration and deprivation.

Unintentional and institutional racism

In recent decades the majority of research has been particularly focused upon unintentionally racist systems and practices operating in schools; as Apple comments, ‘racial dynamics can operate in subtle and powerful ways even when not overtly in the minds of the actors involved’ (1999:10). Wright’s (1992) study found that a strong commitment to fairness and equality of opportunity among teachers played out in combination with unwitting discrimination in the classroom. Mirza (1992) similarly found ‘crusading’ teachers alongside counterproductive attempts to increase
attainment in her study of Black girls. Gillborn and Youdell (2000) went further in exploring how teachers' attitudes towards minoritised and FSM pupils can work with school assessment practices to *systematically* produce inequalities in outcomes.

This focus on school systems mirrors the increased use of the term 'institutional racism' following the publication of the Macpherson report in 2000. There was much hope in the years following the report that there would be serious engagement with the concept of institutional racism in schools (Blair *et al*, 1999; Gillborn, 2006b). However, the resulting legislation, at the time the most far-reaching race relations legislation in Europe, was not enforced and the government's commitment to the cause waned (Gillborn, 2008). Using a CRT analysis, Gillborn now uses the case of the Macpherson report and the Race Relations Act as an example of a 'contradiction closing case', where a little ground is given in order to mask wider racial inequality: an apparent concession allows 'business as usual to go on even more smoothly than before' (Delgado, 1998 in Gillborn, 2008).

The issue of institutional racism and the role of teachers within this is obviously controversial and was the source of much methodological debate in the early 90s (Connolly and Troyna, 1998; Foster, 1990; Foster, 1991; Gillborn, 1990; Wright, 1990). The application of CRT to studies of racism in schools (Gillborn, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2004) has the potential to contribute an alternative conceptualisation of teacher racism: if racism is endemic in society, then teachers are simply part of this wider racism. Furthermore, discussion of school practices must take into account the constraints on teachers of policy imperatives such as league tables (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000); this interaction is discussed further below.

*White working-class boys*

As mentioned, in recent years a new discourse of White working-class boys as the 'underachieving' group in schools has emerged and has in some ways eclipsed the issue of disparities by race in education (Sveinsson, 2009). This has been reflected in policy and curriculum guidance: the DCSF provides specific advice on 'Ensuring the attainment of White working-class boys in writing' (DFES, 2005), for example, and the
new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government has concentrated on additional funding for ‘poorer’ pupils. As Reay (2009) argues, although in the past there have been similar concerns about working-class attainment, this recent ‘pervasive moral panic’ is unusual in its emphasis on Whiteness, and I would argue, in being concerned only with boys. This ‘panic’ centres around the idea that it is shocking that White working-class boys are the lowest achieving group in education and that they have been somehow ‘forgotten’ in terms of policy and funding in recent years (Sveinsson, 2009).

FSP results have contributed to this discourse, particularly in terms of gender: all years of the published FSP data have shown marked differences in attainment between boys and girls, and in 2008/09 there was a difference of almost 20% points between the proportion of male and female pupils attaining the government benchmark (DCSF, 2010). The press coverage has often chosen to focus on the issues of class and gender, however – for example:

At five, a third of poor boys cannot write their names, report says
(The Guardian, 2010)

The gender element of this coverage reflects long-standing arguments in early years education about boys’ and girls’ different rates of ‘development’; in FSP documentation, boys are listed as a group which needs particular attention (QCA, 2008a). The ‘failing boys’ issue in schools in general is not new: as Epstein et al wrote over a decade ago, ‘problems relating to the education of boys, particularly working-class boys, have been around for a long time’ (1998:4). They cite Paul Willis’s work in the 70s on working-class ‘lads’, and Michelle Cohen’s historical analysis of male underachievement dating back to John Locke in 1693 as evidence of the enduring nature of this discourse (1998:4). However, the issue of boys’ underachievement has recently been subsumed in many cases into the wider ‘White working-class boys’ discourse, so that the achievement of boys who are not White or not working-class is removed from the debate.

The focus on working-class boys in this debate is also misleading: comparisons are often made between the attainment of White boys on Free School Meals (FSM) and
minoritised boys on FSM, despite this data only covering 13% of the school population (Gillborn, 2009a). This confusing conflation of FSM with ‘working class’ applies the statistics on a minority of the school population to a far larger group – Gillborn (2009a) cites a survey which found 57% of the population described themselves as ‘working class’. The focus on White pupils as an underachieving ethnic group appears to disregard the fact that the vast majority of the school population are White and thus serves to fuel the ‘moral panic’. The selection of particular assessment results in the press and the improved performance of some minoritised groups have positioned White working-class boys as the ‘new victims’, and resulted in diversion of attention away from other inequalities in schools. Some groups are removed from the picture: the focus on boys ‘underlines [the] educational neglect’ of working-class girls (Reay, 2009:28), while the focus on White pupils frequently implies that differences have arisen from unnecessary concern with minoritised pupils’ attainment (Gillborn, 2009a).

The attainment of White working-class boys is treated as a concern equal to others in this study; in the 08/09 FSP results only 24.9% of White boys on FSM (not ‘working class’) achieved the government’s benchmark. This is similar proportion to Bangladeshi FSM boys (25.3%) and ‘Any other Black background’ FSM boys (25.0%) (DCSF, 2010). While taking seriously the issue of inequalities to related to class, this study aims to consider all of the groups who are ‘underachieving’ in the FSP, and thus move away from this specific focus on White ‘working-class’ boys.

Immigration, assimilation and integration

Research into the experiences of groups who have recently migrated into the UK has argued that educational inequalities are linked to teachers’ attitudes to minoritised pupils. Teachers’ stereotypes about children from ‘backward’ countries or communities that are seen as having ‘oppressive’ values have been found to affect how these children are treated in the classroom, and the educational opportunities offered to them (Phoenix, 2009; Shain, 2003). The teacher attitudes found in this body of research mirror wider political concerns over immigration, and what Gillborn had described as a return to ‘assimilationist/integrationist’ discourses (2008:76),
particularly in relation to Muslim communities. This issue is relevant here given the proportion of pupils in the study classrooms who are recent migrants.

Postcolonial and CRT literature are both useful in considering the complex discourses of race, migration, gender and class at a particular historical moment; in this case, London in the late 2000s. Particularly relevant is the construction of the migrant, and the Muslim migrant especially, given the high numbers of Muslim pupils in the study schools. Migration from country to country has become more common with globalisation, but as Bauman argues, there are (and have always been) different ways of migrating (Bauman, 2000 in Rizvi, 2004:89). There are the elite ‘mobile tourists’ who represent cosmopolitanism and global trade and find international borders ‘dismantled’, but there are also the ‘vagabonds’, refugees who find boundaries to be well-policed, and their presence in other countries to be constrained by increasingly stringent residence laws and discourses of ‘zero tolerance’. Rizvi (2004) argues that in the post-9/11 world the issue of migration has been complicated further by stricter regulations, particularly for Muslim migrants. Nativist discourses concerned with aliens threatening the ‘American way of life’, Rizvi contends, have powerfully merged with patriotism and national pride to cast American Muslims as ‘enemies’ of the US, and to force the abandonment of ‘the ideals of cosmopolitanism’ (2004:167). This has been informed by an understanding of the ‘war on terror’ as based on opposing cultures, a ‘clash of civilisations’ theory which homogenises both sides and is ‘dangerous’ in its disavowal of the shared world views of Christianity and Islam (2004:168). In the UK, terrorist plots such as the London bombings of July 2005 and the attempted bombings of international flights using liquid explosives have served to position young Muslim men as a potential threat in government policy and popular discourse (Preston, 2007; Shain, 2010). For example, universities have been tasked with monitoring extremism among Muslim students on their campuses (BBC News, 2008b). Furthermore, concern over levels of immigration in general has been heightened by the migration of Eastern European EU nationals to the UK, and the issue has become more prominent in politics with rise of the BNP in some areas (BBC, 2009).
Gillborn has argued that a recent shift towards the assimilationist and integrationist ideals of the 50s and 60s is linked to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7, which have 'provided a new language and the spectre of an iconic threatening racialised Other that served to justify further disciplinary policies' (2008:87 emphasis in original). These policies include greater restriction on migration such as a test of English proficiency and a required commitment to community work. The 2010 general election campaign was a further example of this trend, with the issue of immigration prominent in the leadership debates. The integrationist discourse is often related to education: the 'cohesion' agenda of the late 2000s, provoked in part by Trevor Phillips' comments that Britain was 'sleepwalking to segregation' in 2005, implies that schools with a majority of pupils from minoritised groups are inherently problematic. The then home secretary David Blunkett commented that 'Asylum seekers are swamping some British schools' while opposition minister David Davis talked of 'voluntary apartheid' (quoted in Gillborn, 2008:78). Inherent in this discourse is the idealisation of a migrant who assimilates into British culture themselves, not through British culture having to change; 'appropriate' participation in schooling is taken as indicative of assimilation. This migrant is the antithesis of the 'homegrown' Muslim terrorist who symbolises the rejection of Western culture and 'integration'. In this 'contemporary assimilationism', cultural 'difference' is described in terms of a 'barrier' to integration. This is seen most obviously in debates over the veil, hijab and other Muslim dress; Gillborn argues that these represent the 'strategic deployment of gender equity issues as an acceptable trope for otherwise aggressively racist attacks on Muslim communities' (2008:82). I would argue that as a result of this changing policy context, all 'barriers' such as language, dress, and cultural practices have become even more potent symbols of a 'failure' on the part of minoritised communities to assimilate, and have taken on great significance.

This context is significant in understanding the teachers at the study schools' views of their minoritised pupils, and especially those from Muslim backgrounds, some of whom are recent migrants from countries engaged in the 'war on terror' such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Other children are from countries which are regarded ambiguously in terms of international security, such as Lebanon, Somalia and Sudan. The
complexity of the circulating discourses surrounding these particular subjectivities are important in any analysis of their identities as learners in the classroom.

Schools, urban regeneration and ‘deprivation’

Research on urban regeneration policies is also relevant to the context of this study, particularly the literature concerned with the implications for education and the connections made with discourses of class and race (Gulson, 2006; Lupton and Tunstall, 2008; Smith and Lupton, 2008). This literature examines the ‘renewed scrutiny’ of neighbourhoods described as ‘deprived’ or ‘socially excluded’ in the 90s and 2000s (Levitas, 2005), including the impact on schools of policies based on the principle that ‘mixed income communities’ will benefit all. When they came to power in 1997, the Labour government set up several initiatives aimed at the reconstruction of inner city areas, including the Urban Task Force, the New Deal for Communities and the Mixed Communities Initiative. As Lupton and Tunstall argue, these policies are ‘directly underpinned by neoliberal economics’; there is ‘a re-narration of neighbourhood problems, not as structural, but as individual and spatial ... the problem is that poor people live together, not their poverty per se’ (2008:110). As in discussion of minority communities (who are of course often included in discussions of inner city neighbourhoods) urban regeneration is talked about in terms of ‘segregation’ and ‘clustering’, or ‘pockets of poverty’ (Lupton and Tunstall, 2008); neighbourhoods and schools must be places of ‘social integration’ in order to solve this problem. Gulson argues that, within these policies which seek to create ‘mixed communities’:

the discourse that is made visible is the “common sense” positioning of the “desirable”, White, “aspirational” middle-class family/student, a positioning that points, I suggest, to a practice of geographically intertwined “Whiteness”. (Gulson, 2006:270)

Urban schools have also been affected by government initiatives such as Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities and the London Challenge, all of which serve to position inner city schools and the pupils within them as ‘challenging’ and problematic. This discourse has been reinforced by reports from the Labour government (DCSF, 2009a) and the influential Conservative thinktank, the Centre for Social Justice (Allen and Duncan Smith, 2008), which have focused on the
connections between deprivation and educational attainment. The DCSF report uses statistics from research (Feinstein et al, 2008) which suggest that lower educational attainment linked to deprivation results in poorer health, a lower life expectancy, and a greater chance of engaging in criminal activity (DCSF, 2009a:6). Particularly relevant here is the prominence given to the impact of deprivation on very young children in both the DCSF and CSJ reports: both cite evidence that ‘even those children from lower socio-economic groups performing well initially (at 22 months) were overtaken by others by the time they started primary school’ (DCSF, 2009a:6). This discourse of children from ‘deprived’ backgrounds as already disadvantaged when they start school has the potential to further reinforce the low expectations of children from lower income families found in research over several decades (Ball, 1981; Reay, 2009; Skeggs, 1997).

As explained, the literature discussed above on specific relevant issues builds upon and adds further detail to a long tradition of research on inequalities in education. This study continues in this vein by exploring inequalities in terms of both experience and outcomes in early years education. The following two sections focus on research which links inequalities to two issues which are significant in relation to the FSP and Reception children: learner identities and education policy.

**Learner identities**

This study takes up the idea that circulating discourses related to class, race, religion, gender, migration and the inner city have an impact on how children are constituted as learners in schools (Youdell, 2006b; Youdell, 2006c). As discussed, research for several decades has found that teachers use stereotypes, assumptions and prejudices to inform their understandings of pupil’s identities. This study uses a conception of identity as performative, following Butler (1990; 1997); the subject is understood as constituted through discourse. Similarly, I understand ‘learner identities’ as particular subject positions which are framed by dominant discourses of what it means to be a learner. Learner identities are the way in which teachers constitute pupils as successful or unsuccessful, well-behaved or badly-behaved, teachable or not teachable, through the deployment of discourses. These discourses may be related to
other identity markers, such as gender or race. All learner identities are based on discourses of what it means to be a learner, which are historically and geographically specific, and one of the purposes of this study is to explore what being a ‘good’ learner is in these Reception classes. This is informed by the long history of research into teachers’ assumptions about children, but particularly by two previous ethnographies which focused on learner identities – Connolly’s 1998 study of Year 1 classrooms, and Youdell’s 2006 work on impossible and ideal learners; it is useful to examine them in depth.

Primary learner identities
Paul Connolly’s ethnographic study (1998) of three inner-city Year 1 classrooms was significant in bringing me to this research topic. His work considers the role of gender and ethnicity, and the role of wider societal discourses about the inner city in creating young children’s learner identities. His year-long ethnography found that discourses and practices in the school were linked to racialised discourses about the pupils and their home lives. For example, the focus on the ‘Three Rs’ in the school was justified by racialised and classed discourses of single parenthood and inner city deprivation. Connolly also found that pupils’ ethnic groups and genders were invoked in teachers’ constructions of who pupils were: a group of Black ‘bad boys’ were constructed in terms of their ‘hyper masculinity’, evidenced by their interest in football, and their perceived ‘toughness’ and attractiveness to girls in the class. Teachers described these Black boys as ‘excitable’, ‘hyperactive’, ‘oversensitive’ and ‘easily-led’, and this had an impact on classroom practices: Black boys were ‘significantly over-represented’ in public chastisement (Connolly, 1998:79). Pupils’ identities were linked to what I would describe as their complex intersectional positions: in one example, a Black girl from a higher status background was encouraged and valued like the White children.

Connolly found that local discourses relating to the Asian community were reflected in the identities constructed in the classroom. As in Wright’s (1992) study (and much

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1 Connolly uses the terms 'Asian' and 'South Asian' to describe these pupils. This generic description was common in the late 90s, but is now regarded as eclipsing the complexities and heterogeneity of
subsequent research), teachers had high expectations of academic success from the Asian pupils. Asian boys were ‘feminised’, seen as ‘little’ and in need of particular care by teachers; poor behaviour either went unnoticed or was dismissed as ‘silliness’ or immaturity. This was connected to the perceived closeness and supportiveness of Asian families in the area, although there were some doubts about the parenting skills of Asian parents. Asian boys were judged and stereotyped on the basis of a racialised discourse surrounding traditional, tight-knit Asian communities: Connolly argues that these boys were feminised and as such became what Mac an Ghaill (1988) described as ‘invisible masculinities’ (Connolly, 1998:92). The Asian girls in Connolly’s study were assumed to be conscientious and obedient, and this assumption meant that teachers were less keen to help them, because there would be more perceived achievement if more ‘difficult’ children were to succeed. Asian girls were seen as particularly feminine, described as quiet, passive and helpful, which was linked to a discourse about the traditional role of women in Asian families.

Connolly’s work provides examples of how children are understood as learners within a racialised discourse: the ways in which the pupils were understood in the classroom were constructed based on their race, class and gender identities. However, it is now over a decade since Connolly’s study was published and education has changed significantly in that time, particularly in the first few years of primary education; these changes, I argue, make a significant difference to how young pupils are constructed as learners. Furthermore, there have been significant changes in the discourses surrounding Asian boys, notably that Muslim boys have also come to be seen as problematic in schools (Archer, 2003; Shain, 2010). The concept of learner identities has also evolved, most significantly with Youdell’s work on the construction of good and bad, impossible and ideal learners.

**Impossible and ideal learner identities**

Deborah Youdell’s (2006b) work on learner identities, based on ethnographic studies of secondary schools in England and Australia, argues that:

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British Asian communities. Arguably, this phrase was only seen as simplistic following the growth of Islamophobia in the wake of the 9/11 and 7/7 terrorist attacks in the 2000s (Archer, 2003).
‘who’ a student is – in terms of gender, sexuality, social class, ability, disability, race, ethnicity and religion as well as popular and sub-cultural belongings – is inextricably linked with the ‘sort’ of student and learner that s/he gets to be, and the educational inclusions s/he enjoys, and/or the exclusions s/he faces (Youdell, 2006b:2)

Youdell argues that discourses can combine to create ‘truths’ about students’ identities as learners. She uses Butler’s idea of performative identity to examine how students may be constituted as ‘impossible’ and ‘ideal’ learners. Certain identity positions come to be synonymous with the ‘ideal learner’, set up for educational success. For others, their identity markers all but foreclose the possibility of success, as they are seen as ‘impossible learners’. Youdell argues that discourses of ‘ability’, which are linked to assessment, are crucial for the constitution of the good/bad student and ideal/impossible learner dichotomies. However, other discourses about conduct and effort interact with ‘ability’ and gender, class and ethnicity to constitute these learner identities. A similar argument is made in Rollock’s discussion of Black success in London secondary schools (Rollock, 2007), where she uses a Bourdieuan framework to explain how particular styles of clothing, musical tastes and behaviour became ‘ethnicised identities’ in teachers’ eyes which were seen as incompatible with academic success.

An important element of Youdell’s work on learner identities is the identification of ‘ideal’ and ‘impossible’ identities. The idea of ‘ideal’ learner identities is related to an older concept of the ‘ideal client’ of education (Becker, 1952 in Gillborn, 1990), and was used by Gillborn to consider how this ‘ideal’ contributes to institutional racism in schools. Youdell argues that a focus on what and who is the unspoken ideal ‘allows us to identify the proliferation of discourses of the educational Other’ (2006b:97). Traditionally, researchers have identified teachers’ ‘ideal learner’ as White, middle-class and male (Gillborn, 1990; Walkerdine, 1990). The identification of boys as ideal learners has been linked to discourses which associated rationality and intelligence with masculinity, while the feminine subject of schooling was associated with passivity and irrationality (Walkerdine, 1990). However, in more recent years this ideal male pupil has been questioned with the advent of girls’ consistent educational
success in statutory exams and the emergence of the discourse of boys’ underachievement (Archer and Francis, 2007; Epstein et al, 1998).

The concept of ‘ideal’ learners has also been discussed in relation to who is excluded: Archer and Francis argue that although British-Chinese pupils are high achieving, their ethnicity prevents them from inclusion in the ‘ideal pupil’ category. In their research British-Chinese pupils’ successes were seen as anomalous and as having been achieved in the ‘wrong way’ through ‘oppressive home cultures’ and ‘inappropriate learning styles’ (2007:170). They argue that ‘the ideal learner is an inherently embodied discourse, which always excludes minority ethnic pupils and denies them from inhabiting positions or identities of ‘success’ with any permanency or authenticity’ (2007:170). Thus although some ethnic groups are perceived as successful ‘model minorities’, this success is never deemed equal to the success of White pupils.

Research into who is understood as an ‘ideal’ subject of schooling is complicated by differing models of what it means to be an ideal student or an ideal learner. As Youdell writes, ‘student’ and ‘learner’ are ‘apparently interchangeable subject positions’ but differ in how they are constituted: all children are ‘students’ because they attend school, but they may differ in the extent to which they are understood as learners – some may be ‘unacceptable’. As students, pupils are constituted on a binary of good/bad, which defines what is ideal mainly through the correction of what is not ideal. In Youdell’s schema, the pupils at the opposite end of the spectrum from the ‘ideal learners’ are the ‘impossible learners’ – those pupils constituted outside the possibility of educational success. These pupils are beyond acceptable ‘educability’, ‘ability’ and attainment; these may be the bad students but not inevitably: ‘being a bad student is not necessarily the same as being a bad (or impossible) learner’ (Youdell, 2006b:99). Furthermore, in Youdell’s use of the ideal/impossible learner binary, no pupil actually embodies the ideal or impossible learner position; it is a pupil’s proximity to one of these two extremes that constitutes them as a particular kind learner.
Youdell argues that some particular ‘constellations of identity markers’, such as being Black and male, lead to educational exclusion in a system predicated on the separation of normal and abnormal, same and other, good and bad students (Youdell, 2003). This coheres with research on Black boys for several decades (Coard, 1971; Gillborn, 1995; Mac an Ghaill, 1988) and with more recent studies of Black boys’ experiences (Rollock, 2007). Strongly implicated in the construction of ‘impossible learners’ is the reproduction of Whiteness as the universal referent; pervasive discourses ‘mark out spheres of inclusion and exclusion’ and ‘inscribe an abiding normative centre’ through the positioning of Black boys on the margins (Youdell, 2006b:31). The centrality of Whiteness, and the invisibility of this centrality, are also major themes in CRT (Harris, 1993; Leonardo, 2004b; McIntosh, 1992).

Walters (2007) study of English as an additional language (EAL) learners in primary schools similarly argues that the centrality of Whiteness and the corresponding Norm/Other binary were significant in constructing pupils’ learner identities. Pupils experienced a process of ‘othering’ which means that ‘ethnic, gendered accounts of them as children prevail over other possible accounts of them as learners’ (2007:100). These constructions were also linked to the teachers’ desire to be seen as effective professionals with regard to their EAL pupils. For example, an enthusiastic and cooperative pupil with EAL was seen as ‘bright’ and as having good language skills, whereas a quiet and disengaged girl with EAL is understood through ‘the lens of White English interpretations of South Asian females’ (2007:90).

In this study, following on from previous research on learner identities, I aim to explore how conceptions of the ideal and impossible learners operate in Reception classrooms, and how they relate to circulating discourses of differences in attainment by race, class and gender. An important facet of any discussion of learner identities is the issue of ‘ability’ – how it is defined, understood and used to include and exclude some children from ‘ideal’ positions.
Discourses of ‘ability’ and meritocracy

There is a long history of research into ‘ability’ and into the effects of streaming and setting (Ball, 1981; Keddie, 1973; Mac an Ghaill, 1994), but I focus here on the dominance of discourses of ‘ability’ in recent education policy and practice. As Gillborn and Youdell (2000) argue, the discourse of ‘ability’ as a proxy for a fixed and inherent intelligence is significant because it relates to particular raced, classed and gendered positions. This connection is powerful because ‘such perspectives act to reinforce a series of assumptions that present low ability and attainment as not only predictable but also somehow a natural facet of the current pupil intake’ (2000:48).

In their research in secondary schools, Gillborn and Youdell found that ideas about a fixed inherent ‘ability’ – the ‘new IQism’ - were linked to racialised discourses of underachievement among teachers, while ‘scientific’ tests of ‘ability’ work to obscure structural inequalities.

Discourses of ‘ability’ operate in a policy frame that promotes meritocracy and individual effort; this trend is exemplified by Tony Blair’s quote from Labour’s 1997 manifesto:

Children are not all of the same ability, nor do they learn at the same speed. That means ‘setting’ children in classes to maximise progress, for the benefit of high-fliers and slow learners alike. (Labour Party, 1997)

This meritocratic ideal engages with the ‘new IQism’ in that it regards pupils’ positions as fixed and inherent. Ball quotes a government document which refers to ‘every pupil – gifted and talented, struggling, or just average’ (‘Higher standards: better schools for all’ White Paper cited in Ball, 2008:180). Concepts of a fixed IQ are apparent in policy in the form of the Gifted and Talented programme, which White has criticised as a ‘the latest manifestation [...] of Galton’s project [...] of identifying an intellectual elite and making educational provision for them’ (White, 2006 cited in Ball, 2008:180). In this conception of a meritocratic system every pupil is able to rise to the top, given the opportunity: this means that those who fail in the system are individually responsible for their own failure. Herein lies the danger of individualised concepts of attainment: as Gillborn and Youdell argue, individualisation ‘acts to completely to remove wider structural inequalities from the picture’ (2000:216).
There is a distinct link between increasing individualisation and the meritocracy discourse, discourses of ‘ability’, and the construction of pupils’ learner identities. Youdell argues that the modern understanding of education as a positional good, based on individualism and meritocracy, underscores the constitution of certain subjects as low ‘ability’, ‘impossible’ learners as it ‘provides the “taken-for-granted” conceptual foundation that insists that somebody must occupy the bottom of the educational, and societal, heap’ (Youdell, 2006b:31).

Policy sociology and the wider policy context
The third part of this chapter examines the policy context surrounding the introduction of the Foundation Stage Profile, and the connections to the issues of inequalities and learner identities discussed above. In order to consider one specific policy (the FSP) it is necessary to engage in ‘policy sociology’ (Ball, 1997), where ‘sociological concepts, ideas and research are used as tools for making sense of policy’ (Ball, 2008:4). An individual policy can only be understood in terms of the policy context, and particularly the language and rhetoric that, at that time, prioritises some ideas about how education should be organised over others. As Ball argues, ‘Policy discourses also organise their own specific rationalities, making particular sets of ideas obvious, commonsense and “true”’ (2008:5). I would argue that the introduction of statutory assessment arrangements in early years is made possible by the establishment of neoliberal discourses of performativity, managerialism and competition between schools, and that these discourses have an impact on inequalities in education. I focus here on neoliberal policy in education in general before examining the impact of this trend on early years policy.

Neoliberalism in education
In recent decades, education policy in the UK and elsewhere has been influenced by neoliberal principles (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2008). This ‘policy epidemic’ (Levin, 1998 cited in Ball, 2003b:215) has led to policy changes affecting schools, teachers and particularly assessment practices. Ball argues that neoliberal education reform is novel in that it ‘does not simply change what we, as educators, scholars and
researchers do, it changes who we are’ (Ball, 2003b:215). This is done through ‘policy technologies’, which Ball defines as involving ‘the calculated deployment of techniques and artefacts to organise human forces and capabilities into functioning networks of power’ (Ball, 2003:216). Three inter-related ‘policy technologies’ - the market, managerialism and performativity – work to change ‘who we are’. They may vary in emphasis in different countries and localities, but all involve the alignment of public sector organisations with private sector values and methods (Ball, 2003b).

There has been much critical literature on the impact of neoliberalism on education systems in the UK and elsewhere (Adnett and Davies, 2002; Apple, 2006; Labaree, 2007; Lauder and Hughes, 1999 among many others); too much to cover in full here. This review focuses mainly upon the functioning of assessment as a policy technology.

The role and functions of assessment in neoliberal policy technologies

Assessment policy is implicated in each of these three technologies mentioned above - the market, managerialism and performativity. The introduction of market forms has affected both the supply and demand sides of the educational equation (Finkelstein and Grubb, 2000): diversity of provision in different types of schools on the supply side is complemented by greater parental choice and increased provision of assessment information on schools on the demand side. The theoretical justification for this shift is the neoliberal principle that the market will raise standards in schools. Assessment policy is also central to increased managerialism and to performativity: it is frequently the way in which teachers’ performance is judged, and the mechanism through which performativity operates. Education policy in the last two decades has changed the nature and purpose of assessment in schools into a tool by which to judge the ‘effectiveness’ of schools against one another: assessment results in the form of ‘performance tables’ (or league tables) are the main source of information provided to parents in order to help them to choose a school for their child. The publication of these tables has transformed the process of assessment in schools: tests are no longer simply a judge of an individual pupil’s attainment, but simultaneously a judge of the teacher’s performance, and the
school's performance (Stobart, 2008), and this has great implications for classroom practices and for teachers.

Market-based competition between schools puts pressure on schools and teachers to ‘perform’ well in the assessments that are published in league tables, and changes in the use of assessment have led to changes in institutional and classroom practice in schools. Research in schools has shown that the use of ‘expected levels’ and benchmarks, such as the five A*-C GCSE benchmark in secondary school league tables, creates a focus on borderline candidates who can have a disproportionate effect on the school’s statistics (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). Gillborn and Youdell’s study (2000) of two secondary schools in England found that the GCSE benchmark led to an ‘A-C economy’ where teachers focused upon ‘D-C conversion’ in order to increase the school’s percentages in league tables. This caused practices which they describe as ‘educational triage’, where education is ‘rationed’ in that help is only given to pupils deemed ‘suitable cases for treatment’. Those who were seen as having little chance of getting a C grade were deemed ‘hopeless cases’. Booher-Jennings’ study (2005) in the American school system found a disproportionate emphasis on the ‘bubble kids’ who were seen as having the potential to pass the state test. This focus on certain groups of pupils to the detriment of others was also commented on by teachers in my own research (Bradbury, 2008), and Stobart (2008) argues that this targeting of resources has become institutionalised with the establishment of government-funded ‘booster classes’ for primary pupils taking national tests (‘Sats’5) in the UK.

Meanwhile, research in the ‘sociology of assessment’ has emphasised the subjective nature of assessment (Filer, 2000; Filer and Pollard, 2000; Pollard and Filer, 2001; Walters, 2007); this body of work questions ‘the conception of assessment as a neutral technology and its crude use for performance and accountability measures’ (Pollard and Filer, 2001:4). The argument that ‘classroom assessment techniques are

5 These are National Curriculum assessments, commonly known as ‘Sats’ after their previous name ‘Standard Assessment Tasks’.
social processes that are vulnerable to distortion’ (Pollard and Filer, 2001:4) has proved particularly relevant in primary education, where teacher assessment is a significant element of assessment at the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1. Similarly, Stobart argues that testing adheres to ‘Goodhart’s Law’, which states that ‘when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure’ (2008:125); thus, if the stakes are high enough and the measure narrow enough, distortions and corruptions of the system result. This, he argues, can be seen in changing classroom practices, such as ‘teaching to the test’ where the curriculum is halted or narrowed in order to prepare for the assessment. Similar arguments have been made in relation to early years education; for example Graue and Johnson’s research in US early elementary classrooms concluded that ‘a focus on accountability without attention to instructional and assessment resources quality is inherently flawed’ (Graue and Johnson, in press).

Assessment policy has also been significant in producing cultures of assessing teachers’ ‘performance’ which have questioned the professionalism of teachers (Ball, 2008; Osgood, 2006), and led to what Ball, after Lyotard, calls ‘the terrors of performativity’ (Ball, 2003b). Performativity, Ball argues, is a neoliberal mode of state regulation which requires teachers to respond to targets and indicators and discard personal beliefs and values:

> Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change - based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’, or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement. (Ball, 2003b:216)

Ball goes on to argue that ‘the issue of who controls the field of judgement is crucial’ and that in the struggle over who controls what is valued or seen as effective, teachers’ values are challenged or displaced; these are the ‘terrors of performativity’. In the UK system, assessment is often the main way in which teacher’s individual performance is judged in the performance management process, and may affect teachers’ pay or decisions on promotions (Teachernet, 2009b). Research has
suggested that this shift towards peformativity can reduce the time spent by teachers on other activities (Lyotard’s ‘law of contradiction’ as discussed by Ball, 2003b) and that it has psychological ‘costs’, where teacher struggle between the requirements of the accountability system and what they feel is best for the students (Ball, 2003b; Jeffrey and Woods, 1998; Stobart, 2008).

The last of Ball’s ‘policy technologies’, managerialism, also involves assessment; test results are used to ensure schools are ‘accountable’ to the government, and to parents. Apple has criticised the way in which supposedly ‘tighter’ accountability measures, introduced as part of neoliberal reforms, have in fact reduced the concept to ‘simply number counting’ (Apple, 2006:92). These reforms have had a distinct impact on how teachers function and the values that are promoted within the profession: Ball is particularly critical of how the ‘new public management ... plays a key role in the wearing away of professional-ethical regimes in schools and their replacement by entrepreneurial-competitive regimes’ (Ball, 2008:47). Evidence for this is seen in the ‘values drift’ linked to the introduction of market forces, as identified by Gewirtz (2002), and in processes which ‘de-professionalised’ and then ‘re-professionalised’ teachers (Seddon, 1997 cited in Ball, 2003b).

The early years policy context

It has been argued that the introduction of the Foundation Stage and the connected FSP resulted in the ‘transformation of the early years’ (Sylva and Pugh, 2005), and has largely been viewed positively by researchers (Aubrey, 2004). Sylva and Pugh argue, using evidence from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project, a national longitudinal study based on 3,000 children, that a ‘firm focus on families as well as children’ in delivery of services has been effective (2005:11). An OECD report on early years provision echoed this assessment (Bennett in Sylva and Pugh, 2005). Nevertheless, the formalisation of early years provision, with targets for ‘development’ from birth has been criticised in the press for being overly formal (Beckford, 2008; Clark, 2009). This formalisation has had an impact on teachers: Hargreaves and Hopper (2006) argue that the introduction of the Foundation Stage
has been ‘an asset to status’ (2006:184), but that reform also has the potential to reinforce several factors contributing to the perception of early years as a ‘low status’ profession, including the gendered perceptions of early years work. Processes of formalisation reflect a worldwide trend of increased focus on early years education (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Farquhar and Fitzsimons, 2008; Hultqvist and Dahlberg, 2001), characterised by increased government intervention and increasing standardisation of curricula (Farquhar and Fitzsimons, 2008) and greater concern for ‘standards’ (Brown, 2007).

**Development and models of childhood**

Although recent shifts have been linked to the spread of neoliberal values, debates in early years are also framed by wider discussions of the nature of childhood and appropriate early childhood provision. Critical early years work in particular has focused on the politically contingent nature of notions of childhood:

> There is no natural or evolutionary child, only the historically produced discourses and power relations that constitute the child as an object and subject of knowledge, practice and political intervention (Hultqvist and Dahlberg, 2001:2)

The dominant trend in early years research has been to engage with discourses of the child as a subject of political intervention (such as in the EPPE Project), but as discussed, critical early years scholars have questioned the operation of scientific discourses within early childhood education. Early years policy in the last century has been dominated by discourses of ‘developmentally appropriate practice’ (DAP) based on developmental psychology and scientific ‘reason’ (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). These discourses played a significant role in the professionalisation of teaching young children; as Graue and Johnson write ‘The notion of DAP was a revolutionary move in the history of early childhood curriculum ... a stance on professionalism, constructed from empirical knowledge about child development’ (Graue and Johnson, in press). This shift formed part of an agenda that sought to redress gender imbalances in the school system, an attempt to emphasise rationality in the face of discourses that posited teaching as ‘women’s work’ (Apple, 1986). Currently, these developmental discourses function as regimes of truth within early years settings and in policy; DAP works as ‘an authoritative stamp that policy-makers recognize’ (Brown, 2007:656).
These discourses are often connected to the prioritisation of scientific or objective knowledge; this is linked, according to Moss (2008), to:

a particular form of modernity ... [which is] highly regulatory, foregrounding order, control and certitude and privileging a particular concept of reason and knowledge: an instrumental, calculating and totalising reason and a scientific knowledge that is unified and claims to reveal an objective and universal truth about humanity, history and nature (Moss, 2008:8)

The use of ‘scientific knowledge’ in early years is seen in the use of developmental expectations (as seen in the FSP) which claim to predict what children are able to do at particular ages and therefore define what is normal and what is not: they are transformed ‘from a mythic norm ... to statements of how people should be’ (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005:7). Burman (2001) comments:

whether milestones, gender types, reading ages, cognitive strategies, stages or skills [...] they become enshrined within an apparatus of collective measurement and evaluation that constructs its own world of abstract autonomous babies; of norms, deviation from which is typically only acknowledged in the form of a deficit or ‘problem’. (Burman, 2001:6 cited in Dahlberg and Moss, 2005)

Assessments within the EYFS in England are typical of this discourse of developmental expectation: the ‘development matters’ descriptions for children from birth to five lists expectations for six different age ranges, with the youngest as ‘Birth to 11 months’ and the oldest as ‘40 to 60 months’; this latter section includes the points which provide a final FSP score (DCSF, 2008c). Indeed, the government’s description of an expected level of attainment in the FSP was changed to refer specifically to ‘development’ (DCSF, 2008b:14).

This dominant discourse of development is powerful and has become taken for granted: as Borgnon writes, ‘That a child develops seems unquestionably true, and to help the child develop properly seems unquestionably right’ (2008:44). Although academic debate within early years education has been influenced by post-foundationalist thinking which has questioned this discourse, it is not clear whether
this has filtered into early years practice. Hatch (2007) argues that recent years have actually seen:

the re-emergence of positivist definitions of science ... part of a larger, politically driven movement away from postmodern thinking – in effect, an orchestrated return to modernity (Hatch, 2007:2)

Dahlberg and Moss argue that the recent surge in interest in early years education is ‘mostly of a very particular kind ... stirred by prospect of preschools being sites for producing predefined outcomes, mainly through the application of technical practices to the efficient governing of children’ (2005:4). Furthermore, the current early years child, the ‘reinvented child of liberal thought’ (Hultqvist and Dahlberg, 2001:6) is affected not only by the requirements prescribed by developmental psychology, but also by the need to become an ‘autonomous and flexible child’, a neoliberal citizen:

Today established norms of development intersect with “a new normality of the child” – a child who will be flexible, who is developmentally ready for the uncertainties and opportunities of the twenty-first century (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005:7)

While neoliberalism recasts citizens as consumers (Giroux, 2002), neoliberal early years policy has commercialised provision in many countries, and recast young children as ‘consumers-in-waiting, with their care and education increasingly located as a private and individual concern’ (Woodrow and Press, 2008:96). Examples of the creation of neoliberal citizens in early years have been noted by Tobin (1995), who argues that the concept of ‘free play’, where children choose activities, is a reflection of the need to produce good ‘choosers’ who are informed and capable consumers; and also by Kjørholt (2001, cited in Dahlberg and Moss, 2005), who comments upon the increased freedom to choose in Nordic early years provision.

*Performativity and professionalism in early years*

The intrusion of performativity into early years settings is further evidence of the influence of neoliberalism; this involves a judgement of the ‘quality’ of early years care and education based on measurable outcomes that can be quantified (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999). One result of this is that measurable outcomes which can be definitively observed have come to dominate early years practice:
Conservative forces have constructed and implemented an agenda that attempts to reduce educational outcomes to the minutiae of observable outcomes that can be demonstrated in simple tasks that require routine responses rather than consider the educational experience as engagement with people and ideas (Yelland, 2007:ix).

Dahlberg and Moss see this as part of rationality that has become hegemonic in early years education, where schools can only be evaluated through ‘objective and universally valid’ measurement techniques (2005:5). This rationality is part of a worldwide trend in early years education: research from Kindergarten classes in the United States describes the pressure on teachers to develop their pupils’ academic skills in preparation for later tests (Goldstein, 2006), for example. The Foundation Stage Profile is a manifestation of this rationality of measurement; it attempts to record and quantify all aspects of children’s ‘development’. This study aims to explore how this idea of objective assessment operates in Reception classrooms.

These shifts in early years education have had an impact on the ongoing debate over teacher professionalism (Helsby, 1995; Hoyle, 2001; Moyles, 2001; Sachs, 2001). Although a more formal curriculum might indicate a higher status (Hargreaves and Hopper, 2006), Brock comments that the imposition of values and practices from primary education into early years settings means that some teachers feel they are ‘losing opportunities to be creative autonomous professionals’ (2001:2). As in other education sectors, reform has the potential to shift definitions of professionalism in early years: Osgood argues that the naturalness of a New Right conceptualisation of professionalism has ‘become embedded in the rhetoric of state agencies’ (2006:189). Using Ozga’s ‘proletarianisation thesis’ (1995), Osgood argues that early years teaching has become de-skilled and routine, with ‘an intensification of workload with an emphasis on technical competence and performativity’ (2006:188). Early years reforms paradoxically give the appearance of greater freedom while they ‘actually act to de-regulate and then re-regulate’; this has the effect of ‘de- and then re-professionalising’ teachers (2006:188). Policies such as the FSP are implicated in this debate over professionalism because they provide new methods of judging teachers’ success and therefore new conceptualisations of the ‘good teacher’.
Connecting policy to inequalities

The research literature on educational inequalities reveals the importance of studies which examine the practices and discourses operating in schools, and particularly those which focus on learner identities, in understanding how inequalities are produced and maintained. As discussed, this has also been the focus of research on policy shifts worldwide, as research has suggested that neoliberal policies produce practices which exacerbate inequalities (Apple, 2006; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Lauder and Hughes, 1999). This study draws on all of these bodies of work to examine the practices and discourses associated with the Foundation Stage Profile and their relationship to inequalities in early years education.
Chapter 4: Methodology

Introduction
This chapter outlines the methodology and methods used in this study and the rationale behind their selection. I also include here some information on how the schools were selected and contacted and some general information about them. The ethical considerations of the fieldwork are then examined in detail. A final section reflects upon the processes of data collection and my role in the classroom as a researcher.

The research questions are:

- What is the impact of assessment policy on Reception classroom practices and teachers’ discourses?
- What is the relationship between the assessment system and how children are constituted as learners?
- How are learner identities linked to biographical identity markers? Is the notion of intersectionality important in understanding the construction of learner identities?
- What is the relationship between discourses related to assessment, particularly those concerned with ‘ability’, and classroom practices and issues of identity?
- How does early years assessment fit into whole-school practices and discourses regarding market-based accountability measures?
- How do early years classroom and assessment practices contribute to unequal patterns of attainment?

As explained in Chapter 2, this study is guided by a poststructural theoretical framework, and particularly by a conception of discourse influenced by Foucault but extending beyond his use of the term. Poststructuralism ‘allows us to engage with the complexity of people’s social lives and the workings of social inequalities [...]and] facilitates an awareness of the ways in which people are multi-positioned’ (Archer and Francis, 2007:26). This study concentrates on the complexities of classroom life and how these relate to inequalities, and this theoretical framework allows the researcher to begin to unpick these complexities.
In the analysis chapters that follow, I discuss the multiple discourses which operate and are deployed in these classrooms. It is important to note that these discourses are not necessarily similar in nature: some discourses dominate and operate as powerful organising concepts, while others are deployed on occasion, as part of a complex framework of different ideas.

The methodological implications of a poststructural theoretical position include a rejection of the notions of neutrality and objectivity in research; instead I agree with those who view neutrality as a ‘myth’ (Hallam et al, 2003) and argue that research cannot be ‘depolicitised’ and ‘scientific’ principles in research are ‘blind to all but the most crude operations of power and politics’ (Gillborn, 1995). This epistemological position, in contrast to the ‘scientistic mimicry of the social sciences’ (Hallam, Ireson and Davies, 2004:3), does not view research as the pursuit of a reality that can be externally discovered. There is no ‘truth’ to be found by visiting classrooms that can be transferred and compared to other situations. I conceptualise the participants as ‘active respondents’ when involved in research, as opposed to ‘real respondents’ who I assume hold a truth or story which I need to bring out through the interview (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). I also acknowledge that the interviews provide information that is highly contextualised and affected by my position and my relationships to the participants. I am aware of the ‘impossibility of ever ‘knowing’ the context and its subjects and so of pinning down the meanings of it/their practices once and for all’ (Youdell, 2006b:66).

The contribution of Critical Race Theory methodologies to my research is less distinct, largely because the methodological positions of CRT are in many ways similar to those associated with the long tradition of anti-racist research in the UK. For example, the CRT argument that positions of neutrality and objectivity are ‘camouflages’ which obscure inherent racial biases (Tate, 1997) are not unlike those seen in the debates with the ‘methodological purists’ in the 90s (Foster, 1990; Foster, 1991; Gillborn, 1995; Wright, 1990). CRT emphasises the significance of experience, the integration of ‘lived experience with racial realism’ (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and
thus (like poststructural research) regards a process whereby White researchers reflect upon their particular racial positions as an important consideration; this is discussed further in the reflective section later in this chapter. The main contribution of CRT in terms of methodology is a recognition that racism is not something to be discovered through research and proved; its presence is assumed and so the purpose of research is to uncover the complexities of its operation and to challenge these. However, although CRT has traditionally focused on the centrality of race in any situation, in keeping with recent discussions of CRT (Gillborn, 2008), this study also considers other aspects of identity, including gender and class.

**Research design and rationale**

The research design for this study involved ethnographic studies of two primary school classrooms in inner London over the course of just over one academic year. This design was based broadly on the idea that ethnographic studies of research sites provide the depth and quality of data necessary to examine the complexities of everyday life, what Geertz (1973) called ‘thick description’, and more specifically on discussions of poststructural ethnography (St.Pierre and Pillow, 2000; Youdell, 2006b). The possibility of doing specifically poststructural ethnography is debated (Miller and Fox, 2004; St.Pierre and Pillow, 2000; Youdell, 2006b); this approach builds upon feminist and critical ethnographic work which has recognised the significance of multiple perspectives in the research site. Understanding the subject as constituted through discourse has implications for the research process (Youdell, 2006c): although the methods of poststructural ethnography might appear similar to traditional educational ethnography (observing in classes, interviewing participants) the researcher is concerned not with description but with analysing the discourses that operate in that setting, and how the dominant discourses work to constrain possibilities for some individuals. This analysis can never be final or certain, shaped as it is by my ‘discursive’. In presenting data, it is possible only to attempt to ‘construct compelling representations of moments inside school in order to untangle the discursive frames that guide meaning and render subjects within it’ (Youdell, 2006c:513).
Nonetheless, I consider this study to be part of the tradition of engaging in long-term ethnographic fieldwork in schools in the sociology of education which dates back to the 70s (for example Ball, 1981; Keddie, 1973; Sharp, Green and Lewis, 1975). This research has sought, through the use of specific case studies, to examine the detail and complexity of classrooms and the ways in which they privilege some children and not others. In my study, the length of the fieldwork was designed to capture the detail of the setting from the children's first week of school to their last week as Reception pupils. This was particularly important as there are many changing elements of Reception classroom life over the course of one year, including the introduction of new children in January. The following sections explain how the fieldwork was set up and organised, and provide some information about the schools.

Selecting and contacting the schools

For reasons of practicality and time, I decided to base my fieldwork in three schools in inner London. I intended to select these schools from within one Local Authority (LA), because I presumed that the LA would be involved in the FSP process to a similar degree in all schools in their area, and would give the same advice and training to these schools. It was my intention to select schools to ensure a balance of different factors, including: proportions of different ethnicities; pupils' socio-economic backgrounds; religious affiliation or community status; and the presence or absence of a nursery class in the school. I decided to approach schools based in one inner-London LA (which remains anonymous throughout, referred to as 'the LA'), because I knew from my professional experience in another area of London that this LA had a school population including a mixture of different ethnic groups. I also had no personal connection to this LA, never having worked in the borough.

The selection process began with the collection of data about each of the schools in the LA from the DCSF Families of Schools data, which provides information on pupil

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6 The extent to which this held true was unclear from the data collected, as discussed in later chapters.
numbers, religious or community status, proportions of children receiving Free School Meals (FSM), and proportions of children of different ethnic backgrounds (DCSF, 2008e). I contacted a number of schools via a letter and three schools - Gatehouse, St Mary’s and St Peter’s - all passed my letter on to their Reception teachers. I arranged to meet and interview all three teachers in the summer term of 2008. Unfortunately, after this initial meeting the teachers at St Peter’s decided they would not be able to help because of other commitments, leaving me with two schools. By chance, these schools provided the good balance that I had originally been seeking: they varied in size, faith/community status, nursery provision and location. Both of the main Reception teachers were male, which is unusual in early years teaching, but I did not consider this to be of sufficient importance to prevent me using either of their classrooms. The following section introduces the schools and the participants, before I explain how the fieldwork was conducted.

Information on the schools and participants

The study schools belonged to a Local Authority (LA) in inner London which is ethnically and socially diverse. According to the ‘Measuring diversity’ data based on 2008, under 20% of the pupils in the LA were White British, approximately 10% were Bangladeshi, 10% Black African, and over 50% were from ‘Other ethnic group’ (CMPO and ESRC, 2010). Over half of the schools in the LA were ‘Minority White’ according to this data, which is defined as schools where at most 20% of pupils are White British. The LA includes over 30 primary schools, both community and voluntary aided (Church of England and Catholic). Below I outline some basic information about the schools, teachers and pupils.

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7 All names of schools, teachers and pupils are pseudonyms.
8 The significance of the male Reception teachers is discussed further in Chapter 6.
9 Note that some information is deliberately omitted or made vague in order to preserve the anonymity of the schools and teachers.
10 Pseudonyms for the schools were chosen to be neutral terms which nonetheless still revealed the different community and church status of the schools. The names of the participants were chosen to reflect the ethnic identity of the individual. Pseudonyms do not begin with the same letter as the original name, as is sometimes the case in research. Where names are alliterative and this is significant, the pseudonyms also have the same initial letter; this is the case with Reece and Ryan (two
boys who were confused at St Mary's) and with two sets of twins - Daania and Dahab and April and Ashlee.
Gatehouse Primary School

The school

Gatehouse Primary is a large two-form entry community primary school in inner London with over 400 pupils. There is a nursery class which takes children from 3½ years, and several out-of-hours activities at the school, such as breakfast and after-school clubs. The school is situated near a large housing estate with a mixture of high-rise blocks and some low-rise housing, and there are two other schools nearby. According to ‘Families of Schools’ data, in 2008 approximately 60% of pupils were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), and less than 5% of the children were registered as ‘White British’. Significant other ethnic groups were ‘Other White background’ (approximately 20%), Bangladeshi (15%) and ‘Any other ethnic group’ (40%) (DCSF, 2008e). Approximately 90% of pupils had English as an additional language.

The two Reception classes at Gatehouse occupied a large triple classroom with dividing doors in-between that remained open, with a carpet area and whiteboard at each end. There were doors which opened straight onto the outside playground, which was large and contained climbing frames and goalposts. During free play time, children were allowed to move around between the three rooms which were set up with several activities, and could move outside when the weather allowed. The children also spent time in the hall for PE and dance lessons, and had weekly lessons in the ICT suite.

The teachers

There were several adults present at different times in the classroom at Gatehouse: these are detailed below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Biographical information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>Class teacher and main contact</td>
<td>White British, male, early 30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>Class teacher of the other Reception class</td>
<td>White British, female, early 30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>Support teacher for all of Reception, working with small groups and taking the class when Jim or Liz were not available</td>
<td>White British, female, 40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>Foundation Stage leader, and line manager of the other teachers; she spent some time each day in the Reception classes and also covered for Jim and Liz</td>
<td>Chinese North American, female, 30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Teaching assistant (full time), supporting the classes and doing administrative work, mainly for Jim's class</td>
<td>White British, female, 20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becky</td>
<td>Teaching assistant (full time), supporting the classes and doing administrative work, mainly for Liz's class</td>
<td>White British, female, 20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Teaching assistant (full time) for one pupil (Nasser) in Jim's class with a special needs statement; only present for the second half of the year</td>
<td>White North American, female, 40s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of the data collected involved Jim, Lynn and Susan; however, some incidents used in the data analysis involved Liz (teacher of the other Reception class) and the teaching assistants.

**The pupils**

In Jim’s Reception class, there were 12 children in the Autumn term and 27 for the rest of the year, as some children joined the class in January. There were 13 boys and 14 girls. In the other Reception class (Liz’s class), there were a further 30 children; they were also observed as they frequently mixed with Jim’s class. Information on the children’s ethnic groups was displayed in the classroom using photographs attached to flags\(^{11}\). According to this data, across both classes the larger groups were

\(^{11}\) This display is discussed in Chapter 6.
Bangladeshi (9 children), Iraqi (8), Lebanese (8), Kosovan (7), Moroccan (6), Afghan (6) and White British (4). There were also children in the year group who were listed as Black Caribbean, Somali, Mongolian and Algerian.

**St Mary’s Church of England Primary School**

*The school*

St Mary’s is a small Church of England voluntary aided primary located in inner London, in an area of mixed housing and commercial properties. It is housed next to the church in an old and rather cramped building. There is just one class in each year, and the total number of children enrolled is approximately 140. According to the Families of Schools Data (DCSF, 2008e), at the time of the fieldwork approximately 50% of pupils were eligible for FSM. About 10% of pupils were White British, 20% Other White background, 20% Bangladeshi, 25% Black groups, and 20% Any other ethnic group. Approximately 70% of pupils were registered as EAL.

The Reception classroom at St Mary’s was a single small classroom with a carpet, and areas set out for activities. Doors opened from the classroom onto a small outside area which was used for outside play by the class and also by Year 1 and 2 at lunchtimes. The resources at St Mary’s were far less numerous than at Gatehouse and there was less variety in what was on offer apart from the adult-led activities. For example, the ‘home corner’ remained a kitchen all year round while at Gatehouse it changed into different settings every few weeks, based on the current topic. At St Mary’s the free play activities remained constant, consisting of writing area, home corner, painting, train sets, and outside play. The children also attended assembly every day after the morning register.

*The teachers and other adults*

At St Mary’s there was just one class teacher involved in Reception – Paul. His non-contact time was covered by supply teachers or a range of other teachers in the school, and unlike at Gatehouse, I very rarely spent time in the classroom without him being there. There were several other support staff, as detailed below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Biographical information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>Class teacher, and main contact</td>
<td>White British, male, 40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Mr Archer)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Teaching assistant (full time)</td>
<td>Black British, female, 30s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>Learning support assistant for one pupil (Parinda) with a special needs statement (mornings)</td>
<td>White British, female, 20s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosie</td>
<td>Teaching assistant (mornings)</td>
<td>White British, female, 50s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yasmin</td>
<td>Teaching assistant (afternoons)</td>
<td>Asian, female, 40s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asif</td>
<td>Student teacher, present for some parts of the year</td>
<td>Asian, male, 20s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For most of the time at St Mary’s there were four adults in the room: Paul, Vicky, and two of the TAs. Note that Paul was known to the children as Mr Archer, while all other adults at both schools were called by their first names, except the headteachers. Although practices vary, it is more common for teachers in the early years to be known by their first names, but this was not the case at St Mary’s.

**The pupils**

In the Reception class at St Mary’s there were 23 pupils, nine boys and 14 girls. According to the official data on ethnic groups in the class, there were five Bangladeshi children, four Black African children, two Black Other and two White British children in the class. Other children came from Chinese, Kosovan, Moroccan, Mixed other, Pakistani, and Other ethnic groups.

**Fieldwork**

**Initial interviews**

Before beginning the fieldwork I engaged in some initial research exploring FSP documentation and advice, which provided a thorough background knowledge of the FSP process as prescribed by the DCSF and the Qualifications and Curriculum authority (DCSF, 2007; QCA, 2008c) and the updates to the EYFSP (QCA, 2008b). I then visited the schools in June 2008 to discuss the project with the teachers (and
the head in one case) and to conduct an initial interview using a semi-structured schedule. The aim of these interviews was to build rapport with the teacher, and to gather some initial ideas about the research questions, including whether they were appropriate. I was also able to gather more information about the school and the assessment processes used.

**Classroom observations**

The majority of the fieldwork consisted of classroom observation, which I undertook as a non-participant observer. I began my observations in the second week of term in September when a staggered start system meant some children had had a few days to settle in, and some children were experiencing their first day of school. I visited the schools for one day each week for most of the year, changing the frequency of my visits to once a fortnight when the teachers requested or I felt I needed time to reflect upon the data collected. During these visits I observed the classroom from the back of the carpet during lesson times, and moved around the classroom and outside during free play sessions. I made notes at the time, which I wrote up later that day. I began by taking notes on incidents and comments that I found interesting and collecting general information, but as the fieldwork went on I began to make more notes on all aspects of classroom life, often taking down entire conversations verbatim. On some days I decided to observe only two children and wrote down exactly what they did all day; the aim of this was to enliven the observation process when I felt I was seeing the same things again and again, and to collect some more detailed data on children’s experiences in the classroom. Fortunately, the practice of adults writing observations about the children is normal in Reception classrooms, and so my presence was probably less unusual than in other primary classrooms. I also took notes on conversations I had with teachers at break times and lunch, and with all the adults in the setting.

At St Mary’s, I was also able to observe weekly ‘FSP meetings’ with the class teacher Paul and his teaching assistant Kelly, which took place in the staff room during Paul’s non-contact time. These involved a different form of observation as I was far more obvious when taking notes in a small room with only two other people, and this led
to some tensions, as discussed below. However, this alternative form of observation provided me with a great deal of useful data regarding the production of the FSP. No equivalent meeting existed at Gatehouse, where the class teachers organised their own FSP scores without input from the teaching assistants.

**Interviews**

In all I conducted nine interviews over the course of the year, as detailed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gatehouse</th>
<th>St Mary’s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interviews with class teacher (Jim):</strong></td>
<td><strong>Interviews with class teacher (Paul):</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• June 2008</td>
<td>• July 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• September 2008</td>
<td>• October 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• March 2009</td>
<td>• July 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• July 2009</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview with Reception support teacher (Susan):</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• October 2008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview with Foundation Stage leader (Lynn)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• November 2008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of these interviews were conducted at the schools, at times requested by the teachers. The interviews with the class teachers (Jim and Paul) were all after school and lasted up to two hours, whereas I interviewed Lynn and Susan during the school day and these lasted less than an hour. I recorded these interviews on a digital recorder and transcribed them afterwards.

The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview schedule (examples are provided in Appendix 3), with the intention being to provoke a conversation around key issues. I found the participants to be open and enthusiastic about sharing their views, and both class teachers commented on how they enjoyed having someone listen to them. Paul, the class teacher at St Mary’s, was particularly keen to share his criticisms of the school and the education system in general with me, and came to
see me as an outlet for his many frustrations with his job. While I did not encourage this view of me as an ally against the management, I also did not discourage it, and found that these discussions produced rich and revealing data. The willingness of other teachers at Gatehouse to be interviewed also provided different perspectives, especially since they were both more experienced teachers who taught before the introduction of the Foundation Stage Profile.

**Document collection**

I collected data from various documents in the classroom and official documentation about the children. At both schools I spent some time each day looking through the children’s FSP folders, and copying down notable observations and extracts. I also made notes from children’s nursery files when they were delivered to the classrooms, and from the handover reports to the Reception teachers at Gatehouse. I looked at the teachers’ weekly plans which were displayed in the classroom, and had access to organisational information such as grouping systems. Children’s books and homework folders were also accessible and I made notes on these also. More formally, I requested the schools’ official policies on teaching and learning, early years, assessment, equality, and other relevant issues. These were provided to me at Gatehouse, with the proviso that they were not up-to-date or ever looked at, but at St Mary’s I was not able to collect these despite repeated requests. At the end of the year, both schools provided me with their official FSP results for their classes, and at St Mary’s I was also given other assessment information based on the Letters and Sounds assessment system\(^\text{12}\) and was able to look through Paul’s records on a software programme used to collect FSP data. All of this information was provided with my reassurance that it would be kept anonymous.

One challenge was to collect the official information on the children’s Free School Meal (FSM) status and ethnic groups. At St Mary’s I was provided with a class list detailing the children’s ethnic groups with the FSP data (perhaps by accident) and at

\(^{12}\) This is government phonics programme with an assessment system that is intended to complement the FSP.
Gatehouse this information was displayed in the classroom. I was not able to collect information on FSM status of individual children at either school, but was able to use whole school FSM percentages from the Families of Schools Data (DCSF, 2008e).

**Processing the data**

Both the classroom observations and the interviews generated a large volume of data to be processed. As mentioned, fieldnotes were typed up in their entirety as soon as possible after the visit to the school and names were changed to pseudonyms at this point to protect the participants’ anonymity. Interviews were also transcribed without omissions and with pseudonyms, and notes taken before and after the interview process were also typed up. A key to the transcripts is provided below. Direct quotes from the interviews or fieldnotes are indicated by double quotation marks, to distinguish them from quotes from literature or indications of the complexity of terms (where single quotation marks are used).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Key to Transcripts</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>italicised</em> text</td>
<td>Denotes emphasised speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...</td>
<td>Pause</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[...]</td>
<td>Material has been edited out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[square brackets]</td>
<td>Actions, or contextual information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the data was then transferred into the NVivo qualitative data analysis programme, to allow for systematic coding of the data. The data was coded in two ways (a list of codes is provided in Appendix 4). Firstly, after each half term I went through the fieldnotes and coded them into a number of themes, both pre-determined and emerging from the data. This gradual process reduced the time consuming nature of this work and allowed me to focus my subsequent observations on the emerging issues. Interviews were coded separately along the same themes, outside of NVivo. At the end of the year, I used a revised set of themes to analyse all of the interviews, by coding them in NVivo into a range of ‘nodes’. This dual system allowed for the different issues arising in the fieldnotes and interviews to be
separated out. This system worked well in the analysis of the data, making searching and finding individual bits of data and entire themes straightforward. As already mentioned, this processing was done with an awareness of the constraints of my own 'discursive repertoire' (Youdell, 2006b:56). For example, there may have been many discourses operating in these classrooms that I took for granted as normal in a primary school and therefore paid little attention to, which another researcher might have coded quite differently.

**Ethical considerations**

The ethical considerations involved in this project are complex and are therefore examined in detail in this section. The research was carried out within the ESRC and BERA guidelines and has been discussed and examined within the Institute of Education ethics framework. The study is also informed by literature on the particular issues involved in researching race and ethnicity (Connolly and Troyna, 1998; Gunaratnam, 2003; Troyna, 1995) and by the literature on the particulars of research involving young children (Hatch, 2007; Wood *et al*, 2008).

The research was organised on the basis of informed consent: an information sheet (in Appendix 5) was given to the teachers during our first meeting, outlining the research questions and the kind of data I intended to collect. They agreed this plan was acceptable to them during these initial meetings. The teachers who were interviewed gave their consent verbally and also signed consent forms before they were interviewed (see Appendix 6). The headteachers also gave verbal consent for me to observe in their schools and in the Reception classrooms. I did not obtain permission from the parents of the children as I considered the headteachers’ consent to be sufficient, especially since my focus was on the teacher rather than the pupils, and no pupils were interviewed. I made clear to the teachers my willingness to explain who I was to the parents informally or through a newsletter, but this offer was not taken up; the teachers at both schools did not seem to be concerned to inform parents about my role in the classroom, perhaps because they had many visitors and observers. Before entering the schools I obtained a CRB check, and I wore
identification when visiting. The participants were given details of my status as a doctoral student at the Institute and the names of my supervisors in case they needed extra information. The participants were made aware that they could remove themselves from the research at any time.

The teachers were assured that the data would be made anonymous, with all names of the LA, schools, teachers and children changed. Identifying features of the schools have also been omitted where necessary. During my time in the schools, I also kept the identity of the other school secret from the teachers as they were in the same LA. I also kept this information anonymous when discussing the project with other doctoral students and family members, given my close connections with the London primary school community. Any further publication of the data beyond this thesis will take ethical considerations and anonymity in particular into account.

The information given to teachers explained that the research was intended to explore the introduction of the FSP into Reception classrooms, assessment cultures in early years, and the effect of the FSP on different groups of children. This was, I felt, an accurate description of my research at the time. However, I did deliberately omit information about a specific focus on race, for two reasons: firstly, I anticipated that this information would dramatically change the behaviour and responses of the teachers in the study, and secondly, because I was aware that as the study was developing, I was increasingly using the concept of intersectionality, and so was genuinely interested in all axes of identity. The description of the interest in ‘different groups’ of pupils aimed to explain this focus, and during the initial meetings, I was careful to elaborate this point by mentioning different genders, classes and ethnic groups. This approach was necessary ‘to ensure that the appropriate data is collected’, as stated in the BERA ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004).
Reflections on the research process

Experiences in the classroom

In this section I reflect on two issues: the extent to which I was an ‘insider’ as an ex-teacher in a primary classroom, and the problem of attempting to be a non-participant in a Reception class. I also reflect here upon the production of ‘data’ from a classroom.

Researching as an ex-teacher

There is much debate in ethnography about the extent to which the researcher should be an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’. While a lack of familiarity may mean the researcher is more open-minded and can see what is taken for granted, there is a danger than this can also lead to misunderstandings and poorer relationships with research participants, who may be inadvertently rendered ‘unusual’ or ‘exotic’. In the past, research studies into ‘race relations’ in classrooms have been criticised for further constituting minoritised groups as the ‘Other’ (Apple and Buras, 2006). Particularly relevant here is my position as an ex-teacher in a primary classroom, an issue which has been discussed by other researchers. Troman argues that being an ex-teacher was an advantage in his ethnographic study: ‘My experience as a teacher allowed me to have a ‘deep familiarity’ (Goffman, 1959) with the social processes I aimed to research’ (Troman, 2002:103; see also Troman, Jeffrey and Beach, 2006). I would agree with the contention that a ‘deep familiarity’ with primary schools was immensely beneficial for me: knowing school-based terms, acronyms, practices and systems was very helpful in making my presence in the school straightforward. It was also useful in building a relationship with the teachers. However, unlike Troman, I felt that I was understood not as a teacher, but as an ex-teacher, partly because the participants were interested in my decision to stop teaching and begin a research career. My distance in terms of specialism (I was a Key Stage 2 teacher mainly) was also another factor in distancing me from the Reception teachers, who were very interested in what classes I had taught. Troman argues that movement from sector to sector allows the research site to be “sufficiently “sociologically” distant to make the culture “anthropologically strange” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p9) to me.
and thus lend some critical analytical distance to the study’ (Troman, 2002:109). I found that in learning more about the practices of early years classrooms, I was perhaps more aware of what was taken for granted and ‘normal’ to the staff; this was useful in analysing the discourses that dominated in the schools. I was also able as a non-early years specialist to act the *faux naïf*, and ask many simple questions about everyday practices and assumptions. I think this balance was very productive, as I was able to understand much about the classrooms easily, without the setting being too familiar and therefore difficult to research. Although I would not claim to be able to ‘access the thoughts and feelings’ of teachers as Troman does, I think that despite some ‘distance’, having been a teacher did allow me to empathise with the teachers’ daily experiences, and be sympathetic to their needs when organising interviews and observations.

*Non-participation*

One of problems of non-participant observation is the extent to which non-participation remains feasible, particularly in classrooms of young children who are not used to an adult being present who is not there to help them. I took the approach of being quite flexible about how much I participated: I always intervened when safety was an issue, and when it would seem churlish not to help out (for example, with doing up coats and shoelaces), but at other times attempted to remain a non-participant. In order to maintain a good relationship with the class teachers I also volunteered to help out on school trips and visits to the library, and during these times I switched from non-participant to a classroom assistant with control over (and responsibility for) a group of children. This was a successful strategy in that the teachers appeared to appreciate this contribution and it also positioned me as a capable experienced adult, which may have affected how the teachers responded to me in interviews.

This flexible approach was generally successful, but there were moments where I felt I had to make difficult decisions about my level of intervention, and as I realised in my final interview with Paul (discussed below) this strategy was controversial. One moment where I felt a contradiction between my desire to collect interesting data
and the safety and welfare of the children in the class took place during the first few weeks at St Mary’s. I had already observed several occasions where Paul, the class teacher, reprimanded children for things that it appeared to me that they had not done, and this seemed to happen often to a boy named Reece. However uncomfortable these incidents had made me, I did not intervene as this would have seriously damaged my relationship with him during a time when he was asserting his authority with a new class. However, one morning I was watching close by when Reece was accused by another child, Parinda, of stealing her train from the train set, when in fact Reece had merely refused to hand over his train to her when she demanded. Parinda shouted to Paul and went over to him to complain. During this time, Reece looked up at me, well aware that I had seen what had really happened, and motioned pleadingly that I defend him, aware perhaps that his reputation in the class as a child who did not share meant that he was likely to be told off. At this point I hesitated, unsure as to whether to break the rule of non-intervention for the sake of Reece, who looked distraught, or to remain neutral for the sake of fairness to other children who had been wrongly reprimanded, and in order to maintain my still-developing relationship with Paul. Fortunately I never had to make this decision as Paul ignored Parinda’s complaints and sent her back to play. However the incident did reveal to me the complex and emotional issues brought up by doing fieldwork in schools, and the way in which the researcher’s intentions may have to be negotiated and adjusted in different contexts. I found during the research process that the experiences of children such as Reece were quite upsetting to observe, and this was one of the more difficult issues to negotiate when engaging in a long-term ethnographic study.

Building relationships

My position as an ex-teacher helped enormously in building relationships with the teachers in the classroom. I noted several occasions where I had ‘teacherly’ chats with staff about what children were doing, issues in teaching, and the life of a teacher. For example, being able to join in a conversation about Christmas plays with my own anecdotes was hugely important in creating a perception of me as an insider.
I did feel at times as if some of the teachers were concerned that I was assessing their teaching (which makes sense considering the only other time someone watches them and takes notes is when they are assessed), and Susan and Liz at Gatehouse in particular would often explain a lesson to me afterwards as if they were excusing any problem that had occurred. I frequently reassured them that I was not judging their teaching and that I wanted to see real classrooms which meant lessons being a bit unpredictable, and through the year they seemed to relax more when I was observing. Both Paul and Jim seemed to be quite relaxed after the first few weeks, perhaps because I observed them more often. I was reassured that I was seeing a reasonably ‘normal’ version of Jim’s teaching when I saw him obviously make an effort for some visitors, and then relapse back into ‘normal’ mode when they left. I asked Jim at the end of the fieldwork if he felt I had seen his normal classroom:

AB: Do you think that you’ve acted like you normally do when I’m there?

Jim: Um ... yes [reluctantly]. However, honestly, I have looked up at you on occasion, just to, I don’t know, I think I’ve looked up at you throughout the year just to make sure you heard something,

AB: Yeah, something good you mean?

Jim: Or something bad. Whether you’ve spotted my, if you’ve spotted my mistake, sometimes I’ve done that ... [laughs]. But no, apart from that, I’ve taught the same way I teach. I’ve had so many people in, so many students in, and it doesn’t bother me.

(Interview with Jim, July 09)

Although Jim admitted that he sometimes was concerned at my presence, in general he appeared to argue that he wasn’t bothered. Paul made similar comments when I asked him:

“You’ve seen exactly how it was. Yeah, I mean how many days did you come and I had sort of slightly forgotten you were coming? I knew you were but I had sort of forgotten. I never ever, ever planned anything differently, I never reacted differently – can you imagine what I would be like if I had reacted differently? If that was me on my absolute best
behaviour you can imagine what I must be like! No, that was 100% me every single day” (Paul, July 09)

Although both main teachers suggested I had seen the ‘real thing’, I obviously had some effect on what they did and this has to be taken into account in any analysis. I am particularly aware that Paul felt quite uncomfortable with my presence at certain times, and at the end of the year he told me he had found it difficult to be observed when he felt ‘sensitive and vulnerable’, and was often worried what I thought about him “letting rip” (being angry) at his class. Paul was far less comfortable with the arrangement of me visiting regularly, perhaps because of the slightly chaotic nature of his classroom and his disillusionment with teaching in general. I felt less comfortable in the classroom at St Mary’s, and my relationship with Paul was at times quite strained – he felt I was not sure what I was doing and was surprised that I didn’t join in in the classroom more. Although he expressed admiration that I did not help the deputy head (whom he disliked) when he taught Paul’s class, he also said “Then I kind of thought oh, if there was dying child on the floor you would just step over them and write down that there was a dying child on the floor”. My relationship with Jim was far easier, perhaps because we were a similar age, and he seemed quite content with letting me get on with observing without always knowing what I was writing down. He often asked me at the end of the day if I had “got what you are looking for”, without ever asking what that might be, and in our final interview said “I don’t know exactly what you’re researching but I think you’ve probably got a handle on what you need”. Jim’s comments on my lack of participation were far more understanding: he said “I think the weirdest thing is having an adult in there that you can’t use, to work with”, but that he understood why I didn’t join in.

My relationship with the teaching assistants in both classrooms was less easy, possibly due to my ex-teacher or researcher status: they seemed to be more wary of me, and it was never clear how much they understood why I was there or what I was doing (although I reassured several TAs that I was not there to judge them or their teaching). At St Mary’s, Kelly, who had role as a TA which was most like a teacher (reading stories to the class, participating in meetings) seemed to be more at ease with me, perhaps because she was more confident in the classroom. However, when
I talked to Paul at the end of the fieldwork about his experiences of having a researcher in the classroom, he mentioned that he thought Kelly sometimes was more active because I was there:

“Occasionally, Kelly in her conversations when you were present was being slightly, slightly to an audience. [...] For example with the children, she might have just sort of ignored it, whereas because she was being noticed, she did a differently, slightly different, more involved thing. Like this afternoon with the game - I don’t think that would have happened on a normal afternoon” (Paul, July 09)

Paul’s acknowledgement that Kelly was acting differently raises doubts about his own claims to be ‘normal’: it appeared to me that Paul also made an effort to behave in ways that he thought I would approve of when I was present. It would be naïve to argue that these teachers and TAs behaved exactly as normal when I was observing, but I hope that I was able to at least minimise the effect of my presence by building relationships with them.

*Producing ‘data’*

Another element of the research process that it is important to reflect upon is the way in which fieldnotes become ‘data’, and thus take on a seriousness and finality that seems far removed from the researcher’s subjective position in the classroom. I wrote many notebooks of fieldnotes during my year in the schools, and there were several occasions where I was unsure about some of the elements of the events I was writing about. For instance, I could never be sure about references to incidents that had happened the day before. Therefore, although I have attempted to explain any ambiguities I felt when collecting the data, all extracts presented here should be taken as the subjective observations that they are, not as ‘factual’ accounts. This is an unavoidable problem in ethnography, which is made more obvious in this case by the fact that I was observing teachers as they observed children. This simultaneous observation has brought to my attention the many-layered nature of the process of data collection, and how data are created and remade in the research process. There were several instances where I was able to compare a teacher’s description of an incident in a child’s profile with my own fieldnotes. For example, I was observing
during a religious education lesson at St Mary’s and had recorded in my fieldnotes that one pupil, Sarah, frequently interrupted the teacher and was reprimanded several times. However, when I came to see an observation note written by Kelly about Sarah in the lesson, it read:

‘Carpet session: Mr A [Paul] shows a film of the Easter story. First picture of cross and S says: I know that’s Jesus, he goes on there. He hangs on there when he’s dead”. Children watched the film – At end when it shows Jesus on the cross, S says “I told you! Cause I know this story” (Field notes, March, copied exactly from Kelly’s note)

In this observation note, Sarah has participated enthusiastically and knowledgably, whereas my observation was that her contributions were unwelcome. These comparisons serve as a constant reminder of how easily different purposes can affect what you observe in a classroom, and that the ‘data’ I created is just as subjective as Kelly’s note.

My position as a researcher

My theoretical approaches influence the way I conceive of the research that I am conducting, and my place within it. In conducting ethnographic studies of these Reception classrooms I am aware of the need for reflexivity, or ‘uncovering/recognising the difference your differences make’ (Reay, 1996:443 cited in Archer and Francis, 2007:40). It would be unwise to assume that my constitution as a White, middle-class British woman in my late 20s (and the discourses surrounding these identity positions) does not have an impact on the research process (Archer, 2002; Phoenix, 1996). However it is also difficult to discuss the exact impact of my identity as a researcher; it is important to make clear that I do not conceive of myself as a neutral researcher who can understand fully a rational, coherent respondent, or that I can understand the impact of the ‘readable’ elements of my identity on the research. In engaging with reflexivity I do not intend to oversimplify the nature of identity categories as fixed; in line with my theoretical position regarding the constitution of the subject, I regard neither the researcher nor the researched as having ‘ascribed’ characteristics which can be simply ‘read’ and considered (Youdell, 2006b:63). Nonetheless, given what Youdell calls ‘the centrality
of visual economies to discourses of gender and race’ (2006b:65), it is possible to speculate on the impact of the ‘visible’ aspects of my identity. For example, I think that being recognisable as a White woman, an identity which is obviously very common among primary teachers, may have helped me to gain and maintain access to the schools by making me seem less ‘other’. My age also may have helped when acting the *faux naïf*, especially with older participants; in terms of power relations it may have also balanced out my position as the ‘expert’ visitor from a university.

As argued in relation to women researchers (Oakley, 2005), issues of power are always significant in the research situation, which is inherently power-imbalanced from the start (Phoenix, 1996). This is the case nowhere more than in research on minoritised groups by White researchers; some of this work has been criticised as ‘objectifying, voyeuristic, and blunt’ (Youdell, 2006b:61). I am well aware that, as suggested in CRT literature (Harris, 1993; McIntosh, 1992), I am the beneficiary of White privilege in the research situation as much as in all other aspects of daily life. Following the traditions of CRT, I would argue that that my work is affected by and part of racist society: ‘We are all captured, to some degree, by the very machinery of racism and White Supremacy that we seek to criticize in our work’ (Gillborn, 2008:203). The issue of White researchers engaging in projects concerned with race and minoritised groups is the subject of much debate (Archer, 2002; Gillborn, 2008), and CRT literature has been concerned with the different ‘standing’ of anti-racist arguments by White and minoritised scholars (Bell, 1992). White researchers need to be aware of the limits of their understanding of the lived experiences of minoritised people, without this preventing them from engaging in research concerned with race. Gillborn argues that Whiteness can be used in anti-racist work: ‘Whiteness as a practice of power can be disrupted, even to the extent that one’s location within the category White is actually called into question’ (2008:201, emphasis in original). This argument is summarised in his use of Stuart Hall’s advice ‘we must struggle where we are’ (2008:202). After all, as Leonardo argues, ‘White guilt can be a paralysing sentiment that helps neither Whites nor people of color’ (2004a:140).
Throughout the project I have been conscious of my own constituted subjectivity and how this affects the research that I undertake, the analysis I offer of the data and how I present that analysis. Exploring discourses in the study schools is, as Youdell explains: ‘not the collection “real” or “actual” discourse but is wholly constrained by my own discursive repertoire – the discourses I see and name – and my capacity to represent these’ (2006b:56). My ‘making sense’ of the data I produce is constrained in the same ways as the teachers are in ‘making sense’ of their experiences; I too am involved in the ongoing constitution of the participants through discourse. However, I am also aware that, as Youdell argues, the individuals involved are capable of exercising discursive agency (Butler, 1997), within limits and both intentionally and unintentionally, and affect how they are constituted (2006b:64). It is with an awareness of all of these issues that I present my arguments in relation to the data in the following chapters.
Chapter 5: Being a ‘good learner’ and how good teachers ‘know’ children

Educational success

In New Labour’s Britain it seems impermissible for the citizen to be anything other than successful. In education there has been an unrelenting focus on successful pupils and students, successful teachers, and, of course, successful schools (Bradford and Hey, 2007:595).

There is a long-standing interest in the sociology of education with the articulation and definition of educational success in policy and in schools. Much of the literature focuses on a construction of the ‘ideal’ pupil or learner that operates in schools, following Becker’s (1952) discussion of the ‘ideal client’ (Francis and Skelton, 2005; Gillborn, 1990; Youdell, 2006b). In recent years, it has been argued that the marketisation-driven prioritisation of high stakes tests has redefined educational success as high attainment in tests, and that this has had an impact on classroom practices (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Keddie and Mills, 2007). At the same time, patterns of attainment that are reported have shown distinct imbalances in terms of gender, race and class (as shown crudely by FSM data and more recently by IDACI figures). In this chapter, I begin to unpack the model of educational success that is discursively produced by the FSP and how it operates within these Reception classrooms. I argue that central to this model is a specific notion of the ‘learner’ as an individualised subject of schooling. This learner identity is discursively produced within a framework of neoliberal values of flexibility, conformity, responsibility and choice. It goes beyond strictly educational success to encompass all aspects of schooling, including attitudes, behaviour and conduct, and this wider prescription of what it means to be a learner is discursively reinforced by the range of attributes covered by the FSP. I argue that, in this way, the ideal learner in early years is different from the ideal learner in later parts of schooling, where high stakes tests produce a notion of educational success which is focused on exam results, but young people are still assessed as ‘students’ in terms of their overall conduct in school. This distinction, which Youdell (2006b) has made between individuals as learners and as
students, is blurred in early years, where a focus on becoming a ‘learner’ encompasses every aspect of schooling, from being able to dress yourself for PE to sharing toys with others to sitting correctly on the carpet. Although ‘academic’ achievements remain important (and with these, ‘ability’ discourses continue to define children), the early years learner has to be a flexible, ‘all-rounder’ in order to be constituted as having achieved a successful transition into a subject of schooling. Thus I make no distinction between the child as a learner and as a student. Developmental discourses provide for a conception of Reception children as transforming themselves into learners; children are seen, at times, as arriving ‘unmade’ due to their young age, and by the end of the year they are assessed in terms of how they now function as a pupil. Furthermore, some children are constituted as occupying positions as ‘good learners’ with more authenticity than others; some children, especially children from minoritised groups, are constructed as superficially ‘good’ learners, in contrast to natural, innately ‘good’ learners.

It is important to consider how a ‘learner’ is defined in order to explore who is able to be understood as a learner, and who is not. This chapter attempts to explain how the idea of the learner is articulated in the FSP and Reception classrooms. Ball (2010) has argued that the proliferation of private ‘educational’ provision for pre-school children aims to produce the kind of learner that succeeds in school (and this, he argues, has implications for class equality as middle-class parents have the economic capital to engage in these pursuits); my aim here is to consider in detail what exactly this school-based ‘learner’ looks like, before I explore in later chapters how individual children are assessed through this framework. A second section of this chapter then considers how this relates to the construction of knowledge about children as learners by the teachers. In this section, I discuss how the ‘teacher knowledge’ discourse, linked to the FSP, legitimises teachers’ understandings of pupils as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ learners, and as ‘authentic’ or ‘inauthentic’. In a final section, I consider the contradictory discourses in circulation regarding the worth and purpose of the FSP, and how these work to both undermine and reinforce ‘teacher knowledge’ as legitimate and useful.
Being a ‘good learner’

The central argument in this study is that, in their first year of school, children are constituted in different ways as having successfully or unsuccessfully become learners, within a historically specific, neoliberal conception of the learner. This is aided by the FSP, which provides a mechanism for assessing children’s status as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ learners, but is also based on long-standing tendencies for teachers to view pupils as appropriate or inappropriate subjects of schooling (Allan, 1999; Walkerdine, 1990; Youdell, 2006b). The wide-ranging elements of the FSP work to produce a definition of the learner which encompasses all aspects of school life, and blurs the distinction between ‘academic’ and social/emotional elements of school. The importance of assessment in accountability cultures ensures that what is tested equates to what is valued; this is sometimes talked about as the principle of ‘alignment’ (Graue and Johnson, in press), where the content of the classroom is aligned with and coheres with assessment demands. Just as in older Key Stages where testing encourages a focus on ‘core subjects’ or A-C students, in Reception the focus is on all of the aspects of school life included in the FSP. Thus what might be traditionally seen as ‘learning’ is elided with a child’s performance as a pupil in a classroom to produce a specific notion of the learner.

I argue in this and the following chapters that different children are constituted as different types of learners based on their proximity to an idealised notion of the learner; a learner who is implicitly White and middle-class. Furthermore, mechanisms such as the FSP close down the possibilities for a more flexible conception of learning and learners which might allow for recognisable and ‘authentic’ success for children from other ethnic groups and social class positions.

Defining the ‘good learner’

In these classrooms, learning and being a learner had very specific meanings which extended further than what might be seen as ‘academic’ learning. Being a learner

13 For ease of reading, from this point onwards I usually use the terms ‘learner’ and ‘good learner’ without quotation marks; however, I do not suggest that these are not complex constructions.
involved being enthusiastic and motivated to learn, able to choose activities appropriately, and able to display this learning at the correct times and in the correct ways. These values, I would argue, are based on neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility, flexibility and self-regulation which pervade policy, and are given solidity through the points of the FSP. Like Dahlberg and Moss, I argue that this is part of a ‘new normality of the child’, where the ideal is ‘a child who will be flexible, who is developmentally ready for the uncertainties and opportunities of the twenty-first century’ (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005:7). The FSP provides a model of the ‘learner’ as an independent, conscientious and knowledgeable child, and this model is used to constitute some children as ‘good learners’ and others as ‘bad learners’.

The constitution of children as occupying positions as learners to different extents relies on a specific idealised notion of the learner as a subject of schooling. The Reception child as learner has clearly-defined characteristics, which I argue are in keeping with neoliberal values. This argument is linked to Walkerdine’s discussion of the ‘neoliberal subject’ (Walkerdine, 2003; also Francis and Skelton, 2005b; Walkerdine and Ringrose, 2006). In this argument, Walkerdine describes the characteristics associated with the neoliberal subject; Francis and Skelton summarise these as:

- Industrious
- Diligent
- Responsible and self-regulating (and self-blaming)
- Introspective
- Flexible and self-transforming
- Reflective
- Caring

(Francis and Skelton, 2005:124)

I would suggest that the learner as described in the FSP encompasses many of these characteristics, and prescribes a specific subjectivity which includes a wide range of attributes which children must embody in order to be recognisable as having successfully become a learner. These are based on becoming a rational, self-knowing
subject, able to access 'learning' in all its forms, process it, and reproduce it for the purposes of assessment.

It is important to note that this is not an explicit discourse of the learner; rather it is an implicit and taken for granted notion which has developed over many decades of teaching, and is currently framed by neoliberal values. In the past, this discussion might have concentrated on what it means to be a pupil, but my focus here is on the particular construction of the learner, the term itself reflecting a move towards the individual as responsible for their own schooling. This focus on the individual also serves to obscure the role to the teacher in constituting children as different types of learner. Davies writes:

So much is the autonomous individual constituted as central to the educational enterprise that teachers can feel quite upset if their power to constitute their students becomes visible to themselves and those around them (Davies, 1996). The responsibility and power to shape students inside the range of possible subjectivities, subjectivities that are recognisable as viable ways of being, are thus papered over in this emphasis on the freedom of the subject who is actively shaping itself through engagement with the syllabus. (Davies, 2006:430)

As in Davies’ description, I would argue that the FSP works to obscure the teachers’ role by providing a mechanism which is notionally separate from the teacher, because the FSP is constructed as a neutral and objective assessment system. The FSP system also legitimises this wider conception of learning by assessing children on their emotions and attitudes as well as ‘academic’ subjects. As discussed in Chapter 1, the FSP covers almost everything that is done in the classroom: thus when a teacher reprimands a child for calling out and constitutes him or her in that moment as a ‘bad learner’, this is ‘papered over’ by the idea that learning to listen is part of the programme of learning in Reception. The teacher’s role in constituting children as learners is further obscured by the breadth of the FSP and the detail required; their teacher assessments are discussed in terms of objectivity and neutrality as assessments of individual FSP points, not in terms of how they constitute the pupils as learners.
At the same time, however, the FSP also works to close down the possibilities of what being a learner might mean: it is inflexible in its requirements, and absolute in terms of success or failure. As I argue in later chapters, this reduction means there is less opportunity for children to be successful as learners in different ways, and this has implications for groups of pupils who do not fit with idealised notions of the learner predicated on an implicit White middle-class ideal. However, as I also discuss later, children are not powerless in the face of their constitution as good or bad learners, nor are identities fixed and solid: learner identities are provisional and fragile in that they are performatives which require constant maintenance. They are a part of recognisability as a subject in school; Butler comments:

The student achieves precisely through mastering skills and this mundane practical appropriation of norms and rules culminates in ‘excellent work’ and fine marks that can be recognised publically as such. The acts of skill acquisition are thus modes of subject formation, and this formation takes place within a set of norms that confer or withdraw recognition [...] The conferral of recognition, however, does not just happen once, if it happens at all, so a certain anxiety is built into the norm. (Butler, 2006:532)

Being recognisable as a learner is a performance that needs to be sustained. Children unknowingly invest in these performances; they seem to recognise the fragility of their identities as learners in a situation where positive identities can be altered or withdrawn. Furthermore, the ‘conferral of recognition’ has to be intelligible within circulating discourses: it has to be thinkable that this child (with their gender, class and race identity) can be a ‘good’ learner, or indeed a learner at all. These issues are discussed in depth in the following chapters. I now turn to the issue of how the learner is discursively produced in these Reception classrooms.

**Rationality and enthusiasm**

According to the points included in the FSP, one of the most important facets of being a learner is being independent and enthusiastic, and able to make rational choices about what activities to engage in and how:

- Displays high levels of involvement in selfchosen activities (PSED 1, Point 3)
- Selects and uses activities and resources independently (PSED 1, Point 5)
Enthusiasm is not valued alone, however, only in conjunction with rationality. The ‘free play’ organisation of the classroom in Reception provides the opportunity for children to be motivated, rational choosers who engage purposefully in ‘learning’ in all its forms. As Tobin has noted in relation to other early childhood settings, this process of choice mirrors practices of consumption (Tobin, 1995). In this context, children are assessed on their ‘motivation’ and ‘excitement’ in engaging with these forms of learning, encouraged to select one and show ‘involvement’. Children were frequently described by the main class teachers Paul (St Mary’s) and Jim (Gatehouse) as “with it” or “on the ball”, suggesting a required level of engagement. However, because the activities provided vary in status in the same way that different types of learning vary in status, this is not a simple matter of making a choice: the writing table for instance offers more opportunity to show ‘learning’ than the train set; the maths puzzles more than riding the tricycles. Like consumers, children must not simply choose, but choose well in order to be constituted as good learners. As Bauman argues, within neoliberal discourse ‘Freedom to choose does not mean that all choices are right – there are good and bad choices [...] the kind of choice made is the evidence of competence or its lack’ (2005:76). In Reception, children may demonstrate this lack of competence through bad choosing, such as being obsessive about one activity: Paul often complained that two boys (Reece and Daniel) always played with the train set, “doing exactly the bloody same thing every day”. This was taken as indicative of a lack of imagination and a refusal to learn. Instead of demonstrating competence in choosing, they provided evidence of their lack of competence. They also failed to display self-regulation – choosing based on emotion (presumably they play with trains because it is fun) rather than rationally. This need for rationality is linked to neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility: ideally a learner takes responsibility for their learning by making rational choices about what they spend their time upon. Good learners choose a variety of activities (ideally providing enough evidence for all of the 13 scales of the FSP), and engage fully with them – “moving about” was also seen negatively by Paul and his teaching assistant, Kelly. This discourse of choice is linked to the valuing of finding and taking up
opportunities, ‘having a go’, and improving oneself, which are all neoliberal discourses. Walkerdine uses Du Gay’s term ‘entrepreneur of the self’ to encapsulate the individual responsibility to improve oneself required of a neoliberal subject (2003:240); similarly, Woodrow and Press describe the model of the early years child as ‘consumers-in-waiting’ (2008:96). Those children who were not skilled choosers and were therefore constituted as ‘bad’ learners are much like Bauman’s (2005) ‘flawed consumers’ or ‘defective consumers’ - not only do they miss out on a range of opportunities to provide evidence of themselves as ‘good’ learners, but their very act of choosing badly positions them negatively.

Displaying learning
A further element of being a ‘good learner’ was a tendency to somehow display learning: engagement with activities needed to be followed up by some way of showing learning which could be observed, and preferably used for the FSP. This included taking work to show the teacher (so that it could be photographed or copied for the FSP folders) and most commonly, answering questions on the carpet. This ability to display learning was a key part of being a learner. In this quote, Paul explains what he means by the term “bright” in relation to Parinda, a girl in his class with a special needs statement and a full-time Learning Support Assistant (LSA):

“Parinda’s quite bright! [...] when I say bright she’s got a lot of knowledge and she knows how to express it - it’s gone in, processed and she’s showing it.” (Paul, October 08)

This display of learning constitutes effective functioning as a subject of schooling; it is the sort of ‘learning’ that the FSP is designed to recognise and value. Children who were quiet or reticent, despite being ‘good’ in many ways, could be exempt from being an all-round good learner because they did not display their learning through speech or demonstration, or did so at the wrong time. Furthermore, learning that was displayed in particular contexts outside of formal lesson times was sometimes ignored or discounted; for example, a pupil at St Mary’s showed that she could read by handing out all of the class’s labelled water bottles, but Paul did not seem to even acknowledge this, despite her being the only child in the class who could read the other children’s names. At other times, however, being useful at the same time as
displaying learning was particularly powerful in constituting some children as good learners. Most obviously, being able to answer questions on the carpet was highly valued, in part for its usefulness in moving the lesson on, as well as in showing what the child had learnt. This is also connected to the notions of the ‘good teacher’ engaging the learners and organising lessons with good pace. Jim (class teacher, Gatehouse) described his reliance on his “bright sparks” to answer questions and get the lesson going. Moreover, an ability to understand classroom routines and the thinking behind them made some children stand out as useful learners: for example, Khadija, a girl at Gatehouse, was able to help Jim by letting him know if the class were going to lunch before or after the other Reception class, as she understood the rotating system. This sort of helpful behaviour, even when not related to formal learning, constituted her as a good learner.

**Self-regulation, flexibility and submission**

In the discursive framing of these classrooms, the learner is also required to be flexible and self-regulating, in that they must assess when enthusiasm and initiative is inappropriate, and when submission to authority is necessary. Although lesson times in Reception were based on free play, at other times the classes were expected to join in with many of the conventions of primary schooling, such as lining up before moving rooms, sitting cross-legged for assembly and on the carpet, and putting up your hand to request permission to speak. These times required a different facet of being a learner – being obedient and self-regulating, which involved understanding and joining in with all of these routines quickly and quietly. For example, at St Mary’s, when teaching the children on the carpet, Paul made frequent reference to a poster behind him which read “Good listening, good sitting, good talking”. Under each phrase there was a small picture showing (in order) a large ear, a child sitting cross-legged, a child with their hand up, and a mouth with a finger over it (signifying “fingers on lips”, a reminder to children to be quiet). Paul would use this poster as a reminder to children, saying “I want to see good listening…” and looking around to see who was conforming. This need for ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1991) was in direct contrast to the ‘enthusiasm’ required when he asked a question, sang a song or played a game; a good learner was able to recognise these different requirements.
The value attached to following and respecting rules is indicated by FSP points on the 'Social Development' and 'Emotional Development' scales:

Understands that there need to be agreed values and codes of behaviour for groups of people, including adults and children, to work together harmoniously (PSED 2, point 6)

Understands what is right, what is wrong, and why (PSED 3, point 8)

This is a discourse of self-regulation, where good behaviour arises from within the child rather than through instruction; it links to other individual responsibility discourses. In particular, displays of emotion were discouraged: having a tantrum, shouting and being angry were all seen as evidence of immaturity. Paul described children in his class when they first arrived as “just crying every time they don’t get their own way”, the opposite of the FSP description of a child who ‘Expresses needs and feelings in appropriate ways’ (PSED 3, point 3). The children in Paul’s class also appeared to understand submitting to his model of ‘good learning’ as linked to being rewarded: when asked “Why are we here?” they replied “To learn, and get a sticker” (Fieldnotes, St Mary’s, October). These children appeared to understand being successful in the classroom as learning and being well-behaved enough to get a sticker. The importance of behaviour in constituting children as good or bad learners is discussed further in Chapter 7.

The learner and FSP observations

Overall the FSP provides a restricted model of what a learner ‘looks like’, and therefore how learners can be recognised in the classroom. This is illustrated by the collection and processing of observations made for the purposes of the FSP. The FSP narrows down what counts as ‘useful’ information about a child, and informs the kinds of activities, comments and incidents that are recorded. Firstly, observations are made (on post-it notes, sticky labels and class lists) which relate to the skills and activities that are valued in the FSP. Teachers at both schools frequently noted down on the observation which FSP point they saw the observation as referring to (the need for this reminder also indicating the problem of the vagueness of the FSP, as discussed later in this chapter). Secondly, observations are also sorted into ‘useful’ and ‘not useful’ in terms of the FSP; at St Mary’s this sorting was quite explicit - Paul
and Kelly would throw observations made by other members of staff into the rubbish bin if they did not fit the FSP points. Overleaf I set out some examples of FSP observations from the Reception classrooms. These were noted down from the official FSP folders, from collections of observations not yet stuck into folders, and from teachers' notes around the classroom (i.e. at all stages of the processing of these observations). I have organised these loosely into the characteristics shown above, in order to demonstrate the values imbedded within the FSP process. Some include the FSP point that the observation applies to, where this was noted on the observation label (in round brackets). I also separately set out some observations which show the importance of displaying learning, particularly through comments that can be quickly noted down.
<p>| Rationality, good choices | Parinda happily plays for long periods at activities of her choice. | Paige has excellent gross motor skills. She enjoys playing with the other children and her scooter. She talks about going round the horse. | Yihana and Naima shared a story book. N was reading the book to Y. | Nasser joins in with the hunt for colours around the school. | Iryna sits with a small group and Jim [teacher] outside, timing taking turns on the bikes. |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Self-regulation and submission | Suhan is joining in with class routines | Naima played with the wooden mats Tap Tap for 10 mins. N did not talk. She made a house choosing shapes appropriately. | Demi takes turns on the scooter and knows that it is fair to share. | Natasha was able to sit and focused on the carpet activity. She was joining in with the rhyme [...] she was smiling and ready to join in. | Karimah plays with the mosaics for 30 minutes. She does 3. |
| Flexibility and recognising requirements | Ahmed chose number 1 and then carefully threaded it [with photo of A with big 1 with sewing through it] | Demi is very helpful when completing the jigsaw. She shows other how to complete the missing sections by looking for the colours. | Mike retells the story, uses language to recreate roles. Interacts with others taking turns. (Shows an understanding of the elements of the story, main characters and sequence) | Ahmed corrected Mr A when he counted 7 instead of 8. Ahmed shouted “eight”. | Kyle investigates the window using the blue coloured lens. |
| Enthusiasm | Rafeek really enjoyed the number search and is able to come to the front and correctly name #7. (recognising numbers in context) | Iryna enjoys the home corner with her friends (engages in imaginative play) | Ahmed enjoys playing in the Reception playground. He jumps down from the house. He has excellent gross motor skills. | Adiba took a photo and was very happy. | Nasser is enjoying our small group tour of the school [with photo]. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Displaying learning</th>
<th>Anna knows that owls live in trees and that is their home. (Talks freely in a small group)</th>
<th>Demi chose the magnetic letter capital and lower case accurately to make her name [with photo].</th>
<th>Paige built a house for the dogs and talked about &quot;high, tall towers&quot;.</th>
<th>Naima said the dough is made of flour and water. She knows the sounds of the letter ‘t’.</th>
<th>Dahab draws a troll with &quot;big fat nails&quot;.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carl says ‘See you on the Wednesday’ to an adult.</td>
<td>Khalid made a trumpet in the junk modelling area. He came to show me and ‘play’ it.</td>
<td>Rafeek uses the smartboard to count irregular objects up to 10. He is beginning to write the correct numeral for the quantity.</td>
<td>Khadija recognised the picture of Barack Obama.</td>
<td>Liri says ‘I need to cut the straw to make it shorter’. Liri is carefully cutting and placing her junk together carefully.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malika says when wrapping something up “We only need a little bit ‘cause that’s small”.</td>
<td>Maira says “I am Muslim” when talking to Susan about Hajj. (have an awareness of culture and religion)</td>
<td>Jakira tells me she likes the feel of the flour she is playing with (investigate objects and materials by using senses as appropriate)</td>
<td>Ashlee asks the question ‘How does God make us?’</td>
<td>Today Iqbal made a trumpet using a plastic milk bottle and some lids. He pretended to play it for the other children.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These observations work at three different levels: firstly, they represent the teachers’ selection of what to look at in the classroom and what to write down, and for whom (decisions that are affected by the FSP); secondly, they represent teachers’ interpretation of what they see (who is happy, who understands) which is affected by children’s identities as learners; and thirdly they provide examples of the metadiscourse of the good learner that I have outlined above. In later sections of this chapter, I examine the relationship between observations such as these and teachers’ ‘knowledge’ of children – focusing on the first two levels. My focus here is on the ways in which these observations reveal the model of the learner prescribed by the FSP which values rationality, appropriate enthusiasm, submission, and flexibility. The need to make good choices is shown by the kind of activities that are noted down – sharing a book or using the timer – and the value placed upon spending periods of time on different activities. The latter is also an example of self-regulation – it is valued to play with one game for a long time, as is adhering to classroom routines and rules of fairness. Flexibility is more complex: it requires doing different things at different times, with an understanding of what is valued in any given situation. In the examples above relating to Ahmed, we see how children are required to be adaptable in what they do - Ahmed understands that, unusually, he has to use a needle and string to thread through the holes on the number 1, not talk about it as a number. He also understands when rules are applicable – he realises that it is acceptable to shout out when the teacher has deliberately counted incorrectly – and that submission is not always important. The learner is also enthusiastic, and in the examples above, enjoys learning in all its forms. Some of the observations show a number of elements of good learning: for example, the note which reads ‘Paige has excellent gross motor skills. She enjoys playing with the other children and her scooter. She talks about going round the horse’ suggests that physical and social ‘skills’ are valued, alongside enjoying learning and taking about what you are doing. Thus single observations can work at multiple levels to constitute children as particular types of learner.

The examples in the second box above show how the ability or tendency to display learning, particularly in forms which could be easily noted down (such as a concise
comment), was also important in making a child recognisable as a learner. Many of the observations relied on children’s comments; thus what becomes valued is not understanding but the ability to articulate this understanding. For example, it is noted that Liri says “I need to cut the straw to make it shorter”, demonstrating her understanding of length. Another child might also understand length and cut their straw down, but without a comment about it, this understanding is not recognised. Thus the FSP increases the significance of verbal communication, which has implications in classrooms like these where many children speak English as an additional language. However, displaying learning is not simply about talking; it is also important to show a teacher or other children what you have done (like Khalid and Iqbal showing off the trumpets they have made). I return to this issue of agency in terms of learner identities in Chapter 7.

The model of the learner that operated in these classrooms and is suggested by these examples was not explicit in these Reception classrooms; it was present in assumptions about what is important that were implicit in teachers’ discussions, the FSP documents and classroom practices. It also operated in competition with other discourses about how educational success might be understood (as limited to only ‘academic’ skills, for example, or as ‘settling in’ well emotionally at school). Nonetheless, I would argue that this conception of the learner tended to dominate in these classrooms and played a significant part in constituting pupils as successes or failures in school. In the following chapter, I discuss how those children who were constituted closer to this ideal model became ‘good learners’, while some pupils were constituted as ‘bad learners’, understood as having inadequately become a learner. Reception involves inauguration into schooling and into school subjectivities; children are judged and assessed on their relative success at becoming a learner, and idea itself legitimised by the strength of ‘developmental’ discourses in early years education. However, as I discuss in the next section, becoming a learner can be done with varying degrees of ‘authenticity’, a notion which is connected to ‘ability’ and ‘development’ discourses.
‘Authenticity’, ‘ability’ and ‘development’

Within this conception of learner identities, children may be constituted as learners with differing degrees of ‘authenticity’. I am using this term here to describe the extent to which teachers constitute pupils as ‘real’ learners, with inherent ‘ability’ and aptitude for ‘learning’ in all its forms, as opposed to those pupils who are constituted as merely displaying the ‘signs’ of learning without having the underlying ‘skills’ or ‘intelligence’. This authenticity discourse was another way of talking about children as learners, but was not used universally in relation to all children; it was merely deployed on occasion. The discourse was related to two interconnected discourses of ability and development. I set out firstly how these operate within the study classrooms before discussing authenticity further.

Ability and intelligence

Discourses of ability are well established in the education system in the UK (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000) and inform policy, including early years policy: the EYFSP handbook refers to ‘children across the ability range’ (QCA, 2008b:22). However, assumptions about ability ‘are rarely voiced in any explicit or systematic way’ (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000:52). In the study schools, assumptions about ability and intelligence were similarly left unexplained but remained potent, especially in relation to the FSP, despite the lack of any scientific evidence that ability is a single, measurable, innate phenomenon (Sternberg, 1996 in Gillborn and Youdell, 2000:59).

In my first interview with Jim, when I asked about ‘attainment’ in his class he was confused, and assumed that what I meant was, in his words, “ability”. In my understanding of these terms, ‘attainment’ is what children ‘get’ in tests, whereas ‘ability’ denotes an innate quality, or a level of intelligence. Jim described “a big range, there’s right from still unable to write like someone’s name, to full sentences and full stops, capital letters”, using points taken directly from the FSP, a measure of attainment in that it measures what children can do (at least in theory). This confusion between two quite different ideas was typical of discourses of ability,

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14 For ease of reading, I use the terms authenticity, ability and development without quotation marks from this point onwards.
which often included an assumption that ability as a phenomenon was commonsense and widely understood, even though the terms were not always agreed upon. The support teacher at Gatehouse, Susan, commented that the children were “brighter, or whatever word we should use”. Although there is debate (or perhaps Susan is suggesting, ‘political correctness’) over the term “bright”, this comment suggests that ability in some form is something which we all understand without any explanation.

At Gatehouse, terms based on ability (such as “bright” and “sparky”) and the term itself were used frequently, with little discussion of what they meant. For example, weekly plans for literacy and numeracy lessons included sections of text in red, denoting activities or questions for the “more able”, while text in blue related to the “less able”. The Gatehouse children were divided into ability groups in the spring and summer terms (this is discussed in detail in Chapter 7).

Terms and euphemisms for ‘high ability’ were also frequently deployed at Gatehouse, such as “clever”, “smart”, “sparky” and “bright”, also as if the meaning of these terms was common knowledge. The term “academically quite advanced” was also used to describe a pupil, and the class as a whole was referred to as “a sharp bunch” by Susan. The word “intelligent” was also frequently equated with “high ability”. This comment from Jim about his and Liz’s (parallel) classes is an example of how terms linked to ability were used:

“In Liz’s class, there are not – there’s just a completely different class. They’re lovely kids and they’re very well-behaved actually ... and they’re good at sharing, but they’re just isn’t that, there’s not that sparkiness between them and I think I’m very lucky to have had seven or eight really sparky individuals who’ve fed off each other all year long and who’ve actually pulled up quite a few of the other children. I mean there’s Ismail in Liz’s class, who’s super intelligent, but doesn’t speak. ‘Cause he’s so quiet, he doesn’t kind of feed off the other children, or doesn’t feed into their play. He only feeds into kind of Lukman and Artan, who again are very, you know, quite bright...” (Jim, July 09)

Here Jim suggests “sparkiness” is intelligence which is expressed verbally; as discussed, the ideal learner displays their learning for all to see or hear. Jim contrasts the “sparky” children in his class who talk to each other and improve the level of the class as a whole, with Ismail in Liz’s class who is “super intelligent, but doesn’t speak”
and therefore only helps his friends Lukman and Artan, who are “bright” anyway. For Jim, “sparkiness” is useful, verbal intelligence; this is of course connected to the importance of displaying learning discussed above. This also has implications for the EAL children in Jim’s class, who may be prevented from accessing the status of “sparky” by their language level.

Discourses of ability at Gatehouse often conformed to the tripartite ‘top-middle-bottom’ or ‘high-middle-lower’ model. When I asked to see some handwriting examples, Lynn (early years coordinator) offered me “top, middle and bottom to show the ability range” (Fieldnotes, October). The notes on the children coming up from the nursery in January, as discussed by the old and new teachers at a handover meeting, divided the children into three groups: ‘top’, ‘middle’ and ‘bottom’. This tripartite system is reinforced by the moderation policy at a national and local level, which involves the teacher dividing the pupils into these three groups, as if this were a simple and obvious method of dividing up the class.

In discussions of ability at Gatehouse, there was also some conflation of “potential” and “ability”: when Jim was explaining the ability groups to me, he told me that two pupils were in the highest group “not because they’re there yet but because I think they’ve got potential”. This suggests that Jim views ability as more than what he can see in the classroom - as what he judges to be possible for that child because of their innate characteristics. This is an important distinction, which allows for disparities between how well a child attains in assessments and the teacher’s assessment of them as a learner. The idea of potential suggests that there is something innate about these children which means that although they might not be doing brilliantly now, they will do in the future. This is closely connected to the idea of being an authentic learner I outline below, with the natural ability to learn in appropriate ways.

At St Mary’s, the term ability was used less frequently; instead Paul used euphemisms such as “on the ball” and “with it” to differentiate children, probably because he was aware that the term was controversial in educational literature. His
frequent accidental use of the term, quickly corrected, suggested this reluctance. For example, on this occasion, he accidentally began to say ability and then used development instead:

“... if you’ve got two children of equal developmentally, you know, ab-they’re both at the same point in development” (Paul, July 09)

Another example of Paul’s self-correction came with a comment on moderation:

“They do come and moderate every two or three years ... and you show them three samples, a high achiever, or development, developmentally, you know three different levels if you like of development and they check that you’re making the correct assumptions.” (Paul, October 08)

Although Paul attempts to describe the three groups in terms of development, suggesting he sees this as a more neutral term, he does not question the tripartite division; whatever term he uses, he still subscribes to the notion of recognisable differences between children.

Paul’s use of terms such as “with it” indicated an assessment of children in terms of how alert or engaged they were; this enthusiasm for learning is an important element of being a good learner. During a meeting, Paul commented that “Mike’s very interesting – although socially he’s not there yet ... but he’s actually very on the ball” (Fieldnotes, January); this suggests that poor social skills can mask being engaged with learning. This idea of participation is interesting given the high proportion of EAL children in Paul’s class; he appeared to equate being “high ability” with participation in the class through language, which was not possible or a great challenge for many of his pupils. This is similar to the “sparky” children at Gatehouse, but slightly different in that Paul appears to regard being “with it” as participating in the class at all, rather than improving other children by “feeding in” to their learning. As already explained, Paul also described a “bright” girl as “she’s got a lot of knowledge and she knows how to express it - it’s gone in, processed and she’s showing it” (October 08). The FSP as a system reinforces the importance of this tendency to “show” or “express” learning.
As at Gatehouse, various additional terms associated with ability were used at St Mary's: comments about children as “clever” (particularly as “clever boy” or “clever girl”), “top groups” and “lower ability children” were common. This fluidity of the term is important in how it functions in the classroom: ability is constructed as a definable commonsense concept, yet it means different things at different times and to different people. Although it is used in policy and in the moderation process, the term is rarely officially defined, which allows the commonsense nature of ability to continue unchecked. At both schools, ability discourses operated as a regime of truth to define and organise pupils in the class. The operation of this discourse is discussed further in the following chapter on learner identities, and the practice of grouping by ability is explored in Chapter 7.

Developmental discourses

As discussed in Chapter 3, researchers have argued that development discourses based on developmental psychology operate as a regime of truth in early years education (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; MacNaughton, 2005; Yelland, 2005a). Early years policy in England also uses development as a significant organising concept, nowhere more than in the FSP. A major assessment document that predated the EYFSP and formed a large part of the birth to five framework was titled ‘Development Matters’, and four of the six areas of the FSP have titles including the term. The very first of the ‘EYFS principles’ is ‘Child development’, where development is described thus:

Development is a continuous, complex interaction of environmental and genetic factors in which the body, brain and behaviour become more complex. (DCSF, 2009b)

Thus the policy documents construct development as a scientific process of increasing complexity in body, mind and behaviour. The use of ‘genetic factors’ as an explanation for differences suggests fixity and inevitability, while the reference to ‘environmental’ factors reflects the connections made between home life and ‘readiness’ for school. Given the prominence of ‘development’ in these documents, it is unsurprising that the teachers in my study also used the term ‘development’ in multiple ways. Both Paul and Jim talked about development as an important part of
their knowledge base as early years teachers: Paul complained about a lack of training on his PGCE on "developmental stuff, which is what a lot of it, most of it is". However, as with ability, there was no fixed definition of what development meant. The idea was sometimes linked to the age of the children: Paul described the new children arriving in January as “younger, so they’re developmentally behind [...] They haven’t been given the training, so they’re completely behind from that”\(^\text{15}\). This comment suggests development is a complex mixture of age and “training” or experience. The idea that differences can be simply related to age works to remove from view the teacher’s role in constituting the child as developing at a different rate.

One of the most powerful ways in which development can work as a discourse is to appear neutral and scientific while hierarchically organising children (Yelland, 2005a). This is apparent in Paul’s attempts to replace words like ‘ability’ or ‘clever’ with ‘development’, which suggested he regarded it as a more accurate and more neutral, scientific term which sufficiently described the complexity of children’s progress. He even criticised other adults’ use of the term “clever”; here he is referring to comments made by Marsela, a student TA:

“She was saying about “the clever ones get it right away”. I mean that’s just such the wrong attitude, it’s nothing to do with if they’re clever, it’s not a term that should be used in [Reception] ... it really annoys me that attitude. It’s all about development, it’s all about what’s going under the [surface?] – I always see that iceberg, with all that stuff that’s going on [...] this clever/not clever, it’s just so unhelpful.” (Paul, October 08)

Here Paul appears to be attempting to dismiss the term ‘clever’\(^\text{16}\), and replace it with ‘development’, which he seems to locate as an individual, intrinsic and sometimes hidden quality. Development, for Paul, is about more than ‘language’ (being able to express learning) and cleverness; it is more subtle and takes greater skill to uncover. As we shall see in the next section, Paul placed great importance on his ability to ‘discover’ his pupils’ hidden qualities. This intangible development of a child is both

\(^{15}\) There are two points of entry for Paul’s class at St Mary’s – September for children turning five in any month, and January for children with birthdays in the summer term. Parents of children with summer birthdays may choose whether they go to school in September when they may have just turned four, or in the January after.

\(^{16}\) I strongly suspect that this reluctance was due in part to Paul’s (mis)understanding of my research project as being about ability.
scientifically recognisable and also elusive: it is constructed as neutral without being defined. As with ‘ability’, the slipperiness of development only adds to its power.

The idea of development as a neutral concept also works to position assessments as accurate: Paul argued that pushing children for results was irrelevant in Reception because ‘it’s all about development’; he used this to distance himself from the school management, saying “They want results ... but actually it’s developmental, it’s not about the teaching”.

He also commented:

“As children get older, it’s probably less influenced by development and more influenced by practice, and being exposed to the curriculum, whereas in the early years it really is about development.” (Paul, July 09)

This engagement with development discourses allows Paul to reject ability notions which he associates with the rest of the school, but also to accept ideas about children being different in what they can do, as if assessing this were neutral. Since it is “all about development”, Paul’s assessment process is cloaked in scientific rigour and neutrality, not subjectivity and personal opinion.

Similarly, at Gatehouse developmental terms were used to explain results and progress:

“Some of them [come on] in leaps and bounds but then again that’s down to the child ... the child’s readiness.” (Lynn, November 08)

The use of the term “readiness” suggests a developmental concept of progression along set paths: some children are at a stage where they are ‘ready’ for learning, while others are not (Graue, 2006). For Lynn, this level of “readiness” can be used to explain why children vary in the amount of progress they make. Jim also referred to children being behind because they “needed more developmental stuff”. In these cases, development appeared to be used as an admission that the children were very young but also varied in how much this affected them. Development was also constructed here as something that could be seen and assessed by the teachers, just as they could ascertain ability.
**Development and ability together**

As has been apparent from the data on these two terms, development and ability were used without exact definition or discussion. This fluidity allowed the terms to also be used interchangeably, as seen in Paul’s comments. Although I am not suggesting that the teachers believed the two terms to mean *exactly* the same concept, it was clear that since neither was defined, they were used as if it were just commonsense to use them without any explanation of the distinction. Indeed, the FSP document refers to both development as a guiding principle and also to the ‘ability range’, without explanation of what the difference between them might be. This undefined concept is what Paul refers to when he says “whatever you want to call it”, where “it” has some real meaning even without a name. When Susan says “whatever word we are meant to use”, it reveals the strength of this commonsense idea, despite the continued debate over the ideas and their uses; because everyone knows what it is, the terms used are irrelevant, merely changing with educational fashions. The slippage between these terms is hugely significant in understanding how children in Reception are understood as learners: the pseudo-scientific overtones of ‘development’ give the term ‘ability’ a neutrality and inevitability that is usually only alluded to. It also allows for both the idea of ability/development as something that is neutral and scientific, and the idea of it as something that can be assessed or ‘discovered’ as part of a teacher’s knowledge of the child.

An example of this confusion between the terms can be seen in Jim’s discussion of one of his pupils, whom Jim has allocated to a higher group:

> “Carl is not the brightest child in the whole class, he’s not somebody who can read and write and knows all his letters and numbers, but he is quite mature and he’s really willing to learn, so I made the decision because I thought he could cope and he can, whether or not that was the right decision, whether or not he needs more developmental stuff before the stage he’s at now I don’t know, I haven’t really assessed him yet” (Jim, March 09)

Here Jim appears to equate being “bright” with reading and writing and knowing numbers (using ability discourses), and balances this with maturity and a willingness to learn (using development discourses), before bringing in the idea of Carl needing
“more developmental stuff”; all of these will be revealed, Jim suggests, by assessment. In this way, terms with quite different meanings can easily be used together and confused. This comment from Paul on his class reveals a similar use of these discourses; his comments show how the terms can be used together to allocate children to points within a range:

“in terms of differentiation it’s been massive because the range is from nursery [...] very very low level nursery achievement. Achievement’s the wrong word, development, development matters types aspects – they’re very definitely low level. And some of them are actually the opposite end and very competent [...] Ryan, is probably about the most capable thinking wise, predicting and working out, he’s probably Year 1, but nobody else” (Paul, July 09)

Here Paul compares the “low level nursery achievement” with being “capable thinking wise”, and with being “Year 1”. As in Jim’s comment, Paul uses a variety of terms to describe the children, calling up the discourse of ability, without actually using the term. This flexibility eases the ranking and positioning of children; low-attaining pupils can be ‘developmentally’ behind, but high-attaining children have “good thinking skills”. For Paul, there is no tension between the use of these terms to compare pupils, because they mean the same commonsense thing.

The idea of discovery is an important part of the entanglement of these two discourses: Paul argued that the children were too young to be affected by their ability yet, in comments which suggested that although he might be concerned with development, their abilities would always be there under the surface:

“I think at this stage it’s not because their abilities are influencing their learning yet, if you like. ‘Cause clearly some children pick things up much faster than others, just because their potential to learn is just different, in those subjects, and their skills and all that – some are brilliant athletes, they’re born brilliant athletes, you know what I mean. Some of them can learn how to jump properly, and fair enough. So to an extent by Year 6 they do they are showing their er, you know, um [pauses, thinking of word] specialisations, their gifts if you want; their gifts are clearer, whereas at this stage I don’t think they’re clear at all.” (Paul, October 08)

In this comment, Paul engages with the idea of innate qualities that they are born with, but only ‘show’ (or perhaps can be discovered) as children get older. That these
abilities exist is taken for granted - children’s potential is “just different”. In early years, Paul has to find these qualities while they are unclear, through his understanding of development. Paul uses terms such as “gifts” and “specialisations” which cloak the idea of ability with suggestions of sympathy with children’s uniqueness and individuality, distant from ideas of ranking children or labelling them “high” or “low”. However, Paul’s shift from using “abilities” and “potential” to using “gifts” reveals the dangerous way in which these terms can come to mean inherited intelligence, even when they appear to mean something milder. Comments such as these have real implications for what a child can ‘be’ in the classroom.

I would argue that Reception is a unique site in that it is the location where two powerful discourses collide, are integrated and are reconciled: a discourse of development from early years practice and principles, and ability from primary education (and popular, ‘commonsense’ discourse). The result of this entwinement is a potent and dangerous conception of ability/development as measurable and neutral. Research has criticised the dominance of development discourses in early years education, arguing that it is related to an ‘apparatus of collective measurement and evaluation’ (Burman, 2001:6 in Dahlberg and Moss, 2005) which defines what is appropriate and what is a ‘problem’. A combination of ability and development has even more power to designate some children as appropriate and some as problematic because it confuses attainment and progress with a fixed ability that children have in different amounts, and borrows scientific legitimacy from developmental psychology. Although development was a powerful term in the study schools, especially St Mary’s, I would not argue that it operated as a regime of truth because it was so entangled with discourses of ability and ‘achievement’; the prevailing feature was inconsistency in the use of these terms. The discourses at the schools were dominated by a notion of differences between children that were wider than just development, though they borrowed assumed scientific legitimacy from the term. The ‘truth’ of children being different and this being something observable by the teachers was powerful because it did not mean only development, or intellect, or attainment: by being all of these things, it becomes more ambiguous but also more commonsense. This idea of fundamental, fixed differences between children is most
frequently called ability or development, but this does not mean that these terms are used to mean something more specific or different from each other; as I will argue in the next section, these contribute to wider assessment of children as ‘authentic’ learners. Perhaps in older year groups, where ability discourses reign, or in nursery classes where development dominates, the fact that these two terms are essentially used to mean the same thing would be less obvious; in Reception, the collision of these two discourses and their effective equation is revealed. This particular position where the two discourses overlap is, I would argue, a further reason why the Foundation Stage staff feel distant from both the rest of the school and the early years community; they fit in both, and in neither.

As I have argued, the model of the learner that operated within these classrooms was built around success in all areas of school life, including behaviour and emotional development. These discourses of ability/development were intertwined with this model, as shown in the teachers’ observations for the FSP below. Like the observations in the previous section, these notes come from both classrooms. I have used two sections to show how observations can constitute children as having more ability, being more developed, or not.
In these observations, we see how ideas about innate ability or faster development can be manifested in the FSP. In describing activities done ‘with support’ or ‘attempted’ teachers constitute some children as lacking in the appropriate level of ability/development. Other children are observed as possessing the required physical skills – to use an unusual bike, or to hold a pen – or as possessing ‘academic’ attributes such as being able to copy a sentence or write your name before anyone has taught you how. Thus discourses of ability/development are reflected in some observations which focus on the presence or absence of innate characteristics.

### Authenticity

These discourses of ability and development intersect and operate powerfully together and apart in these classrooms, and form part of an overarching discourse of
‘authenticity’ in being a learner, which was sometimes used in relation to particular children. As I have discussed, the learner displays all the elements of this identity, including enthusiasm for learning, rational choices, obedience when necessary and a tendency to display what they have learnt. But, some children are constituted as doing these things because they are naturally inclined to, and some are constituted as merely performing these attributes. Authentic learners are seen as having innate, natural tendencies to be a learner in all aspects, while inauthentic learners are merely emulating these qualities in school. I am drawing here on Archer and Francis’s discussion of Chinese pupils’ academic success (Archer and Francis, 2007). This work in turn owes much to previous work on discussions of girls’ learning styles, particularly in masculine subjects, as not the ‘proper way’ (Walkerdine, 1990). Archer and Francis argue that ‘model minority’ students are similarly subject to racist discourses, because Chinese pupils are seen as ‘not achieving in the right way’:

The ‘ideal learner’ is an inherently embodied discourse which always excludes minority ethnic pupils and denies them from inhabiting positions or identities of ‘success’ with any sense of permanency or authenticity (Archer and Francis, 2007:170)

My analysis of the Reception classrooms suggests that minoritised pupils are not always excluded from ideal learner discourses, as I discuss in later chapters. However, the idea of authenticity is useful in that it adds subtlety to the analysis of who gets to be a ‘success’. I argue with regard to the ‘permanency’ of positions of ‘success’ that although no pupil ever has a permanent, unalterable position of success (due to the need for constant acts of recognition as a viable subject), it may be that some pupils occupy good learner positions with more precariousness and fragility. Part of this variance is the authenticity of a learner: inherent ability and aptitude for learning provide a more solid foundation for a positive learner identity. Authenticity discourses are connected but not identical to ability/development discourses; authenticity is similarly about innate qualities, and the ‘able’ child succeeds in an authentic way. However, the wider conception of what learning is that operates in these Reception classrooms results in a broader conception of the innate qualities that are necessary to succeed at school; the authentic learner must not only be enthusiastic, make good choices and show learning, but do these things naturally,
rather than because they have be encouraged to do so by pushy parents. Being ‘high ability’ or ‘more developed’ is helpful in being constituted as authentic, but is may not necessarily be enough because being a learner is a wider ideal.

Like the Chinese pupils in Archer and Francis’ study, some pupils in these Reception classrooms were seen as achieving in the ‘wrong way’ because of home pressures. However, I think the idea of authenticity goes wider than simply learning in the ‘wrong way’: it includes those children who for other reasons are seen as merely ‘acting out’ the learner identity, rather than truly embodying it. For example, Paul is discussing here how he understands the “thinking skills” (a term he introduced) in his class:

“They all, there are some children who are very good at repeating, and memorising, but in terms of real thinking skills: not really there. I mean Dylan’s quite sprightly [Not clear] and he’s brilliant at rhymes and ... his language is excellent and his ability to repeat things probably, repeat is the thing. He’s been surrounded by a lot of high level language and thinking and stuff... but actual understanding is not there. ... So you get what I mean, there are a lot of children who have learned a lot, but they haven’t intellectually got that thinking skills and problem solving [...] There are too many children coming out that are able to repeat things, like a parrot, or follow a writing frame ... they’ll do that but ask them to really truly do something authentic and they can’t do it and I think that’s a major problem.” (Paul, July 09)

In Paul’s understanding, children such as Dylan display a great deal of learning through language and repetition, but this is not an indication of their “intellect” or “understanding”; it is simply a performance of learning. These children are unable to “really truly do something authentic”; they are unmasked as merely putting on a show of learning. This contention that some children “truly” do “real” things is at the heart of this discourse of authenticity. It is not clear who is able to assess what is “truly” done or authentic, and this ambiguity allows for the dismissal of some children’s achievements as inauthentic. At Gatehouse, Jim made some comments regarding a girl in his class who I thought he saw as a good learner, when he placed her in the second-to-top ability group:

Before school; Jim is showing me the list for the ability groups for the first time. I ask about Khadija who is in the second to top group, and Jim says
that she answers lots of questions, “she’s very vocal, but she’s there for consolidation. I’m not sure it’s all there”. (Fieldnotes, June)

Thus Khadija’s skills as a learner are rendered inauthentic – she is merely “vocal”, a superficial display of learning. Jim says “I’m not sure it’s all there”, suggesting that the real innate intelligence is missing. Here we see how ideas about authenticity and ability/development relate to each other: an important part of authenticity is whether the child is constituted as ‘high ability’ or ‘developed’, because these terms confer the idea of a natural inherited talent. However, children have to be more than ‘high ability’ to be constituted as a good learner: they need to be judged to possess the wider range of attributes of a good learner with authenticity. So, enthusiasm for learning must be natural, not superficial; rationality must be an inherent trait, not taught; and obedience must be due a deep understanding of what is appropriate, not just a slavish adherence to the rules. Also at Gatehouse, another girl (Liri) was seen as a good learner, but was also constituted as inauthentic:

Jim and I are looking at list of final FSP scores in rank order; he tells me he has been concerned about where some children are in the list. He says “like Liri, I wasn’t sure because she’s above Khadija and Khalid, but she’s one of those children, you know when you look in the booklet and there’s all these examples, she says those things, so she scores highly on the FSP. But it’s sevens and eights”. (Fieldnotes, June)

Here we see how Liri’s high placement on the FSP ranked scores is dismissed as being due to her merely saying the right things. Liri’s mother was a teacher, which Jim mentioned several times, and the implication seemed to be that she had been taught (presumably not explicitly) to say the kind of things that the FSP recognises as part of being a good learner. But, as Jim says, she only gets sevens and eights, not nines (out of nine); not very high scores, but consistently good. At an interview not long after, I asked Jim why Liri was in the middle ability group even though she scored so highly in the FSP; he answered:

“Liri possibly was in the wrong group here, but she’s not very confident at independently [working] so I think she needed something a little bit easier - like the work was a little bit easier, just to build her confidence.” (Jim, June 09)

17 The issue of Khadija’s constitution as an inauthentic good learner is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.
Although Jim admits she may have been wrongly placed, he explains Liri's group in terms of the wider skills needed to be a good learner. Liri is described as lacking confidence and independence, both of which are important learner skills. So although she might contribute in class and be keen to learn, Jim assesses her as not really possessing the right skills to be a good learner.

A final example from Gatehouse shows how, as with Liri's situation, parents may be implicated in rendering a child or their success inauthentic. Earlier in the year, the class had been split into higher and lower groups, Group 1 and 2. One pupil, Bilqis, was in Group 2, despite several comments about how good her word recognition was, and her being chosen to show the rest of the class that she could read all of the set high frequency words. Jim told me that "Her mum has been working flat out since she joined Reception" to teach her these words, and she was not moved group (while other children were moved). Bilqis's word recognition was regarded as a false display of good learner status, as arising from her 'pushy' parents and therefore as inauthentic.

This issue of authenticity is important, I would argue, because it means a pupil may to appear to be a good learner, without ever gaining recognition as authentically so. It is also important because it can be deployed in ways which render a child's success as illegitimate. It is perhaps useful to elaborate on the differences between the 'ideal learner' discourse and the 'authentic learner' discourse: while the ideal is an unachievable aim which can only be approximated, pupils can be constituted as 'authentic' (albeit with varying degrees of permanency). Ultimately, the ideal learner is an authentic learner, but this does not prevent pupils seen as inauthentic from succeeding at school and be constituted as 'good' enough learners, close to this ideal.

I would argue that the demands of performativity do not require authenticity, only results, and the teachers still value those children who are seen as inauthentic good learners because they score highly on assessments like the F5P, and this is their priority. This axis of authenticity adds greater subtlety to the assessment of children as learners: it suggests there is a right way and a wrong way to be a 'good' learner. Discourses of authenticity are linked to race and class in similar ways to that found in...
the literature on ability (Archer and Francis, 2007; Gillborn and Youdell, 2000); I extend these arguments to encompass a wider range of attributes associated with a good learner. Raced and classed ideas about who can be authentic allow for apparent educational success, while simultaneously constituting some pupils negatively and denying them authentic positions; this is discussed in more detail in later chapters.

‘Teacher knowledge’ discourses

Despite their roles as official assessors of the children’s attainment and as collectors of evidence, the teachers did not appear to recognise their own part in constituting the pupils as different types of learner. As this section explains, the teachers instead engaged with a discourse which I have termed the ‘teacher knowledge’ discourse, which presented their constructed knowledge of the pupils as neutral, factual and objective. This discourse dominated these classrooms and led teachers to dismiss any information which did not correspond with their ‘knowledge’. As discussed, the teachers constructed their assessments of how authentic a child was as completely neutral; this is the same for all ‘teacher knowledge’. The ‘teacher knowledge’ discourse was informed by development concepts which provided the idea that these young children needed to be ‘discovered’ and their true identities drawn out by skilful teachers. Thus ‘teacher knowledge’ was constructed as an important part of an early years teacher’s skill and professionalism, rather than as subjective and discursively constrained.

The idea of ‘teacher knowledge’ originates in EYFS policy documents which assert that long-term observation is the best method of assessing a child. This was also reinforced by the recent advice from the Local Authority (LA) on how to conduct the FSP:

“I was moderated two weeks and we were basically told that assessment is now almost 50% teacher knowledge – you don’t have to have a note, you don’t have to have it written down, you just need to know.” (Jim, June 08)

“Now I think they’re going towards 50% of it being teacher assessment, so basically your own brain.” (Jim, September 08)
This advice chimed with the teachers’ concerns about producing large amounts of evidence and the lack of trust this indicated; as Jim said, “it’s like they finally trust you”. The teachers’ reliance on ‘knowledge’ of the pupils is part of a counter discourse in early years education, where ideas that lost legitimacy in a results-driven culture - ‘disqualified knowledges’ (Foucault, 1980) regarding caring about children and the slow build-up of knowledge about children’s development - are re-legitimated. This counter discourse rejected notions of teaching as preparing children for tests in favour of teacher assessment as a less damaging assessment tool; in early years this counter discourse finds itself in alignment with assessment policy.

The policy-based process of gathering ‘knowledge’ about a child was understood by Paul to mean he had to uncover their skills and qualities, and find (as mentioned earlier) what lay ‘under the surface’:

“At this stage I find it really interesting, trying to work out where they’re at and who they are, as individuals [...] when you’re not quite sure what’s going on in there, so to kind of open them up and get a picture of what’s going on.” (Paul, October 08)

This more romanticised vision of discovering pupils is linked to the idea that these young pupils are somehow harder to get to know or more reluctant to be understood. But, throughout, Paul never appeared to doubt that he would be able to understand and ‘know’ all the children in the end. He commented:

“I think they’ll be getting more trusting and confident and whatever, they will eventually, they normally, my experience is they normally do [open up], by about March [laughs]” (Paul, October 08)

This idea of discovery is intimately connected with ability/development discourses which construct ability as something which some children innately have, and some lack, coupled with the idea of ongoing age-related development. Because ‘ability’ is innate and fixed, but not always reflected in terms of how children behave in the classroom (because some may be inauthentic), the teacher has to discover them and gradually come to gain a ‘true’ understanding of them. There is in fact a Department for Education and Skills document called ‘Creating the picture’, which explains how early years teachers should gain this ‘knowledge’ of their pupils (DES, 2007).
In relation to the FSP points, this collection of ‘knowledge’ is implicitly an assessment of the normality of each child, their proximity to the ideal learner. This is underpinned by wider conceptions of how normality can be assessed; as Foucault writes:

The judges of normality are everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the social worker-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements (Foucault, 1991:304)

The omnipresence of ‘judges of normality’ more widely, I would argue, allows these ‘teacher-judges’ to place great emphasis on their ‘knowledge’ as factual and unquestionable. The veracity of teacher knowledge was rarely questioned, and this was in part due to the fact that part of their professional identity appeared to rely upon their ability to ‘know’ the children through observation. This was shown in Jim’s comments about a pupil who came to the class just before the FSP was completed:

Jim took pride in only giving her ticks for things he definitely knew through observation that she could do. He said: “I don’t know her so I could only tick what I knew of her, hence her scores are incredibly low” (July 09). It would be irresponsible, in Jim’s view, to score a child that he didn’t ‘know’; this also allows him to suggest that his knowledge of all the other pupils is based on observation, rather than assumptions.

The idea of a supposedly objective process of observation was used in this discourse to lend teachers’ knowledge a sense of certainty; ironically, it also allowed some observations to be rejected because they did not fit the teacher’s view of the child. In the weekly FSP meetings at St Mary’s, Paul and his TA, Kelly, would go through the observations, and their discussions would be framed by the idea that they ‘knew’ the children, and that this ‘knowledge’ was unquestionable. Observations were described as ‘100% him’ if they fitted well with their view of the child, while other observations were rejected and literally thrown into the bin. One incident which reveals the strength of ‘teacher knowledge’ is worth discussing here at length.
Reece, Ryan and the supply teacher’s observations

This episode took place during a meeting between Paul and Kelly in a work space adjoining the staffroom at St Mary’s, one morning in the second half of the Autumn term. Paul and Kelly met at this time each week to “discuss the children” and update their FSP files, and the intention was that they concentrated on four “focus children” each week so that each child’s folder was looked at through the course of the term. On this occasion, two of the four focus children (organised alphabetically) were Reece and Ryan, two African-Caribbean boys in the class. The learner identities constructed for these two boys are discussed in detail in the following chapter; it is sufficient to note here that neither was seen positively, and Paul often seemed to mix the two boys up (their names began with the same letter, and there was only one other Black boy in the class at the time). In the meeting, Paul and Kelly were looking at two ‘long observations’ (page-long detailed observations of a child over 10-15 minutes); one each of Reece and Ryan. These had been written by a supply teacher who had been in the class for a day while Paul was absent. Firstly, they looked together at one for Reece, which described him playing with farm animals.

Paul reads from the observation and makes a few notes about ‘working relationships’ in Reece’s folder. He continues; the observation says that Reece was grouping the farm animals. He writes down ‘grouping things’. Paul reads out: “Reece said ‘Let’s put all the pigs on the mud’! Reece would never say that, that’s bollocks!” They both laugh. He repeats ‘Let’s put all the pigs on the mud!’ in a posh voice, and says “I’m not going to put that”.

Kelly: “It was the supply teacher who wrote it”.

Paul reads [as Reece]: “‘Let’s put all the cows ...’: Uh-uh” [as if to mean ‘no way’]. He laughs again. “Why is she writing this?”

Kelly: “Maybe she mixed up Ryan and Reece?”

Paul: “How funny.”

Kelly: “He’s [Ryan’s] much more likely to say that. She could easily have got the two mixed up”.

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18 The full observations can be seen in Appendix 6.
Paul agrees: “Yes, this is bollocks”. They cross out and swap over the names on the two observations made by the supply teacher.

(Fieldnotes, St Mary’s, November)

What is apparent in this incident is the assumed impossibility, to Paul and Kelly, of Reece saying these sentences, due to their prior ‘knowledge’ of Reece. The very idea of him saying full sentences and organising the farm animals logically is laughable to them, and rejected as simply untrue, literally impossible. Despite evidence to the contrary, Paul’s previous ‘knowledge’ of Reece continues to constitute him outside the boundaries of being a good learner (which is strongly associated with making statements like those listed in the observation – being logical, articulate and organised). The supply teacher, as an impartial outsider with little knowledge of the children, has no motive in making up what she observed, yet the possibility of her recording accurately what Reece said is not even entertained. The justification for this is that she does not ‘know’ the children like Paul and Kelly do, and therefore is a questionable source of information. The swapping over of Ryan and Reece’s names provides Paul and Kelly with an explanation for what they perceive as impossible. Ryan was seen as more articulate in general and so Kelly says it is “much more likely” that Ryan is the boy in the observation.

As they went through the observation, now listing points for Ryan, Paul found further information which he felt supported the decision to swap:

    Paul reads out a section about working independently: “That again is Ryan, he will go and play on his own”.

Paul and Kelly’s ‘knowledge’ of the children is the justification for this swap, used to reject the depiction of Reece and accept the change-over to Ryan’s name. Paul knows what ‘is’ Ryan and what ‘isn’t’ Reece, and information that supports this is accepted, but that which questions it is rejected.¹⁹

¹⁹ There is no way to find out if the two observations were round the wrong way: I am not making a judgement on this myself. However, whether or not the supply teacher made a mistake, the conversations are very revealing in that they show how strongly Reece is positioned as distant from a good learner.
The next stage of the meeting revealed more about Paul and Kelly’s ‘knowledge’ of Reece. After discussing other matters and other children, Paul and Kelly looked at the second observation, now labelled as being about Reece.

Paul reads out the second observation (Kelly has changed the name on the sheet and throughout the observation). It is about the ‘Fishing for numbers’ game.\(^{20}\)

Paul: “I still don’t believe 100% that he said that. She’s turned it into sentences – it’s no use to us”. Paul continues to read, up to a part when Reece says he wants to have two fishing rods. Paul laughs: “Here comes the fight”. As he reads, it becomes apparent that Reece just said “I need both”, meaning he needed two rods to get the numbers; no fight happens. They list some more points for Reece. Kelly comments that the “disjointed speech” in the observation sounded like Reece so she knew they were mixed up.

When faced with further positive information about Reece, Paul again rejects it. He doesn’t “believe” that the supply teacher noted down accurately what he said, and instead suggests that she embellished it. However, later Kelly uses the speech patterns in the observation to justify using it for Reece: their “disjointed” nature is indicative of Reece to her. Clearly, this information can be used both to reinforce what is already known about Reece, or simply rejected: “it’s no use to us”. It is “no use” to Paul because it does not fit with what he already knows about Reece. This shows how observations and evidence are used to back up what the teacher already ‘knows’, not as a collection of evidence on which to base judgements.

Furthermore, Paul feels able to predict what will happen in observations: “Here comes the fight” is his response to the part about Reece asking for two sticks. In fact, Reece appears to be acting quite logically (two rods means picking up more numbers), but this element of Reece’s behaviour is ignored or goes unrecognised in favour of a prediction that sees him causing trouble. Later in the meeting, when looking at another observation for Reece which described him not letting other children play with some blocks, Kelly comments “That is so him”. Thus information

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\(^{20}\) This is a game where wooden ‘fishing rods’ with magnets on the end of the line are used to pick up magnetic numbers from a large tray, intended to encourage numeral recognition and conversations about numbers.
which fits with the largely negative picture of Reece is accepted without question, and even that which isn’t obviously negative, like Reece wanting to use two sticks, is interpreted as evidence that he is difficult.

In this example, we see how the adults’ certainty in the veracity of their ‘knowledge’ of the children outweighs evidence to the contrary and taints their analysis of observations done by other people. This is what makes this discourse so powerful; it regards teacher ‘knowledge’, however changing, unreliable or subjective, as sacrosanct, objective truth.

**How ‘knowledge’ relates to the FSP**

In a later chapter, I discuss how ‘teacher knowledge’ contributes to the production of the final FSP scores. However, as in the example above, the discourse of collecting and using ‘knowledge’ is implicated in the entire processing of evidence for the FSP. The observations contribute to the ‘knowledge’ of children but are also affected by ‘knowledge’, which defines which are useful and even recognised as realistic. Furthermore, teacher ‘knowledge’ can also be used in making sense of observations, as in this example from another FSP meeting at St Mary’s:

Paul and Kelly are looking at a long observation for Liam. They are trying to make sense of what it says about him filling a teapot with sand; they are remembering the incident as well as looking at what is written down. They have already found some points relating to literacy, and Paul says after writing down a PSED point, “He works well with other children – he always does”. Paul says about the teapot “He was good at filling it up wasn’t he? His fine motor skills are good.” Kelly tries to remember, and says Liam was looking around. Paul says “Making choices then. He is good anyway – our knowledge beyond this is that he good at choosing.” They note it down. (Fieldnotes, St Mary’s, November)

Here Paul and Kelly use their ‘knowledge’ to determine what the observation about Liam represents in terms of FSP points. They use their “knowledge beyond this” to help them work out what the observations suggests Liam can do, sometimes making tenuous connections between what is written down and the FSP points. What is clear is that they rely on their already acquired ‘knowledge’ of Liam as a good learner in
processing the observation, and in turn the observation comes to be ‘evidence’ of this ‘knowledge’.

It is important to note that despite this use of ‘teacher knowledge’ in assessment, the teachers were also willing to acknowledge that some children were less well ‘known’ that others; Jim explained how some children were ‘overlooked’, for example. Nonetheless, ‘teacher knowledge’ of children had the potential to define and limit how children could be seen, as in the example of Reece and Ryan’s observations; thus the certainty of ‘knowledge’ had the potential to transform children’s educational experiences.

**How a child comes to be ‘known’**

In this section I consider the sources of information that are used by teachers to “discover” the children and build their ‘knowledge’ of them. The most significant of these was of course through daily interaction with the children in the classroom, dinnerhall and playground. However, before the children even interacted with the teacher in school, there were two major sources of information - home visits and nursery information – which contributed to how a child was understood as a learner. Although the teachers described this process of discovering children *in the classroom*, I would argue that these sources of information meant that children did not arrive in the classroom as ‘blank slates’ ready to be uncovered: some had already begun to be understood as good or bad learners before they had even started school.

**Reliance on family as a source of information**

The teachers engaged with a discourse which sees educational success as linked to family background, and furthermore with a discourse which regards children’s characteristics as genetically determined. This meant that ‘knowledge’ about families provided a viable source of information about new pupils. The importance the teachers placed on genetic connections was shown by the teachers’ treatment of the sets of twins in their classes. Dahab and Daania, identical twins at St Mary’s, were almost always referred to as ‘the twins’, and their attainment was discussed collectively during meetings, as if it would naturally be the same. At Gatehouse, Jim
used an example of a set of twins from the previous year to show the accuracy of his marking:

“We did mark apart from each other, though we did talk about stuff... And really interestingly we both marked a twin, and I know twins are different but twins are generally similar, we marked a twin and they came out with two or three points different and that’s two teachers, across all of it” (Jim, September 08)

The idea that twins are “different ... but generally similar” reveals the underlying presence of a pseudo-scientific discourse of innate characteristics based on biological inheritance. This mirrors Mirza’s argument that, despite the scientific establishment’s dismissal of genetically-determined characteristics, ‘this new age of gene science appears to be able to accommodate a new popular version of biological determinism’ (Mirza, 1998:116). Most importantly in this case, this discourse of the importance of genetic connections legitimises the idea that children can come to be ‘known’ through knowledge of their parents.

Information about the families was collected both formally and informally, and the formal processes varied between the schools. At St Mary’s, each parent met with Kelly (the TA) and together they filled out a “parent questionnaire”; Paul commented “that’s how we get a picture of them” (October 08). Paul also explained that he had constructed this so that he could “read through the lines to find out the set up”, suggesting that this information - presumably the presence or absence of both parents, the number of siblings, and the parents’ occupational status (all of which are entwined with class and race in popular discourses) – helps him to understand the child.

At Gatehouse any children who came from other nurseries were visited at home, and a similar need to understand the home situation was mentioned:

AB: What about information on the children from outside?

Jim: We go to their homes and talk to their parents and ask them really awkward difficult questions.

AB: Like what?
Jim: Like “Where is dad? Is dad likely to turn up at school? Why are you in the UK?” Difficult questions that the school needs for their database, and actually does kind of - I’ve realised as the years have gone on, it is quite useful, useful information, although really really difficult to ask sometimes, awkward situations.

(Interview with Jim, September 08)

Jim’s questions suggest that information about the family composition and racial/cultural background of the family (including reasons for migrating to the UK) is important in Jim’s understanding of the child. This was also evident in the comments made in the classroom about information from home visits: Lynn returned from one home visit for a nursery child and made comments about the mother “answering the door in her underwear” and letting the children ride their bikes inside the house and over mattresses; this led to a discussion which I noted at the time was ‘generally disparaging about parents’ (Fieldnotes, September). Home visits were also a source of positive information for some pupils:

Lunchtime: Jim is talking to Liz and Susan about the home visit he did. Jim makes a point of saying that the new girl (Farah) is “one of seven, with another one on the way”- the women are shocked. The new girl is described as “quite bright, quite a bit of English”. They hope the new girl will be good model of English for Jim’s children. She is described as Afghan, and Pashto speaking. They discuss if there are any other Afghan children. Jim mentions that older children in the family have gone to university and says “obviously they have high aspirations”. The family is also described as very “with it” – Dad took time off work to meet Farah’s new teacher. (Fieldnotes, September)

In this case, Farah is already constituted as a good learner – she is a useful English speaker with parents who fit into positive models of parenting (aspiring, committed to education). Even though her family might be seen as too large (and this brings up many discourses of ‘uncivilised’ minority families) Farah is already seen positively within the classroom, before she has even arrived. Jim also commented frequently on how he saw one pupil, Sophea, independently make and eat a bowl of cereal when he visited her home, and how mature this was. This information was repeated whenever Sophea did something sensible or independent in the classroom. Thus the information from home visits was not only crucial in beginning the constitution of
some pupils as good learners, but also in the ongoing maintenance of these identities in the classroom.

Informal collection of information about the parents happened continuously, through chats as the children were dropped off or collected from school, from children’s comments, and through homework. During our last interview, I asked Jim directly if he thought knowing the families helped him, and he described more informal methods of collecting information:

[We have been discussing how Jim knew all names of the children’s siblings]

AB: You know the families very well ... does it help in knowing the child, if you know the family?

Jim: Yeah I suppose so, ‘cause they’re more likely to come and tell you about what happened at the weekend, or .. ‘cause the foundation stage is supposed to be incorporating what the parents say and what happens at home but it’s very difficult to get stuff out of parents if they’re not willing to talk to you. Like Waseem’s dad [describes him] I’m not going to get anything from Waseem’s dad about what Waseem does after school, but I do pass Waseem after school, so I do stop and have a kick around with him after school in the street [laughs]. So that’s how I’ve got to know his brothers’ names and I know the area he lives in and I know what he plays with.

(Interview with Jim, June 09)

Jim explains here how alternative information about Waseem’s siblings, his “area” and social habits is useful if he is unable to speak to the parents (Waseem’s father spoke no English). Thus even when there was no official way to collect information about families, Jim found a method of still building up his ‘knowledge’.

Information from Nurseries

The other source of information which meant that the children did not start from a neutral position was the information provided from their nurseries, both within the
school and outside. This information was often very detailed and made strong judgements about the child, and also included information about the parents and their occupations. As mentioned, the children coming up from the nursery at Gatehouse in January were labelled as ‘top’, ‘middle’ or ‘bottom’ by their previous teacher. Handwritten notes from the handover meeting included comments such as ‘Jasmina – attention seeker’ and ‘Zafir – stroppy and stubborn’. Another child was listed as having a ‘reliable parent’. The formal reports included detailed information on the children’s experiences in nursery, which constituted them as different types of learners:

“Zafir ... does need reminding of expectations when sitting on the carpet”

“Bethany is a visual learner”

“Hakim ... likes to be the first to try activities suited to more able children. He can become disagreeable when asked to perform a task he deems easy or when he is tired ... [his target is] to follow routines and behaviour expectations in the classroom... Hakim is a quiet child ... Hakim is an active learner”

“Ashlee ... is a good all-rounder ... considerate to those younger or less able ... has a big personality”

“Jena [has had] extended time abroad ... is a quiet child... [under ‘Dad’s Job’ section] Area of London/selling clothes”

“Bilqis ... is a quiet member of the class ... particularly likes imaginative home play with mummies and babies as this is particularly relevant to her”

It is clear from these examples that before any of these children arrive in Jim’s Reception class, he will have begun to get to ‘know’ these children. He will know that Zafir has some behaviour issues, that Hakim has an overinflated sense of what he is able to do and can be disagreeable, but is an ‘active learner’, and that Ashlee is considerate. Jim will know that Jena’s family have taken her abroad for an extended period, a practice disapproved of by schools, and that her father sells clothes in a particular area of London. Bilqis is described with particularly feminine traits of being

21 Many of the children at St Mary’s had been to some form of nursery before starting school, though not all of these provided information to Paul. At Gatehouse, most of the children had been to the school nursery, and so a report was passed up to the Reception teacher and there was also a ‘handover’ meeting.
quiet and liking playing “with mummies and babies”. Because this information is so specific and extensive (the reports last several pages and include samples of work), it forms a clear basis for the construction of the children’s identities. It makes the children intelligible to Jim because it explains the pupils in a similar way to how he needs to understand them, dealing with the same six areas of the FSP. He commented “the information from nursery is useful, especially the kind of medical information, information about their parents, who’s good at helping, who’s not so good” (Jim, September 08). As well as the practical medical information, Jim lists “information about the parents” as important; thus, as with the home visits and parental interviews, the parents become proxies for understanding the child.

The potential effect of the nursery information was also shown at St Mary’s, where there were three new children in January. Paul received information about two of the new children starting in his class beforehand:

After lunch, mid-December: Paul tells me that the information from the local nursery has arrived about the new children. He shows me their information packs and says that “We can see just from their pictures that Nalini is really on the ball and Dinesh, not at all”. He shows me the children’s pictures on the front of the packs – Nalini’s is of a recognisable house done in several colours; Dinesh’s is a grid, all in orange felt tip. (Fieldnotes, St Mary’s, December)

Here we can see how Paul begins to construct Nalini and Dinesh’s learner identities very early on, perhaps before he has even met them, based on their drawings. The children had perhaps been asked to do the same activity – maybe to ‘draw a house’ – but we cannot be sure of this, and yet Paul uses the information to make an impromptu assessment of their ability/development. Nalini is already “on the ball” while Dinesh is “not at all”; they already occupy opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of engagement with learning. These identities, while reinforced by classroom observations and further information, stayed with these two children throughout the year (Nalini scored 89 in the FSP, while Dinesh was the lowest in the class with 20 points). This incident reveals how the simplest of events can mark a child as a good or bad learner in this context: once seen, these pictures become part of Paul’s ‘knowledge’ of Dinesh and Nalini and can be used as evidence; thus Paul’s subjective
reading of them is taken as fact, with no questions asked over the reliability of this information or its context.

Navigating assessment in Reception

Although the teachers constructed their ‘knowledge’ of the children as definite, neutral and objective, their responses to the FSP and assessment in general were contradictory and complex. The certainty of ‘knowledge’ contrasted with the ambivalence felt towards the FSP as a policy; in general, the FSP was described as impractical and an inadequate method of recording their ‘knowledge’ of the children. The FSP was frequently discussed as blunt instrument which failed to capture the intricacies of a child’s attainment; however, at other times it was also seen as a neutral, objective instrument which could be used in conjunction with teacher ‘knowledge’ if it were written better. These contradictions suggest the extent to which the teachers were constrained within the dominant discourses in education which prioritise assessment as an accountability mechanism (and provide a way for teachers to show they are a ‘good teacher’). The similarities and differences between the FSP and other statutory assessment systems in primary schools (Sats) also complicate these teachers’ perceptions of the FSP.

Problems with the FSP in practice

The teachers were very critical of the FSP as a policy: in terms of its practical application, their main complaint was that the points were too vague, or too long. The profile points were characterised as “too wordy”, “wishy washy” and “airy fairy”, and therefore difficult to assess with any degree of accuracy. However, many of the teachers’ comments suggested that they valued a neutral, accurate assessment system, which I would argue shows the extent to which they are constrained by current discourses which value the kind of objective assessment which testing exemplifies. A selection of their comments reveal their main criticisms:

Lynn asks Susan and me what we are talking about; I say the FSP. She says “its crap”, “it’s vague” and “it doesn’t show progress”. (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, October)
"When it comes to kind of personal and social and emotional development that’s something you can’t really ... [assess]” (Jim, June 08)

“You’re quantifying something that’s not quantifiable. Some of it is quantifiable but for the majority of it, it’s not.” (Jim, June 08)

“If they want people to use the system, it should be easy. [...] When you’re a brand new practitioner you don’t know what it means. [...] For example, this one here [FSP point on sheet] says “links sounds to letters, naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet”. Now naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet, OK, does that mean some letters, does that mean all letters? Does it mean which letters, does it mean what? What does it tell me? Nothing. So actually it’s vague and it’s very very typical of these statements – they’re vague and they’re useless.” (Paul, July 08)

“It’s all rubbish, they’re wide, they’re broad, they’re vague” (Paul, October 08)

The teachers’ complaints about the FSP were based on their difficulty in making decisions about awarding children a point (or not). These criticisms did not reject the principle of objective assessment through observation, however, only the tool that is provided. Complaints about how the ‘vague’ FSP suggest a desire for accuracy, as was also shown by several comments which compared the FSP points for Maths with other scales, to emphasise the ease with which ‘measurable’ objectives could be assessed:

“It’s a yes/no, can/can’t and I think that’s very easy to do, and you, as a teacher, can assess the children very accurately, and I feel completely confident with all of the maths.” (Jim, June 08)

“Some of them are very clear and are very black and white. [For example] that a child is able to recognise up to number nine. They either are or they aren’t, it’s not a fuzzy situation.” (Lynn, October 08)

We see here how the teachers appear to welcome the parts of the FSP system which allow them to produce an ‘accurate’ assessment; despite the value placed upon detailed ‘teacher knowledge’, the teachers also deploy discourses which prioritise measurable outcomes. Their comments reveal the importance of good assessment processes in making them feel like ‘good teachers’; Jim includes the phrase “as a teacher”, indicating that he is able to use his expertise and feel confident with the “can/can’t” maths points. This apparent belief in the possibility of neutral objective
assessment was also indicated by the instructions which were taped to the inside of the adults' observation clipboards at Gatehouse, which read:

“All observations should include:

- Name
- Date
- Areas of provision/indoor/outdoor
- Social context – alone/group-adult led/child initiated
- What is happening- factual, objective description
- Name of observer
- Most significant areas of learning/EYFS target - best fit!

All observations should be POSITIVE and FACTUAL and CLEAR and MEANINGFUL!”

(Fieldnotes, January, emphasis in original)

The double mention of the need for “factual” observation indicates the strength of the discourse of objective assessment; this is considered to be an achievable aim. We see here how the FSP is simultaneously a factual and neutral assessment method, and a “wishy washy”, inaccurate system. Within this contradiction, there was no questioning of the teachers’ knowledge of the children - the fault for confusion lay entirely with the vagueness of the FSP points. Jim explained:

“It’s really hard because they’re asking for a number. I always think if you’re going to ask a question, you’re going to get, like if you ask an open-ended question you’re going to get an open-ended answer, but if you ask a closed question you get a closed answer but they are asking an open-ended question, with a closed answer, it’s kind of, the two don’t really go together.” (Jim, March 09)

Jim appears to see the problem as the FSP asking the wrong questions; it does not allow for the complexity of the situation or the extent of his knowledge about the child. He also commented that the FSP had to be a “best fit” because “there’s no way you can quantify everything that they’ve said and done throughout the whole year and give them a tick for it. It’s impossible.” (September 08). Thus the FSP is an inadequate instrument: it has “too much in it that’s not relevant, and misses out important stuff” (Jim). Several other teachers also criticised the content covered by
the FSP, particularly the literacy points. Within these criticisms, the extent and neutrality of ‘teacher knowledge’ is not questioned; the teachers actually ‘know’ more than the FSP covers. Moreover, these discussions were never framed by any wider reflection on more flexibility about what a good learner might look like; like ability/development, this was taken as a given notion – given legitimacy by the FSP perhaps, but always in existence.

The teachers’ perceptions of the FSP were also affected by the practical requirements, especially the need to collect so many observations and translate them into FSP points. This process was seen as an impossible task and a waste of time:

“There’s 117 profile points, you know, and you’re supposed to have evidence, three pieces of evidence, for each. There is no way that you can do that. [...] If you look at the profile book, it’s just like, nonsense. You know there’s no way you’re going to see Johnny doing this or that because you’ve got thirty Johnnys, you can’t find that on a daily basis.”22 (Paul, July 08)

Paul’s resentment of the impossibility of this requirement was compounded by the irrelevance of the evidence collected given the reification of ‘teacher knowledge’ (and of the course the inclusion in the folders of only the evidence that was in agreement with this ‘knowledge’).

Problems with the FSP in principle
Assessment was an ambiguous and problematic concept in these teachers’ discourses: it is something that they wish to get ‘right’ using their knowledge and an appropriate tool, as we see above, but it is also something which they resent as going against the values of ‘good’ teaching. The teachers, at times, rejected the idea that schools should be focused on their performance in high stakes tests:

“Oh yeah, the school’s totally about results [with enthusiasm] ... I mean that’s what makes me mad, the whole school, every school, this school for...

22 Paul’s use of names here reflects the use of names in the FSP document, which provides examples of the type of evidence that could be collected; it also reflects a teacherly practice of referring to a generic child as ‘Johnny’.
These comments engage with a common ‘teacherly’ counter discourse which positions ‘good’ teachers as ones who care more about the children than about accountability measures. However, the Reception teachers’ deployment of this discourse was complicated by the difference between the kinds of high stakes testing used with older children (Sats tests especially) and the nature of the FSP, which is rooted in specifically early years discourses – gradual teacher assessment, observation, incremental development. Jim perceived even these methods of assessment as too “strict” for children of this age:

“Well I find the whole thing a bit strange anyhow, assessing you know, five-year-olds, so strictly, you know, 117 points - it’s just ridiculous.” (Jim, June 08)

For Jim, the age of the children requires a less rigorous assessment. Similarly, Paul argued that accountability mechanisms were inappropriate because of the ‘developmental’ nature of learning in Reception; he said “it’s developmental, it’s not about the teaching” (July 09). These comments reproduce what Osgood has described as a ‘counter hegemony’ in early years education, which rejects the hyper-rational judgment of teaching and replaces it with a more flexible understanding of what the children can do and achieve (Osgood, 2006). This counter discourse positions the teachers within their professional discourses as ‘good teachers’, who wish to re-engage with the ‘disqualified knowledges’ (Foucault, 1980) of early years education, which emphasised more than just the production of results.

However, the teachers’ comments against assessment policy in general and the use of the FSP in Reception were constrained by the dominance of accountability as a useful tool of management; thus the counter-discourse is only partial:

“It’s just government statistics really ... you have to quantify something, I mean the way that it works at the moment is, if you’re funding stuff and you’re giving all these schools money, you need to know, the government need to know that they’re getting their money back from it, that they are, the people who you’re giving money to are doing their work, so you need a figure, you need a percentage. And I just think that, it’s like a hoop to jump though – you need to do this to get a figure and everyone’s doing
the same thing you get a kind of average, and I suppose to a point that’s quite useful, they know they’re getting their money’s worth, or not getting their money’s worth, and where they need to put money into and things like that. But, they’re five, it’s just stupid.” (Jim, June 08)

Here we see how Jim expresses sympathy with the need for accountability before arguing against the need for such measures with young children. He cannot escape the neoliberal discourse of education as an economic transaction between the state (as funder) and the schools (as providers of a measurable service). In their discussions of the FSP, the teachers engage with and also reject the policy discourses which display what Dahlberg and Moss describe as ‘hegemonic rationality’ in early years education:

... a rationality that cannot imagine any other way to justify and evaluate preschools except in terms of their ability to produce pre-specified outcomes and through the application of measurement techniques that are assumed to be objective and universally valid (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005:5)

As we have seen, the Reception teachers engage with this rationality in that they criticise the FSP for being vague and subjective, suggesting that they would prefer an objective and universally valid system, and that this would be a rational method of evaluation. Their comments on the need for the government to produce a number (and their occasional sympathy with this need) suggest that they are engaged in the maintenance of this hegemonic rationality: by accepting the need for the government to receive a numerical judgement of their teaching, they reproduce a discourse of rational, objective evaluation of early years education. They are also constrained in the extent to which they can resist this discourse; as Jim says:

“I understand why it needs to be done, and I understand the reasons behind it, but it just seems, you know, it seems a bit irrelevant ...but I still have to do it.” (Jim, June 08)

Nonetheless, comments about the FSP’s irrelevance and inappropriateness do represent some resistance to policy-based discourses: they reflect what Osgood terms ‘passive resistance’, where teachers are ‘overtly opposed’ to policy reform ‘yet feel powerless to resist’ (Osgood, 2006:189). These teachers are engaged in everyday processes of reworking and resisting policy, at the same time as they rely on policy discourses to justify and explain their practice.
The teachers’ responses to assessment policy are contradictory, and this is connected to the complex effects of the FSP on the teachers’ views of their professionalism and status. As Ball argues, neoliberal policy has the potential to affect not only what teachers do, but ‘who they are’ (2003b:215). Some research has suggested that increasing formalisation of early years has been as ‘asset to status’ (Hargreaves and Hopper, 2006) and these teachers certainly appeared to feel pride in using their ‘knowledge’ in the FSP. However, the requirements of the FSP also appeared to result in feelings of stress and incompetence:

[Interview with Paul, October 08 - We are discussing the need to produce evidence and the volume of it]

AB: I just wonder how that makes you feel as a professional?

Paul: Oh I feel absolutely incompetent, all the time, constantly.

“I mean this is basically the Sats of the Foundation Stage and it is a lot of pressure” (Jim, September 08)

Both these teachers had negative responses to the FSP in terms of their own professionalism; this was particularly the case when the LA intervened:

“I was moderated, which was a total farce. They told me [each year] that I’d been marking too high, then too low and then too high, and that basically that I need to make sure I mark the children a certain way. And I was like well, you know, I can’t mark them a certain way, they come out with what they get.” (Jim, September 08)

Paul says about the Local Authority: “They just say ‘do your best’ because they know that there is no way that it can be done. That’s what I don’t understand, why they set us up to fail? [...] It’s appalling, no one’s taking the responsibility” (Fieldnotes, St Mary’s, January)

The FSP seemed to generate a great deal of resentment from the teachers, about their school management teams, the LA, and the government. This had an impact on their practice, which was often characterised by ‘cynical compliance’ (Ball, 2003b), as I discuss in Chapter 8. The FSP also added to feelings of isolation as early years teachers (for example, Paul commented that “Early years is very, very undervalued”) because few other teachers understood the complexities of the FSP.
Multiple discourses converged and collided in the teachers’ discussions of the FSP, resulting in their ambivalence toward the system. The teachers’ contradictory responses, whereby the FSP is an inappropriate, vague assessment system and yet objective factual assessment using observation is still something to be aimed for, are complicated by the deployment of discourses which both reject and coalesce with neoliberal values of accountability. This ambivalence about the FSP has implications for how the final results are produced, as discussed in Chapter 8.

Discussion

In this chapter, I have discussed how the learner is constructed in early years education within a neoliberal framework which values flexibility, rational choice, submission and individual responsibility. I have explored how this is connected to ideas of natural ability, development, and the authentic learner. I have also considered how assessment policy legitimises a discourse of ‘teacher knowledge’ as neutral and objective, and how the teachers engage with this discourse both when describing their roles and practices, and when criticising the FSP as ‘vague’ and inaccurate. Throughout, we have seen how the teachers are constrained by discourses of accountability, but also deploy other discourses such as the caring early years teacher to resist these performative mechanisms. This chapter has demonstrated how dominant discourses can work in contradictory ways: at times, the FSP requirements worked against the teacher knowledge discourse, when demands for evidence were seen as a lack of trust, while in general the FSP legitimised the accumulation of ‘teacher knowledge’ as a professional skill.

In the next chapter, I consider how the idea of the learner is applied to the children in the Reception classes at Gatehouse and St Mary’s to constitute the pupils as good or bad, authentic and inauthentic learners.
Chapter 6: Recognising ‘good learners’

In this chapter I consider how the conception of the learner explored in the previous chapter operates to exclude some children from positions of education success. I argue that ‘good’ learner identities are implicitly and explicitly linked to Whiteness and middle-classness in prevailing educational discourse and practice, and this renders these inner city, minoritised and lower socio-economic status children other children as a “difficult intake”, and unintelligible as good learners. I also explore how raced and gendered discourses have an impact on classroom practice.

The deployment of this “difficult intake” discourse is complex, and has multiple forms with great slippage between them; teachers cite some discourses explicitly, but also cite one thing as a proxy for another. What is left unsaid can work powerfully to constitute these children as ‘other’; Apple (1999) comments in relation to race that it acts as an ‘absent presence’ in education. In this chapter we see how race, class and ideas about the exotic but dangerous inner city operate as ‘absent presences’ in these Reception classrooms.

Which children are recognisable as ‘good learners’?

Constituting the White middle-class norm

As I have explained, discourses operated in these classrooms to define what being a good learner looks like. This included characteristics such as rationality, enthusiasm, submission and self-regulation, a tendency to display learning in appropriate ways and an ability to recognise the requirements of the moment. Discourses of ‘authenticity’ also worked to delegitimise some children’s attainment; these were reliant on the idea that, as with ‘ability’ and ‘development’, some children have innate characteristics which make them a good learner, while other children merely perform this identity. In these teachers’ comments, this idealised learner identity was often linked to middle-class children, who were placed in contrast to the children at St Mary’s and Gatehouse. Within this, the association of these middle-class children
with Whiteness was often implicit. For example, Lynn (early years coordinator at Gatehouse) commented on the FSP:

> “These goals are fair enough if you’re a English-speaking middle-class child whose parents work with you at home, but our children are not like that – they’re few and far between whose parents work with them – who will engage with them, who know what it means to develop a child’s mind.” (Lynn, November 08)

Lynn appears to regard English-speaking middle-class children as the universal or normal child assumed by the FSP, making the FSP irrelevant to the Gatehouse children. Simultaneously she engages in a deficit discourse about Gatehouse parents’ knowledge and skills, based on their assumed lack of developmental knowledge. Although Lynn refers to ‘English-speaking’ children she does not name race explicitly; non-English-speaking acts here as a proxy for non-White. Her comments powerfully locate lower income, non-English-speaking (minoritised) families as unknowing, uncommitted, and as failing their own children.

This deficit discourse was often used to compare the children at Gatehouse with their idea of the White middle-class, ideal learner. Here, Lynn is discussing how different schools in the LA should be compared:

> “It’s not to say that there aren’t schools in [LA] that are achieving this and that and well you can say that’s great, but let’s look at the makeup of that school – why are those children achieving? Well they’re middle-class, English parents who are involved in their children. Who come and support the class teacher, who know to bring in their child’s book bag every single day, who know the importance of not showing up in shorts and t-shirt on a day like today when it’s freezing.” (Lynn, November 08)

Here the “achieving” White middle-class school’s parents are described as supportive, capable and caring, while the Gatehouse parents are positioned as incompetent. Again “English” operates here as a proxy for silenced Whiteness. A contrast is set up between ‘knowing’ parents and the Gatehouse parents. Lynn continued:

> “It’s just little things like that, I mean I know they sound stupid but it’s kind of like do you think if a parent shows up on a day like today which is like I don’t know, 5 degrees and he shows up in a thin windbreaker type coat for their child – if they can’t even figure that out, do you think they’re
going to be spending any time, like, reading to them? If they can’t even put a coat on their child do you think they’re going to spend the time? And it’s just little things which I mean, like I say sound a bit stupid but actually it’s kind of like well this is what I’m working with, and these people can’t even grasp this.” (Lynn, November 08)

Here Lynn makes explicit her assumptions about the links between what she sees at the school gate and what happens at home; for her, not giving a child the appropriate coat inevitably means the parents don’t read to the child at home. Her comments “they can’t even figure that out” and “these people can’t even grasp this” suggest that the parents are not intelligent enough to care for their children appropriately. Her comment “this is what I’m working with” suggests that she has to cope with a poor quality of parent at Gatehouse. This is an individualised discourse; the issue of poverty (which may well be the reason why some children do not have a warm coat) is obscured and the individual failure of parents to act responsibly is emphasised. We see here how a “difficult intake” discourse operates to make positions of educational success all but impossible for the Gatehouse children, but also logical and located within individual families and their failures.

“Difficult intake” discourses

The children at both schools were discussed (as a group) in ways which constituted them as incommensurate with good learner identities, as “difficult”. This included comments on class, parenting, religion, language and race, both in combination and separately. Before discussing the data, it is worth noting that the two schools did have an unusually high proportion of children on Free School Meals (FSM), with English as an additional language (EAL) and from minoritised communities in comparison with schools in England as a whole, but were not unusual in their LA or indeed London23.

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23 Families of Schools Data from the DCSF shows that approximately half of the schools in the LA had proportions of FSM as high or higher than Gatehouse and St Mary’s (DCSF, 2008e). According to data based on 2008, White British pupils made up less than 20% of the school population in over half of the schools in the LA (CMPO and ESRC, 2010). In London as a whole, over a third of schools have a White British minority of under 20% of pupils.
When I asked the teachers about their intakes, all of them described their schools in terms of how unusual they were for having large proportions of children with EAL, on FSM and from minority communities. This was often linked to the effect it had on the school; for instance Lynn explained:

“Pretty much everyone is English as an additional language. I mean the children were all born, the majority of the time, in England, but their parents weren’t so of course their home language is something other than English so that’s something they’ve got to work with as well. And our parents, as I said, a lot of them are on income support, a lot of them don’t work, a lot of them have issues with assimilating into a different culture, and dealing with money issues and things like that.” (Lynn November 08)

Lynn’s comment shows how easily the teachers slip between discourses of language, nationality, assimilation and income, while never explicitly citing race. In general the teachers’ comments about intake were not merely descriptive, but drew on policy discourses which position minoritised and FSM pupils as needing extra support and sensitivity. Instantly, these pupils were positioned in contrast with ‘normal’ (i.e. White and middle-class) children as unusual and requiring particular provisions. The emphasis Lynn puts on the high proportion of EAL children also resonates in a context where schools with a majority of the pupils who come from minority communities are constituted as problematic through discourses of ‘swamping’ and ‘tipping points’ (the point when there are so many minoritised pupils that White families leave) (Gillborn, 2008:78/81).

Throughout my observations and interviews, the teachers talked about ‘our children’ as if the implications of being EAL, from a minority group or on FSM were commonsense. Lynn explained that the old assessment system “wasn’t really appropriate for our children” with little further elaboration; she expected me to understand why it was inappropriate. As I discuss through this section, this “difficult intake” discourse operated in two ways: predominantly it worked to distance these children from the attributes of the learner, and therefore as ‘other’, but at the same time it also worked to render the children as exotic and interesting. It was also tied up with ideas about the inner city as dangerous but exciting.
**Inner city discourses**

An important part of the “difficult intake” discourse was the connections made between the inner city location of the schools and the home lives of the pupils. The backgrounds of the children were almost universally described in terms of what was lacking. Paul’s comment “With the social backgrounds they have, they don’t see a lot of books, so they’ve got really into them here” (Fieldnotes, St Mary’s, July) was typical. This general discourse of social deficit was inextricably linked to ideas about the inner city which related, I would argue, to the policy context whereby ‘urban’ communities are constituted negatively, often in terms of ‘segregation’ by race and class (Gulson, 2006; Lupton and Tunstall, 2008). The location of the schools appeared to be important in how the teachers understood the schools and the pupils.

At Gatehouse, comments relating to the urban locality were made during lessons: Jim also told the children he had picked a particular book about two men who live in a tower block because “many of you live in flats”. On another occasion Lynn explained a washing line in a picture book saying “I know it’s not how you do your laundry but if you lived somewhere with lots of space”. The focus of these comments reveals the teachers’ deficit perception of the inner city; they assumed that all the children lived in the local tower blocks, and commented on what was missing in the children’s experiences. This deficit perception of the local community, linked to discourses of urban deprivation, the inner city and race, had an impact on Lynn’s comments on the role of the school:

“I think we’re quite a supportive school, I think in general we do as teachers, in this school as with many inner city London schools, have to take on quite a bit of other issues that the parents are going through, beyond what their children’s academic issues might be [...] A lot of the parents that we have, it might be the first time they have ever sent a child to school, it might be their first child, it might be their first experience with British school. They don’t know how things go, they don’t know when, you know what’s the regular routines of the day and what’s appropriate and all of that sort of thing. [...] A lot of these children don’t have bikes at home, parents don’t have the space to practice, parents don’t take them to the park, parents don’t, you know, ride that bike. And a lot of children have obesity issues, and health issues, and with a lot of them it’s that they live in these tall flats, they don’t get to go out, they don’t get to do all the running around. Their parents a lot of the time
come from very hot countries and get very concerned about the cold, they
don’t like to let their children go out. Some of our parents say “Oh don’t
let him run”. (Lynn, November 08)

In this revealing quote, Lynn constitutes the Gatehouse pupils and their families as
inherently lacking in terms of knowledge of the education system, material
possessions and parenting attitudes. She again deploys the idea of the unknowing
parent, which she contrasted with “English speaking middle-class” parents in
previous comments, and any recognition of the impact of poverty of what parents
can do is only ever tacit (“they don’t have bikes”). The entanglement of a range of
discourses is very powerful; she is both critical of the parents (they “don’t let” their
children go out) and sympathetic (“they live in these tall flats, they don’t get to go
out”). The comments Lynn makes relating to poverty (including poor health, obesity,
lack of space) reflect a conception of inner city populations as victims, similar to
Leonardo and Hunter’s comments on perceptions of urban communities of colour in
the US:

Even when they are viewed sympathetically, which is not often, they are
seen rather as passive victims of larger social inequality, not agents or
experts in their own lives. This image of urban residents portrays them
utterly without power, creativity, perseverance, or intelligence to fight
back against an unfair system. (Leonardo and Hunter, 2009:153)

This patronising construction of the inner city parents as lacking agency is significant
in the “difficult intake” discourse as it also positions the children as unable to help
themselves to improve their lives, as lacking perseverance or intelligence. This is not
dissimilar to constructions of the inner city population present in UK government
policy on ‘urban regeneration’ (Gulson, 2006), which has focused on the ‘problems’
of inner cities. In this discourse the teachers’ work becomes even more important:
they not only need to teach the children, but also to persuade them that education
will ‘improve’ them. This links to the deficit discourse implicit in ‘aspiration raising’
initiatives, such as Aim Higher and the Widening Participation to higher education
programmes (Burke, 2002), where those who are ‘underachieving’ need to be taught
how to value education.
However, this discourse runs alongside and in tension with a discourse of individual failure, as seen in Lynn's comments about parents not knowing school routines, not taking their children to the park, and not letting children outside because the parents are “from very hot countries”. This discourse is also apparent in policy on urban areas; as Lupton and Tunstall argue, ‘in a neoliberal analysis of the problems of low-income neighbourhoods [...] structural problems are individualised and spatialised’ (2008:114). Nonetheless, the link made between the inner city and the inevitability of problems is still made: ‘disadvantaged neighbourhoods [...] are discursively repositioned as irredeemably problematic’ (Lupton and Tunstall, 2008:114). These two discourses of individual failure and structural inequality are deployed together to constitute the children at Gatehouse as unusually “difficult” and children from lower socio-economic groups as inevitably doing badly in school.

*Race and immigration*

As seen in the previous comments, the “difficult intake” discourse is racialised; this was sometimes explicit, such as when Jim contrasted Gatehouse with a school in “middle-class White England”, but more frequently implicit, such as when Lynn talked about parents who “come from hot countries”. This implicit citation of race is in keeping with the policy context, where issues of race are ‘collapsed into’ the issue of ‘social exclusion’ (Lewis, 2000). Lynn constitutes the minoritised children as having failed to assimilate, as evidenced by their lack of engagement with ‘British’ cultural norms such as playing in the park or riding a bike. This takes on greater importance in a situation where assimilation and integration are valued through a discourse of ‘cohesion’ (Gillborn, 2008). At St Mary’s, Paul made comments which similarly emphasised the Otherness of minority children and their families:

> It is before school on my first day of observation. Paul starts to explain that the school is taking on some more children in January because “is desperate for kids. They’ll take anyone”. He describes the families as coming from “who knows where” and says that their “social and educational values are...” and he pulls a face as if to say they’re dubious. He says that they arrive in the country, can’t get into the schools they want, come to St Mary’s and then move when the schools they wanted can take them, which is very disruptive for him. (Fieldnotes, St Mary’s, September)
Here Paul makes a clear link between what he sees as the ‘poor quality’ of pupils at St Mary’s and their origins “who knows where”, as well as associating this with poor “social and educational values”. His comments on children moving school ignore the fact that this decision could be taken as evidence of a real commitment to education; neoliberal policy on schools is based, after all, on parents exercising their right to ‘choose’ (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995), and choice advice is aimed specifically at disadvantaged parents (Exley, 2009). His comments suggest instead that they are abusing the system by transferring their children, and he does not take into account the complex problems of temporary housing and settling into a new country experienced by many new migrants in London, instead focusing on the disruptive effect to his classroom. This, and Paul’s comment that the children come from “god knows where”, bring up discourses of good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable migrants, defined by their assimilation into institutional structures (as I discuss more later in relation to individual children). It positions the newly arrived children negatively as ‘bad migrants’, implicitly citing media and government discourses of migration as out of control and in need of greater restriction. As in Lynn’s comments, the minoritised pupils and their families are constituted as part of the inner city problem, particularly in their failure to ‘assimilate’ by adopting ‘British’ practices.

**EAL and Bilingualism**

Another aspect of this racialised discourse of the “difficult intake” related to the EAL status of the children. The concern with proportions of EAL children reflects a general positioning of EAL pupils as another ‘problem group’ alongside Special Educational Needs (SEN) pupils in educational documentation including the FSP handbook (QCA, 2009). At Gatehouse, Lynn mentioned the fact that most of the children spoke a language other than English at home as one of the problems she faced, and some children were put into a group called ‘EAL/SEN’. However, the discourses related to language that were cited at Gatehouse were not entirely based on this negative ‘EAL’ connection; Jim attempted to use a more positive discourse of bilingualism:
"They’re all learning ... I know they’re not achieving like above the national average, or even the national average, but most, the majority come in with English as a second language, so. They just do incredibly, I’m just, you know, they finish the school day and [clicks fingers] they’re straight into another language. So I already think that this whole national average, levels and that kind of thing, I don’t really think that’s that relevant here because these children who achieve really highly according to the government statistics, I don’t know if they could speak another language as fluently as these children, and I think that’s a major skill in itself. And it’s an undervalued skill because I think it’s incredible. Some of them speak three languages, and all fluently.” (Jim, June 08)

Here Jim appears to rally against common attitudes towards bilingualism which are ‘wrought with contradiction’ in that they glamorise bilingualism when it involves European languages and higher education, but reject immigrant languages (Leonardo and Hunter, 2009:157). His comment describes the children’s home languages as worthy, and not as evidence of resistance to assimilation, as they are frequently described in popular press discourses (Chapman, 2009; Ford, 2007). However, despite this positive stance, Jim also slips into the ‘EAL as a problem’ discourse: national averages are “not relevant here” and it seems there is no ambition for these pupils to reach the expected levels because they do not speak English at home. Even when he appears to be sympathetic to his pupils’ different situations, Jim actually rejects the possibility that they could do as well as White middle-class pupils. His following comments reveal further the limits of this attempt to reposition EAL status as positive rather than a problem:

“I always wonder with these children are they achieving as highly as I say they are, or is that I just completely don’t understand – I’ve never taught in a school where children speak English as a first language. Am I just really positive towards them because they know it in two languages, and isn’t that amazing, or is their achievement actually lower than, you know, an English speaking, White middle-class primary school in the middle of England? I don’t know.” (Jim, June 08)

Here Jim uses the White middle-class referent already discussed to explain his doubts about his positive stance. In physically locating the norm of White middle-classness in ‘the middle of England’, probably a reference to popular conceptions of leafy and affluent ‘Middle England’, Jim sets up a clear contrast with the urban location of Gatehouse. The otherness of the Gatehouse children is emphasised by their EAL
status, which positions them further from the White middle-class high-achieving ideal.

Family, parenting and class
As we have already seen in Lynn’s and Paul’s comments, at both schools local parents were regarded as lacking in parenting skills or the right educational values. This was particularly important given the links made in policy discourses regarding good parenting (Ball, 2008), and its impact on the community. This link between bad parents and difficult children was frequently made; for example:

“I mean there’s a lot of them come from very, very difficult backgrounds, you know, and parents that have been through a lot and the children are kind of mirrors of what they see – they absorb it, they reflect it, and you see it coming out in different ways” (Paul, October 08)

In Paul’s comments, the link between parents’ experiences, home life and behaviour in school is rendered inevitable (“they absorb it”) and obvious (“you can see it”). This certainty was reinforced by Paul’s discussions of educational research on the subject, which he was keen to discuss with me as a researcher. He thought it very interesting that the EPPE project\(^\text{24}\) “actually says it is more about their bloody home life that the teaching”; he commented sarcastically “Ha ha! Surprise, surprise!”.

Paul used his understanding of the EPPE project’s findings to justify the connections he made between home life and attainment. He also saw this as simply commonsense - the research had just found what all teachers know anyway\(^\text{25}\). Following on from these comments, I asked Paul if he saw a similar pattern in his class, where background was related to progress at school; he responded with conviction:

“I definitely, I definitely think that’s true. Definitely think that if you have a family - if you’ve got two children of equal developmentally, you know, ab- they’re both at the same point in development and they’re both could probably move in a parallel way, and you put one in a home that’s full of support and security, and one in a home with nothing, the one who’s all secure and full of really good learning in their home life will shoot up whereas the other will just not, even though they’ve got the same

\(^{24}\) This is a reference to the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project, a longitudinal study of provision for 3-7 year olds.

\(^{25}\) This comment also engages with a common discourse among teachers which regards educational research as too academic and irrelevant to everyday practice.
potential. There's no question who will do, who will move forward faster, definitely. It's obvious. [...] There is no question who is going to do better, and it's the same thing with all you know, one's sent to the TV, whereas the other one's taken to the ballet lessons, and mathematics and gymnastics [...] I mean Paige's mum has, now got three, got one on the way, she started producing children when she was 16, she's had no life - she's not been modelled good living if you like. Paige's sent to, Paige's arrived 'cause she's got a television in her room! [sarcastically] She has speech problems because of that, she has speech problems and that hasn't helped, and one of the other boys is coming next year same thing, her brother, and I'm thinking bloody hell...” (Paul, July 09)

Paul's comments conceive of the problems he sees in the classroom as originating entirely from, and entirely because of, the parents of the children. He explicitly links certain homes and styles of parenting with quicker development. He juxtaposes stereotypically middle-class activities such as being taken to ballet lessons with the pupils in his class, using a White working-class girl, Paige, as an example of the effects of poor parenting. Here he is using a constructed notion of the supported middle-class child (Vincent and Ball, 2007) to emphasise what he sees as the deficiencies of the parents at St Mary's. He is also reflecting, as Ball (2010) has argued, a division between the kinds of children produced by extracurricular 'edutainment' services available to middle-class families and those who do not experience these. All of this is cloaked in terms of sympathy with these families and support for 'interventions'; Paul went on to talk about family literacy projects and said “Why are we even bothering to target the children? You must target the adults”. Nonetheless, Paul comments that Paige's mother has “not been modelled good living”, which suggests that she is unable to improve her life and is trapped, as in Lynn's comments. These teachers engage with the idea that there is a 'good' way of parenting and that this is something that they can recognise; when it is absent, the effect on the children is seen as inevitable - as we see with Paul's comment about Paige's younger brother, who is already feared before he even arrives in the school. There are also overtones of a discourse of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor in this discussion of a White working-class family: Paul seems to suggest Paige's mother has not helped herself by having several children and spending money on televisions for them.
Special Needs and ‘needy’ children

At St Mary’s much of this discourse of poor parenting and low income families was tied up with the idea of ‘needy’ children. For Paul, the term ‘special educational needs’ included issues of emotional maturity and sociability, as well as formally recognised educational needs. This ‘neediness’ was linked to the children’s backgrounds:

“...this class is definitely [laughs] quite interesting. There’s a lot of er ... needy children in the class so it’s quite... [...] The special needs person said to me “Ooh you’ve got quite a few this time” [...] I really don’t know that you can tell that they are needy, what their needs are until they start opening up, ‘cause you’ve got all the issues to deal with – you’ve got English as an additional language, you’ve got sort of fear, and all those sort of social things” (Paul, October 08)

“I mean the thing about this class which was different from last year was their sort of social/emotional. It was very low level [...] although they’re still quite challenging and it’s always [rolls eyes and blows air out of mouth to say ‘phew’ in shock] you know, happening at every corner, because we’ve got so many, sort of, special needs.” (Paul, July 09)

Paul’s discussions of ‘neediness’ and ‘social things’ relate to discourses of ‘challenging’ pupils; he appears to conflate emotional and social issues with SEN and EAL, as if being socially disadvantaged were another ‘special need’. This is a complex deficit discourse, where the socially disadvantaged are seen as lacking in terms of emotional and social skills as well as economic capital; it is discursively reinforced by the government’s targeting of low income families with projects such as SureStart which focus on parenting and social skills. The vagueness of Paul’s comments about ‘needy’ children do not lessen the force of this discourse; it worked powerfully to constituted these children at St Mary’s as ‘challenging’.

The significance of the “difficult intake” discourse

As we have seen, a discourse of the “difficult intake” operates in these classrooms in complex ways to position these children as distant from a White middle-class ideal learner. Issues of race, religion, language, parenting and class work to constitute these children as a group as unusual and challenging. Furthermore, the urban inner city location of the two schools is critical to the discourses used to describe the pupils who attend them. As the data has shown, the inner city is linked to poverty, minority
communities, and to deprivation in social as well as economic terms; this is reinforced, I would argue, by policy which is focused on urban regeneration, such as Education Action Zones, which construct inner city populations as inevitably problematic (Gulson, 2006; Lupton and Tunstall, 2008). As in Connolly’s (1998) study of infant classrooms in the inner city, the teachers engage in a discourse which links the school’s physical location with particular expectations of the cohort as a whole. Leonardo and Hunter’s (2009) discussion of the ‘urban’ and education, although based on US cities, is useful here in considering the significance of discourses about urban spaces for schools. They argue that the urban can be ‘imagined’ in three ways: as a sophisticated space, as an authentic place of identity, or as a disorganised ‘jungle’. I would argue that the teachers in my study predominantly imagine the urban mainly as a disorganised ‘jungle’.

The teachers’ descriptions of a lack of activities at home, the doubt cast upon parents’ educational values, and their contrasts with the ‘White middle-class’ engage with a discourse of disorganization and a lack of civilization, similar to that described by Leonardo and Hunter in their comments on the ‘internal colony’: in this imagining, ‘the urban resembles the colonies frequented by the colonists who never feel out of place, never not in charge’ (2009:148). Here, the inhabitants of an ‘internal colony’ need to be improved through education:

These spaces are complete with colonial-like education system that treat the urban “natives” as something to be assimilated, civilised, and converted. Real urban dwellers [...] may not be constructed as sophisticated, but through proper education, it is believed they can become modernised. (Leonardo and Hunter, 2009 based on Blauner, 1972 and Ladson-Billings, 1998)

The pupils at Gatehouse and St Mary’s are seen as needing to be civilised, modernised and improved through education; this civilising process is constructed by Lynn as part of early years education, important because it is the first point of access. For Paul, the dubious “educational values” of the parents who come from “who knows where” need to be improved (though some White parents also need to be taught “good living” in his view). The discourses of the inner city at both schools
suggest the teachers imagine their urban locations as 'internal colonies', where they are needed to begin the process of assimilating the children into civilised life.

However, in Jim’s discussion of the children’s bilingual skills and his occasional positive comments about diversity, he attempts to engage with the first of Leonardo and Hunter’s ways of imagining the urban: as a cosmopolitan place of interest. Here, they argue that ‘urban’ can be used to mean ‘the right amount of diversity’ or the ‘urban without the burden’ (2009:146). In this imagining, people of colour are ‘recast’ in a positive light, for example through ‘appropriating diversity or urbanism is a way of marketing a school or program as “cutting edge”’ (2009:146). Jim uses this view of the city when he engages superficially with the idea that the minoritised groups in his class are exotic and interesting (though not sophisticated, as Leonardo and Hunter describe). This view of the inner city resonates with all of the teachers’ attempts to position themselves as having particularly difficult jobs, as having taking on the greatest challenge. Leonardo and Hunter argue that in this construction, ‘educators who deal with the urban are constructed as positive, but the urban students and families themselves are not’ (2009: 146). We see this in Lynn’s comments when she argues it is easy for White middle-class schools to do well. The teachers in these schools manage to combine these two imaginings to cast themselves in a positive light: they work in difficult areas (the ‘urban jungle’) and so have more problems to deal with, but this also means that their work is ‘cutting edge’, important, and somehow more exotic or interesting because they deal with ‘diverse’ populations, unlike the teachers in White middle-class areas who have it easy. This complex construction of the ‘urban’ is a fundamental part of the “difficult intake” discourse: the city is both exotic and a problem.

The “difficult intake” discourse is implicitly and explicitly racialised: it draws upon ethnic groups, religion and language to define children as different and atypical. The external idealised image of White middle-class children reinforces the centrality of Whiteness in a Norm/Other dichotomy, where the Other is inevitably deficient. The ‘Otherness’ of the children at St Mary’s and Gatehouse positions them as a group as ‘outside of educational success’ (Youdell, 2006b). Individual pupils may have the
status of good learners, but when talking about the children as a group, the teachers focus on their ‘difficulty’ and unusualness. The “difficult intake” discourse frames much of the discussion of learner identities in Chapter 7; it limits and enables how the pupils in the Reception classes can be talked about, and how they can be assessed.

The teachers’ use of this discourse should not, however, be seen in isolation from education policy discourses, which position certain groups of pupils (including those from minoritised backgrounds, those with EAL, and those on low incomes) as needing extra help to succeed in school. The updated FSP document itself has a whole section on ‘Inclusion’, which deals with four groups: ‘Children who are learning English as an additional language’, ‘Boys’, ‘Children with special educational needs’ and ‘Children from minority groups’. The teachers in my study had classes with large proportions of children who would fit into these groups; their descriptions of them could be seen as a genuine concern to deal with particularities of their cohort. In their use of these terms and descriptions, the teachers could be seen as merely suffering from the form of ‘ventriloquism’ described by Morley (cited in Ball, 2003b), where teachers use policy terms in everyday discussions; certainly, the idea of concern for EAL or minority pupils appears commonsense in these teachers’ comments. As with all analysis of their comments, the teachers’ discussions have to be seen as constrained by the discourses which, for example, mark out what being a ‘good teacher’ who cares about their pupils is. That said, the assumptions about deficient home backgrounds, poor parenting and the inevitability of low attainment shown in the teachers’ quotes show that the “difficult intake” discourse is not simply about a concern for underachieving groups; it has the potential to embed low expectations of pupils in their first year of schooling, and define who can be a good learner. Youdell argues that the use of categories such as EAL and ‘special needs’ can be associated with the exclusion of certain identities from positions of success:

proliferations [of category] also have the potential to box us into tighter and tighter spaces, to open us up to closer scrutiny, to render some bodies and selves possible and others impossible (Youdell, 2006b p29).
With the “difficult intake” discourse, the Reception teachers have boxed their pupils into a clearly defined space where poor parenting, religion, language and race render the majority of their classes as ‘impossible’, incapable of high levels of attainment.

The “difficult intake” discourse and assessment

We see most clearly how this discourse constitutes these children as a whole outside of educational success in the teachers’ comments on assessment. For example, Lynn commented in relation to scoring children on entry to the nursery:\(^{26}\):

“I mean most of our children would score like say 0, but some of them are like minus 0, minus 1 or whatever because actually they aren’t even anywhere near.” (Lynn, November 08)

“Shearing against the country, I just think if you measure against the country we’re just always going to look hopeless. I mean it’s just...” [shrugs] (Lynn, November 08)

Lynn thinks that her children are ‘off the scale’ as it were, because they are so behind, rendering the FSP inappropriate. She commented on local White middle-class schools:

“they’ve got much smaller classes, and “Oh, it’s only one EAL child”, and it’s like, well of course your children are achieving better, they’re starting at a higher point than our children are” (Lynn, November 08)

It is taken for granted that the Gatehouse children will inevitably be low-attaining and have lower starting points on entry, reducing the relevance of the FSP.

Jim argued that the FSP was also irrelevant due to the nature of the parents at Gatehouse:

AB: So the parents’ evenings, it hasn’t been useful? [Jim has previously complained about the parents’ evenings]

Jim: No, I think I’d be concerned if I was a parent and I saw my child didn’t get a tick for role play and blah blah blah, and there’s no real way of explaining it to

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\(^{26}\) The FSP is, in theory, begun in nursery where information is collected for the six areas. However, the Reception teachers are reluctant to use this evidence (if they receive it). Lynn is referring to what the children would get if an assessment were carried out on entry to nursery at age 3½-4.
some of the parents because their English themselves is just so ... so bad.

AB: So it's not useful in that way?

Jim: No, god no. Not at all I don’t think.

AB: Do you think it might be in some schools?

Jim: Yeah, I think it might be in like middle-class White England. Might be very good.

AB: Because the parents will come in and get a lot of detail about-?

Jim: Yeah. But then again, whether they are better able to assess White middle-class English kids, using that system, I don’t know, I’ve never done it before.

(Interview with Jim, July 09)

Here the “difficult intake” means that the FSP information cannot be relayed to the parents\(^\text{27}\); on another occasion, Jim told me that he found parents evening difficult because the parents “don’t have a clue... the first few I explain it all but after a few I think fuck it” (Fieldnotes, April). Thus the “difficult intake” intersects with the assessment process to create discourses which constitute EAL parents as inappropriate users of the education system, unable to take an interest in their child. This means that, unlike in “middle-class White England”, the FSP fails to fulfil its stated aim of informing parents about children’s progress. These comments also show that Jim, like Lynn, has doubts about the appropriateness of the FSP system for his class.

This widespread idea that the Gatehouse children are unusually “difficult” contributes further to frustration with the Local Authority (LA). For instance, the LA are seen by Lynn as unresponsive to the particular demands of the school:

“I think it’s very difficult ’cause another thing that was brought up last year was that you know our scores weren’t appropriate [...] this is the

\(^{27}\) It was not clear why translators were not used for parents’ evenings at Gatehouse; this is common practice in other primary schools in the area.
issue we have as a school because of it being a deprived neighbourhood and this is the kind of intake we have and this is the kind of needs we need to meet for the children that we have, and they said of course you need to meet the needs of your children, not the needs of a child based on EYFS ‘cause all those children don’t come in at that level, so it was obviously brought up well if we’re not doing appropriate things or we’re not doing everything that we should, could you please show me a school in [LA] that has a similar ethnic make-up, well not an ethnic make-up as such but a similar kind of level of intake as we do and same kind of constraints as we do and that are doing it correctly? Who is doing it correctly? What’s the right way to do it, you know? Um, and there was none, nobody.” (Lynn, November 08)

These comments about the exceptionalism of Gatehouse and the inappropriateness of the FSP, like Jim’s argument about national averages being irrelevant, position these children as Other, and their educational attainment as inevitably lower than ‘normal’ children. We see through all these comments how this discourse removes the possibility of education success from these children, while appearing to be sympathetic to their “needs”.

**The operation of raced discourses in the classroom**

In this section I consider how the “difficult intake” discourse was manifested, particularly in relation to race, in these classrooms. I think it is important to consider the explicit as well as the implicit talk about race in Reception, because it reveals the complexity of a situation where children as simultaneously constituted as the deficient Other and as exotic. As Said describes in Orientalism (Said, 1978), these non-Western children are constituted as removed from Western culture and as inevitably deficient, but also as exciting and interesting.

The issue of race or ethnic group was not a common feature of talk among the adults in the research classrooms, but the few occasions where it was discussed revealed that ethnic groups were largely seen as based on nationalities, rather than regions. There was, however, still an acute awareness of skin colour and other aspects of appearance, among both the adults and the children. The teachers were also conscious of the religion of the children and adapted their practices to suit their perception of Muslim sensibilities. Implicit within all of these discussions was a
celebration of the exotic, for example in an emphasis on the ‘mixedness’ of the children, and in the sometimes clumsy attempts to be sympathetic to an ‘unusual’ cohort of children.

The public presentation of ethnic groups

There were some physical demonstrations of the importance of ethnic groups in the classrooms. At St Mary’s this was not very obvious: the mixed makeup of the class was shown more through signs in different languages and the choice of religious books and objects. There were several books about Muslim practices such as wearing hijab in the class library, and the crucifix in the classroom was a multicoloured painted cross, labelled in Spanish, with a Black Jesus. However, there was no listing of the children’s nationalities, and their different backgrounds were rarely discussed by the staff. The only information I was able to collect on ethnic groups came from an official class listing. This is not to say, however that Paul was not acutely aware of the multicultural nature of his class; as discussed in the previous chapter, he told me on my first observation visit that the children came from “who knows where”. Later in the year, when talking about children’s experiences of nursery, he again emphasised the mixed backgrounds of his pupils when he told me they came from “their mother’s side, from nursery, from another country” (Fieldnotes, September).

At Gatehouse, there was a far more obvious demonstration of difference: a display which identified which country each child’s family came from was prominent, stretched through one classroom on a string. Children’s photos were hung under a series of national flags, making clear the larger or smaller groups and the physical similarities of the children from each country. Some of the staff (Liz, the other class teacher, and two of the TAs) were also displayed, under ‘Great Britain’. This display served to mark out who was like the teachers, and who was not. It also made very obvious those children who came from larger local populations (Kosovan, Bangladeshi) and those who were the only child from that group (such as one Somali girl, and one South Korean girl). This attempt at recognition of the children’s home cultures attempted to make all of the nations equal (Great Britain was not the first one of the display) but ignored the imbalance of power within the classroom and
within society; by displaying the small number of White children next to the staff it reinforced their special position as members of the majority group, even in a situation where Whiteness was in the minority. The display ignored the fact that the school is actually located in one of the countries, and that most of the children were born in Great Britain: listing it as just another country meant that many more complex issues were ignored. Despite its physical prominence, the display did not seem to be a significant part of classroom life - during my time at Gatehouse I did not hear any discussion with the children about the display, and some new children were not added to it. Nonetheless, this token recognition of diversity, a gesture towards ‘multiculturalism’, remained a potent signifier of the ethnically mixed class and the significance of Whiteness. Both the obviousness of the Gatehouse approach to race/nationality and the disregard shown at St Mary’s (the “who knows where” approach) are problematic.

Ideas about nationality in the classroom

At Gatehouse, practices in the classroom also served to solidify ideas which linked certain characteristics to particular nationalities. A game played at Gatehouse, for example, linked stereotypical ideas about Mexican and French identities with these nationalities:

After the register, the children do exercises; today they play the Beans game. Jim calls out different types of beans and there is an action for each, e.g. chilli beans involves pretending you are cold; runner beans involves running on the spot. The children seem familiar with the actions and types of beans, but two actions surprise me: “Mexican jumping beans” involves jumping up and down while doing a taking off your hat action and shouting “Ariba, Ariba!”. Then Susan says to Jim “Do we not do the French bean – is it not politically correct?”. Jim replies “We’re going to do it in a minute”. “French beans” means standing like a teapot with a floppy hand, and saying “Oh la la” in an exaggerated camp accent. It appears to be a strange conflation of Frenchness and homosexuality. (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, September)
This episode featured a humorous game which is often played in primary schools\textsuperscript{28}. However, the connections made between different nationalities and particular actions demonstrated a lack of regard for the operation of stereotypical ideas about particular nationalities. The conflation of Frenchness with an exaggerated femininity and/or homosexuality reflects crude ideas of effeminate French men, and is particularly concerning given the lack of any other ideas about being French in the classroom (there were no French-speaking children in this class) and the children's likely lack of familiarity with real French people. The fact that Susan recognises this action is not "politically correct" and Jim does it anyway suggests that the teachers are not unaware of the dubious nature of this action in the game, but disregard this concern because the action is fun. The confusing gender implications of the "French beans" actions were apparent when, on another occasion that this game was played, one boy questioned whether he should be saying "Ooh la la":

They play the Beans game. After French beans, Ismail says "Ooh la la is for girls". Jim says "No, it's for boys as well. It's like some people say pink is for girls, but Rashid in Year 1 loves pink, and that doesn't make him funny. I've got a pink stripe in my shirt and I'm a man." (Fieldnotes, December)

What is interesting is how, when Jim attempts to challenge stereotypes, he moves quickly to another example, and does not consider the confusion created over whether being French means being a girl, or why Ismail should think a particular saying is "for girls". Simply saying "it's for boys as well" ignores the complicated messages given to the children by the "French beans" action. The use of nationalities in this game suggests to the children that national identities can be linked to stereotypes; this is a concerning assumption given the strong links made between the children (most of whom were born in London) and their families' nationalities.

\textit{The exotic 'mixture'}

At Gatehouse the heterogeneity of the pupils seemed to be seen as important feature of the class. When we were discussing the new January children, Jim said to me "We've got such a range. We've got kids from Korea, Cambodia, Ecuador. We're

\textsuperscript{28} I have seen this game played with many ages of children at different primary schools, with variations in the actions. At St Mary's they played the same game, but the action for 'French Beans' was saying 'Bonjour' to another child.
going to have to make new flags. Flags we've never made before" (Fieldnotes, December). Here Jim is engaging with discourses of the exotic Other (Donald and Rattansi, 1992; Said, 1978), and with Leonardo and Hunter's imagining of the inner city as an exciting, cosmopolitan place (2009). The growing number of different flags that are needed to demonstrate the children's families’ origins is cited as evidence of the international nature of the class; Jim appears to be citing a 'melting pot' discourse, where diversity is valued. This focus on the “range” of children was also present when I discussed the children’s final results with Jim (using a copy of the final scores). When asked about the results, he came up with the issue of different groups without prompting, and focused on the variety of different ethnic groups:

[We have just been discussing gender differences in the scores]

AB: What about between the different kind of...

Jim: Ethnic groups?

AB: Ethnic groups [agreeing]

Jim: Well top is Afghan, Pashto speaking; [pointing in turn down the list] Lebanese Arabic; Kosovan; er... Kuwaiti; and then we've got two Afghans; Kosovan; Bangladeshi; ... er, I'm not sure where Jakira's from, the Congo I think, I can't remember, I feel bad about that; and then Kosovan; Lebanese, Kosovan, Bangladeshi; er, Lebanese, Moroccan, Moroccan; Scottish [laughing]; er, Bangladeshi, Afghan, Iraqi, Bangladeshi; Iraqi, Afghan, Afghan; Zafir, Iraqi I think; and Bangladeshi so a real mix.

(Interview with Jim, July 09)

Jim cannot see any distinct features because he is focused on the detail and variety of the children’s different ethnic groups (which he seems to pride himself on knowing29). He makes a joke about Bethany’s identity, describing her as Scottish instead of British, again focusing on the detail rather than the reality of the very different position of White people in society. The variety of different ethnic identities

29 It is interesting to note, in passing, that the one ethnic group that Jim is unsure of is that of Jakira, the only Black girl in the class. Her 'Black' identity is perhaps adequate for Jim's purposes of 'knowing' her.
in Jim’s class seem to obfuscate any concern for which groups do particularly well or poorly in the assessment; there is just “a real mix”.

This “mix” was at times rendered very obvious within the classroom; it appeared to sometimes be a source of amusement, or at least irony, for the adults that most of the children looked “Asian”; for example:

The class is playing the “Who’s missing?” game – one child goes out the class, and another hides and the returning child has to work out who is missing. When Zafir can’t work out who is gone, Lynn gives him clues by asking the other children “What colour is her hair?”. She then says, partly to me, “Not that that really makes helps in here, unfortunately.” The children say “a little bit brown”. Lynn says to them “It doesn’t really help does it?”. (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, June)

These comments to both me and the children, while focused on the fact that most of the children had the same hair colour, served to emphasise the high proportion of minoritised pupils in the class. There was also an implicit slight to the children when Lynn says “unfortunately”, as if she would prefer a range of hair colours. At this moment, the children are homogenous in their Otherness, and the difference between this and a White class (where, it seems to be assumed, hair colours would vary widely) is reinforced.

Despite this public comment on the physical similarity of many of the children, there was one comment, made by a (White) TA, that showed me how some of the staff, at least, were keenly aware of who was White and who was not:

I ask the TA, Laura, about the children’s names and say I mix up Wafia and Wafeeqa, who have similar names. Laura says to me “It’s easy, Wafeeqa is brown (she points to her face) and Wafia is White”. (Fieldnotes, May)

This comment revealed that Laura has a very clear idea about who was White and who was not (whereas I, without the flag display, was not always sure where children came from). My comment had been based purely on mixing up their similar names, not knowing who was who, but Laura thought this confusion was silly since the children looked so different (Wafeeqa was Bangladeshi, and Wafia was Kosovan). That this was the most obvious way to distinguish between them (and that Wafeeqa
is nothing more specific than “brown”) suggests that Laura had quite a clear division in her mind between the White children (including, interestingly, the Kosovan pupils) and the other “brown” children.

Religion

Issues of religion took very different forms at the two schools, because at St Mary’s there were more frequent RE lessons and the school church status made religion more of an everyday issue (children attended assembly every day, often led by a vicar, for example, while there was no assembly for Reception children at Gatehouse). However, at both schools, there was an awareness of the religions of the children, which again served to render them Other to an external White/Christian Norm. At Gatehouse, this took the form of being very conscious of the (assumed) Islamic faith of most of the pupils. This faith was seen in simple terms, and as a homogenous entity. There were several incidents in the classroom which appeared to be attempted accommodations to the Muslim pupils, and incidents that showed the teachers’ ideas about Islam:

I have a look at this week’s group reading book, which is ‘My dad’. On each page there is a sentence beginning “My dad likes...”; the things Dad likes include his dog and work. It seems very dated and turns out to be first published in 1978. One the back it says it is “designed with the urban child in mind”. A page saying “My dad likes his beer” has been glued shut. Susan explains to me “Jim thought it wouldn’t be appropriate for Muslim children”. (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, September)

We discuss the dates for Eid and confusion over them with Lynn. There is a general lack of sympathy for children missing school. (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, September)

There is a display on the wall of two life-size painted children, in school uniform but with no facial features. The boy has no hair but the girl has a grey hijab. I notice only one girl in the class is wearing hijab. (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, October)

The children are learning the ‘h’ sound; one of the pictures used is a hamburger. Jim reassures the children that a hamburger has no ham in it. (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, October)

At lunchtime, I ask if they have a Christmas play. Jim says they have a singalong with nursery, but they are not allowed to mention anything to do with Christianity because the parents are unhappy with this, so they
don’t mention it. But, he says, they did all about Diwali – the parents don’t mind that/don’t understand. (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, November)

Jim comments on what he calls an “interesting bag” brought in by a child from home – it is a plastic bag from an off licence. (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, May)

From these incidents we can see how the teachers’ views about what was involved in being a Muslim (not eating ham, girls wearing hijab, missing school for Eid, not drinking alcohol) affect practices in the classroom and comments to the children. All of this seems to be tinged with a perception of Muslim parents and children as inflexible, and easily alarmed: the parents are described as unhappy about calling it a ‘Christmas’ play, and the children have to be physically prevented from reading a page with the word ‘beer’ on it. However, Lynn’s unsympathetic comments about Eid suggest that these accommodations are not borne out of respect, but a desire to avoid unnecessary criticism from parents. When I asked Jim about gluing the page shut in the ‘My Dad’ book during an interview, he became quite embarrassed and awkward, and it was clear this was an issue he recognised as controversial:

AB: I thought it was interesting how you, with the page in that ‘My Dad’ book had stuck the beer -

Jim: Yes and that’s because of, I did that because of the general religion within the school.

AB: Because you thought it would be -

Jim: I thought it would be inappropriate, just because I’d then have to go into explaining what beer was [seems a bit cagey]

AB: So more trouble than it’s worth?

Jim: Yeah.

AB: I just wondered. I suppose it also says something about gender, I suppose as well.

Jim: Yeah, and it’s a bit of an old notion, I mean it would have been a really funny page back in the early 80s, but it’s not that relevant for the kids [seems defensive].
AB: No, no [trying to agree to stop the difficult atmosphere]. It’s not that it’s a big deal.

Jim: No, no, but it is a big deal.

AB: I just noticed it and I thought, I wonder if that’s - and Susan said that you thought maybe it wouldn’t be appropriate and I connected it with the fact that most of the children are Muslim and-

Jim: Yes, but it is a big question, should I have? We’re an English school and ...

AB: Yeah [sceptically, as if not sure]. But as you say it’s...

Jim: I’m not sure it’s actually appropriate, even if it’s appropriate for my five-year-old niece, if I’d ... you know. It’s not necessary.

(Interview with Jim, September 08)

In this exchange it seems that Jim recognises the complicated issues involved in changing a book because of the Muslim children, but is also quite defensive about the practice. He recognises it is “a big question” Jim’s complex position on this issue and his awkwardness in discussing it suggest that he is concerned not to appear to be making too many accommodations to the Muslim pupils, or appear to be censoring the book; perhaps he fears this will be a major part of my research.

At St Mary’s there were similar accommodations to the Muslim religion of some of the pupils in the class (fewer than at Gatehouse), including a lesson based on a poem called ‘Eid is coming’. However, as it was a Church of England school, most of the RE lessons were based on bible stories and Christian festivals. This led to some confusion at times between religions: Paul at one point described praying as something directed at “God, Jesus, Allah, Diwali” and later explained he used the term “Diwali” even though it is a Hindu festival so that the children connected up the comment with some previous work on the subject.

The different religions of the children formed an important part of the constitution of their Otherness, particularly for the Muslim children. There was very little discussion
of the religion of the White or Black pupils – it seemed to be assumed at both schools that these children would be Christian, if they were religious at all. In this incident at Gatehouse, certain assumptions about White pupils and Christianity were revealed:

Phonics lesson on ‘ch’ sound with Susan: she uses a picture of a church from the book. She says “Some people might know this word”. Lana puts up her hand and says “Go to pray”. Susan says “Yes, like a mosque but it’s not a mosque. Usually you’re a Muslim if you go to a mosque, you’re usually a Christian if you go to this place. I sometime go there to pray”. No one answers at all. Susan says to me “This is very interesting, don’t you think?”. I nod. Susan says to the one White British child in the class “Ashlee, I think you might know”. Ashlee doesn’t know so Susan explains. (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, March)

Susan sees the children’s lack of knowledge about churches as “interesting”; as already discussed, the children’s difference from ‘normal’ pupils seemed to be a source of interest for the teachers. Susan’s targeting of Ashlee to answer about the church seems to be based on her Whiteness, given that there was a church nearby which all the children would have seen. Susan’s identification with the building as somewhere she goes to pray further reinforces the Whiteness of the teachers, and the privileged position the White British children have as the norm within society, even if they are in the minority in the class.

Religion seemed to be an important issue in both schools, and a significant part of what made the classes unusual and interesting. The teachers seemed to be torn between a desire to make concessions to the Muslim pupils and parents, and an underlying scepticism about and stereotypical view of the Islamic faith. As several researchers have argued, young Muslim men have become stereotyped as problematic in recent years, due to fears about Islamic extremism following the terrorist attacks of September 2001 and July 2005 and the ‘race riots’ of 2001 (Alexander, 2004; Archer, 2003; Shain, 2010). While the children in these classes were perhaps too young to be tinged with much of these damaging discourses, I suspect that the “interest” which the Gatehouse teachers showed in their majority Muslim class was partly due to an increased focus on Islamic communities in the press and popular debate in recent years. The presence of children from Iraq and Afghanistan, countries where British troops were at the time deployed against
Muslim groups, further emphasised international issues around Islam in the classroom. Although the different nationalities of the children were seen as exotic, it seemed that the Muslim religion of the children was not; instead, the ‘backwardness’ of Islam was cited in comments about how it restricted behaviour (drinking alcohol, eating ham). This is perhaps due to popular discourses which have positioned Islam as a socially conservative and potentially dangerous faith. However, the idea of Islam as ‘backward’ and repressive is also consistent with Said’s argument that in Orientalist discourses the exotic and the uncivilised cannot be separated (Said, 1978). Prevailing discourses constitute ‘good’ Muslim subjectivities as passive and Westernised, and it was this particular element of the minoritised children’s identities that seemed to be regulated more strictly than others. Youdell writes, in her research on a ‘multicultural day’ at a multi-ethnic school in Sydney where White teachers patrolled the grounds:

In post 9/11 western contexts, perhaps this pluralism and policing are reconciled in the subjectivation of the good teacher and good citizen who celebrates diversity as long as it remains minoritized, marginalized and willing to be (impossibly) Westernized (Youdell, 2006c:524)

This balancing act is seen in the discussions of the ‘Christmas’ play and the ‘beer’ page of the reading book. The teachers are willing to made accommodations to ‘minority issues’, as long as they remain positioned as the minority and are subject to Western/White/majority regulation. As discussed in the next chapter, popular discourses about Islamic communities in the UK affected ideas about the kind of pupils Muslim children could be, particularly in relation to their gendered identities.

Language

As with issues of religion, there were several practices in the classrooms which were based upon the large number of children learning English as an additional language (EAL). These included signs in many languages, opportunities to use home languages in songs and games, discussions of particular words in home languages, and writing in different scripts on posters and displays. Some of these practices, at times, served to mark certain children out as different, because they spoke English at home, or because their home languages seemed more valued than others. Again, the use of
foreign languages in the class seemed to be both a sympathetic accommodation to the particular needs of the children, and a celebration of the “mix” of ethnic groups which marked the teachers out as having a particularly unusual intake of pupils.

At Gatehouse, children who spoke English at home were few in number and seen as particularly helpful. Jim had told me at our first meeting about how useful it was to have some models of English among the children, and how useful these children were because they could be relied upon to answer questions. This was also apparent in the classroom, for example in this lesson on spring where the twins Ashlee and April were the only White British, first language English-speakers:

Susan is talking about what season it is. She says “Spr, spr, spr ... does anyone know, Ashlee?”. Ashlee answers “spring”. Later Susan asks what a baby horse is called. She asks Umran as he has his hand up but he doesn’t know, and then she asks April even though she doesn’t have her hand up. April doesn’t know either. In the next part of the lesson Ashlee corrects Carl when he talks about a picture – she says “Geese, not ducks!”.

(Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, March)

Here we see how, in a lesson which is based on many culturally-specific English words, Susan quickly tries to use Ashlee and April’s vocabulary to answer the questions. Their assumed wider grasp of English is also made obvious by Ashlee’s correction of another pupil’s word; Susan’s targeted questions perhaps gave Ashlee the confidence to correct Carl about the geese. However, given that there were several pupils who spoke English at home (such as Jakira) and who spoke English enough at home that they were all but fluent (such as Liri, Khadija and Farah), the use of Ashlee and April to provide vocabulary seems to be based as much on perceptions of their cultural background as their language. These two White girls, as discussed further in the following chapter, were seen as the White pupils with ‘positive’ home backgrounds. As with the comments about the church picture, Susan assumes (despite having no evidence and the school’s urban location) that these White girls will have had more experience of baby horses than the other pupils. Simplistic assumptions about the richness of children’s home lives are hidden beneath practices which appear, at first, to be based on language. These practices also have a dividing effect: in directing these questions specifically at Ashlee and
April, Susan constitutes them as a class and racial Norm to the rest of the children’s Other. Whiteness and middle-classness are again made central and desirable.

Another incident at Gatehouse involving a celebration of different languages also showed how different languages could be constituted as exotic:

Jim and the class play a game involving counting to ten in different languages, and the rest of the class repeating after. Jim does English, Spanish, French, “Jim language” (made up sounds), Japanese, and Arabic. Then Khadija does it in Pashto. I see that Hafsa is desperate to say it in her language (Somali). Iryna also has her hand up (Albanian). Several other children get to lead the class in made up versions of 1-10. Zafir does a made up one with lots of Arabic sounds. Jim says “I really like that noise you make”, referring to a sort of rolled ‘r’ sound, and says how he can’t do it very well. The children all do it, and Jim says “Lots of children can make that noise!” and looks at me pointedly. (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, July)

On this and several other occasions Jim seemed to be particularly interested in the Pashto language, perhaps because of its unusual script or because there were increasing numbers of children from Afghanistan in the school. Jim’s comments on the rolled ‘r’ sound that Zafir uses demonstrate that many of the children speak Arabic, or similarly pronounced languages. His comment that he cannot do it also serves to make the children seem exotic, and the fact that he looked at me pointedly when commenting on how “lots of children can make that noise”, suggests that he wanted to make a point about the high proportion on EAL pupils, and the unusual sounds of the language they speak.

As we have seen through these examples of how race operates in the classroom, the minoritised children are constituted repeatedly as Other, and also as exotic. The teachers engage with Orientalism (Said, 1978), a discourse of the exotic Other where all other cultures are seen similar to each other and also as distant from and inferior to ‘Western’ culture. These children are symbols of an exciting ‘international’ city, but they also remain limited by their status as an ‘internal colony’ (Leonardo and Hunter, 2009), still seen as strange and foreign. All of these discourses serve to distance these children from the desirable Norm, and from positions where educational success is intelligible or seen as authentic. Before I turn to how these
discourses work to constitute individual pupils as different types of learners in the next chapter, it is necessary to consider the operation of gender discourses within these classrooms, and how they relate to the “difficult intake”.

**Gender in the Reception classroom**

In these Reception classes, the teachers were keen to discuss gender, to use it to organise their classrooms, and to base assumptions about the children on their gender. This was reinforced by differences in uniform and which toilets the children went to, and official listings in the class register. Nayak and Kehily argue that ‘[a]t an ontological level, the processes of schooling assume the presence of sex categories as known and knowable’; gender is a ‘comfort zone’ in schools, ‘a settled certainty of the educative experience’ (2006:470). These categories provide ‘an unassailable presence, a constant’, they argue, ‘amidst the turmoil of the reform and new initiatives’ (2006:470). For these Reception teachers, gender had a similar comforting function: it was a difference that was acceptable to talk about, due to its official status and the long history of scientific study into the different ways in which boys and girls learn (part of the development discourse). It also helped to explain processes in the classroom which the teachers felt uncomfortable about, such as the boys at St Mary’s who played with the train set all day every day. In Paul’s explanation, gender differences provided further evidence of the distance between official advice and reality (advice which, he argued, along with current research, sought to deny that boys and girls learnt differently). Gender appeared to be a ‘safe’ difference to discuss, less likely to be seen as indicating prejudice or snobbishness, as was perhaps the risk when discussing race or class with a researcher (though this did not seem to restrict what the teachers were prepared to say, as shown by the data throughout).

Given previous research on boys as ideal rational subjects (Walkerdine, 1990), the characteristics associated with an good learner might seem more associated with boys than girls in Reception. Furthermore, the idea that girls are simply ‘plodding’ hard workers while boys are inherently more inspired (Francis and Skelton, 2005)
might suggest that boys are more likely to be constituted as authentic learners with innate skills. However, I would argue that these discourses do not operate in such simple ways in these classrooms, not least because gender discourses intersect with race and class in complex ways. The discourse of rationality does, I would argue, have an impact in that boys are still constituted as better at subjects such as maths and science. This discourse renders the constitution of some boys as ‘intelligent’ recognisable, and allows authentic good learner status to be viable for some boys. However, I would argue that boys are not generally more likely to be constituted through classroom discourses and practices as ‘good’ learners, because this subjectivity requires not only rationality, but also flexibility, passivity, and conscientiousness, all of which were discussed in relation to girls.

Essentialist notions of how boys and girls learnt informed this distinction between girls as good learners and boys as ‘flawed consumers’ (Bauman, 2005):

AB: And do you notice differences between boys and girls?

Paul: I basically don’t, in this class. I’ve got very capable boys, and I’ve got very capable girls, and I’ve got very developmentally behind sort of boys, not behind but at the level of development they’re at, you know. Similarly with the girls, you know, in here, it’s irrelevant. And I think it’s because partly it’s play-based and the boys get a chance – I try to put the literacy and the numeracy into what they like to [...] it’s very, very clear that boys are different from girls in their play ... it’s really clear [...] boys like big movements [does big movements with arms], they like cars going round, they like trains going round, they like anything going around, so if you introduce big movements into their play, and introduce numbers, introduce the words, introduce anything, but they can do all the bouncing around, while you’re working with them, they take it on. You try to do what you would do, more girl-type stuff, they won’t, they don’t want to be there.

Paul’s describes himself as ‘genderblind’, as it were, and yet describes how he provides different activities for boys and girls based on simplistic ideas about how they learn. His description of how he manages to fit in the literacy and numeracy around what the boys like suggests that boys are inherently less likely to
independently choose these high status forms of learning, and need further encouragement in order to move them away from “anything going around”. Thus boys are rendered less likely to be authentic good learners who display the entrepreneurial spirit of seeking out and joining in with a range of learning activities. Like other ‘problem groups’ like EAL and SEN children, they need to be provided for separately. This is a discourse which is increasingly apparent in policy, and indeed ‘boys’ are listed as one of the groups requiring additional support in the FSP handbook (QCA, 2008a).

Boys were also distanced from good learner identities by discussions of their behaviour, which was often seen as not submissive enough (or not at the right times). This is in keeping with long standing ideas about boys as ‘naughty’ in school, which have traditionally run alongside the idea that boys are more intelligent. In this example from an FSP meeting with Kelly, Paul engages with both of these ideas:

Paul and Kelly look at a group observation about some children using a programmable toy. He says “Do one [a label] for Dylan, with the language - it’s predicting, estimating, it’s thinking skills, quite advanced. Some of the boys are good at that. Although their behaviour is hellish, they are good at that actually. This sex differences is interesting. They do want to do different things, and their interest comes from ease. They just learn differently. It’s so clear, I don’t know why there’s even any question about it. It’s just obvious.” (Fieldnotes, February)

In these comments we see how discourses of male rationality make Dylan’s success in using technology intelligible, but this still makes sense alongside the boys’ “hellish” behaviour. Paul’s implicit surprise at this success suggests that, in general, boys are seen as incompatible with good learner identities. I would argue that these traditional discourses which, in the past may have worked to position boys as good learners but not good students, work in this situation, where ‘learning’ has a wider remit, to distance boys from being good learners. The specific notion of the learner that operated within these classrooms appeared to value the reliable work of girls, who produce and display a range of learning, over moments of brilliance; after all, consistent good work is more useful in the FSP than infrequent achievements in a few areas.
At Gatehouse, Jim talked explicitly about what the FSP valued and how this related to boys’ and girls’ characteristics:

"Generally speaking girls seem to be higher [...] But I think that’s because girls are more interested in literacy and reading, than boys. Boys are more interested in riding [bikes], playing football, fighting, building stuff. Girls are more interested in sitting down and making, and talking, and reading, and if you’re more interested in reading and talking, then you’re going to do well in literacy and that’s where you score the most points.” (Jim, July 09)

Jim’s explanation of the gendered nature of high and low status and acceptable and unacceptable activities has wider implications than simply getting the most points. It shows how boys are constituted as not only failing to engage in the kind of activities that are important in being a learner (including both passive “sitting down” and more active “reading and talking”) but also as doing things which are anathema to the socially adept learner, such as fighting. Furthermore, the boys’ activities he lists are all physical rather than mental pursuits, further distancing them from ideas of ‘high ability’ learners. This is linked to a number of discourses, such as ‘developmental’ explanations about boys talking later than girls, boys being less interested in books (Moss, 2007), and to wider ideas about men as generally more physically competent (‘you throw like a girl’). In Reception, where physical activity is included only within parts of one of the scales of the FSP\(^{30}\), being physical is only valued at particular times and particular ways, not in general. The idea that boys are only interested in these lower status activities means that they have chosen badly.

In arguing that boys are no longer associated with being a good learner, I am not suggesting that the discourses surrounding what boys are like has changed dramatically (although policy discourses about ‘failing boys’ have probably eased this transition by making it intelligible to talk about boys as bad learners); instead I am arguing that what it means to be a good learner is different in Reception. In particular the need to be a good ‘all rounder’, an idea associated with girls more than boys, has worked to place girls as the vehicles of educational success. The idea that boys may

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\(^{30}\) The ‘Physical Development’ scale includes points about fine motor skills such as holding a pencil correctly as well as gross motor skills such as running or jumping.
be ‘gifted’ remains, particularly in maths and science, but this is irrelevant if boys score badly on other areas. At St Mary’s, where Paul talked about the difficulties he faced with boys, one boy (Ryan) was constituted as high ability in maths, and scored the only nine that was awarded in the class for the Shape, Space and Measure maths scale. This was completely intelligible within the discourse of boys as good at maths and more specifically as better able to cope with spatiality (Francis and Skelton, 2005:81). However, his scores for the other areas varied, and his lowest score was six for the writing scale. In contrast, all of the five top scoring girls in the class scored either seven or eight on every scale, but scored no nines at all. The high-attaining girls were constituted as good all-round learners: they were able to score highly on the ‘boy’ areas such as maths scales and physical development as well as on the emotional and physical scales.

This leads me to the other impact of this specific notion of what it means to be a learner: that girls are completely intelligible as ‘good’ learners. They are the rational choosers who select the high status reading and talking, and they do not need extra provision in order to become engaged with learning. This also makes them more authentic, because being a learner is understood as coming naturally to girls, and the sort of innate brilliance associated with boys is not required. General educational discourses about (White, middle-class) girls’ high attainment in recent years also makes the girls’ success more intelligible. Although much of this discourse has focused on ‘failing boys’ and feminist work has critiqued the construction of this issue as a problem (Epstein et al, 1998), the idea that girls can and will do well at school is now well established in school discourses. This is particularly apparent in early years: every year the FSP data have been collected, girls have outperformed boys overall (DCSF, 2008a; DCSF, 2010). I would argue that the idea of girls as good learners is also connected to the broadening out of discourses of women’s places in the workforce, especially for middle-class women, which provide for different femininities:

[M]iddle class girls and women today are involved in a repositioning and the construction of slightly different variants of femininity which allow the possibility of academic excellence within schooling and leadership within the labour market. They have been more adept than their male peers at
assuming the “gender multiculturalism” which Connell (1995) argues opens up and broadens the possibilities of gender (Reay, 2001:163)

It is intelligible that the ideal learner can be female because the learner must be self-reliant, adaptable, and hardworking, all of which have come to be associated with modern femininity.

Although I am arguing that these overarching gender discourses play a part in the constitution of individual children as learners, I do not wish to overstate the importance of this idea given my commitment to using concepts of intersectionality. As commented on in the quote above, this connection between women and academic excellence has largely involved middle-class women, and popular discourses continue to pathologise working-class women as lazy and uncivilised (Gillborn, 2010). Moreover, the constitution of these children as “difficult” through race, religion and class applies to girls as well as boys. As with all identities, these children are constituted within competing and overlapping discourses regarding all aspects of their identities. Indeed, the minoritised boys in these classrooms are also subject to a complex matrix of discourses regarding their race, urban location, and class positions:

frequently portrayed in “folk devil” terms, being associated with inner city social problems such as crime, deviance and unemployment, the causes of which have been linked to the boys’ problematic subcultures and/or class/ethnic cultures and their “anti-education” masculinities (Archer and Yamashita, 2003:115)

While, as Alexander (2004) has argued, these discourses distance minoritised boys from the ideal learner, it is important to note that this works in more complex ways than the idea of ‘multiple disadvantage’. I am wary of suggesting a simple binary of girls as good/boys as bad; as we shall see in the individual examples below, the constitution of children as different types of learner is rarely simple. It is also worth noting that negative ideas of femininity were still present: Jim made a comment about “a lot of silly girls who like to mess around and chat” in Liz’s class and explained “that’s why her class seem to be a bit lower”. Nonetheless, despite this concern, I think it is important to consider these specific gender discourses because they have an impact on recognisability of some children as good learners.
The Reception teachers’ gender performances

Although it is not the main focus here, I think it is important to discuss briefly the significance of the gender of the main teachers in the study, particularly since much has been made of the importance of male teachers in primary schools in recent years (Francis, 2008). Headlines such as ‘More than a quarter of England’s primary schools have no male teachers’ (Simpson, 2009) and initiatives such as the Teaching Development Agency’s special workshops for prospective male teachers (TDA, 2009) assume that men have a particular role to play in the primary school. This assumption is based on the principle of ‘matching’ genders between teachers and pupils (often framed as providing ‘role models’), and on the idea that men and women teach in different ways (Francis, 2008). The two male teachers in my study are unusual because men make up a very small proportion of early years teachers, and both commented on this during the fieldwork.

During classroom observations I noticed there were moments where the teachers’ masculinities were suddenly made visible. For instance, one afternoon Jim began talking to a (male) carpenter who had arrived in the classroom to build a new desk, and some boys crowded around to see what was happening. Jim talked to them and showed them what the carpenter was doing, and suddenly I was reminded of men discussing DIY; it seemed the boys were being taught how to perform an aspect of heterosexual masculinity. On another occasion, Jim took a group of children outside to dig up some mud for the class wormery and all the volunteers were boys. When he returned and showed the rest of the class, he referred to ‘me and the boys’, and the whole endeavour was constituted as a male act. However, I would argue that it would be simplistic to assess Jim’s performance of the role of teacher as ‘masculinised’ (as Francis suggests in her case studies, 2008). Jim also engaged in more ‘feminine’ tasks with groups of girls, such as looking through catalogues, and talked to all the children about the sewing involved when he made one of the class soft toys. Nonetheless, Jim did make frequent reference to his male status, often when correcting children’s mistakes. For example:
During a free play session, Jim is wearing cardboard hat and a necklace that one of the children has made. He explains “Someone said I look like a princess. I hope I look like a prince”. (Fieldnotes, February)

I understood comments such as these to be part of Jim’s attempts to teach the children about gender-based words; however, they were part of a gender performance. At St Mary’s, Paul engaged in discourses which positioned him as the rational, scientific male in contrast with the emotional, disorganised women in early years: he used an exaggerated high-pitched voice when repeating comments from early years advisors, and described the (female) headteacher of the school in distinctly feminine pejorative terms (such as using insulting names which are only usually applied to women). Thus Paul used his masculinity to emphasise his distance from other early years staff.

However interesting these gender performances are, it is clearly unrealistic to suggest that male teachers will perform masculinity in the classroom in identical ways, any more than women teachers will perform femininity homogenously. Paul uses a particularly feminised construction of early years teachers to criticise them, but of course this cannot be extended to any discussion of male Reception teachers in general. Although I would not dismiss the teachers’ maleness as irrelevant, I would argue that to come to any conclusions as to the effect of their maleness specifically would be to essentialise both male characteristics and male teachers generally.

Furthermore, this study is focused on these two classrooms as communities of practitioners, and the female teachers and teaching assistants are prominent in these. The analysis is focused on systemic rather than individual responses to the FSP, involving the school management and local authority as well as the main class teachers. Responses to the FSP itself were reasonably consistent across the teachers and schools, and their practice is located in wider policy discourses about learning and assessment, and popular discourses about learners. Thus although there may be some gendered aspects to their classroom practices, the data discussed here does not represent a distinctively masculine response to the FSP.
Sexuality

I am conscious that I have not dealt here with the issue of young children's sexualities, despite a growing body of literature on this interesting topic and on how sexuality is intermeshed with gender (Renold, 2005). I am taking as an assumption the presence of compulsory heterosexuality in these classrooms, and thus the need to perform masculinity as heterosexual masculinity, and femininity as heterosexual femininity. The denial of sexuality present in the classroom only emphasised heterosexuality as a taken for granted norm. Moments where the issue of sexuality did arise, such as the French beans incident, involved the implicit Othering of homosexuality.

Recognisability as a learner

In this chapter I have begun to explore how discourses of the learner work with discourses of a “difficult intake” (involving race, class, the inner city, religion and language) to exclude the children at St Mary's and Gatehouse from positions of educational success. These children are so far removed from the implicitly White middle-class ideal learner that the FSP is irrelevant. These deficit discourses have an impact on practices in the classroom: race functions as an absent presence, physically represented through displays but rarely talked about in any depth. At the same time, gender discourses work to position the girls as all-round good learners. All of these discourses have an impact on these Reception classes as a whole. In the following chapter, I consider who is recognisable as a good learner on an individual basis, and the possibilities for minoritised pupils to have positive learner identities.
Chapter 7: Intelligible learner identities

As I have argued, children in these classes were constituted through a complex web of different discourses as far removed from the specific idea of what it means to be a ‘good learner’ in Reception. In this chapter I argue that, nonetheless, on an individual basis some children were constituted as good learners, and this was made possible by the discursive provision of some ‘intelligible space’ where they could be recognisable as ‘good’. I also consider the children’s agency in their constitution as learners, and the importance of performing their learner identities in ways which allowed them to remain recognisable as learners. Being a learner is a performative identity, which must be coherent within established discourses in order to be intelligible (Butler, 1990; Butler, 2004a). Butler’s use of the concepts of intelligibility and recognisability are key in this discussion of learner identities. She has argued that to be non-recognisable as a subject is to fail to be constituted as human at all (2004a). She writes:

What counts as a person? What counts as a coherent gender? ... By what norms am I constrained when I ask what I may become? And what happens when I begin to become that for which there is no place within the given regime of truth? (Butler, 2004b:58)

It is this final question which is of most importance here: what happens when a child becomes something for which there is no place within the regimes of truth relating to their intersectional position? How does this limit who can be recognised as a good learner? As Davies writes: ‘Subjects, and this includes school students, who are constituted as lying outside intelligibility are faced with the constitutive force of a language that grants them no intelligible space’ (Davies, 2006:434). I focus firstly on what happens when children’s identity performances are located outside of intelligibility. Later in the chapter, I also examine how everyday pedagogic and organisational practices produce and maintain children’s identities as learners.
The importance of performance

Discourses operate to limit the ‘intelligible space’ open to children in terms of how they perform their identities and the idea of the ‘good learner’. Minoritised children were more limited in how they could perform their identities while remaining intelligible, as they were bound by complex overlapping discourses, specific to the historical, political and geographical location of the classroom, which rendered all but a few subject positions unrecognisable. I am concerned here with which children’s identities and their performance of these identities allowed them access to inhabit positions as good learners, and which found this position foreclosed to them. Youdell’s (2006c) research in an Australian high school considers the unintelligible nature of positive learner identities for Lebanese and Turkish (known as ‘Arabic’) students:

[A] series of political, educational, popular and (sub)cultural discourses that circulate in this school setting and beyond ... provide the discursive terrain on and through which these students are subjectivated. [...] Lebanese and Turkish students are subjectivated in ways that render apparently incommensurable constitutions of the good-Arabic-student-subject and the bad-Arabic-subject through the citation and inscription of an Orientalism (Said, 1978) reinvigorated by post-9/11 anti-Islamic discourse (Lipman, 2004) (Youdell, 2006c:512)

Although my analysis draws on Youdell’s work on the intelligibility of the good-student-subject, I would argue that the incommensurability of the good ‘Arabic’ student is more complex in the case of the Reception classrooms in my study. In these classrooms the discursive terrain of Orientalism and anti-Islamism is layered over with gendered discourses about Muslim families and discourses of displacement and refugee status regarding children from countries in conflict. The political and international context eight years after 9/11 includes competing discourses about recovery, withdrawal, and ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslim states, which have an impact on the possible subject positions of ‘Arabic’ pupils. The ‘reinvigoration’ of Orientalism in the immediate post-9/11 years\(^3\) has given way to longer-term fears about global

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\(^3\) Youdell’s research was conducted in December 2001.
radicalisation, the stability of Muslim states such as Iran, and the danger of so-called 'home-grown' terrorists (Winnett, 2008). I begin with a discussion of how some Muslim girls at Gatehouse were constituted as ‘good’ learners.

**Muslim girls as ‘good learners’**

On my first visit to Gatehouse, Jim had made some comments about how useful it had been to have some English-speaking girls in his class the year before. During the year of observation, it became clear that a group of girls - Farah, Khadija, Maira and Anna - were similarly “useful” to Jim, and were constituted as good learners in this classroom. These girls came, respectively, first, fourth, fifth and sixth of the girls in the class on the FSP. Ashlee, who came second, and Liri, who came third, are discussed in detail separately below. These four girls were all Muslim; Anna was Kosovan while the other three were Afghan. All had reasonable fluency in English, and it is likely that, as in the previous class, this was helpful in the classroom. The ‘conditions of possibility’ for these girls were demarcated by complex web of discourses of Muslim femininity; fortunately for them, these discourses did not foreclose the possibility of academic success. The following examples show how these girls’ good learner status was manifested in the classroom; several extracts are presented in order to emphasise the small, everyday ways in which these children’s subject positions were maintained:

Anna is chosen by another teacher as the line leader; Jim says “It’s a good choice, she’ll be making sure we all do the right thing.” (Fieldnotes, September)

Jim writes 10 wrong as 01 on the board, but the children say it is right. He asks Maira, she chooses 10. Jim says “Maira is right”; he uses her to prove to others that he is right. (Fieldnotes, November)

In free play time, Farah appears quiet, studious, and is often alone. When Jim is reading a book, Farah calls out “It always rhymes”. Jim says “Yes, that’s right Farah, it always rhymes”. He is impressed. (Fieldnotes, January)

Khadija is picked as an “extra special helper” – Jim says this person has “got to be SO good”. Khadija laughs when she realises she has forgotten to put up her name card. Jim laughs too; they seem to have a special bond. (Fieldnotes, February)
The class are playing a game. Susan asks the class about the song for the game. Anna explains it all and then gets to be first “because you’ve explained it so well”. (Fieldnotes, March)

The class have been on a trip, and Jim is grumpy because they didn’t say thank you for the trip and going to the park; Maira is worried about Jim being grumpy. He says to her “I’m not worried about you saying thank you, don’t worry Maira”. Seems she isn’t at fault. (Fieldnotes, March)

Jim is reading a story about some naughty rabbits. When he reaches a line which says one ‘piddled’ on the carpet, he pauses and looks mock shocked. Farah reads out ‘piddled’; he says “Say that again” and she repeats. He says to everyone “It’s just frustrating when you’ve got someone who’s Level 20 and you’re trying not to read something but someone can read it”; he says this jokingly and fondly. When Jim picks up the next story, he says “And who wrote this story?” as a rhetorical question as it is the same as another book; Farah immediately reads “Eric Carle” as if it was a genuine question. The children don’t want any of the books Jim chooses so he gets Khalid and Farah to choose one. Khalid picks the ‘Bottoms up’ book which makes them all giggle. Jim reads it, replacing words that are too rude, but Farah continues to correct him, reading out the rude words, but not loudly. (Fieldnotes, June)

These examples show how Anna, Maira, Khadija and Farah gained access to and reinscribed their positions as good learners. Jim treated these girls differently from other children: he made jokes with them, had quiet chats, and praised them more in whole class groups. They were given positions of responsibility more often, and were asked to answer questions more than other children. Their ‘high ability’ was made obvious within the classroom through Jim’s displays of shock at their achievements. These girls were not ideal learners - the ideal is never achievable, much like gender performatives are never complete but remain ‘illusions of substance’ (Butler, 1990:146) - but they were as close as Jim had.

These girls’ identities within the class were also maintained by the teachers’ ‘knowledge’ of the children, which affected how their behaviour was perceived. For example, these girls were seen as good when they called out, and were not reprimanded, because what they said was usually helpful or correct. When Farah (in the last quote above) reads out the rude words in the book, it is not seen as questioning Jim’s authority, but as evidence of how well she can read. Thus once the
learner identity is established and the child is ‘known’, the child’s behaviour is seen in this light, as further evidence of their good learner status.

These girls’ good learner identities were made possible and recognisable because they fitted into a small intelligible space created by discourses linked with Asian and Muslim girls. Shain’s research has suggested that female Asian pupils are perceived by teachers as passive, timid and shy and are positioned as victims, caught between two worlds (Shain, 2003:123). In this study, I would suggest that these girls were subjectivated through discourses of Islamic gender relations which position Muslim women as compliant and oppressed; this is linked to popular debates about the wearing of the hijab and the veil in recent years (Gereluk, 2008). Simultaneously, however, they were constituted as being good learners as female pupils who were enthusiastic about learning and articulate; thus they combined gendered qualities of being conscientious, obedient and subservient with the other valued aspects of being a learner. Thus they held intelligible subject positions within dominant discourses of Asian femininity as passive, sensible and hardworking; for the Afghan girls, these were further made intelligible given specific discourses relating to ‘good migrants’.

Maira, Khadija and Farah were constituted in a very specific intelligible space as ‘good’ Afghan girl learners. It is only through a quite detailed consideration of their particular ‘diaspora space’ (Brah, 1996) that the discourses which allow for their intelligibility are revealed. Firstly, these girls’ families were described positively in terms of having the right educational values and their fathers as having good jobs; their mothers helped out on school trips. Thus they displayed some of the practices associated with middle-class parenting (Ball, 2003a), unlike the parents discussed in the previous chapter. The positive perceptions of these parents were also linked to discourses of immigration which constitute them as ‘good migrants’ – aspiring, hardworking, and keen to assimilate. This is particularly potent given a policy context

32 Although one of these girls, Anna, was not Asian, I would argue that in a Muslim majority class, her Muslim identity seemed define her; without a stereotype of Kosovan children to fall back on, I suspect that defining the Kosovan children as Muslim becomes the default position for the teachers at Gatehouse.
of ‘contemporary assimilationism’, where ‘integration’ means learning English and contributing to the community (Gillborn, 2008). Furthermore, their particular status as Afghan Muslims has to be seen within the political context of the time: 2008-9 saw an increased number of British forces deaths in Afghanistan and a growing unease about the purpose and effectiveness of military action there (BBC News, 2009a; Loyd, 2009; Reuters, 2009). Thus the issue of Afghanistan was prominent in popular discourse at the time. In the run up to the Afghan elections in August 2009, much of the press coverage focused on an Afghan population who were reluctant to adopt ‘Western’ values of democracy and anti-corruption (Boone and Nasaw, 2009). In contrast, these families had implicitly rejected Islamic extremism and accepted Western values: thus they were constituted sympathetically as ‘good migrants’, models of Westernised, submissive, moderate Islam. Furthermore, their migration from Afghanistan also suggests that they are relatively affluent families with aspirations, and thus close to the more middle-class backgrounds associated in popular discourse with the ‘model minorities’ – Indian and Chinese communities. This class position was reinforced for Khadija in particular by her father’s job at a broadcasting company. Although the teachers at Gatehouse never talked about these identities specifically, at St Mary’s Paul did make some comments which illustrate this ‘good migrant’ discourse:

“In my last school it was a lot of Kurdish children, who’d come from villages, whose parents didn’t know what – they’re really weren’t that interested in education to be honest, and so they did no work with them at home [...] Those children seriously didn’t move the way that some of our Arab-speaking children from Baghdad, whose parents have fled the country but are very highly educated, who can’t speak much English, but they’ve got high education ethic.” (Paul, July 08)

We see how Paul sees greater potential to “move” the children from “Arab” countries; I would argue that the Afghan girls at Gatehouse are constituted through similar discourses as coming from families with the “education ethic”. Paul’s comments also suggest a rural/urban division that could also be applied to migrants from rural Bangladesh and from modern and comparatively ‘Western’ Afghan cities. Here we see the complexity of discourses of class, race and the urban in relation to ‘good migrants’.
Although these girls were still subject to Orientalist/racist discourses as the Other compared to the White middle-class ideal, their status also as Muslim girls allowed for them to be seen as engaging with learning, and well-behaved. Not subject to discourses of Muslim boys as the ‘new folk devils’ and as potential terrorists (Shain, 2010), these girls could provide a model of the kind of submissive, assimilating, liberal and Westernised Islam which is valued in the current policy context. Like the emphasis for working-class children on ‘upward mobility’ in the past (Walkerdine, 2003), these children are constituted as migrants who should be aspiring to higher social status through education; thus their educational success is welcomed by the teachers. These discourses also allow greater proximity to the neoliberal subject of schooling, who takes responsibility for their own learning in a discourse of individuality.

These complex discourses opened up conditions of possibility whereby these girls could be recognisable as good learners. Jim’s descriptions of Khadija reveal the complexity of this position; here we are discussing whether the new January children had been as he expected:

Jim: Khadija’s exactly how I knew she was going to be.

AB: Which is what?

Jim: Which is exactly what Claire [nursery teacher] said. Which is just amazing, kind of, just funny and “how do you know that?” kind of girl. Like knowing who Barack Obama is, and Gordon Brown [fondly]33. And all these other thing which are, and it’s because her dad works at [broadcasting organisation] so he’s kind of, not political, but he obviously talks about stuff at home. So she picks up on it and knows about it, which I think’s just amazing that a four year old... She’s really with it. She’s one of those, the ones I was talking about earlier34, who just, it’s, English-speaking girl,

33 Barack Obama had been elected four months before this interview and Gordon Brown was the Prime Minister.
34 The children Jim was talking about earlier were the useful English-speaking girls who helped everyone along.
where it's not all about hair braids and playing with the skipping rope and that kind of thing, and making up new games. It's about almost like political and, I dunno, just totally different.

Jim describes Khadija as "amazing" and "a slightly different clever". She is constituted through discourses of globalisation as the bilingual international child: she is politically aware and a moderate Muslim (she did not wear hijab) whose family have chosen to live in a Western state rather than an Islamic state. Khadija is a thus a 'good' Muslim, unthreatening and submissive to the demands of living in the UK (as shown by parents teaching her English before she went to school). However, she is still constituted through Orientalist discourses as exotic and interesting, as shown when Jim was very impressed with her writing her name in Pashtu. Youdell argued in her work on Lebanese and Turkish pupils in Australia that 'the "Savage Arab" once in need of taming and Christianizing comes, in contemporary Western discourse, to be in need of westernizing, "democratizing"' (Youdell, 2006c:S21-2). I would argue that in the late 2000s, Afghan children such as Khadija, Farah and Maira come to represent the triumph of this westernizing and democratizing process; successful, international, moderate Muslims fully assimilated into life in Britain. This is a precarious position which requires constant maintenance, however; there is always the risk of being subsumed back into general minority subjecthood through discourses of low attainment, disruptive behaviour and lack of 'ability', and the possibility of good learner, 'high ability' status being withdrawn.

The fragility of minority success

Davies writes 'Teachers, in shaping the conditions of possibility of their students, do not wholly determine who their students are' (2006:430). All of these girls also made use of their discursive agency in performing idealised femininity, in terms of actions and speech. For example, Maira would take work to show Jim, knowing he would be impressed, and Farah frequently took control of the large Whiteboard in the classroom during free play time, which offered a very public opportunity to show off her writing skills. However, Khadija’s deployment of her discursive agency towards the end of the year, which involved some unconscious resistance of her
subjectivation as a passive Muslim girl, moved her beyond recognisability as a good learner.

Firstly, Khadija began to question Jim’s authority within the classroom, and was disobedient:

Everyone is coming to the carpet for the end of the day story. Khadija doesn’t come to the carpet. Jim calls her over. She says “because there are beans everywhere” (these have been used for an activity). He says “I’ll pick them up later”; Khadija replies “No, I’ll pick them up” and carries on. Jim says “We’ve finished now so come and sit down”. He starts to read the story. Five minutes later, Khadija is still tidying – she has ignored Jim. Jim sees her and calls her over “It does make me a little bit cross that you’re not listening. You’ve done a fantastic job but you do need to listen”. Khadija sits down, and doesn’t seem upset by this. (Fieldnotes, May)

Just before lunch: the children are sitting waiting to be chosen to go and wash their hands. Khadija and Jena are running around the carpet while they wait; they don’t seem to care that they will be last. Their behaviour seems very silly – they are giggling and running in circles while everyone else sits still. Lynn says “Khadija and Jena that’s a little bit silly for in here”; she doesn’t seem too cross. They carry on, ignoring Lynn. She then says again, more crossly “Girls, little bit silly”. They are the last ones in. (Fieldnotes, June)

On the carpet, some children are at the front showing their work. Khadija is reprimanded for talking when the speakers have not finished – Lynn says “Khadija, they’re still talking!”. (Fieldnotes, June)

In free play time: Jim is sitting with a group, absorbed in an activity. I am the only other adult in the room. Khadija, Bilqis and Jena have been playing together. Khadija and Bilqis go outside into the corridor, which is forbidden without permission. Jena stays. They giggle outside, and look back in to see if anyone has noticed they have broken the rule. They come back in and look at me guiltily, but they run off giggling. (Fieldnotes, June)

Here we see how Khadija’s actions and words start to push at the boundaries of acceptable learner subjectivities; she is both verbally and physically rejecting the norms of being a ‘good’ learner, and particularly the norms of being a good female Muslim learner. This different ‘identity performance’, is not simply a failure to engage in the kind of ‘identity work’ (Carbado and Gulati, 2000) required for a minoritised child to maintain their positive subject position, but it is proactive step outside of and beyond acceptability. In the following weeks, Khadija’s behaviour
seemed to become more challenging of authority, and the teachers began to speak to her more like the other children who were not understood as good learners. Connolly (1998) found in his study of infant classrooms that girls’ behaviour transgressions tended to be seen more negatively than boys’, while Reay found that girls who appropriated ‘girl power’ were labelled as ‘real bitches’ and ‘a bad influence’ (2001:152). Khadija was similarly subject to regimes of truth which view assertive, challenging girls as inherently problematic. Furthermore, her increasing tendency to play with Jena and Bilqis, two girls who were seen as “middling”, and as “silly” also began to position her in contrast to the other ‘good’ learner girls. This move towards a certain ‘silly’ femininity was compounded by Khadija’s changing choice of clothes and footwear:

Khadija falls over and I mention it to Lynn. We talk about her shoes; Lynn says “They’re not the worst that we’ve had. We do try to tell them”. Lynn says maybe she should ring home to get them changed, and asks Khadija if she should, but this doesn’t happen. (Fieldnotes, June)

Khadija seems to be a totally different position – much naughtier, and more feminine. She is wearing high heeled Black sandals, with bows on the front (which she can’t walk properly in), track suit bottoms, and a polo shirt, and sparkly bracelets. The other girls are mainly wearing summer dresses. (Fieldnotes, June)

The embodied identities of the children matter because they are a significant part of the performative: ‘The way we style our bodies is neither a matter of sex (nature) nor simply an adjunct of the prevailing gender order (culture), rather it is one of the techniques through which we perform, enact and “do” gender’ (Nayak and Kehily, 2006:467). Here the way Khadija ‘does’ her gender is unaligned with discourses surrounding Muslim women; she wears shoes that are overtly girly (in contrast to the generally practical trainers that the other girls wear) and are impractical. These shoes also physically restrict her from joining with activities and being a ‘normal’ pupil. This is in stark contrast to Jim’s comments about how Khadija is not interested in hair braids and skipping earlier in the year, when her lack of sexualised femininity was seen positively. Lynn’s comments on Khadija’s parents’ failure to provide appropriate footwear are linked to “difficult intake” discourses about the deficiencies of immigrant parents, and by wearing these shoes she is suddenly moved away from
the idea that she has 'good immigrant' parents who want her to succeed as a pupil. Her jewellery and shoes are evidence of an unacceptable femininity in Reception classrooms, where all children are supposed to be practically dressed so that they can engage in all sorts of play. There is an acceptable femininity, which involves wearing the school summer dress and having nice hairbands, but Khadija rejects this in favour of her sandals and jewellery, which represent a more adult, sexy femininity that is unacceptable in this context. In wearing high-heeled shoes and jewellery Khadija is constituted though discourses of 'silly' superficial femininity, but her non-feminine clothes (tracksuit bottoms and polo shirt) are completely incongruous with these displays of sexual femininity. Khadija is failing to present a coherent gendered self, neither successfully performing passive asexual Muslim girl-hood, nor assertive sexual girl-hood. However, her appropriation of the outward displays of sexual femininity contribute to the shift in how the adults understand her subject position.

Khadija performed her identity in ways that negated a viable, recognisable subject position; it was beyond the bounds of the discursively prescribed norms of high-ability Muslim femininity to be disobedient, silly, and overtly feminine in this way, and thus she becomes unintelligible as an able Muslim female pupil. I was only just becoming aware of this process when Jim showed me how he had organised 'ability' groups (discussed further later in this chapter). I was surprised to see Khadija in the second to top group, given Jim's earlier comments about her; Jim explained (as mentioned in Chapter 5) “she's very vocal, but she's there for consolidation. I'm not sure it's all there” (Fieldnotes, June). Khadija is suddenly rendered inauthentic as a learner; her being articulate and answering questions become merely evidence of her being “vocal”, not of some underlying intelligence. Jim almost seems to suggest that Khadija has tricked the adults into thinking she was 'clever' when really she was just chatty; the authenticity discourse is deployed when she becomes unrecognisable. There is no intelligible space for Khadija as a disobedient and overtly feminine authentic learner subject, and so she is relegated within the hierarchy of the class. Khadija becomes another of the Muslim girls in the class who is a bit 'silly', and has parents who are disapproved of; her articulate language skills become just a smokescreen for what she really is, no longer evidence of her 'high ability'. She is
discursively constituted in another viable subject position of silly, disobedient Muslim girl; this shift means she remains intelligible as a learner, just a different type. Although she is in some ways still a ‘good learner’ as she will do well on the FSP, she is no longer inhabiting this position with any authenticity.

How can we understand Khadija’s fall from grace in terms of how this sort of process might disadvantage minority pupils? Carbado and Gulati argue in their paper ‘The Fifth Black Woman’(2001) that discrimination based on identity performance is still discrimination. They give the example of a law firm which promotes four Black women, but fails to promote a fifth and cites this as evidence that no discrimination took place. Carbado and Gulati argue that if the rejection of the fifth woman is based on her identity performance – as evidenced through her choice of dress and hairstyle, her association with ‘controversial committees’, where she lives, her attendance at social events, and her professional associations – then this is still discrimination. In this situation, they argue, the concepts of intersectionality alone are not enough: ‘Intersectionality does not capture this form of preferential treatment’ (2001:718); some discussion of identity performance is necessary. Similarly, Farah and Khadija cannot be understood only in terms of their intersectional identities as Afghan Muslim girls; how they perform this identity, albeit unknowingly, affects how they are understood in the classroom. It would follow then, that considering the conditions of possibility for pupils, or the intelligible space that is open to them in terms of being a successful learner, is an important part of understanding how some pupils come to be disadvantaged. It is not as simple as a teacher engaging in unconscious racism; for some children doing well is simply not possible given the constraints prescribed by their intersectional identities, particularly if they engage in certain performative practices. These performative practices, such as walking in a particular way, can have significant effects on how students are constituted as learners (Gillborn, 1990; Youdell, 2003). This argument is further illustrated with the case of Abeje at St Mary’s, another child whose discursive agency rendered her learner identity incommensurate with ‘high ability’ and good learner status.
Failing to perform as a ‘good learner’

With the example of Khadija, we have seen how a different identity performance outside of intelligibility can result in a pupil being seen as an inauthentic learner, merely ‘vocal’ rather than a naturally good learner. With the example of Abeje, we see how identity performance can distance a child from good learner status entirely.

Abeje was a female African-Caribbean pupil in Paul’s class at St Mary’s. She was articulate and talkative, contributed in class and was keen to help the teacher. She was also bilingual in French and English, and this was celebrated within the class, for instance when she sang and taught everyone ‘Frere Jacques’ and was told she was “very clever” by Kelly. I would argue that there was some ‘intelligible space’ for Abeje to be a good learner; she engaged with many activities, answered questions, and generally behaved in ways which, for other children, were seen as evidence that they were ‘good’. Abeje was often put at the front of the line as a reliable child and she was often helpful within the class, for example helping other children to read out the names on the water bottles as they were given out. She offered useful suggestions as to how to organise the class (“Perhaps we could sit in a circle?”) which were taken on and praised by Paul.

Abeje’s intersectional identity did not foreclose the possibility of ‘good’ status; her bilingualism in two European languages and her vocabulary could be seen as evidence of her middle-classness and her international, exotic status. Mirza has argued that Black girls’ educational success is little recognised because they fall between two discourses of race (which focuses on Black masculinity) and gender (which focuses on White femininity): ‘this dichotomy explains the blind spot; the invisible location the leaves the complex, messy and untidy issue of Black women’s success unaddressed’ (Mirza, 1998:121). Perhaps this ambiguity could have allowed Abeje to be constituted as a good learner if she had engaged in the right sort of ‘identity work’. However, Abeje’s performance of her Black female identity instead
brought up different discourses about African-Caribbean women, which lead to her discursive constitution as a difficult Black girl. Abeje behaved and dressed in ways that emphasised her Black identity: although her ‘ethnic group’ was listed as Black Caribbean on the official school data, Abeje talked frequently of going to Nigeria, and said it was where she was “from”. She wore her hair in a large afro, and wore a ‘Rasta hat’ woollen cap in green, red and yellow stripes. These physical manifestations of her Black identity are the opposite of the ‘identity work’ that Carbado and Gulati argue is needed to fit in as a minoritised individual, whereby minoritised individuals engage in ‘racial comfort’ for White people by de-emphasising their racial status (2002; 2001).

Abeje’s behaviour in the classroom was often constructed as transgressive, even when it might have been seen as evidence of enthusiasm or being helpful:

On the carpet: Paul sings the ‘Everybody sitting down’ song. Afterwards Abeje sings it again, and is told to leave the circle. Paul explains to the others “She’s not listening so she’s sitting out”. Later the same day, Abeje comes to Paul for a hug; on the way back she dances and is sent away with a timer. (December)

Abeje is missing from storytime. Someone asks “Where’s Abeje?”; Paul says “Probably faffing around somewhere” and carries on. A few minutes into the story, Abeje arrives with dustpan and brush and puts them neatly away. (March)

Paul’s constitution of Abeje’s behaviour prevented her from accessing good learner status; although she was helpful, she was seen as challenging Paul too often. She danced and sang when she shouldn’t, and so failed to display the kind of bodily control required to be a ‘good’ learner. These performative practices also resonated with discourses of Black musicality and physicality (Sewell, 1997). This was compounded by perceptions of Abeje’s mother as interfering and ‘difficult’; she complained on two occasions about what was happening in the classroom, and Paul made it very clear to me that he found her to be irritating. Her interest in Abeje’s learning was regarded as inappropriate and uninformed, rather than evidence of positive educational values. There is evidence that many Black mothers are keen to be involved in their children’s education (Crozier, 2000; Crozier, 2005; Reay and
Mirza, 2005); however, ‘these approaches may still be read by schools as exemplifying “the wrong cultural currency”’ (Archer and Francis, 2007:168). Abeje’s tendency to speak up about things that she felt were not right (and her mother’s tendency to complain too), combined with her proud demonstrations of her African and Caribbean heritage and her displays of musicality prevented her from accessing good learner status; proud Black femininity appeared to be incommensurate with being a good learner, as this involved passivity and obedience.

On another occasion, Abeje played a significant role in a lesson which involved using several different types of toy animal. She recognised and found each of the animals in the classroom, and brought them to Paul, and single-handedly kept this complicated lesson going. However, this helpfulness was complicated by Abeje’s commitment to getting the animals right:

Afternoon maths lesson on the carpet; Abeje is handing Paul animals on request.
Paul: Now we need a goat.
Abeje: This is a goat.
Paul: No, that’s a sheep.
Abeje: That’s a goat.
Paul: It’s a sheep.
Abeje: [quite irritated] No, look [points to horns].
Paul: It’s a sheep.
Abeje: [patronising] No, goats have these [horns].
Paul: OK [takes the animal].
(Fieldnotes, St Mary’s, March)

At the end of this lesson, despite Abeje organising all the resources required, she was sent away from the carpet (a common sanction) for talking, although this would not always warrant this punishment. Abeje’s reasonable argument about why the toy is a goat not a sheep does not position her as capable, but as annoying. Her confidence is regarded as problematic: as in Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth’s (2007) study of inner city working-class girls, Abeje’s exercise of agency positions her in conflict with the school because this assertiveness is understood as deviant and aggressive,
particularly for minoritised girls. Abeje's lack of deference is particularly unwelcome given her proud Black feminity: it brings up discourses of a 'feisty', loud Black woman. Abeje is in the process of learning, like the Caribbean women in Phoenix's study (2009), that she is constructed as an inadequate learner, even when she shows signs of success. Her gendered and raced position affects the way that her assertiveness is interpreted, and counters normative ideas about idealised middle-class femininity (Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth, 2007). Abeje is also being taught that there are limited ways in which her femininity can be performed that are commensurate with becoming a good learner, and that her performance, so far, is not one of them.

Like Khadija, Abeje is understood through her intersectional identity, the discourses surrounding which limit the ways in which she can succeed at school. She has perhaps an even smaller 'intelligible space' as a high ability pupil open to her, and fails entirely to occupy it. I would argue that, without the possibility of westernized (i.e. 'reformed') Muslim subjecthood, the possibility of Abeje as a Black girl attaining good learner status is extremely limited: after all, Black pupils never approximate 'model minority' status in popular discourse. That is not to say it is impossible, but that, for Abeje, it would be quite difficult to ever reach good learner status; it would require a very specific identity performance. I return to this issue of the reduced intelligible space for minoritised pupils to be constituted as good learners later in this chapter.

My argument in relation to these two girls is, I think, more pessimistic than Youdell's work on the possibilities of using 'discursive agency' to think about 'how the self might be made again differently' (Youdell, 2006c:512). She argues for a performative politics which 'insists nobody is necessarily anything, and what it means to be a teacher, a student, a learner might be opened up to radical rethinking' (2006c:519). In my data, discourse and its effects do indeed 'exceed the intent or free will of an agent' (2006c:519), so that, for minoritised children especially, moving beyond a narrow realm of particular subject positions renders them unintelligible and removes the option for them to be 'made again differently'. In these classrooms the balance of
power heavily favours the restraints of discourse, to the extent that alternative subject positions which are not recognisable within circulating discourses must be quickly rectified. I am not arguing that there is no room for interruption, merely that we need to be aware of the extreme constraints of who can be constituted as a good learner. I discuss the potential for resistance in more detail in the concluding chapter.

**White pupils as intelligible learners**

As discussed in previous chapters, White middle-class identities operated as the idealised Norm within these Reception classrooms, rendering almost all of the pupils at Gatehouse and St Mary’s Other. However the relationship of the individual White pupils in these classes to this ideal was mediated by complex discourses relating to their class positions.

In their discussions of identity performance in the workplace, Carbado and Gulati argue that in a law firm, White employees do not have the burden of ‘identity work’. People of colour are divided into those that do ‘identity work’ in order to ‘fit in’ to a majority White workplace, and those that do not, and that the ‘interracial problem is that White people are not subject to this subcategorization’ (2001:720). Although I think their theory of identity performance is very useful in its application to this school context, I would question this argument regarding identity performance among White individuals. The ‘identity work’ required to be deemed a ‘good’ learner in these Reception classrooms was necessary for these White pupils too, but took on different forms more related to class positions. Furthermore, performing identity is different in a context where minoritised groups are in the majority. It is worth remembering that as a small minority of the pupils, the White children were very noticeable, and were at times rendered explicitly distinct from the other children (for example, on sports day when the TAs only put sun cream on the White pupils). Intersectionality is just as important for the White children: their gender and class affect what ‘kind’ of White child they can be, and the relative access they have to the privileges of Whiteness (Leonardo, 2009b). Within CRT literature, there is much discussion about the benefits of being White for poor or working-class White people.
within the context of White privilege (Leonardo, 2004b; Roediger, 1991). I agree with Allen’s contention that people whom he terms ‘poor Whites’, ‘are invested in Whiteness and receive the benefits of White privilege, even if their returns on their investments are not as great as the returns for nonpoor Whites’ (Allen, 2009:216). Nonetheless, they are also ‘in a relational sense oppressed people who do face institutional and everyday forms of dehumanization’ (2009:214 emphasis in original).

It is important to note here that a CRT framework considers Whiteness as a constructed concept, which is flexible given the historical and political context (Ignatiev, 1995), and that wider literature has noted a long history of poorer White people’s ‘precarious and contingent relationship to Whiteness’ (Nayak, 2009:29). Different forms of Whiteness, and the importance of identity performance within these, are apparent even within the group of White working-class girls at Gatehouse.

White working-class girls have to some extent been absent from discourses of educational success and failure in recent years, due to the specific focus on White working-class boys (Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth, 2007; Francis and Skelton, 2005). Where there is discussion, discourses of White working-class femininity have largely been concerned with negative subjectivities such as the ‘ladette’ and ‘chav’. These discourses, which follow from ideas about ‘laddishness’ as a working-class male culture, position White working-class girls as ‘shameless and brash’, and ‘unrespectable’ (Jackson, 2006:346). Research on working-class girls has argued that they engage in heterosexual hyperfeminine performances, despite the masculine associations of some of their attitudes and behaviours, and that these girls are constituted within school discourses as ‘problem’ girls - disruptive, rude, and anti-academic (Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth, 2007; Jackson, 2006). Recent discourses about the ‘underclass’ and ‘broken Britain’, which hark back to ideas of the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor, often represent White working-class women as ‘degenerate’ (Gillborn, 2010). White working-class girls have been affected by the ‘poor White boys’ discourse, because they are still constituted as the contrasting

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35 There were no White boys at Gatehouse, and no middle-class White children.
group in the boy/girl (failing/succeeding) binary; thus, I would argue that they are expected to succeed (to some extent) at school because they do not have the ‘disadvantage’ of being working-class boys. Ideas about the importance of aspiration (which, as we have seen above, when combined with discourses of migration play out in complex ways) have been reinvigorated by government policy on raising aspirations such as the Aim Higher project, which implicitly apportions the blame for working-class ‘underachievement’ (and therefore gaps in wealth) to the working class, who are accused of lacking ambition. This deficit discourse, present in policy from early years to higher education (Burke, 2002), divides working-class children into either hardworking and aspiring to ‘better’ themselves (and close to middle-class ideals), or as having negative educational values. For these girls at Gatehouse, their identity performances constitute them through these deficit discourses as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ White working-class girls.

There were four White British pupils at Gatehouse, all girls – Chloe, Bethany, and twins Ashlee and April. While Chloe and Bethany were constituted through classroom discourses as bad learners, Ashlee and April were seen as good learners. For instance, when discussing the results of the White children in his class (which included only Bethany and Ashlee of these four), Jim commented “Bethany’s way down and Ashlee’s way high”. I would suggest that the difference between how the White girls at Gatehouse were treated was based on subtle differences in how their family backgrounds were perceived and constructed by the teachers, including their proximity to middle-classness (and therefore positive learner attributes), and their performance of White femininity in the classroom. All the girls were constituted through the inner city and “difficult intake” discourses as distinctly working-class, but there were subtle differences in how their families were constituted in terms of educational values. For instance, Ashlee and April brought in pictures they had drawn at home, they talked about their sister and family events, and they used a wide range of vocabulary (which was particularly obvious given the smaller vocabularies of the

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36 This contrast is used less than the White boys/Black boys binary present in many press reports about ‘poor White boys’ (Gillborn, 2009) but remains potent given the wider educational discourses about boys’ failure.
EAL children). Although they were never seen as middle-class, in the absence of more middle-class White children, they came closest to the ideal of English speaking, White middle-class pupils. In contrast, Chloe and Bethany’s families were talked of disapprovingly and they were constructed as problematic, not because they were badly behaved pupils, but because they were “needy”. Some data below provides examples of these children's experiences in the classroom:

As soon as she arrives in the morning, Bethany has her face cleaned by Lynn. It is not clear why. No other children have their faces cleaned. (Fieldnotes, January)

Jim asks Bethany where she was yesterday (a school day), she says “at the park”. Anne and Jim look disapproving. (February)

Chloe has a runny nose and adults constantly give her tissues, all day long. It seems to take up a lot of time. The adults recoil when discussing it. (February)

Sports day: Laura (TA) puts sun cream on Bethany as she is very pale. She is disapproving about the fact that her mum didn’t do it before. (June)

I comment on Bethany and Chloe’s new short haircuts, saying they are fashionable – Jim says it’s due to “N.I.T.S. – a last resort”. (June)

Jim talks about homework. Ashlee asks about a bit she can’t do (and shows Jim). Jim says “Ask your mum or your sister. How about [sister]? She’ll know.” (May)

On a day where it is colder than expected, Ashlee and April’s mum turns up with their jumpers for them. (June)

We see from these examples how Bethany and Chloe’s families are seen as unhelpful, while Ashlee and April’s family is seen as educationally-orientated and caring. These episodes resonate with ideas about the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor – April and Ashlee’s family have the right values, while Bethany and Chloe’s are not trying hard enough - which are present in popular discourses about working-class White families (Gillborn, 2010). There is also the possibility of a genetic, biological undercurrent in discourses surrounding working-class White people. Allen has argued, with reference to marginalised White groups in the US:

The ‘White but not quite White’ positionality of poor Whites is perpetuated not just by attitudes toward their economic status or alleged cultural dysfunction but also by beliefs about their biological inferiority (Allen, 2009:214)
Allen here is referring to discourses about ‘inbreeding’ in White Appalachian populations. Although there were no explicit or implicit references to a ‘biological inferiority’ at Gatehouse, the suggestion that Bethany and Chloe had continual headlice infections and that Bethany isn’t clean do suggest a certain physical dimension to their reputations as unsuccessful White children. Paul’s comment in Chapter 6 regarding a working-class White girl’s mother “producing children” from a young age also resonates with this perception of some families as being outside of the boundaries of ‘respectable’ Whiteness.

Furthermore, Bethany’s failure to care about being at school matters because it positions her outside of the working-class aspiration discourse, as part of the ‘undeserving poor’ or even the ‘underclass’. She didn’t do her homework and her attendance was described by Jim as “shocking”. Discourses of individual responsibility position a disadvantaged child who doesn’t come to school as failing to help themselves to ‘escape’ their situation; as Bauman argues in relation to poverty in neoliberal discourse:

> Not doing what is needed, in a country of free choosers, is easily, without a second thought, interpreted as choosing something else instead (Bauman, 2005:75)

Bethany and Chloe are constituted as bad learners because they ‘choose something else’ and therefore fail to demonstrate the enthusiasm for learning, commitment and hard work prescribed by the FSP; therefore the position of good learner which is intelligible in relation to their raced, classed and gendered identities (an aspiring White working-class identity) is foreclosed.

In contrast, when Jim talked about Ashlee, he described her positively as enthusiastic about learning; here he was comparing her with her twin sister:

> “Ashlee’s more with it, and asks some amazing questions [laughs] ... [In the] middle of the carpet asking about 567, what’s next? and Ashlee goes “How did god make us?” and I was like “My god, ask your mother”. So she’s more kind of like, she also needs more time to think about stuff than April. You can ask a question and then leave it and come back to her in 10 minutes and she’ll give you the answer.” (Jim, March 09)
Ashlee performs a good learner identity and is recognisable as such – she asks probing questions and takes time to think. These behaviours, which might be seen as evidence of ‘slowness’ and as challenging or disruptive with another child, provide evidence that Ashlee is “with it”. Her intersectional position means that this is an intelligible learner identity for her, and her authenticity is never questioned, unlike for other children.

The gender of these pupils is also important in constituting them as quite different learners: Bethany’s lack of enthusiasm contrasts with Ashlee asking for help with her homework. Their adherence to a model of hardworking femininity differs greatly. As discussed, I argue that girls have more access to good learner positions because the attributes of the learner as prescribed by the FSP are more associated with discourses about girls; the distance from this identity created by Bethany and Chloe’s lack of enthusiasm is more stark because they are girls. Exempt from the ‘failing White working-class boys’ discourse, these girls are expected to be good learners, albeit within discourses about the hard-working, aspiring working-classes. Furthermore, their different performances of femininity bring up quite different discourses: like many of the girls, Ashlee engaged in displays of femininity such as caring about her hair, but not to the extent of being seen as ‘ditzy’. She would get annoyed with anyone playing with her hair on the carpet, for example, showing a commitment to learning. In contrast, Chloe and Bethany were marked out as unattractive and not engaging in appropriate displays of femininity by their constant head lice infections, runny noses and faces that need to be publically cleaned. Their lack of concern about their appearances in fact disrupted their learning on occasion: Chloe was frequently told to leave the carpet to blow her nose.

Bethany and Chloe’s identity performances resulted in them being seen as ‘White but not quite White’ (Allen, 2009:214); their ‘Whiteness’ is brought into question by their appearances and their (assumed) poor educational values. While they reaped some reward from their Whiteness, they were still seen as bad learners because they did not display the kinds of educational values (hard work, commitment) associated with aspiring, ‘deserving’ working-class pupils. In contrast to Carbado and Gulati, I would
argue that the White children do have to engage in some identity work in order to be constituted as good learner subjects. The competing discourses of Whiteness, working-classness and femininity open up an intelligible space for pupils like Ashlee and April, in contexts like the Gatehouse classroom, to be ‘good’ learners; however, they also open up the possibility of negative White working-class femininity, like that discussed by Gillborn (2010) and Allen (2009).

**Negative learner identities**

Thus far, I have discussed the complex ways in which some pupils are intelligible as good learners, and some, through a combination of their intersectional identities and their identity performances, are unintelligible as good learners. I turn now to pupils who not only fail to occupy a good learner position, but are actively constituted as bad learners. For these children, who are mainly boys from minoritised groups, I argue that there is more intelligible space as a bad learner created by their intersectional identities; in other words, it is far easier for them to makes sense as bad subjects of schooling than as ‘good’. This is in keeping with a long history of research on minoritised boys (Archer, 2003; Gillborn, 1990; Gillborn, 1995; Sewell, 1997). I discuss in detail here how the specific conception of the learner in Reception operates to distance good learner identities from discourses connected to boys and minoritised communities. However, as I discuss at the end of this section, there are possibilities for shifts in what is intelligible when a child’s class identity is constructed differently.

**Black boys at St Mary’s**

At St Mary’s, the Black boys were constituted as bad learners through discourses of poor parenting and single-motherhood, violence, and neediness. Given the prevailing discourses regarding Black boys and men as problematic and the long history of research into racist attitudes toward young Black men (Gillborn, 1995; Mac an Ghaill, 1988; Rollock, 2007; Sewell, 1997), I was not surprised to find that these boys were only intelligible as bad learners in the classroom. However, I was surprised to find
how quickly and how powerfully these discourses worked to distance these boys from positive learner identities, and how ‘impossible’ they were soon seen as being.

At the time that this research was conducted, there was a growing concern with ‘knife crime’ and ‘gang violence’ in London that was linked to Black young men (BBC News, 2009b; BBC News, 2009c; BBC News, 2009d). This popular discourse tapped into longer-standing concerns about Black male criminality, social breakdown in Black communities and Black single mothers that have historically limited how Black boys can be understood within classrooms (Alexander, 2000; Archer and Yamashita, 2003).

It is within these frames of reference, I would argue, that the Black boys at St Mary’s (Reece, Ryan, Mike and Dylan) were understood. These boys all came from single parent families, and Paul was quite critical of their mothers. He experienced several problems with parents arguing with each other in the classroom and using threatening behaviour, and described “really, really aggressive angry parents”, one of whom “threatened to kick people’s effing heads in” (Paul, July 09). These boys were constituted through complex racialised discourses of bad parenting, poor educational values, and the ‘undeserving’ working-class, as well as through discourses of Black aggression. On another occasion, Paul openly criticised Reece’s mother for her attitude towards her son:

Lunchtime: Reece isn’t well, so he has been given an extra jumper and is curled up on a soft chair. The adults look at him and discuss sending him home. One of the TAs says “But take that jumper off him first, it’s ours”. Paul says he will call Reece’s mum, but to me he is quietly doubtful if she will come; he says “She’s got to do her swimming [cynically]. She’s all ‘That effing boy, he’s such an effing pain’. [Then to Reece] but we know he’s such a special person in our class”. (May)

These boys’ Black single mothers were constructed as violent, neglectful, poor and potentially criminal (as shown by the implication that she will keep a school jumper). This was particularly important in Paul’s classroom, as he had strong views on how parents have a “huge impact” on their children, and played a key role in constituting them as inevitably bad learners:

In free play time, there is a fuss in the home corner – Dylan doesn’t want to be Liam’s friend. Paul argues with Dylan about whether his mum would want him to be kind. Dylan says “My mum isn’t kind, not if people aren’t
nice to her”. Paul talks to me about an incident that week when Dylan and Ryan’s mums were swearing and shouting at each other and threatening to stab each other in the head. Paul says it is all coming out in Dylan’s behaviour - “He sees it you see”. (Fieldnotes, St Mary’s, October)

Within generally poor perceptions of the home lives of the children, these Black boys’ backgrounds were seen as particularly damaging to them. Mike was also described in terms of his “major home problems” and the involvement of social services, and described by Paul as a “shitty child”. These boys were constituted simultaneously as victims of their circumstances and as problematic as individuals; there is a strong sense of inevitability about them being bad learners, which indicates how this is the only intelligible position for them in school. This inevitability was extended to their adult lives: Kelly commented, prompted by discussions of Mike:

“It’s just scary to think [what are] these children going to be like as adults? What are they going to be like then?” (Kelly, Fieldnotes)

In the classroom, negative learner identities were quickly established and became commonsense. In the first few weeks of term, Reece and Ryan appeared to be singled out as disruptive and in need of extra help with “settling” into Reception. Reece and Ryan were initially frequently confused and their identities seemed to merge37: Ryan had been “diagnosed” as hyperactive, and Reece had also gained this label within a few days, despite no official diagnosis. The two boys were a constant focus of attention and seen as problematic from the very start of term. These fieldnotes are from the first week of school:

After assembly, lesson on carpet, sitting in a circle. Reece is moved to sit on a chair for picking up a bag twice. Then Reece won’t put his hands in his lap while the others sing – he gets taken away. Paul says to the rest of the children “Reece isn’t doing the right thing”. Reece has to sit apart with the egg timer. (September)

The children are moving off the carpet when told to for free play. Ryan is last but one to go; he starts to move but is told off. (September)

From the very first week of their educational careers, Reece and Ryan were seen as bad learners, unable to display the sort of behaviours associated with good learning.

37 Mike did not arrive until January, and Dylan was very distinctive due to a medical condition; therefore Reece and Ryan appeared to be confused as they were the two ‘normal’ Black boys in the class, and Paul did not appear to distinguish between them.
At times, these identities were given validity through pseudo-scientific discourses; Paul said about Ryan:

“He’s like a boy, but an extreme, you know if there’s a normal distribution of the boy behaviour [draws bell curve in air], he’s quite at the end of it sort of thing, you know, he’s not average in concentration.” (Paul, October)

Thus the discourse of boys as bad learners worked with the idea of Ryan as “hyperactive” to position him as an “extreme”, far removed from educational acceptability. Similarly, Reece’s bad learner identity was maintained through the first term, as we saw in Chapter 5 when Paul and Kelly swapped the names over on the supply teacher’s observations. Soon, the idea of Reece as being anything other than difficult became entirely impossible for Paul to imagine:

It is fruit time, mid-morning. The children sit in a circle and the bowl of fruit is passed around, while two children (Amy and Naima) give out the water bottles. When they go to sit down their own water bottles aren’t there in their places. Everyone looks around for them. This goes on for several minutes until Paul is quite agitated (there are several other things he is dealing with at the same time). Paul tells Reece, who is sitting against the main teacher’s chair, “Stand up!”. Reece looks confused. Paul assumes he has hidden the water bottles and looks under the chair. There is no sign of the bottles anywhere. Naima and Amy are told “Nevermind” and don’t get any water.

Later that day at lunchtime, Paul brings up the loss of the water bottles. He looks again under the chair and they are there, further to the side. Paul says he knew Reece hid them, it is “One of his things he does. I knew he had a twinkle in his eye”. He then tells the other children that Reece hid them. (January)

The certainty with which Paul accuses Reece of hiding the water bottles initially shows how strongly Reece is constituted as a ‘bad learner’ who breaks the rules in this classroom. Paul’s contention that this is “one of this things he does” shows how ‘teacher knowledge’ can work to constrain how a child can be understood; Paul believes he can predict Reece’s behaviour (as seen when he predicted Reece would start a fight in the swapped observation in Chapter 5), and decides he has taken the bottles even though he has no proof.
The bad learner identities of these boys were made clear to the whole class both explicitly (as in the episode above) and implicitly through the use of sticker charts. These were colourful pieces of card mounted on the wall, on which they were instructed to stick any stickers given to them (all children were given stickers as a reward for good behaviour or learning), while other children simply stuck them on their jumpers. Reece was given a chart in the first week, and in the second week Paul told Ryan “I hear constant interruption. We’re going to make you a sticker chart. That is going to help”. One of the effects of this on Reece was that he became increasingly withdrawn through the first term of school, and often appeared confused about what he should be doing and what he was doing wrong. This only further reinforced his negative identity as a learner because he did not display the required enthusiasm and motivation. Reece became reluctant to do any activities other than play with the train set, and had to be strongly encouraged to join in with adult-led activities; thus he appeared to reject the model of learning presented to him by only doing one activity in free time, and failed to be a ‘rational chooser’. I would argue that the strength of Reece’s negative learner identity was based on the recognisability of the Black boy as a bad learner; the intelligibility of this position in relation to circulating discourses may have led to Paul’s certainty about him.

However, the need for subjectivities to be maintained and repeated constantly and the scope for discursive agency applied to these negative identities as they did to the positive identities already discussed. For Ryan, the discovery of more information about his home background made his bad identity unintelligible, and opened up the possibility of a more positive learner identity. The discussion of Ryan at the FSP meeting in November where his and Reece’s observations were switched was the first indication I saw of these changing ideas:

FSP meeting, Paul and Kelly present. They have already switched over Reece and Ryan’s names on the two supply teacher observations. They now look at an observation for Ryan. It is about Ryan playing with the fire station, then the playdough, then going to the writing desk. Paul defends Ryan moving around: “It was early days”. Then Paul says “And Ryan’s really clever, he’s really developed. Clever’s not the right word”.

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A while later: Paul says he is not going to write about Ryan moving about as “He’s not doing that now”. They discuss how some observations can not be useful for the profile as “It all moves on, but it’s useful for teaching and that’s the point” (Paul). (Fieldnotes, November)

Here we see how the first observation about Ryan describes behaviour that is not commensurate with being a good learner: he is moving around too quickly without being focused on one activity, not exercising choice effectively. However, this information can be dismissed through the development discourse – he is now “really developed” because he doesn’t move around as much. Here Paul uses his ‘teacher knowledge’ to constitute Ryan more positively. This change coincided with Paul finding out more about Ryan’s home life, and the distancing of Ryan’s mother from other Black single mothers:

Paul talks about Ryan’s mum from parents evening; he says “She’s actually very nice. She’s a nursery nurse, you know”. Kelly is surprised. Paul says “I was honest with her, and I told her that when he first came in I thought what support are we going to need? [...] She was really nice. I told her how he’s changed”.

With these comments, Ryan’s class and race position is shifted to being more ‘respectable’: his mother is a nursery nurse (a profession requiring qualifications) and “actually very nice” (which is implicitly connected). Later in the discussion, it was mentioned that Ryan’s mum was a single mother because his father died from an illness. Thus Ryan’s home life was constructed as unfortunate but importantly not a result of the hypersexuality and promiscuity attributed to Black communities in enduring discourses of raced sexuality. This information appeared to disrupt Paul’s perception of Ryan’s particular ‘constellation of identity markers’ (Youdell, 2006b), and renders his initial assessment of him as a bad learner unintelligible. Ryan cannot be understood through simplistic discourses of Black boys with single mothers; instead, he is constituted as the ‘deserving poor’, the victim of unfortunate circumstance, with a mother in a caring, respectable occupation. This opened up another recognisable identity for him in the classroom: as a Black working-class ‘success story’. In explaining this shift at the end of the year, Paul drew on developmental discourse: he said “He just developed emotionally, he’s a thousand,
thousand times better”. Ryan’s “hyperactivity”, initially seen as an official diagnosis, was now ‘solved’ and he was removed from the special needs register.

Ryan’s changed identity allowed for him to be seen as authentic and “clever” within a particular discourse of masculine intelligence. As mentioned, he scored the only nine on the FSP for a maths scale. This was entirely intelligible given discourses of boys as good at maths, and the idea of gifted working-class boy. However, he was never seen as a ‘good’ all-round learner; this was not recognisable for a Black boy, and Ryan’s performance of this identity, as with Abeje, brought up negative discourses of Black aggression. Ryan’s height (he was the tallest in the class) compounded this as he was often seen as too ‘physical’. When Ryan was keen to answer questions on the carpet, he tried to answer every question, and thus while displaying the right kind of enthusiasm, did not display the self-regulating social skills described in the FSP. This led to him being reprimanded, even though Paul had a great deal of patience with him:

RE lesson about Noah’s ark: Ryan answers a lot of questions – he knows about the dove in the story, and the lesson seems to be a conversation between Ryan and Paul. Paul is sympathetic to Ryan’s enthusiasm for ages, and then says “Everybody else has to have a turn, you’re shouting out constantly”. Some other children answer questions, but then Ryan asks more questions. He also picks up and reads a second Noah’s ark book that is lying near him, and asks about that. Paul tolerates this for a while then says “You’re brilliant but I’m tired!”. He send them off for free play; he asks Ryan what he wants to do, then says “Everyone else do what you like”. (Fieldnotes, May)

Here we see how, although Ryan was constituted differently from the other Black boys (from whom this behaviour would not be tolerated), it remained entirely recognisable for Ryan to be seen as difficult; there was a constant risk that he might be shifted again to being a bad learner. Unfortunately for Ryan, this more negative perception of him prevailed in the rest of the school, so the durability of this more positive identity was doubtful:

At break, Paul is talking to other staff in the staff room. The woman who works in the office says Ryan came and apologised to her, and tells everyone a story about him being rude to her. She says “What is he going to be like in Year 6?”. Another adult says “Like him upstairs, Rob”.

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Everyone agrees. Rob is obviously known throughout the school as a problem. Paul says there are going to be “several” and another teacher adds “Yes, you have a few potentials”. (Fieldnotes, May)

Ryan’s future as an ‘impossible’ pupil is mapped out for the next seven years in these adults’ discussion: the possibility of him changing as he ages is not entertained. I would argue that this certainty, as with Reece, is due to the recognisability of Black boys as bad learners. Even though Ryan’s home background had opened up some space for him to be seen positively as a learner in Reception, this space could also quickly be closed down. As with Khadija’s shift from good to inauthentic learner, Ryan’s position as “clever” could be temporary and was certainly more precarious than his original bad learner identity. I would argue that when minoritised children are able to be intelligible as good (or at least not bad) learners, these positions are very unstable and fragile; there is a constant threat that they will be returned to more easily recognisable bad learner positions at any time.

Other ways to be a ‘bad learner’

Although I have focused here on the Black boys at St Mary’s, I am not suggesting that it was only Black children who were recognisable as bad learners, or only boys. Other minoritised children were constituted as failing to be a learner through different discourses. I provide here two brief examples. At St Mary’s Dinesh, a Bangladeshi boy, was constituted as a inadequate learner through discourses of Asian boys as weak, effeminate and lacking in independence. Dinesh was very shy and quiet, probably due to his limited English, but was described as lacking in confidence because of his overly concerned parents:

FSP meeting: Kelly, Paul and Asif (the student teacher) are looking through the observation labels. Asif mentions there isn’t much for Dinesh. Kelly reacts by saying “Oh, bless him!”, and they say there isn’t much as he hasn’t done much. Kelly tells them about seeing Dinesh walking very slowly with his dad, “like precious porcelain”. They discuss if this is because he is the only boy, or the first one. Paul tells the others about how Dinesh is scared of PE, and got hit by bean bag when he was sitting out. Paul explains that he didn’t say anything as he was waiting for Dinesh to “express his feelings” (an FSP point). They laugh because Dinesh didn’t say anything. (Fieldnotes, January)
Dinesh is constituted here as failing to demonstrate the social skills described in the FSP, and this is connected to discourses which position some Asian boys as overly ‘mothered’, like the boys in Connolly’s (1998) study of infant classrooms; Kelly commented that “they do everything for him”. Further evidence of this was provided in this same meeting when Kelly told a story about Dinesh’s pencil falling on the floor and him expecting her to pick it up. Thus Dinesh was failing in being an independent, flexible learner, while the effect of the language barriers he faced were ignored; this was entirely intelligible within discourses related to Asian boys. Dinesh’s constitution as a bad learner was compounded by the lack of evidence he provided for the FSP by being quiet, but this did not lead to Paul seeing him as unknowable; he simply decided that Dinesh was unable to do most of the FSP points, and he was awarded the lowest score in the class. At Gatehouse, another Bangladeshi boy, Waseem, was also the lowest scoring child, and was similarly described as quiet and lacking in confidence.

While Dinesh was constituted as bad learner in entirely different ways to the Black boys discussed above, at Gatehouse another boy held this position through another set of discourses related to race and class. Tahir came from a Lebanese family, but was constituted as a bad learner in ways that were similar to Bethany and Chloe, the two ‘undeserving’ working-class White girls. Tahir was constituted as a bad learner through discourses of parental neglect and poverty, but also discourses of ‘bad migrants’ who fail to assimilate into British ways:

During the morning register, Tahir sits and does his homework with Susan. He ends up being the first one to hand it in. It is not clear why he is getting special treatment – they seem to assume he won’t do it at home. Later that day, Tahir is doing an activity which involves porridge oats. He gets told off for eating the oats. I ask later why he ate them, and Susan tells me he’s probably hungry. (September)

Before the dance class, Tahir doesn’t have any socks on – he is only wearing plimsolls despite the cold. They give Tahir some school socks. Laura says “We won’t get them back!”. (December)

Jim is sorting out some mixed up belongings; he says “lovely hat” to some children, but then to Tahir he says “You need new shoes, don’t you? You’ve worn a hole in your shoes”. (January)
At the end of day, the children go to the cloakroom outside to get their bags. Jim says to Tahir “Tahir, you don’t have a bag, you shouldn’t be going outside”. (June)

Like the parents described by Lynn in Chapter 6, Tahir’s parents had failed to give him appropriate shoes and socks for winter, and he was regularly described as lacking in terms of material possessions. As with Reece at St Mary’s, this lead to the teachers predicting the family would steal school clothes – a further indication of failing to keep to social norms. These problems at home were associated by the adults with non-acceptable behaviour in the class, such as eating the oats. Tahir’s behaviour was a constant issue in Jim’s classroom, with regular reprimands for not sitting still, calling out and fiddling with things. The way in which he was reprimanded often sought to isolate him from the other children, by emphasising how differently they behaved; the teachers made comments such as “no one else is calling out” and “we’re all waiting for Tahir”. Like the sticker charts at St Mary’s, these dividing practices worked to solidify Tahir’s identity as a bad learner. This identity was entirely intelligible given the way in which Tahir’s home life was understood.

**Everyday classroom practices**

This section focuses on the organisational and pedagogic practices which were constitutive of children and their learner identities. Practices such as grouping children by ‘ability’, methods of managing behaviour and differences in the amount and type of interaction between the teacher and child all worked to reinforce and maintain children’s identities, and had a significant impact on these children’s experiences of school. These dividing practices related to grouping, behaviour management and pupil-teacher interactions made children’s learner identities appear solid, innate and definite, while producing and maintaining these identities.

**Practices based on ‘ability’ and ‘development’**

As discussed in Chapter 5, discourses of ability and development worked together and separately as a significant part of the subjectivation of children as good/bad and authentic/inauthentic learners. This regime of truth was particularly noticeable in the classroom, because it was used to classify, divide and regulate pupils. Organisation of
activities and seating through ability groups is common practice in Key Stage 1 and 2 for at least the core subjects (Alexander, 2009; Hallam et al., 2003) and has been encouraged by the Literacy and Numeracy hours (Hallam, Ireson and Davies, 2004). However, it is more controversial in Reception due to the young age of the children and the format of learning (through free play) in early years.

*The two group system at Gatehouse*

At Gatehouse, the system of ability groups used during the Spring term worked to define who was developmentally ‘normal’ and who was behind, a micropractice of ‘normalisation’, where definitions are used to classify children. When 36 new children arrived in January, the whole year group was split into “higher” and “lower” groups (Group 1 and Group 2) for differentiated Maths and Literacy lessons. Jim explained this system to me as being based on age, so that all the new children (born in the spring and summer) would be in Group 2. However, the imbalance in the number of children from the autumn intake (only 21) meant that some new children would have to be in Group 1. This decision was based on an assessment of who was “ahead”; Jim explained:

“with the new intake [...] because they need some form of streaming initially, we couldn’t like stream them into a class of 21 and a class of like, 36, 35 or whatever it was. So we had to just kind of gauge who from the nursery coming up would be a good candidate to join in with the children who have been in Reception for ages. And who needed to also drop back, and have a little bit more ... [long pause] more, er, what’s the word I’m looking for ... just more practice I suppose, within like letters and sounds, basic reading, that kind of thing.” (Jim, March 09)

So although the groups were based “primarily on age”, according to Jim, they involved a decision as to which of the new children were capable of being with children who had had an extra term of school, and even who from the September intake should “drop back”. When I asked how the groups were decided, Jim explained “that was by talking with the guys in the nursery, and the initial assessment we made of the children”. Jim’s comment about one “ahead” January girl showed how this related to learner identities: he commented about Liri “She can name all of the planets in order so I don’t think she’s going to have any trouble”. Thus the new children are designated as either more advanced or normal, while some of the
September children are designated as “behind”, within their first term of school. Within this process, the role of the teacher in constituting pupils as different types of learner with different levels of ‘ability’ is obscured by the idea that it is based on age.

Even though the two group system was only used for maths and literacy lessons (effectively for most of the morning teaching), it seemed to demarcate not only who was successful in academic subjects but as a learner in general: for example, one boy was moved down to Group 2 because “his maturity isn’t quite where it should be” (Jim). The groups worked as a dividing practice to separate those who were conforming to the learner ideal, and those who were not. This also worked to demarcate authentic and inauthentic learners: Bilqis was a January child who was put into Group 2, but it soon became apparent that her word recognition was the best in the class. However, she was not moved; I would argue this was because, as mentioned previously, Jim saw this success as being based on her pushy parents: “Her mum has been working flat out since she joined Reception”\textsuperscript{38}. This is contradictory given the evidence given for the allocation of Liri to Group 1 (because she can name the planets in order) - this is also evidence of rote-learning encouraged by ‘pushy’ parents. Jim’s explanation for why Bilqis stayed in Group 2 – “I’m just going to keep them the same, it’s not as if the lessons are so totally dramatically different” – is also contradictory given the other children who had been moved. Bilqis was constituted as inauthentic, and regulated through the ability group system.

\textit{The five group system at Gatehouse}

During the summer term at Gatehouse, a more complex system of ability groups was used to further regulate and classify children. For about six weeks, the children returned to their actual classes, but these classes were split into five “ability groups” for maths and literacy, and given different tasks at different tables, much like the organisation of Key Stage 1 and 2 classrooms. This was explained to me as part of the “transition” to Year 1 ways of working. These groups were given different names based on sea creatures, but a clear hierarchy was apparent, as references were made

\textsuperscript{38} Note that there is also a contradiction here between the implicit criticism of Bilqis’s mother as ‘pushy’ and Lynn’s comments about middle-class parents who encourage their children.
to the “top group” and “bottom group”. The groups were named (from “the most able, down to those who need some help” [Jim]): Dolphins, Starfish, Seahorses, Whales and Sharks. These groups served to classify the children, based on how they children were constituted as learners, and solidify these identities by providing different work for them. However, they did not simply reflect the hierarchy of learner identities, as different discourses about ‘good practice’ relating to gender worked to obscure how girls were more likely to be constituted as ‘good’ learners. Jim explained how he decided the top groups (note that Ashlee, Jakira, Carl and Mansur were in the second-to-top Starfish group, and Hakim and Bilal were in the top Dolphins group):

We are looking at the group list [with boys and girls in different columns]. Jim explains to me that “Ashlee should be a Dolphin, really” and also Jakira, and maybe Hakim and Bilal should come down, but “I can’t have a group of girls and a group of boys, so”. He then tells me “Carl and Mansur are there not because they’re there yet but because I think they’ve got potential”. (Fieldnotes, June)

Ashlee’s ‘true’ identity as a Dolphin is constructed here as something definite and identifiable. However, she is not in the Dolphin group because Jim thinks he cannot have all girls in the top group; thus what is deemed fair actually works to disadvantage girls, by lessening their chances of accessing harder work. The idea of gender balance is so powerful that it means that two boys who are deemed not actually “there yet” (but with “potential” so perhaps authentic learners not showing it yet) still get to be in the second-to-top Starfish group. Jim explained his decision later:

“I probably could have had a whole top group of girls, and they probably would have worked really well, but then I would have ended up with a whole group of boys who would have just been messing around [...] also in life, boys have to work with girls, so it’s important.” (Jim, July 09)

Despite girls being increasingly positioned as the success story in education (Epstein et al, 1998), the ‘feminization of school success’ (Renold and Allan, 2006), we see here how essentialist discourses about boys as naughty and girls as good can also have the effect of limiting girls’ access to positions where they can display ‘good learning’.

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As previously mentioned, the decisions made about ability groups also revealed who was constituted as inauthentic, and who was innately a good learner: Khadija was described as merely “vocal”, while another Afghan girl, Jena, was described as “knowledgeable” but “quiet”. Furthermore, the decision to move the groups around after a fortnight showed how unstable learner identities could be. In the new list, Ashlee (previously a second-to-top Starfish) was moved up to the top Dolphins, but Jakira (a Black Caribbean girl), who Jim also mentioned, remained a Starfish. This reflects the racialisation of good learner discourses: Ashlee is more recognisable as a good learner than Jakira. Hakim was moved down to the Starfish, leaving the Dolphins unbalanced in terms of gender (four girls, two boys). Despite Jim’s comments about his “potential”, Carl was moved from the Starfish to the middle Seahorses. A new girl, Hafsa, was moved “from bottom to top” in Jim’s words (up to the second-to-top Starfish group) because “We’ve discovered she’s got a bit of a nasty streak, but she’s very clever”. Jena was moved down from the middle Seahorses group to the second-to-bottom Whales, despite her “knowledgeable” status, perhaps to make sure there was more than one girl in the Whales; although girls are associated with success in current discourse, there still needs to be some girls in the “bottom group”.

The use of ability groups at Gatehouse worked to make obvious how children were classified as learners, and to discipline those children who failed to perform appropriately as learners. The groups were not popular with the teachers – Jim described them as “yuk” – but were seen as necessary for the organisation of the classroom, and generally as the only feasible method of differentiating work. Lynn explained:

“it’s just nature – chances are if there’s one child like this there’s likely to be another like it, [who] will have a similar kind of need at least to some extent, you know. You have to differentiate, but you can’t differentiate for 60 different children” (Lynn, November 08)

Thus the system is described in terms of necessity (and interestingly, “nature”), and the relationship between teachers’ understandings of pupils and their ability group is
obscured. The teachers claimed that the pupils did not know what the groups meant, and in fact liked them.

The use of ability groups is an example of how the Reception teacher works against and with the constraints of policy, public discourses and the rest of the primary school, where these groups are seen as ‘good practice’. But these practices do have a disciplinary function, and the long-term effects of maintaining and solidifying learner identities are potentially significant: a child who comes up from nursery described as “low ability” is put into Group 2 and then the lowest Sharks group, and never gets the chance to do the more difficult work or display the kind of learning required. Simultaneously, the differences between children are constructed as fixed, inevitable and accurate, as if they were there without these dividing practices.

**Behaviour management practices**

The regulation of behaviour was a constant feature of classroom life in the study schools. Much of this regulation was done through the imposition of the specific conception of what a learner and learning looked like which encouraged children to self-regulate by conforming to the stated behaviours. I concentrate largely here on how particular strategies were used to deal with trangressive behaviour, and how these related to how children were constituted as different types of learner, and reinforced these identities. The strategies are divided into reward strategies (those which involved encouraging good behaviour), and sanctions, which involved punishments for breaking rules or otherwise behaving inappropriately. This reflects a division in current thinking on behaviour, which advises teachers to manage behaviour through prevention (using positive strategies) rather than through negative sanctions (DES, 2005; Teachernet, 2009a). Some of the data shows, however, that apparently ‘positive’ strategies may have a negative impact on the children in that they identify and pathologise bad learners. Furthermore, I argue that the use of behaviour strategies varies depending on the teachers’ ‘knowledge’ of the child (which give these differences legitimacy). The child’s learner identity is constituted as pre-existing and inevitable, and is solidified through these strategies, so that the potential to disrupt or challenge these identities recedes over time.
This discussion of behaviour management shows the regulation of the body and voice which is involved in becoming a ‘good’ learner: sitting correctly on the carpet, speaking at the right time with permission and following instructions. During free play times, being a good learner meant playing in the right way: taking turns, sharing, using equipment appropriately, and not breaking anything. None of this is particularly surprising, but it is worth noting because Reception is, for some children, the first time they have been expected to exercise such self-restraint, and the first time they have had to submit to rigid constraints on their bodies and speech. Their ability to cope with these constraints was seen as a marker of their “maturity”, “development” and, in turn, their “ability”. The submission required to be a good learner is explained in the FSP as a requirement of group harmony:

   Understands that there need to be agreed values and codes of behaviour for groups of people, including adults and children, to work together harmoniously (PSED Social Development Point 6) (QCA, 2008a)

The development discourse allows for these connections between behaviour and being a good learner, and works to render some positions unintelligible; for example being ‘high ability’ and disruptive, because it would not make sense within these discourses to have matured enough to engage in good learning, but not enough to behave appropriately.

Rewards and sanctions

Although at both schools there were reward systems which encouraged good behaviour, there were also practices of ‘positive’ behaviour management that publically marked out certain pupils as a problem. As previously mentioned, Ryan and Reece’s sticker charts at St Mary’s were intended to reward good behaviour but also made their identities as ‘difficult boys’ obvious to everyone in the class and any visitors. Later on in the year, four other pupils were also given these charts and publically classified as badly behaved.

Rewards and praise also worked to demarcate children who were conforming to the ideal of the learner; for example:
On the carpet, Paul says “Amy and Naima - sitting beautifully as usual”.
(Fieldnotes, St Mary’s, January)

This praise also worked to emphasise each child’s individual responsibility for their behaviour, and to construct some children’s adherence to the rules as expected and inevitable and thus innate and authentic.

Sanctions worked in a similar way to constitute some children as inherently bad at being a learner, and usually took the form of simply being ‘told off’, being taken away for a ‘chat’, and being told to “take the timer”. The last involved leaving the carpet to sit separately and wait until a one-minute egg timer had finished, a physical exclusion which was based, it appeared, on the idea that one child should not disrupt the others; this is a discourse apparent in the growing policy of using Behaviour Support Units to remove pupils in both the primary and secondary sectors. “Taking the timer” emphasised some children’s positions outside of educational acceptability, and also had the effect of making learning more difficult as they could not participate in the lesson. The decision to send some children away from the carpet was also based on who was already regarded as a bad learner: for the children seen as difficult in Paul’s class, a small infraction could lead to “taking the timer”.

Behaviour management based on learner identity

Behaviour management strategies played a significant part in constituting some children as bad learners, and maintaining these identities. Children appeared to be treated differently based on the learner identities already established for them, so that behaviour that was regarded as acceptable from some children was seen as challenging from others. Earlier in this chapter I discussed examples of how Abeje was seen as difficult, and Reece was accused of playing tricks. These further examples show how this tendency can lead to quite harmless behaviour being described as challenging to authority:

St Mary’s, tidy-up time before break: Paul does his usual routine for getting the children’s attention, involving ding a triangle and the children showing three fingers, then two, then one, after each ding. Reece is tidying up and is holding eight or nine bits of toy train. He is confused about what to do because he has no hands free to do the fingers action. He gets told off for not holding up a finger when the triangle dings.
Paul says crossly “Reece, I need a finger!” (Fieldnotes, St Mary’s September)

Gatehouse, tidy-up time before morning break: Jakira carefully picks up bits of things from the floor. Becky [TA] sees her move away and has a go at her, saying “Go back and tidy!” It seems unfair as she was tidying before. (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, February)

For Reece and Jakira, who were both constituted as bad learners, even normal behaviour is treated as if it is trangressive. The teacher knowledge discourse means that the teacher can base their comments and interventions on what they ‘know’ of the child (such as Jakira doesn’t like tidying up) rather than what they see; thus these identities are produced and repeated as if they were always there. Behaviour management provides an ideal space for the repetition and maintenance of learner identities.

High and low focus children

A final classroom practice which served to regulate pupils involved significant variations in the duration and quality of interactions between the children and adults. Some variation is inevitable within a classroom, but I observed distinct and systematic differences in who got to talk to and work with the teacher, what they did, and how they were spoken to. The children who were constituted at either extreme of the range of learners (those constituted as ‘good’ or ‘bad’) took up the majority of the teachers’ time, while a group in the middle rarely interacted with the teacher or other adults. This group, in some ways similar to the busy ‘mass in the middle’ (Sharp, Green and Lewis, 1975), who I call ‘low focus’ children, had quite different experiences of school from the ‘high focus’ children.

Low focus children did not answer questions or were not asked to, did not join in with adult-led activities in free play time (or only when instructed to), and did not have ‘chats’ with the adults. In order to explore how the children’s experiences differed, for one morning session I observed two children at St Mary’s who had widely different levels of interaction with the adults – Reece and Naima. Reece has already been discussed; Naima was a Bangladeshi girl who was generally constituted as an adequate learner. The two children had quite different experiences in the
classroom. When they entered the classroom in the morning, Naima came quietly onto the carpet and sat down, while Reece attempted to talk to Paul, and was told immediately "You need to sit down now". Both children said "Good morning" as required when their names were called on the register, but Paul reacted to Naima by saying "Beautiful, thank you so much" and to Reece with "Thank you, very good". Naima was placed in the line for assembly between two "disruptive boys" while Reece was put last. While he was waiting his watch was taken away by a TA. During the lesson after assembly, Naima listened quietly while Reece tried to ask and answer questions but was told "Put your hand down Reece" by a TA. During free play, Naima went to the home corner and then to the writing table. Reece was instructed to go to the writing table straightaway, and when he was reluctant, was told he could play with the trains later if he did some writing now. After causing some disruption at the writing table but finishing his task, Reece is allowed to play with the trains. Paul put him on the kindness tree for sharing the train set with other children, saying "I’m so proud of you when you do that". During this whole session, Naima had minimal interaction with the adults but Reece was a frequent source of attention. Naima had a role as a ‘sensible girl’, and was allowed to engage in activities of her choosing during free play, while Reece was forced to do some writing before returning to his usual pastime of playing with the train set. It was Reece, however, that received praise and a sticker on the kindness tree. This table shows the two children’s experiences during a trip to the library that same morning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Naima</th>
<th>Reece</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At the library: Naima reads using finger to point at words. There is no interaction with any of the adults.</td>
<td>At the library: Reece needs help to find the ‘Thomas’ books. He tries to talk to Paul. He looks like he is going to cry when Paul ignores him (Paul is talking to another child, Liam). Paul asks “Have you found a book?” and gives him ‘Noisy Building Site’ book. Paul talks to Reece and Liam for five minutes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Naima reads with Sarah [another child] and then goes with Sarah to find more books. She runs about quite a bit (all the other children are reading) and no one comments. They then dance about. Rosie (TA) says “Sarah, Sarah, can you come and sit down please?”. Rosie is not angry, and there is no mention of Naima at all.

She plays with the mats for story time.

She is told to come to the carpet for the story. She dances round, and an adult says “Sarah, Naima, sit down please”.

She listens to the story, and is quiet through the rest of the session.

We travel back to school; Naima walks with her partner.

He brings books to show Paul, and then spends a while with Paul looking for ‘Thomas’ books. He runs off with a book and Paul shouts after “Walking, Reece!”. He wanders around, still looking, and looks again like he might cry. Paul comes to help. Ryan and Ahmed call him over, and Paul says “Why don’t you go play with them?”, which seems to solve the problem.

He is told to come to the carpet, and sits down with a mat, right in front of Paul. He wriggles a bit and then listens to story.

He calls out “Archer, Archer [meaning Mr Archer – Paul], somebody ripped the book!” Paul says “Yes, that’s sad”.

Reece puts his hand up to answer a question about mums, and Paul says “One minute” with dismissive hand. He looks sad, and says “My dad buy me a gun”. Paul is not listening and says “That’s good.” Then he says “A gun? [looks surprised] That’s not good”.

When other children laugh loudly, Reece whinges “We’re in the library!”.

Later, when Paul organises the line, he talks to Reece again because he wants to be in Paul’s group.

We can see from this observation how different these children’s experiences of school are: Naima has very little interaction with the adults, and even when she misbehaves, her part in this is largely ignored. In contrast, Reece has frequent interactions with Paul, either instigated himself or because he is seen as a problem.
The variation in interaction is related to a number of processes going on in the classroom, involving the children’s reluctance or willingness to interact with adults, their behaviour, and the sort of activities they get involved in. However, over time, this variation has the effect of making it easy for Paul to build up ‘knowledge’ of Reece, and his identity to be repeated, while Naima remains less ‘known’.

The question raised by this example is what effect does having less interaction have on how children are constituted as learners? Does being less well known confer greater flexibility and therefore more agency for the child to resist subjectivation? At Gatehouse Susan talked about children who are “under the radar”: she commented that “the average slips under the net, it’s always the average child” because the “needy” children get support and the “above average are more out there”. It may be that the low focus children are constituted as average learners by default; the teachers’ comments on bell curves suggest that they think a number of children will naturally be in the middle.

There was also an implication, however, that low focus children were themselves responsible for not presenting themselves to be known; this is connected to the idea that the learner must display and perform learning so that it can be recorded, as explored in Chapter 5. This meant that very quiet children, even if they were academically successful, were not constituted as ‘good’ learners. This was the case with Amy at St Mary’s: she has a speech problem that meant she was reluctant to talk, although it soon became apparent that she was the first child in the class who could read unknown words. But Paul never talked about her as a good learner, and in fact he rarely mentioned her at all. Thus the conception of the learner as specified in the FSP worked to close down the range of ways of being a good learner, so that the quiet studious child is not recognised. This obviously has implications for the EAL children, who may find it more difficult to present their learning and become a good learner.
For the high focus children, the increased attention worked to reinforce this status, particularly through spending more one-to-one time with the teacher. This is an example from Gatehouse:

In the afternoon free play session, Jim sits down on his comfy chair with Maira with a pamphlet advertising lots of books. Lana looks bored and tries to bring a box of books over, saying “Jim, do you want me to get these books?” Jim says “thank you” but to leave the rest there. Jim discusses with Maira which books his niece has and asks her “Should I buy this one?”. It is a much more grown-up conversation than with the other children. Maira sits on the chair by Jim; they seem very close. Lukman and Lana hover nearby, unable to get involved in this conversation, though they seem keen to enter into this private world where books are discussed. Meanwhile, Iqbal calls over to Jim many times. Jim doesn’t hear/ignores for at least a minute. Iqbal goes over, and Jim eventually responds “I’m sorry” and tries to help him. Jim returns to discussing the books and then their related TV programmes. Lana joins in a bit about TV, but is mostly ignored. She looks very cross. [A few minutes later] Jim continues to chat to Maira. She reads her book with him and guesses words from the pictures. She gets a sticker. (Fieldnotes, November)

Maira was constituted in this episode as the good learner while other children are deemed inadequate for the level of conversation she has with Jim. She is given an opportunity to display her learning by talking about books which is not open to most of the other children, and this allows her position as ‘good’ to be reinforced. It also allows her to show more middle-class values of valuing education outside of school. The physical and social exclusion of the other children is very obvious, and further demarcates the divide between high and low focus children.

Discussion: Who is recognisable as a ‘good learner’?

In this and the previous chapter I have argued that in these Reception classrooms, the idea of what a good learner looks like and the association of these attributes with White middle-class (and to some extent, female) identities works to distance almost all of the children from positions of educational success, but, at the same time as this overarching discourses limits the classes as “difficult”, some children are still recognisable as good learners within the web of discourses associated with their intersectional identities. This exploration of who is recognisable as a good learner has attempted to examine the complex ways in which it is possible for some children to
be constituted as successful in the classroom, while for others this is almost impossible. I have attempted to map the ways in which the extent of the intelligible space open to different children varies, and how moving outside of recognisability can lead to shifts in a child’s learner identity or them being re-made as inauthentic. I have used several examples of individual children who exemplify this complexity, but there were of course many more children in these classrooms than I have space to discuss, and so I have selected only the most clear examples of the processes I identified through my analysis. Other children have different experiences, and it would be simplistic to assume that all children of the same class, race and gender experience the same thing (not least because, as I have argued, they have some discursive agency). I can never convey the totality of the complexity of these children’s learner identities, because they were constantly shifting, solidifying and dissolving with every moment spent in school. All learner identities are performative, in need of constant maintenance and reinforcement.

Good learner identity positions are precarious, and dependent of the children’s particular performances of their identity. There is the constant risk that minoritised children’s successes may be seen as inauthentic, and White children too may be constituted as lacking in the appropriate ‘education ethic’ if they are seen as the ‘wrong’ type of working-class. Other children, particularly Black boys and some Asian boys, are more recognisable as bad learners, and any move beyond this identity is only possible with a significant shift in how their identity is understood. Pedagogic and organisation practices related to ‘ability’, behaviour management and variance in levels of interaction produce and reinforce children’s learner identities, constituting them as innate and pre-existing.

The implications of this argument are, in many ways, pessimistic. I argue that only a small number of children from minoritised groups and working-class families can approximate good learner identities, and this may only be possible in these classes where there are no White middle-class pupils. When success is recognised, it is fragile and can easily be dismissed as inauthentic. But, the case of Ryan also provides an example of how disrupting how a child is understood can open up small spaces for
him to be recognisable as succeeding, at least in some parts of learning. As Youdell argues, with a performative politics there is the possibility of resignification or reinscription – this is ‘not simply a doing again, but a reversal or a doing again differently’ (Youdell, 2006b:49/50, emphasis in original). There is the potential for interruptive work that seeks to introduce different discourses into the web, and perhaps widen the intelligible space open to these children. I return to these questions in the concluding chapter.
Chapter 8: Assessment practices

Introduction
In this chapter I consider the production of FSP results which are intelligible within the contexts of the study schools and the policy requirements. Firstly I explore how the FSP functions in the classroom and the teachers’ ‘cynical compliance’ (Ball, 2003) with the requirements, before considering how the final results are decided. The FSP results from these schools are then explained, and the relationship between these final results and the process of ‘moderation’ is discussed. I focus in particular on how the results at Gatehouse were changed under pressure from the school management and local authority (LA). I argue that the negotiation of policy at both the school and LA level works to reproduce inequalities in early years education.

The FSP in the classroom
Any discussion of how the final FSP results are decided must be framed by some examination of how the FSP functions in the classroom throughout the year. As I explained in Chapter 1, the 117 points across the thirteen different FSP scales are awarded or not awarded at the end of the academic year. Teachers are advised to base these decisions on what they have observed through the year and the evidence they have collected in FSP folders. The FSP is an example of the complex processes of renegotiation that occur when policy is translated into reality in the classroom; as Apple writes, ‘All texts are “leaky” documents. They are subject to “recontextualisation” at every stage of the process’ (Apple, 2006:71). As discussed in Chapter 5, the teachers described the FSP as inappropriate because it was too lengthy and the points were vague. They engaged in a discourse of ‘teacher knowledge’ as neutral and factual, and yet saw the FSP as an inaccurate vehicle for this ‘knowledge’ to be recorded. This disenchantment with the FSP lead to a range of practices in the classroom which, I would argue, are examples of what Ball called ‘cynical compliance’ when discussing the performance required by school inspections:
What is produced is a spectacle, game-playing, or cynical compliance, or what one might see as ‘enacted fantasy’ (Butler, 1990), which is there simply to be seen and judged (Ball, 2003b:223).

These practices were in keeping with the rules of the FSP requirements, but also showed their ambivalence towards it; practices such as collecting evidence were done only because they were checked, rather than an important part of the accumulation of ‘teacher knowledge’.

At both schools, the collection of evidence in individual FSP folders was seen as hugely time-consuming, but necessary for accountability purposes:

“You’ve got 22 folders down there with nothing in and it’s like Christ, let’s fill it. You need stuff in there – we need to show that we’re doing work”. (Jim, June 08)

Meeting with Paul and Kelly: they discuss a sheet to keep track of observations done. Paul says “It’s another pain in the arse bit of paperwork, but we need to find out where the big blanks are [...] we’ve got to do it or we’ll end up with a big fat zero by the end of the year.” (Fieldnotes, St Mary’s, November)

At St Mary’s, where there were fewer adults to help file observations, this collection of evidence was seen by Paul as a particular problem. The complex relationship between time spent on producing observations and actual teaching suggests Lyotard’s ‘law of contradiction’ (Lyotard, 1983 in Ball, 2003b): Ball explains:

This contradiction arises between intensification – as an increase in the volume of first order activities (direct engagement with students, research, curriculum development) required by the demands of performativity – and the ‘costs’ in terms of time and energy of second order activities that is the work of performance monitoring and management. (Ball, 2003b:221)

Providing activities meant producing observations, which then had to be filed, thus reducing the amount of time spent planning and preparing for new activities. This contradiction lead to the tactical selection of what observations to file. Paul was aware that the folders might be checked by the LA at the end of the year as part of ‘moderation’, so he engaged in ‘cynical compliance’ with this process:
FSP meeting: Paul tells Kelly about a discussion in last night's staff meeting about portfolios of evidence for other year groups. They were seen as unmanageable but they talked about having “two high, two middle, two low developmentally, or whatever you want to call it”. He says “I’m telling you this because it confirmed what we were thinking”. He explains about focusing on six children for the moderation, to “make sure we’ve got sound... [going to say judgement?] – make sure we can prove” for the moderation process. He says “We know where the other children are at, ‘cause we’re observing them all the time”. Later in the meeting, Paul explains “We’ll put the observation bits into the file, and then sort out the six children. Then the rest, we’ve just got to keep up”. (Fieldnotes, February)

As the weeks went by, it emerged that this “focusing” on six children meant only updating those six folders, and not worrying too much about observations of the other pupils, because the LA would only look at six folders, which Paul could pick. This is an entirely cynical tactic, based on producing that which will be monitored, which appears to be justified by Paul through the ‘teacher knowledge’ discourse: “We know where the other children are at”. Paul avoided letting the parents know about this practice, once deliberately turning the box of FSP folders around so that the label was hidden from parents so that they did not ask questions, but he was content to tell me about it. This ‘cynical compliance’ continued when he found out that he was not going to be moderated at all: he said “We’re not being moderated so we don’t need to worry about sticking everything in” (Fieldnotes, June). For Paul, the only purpose of sticking in the observations was to pacify the LA advisors, not to gather evidence for use in the final FSP scores.

This is not to say, however, that the FSP had a limited effect on these classrooms: it was a constant presence, in the form of observations being written, photographs being taken, and tick sheets for activities. It also affected planning: when Jim talked about colours not being a FSP point, he said “How can we teach it if it’s not a target?” (Fieldnotes, September). Hundreds of observations were written and stuck into folders over the course of the year and all of the adults in both classrooms were involved in the process. The importance of observations had a real effect on how the teachers understood their roles. For some, the ‘enacted fantasy’ (Butler, 1990) has become real and the collection of observations has become the essence of the
teacher’s role: when I asked if Susan (the support teacher at Gatehouse) was still collecting observations after the final results had been submitted to the LA, she said “if I didn’t do it I wouldn’t feel like I was doing my job” (Fieldnotes, June). For Susan, “doing her job” is collecting observations, not teaching. I would argue that the pressures of the FSP lead to teachers constructing their roles as enablers and recorders rather than teachers, providers of learning ‘opportunities’, which the children could take up if they chose. This is tied in with the idea of the child as having individual responsibility for their own learning. It is also legitimised by development discourse, which suggests that the ‘natural’ process of development will happen inevitably, and all the teacher can do is provide the space for it to happen; as Paul commented “actually it’s developmental, it’s not about the teaching” (July 09). This was evident in Lynn’s comment that, if the children get low FSP scores, “you’re failing them in that you’re not providing an appropriate situation for them” (November 08); the problem is not the teaching per se, but the ‘learning opportunities’ you have provided to aid development. As always, this situation is wrought with contradictions: the teachers felt they could not contribute to the child’s progress, and yet they were held responsible for it by the school management. Furthermore, despite the huge role of collecting observations in teachers’ everyday lives, ‘teacher knowledge’ always had precedence over observations in terms of perceived legitimacy, as shown in Chapter 5.

The impact of the FSP on classroom practices can be understood as two processes running in parallel: firstly, a process of producing evidence which exists only to be checked, and secondly, a process of gathering ‘knowledge’ which will eventually be used to score the children. Both of these processes are necessary for the teacher to appear and feel professional, but they do not necessarily need to interact, until the final point when the LA moderator relates the folder to the FSP scores. It is only at this point (and for only six children in the class), that these two parallel processes need to converge. These processes do, of course, feed into each other through the year (or at least the ‘knowledge’ collecting process feeds into the folder production by determining what is included) but they are not regarded as one and the same; they are two different processes, running along in parallel in order to be checked at
key points. This is the performance required, and the teachers have little choice but to comply.

**Producing final results**

In this section, I consider the production of the final FSP results in terms of practicalities and how the teachers construct this process. I use the term ‘production’ to deliberately emphasise that this is a process which is influenced at many levels and constrained by a number of forces. I concentrate initially on the constraints imposed at the classroom level, before later sections explore the influence of the LA in determining which results are accurate and acceptable. Throughout this chapter, I conceptualise the FSP results as ‘fabrications’, in that they are performances created for the purpose of accountability. Ball explains this term:

> Fabrications conceal as much as they reveal. They are ways of measuring oneself within particular registers of meaning, within a particular economy of meaning in which only certain possibilities of being have value. However, such fabrications are deeply paradoxical [...] Fabrications are both resistance and capitulation. They are a betrayal even, a giving up of claims to authenticity and commitment, an investment in plasticity. (Ball, 2003b:225 emphasis in original)

Both the final results (the ‘fabrication’) and the practices which produce them (the ‘cynical compliance’) are regulated by discourses of attainment gaps, deprived communities and underachievement, which I argue render some results intelligible and some not. Just as identity performances need to be intelligible in order for recognition to be conferred, these results must comply with circulating discourse in order to be accepted as ‘accurate’. The final results are not a neutral, scientific process of assessment but a fabrication, a produced set of numbers which sets particular children on trajectories of educational success, and all but foreclose this possibility for others.

The production of intelligible results begins with the teacher’s ‘knowledge’ of the child, which as we have seen in previous chapters, is not neutral. This information about the child as a learner, which is informed by discourses relating to their intersectional identity and their identity performance, is used by the teachers to
make decisions about which FSP points to award to which children. However, the teachers employed contradictory discourses to explain their use of knowledge, describing their knowledge as both entirely adequate and as inadequate to the task of deciding FSP results. The latter position was linked to their criticisms of the FSP as impossible, and as I argue later, contributed to their acceptance of external definitions of ‘accurate’ results. I consider both of these positions in turn.

Accounts which focus on ‘teacher knowledge’ as adequate

At times, the teachers were keen to explain their use of ‘knowledge’ to decide on FSP results. For example, despite his explanations of his detailed system of observations, Paul explained that he did not use the folders to mark the FSPs; he said “We’re not making our decisions based on what we have on our profiles [folders]”, instead arguing that it was based on discussions between him and Kelly. Further evidence of this came during my observation of an FSP meeting in the summer term, when I saw an example of how Paul assessed the children’s FSP scores:

FSP Meeting, June, in the staff room with Paul and Kelly: Paul gives me a print out of the children’s FSP results. He is unsure why Dinesh has an N for his Creative Development score (indicating a missing value in the chart). Paul sits at the laptop and checks Dinesh’s CD score. It seems he hasn’t done it. He says “I’ll do it now, I’ll ask you questions” (to Kelly). Kelly jokingly but affectionately says “It won’t be much”. Paul says “I know”. The folders are in a box next to Paul but he does not get Dinesh’s out. He reads out the FSP points saying “No” and “Not really”, after them. Kelly agrees, and says “It’s like Parinda” and gives an example from the day before when Parinda couldn’t take her own jumper off. Paul agrees that these children get everything done for them. He continues with points: “sings on his own, no chance”, next one - “no way”. Then he says as he goes through “bloody nightmare”, “engages in repetitive play – he doesn’t, he just doesn’t”. Paul gives him 0 and then realises he may have done it already – the 0 doesn’t work for some reason and stays as an N.

(Fieldnotes, St Mary’s, June)

Paul’s mistaken second attempt at assessing Dinesh’s creative development (CD) shows how FSP points can be allocated through teacher ‘knowledge’, because this is seen as objective factual information. We also see how Dinesh is constituted in this moment as a failing learner, which is in keeping with his learner identity throughout the year; as discussed, he was constituted through discourses of ‘overly mothered’
Asian boys as lacking in confidence, independence and ‘ability’. It was not clear if Paul did all the scores this way – it may be a special case as he was worried that the score was missing, or that Dinesh may be seen as particularly easy to assess - but nonetheless, it shows the power of the teacher knowledge discourse in legitimising this practice. Paul’s comment about engaging in repetitive play (one of the creative development points), “he doesn’t, he just doesn’t” seems to present Paul as trying desperately to give Dinesh points, but being bound by what he ‘knows’ that Dinesh can do. This ‘knowledge’ is co-constructed with Kelly, who would regularly contribute stories and observations from the classroom; in this case, another child’s actions are used to back up Dinesh’s lack of confidence. However, these opinions are still seen as fact, and used to give Dinesh a score of zero.

In contrast, at Gatehouse Jim was keen to stress his use of the FSP folders in his assessments:

“I read their folder, and then I read their assessments, and then I went through each point, and highlighted on their tracking form whether I thought they could or couldn’t.” (Jim)

Jim appeared to recognise that the points are based on what he ‘thinks’ rather than fact, but he also engaged with the idea that he can accumulate enough ‘knowledge’ to produce accurate results:

AB: So you do: looking through the folder, looking through the assessments...

Jim: And what I know.

AB: And what you know of the child...

Jim: I kind of absorb myself in one child. In previous years I would absorb myself in a child, which sounds really odd ... tick the boxes and then I wrote the report after that. This year, I absorb myself in the kid, tick the box, move on. Absorb, but because it was fresh in my mind I was able to tick the boxes and then move on.

Jim’s process of ‘absorbing’ himself in each child is constructed as the professional and accurate approach to assessment; this is also legitimised by LA advice and policy
documents such as ‘Creating the picture’ (DES, 2007). However, this detailed approach was dependent on the child: Jim also commented that “Sometimes you don’t need to look at the folder – you know or you don’t know if the child has achieved that, just from your own brain” (July 09). Although the teachers collected a great deal of information, at the point of deciding the final results, they appeared to rely a great deal on their accumulated ‘knowledge’. Furthermore, even when they do use the folders of evidence, this is likely to include only what correlates with their ‘knowledge’ anyway.

Attempts to resist the FSP system
Alongside the explanations of how teacher knowledge could be used for accurate assessment, the teachers also attempted, on occasion, to resist the practices and priorities associated with the FSP. These discussions rendered the entire system dubious, and revealed the extent to which the teachers regarded it as a performance and fabrication.

At the simplest level, the time-consuming nature of the FSP meant that some results were seen as less reliable than others; despite his ‘absorption’ process, Jim admitted:

“...so [I] whizzed through the others, and unfortunately the last three or four, no, the last two for sure was just a crazy, last minute, absolutely knackered, can’t be bothered anymore, rush.” (Jim, July 09)

Jim also told me about an occasion in a previous year when he had accidentally copied down the results given to the LA incorrectly as he was told to do it at the last minute. There were also doubts about the possibility of ‘knowing’ all the children well enough:

AB: Do you think you have all that information in your head, confidently?

Jim: No, not at all. I don’t feel confident about that, and I never have done. And I’ve always thought that when I was filling out their Foundation Stage Profiles at the end, that it’s always just a best fit, it always has been. It’s just there’s no way you can quantify everything that they’ve said and done throughout the whole year and give them a tick for
it. It’s impossible. It’s a way to make people do their job and do it properly.

(Interview with Jim, September 08)

In this extract, Jim attempts to resist the ‘teacher knowledge’ discourse by arguing that the FSP is impossible in practice. The results are rendered doubtful – it is “just a best fit” – and the entire system is dismissed as an accountability measure. Jim made other comments which focused on the subjective nature of the FSP, such as “it does depend on your mood when I’m marking” (September 08). His overall attitude to the FSP was summed up by a comment he made during the weeks when he was producing the final scores:

“We have to work with the Foundation Stage Profile but I just think it’s rubbish. It’s just to produce a number. The more I work with it the more I think it’s rubbish” (Fieldnotes, Gatehouse, June).

This explanation of the FSP system as being “just to produce a number” dismisses the entire worth of the process, and in turn, as we shall see, justifies the changing of the final scores when they do not seem ‘right’. Paul, who regarded the FSP as “impossible”, similarly gave an account of the process which suggested he was simply ‘doing his best’ with a flawed system. This dismissive discourse worked alongside other constructions of the FSP as the realisation of ‘teacher knowledge’; even though they contradicted each other, these two stances were deployed at different times in order to position the teachers as both professionals and as resisting the system. They were constrained by discourses of what makes a good early years teacher, particularly that they should have good ‘developmental knowledge’ of each child. Both of these discourses, however, fail to recognise the power of the results in providing a baseline for the children as they move up the school, and the role of the teachers in constituting pupils as good or bad learners. The focus is never on the subjective nature of the teachers’ decisions, even when the results are dismissed as a “best fit”.

Ordering and checking the results

Further contradictory ideas about accuracy were evident in the teachers’ descriptions of how they ranked and checked the children’s FSP results. The teachers drew upon
their ‘knowledge’ to determine whether their individual assessments were ‘right’ when children were compared against each other. This process of checking worked as another check of intelligibility (the first check being if the individual scores were recognisable in relation to the child’s learner identity). At Gatehouse, a simple process of ordering the children in the class by total point score was the main checking method:

After school, Jim shows me the final FSP figures on the screen. He says he has sorted them, “from bottom to top” so that he can “check” them, to see if there are any “glaring inaccuracies”. He says “Like Liri, I wasn’t sure because she’s above Khadija and Khalid, but she’s of those children, you know when you look in the booklet and there’s all these examples, she says those things, so she scores highly on the FSP.” (Fieldnotes, June)

This practice is based on the idea that Jim has an accurate overall picture of the children in his class as compared to each other. He is able to find the “glaring inaccuracies” because he knows how high or low each child should score, and this overrides the decisions made through the painstaking process of going through each point in turn and ticking yes or no. He is able to deem his own decisions as inaccuracies, if they do not fit his overall model of the class, which is, I would argue, informed by ideas of tripartite ability groups and a bell curve. In this quote, he is confused by Liri’s high position, which is unintelligible given her constitution as a good but not ‘high ability’ learner (as shown by her position in the middle ability group). However, his comments about her saying the right things render her success inauthentic; he later explained “[she] has the input at home to ask pertinent questions, and therefore the question slots perfectly into an area, and you feel very confident that she’s able to do that”. Liri is once again made recognisable, and her high position is intelligible within this discourse of the inauthentic minoritised learner.

At St Mary’s, Paul used other methods to check that results were recognisable: he commented that the colour coding produced on his final results sheet was useful (shown in Appendix 8). The programme he used included automatic colour coding, with scores of nine in purple, scores of 1-3 in green, scores of zero in red, and all other scores in white:
AB: Do the colours help? You said about the colours.

Paul: They're quite useful actually, it draws your attention to, it draws your attention to Dinesh, the green that they show... they're very vivid, they show, that is quite handy, because these jump out at you – Natasha, Dinesh, Parinda. You just glance at that in colour and it just flies out at you.

Paul appears to like the visual confirmation of his 'knowledge' of some children as low-attaining. Like Jim's system of checking, Paul's desire for the low scoring children to 'jump out at you', reflects his need for the overall picture to mirror his knowledge of the children. I asked Paul about this system of checking:

AB: Do you ever get surprised when you put them [the scores] all together?

Paul: Do you know what, not really. There might be a number and I think "Shit!" [surprised voice] and I look at what the point, the profile point and I have to rethink. Oh yeah, I mean I've reviewed it definitely before the final data. I'll scan, I'll go through it and think "Shit, why is that 6? That kid, why is that 6?" And then I'll look at it again and think, "Oh yeah, they can't do that". And I'll say to Kelly, "Are we sure they can't do that?" And Kelly will say "yep", and it'll be like yep, so that makes sense. ... I've never been asked a question that I didn't have that for. I definitely review it myself.

[...]

AB: And do you ever, is there any kind of process of looking through them and thinking "Oh that looks right"?

Paul: Yeah, I do, I do, 'cause what happens is, at the beginning of next term, the local authority will come and say [higher voice] "Er, we've noticed, the spread is this and that, what do you think about the trends here and there? Why do you think that's happened? Why is it?" you know. "Why is it that they can all write, I don't know, a paragraph, but actually they can't hold a pencil?" [both laugh] How did that happen, d'you know? (Interview with Paul, July 09)

Here Paul explains his checking system in terms of needing to produce results that the LA will not find to be inaccurate. The results need to tie in with what they will find if they visit the classroom. He also describes how even if he is surprised, he often
finds his initial detail to be accurate; this argument constructs the FSP scores as objective and neutral.

As with many of their practices, the teachers also engaged in an alternative discourse where they dismissed the idea of changing any figures: as Jim put it, “they get what they get”. When I asked Jim if he thought any children were in the wrong place, he commented “No, there weren’t and that’s actually, it’s really nice”, seeing this as a confirmation of his ‘knowledge’. In this discourse, which Paul also deployed, the results produced are neutral facts created through detailed observation, and simplistic checking is a practice for lazy teachers:

“I mean to me there’s absolutely no point in saying “This is a child who we clearly know is nursery level in most things, make sure he’s only got 3, 4. Whereas this child is like an average child, he should be getting 6, 7. Whereas this is a sort of exceptional child, he should be getting.....”. You know the sort of high/low/medium group, and then expect them accordingly to be getting 6 ... My feeling is that a statement is a statement, the profile points, although vague, there’s exemplification, now available, which we’ve now got.” (Paul, July 09)

Paul’s contradictory position dismisses his role as a subjective assessor; he argues that exemplification means that there is no need for simple allocations of points based on top, middle or bottom assessments. Both teachers appeared to deny their roles as arbiters of accuracy (at least at this point), in favour of a construction of the FSP as accurate. This tension between the desire to compare results with ‘teacher knowledge’ of the order children should be in and the idea that the results are objective assessments is tied up with the teachers’ construction of the FSP as an ineffective and unwieldy assessment system. Their comments about how vague the points are, how they are too “wordy” and are unequal, make this shift between caring about individual points to focusing on final scores and rank possible, if not all the time. Both the class teachers engaged in practices which ensured that their results were intelligible within their framework of understanding the pupils’ identities as learners. After I explain the FSP results awarded, I consider a final check of intelligibility, the LA moderation process.
The final results

In this section, I outline the main features of the FSP results from both classes\(^{39}\). The process by which these results are produced is a messy one, constrained by many factors. They are not accurate indications of different children’s abilities, but ‘fabrications’ for the sake of performativity. Nonetheless, these results do have material effects: they are the basis for the information handed over the Year 1 teacher, and they form part of the results that are published on a local and national basis by the DCSF. I deal with the main features of each school in turn\(^{40}\).

Gatehouse

In Jim’s class at Gatehouse there were 27 children\(^ {41}\), who scored between 104 (Farah) and 45 points (Waseem) out of a possible 117. Most of the children scored in the 70s, 80s and 90s (18 of them are inside this range), with eight children with scores in the 90s. The numbers of pupils with final scores in each range is shown in Figure 4.

![Figure 4: Number of children in each range of scores at Gatehouse](image)

\(^{39}\) More detailed analysis of the results can be found in Appendix 8.

\(^{40}\) As the numbers of results are very small it is not appropriate to do any statistical analysis on the results. The data for which children were on Free School Meals were not available at either school.

\(^{41}\) Although children from both Jim and Liz’s classes appear in the data, I was only given access to the final results from Jim’s class.
We can see that Jim’s class at Gatehouse broadly fits a standard pattern of a few high scores, a few low, and the bulk of children in the middle – the “bell curve” that was mentioned in interviews, albeit with a long tail. There was no great variation between scores in different subject areas.

In its analysis of the FSP results, the government uses the term ‘good level of development’ to describe pupils getting over 78 in total, and at least six or more in each of the PSED and CLL scales. Twelve of the 27 children in Jim’s class make this benchmark, which is 44.4% of the class. Nationally, the proportion of children reaching a good level of development in 2008/09 was 51.6% (DCSF, 2009c), so Jim’s class at Gatehouse would be below this national score.

**Gender**

There were 13 boys and 14 girls in Jim’s class at the time of the assessment. The girls took up far more of the higher total marks, as shown in Figure 5.

![Figure 5: Total FSP scores in rank order at Gatehouse](image-url)
The average score for boys was 75.4 points, while for girls it was 86.7 points. The gender difference is also apparent if the government's benchmark is applied: four boys and eight girls reached a 'good level of development' in Jim’s class. That is 30.8% of the boys, and 57.1% of the girls. Therefore almost 70% of the boys are designated to be ‘developmentally’ below where they should be at the end of their first year of school, compared to just over 40% of the girls. These results are in keeping with policy discourses regarding ‘failing boys’ but also with Jim’s comments about girls as engaging in the kind of activities that are valued as being ‘learning’.

**Ethnic group**

The wide variety of ethnic groups present in Jim’s class makes this any analysis complex; all but two of the 27 children come from minoritised groups. If we use the government’s benchmark, the 12 children who have reached a ‘good level of development’ are: four Kosovan children (out of four), three Afghan children (out of four), one White British child, one Black African child, one Moroccan child, one Iraqi child and one Bangladeshi child. This means that while all the Kosovan children reached this level, only one of the five Bangladeshi children did so. I would argue that these results are intelligible given the discourses surrounding these minoritised groups: as I have discussed, while some Muslim children can be constituted as ‘good migrants’, other groups, and particularly boys from these groups, are constituted as failing to become learners.

**St Mary’s**

In Paul’s class at St Mary’s there were 23 children. The range of results is much larger than at Gatehouse, with a far lower lowest score of 20 for Dinesh (the lowest score in Jim’s class was 45), and a similar highest score of 104 for Grace and Demi. In terms of the spread of results (see Figure 6) a large proportion of the class are in the highest range scoring over 100.
This is quite a different pattern of results from Gatehouse, with seven of the 23 children scoring between 100 and 104, and three children scoring below 50. Perhaps this pattern was due to Paul feeling less pressure to produce results similar to a bell curve. The cluster of children with high scores are mostly girls who were constituted as ‘good learners’ in the classroom; perhaps Paul perceived them as broadly similar (this issue is discussed further below). The lower scores are also consistent with Paul’s views of some of his pupils as unusually difficult. In terms of subject area, on average the pupils in Paul’s class scored higher on Physical Development, Knowledge and Understanding of the World and Creative Development than in the core subjects (see Appendix 8 for details). Despite the unbalanced distribution of scores, only eight of the 23 children in Paul’s class met the government’s benchmark for a ‘good level of development’. This represents 34.7% of the class, below the national figure of 51.6% (DCSF, 2009c).

**Gender**

There were 14 girls and nine boys in Paul’s class (see Figure 7 below). There were fewer boys in the top scores, but the lower scores are quite mixed. It should be noted that this class had quite an imbalance of girls to boys, however.
The average score for the girls was 83.3 points, whereas it was far lower for the boys at 65.5; the average for the girls was brought up by the large group of girls scoring over 95. Seven out of the 14 girls reached a ‘good level of development’, which is 50% of the girls, compared to just one of the nine boys (Ryan), which is 11.1%. There are clear gender differences in Paul’s results, which again are intelligible within current discourses of gendered attainment. It is also noticeable with Paul’s results that there were two girls who scored eight on every one of the 13 scales, and another two girls who scored eight on every scale but one or two, which were sevens. This consistency is recognisable within discourses which position girls as good all-round learners who are perhaps not ‘brilliant’ at anything, but are no less valued for it.

*Ethnic group*

Again, this analysis is complicated by the small numbers of children in each ethnic group (detailed results are given in Appendix 8). Of the eight children who reached the government benchmark, two were Bangladeshi, one was Black African, one was
Black Other, two were Mixed Other, one was White British, and one was Mixed White/Asian. The fifteen other children are labelled by the FSP as having failed to reach a ‘good level of development’.

**Emerging patterns**

Any analysis of these results is limited by the small numbers involved; it is unwise to draw conclusions from these two classes. However, it is worth noting that although these are individual assessments which use specific criteria applied to each child, when the scores are aggregated patterns emerge which are largely consistent with national results. In terms of gender in particular, these two classes reflect the sector-wide trend of higher results for girls. The results also show how easily large numbers of children from disadvantaged and minority communities are labelled as failing to achieve a ‘good level of development’; the next section discusses how these results are intelligible within prevailing discourses.

**Producing intelligible and acceptable results**

As I have discussed, the final FSP results were produced using ‘teacher knowledge’ to be recognisable within discourses circulating in the classroom about who was a good learner and who was not. However, the need to produce intelligible results operated at another level over and above the teachers’ decisions about which points to award. The influence of the school management and LA superseded the ‘knowledge’ of the teachers, as they operated as the final arbiters of what was accurate. The LA advisors and school management fulfilled this regulatory function both informally and formally. The formal process was conducted through ‘moderation’, but results could also be influenced through informal chats with teachers. Throughout these processes, the LA’s role in deciding what is accurate was not questioned. This flexibility over the idea of correct results, whereby ‘accurate’ means that which is intelligible in that particular context, derives from national policy documents regarding the FSP, particularly in the years immediately after its introduction. In these years, when the FSP data was published by the Department for Education and Skills (DES), the statistics would come with this caveat:
The results should be treated with caution as this is the first year that such data have been collected. The data result from a new statutory assessment for which teachers have received limited and variable training and the moderation of results within and between local education authorities (LEAs) has been patchy. Therefore, there is less confidence in the quality of the assessments and the consistency between teachers, schools/settings, and LEAs. In addition, we know some of the data to be of poor quality and completeness, although we are satisfied that these do not affect the results significantly at a national level. (DES, 2004:1, emphasis in original)

Implicit in this statement is the idea that teachers need to learn to assess properly, and that the local authorities or national government can ultimately define what accurate assessment is (and what is 'poor quality') and recognise it when the teachers produce it. This idea turns the idea of accuracy on its head, by defining it as something which can only be recognised after the results have been produced, not something which can be ensured through the careful application of fair practices (as in scientific discourse, for example). This flexible definition of 'accuracy' allows the DES to decide when the teachers have got it right, and therefore which sets of results should be taken as indicative of children's progress. As the analysis below shows, this idea is transferred to the local authority, who define what the accurate set of results for the Reception class at Gatehouse should look like. This definition is based on powerful discourses in education which prescribe what constitutes intelligible results, and in the process exclude many children from educational success.

The production of FSP results was a sophisticated fabrication informed by complex factors; alongside the need to make results intelligible for an inner city school, there was one final additional pressure, related to 'value added' scores. Value added scores are a measure whereby a school is judged on the 'progress' made between two tests several years apart; it aims to judge the 'value' added by the school during the children's time there. Although there are no official measurements of value added scores based on the difference between the FSP and the Key Stage 1 'Sats' tests (two years later), the data suggests that this has not prevented schools (and possibly LAs) from beginning to apply value added principles and calculations to FSP results. This practice is also indicated by the adoption of assessment software such as
‘Target Tracker’ at St Mary’s, which tracks children’s progress in several tests as they move through primary school. As we see in the data below, policy works in complex ways to define what are acceptable results, and further disadvantage certain groups of pupils.

The moderation process

All of the teachers commented regularly on the pressure they felt from the LA, in terms of assessment, training and the production of final results. Within these comments, it was clear that the teachers did not hold the LA advisors in high regard, and often found their advice to be confusing or inappropriate. A particular source of stress came from the ‘moderation process’. This is explained by the EYFSP handbook as:

Moderation activities within the context of the EYFS profile involve professional dialogue to ensure practitioner judgements are based on assessments of children consistent with nationally agreed exemplification and that attainment of individual scale points is a reliable, accurate and secure process. The moderation process is a supportive one, designed to develop practitioners’ confidence in their approaches to assessment and their understanding of the EYFS profile. (QCA, 2008a)

Moderation was explained to me by the teachers as taking the form of giving a number of folders to the LA advisors, who would assess them against the final scores, and perhaps come in and assess the children as well (this is the process which caused Paul to concentrate on six folders). Moderation was seen by the teachers as an assessment of their ability to score children accurately, but was also resented as the LA appeared to give conflicting advice:

“We’ve been moderated every year, the first year Lynn and I were teaching in Reception ... and we were told that between, like a score of four was an average score. The following year ... we were told six is a good score.” (Jim, March 09)

“It’s quite funny because actually we’ve had, we’ve had a lot of moderation, you know [LA’s] been very big about having schools moderated and a variety of early years teachers come in, and moderate alongside us and going to moderation things, and all of that sort of thing, and even last year when we had someone quite focused on looking at their moderation, and talking to them and moderating to death – the results that came out were just, they were even worse than previous
years! And I’m just thinking OK, if someone alongside us from [LA] is doing it along with us and is saying “this, this, this” and “this area is appropriate” and the results are even more, a larger gap, even more so than previous years, well I don’t know what to say.” (Lynn, November 08)

“I was moderated, which was a total farce. They told me [each year] that I’d been marking too high, then too low and then too high, and that basically that I need to make sure I mark the children a certain way. And I was like well, you know, I can’t mark them a certain way, they come out with what they get.” (Jim, September 08)

From these comments, it is apparent that the teachers resent this external definition of accurate results; there is a real tension between the teachers’ discourses of ‘knowledge’ and the LA’s power to decide if scores are “too high”. In the following section, I discuss what informed this assessment of Gatehouse results as “too high”.

**Inner city ‘underattainment’ discourses**

The moderation process seemed to be informed by discourses of inner city schools similar to those expressed by the teachers, but also by concerns about value added scores; Jim explained why his marks had been “too high” in the past:

Jim:  [Our scores] were “too high”, they were way above the national average. And because the school is in an EEZ, or education action...

AB:  An EAZ?

Jim:  Yes, we shouldn’t be that high, because we’re achieving really high so by the time they’ve got to Year 6 they’ve gone down, and what are we doing wrong?

AB:  And that doesn’t look good?

Jim:  No, exactly. So the second year we were told to make sure, that between 4-5 points is a good score, so we did that.

(Interview with Jim, September 08)

42 This ‘gap’ is presumably between the Gatehouse results and the national average.

43 EAZs were Education Action Zones, areas designated as needing additional funding due to poor educational results. They were a new Labour policy enacted in the early 2000s to target deprived areas, which turned into the Excellence in Cities programme.
Jim’s comments suggest that in the past he has been told directly to keep his results low because of the intake of the school. Furthermore, his assessments are unacceptable because high results will make the value added scores look like the school has done something ‘wrong’ in the years between the FSP and the subsequent Sats tests. As a result, he is told that 4-5 is a good score, rather than the usual score of six. Here we see how the idea of teacher knowledge and the careful observation of children to assess each point is superseded by pressure to keep overall results lower, including by using a “good score” as a tool in assessment. Jim explained how this mechanism would affect his marking:

Jim: I don’t know how you’re told [frustrated laugh]. I don’t really understand it, they want results, but then they tell you that between one and six is a good result. [quietly] I don’t know, I find it all a bit odd. That really sways your opinion of the whole thing.

AB: Yeah, to be told six is a good score...

Jim: Then for instance I might think well, Carl is good and he’s a little bit better than good so he really should be getting sevens -

AB: But if they tell you four is a good score then you think well maybe Carl-

Jim: Exactly, exactly.

AB: - is a five.

Jim: Exactly.

(Interview with Jim, March 09)

Thus the LA’s flexible definition of what is a “good score” is a useful mechanism for keeping overall results lower, but is framed in terms of a desire to teach teachers to assess accurately.

Jim’s comments suggest that it is easy for labels such as ‘EAZ’ and their class and race associations to be collapsed into ‘low attaining’. The LA’s definition of what is accurate is informed by raced and classed discourses of the inner city which view
'challenging' areas as incommensurate with educational success. Jim was critical of this association, despite the operation of a very similar discourse within his classroom: he was clear that this advice was not a one-off, and fully expected it to be the case in the year I followed his class:

AB: So it’ll be interesting to see this year then whether it’s still “too high”.

Jim: Yeah exactly, I’m sure it’ll be exactly the same. It’s all because you know, we’re in, shouldn’t really, we’re in an EAZ, underprivileged children - [cynically] there should be no chance of them getting nines.

Jim is very cynical here about the pressure from the LA to keep the results ‘realistic’ in terms of the prevailing discourses about the local population. I questioned him further:

AB: Do you think there are low expectations then of a school like this?

Jim: Well apparently there are. Apparently really low aspirations and expectations, and I don’t think that’s right. I mean yeah, they speak a different language and come from different backgrounds but some aspects ... the children here are I think so polite and I mean I worked in a school in [other borough], and they were nice kids but they were nowhere near as polite as the children here.

Jim attempts here to position himself (as in previous comments about the children’s EAL status) as more positive about the children than the LA. However, the similarity of the discourses allegedly used by the LA to those used by Gatehouse teachers suggest that the link between the “difficult intake” and low results works powerfully to remove the possibility of educational success for these children. Although the LA may talk in terms of EAZs and “too high” marks, this is the same discourse that Lynn mobilised when talking about parents who don’t look after their children or let them play in the park, or when Jim compared his school to a “White middle-class primary school in the middle of England”. However, the teachers’ role in constituting the pupils as ‘difficult’ is obscured, in the end, by the LA’s interventions.

Nevertheless, these comments do remind us of the power of policy decisions to
define who is likely to fail and who to succeed. As mentioned, the FSP booklet lists ‘ethnic minorities’ as a group with particular needs, alongside boys and SEN pupils. At a wider level, policies such as Educational Action Zones and more recently London Challenge schools might aim to weaken the link between deprivation and educational underattainment through ‘intervention’, but simultaneously have the effect of solidifying this association in that area or that school. This raises serious questions about the long-term effects of social policies. I return to this issue in the concluding chapter.

The effects of LA pressure

The pressure from the LA was such that the teachers, even if they attempted to resist this discourse, were constrained by the LA’s power to define accurate results and in turn the quality of teaching and assessment the teachers produced. Although the teachers claimed their values differed from those of the accountability system, they admitted that they felt pressure to produce results that would appease the LA. For example, Jim joked about scoring all the children the “good score” of six:

Jim: I was thinking of just marking them all six [joking] and be done with it [we laugh]. I don’t know, I mean I wonder if anyone would question it if I did that? I mean obviously I might lose my job or something terrible, but I mean it’s like, they want us to fit into a bell curve, that’s all it is. You know, a few low, a few middle, and a few high.

AB: And do you think – I think they would notice more if everyone was the same than if you [spread action]

Jim: Yeah absolutely, I just, I don’t know.

AB: Do you feel a bit as if you’re just producing what they want to hear?

Jim: Well yeah, pretty much. ‘Cause I look at it, and I think ‘Oh they got three there, and they got three there [worried voice], oh I don’t know, probably need a few more. Can I squeeze it in, do I have evidence? Do I have evidence inside my head, for this?’

(Interview with Jim, March 09)
Jim’s comments can be seen as resistance within constraints: he knows he cannot just mark every child as six, but joking about it reveals the ridiculousness of the situation and the extent to which teachers feel they are required to produce acceptable results. His comment “they want us to fit into a bell curve, that’s all it is” shows how disengaged the FSP process is from the realities of the classroom: Jim argues that the main point is to produce a normal distribution of results, “a few low, a few middle, and a few high” in order to please the LA. Here Jim is questioning the centrality of the normal distribution discourse in education. He explains how the process of producing acceptable results works in practice - how he tries to find places to add more points, within the framework of the ‘teacher knowledge’ discourse - he asks himself not if he has evidence in the child’s folder, but “inside my head”. There still seems to be a consideration for evidence, albeit only teacher ‘knowledge’, in Jim’s assessment; he is not totally bound by the LA’s requirements. Nonetheless his comments do suggest that he feels very strongly that he needs to produce an acceptable pattern of scores, meaning a normal distribution of results.

I also asked Lynn, after she had been critical of the LA’s involvement, if she felt under pressure to produce the required scores:

“I mean, look, you’re human, obviously if someone keeps saying to you, “Oh that’s not right, no, that’s not right, that’s not right, I don’t want you to mark them into a curve, I don’t want you to fit them into a pigeon hole, I want you to mark them how you think you mark them” and then you get told off for that, then you think - and you do get to the point where you think I’m just going to fill this out – what do you think I should write, so that you will stop bothering me please.” (Lynn, November 08)

Here Lynn describes the LA’s advice as contradictory and critical, asking the teachers not to mark into a curve and then telling them they are wrong when they don’t. Her frustration with the FSP system and the LA is evident, and this frustration leads, she suggests, to teachers filling in the FSP in ways that will discourage the LA from criticising them. This shows the regulatory function of the LA, who define what is accurate, but also blur the requirements of accurate assessment (while emphasising its importance) to such an extent that Lynn feels she just wants to stop them “bothering” her.
Paul made similar comments about how other teachers complete the FSP:

"... the profiles you can make up any number and they're not going to bloody know. They do come and moderate every two or three years, whatever it is, and you show them three samples\(^{44}\) ... and they check that you're making the correct assumptions. Well my experience is that most people just go and say right, what do we have to write to make them that level? They know the child is at a different level, but then they just go ahead and make up the points. [LA] say the average child would be expected to get up to six, the lower child would be expected to get no more than three, and the sort of super duper child who should be in Year 1 by now will get, you know, seven, eight and at absolute most nine. They tell you, \([\text{agitated}]\) so all you have to do is decide which child, where it fits in, through your year's experience, and give them a number! That's what people clearly do, \([\text{quieter}]\) sometimes. And it's just crap. I try to really genuinely form a system and it’s always “Do your best, do your best” because everybody knows it can’t be done.” (Paul, October 08)

Paul suggests firstly, that the limited sampling involved in moderation encourages teachers to write whatever is necessary to ensure the child really is the level they say they are; and secondly, that the LA advice on what low, middle and “super duper” children will get also encourages teachers to decide on which category and “give them a number”. He distances himself from this practice, arguing that he has a “system” instead, but also suggests that the impossibility of the FSP means “doing your best” is all that is possible.

The limits of these teachers’ resistance to external definitions of accurate results are caused by, I would argue, both the policy-legitimised idea that teachers can get assessment ‘wrong’, and by their perceptions of the FSP as inaccurate and inappropriate. They seem to argue that since the system provided is impossible, why shouldn’t we just make up the results? This argument is perhaps used to obfuscate the complex issues at work here: the contradictory pressures of being a professional teacher and assessing ‘accurately’, the demeaning nature of having your decisions deemed ‘wrong’, the ambiguous role of FSP results in defining good teaching in Reception, and the unseen force of the discourses about learners that circulate in the

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\(^{44}\) Paul appears to be referring to the three levels (high, middle and low) of the sample folders he has to provide; usually a boy’s folder and girl’s folder are submitted for each level (his six ‘focus’ children).
classroom every day. Nonetheless, these comments do show the power of the LA in
deciding the final results, even when this is linked to discourses of inevitable inner
city failure.

‘Keeping the wolf from the door’ and value added scores

Paul made comments which suggested that other teachers produced results in order
to avoid any criticism from the LA, and made connections similar to those made at
Gatehouse regarding value added scores. I asked him whether he checked through
his results to see if any scores looked out of place and changed them (he had earlier
said that he “reviewed” them):

Paul: I think some people do. I think so. I think the people who
don’t monitor them do ‘cause they don’t want to stand
out. I’ve seen that.

AB: OK, so that would look-

Paul: [quietly, conspiratorially] it wouldn’t draw attention to
them. But what’s stupid about that, is that although this is
not used to predict national curriculum levels, they’re
trying to use Target Tracker to do it ... so I think people
who do it are trying to cover, trying to keep the wolf away
from the door-type thing, but actually it means with value
added if you’ve got a bunch of children who are really
developmentally very behind, and you’re telling everybody
that they’re normal [correcting self] - that their kind of
expectation would be a normal expectation, you’re really
setting up for massive failure, for the kids. So personally, I
think it’s stupid.

(Interview with Paul, July 09)

Paul suggests that other teachers “keep the wolf away from the door” by changing
results so that they won’t attract attention45. He seems to suggest that it is
incompetence or laziness that means teachers have to adjust the results to avoid the
LA’s criticism. Implicit in these comments is the idea that there is a commonly known
way to produce results that the LA will find acceptable. Paul’s argument that this

45 This phrase is usually used in terms of escaping from the dire consequences of poverty – for
instance, one might take an unpleasant job in order to ‘keep the wolf from the door’, i.e. to avoid
starvation or eviction. Paul appears to use it to mean avoiding the attentions of the LA advisors.
practice means that “developmentally very behind” children will be assessed as "normal" implies that this adjustment will inevitably involve assessing children as higher than is accurate: he seems to suggest that teachers will falsely raise scores, not just make them more consistent. This stands in contrast to the kind of practices Jim describes at Gatehouse, where the focus seems to be less on the teachers trying to “cover” up their pedagogical failings, and more on producing results which are not “too high”. Nonetheless, Paul’s comments (which can also be read as attempt to distance himself from other teachers) do suggest that the concept of producing intelligible results is familiar at St Mary’s too; it is however, less clear how this operates.

In these comments, Paul engages with the idea that the FSP is an accurate assessment: he suggests that his unchanged results will give a true representation, in contrast to the falsely inflated results produced by some teachers. This obviously contradicts Paul’s other comments where he dismissed the accuracy of the FSP on the grounds that it was vague, unscientific and “impossible” to manage. The presentation of the FSP as an accurate assessment here reflects Paul’s desire to show that he does not act in the “stupid” ways of his peers, who prioritise the short-term aim of “keeping the wolf away from the door”. These comments also show the flexible and contradictory ways in which the FSP can be framed, and again, the taken for granted nature of ability and development, which are never questioned.

We also see in Paul’s comments how value added systems serve to further regulate what results are deemed acceptable, and how the school is encouraged by these performative technologies to engage in tactical assessment practices (Stobart, 2008). Value added scores are included in league tables for primary and secondary schools and the principle of measuring ‘progress’ over several years appears to be spreading in education. As I have argued elsewhere (Bradbury, 2010), the inclusion of ‘contextual’ data in these scores sanctions low expectations for particular ethnic groups, FSM pupils and boys. At both schools the teachers mentioned the need to keep results lower in order not to make life difficult in later years; Paul says that a side-effect of artificially raising your FSP scores will be that when the Key Stage 1 Sats
results come out, the children will do unexpectedly badly: it will be “a massive failure, for the kids”. This comment ignores the fact that value added scores have little meaning (and are never published) at an individual level: they only have significance in terms of judging a school.

Both teachers were also critical of practices associated with value added: Paul commented that using these scores was “completely wrong, ‘cause what they’re assessing there is not national curriculum level-type predictable”. At Gatehouse, Jim also thought it inappropriate to use the results of the FSP and Key Stage 1 Sats:

[We have been discussing the confusing LA advice]

AB: But it sounds like from what you’re saying that you’re not even sure if you want to get good results?

Jim: Yes ... [the LA say] they really should not be scoring that high, according to the government figures of, you know, this bell curve kind of thing ... [but] this is totally different from the rest of the school, this is a different curriculum, it’s not the same so I don’t know why they’re using the figures and [action – waves hands as if measuring at two points].

AB: Mapping the children on?

Jim: When it’s not really the same thing.

(Interview with Jim, September 08)

Here Jim appears to use the idea of a “bell curve” to mean a prediction for what children will get in Key Stage 1 and 2 based on their FSP results (an entirely different idea from his previous use of the term to mean a normal distribution of scores within the class). He rejects the use of the FSP for value added measures because it is a different curriculum; he went on to say: “it’s just ridiculous ... I mean there are similarities – it’s in a school, it’s a document, but you know, it would totally skew it”. Jim explained that wide range of areas involved in the FSP compared to the Sats (which are just Maths and English) meant it would not make sense to compare them. However, Jim’s rejection of the use of the FSP in value added scores did not prevent
this from being one of the main justifications for some final “adjustments” made to the FSP scores at Gatehouse, as I discuss later in this chapter).

The issue of value added scores was important in both schools as a factor which determined what results were acceptable and even desirable (Jim’s comments below reveal the role of these scores in the production of the results at Gatehouse). One of the functions of value added scores and particularly contextual value added scores (CVA) is to recognise the achievements of schools with lower overall attainment through a focus on ‘progress’. With contextual scores this progress is calculated within a statistical framework which expects slower progress for children from some minorities, on FSM and from lower IDACI indices, and boys (Bradbury, 2010); as such, CVA is often presented as a mechanism which is ‘fairer’ to schools in deprived areas with high proportions of FSM and minoritised pupils. These schools’ positions in local league tables, importantly, are likely to be far higher when ranked by CVA than raw scores. Therefore, value added measures are particularly important to schools like Gatehouse and St Mary’s; they provide a chance to demonstrate the quality of the school in the light of ‘contextual’ issues.

It would seem from the comments made about value added that the importance of these scores means that they function as a powerful but complex regulatory mechanism. The school management and LA find desirable results that are low enough to show that children make progress as they move through the school; there is an incentive to mark low. Combined with the pressure to deflate results that are deemed too high for a deprived area, value added scores work powerfully to ensure that FSP results at these schools remain below national averages. However, these scores remain one of several different ways of judging a school, just one disciplinary technology in the accountability system. There is always a danger for low-attaining schools that they will not be judged on value added, and so lowering scores may be self-defeating. The ambiguity of the relative importance of different measures was shown in 2008 when the government used raw GCSE percentage scores to define 638 schools as ‘failing’, whatever their CVA scores (BBC News, 2008a), an apparent reversal of previous policy which had prioritised progress and improvement over
percentage figures. Thus the ‘fairer’ measure, presented as a gift to low-attaining schools, can also be taken away without warning. At Gatehouse and St Mary’s, the concern over value added in the Foundation Stage, where it is not even officially used, suggests the power of this disciplinary technology to regulate results in all areas. Confusion allows the regulation to spread beyond its original remit; as Ball explains, in a performative system ‘Constant doubts about which judgements may be in play at any one point mean that any and all comparisons and requirements to perform have to be attended to’ (2003b:220).

**How results can be changed**

As we have seen, the production of final FSP results was subject to competing demands in order to be intelligible and acceptable: the need to fit to some extent with teacher knowledge, the need to be low enough to not skew value added scores, and the need to be recognisable within circulating discourses about inner city pupils and educational attainment. As discussed, at Gatehouse Jim had felt under pressure in previous years to produce the ‘correct’ results, as defined by the LA. He was concerned to avoid being told he had marked “too high” or “too low” by the local authority again. He commented in September that:

> “what blatantly came out from the thing [moderation] last year, you know that the children can’t, they really should not be scoring that high, according to the government figures” (September 08)

This suggested that he felt limited in what scores he could possibly give the children by the LA’s insistence that they “can’t” and “should not” be getting these scores – a clear definition by the LA of what they deemed intelligible, which is backed up by “government figures”. During the year I spent at the school, he had speculated with some pessimism about what would happen when he calculated that year’s results. I observed the production of the results and all seemed to be going smoothly; however, in my final interview with Jim, he explained the more complex process of producing the final results and the influence of the school management. The complexity of this issue requires quoting this interview at length:

> Jim: So basically [bit awkward] Liz had a couple of days off with a bit of illness, and hadn’t got her reports sorted. So [the
head] gave me a day and got some cover in and I went off and looked through her reports [...] Printed them off, got rid of spelling mistakes [laughing] and had to change some of her results. And we had the early years specialist in 'cause when I, I put them all into my own table as they were. Divided it by 56 and came out with a 78.5 which made the class half a percent, made the school sorry, half a percent above the kind of required mark, of 78. And [guiltily] although I was not told to change any of the figures, the question arose as to how a school with a very difficult intake, could achieve half a percent, like average, how could it be average? And it also would then skew the Year 1 ... Key Stage 1 Sats results which had come out just below average. Which would show, if you were to chart it on graph [cynically], would show that the children haven’t achieved, well have gone backwards from the end of foundation to the end of Year 2. So therefore [laughing], stuff was changed.

AB: Because it was thought they were too generous, it was just too-?

Jim: Yeah, so anyhow I prioritised Liz’s – I looked at Liz’s results 'cause I had to.

AB: And also she hasn’t done it before so it’s-

Jim: Yep, so basically, I had all of the children, I put them all in a list, from top to bottom, and I picked out the ones that looked in the wrong place. And then had a closer look. I noticed that Liz had marked quite a lot of children as achieving I think point 7 in the third section of maths, which is about shape, space and measure 7, which is something to do with uses mathematical language such as larger, greater, smaller, and she ticked quite a lot of children as achieving that. But the children who had achieved that hadn’t achieved point 6 and 5 and 4 and so. Now this has been a big push for her this year, mathematical vocabulary.

AB: Yes, it was a whole school thing.

Jim: Yes, and she’s really pushed it in her maths lessons. But I think, and I’m quite confident in the fact that I took it away from the majority of her class — I don’t think I gave it to very many children in my class. They’re perfectly capable of being able to copy the words in lessons and being able
to use the words in lessons, but they don't use it independently, and because they don't use it independently ... well it's a bit cheeky 'cause I'd be upset if another teacher came and crossed off loads of my results, but ... I would have left it personally but because of the conversation I'd had about the average marks, I had to kind of revisit...

AB: And that was one that's more kind of-

Jim: That was one that it actually very difficult to get – I don't know many children who use greater, specifically greater, larger, smaller, so I knocked those off. And at the end of it, because I knocked it off for most of the lower ability children, that took the average up, because the lower went further down but the higher didn't move. So the overall average went up by another half percent after I spent two hours on it. I gave up, I wasn't going to change it any more.46

AB: So you just decided?

Jim: I think it's actually, what I think, I didn't take away stuff that wasn't fair to take away.

AB: Right, you took away the stuff that was...

Jim: That I thought was a bit overly generous. Things like Yuhannis [with incredulity] being able to use greater and smaller – in a lesson fair enough with a bit of prompting, but I don't think independently.

AB: So you could say it's inexperience, or ambiguity?

Jim: I actually think Liz's done incredibly well this year. And I think actually, I don't think we do a bad job. I don't know what other schools are like and this is the issue. We don't know what kind of other scores, other schools are like. We have about, we have a fair few nines, across the board.

Jim explains here how he was either told, or felt under a great deal of pressure, to lower some the children's marks because the overall percentage of the class was too close to the government's benchmark of 78. As he described in previous years, his

46 Note that this is mathematically impossible: if Jim is lowering some marks, the overall average cannot possibly increase.
marks were “too high” for the kind of school that Gatehouse is; they are unintelligible within the discourses of race, class and deprivation present in the inner city. A further consideration was that the school’s low Key Stage 1 results (though obviously for a different group of children) would look even worse if the FSP results were good, or even just average – this is the power of value added to function as a performative technology, often in illogical ways. Jim’s concern is not to boost his results to make the school look better, but to lower them in order to fit the LA’s perception of the school as “challenging”, and to make sure the school’s value added does not look like the children are going “backwards”. The nonsensical nature of this value added theory is perhaps obscured by a view of the local population as homogenous. We see here how these two elements – value added scores and the “difficult intake” discourse – work together to ensure that the school has a vested interest in keeping marks low and has a ready-made justification. It is acceptable for the Reception children to do badly because they are still so influenced by their homes and backgrounds, so it can be argued that the school has not had a chance to ‘add value’ yet. This deflation of the FSP scores will only make the school look better in the long run, and it makes sense as the only intelligible set of results given the dominant discourses around poverty, race and the local area. Despite the school-wide focus on a particular area of maths, Jim removes the marks from this very area; success is regulated away, even in the subject area that has been specifically targeted.

The removal of marks, which appears logical and even sensible in Jim’s explanation, plays out in complex ways, as shown by the removal of marks from the “low ability” children. This reveals the relative difference in value of the children in the class: these children, already assessed as “low”, are expendable within the system – it does not seem to matter so much if they lose a few marks. Jim does not take a point away from everyone, thereby keeping the same pattern of attainment but lowering overall scores; instead his tactic increases the spread of results in the class, distancing the “low ability” even further from the “high ability”. This is, perhaps, informed by the need to produce a normal distribution of scores: removing these marks will just produce a longer tail end to the “bell curve” without flattening it out. But the effects are not just statistical; these children, already given low scores, are further
disadvantaged by a system in which they are unimportant as individuals. They will arrive in Year 1 with a FSP assessment which states that they cannot use this mathematical language, despite their teacher observing that they can; they are victims of the external definition of what can be ‘correct’. Furthermore, this will not seem incongruous, given the strength of the “difficult intake” discourse. This process of lowering “low ability” children’s scores can be seen as the beginning of a process which maintains a ‘spread’ of results: research in secondary schools has suggested that processes of setting and tiered exam entry repeatedly disadvantage certain groups of pupils (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000; Tikly et al, 2006);

In the interview extract above, we see how Jim relates the production of his marks to other schools’ systems. His comment “I don’t know what other schools are like and this is the issue” shows the wider pressure to produce intelligible results, not just for the LA, but in terms of comparisons with other schools. Jim knows that his school cannot intelligibly score higher than schools in more affluent areas, and so is worried that they have too many nines. The implication of this is not that he might have accurately assessed the children (whom he himself described as “very intelligent”) and they did very well, but that he might have done it ‘wrong’. Here the teachers’ complex positions as professionals contribute to the production of results: they feel simultaneously trusted to get the right results by the ‘teacher knowledge’ discourse, but this can be taken away in a moment by the LA. The fear for Jim is that the other schools will make his results look unintelligible, but without access to this information, he is left guessing what will be seen as realistic. This mirrors Ball’s description of the uncertainty inherent in many accountability systems, which leave us ‘ontologically insecure’, ‘unsure about whether we are doing enough, doing the right thing, doing as much as others’ (Ball, 2003b:220).

The situation at Gatehouse reveals the intricate balancing acts involved in transforming early years into an ‘auditable commodity’ (Shore and Wright, 1999 in Ball, 2003b), and the necessity of engaging in ‘fabrications’ (Ball, 2003b). In submitting to the school management’s concerns to change the results, Jim is engaging in ‘both resistance and capitulation’ (Ball, 2003b:225 emphasis in original).
On the one hand, the deliberate changing of results is a resistance to the detailed, year-long build up of ‘knowledge’ prescribed by the FSP; it shows he can assess without collecting information into folders, and that he is prepared to cynically produce results which he understands to be inaccurate (though he attempts to deflect this) and therefore undermine the principles of teacher assessment. However, changing the results is also capitulation; there is no doubt that he will produce the results, and that they will be as acceptable as he can manage given the ambiguity of what is ‘accurate’. He does give up what Ball calls ‘claims to authenticity and commitment’ (2003b:225) by changing the results, although the perception of the FSP in general as inaccurate and impossible underpins this as it renders the ‘authenticity’ of the FSP doubtful from the start.

Jim’s decision to remove marks from some pupils reveals his investment in a fabrication, but by arguing this I do not mean to apportion individual blame; it is clear, given the data in this and previous chapters, that Jim is severely limited in his ability to resist the pressure to produce a fabrication. Having been told in previous years that his assessments were ‘wrong’ because they were too high or low, Jim is familiar with the ways in which his assessments can be deemed incorrect on the basis of the “difficult intake”. His comments throughout have suggested he is resigned to the need to “produce a figure”, and although he might at times mobilise other discourses to challenge the FSP processes, in his words, “I have still have to do it”. Later in the interview, he commented that despite the changes, “they’ll probably say something like they’re too high”, suggesting he feels that whatever results he produces, he will be criticised. Within his professional context, Jim is unable to resist the need for a fabrication due to the pressures of the LA and school management; he is constrained by local and national discourses which define how well pupils can do so that the results remain intelligible. However, he is not willing to admit to this capitulation: his claim that “I didn’t take away stuff that wasn’t fair to take away” can be seen as an attempt to justify a process which he knows to be controversial. It is also, perhaps, an attempt to deny the extent to which he is constrained by local and national pressures when producing the FSP results. Nonetheless, his willingness to tell me about changing the results at the beginning of our final interview, when he
could have simply avoided this issue, suggests he has serious misgivings about the practice, however he presents it later; as such, this very act of telling a researcher how results are changed can be seen as a form of resistance against the dominant discourses in education.

**Discussion: Producing intelligible results**

We see in the example of Gatehouse how the need to produce acceptable and intelligible results is a powerful determinant of the scores that are allocated; however, it also shows how performative technologies require constant work and maintenance. The ‘enacted fantasy’ (Butler, 1990) does not happen in one moment, but must be built up and performed throughout the year, in the production of folders of evidence and through continual observation. The fictive accuracy of the FSP must be resignified though the regular collection of data and the allocation of points, up until the final scores. Even then, success (in the form of getting intelligible results) is only ever fleeting – it will need to be reproduced, refabricated again next year, and the next, so that there can be no respite. The need for coherence between fabrications is determined by long-term analysis of results, as well as by value added measures.

Any discussion of these assessment practices must be informed by an awareness of the effects of the FSP on the teachers. Practices at St Mary’s and Gatehouse reflect the deep ambivalence felt towards the FSP and the conflicting pressures associated with it. The FSP reinforces the Reception teachers’ understandings of their roles as based on particular early years, ‘developmental’ knowledge, which makes them accountable, expert professionals. The ‘teacher knowledge’ discourse legitimises this position further, and works powerfully to create great flexibility in the production of results. However, the FSP simultaneously also devalues the teachers’ status, by requiring them to produce evidence (which they do only cynically) and designating them through moderation as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ in their assessments. The FSP seems to give the teachers greater status, but then also constantly threatens to take this away. This ambiguous position is inextricably linked to the assessment practices discussed in this chapter: the teachers engage in ‘cynical compliance’ with the
requirements for folders of evidence because they need to show they are ‘good teachers’ who can build up a view of a child. They need to engage in the performance of assessment, because that is an important part of defining them as good teachers. There is little room for resistance, but they know that the performance will rarely be checked and that it is hugely time consuming, so they only do what is necessary. They rely on the ‘teacher knowledge’ discourse to produce the scores initially, and then undermine the legitimacy of this ‘knowledge’ by admitting that they cannot know all of the required information about every child. This ‘knowledge’ is then undermined by the LA’s judgements about their accuracy. The performative technology appears to give and take away at the same time; it gives status but also pressure in producing results, yet also burdens them with the danger of being told they are assessing inaccurately.

The ambiguity of this situation gives rise to competing discourses about accuracy through which the teachers understand their role as deliverers of intelligible results. Their investment in the fabrication is immense: it is a judgement on a year’s work, their professionalism and their pedagogy. While they have some power to determine who will be designated as successful in the FSP, they are also limited by circulating discourse associated with inner city schools and minoritised learners. In the final chapter, I discuss how fabrications such as the FSP results might work at a systematic level to reproduce educational inequalities.
Chapter 9: Producing intelligible learners and intelligible results

Introduction
As I explained in Chapter 1, this thesis tells a story of who gets to 'do well' at school and who doesn't. This is an old story that is very familiar in the sociology of education, but what I have aimed to elaborate on is how within this simple story there lies great complexity: a multitude of different discourses and practices are operating in these classrooms to regulate who succeeds at any one time. In this conclusion, I summarise my arguments in relation to the making of intelligible learners and intelligible results, and discuss how this forms a contribution to knowledge. I also consider the wider implications of my findings and the possibilities for interruption. The flaws and limitations of the project and the potential for future research in this area are also discussed.

At the heart of the story that I have told is the need to constitute children as intelligible learners, who correspond to both dominant discourses linked to their intersectional identities and the particular conception of what being a 'learner' means that operates in Reception. Simultaneously there is a need to produce intelligible assessment results for these children, though the relationship between these two processes is itself complicated. The demands of performativity ensure that the final FSP results are a 'fabrication' produced to be acceptable and recognisable, not necessarily a reflection of how the children are constituted as learners. The production of intelligible learners and intelligible results are merely two parts of a vast assemblage of different processes that take effect in classrooms.

What this thesis has contributed to the field is a detailed analysis of exactly what is involved in being constituted as a good learner, and how this requires different things of different children. I have shown how discourses that position entire populations of children as 'difficult', as 'internal colonies' incompatible with educational success (Leonardo and Hunter, 2009), may co-exist with discourses which position certain children (in this case, some White working-class girls and some Muslim girls) as good learners. I have also examined how classroom practices work as regulatory
mechanisms to produce and maintain children's learner identities, and how these are informed by discourses of ability as innate. Furthermore, I have shown how discourses of low expectation are reinforced by national policy which aims to alleviate the effects of poverty, and can work to reduce the possibility of inner city schools ever having high results that are seen as accurate. Meanwhile, policy technologies such as ‘value added’ scores also work in unexpected ways to provide an incentive to keep scores low, even when the scores themselves are not used in official value added measures. Overall, I have examined the layers of discourse and practice which work to systematically disadvantage some pupils, right from their first days in school.

So what is the significance of these findings in terms of policy and practice, and what are the implications? I would argue that the significance of this study is located in two areas: systematic disadvantage or institutional racism; and policy effects.

**Systematic disadvantage**

Although there are many familiar elements of my findings, the data also reveals some unexpected practices. If, in line with a CRT framework, I assume that racism is endemic in education, then the systematic ways in which these classes of mostly minoritised children are constituted as failing represent merely a small section of an educational trajectory that is determined by race. Yet (and perhaps this is fortunate) the very certainty with which these children are assumed to be ‘difficult’ as learners is still shocking. The complexity of discourses working against these children ever being seen as successful in an ‘authentic’ way works so powerfully, while at the same time the complexity obscures the systematic disadvantage that occurs. I use this phrase rather than institutional racism as I do not wish to exclude the aspects of children’s identities other than race that constitute them as bad learners – we have seen how interrelated aspects of class and race are in discourses of the inner city. I understand systematic disadvantage, like institutional racism, to mean processes which produce unequal outcomes, whatever the intentions. At this point I think it is
important to make my arguments about intentions and outcomes clear; to do this I
use a CRT technique of storytelling.

**Using CRT to understand intentionality and outcomes**

In 2006, David Gillborn wrote an article called ‘Rethinking White supremacy: Who
counts in “Whiteworld”’, which examined the first sets of FSP results. In this paper
and in his 2008 book ‘Racism and Education’ he argued that the poor attainment of
Black pupils on the FSP in comparison with their previous levels of attainment at age
five, and the lack of a public outcry over this reversal revealed a deeply ingrained
racist system in education. He used a CRT-style counterstory to explain this
phenomenon:

Once upon a time there was a deeply racist society. In this imaginary
society racism saturates all public agencies. This is not a generally nice
place where the occasional nasty individual spoils things. No, this is a
society were racism leaves its imprint on virtually every aspect of life,
from birth to death (and everything in between).

Now, of course, in a society so deeply patterned by racism not everything
is plain sailing. People don’t simply accept their subjugation no matter
how long it has been practised. There are continual points of conflict and
resistance, but most of the time these are kept in check and barely
register on the ‘mainstream’ consciousness. Consequently the dominant
group is able to sustain its preferred fiction; that the despised people only
have themselves to blame for their misfortune. This is possible because –
in this imaginary place – racism is present throughout every major part of
society. Racism patterns its polity, its academy and its public services,
including the police and the schools.

In my story, the despised group is excelling at a test that every pupil must
take. You see, in the place I’m asking you to imagine, the state has
decreed that all children must be tested throughout their school careers.
They are each stamped with a unique code number and a log of their
successes – and failures – follows them throughout the system. And so
everyone must take the test. But if the dominant group cannot restrict
entry to the test, it seems that only one course of action remains; change
the test. The test must be redesigned so that the despised group no
longer succeed.

Simple.
But, of course, such a crass and obviously racist set of events could never occur in the real world. There would be an outcry. Wouldn’t there? (Gillborn, 2006c:324-6)

Gillborn does not suggest that the FSP was deliberately introduced in order to make children from minoritised groups do badly; instead, he offers this analogy to show that the results of this policy are the same as if they had been intentionally racist. In the same manner, I offer here a story which focuses on the processes I have observed at St Mary’s and Gatehouse; this story takes as its premise the same racist society outlined above:

A new test is introduced; the despised group do badly, and the status quo is preserved. But, the new test is for very young children, and so has to be based entirely on teachers’ judgements and observations. There is a risk that the despised group might start to get better scores. How to control the teachers, and ensure the scores are kept down? Two processes ensure that the despised group continue to get low scores: firstly, the idea that this group will and should do badly must become commonsense in the school system. This can be achieved by mentioning this group as a particular problem alongside other ‘problem groups’ who will be expected to fare badly, or creating policies which single these groups out as problematic. Particular features of the despised group, such as their non-majority language, are emphasised to ensure that everyone has a reason for why this group are doing badly. Because the entire test is based on what the teachers ‘know’ about the children, any lower expectations of this group will not be too obvious; this can be legitimised by the idea that a good professional teacher can gather ‘knowledge’ accurately. Thus the teachers can give lower scores to the despised group, without it ever seeming unfair.

A second back-up process ensures that if the teachers do start to give children from the despised group high scores, this can be monitored and prevented. Each teacher’s scores must be monitored by the local authority ‘expert’ advisors, and checked. These advisors have the power to deem teachers’ scores right or wrong, and they are feared by the teachers, because they know they are judged on these scores. They give contradictory advice, and so the teachers are always unsure quite what the advisors want. The teachers have become so confused with the system that they just want to produce what the advisors want to hear. When the advisors tell the teachers that their scores are too high, the teachers respond. So, when results from a school with a large number of children from the despised group are high, the advisor can simply declare them ‘too high’ and the school has to change them. This is helped by the official designation of schools like this into special zones which have low attainment; being in this zone provides further proof that the teacher
must have simply got the scores wrong. Soon, the advisors do not even have to say the scores are wrong because the headteachers begin to understand the system, and make sure that their teacher scores low to avoid the pressure from the advisors.

Through these two processes, the group gets low scores. The results are published each year, and this backs up the idea that it is only commonsense that the despised group do badly, and no one is to blame. Everyone is quietly pleased with the wonderfully circular, self-perpetuating way in which the group stays lower than the other groups in this test, especially since it provides the benchmark for all of the children’s further progress. As long as the advisors keep checking, the teachers keep feeling that they need to get it ‘right’, and the idea that the group will inevitably do badly keeps circulating, the despised group will get poor scores, and keep getting poor scores.

It is important to reiterate here that I am not suggesting that this hypothetical story is what actually happened with the FSP; I do not believe that this is a deliberate, planned strategy to ensure that minoritised groups do badly in schools. However, as with Gillborn’s story above, the results are the same: my data has shown that the teachers expect their schools to do badly because of their “difficult intake”, and the FSP scores are changed if they are too high for a school in an area with low educational attainment. The children’s final scores in these two classes are lower than the national average; the results are the same as if it had been deliberate, and this is deeply concerning. Gillborn writes, following his story above:

But there is no evidence of conscious intent: there is no conspiracy. It is more frightening than that. Rather than being generated by a deliberate strategy (one that is readily open to exposure and reversal) these changes appear to have resulted from the normal workings of the education system – a system that places race equality at the very margins of debate and takes no action when Black students are judged to be failing.

(Gillborn, 2006c:334)

The idea that the ‘normal workings’ of the system result in minority groups being disadvantaged is a familiar concept to CRT scholars who take racism as an endemic aspect of society, but it is a shocking idea to many educators. I am arguing here that it is the ‘normal workings’ of the FSP and Reception practices in general that work to disadvantage some children, without anyone ever consciously intending to do so. My intention is not to blame the teachers for their situation either; as I have argued
throughout, they are entirely constrained by the discourses surrounding them and their professional context.

Individual stories within a system
A detailed awareness and understanding of how discriminatory processes operate in schools contributes to our understanding of why and how certain groups of pupils consistently fare badly in several measures of educational success, including assessments, attendance and exclusion rates. Concern with the day-to-day workings and the minutiae of classroom interactions offers an insight into the complexity of learner identities; it allows us to consider how discriminatory processes are hidden within everyday practices and acceptable discourses of good learners and authenticity.

Although I have focused in the previous chapters on a great deal of detail about the workings of these classrooms, I think one of the most significant findings overall is that ideas about what a good learner looks like and who can be recognisable as one work systematically to disadvantage minoritised and working-class children, and to some extent, boys. Although each individual is constituted in different ways, there is far less intelligible space for a minoritised, working-class child to be constituted as a good learner. There is space for minoritised children to be good learners, but this is very precarious, and the wrong identity performance can result in a child being seen as inauthentic; success can always be explained away by this idea of authenticity. White pupils are more recognisable as good learners, even if they are working-class. Furthermore, all of these processes can operate in the absence of any idealised White middle-class children.

Policy effects
My exploration of the effects of FSP on Reception tells a familiar story about the negotiation of policy into practice and its unintended effects (Ball, 1993). However, other policies are implicated too in the analysis, particularly value added measures and the creation of Education Action Zones, with similar unintended effects; at times these three work together to produce the systematic disadvantage discussed above.
The FSP

The FSP has effects on the teachers, the classroom and on who is recognisable as a good learner. Statutory assessment positions the teachers in new ways as enablers and recorders, and forces them to rethink how they collect ‘knowledge’ and how neutral and accurate this is. The FSP also legitimises the idea of ‘discovering’ a child, which is linked to development discourses and the idea that a child has inherent characteristics that can be identified over time, and makes this an important skill in early years. It also works as a form of surveillance, especially given the power of the LA’s interventions. The FSP also turns the classroom into a site for the specific types of learning that are included in the FSP points to be produced and recorded. This is a classroom which values independence, enthusiasm and responsibility for your own learning, and at other times values submission and obedience. It is organised so that those children who take up the position of ‘learner’ effectively are marked out, and those who are constituted as having failed to become learners are labelled and excluded. Many of these practices were there before the FSP, but I would argue that the introduction of statutory assessment has fundamentally affected Reception classrooms and Reception teachers.

Value added scores

It is apparent that value added policy has spread in its application: there are no published value added data on progress between the FSP and Key Stage 1, and yet the schools are concerned about this phenomenon or at least its potential to be used. The idea of needing to be aware of the long-term effects of scores, which may take effect when the teacher concerned has left, appears to be applied to all assessments. The policy of using value added scores is framed in policy documents as being a ‘fairer’ method of judging schools which takes into account the children’s attainment on entry. But, it only functions as an accurate measure of ‘progress’ (setting aside the dubious nature of this measurement in the first place) if the ‘previous attainment’ scores are accurate. FSP results are therefore the best possible opportunity to make a school appear to be adding value; they are sometimes seen as a ‘baseline’ figure, even though they are assessed after children have spent a year in
school. There is also the fact that after only one year, management can attribute low results to factors outside the school context more easily; low FSP results do not do too much damage to a school’s reputation. Perhaps it is surprisingly that any school produces high FSP scores, considering the situation it sets up for the next six years. But, the incentive to give low scores is greater for schools that are unlikely to do well on raw results; valued added is their chance to show their success. Unintentionally, this policy works to lower the FSP results of schools that are already seen as low-attaining; it perpetuates educational ‘failure’ for some schools and some children.

*Education Action Zones*

Another policy which reproduces inequality is the labelling of certain areas as in need of additional help. Policies such as Education Action Zones and its successors Excellence in Cities and London Challenge aim to reduce educational inequality through the allocation of additional funds. But, as the data shows, the effect of this designation may be to constitute schools or an area as incommensurate with high results. There is clear link in the teachers’ explanations between this specific label and the intelligibility of low results. EAZs ended in 2005, and yet in 2009 Jim was still talking about the area as an EAZ; we see how the negative effects of the label linger on after the policy and the money have disappeared, like a policy hangover. The idea that policy which is notionally redistributive and should contribute to social justice could also have the effect of making sure that results remain low is deeply worrying. If, as I have argued in relation to Reception, teacher assessments are informed by the need for them to be recognisable within the context of the school, then this has implications for many schools which are designated as Challenge schools or are involved in other policies which aim to reduce inequality. The increase in teacher assessments as replacements for ‘high stakes’ tests in all schools (for Key Stage 1 and 3, and possibly Key Stage 2 in the future), makes this issue one which has the potential to affect all schools. What if teacher assessments are only recognised as accurate if they mirror the patterns of previous test results? Gaps in attainment and inequalities will be the only intelligible results, and will be reproduced while the possibility for change is shut down. This is an issue which deserves more research.
and attention, particularly given the prominence of issues of poverty and attainment in recent political debates.

**Implications**

In many ways, my arguments are pessimistic: the complexity of forces working within these schools makes it difficult to see how and where systematic disadvantage could be challenged. The current political situation in the UK is such that any reduction in assessment of children is unlikely, even with a change of government in 2010. Indeed, much of the current political discourse on ‘early intervention’ has the potential to strengthen the link between poorer families and educational failure, with comments from Conservative cabinet ministers suggesting that children living in poverty have ‘going to school with a brain the size of a child of one’ so that they ‘simply bump along at the back and at the bottom’ (Iain Duncan Smith in Woolf, 2010). Furthermore, with the continued focus on White working-class pupils (BBC News, 2010), racism remains an ‘absent presence’ (Apple, 1999) constantly working to maintain inequality.

However, I would argue that there are opportunities to disrupt systematic disadvantage, and that these can be found through an understanding the detail of how classrooms work. The politics of the performative allow a questioning of what is intelligible and how alternatives can be opened up. Although the detail may be unique to each child, exploring the intelligible space where children can be recognisable as learners within prevailing discourses matters because we learn more about what the possibilities for change might be. Can the intelligible space where particular intersectional identities are recognisable as ‘good learners’ be expanded? Can different identities become commensurate with good learners, if the discourses associated with them change? This analysis offers the potential for interruptive work: what would happen if a teacher was aware of the complex ways in which they constitute children as different types of learner? Could the associations between certain classed and raced identities and failure as a learner be interrupted, so that these children could be understood as successful at school?
Some of my optimism about the possibility of disruptive ideas comes from personal experience. During the process of working on my thesis I have had regular conversations with a friend who works as a Reception teacher. She has always been interested in my work, and has been helpful as a consultant on all things Reception. Her views on education are such that she is sympathetic to my arguments, and willing to accept the role of teachers in reproducing disadvantage. Quite unprompted, she commented to me during my year of fieldwork that just knowing about what I was looking at had made her rethink her ideas about her Reception children. Did she make too many links between what she thought of the parents and what she thought of the child? How were her assumptions affecting who she thought of as settling into school well? Did she see the taller Black boys as unacceptably physical just because they were bigger? These are not unusual questions for a reflective practitioner, but my friend was prompted to ask them by the stories I told her about other Reception children and the complexity of each child’s situation, not by talk of institutional racism. Seeing the way in which tiny moments could change how a child was understood as a learner helped her to think about how these moments might work in her classroom without her knowing. Perhaps, given the reluctance of many in the education sector to accept the presence of systematic disadvantage, and teachers in particular, exploring the detail of individual cases can open up the possibility of thinking about children differently. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, this potential is inherent in seeing identity as performative: it means that no one is ‘necessarily anything’ (Youvell, 2006b). This also needs to be done within an understanding of how discourses frame what is intelligible; my friend knew, for example, that seeing Black boys as too physical was a familiar discourse in education. In understanding how discourse shapes the intelligible space open to children as learners, and also the power of discursive agency in confirming or resisting these identities, we can see exactly where the potential for interruption lies. For example, how could the recognisability of some Afghan and Kosovan Muslim girls as good learners be extended to include boys, or other Muslim girls? Could these groups who have more recently become established in the UK come to be associated with ‘model minorities’ (taking into account the way in which these pupils are
constituted as inauthentic) and become more recognisable as good learners, even when their performance in the classroom is not submissive? Could the confidence and proud Black femininity of a child like Abeje coalesce with her high ability identity?

This sort of suggestion, that we need to think about how discourses can be changed or stretched, can be criticised for not being ambitious enough, or for failing to deal with the structural issues at play; this is a complex political issue. However, I would argue that it is the endemic nature of racism, for example, which means interruption needs at times to be small in scale: suddenly trying to position a group strongly associated with educational under-attainment as model learners would be completely unrecognisable to teachers, and serve no purpose at all. This does not mean that we accept or ignore the wider inequalities, but that we ‘choose our battles wisely’ while also seeking to address broader issues. There is much debate about this issue, and I do not pretend to have any answers, merely suggestions for how these findings could offer some potential sites of interruption. As the saying goes, we need to ‘struggle where we are’, and where we are, I would argue, is entwined in a network of discourses which make low attainment by minority and working-class children commonsense. This has not gone away despite decades of research which has found the same thing. Perhaps, alongside talking about institutional racism and asking the big questions, we need to think about the small moves that can be made to disrupt the bigger pattern. Youdell writes on performative politics:

This is not a revolutionary politics that promises a monumental upheaval and reordering of social (and political and economic) life. Nor is it a politics of liberal reform that looks to the legislature to enshrine particular rights, responsibilities and protections but leave the textures and meaning of daily life unquestioned. (Youdell, in press)

My arguments in relation to intelligible learners do offer one site where there is great potential for disruption to the ‘textures and meanings of daily life’ that work to reproduce inequalities, particularly given the ambiguous state of assessment in primary schools. With a new government in power which has announced a review of the Early Years Foundation Stage and a general trend toward more teacher
assessment in primary schools, I would argue that this is an ideal time to question our ideas about what good learning looks like. We need to ask: who gets to decide what a good learner looks like? Why are the skills listed in the FSP the ones that are valued, and who does this exclude? What does this mean for children with different skills? As with long-standing arguments over who gains from the 'official knowledge' of the curriculum (Apple, 1993), we need to ask who gains from this model of what a learner looks like. What sort of learners are produced in this system, and is it consistent? It is not clear from this study the extent to which these attributes of being a learner extend to other Reception classrooms or to other Key Stages, and this would be another way in which this research could be extended. These are questions that need to be asked when assessments are reformed or changed, as there is a danger that teacher assessment will reproduce patterns of attainment from high stakes testing. As I have shown with the example of Gatehouse, the use of teacher assessment does not mean freedom and autonomy over how pupils are graded.

Limitations

There are obviously several limitations to this study, and I should be clear that I am not arguing that the same processes occur in the same ways in all Reception classrooms or all other schools. The teachers involved, in being willing to have a researcher in their classroom, are likely to have more to say on assessment, or be more confident, or be more interested in research in general. As male Reception teachers, when the vast majority of early years staff are women, they are also exceptional. However, as I am not suggesting that these findings can be extended to other contexts, these teachers only represent themselves and their classrooms not Reception classrooms in general and so whether they are typical or not matters little.

A further limitation is that the data used in this study represent only the voices of the teachers and support staff, not the Reception children themselves. As shown by Connolly’s (1998) use of interviews with children, young participants can provide an

47 For example, Key Stage 2 Science tests were replaced with teacher assessments in 2010, and Key Stage 1 and 3 are assessed through teacher assessment.
alternative perspective, particularly on the constitution of pupils as learners. Due to time and resource limitations I decided to focus on the teachers’ perspectives and the classroom practices in Reception as I considered these to be central in the production of inequalities in early years.

I am also aware that in laying out my data I have left out a high proportion of what I saw and heard over the course of the year; I have been very selective, and another researcher might select other themes and other issues to focus on. My data could be analysed with greater attention to how the FSP works to position teachers as professional, for example, or to explore the relationships between early years and the rest of primary schools.

**Further research**

The arguments I make in this study provoke many additional questions which could be the basis for further research. As mentioned, it would be interesting to see how the model of the good learner works in other classrooms, and how this relates to the early years learner. I would also be interested to explore further how discourses of the ‘inner city’ and policies which aim to reduce attainment gaps (such as the new ‘pupil premium’) work to reinforce inequalities by making low attainment commonsense and rendering any alternatives unrecognisable.

Further research could be conducted into the learner identities of children from minoritised families who have more recently come to the UK, particularly those from Muslim states where British forces have been involved such as Iraq and Afghanistan. I am interested in how these pupils (and also Kosovan Muslims), and particularly girls, are able to access/approximate ‘model minority’ status despite negative discourses regarding Islamic communities. The data has suggested an interesting interplay between these children’s Muslim identities and their ‘good migrant’/assimilating status. The issue of the relative acceptability (and the relative ‘Whiteness’) of different Muslim groups is an issue that has yet to be explored in relation to schools, to my knowledge.
Concluding comments

This study aimed to explore the impact of a specific assessment policy on classrooms, and the related issue of how children are understood as learners in these classrooms. Throughout, I have been concerned to explore how issues of identity – including race, religion, class, language and gender – affect children in terms of both assessment and everyday life in the classroom. What I have found is that, in these Reception classrooms, these issues of identity work in complex and at times contradictory ways to position different children as different types of learner, and also affect their discursive agency and how this is understood. The FSP contributes to this process, but also independently encourages teachers to produce results which are intelligible and acceptable to the local authority and school management. As such, the results are a ‘fabrication’, cloaked in a façade of accuracy, produced to satisfy the requirements of accountability and performance. This does not reduce their power, however, in repeatedly constituting whole groups of pupils as ‘underachieving’ when the results are published each year. Questions need to be asked and changes need to be made in classrooms, at local authorities and at policy levels if there is to be hope that inequalities in the system can be reduced.
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Appendix 1: FSP points
This appendix lists the 117 FSP points across the six areas of learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal, Social and Emotional Development 1: Disposition and attitudes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>9</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal, Social and Emotional Development 2: Social development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>9</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Personal, Social and Emotional Development 3: Emotional Development

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Separates from main carer with support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Communicates freely about home and community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Expresses needs and feelings in appropriate ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Responds to significant experiences, showing a range of feelings when appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Has a developing awareness of own needs, views and feelings and is sensitive to the needs,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>views and feelings of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Has a developing respect for own culture and beliefs and those of other people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Considers the consequences of words and actions for self and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Understands what is right, what is wrong, any why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Displays a strong and positive sense of self-identity and is able to express a range of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>emotions fluently and appropriately.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Communication, Language and Literacy 1: Language for Communication and Thinking

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Listens and responds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Initiates communication with others, displaying greater confidence in more informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Talks activities through, reflecting on and modifying actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Listens with enjoyment to stories, songs, rhymes and poems, sustains attentive listening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and responds with relevant comments, questions or actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Uses language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Interacts with others in a variety of contexts, negotiating plans and activities and taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>turns in conversation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Uses talk to organise, sequence and clarify thinking, ideas, feelings and events, exploring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the meaning and sounds of new words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Speaks clearly with confidence and control, showing awareness of the listener.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Talks and listens confidently and with control, consistently showing awareness of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>listener by including relevant detail. Uses language to work out and clarify ideas, showing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>control of a range of appropriate vocabulary.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Communication, Language and Literacy 2: Linking sounds and letters

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Joins in with rhyming and rhythmic activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Shows awareness of rhyme and alliteration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Links some sounds to letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Links sounds to letters, naming and sounding letters of the alphabet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Hears and says sounds in words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Blends sounds in words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Uses phonic knowledge to read simple regular words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Attempts to read more complex words, using phonic knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Uses knowledge of letters, sounds and words when reading and writing independently.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Communication, Language and Literacy 3: Reading

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Is developing an interest in books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Knows that print conveys meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Recognises a few familiar words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Knows that, in English, print is read from left to right and top to bottom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Shows an understanding of the elements of stories, such as main character, sequence of events and openings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Reads a range of familiar and common words and simple sentences independently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Retells narratives in the correct sequence, drawing on language patterns of stories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Shows an understanding of how information can be found in non-fiction texts to answer questions about where, who, why and how.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Reads books of own choice with some fluency and accuracy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Communication, Language and Literacy 4: Writing

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Experiments with mark-making, sometimes ascribing meaning to the marks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Uses some clearly identifiable letters to communicate meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Represents some sounds correctly in writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Writes own name and other words from memory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Holds a pencil and uses it effectively to form recognisable letters, most of which are correctly formed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Attempts writing for a variety of purposes, using features of different forms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Uses phonic knowledge to write simple regular words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Begin to form captions and simple sentences, sometimes using punctuation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Communicates meaning through phrases and simple sentences with some consistency in punctuating sentences.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Problem-solving, Reasoning and Numeracy 1: Numbers as labels and for counting

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Says some number names in familiar contexts, such as nursery rhymes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Counts reliably up to three everyday objects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Counts reliably up to six everyday objects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Says number names in order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Recognises numerals 1 to 9.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Counts reliably up to 10 everyday objects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Orders numbers up to 10.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Uses developing mathematical ideas and methods to solve practical problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Recognises, counts, orders, writes and uses numbers up to 20.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Problem-solving, Reasoning and Numeracy 2: Calculating

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Responds to the vocabulary involved in addition and subtraction in rhymes and games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Recognises differences in quantity when comparing sets of objects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Finds one more or one less from a group of up to five objects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Relates addition to combining two groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Relates subtraction to taking away.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>In practical activities and discussion, begins to use the vocabulary involved in adding and subtracting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Finds one more or one less than a number from 1 to 10.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Uses developing mathematical ideas and methods to solve practical problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Uses a range of strategies for addition and subtraction, including some mental recall of number bonds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Problem-solving, Reasoning and Numeracy 3: Shape, space and measures

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Experiments with a range of objects and materials showing some mathematical awareness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sorts or matches objects and talks about sorting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Describes shapes in simple models, pictures and patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Talks about, recognises and recreates simple patterns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Uses everyday words to describe position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Uses language such as ‘circle’ or ‘bigger’ to describe the shape and size of solids and flat shapes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Uses language such as ‘greater’, ‘smaller’, ‘heavier’ or ‘lighter’ to compare quantities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Uses developing mathematical ideas and methods to solve practical problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Uses mathematical language to describe solid (3D) objects and flat (2D) shapes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Knowledge and Understanding of the World

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Shows curiosity and interest by exploring surroundings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Observes, selects and manipulates objects and materials. Identifies simple features and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>significant personal events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Identifies obvious similarities and differences when exploring and observing. Constructs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in a purposeful way, using simple tools and techniques.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Investigates places, objects, materials and living things by using all the senses as</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>appropriate. Identifies some features and talks about those features s/he likes and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>dislikes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Asks questions about why things happen and how things work. Looks closely at similarities,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>differences, patterns and change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Finds out about past and present events in own life, and in those of family members and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>other people s/he knows. Begins to know about own culture and beliefs and those of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>other people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Finds out about and identifies the uses of everyday technology and uses information and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>communication technology and programmable toys to support her/his learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Builds and constructs with a wide range of objects, selecting appropriate resources, tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and techniques and adapting his/her work where necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Communicates simple planning for investigations and constructions and makes simple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>records and evaluations of her/his work. Identifies and names key features and properties,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sometimes linking different experiences, observations and events. Begins to explore what it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>means to belong to a variety of groups and communities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Physical Development

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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Moves spontaneously, showing some control and coordination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Moves with confidence in a variety of ways, showing some awareness of space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Usually shows appropriate control in large- and small- scale movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Moves with confidence, imagination and in safety. Travels around, under, over and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>through balancing and climbing equipment. Shows awareness of space, of self and others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Demonstrates fine motor control and co-ordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Uses small and large equipment, showing a range of basic skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Handles tools, objects, construction and malleable materials safely and with basic control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Recognises the importance of keeping healthy and those things which contribute to this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognises the changes that happen to her/his body when s/he is active.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Repeats, links and adapts simple movements, sometimes commenting on her/his work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demonstrates co-ordination and control in large and small movements, and in using a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>range of tools and equipment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Creative Development

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Explores different media and responds to a variety of sensory experiences. Engages in representational play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Creates simple representations of events, people and objects and engages in music making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tries to capture experiences, using a variety of different media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sings simple songs from memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Explores colour, texture, shape, form and space in two or three dimensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Recognises and explores how sounds can be changed. Recognises repeated sounds and sound patterns and matches movements to music.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Uses imagination in art and design, music, dance, imaginative and role-play and stories. Responds in a variety of ways to what s/he sees, hears, smells, touches and feels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Expresses and communicates ideas, thoughts and feelings using a range of materials, suitable tools, imaginative and role-play, movement, designing and making, and a variety of songs and musical instruments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Expresses feelings and preferences in response to artwork, drama and music and makes some comparisons and links between different pieces. Responds to own work and that of others when exploring and communicating ideas, feelings and preferences through art, music, dance, role-play and imaginative play.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Appendix 2: Glossary of terms and acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CD</td>
<td>Creative Development (an EYFS area of learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLL</td>
<td>Communication, Language and Literacy (an EYFS areas of learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCSF</td>
<td>Department for Children, School and Families (2007-2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development Matters</td>
<td>Government document which preceded the EYFSP and included developmental statements for children in Nursery and pre-Nursery settings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DfE</td>
<td>Department for Education (from 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAL</td>
<td>English as an additional language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECE</td>
<td>Early Childhood Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECM</td>
<td>Every Child Matters, a government strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EYFS(P)</td>
<td>Early Years Foundation Stage (Profile)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSM</td>
<td>Free School Meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSP</td>
<td>Foundation Stage Profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDACI</td>
<td>Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KUW</td>
<td>Knowledge and understanding of the world (an EYFS area of learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Local Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSA</td>
<td>Learning Support Assistant, an adult usually allocated to a child with a SEN statement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderation</td>
<td>The process of checking teachers’ assessments each year,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
conducted by the local authority.

ONS  Office of National Statistics
PD   Physical Development (an EYFS area of learning)
PGCE Postgraduate Certificate in Education, a one-year course including qualified teacher status
PSE  Personal, Social and Emotional (an EYFS area of learning)
PSRN Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy (an EYFS area of learning)
QCA  Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, a government organisation
Sats End of Key Stage tests taken in Year 2 (age 6/7), Year 6 (age 10/11) and previously in Year 9 (age 13/14).
SEN  Special Educational Needs
TA   Teaching Assistant
Value added A method of monitoring schools which compares progress against between two tests (years apart) with an expected level of progress, resulting in a score for the school.
Appendix 3: Interview schedules

This appendix provides some examples of the interview schedules used in the semi-structured interviews.

Interview schedule for Gatehouse class teacher - Autumn term 08

1. How have the first few weeks of term been?

2. Are you enjoying your new class?

3. Are they different from last year?

4. Are they unusual in anyway? Is what I’m seeing typical of a Reception class here?

5. What do you think will be the impact of the new children in January?

6. What information does the child arrive with – from the Nursery here, from other Nurseries, from outside agencies?

7. How useful is this information? Is it better to just find out about the child from your experiences with them?

8. How are the initial assessment used? To be a benchmark, for planning?

9. How important is the FSP at this time of year?

10. Have you done anything differently this term because of the EYFS changes?

11. You have mentioned to me previously about your frustration at the FSP – such as the colours not being present, are there any other examples of points that are either missing or too complicated?

12. I’ve noticed a lot of people doing observations – when do you have time to collate them all – do they all get used?

13. Do you trust other people’s observations or do you prefer to see it yourself?
14. How helpful is it to have a support teacher? How is her group decided? Does it change?

15. Is there anything else you’d like to say, or to ask me about?

Interview schedule for support teacher

1. First of all – some background information: could you tell me how long you have been teaching, and how would you describe your current role?

2. What does being a support teacher involve?

3. Is there any mismatch between the official role and the reality?

4. What impact do you think you have on the Reception classes?

5. How are you involved in assessment?

6. How important do you feel assessment is in the classroom? How big a role does it play?

7. Do you feel confident in using the EYFSP? Have you had training in using the EYFSP?

8. If you were you teaching before the FSP, is it different and how?

9. Do you feel that the FSP is an accurate judge of children’s attainment?

10. How could it be improved?

11. Have you got any ideas about why different groups of children do differently – boys worse than girls, different groups in the community?
12. Do you feel there is coherence in the assessment system in your school? Does the FSP fit well into the assessment processes in Key Stage 1 and 2?

13. Is there anything else you would like to say?

**Interview schedule for EYFS coordinator**

1. First of all – some background information: could you tell me your name, what year you teach, and how long you have been teaching?

2. Could you tell me what kind of school you teach in?

3. Could you tell me about your current role?

4. And how would you describe the classes you teach?

5. Follow up questions on the class – are they different from other classes?

6. What are the demographics of your class – boys/girls, ethnicities?

7. What is the attainment level like?

8. I am going to ask you about assessment in your classrooms. How important do you feel assessment is in your classrooms? How big a part of your role is assessment?

9. Do you feel confident in your use of assessment? Have you had training in FSP?

10. Were you teaching before the FSP? If so – is it different and how?

11. Do you feel that the FSP is an accurate judge of children’s attainment?
12. Have you got any ideas about why different groups of children do differently – boys worse than girls, different groups in the community?

13. Do you feel pressure to get good FSP results?

14. What happens to your results in Year 1 – do you feel they are useful there?

15. Do you feel there is coherence in the assessment system in your school? Does the FSP fit well into the assessment processes in Key Stage 1 and 2?

16. Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Interview schedule for class teachers - final interviews (June 09)**

A: FSP results (Using sheet of results, as given by teacher)

1. Could you talk me through the process of getting these figures, step by step? (and follow on questions)

2. You mentioned that you ordered them – how does that help?

3. Did you find you had any ‘glaring inaccuracies’?

4. Did you go back and change any figures?

5. How can you tell if the figures are ‘wrong’?

6. Did anyone’s results surprise you?

7. How the results this year compare to last year?

8. Do you think the LEA will accept these results?

9. Are you pleased with the results? Will it have any effect on your career here or elsewhere? Would it have done if you had stayed here?

10. Do you take into consideration the government’s ‘good level of progress’ statistic (78 plus at least 6s in PSE and CLL)?

11. Do you notice any great differences in the scores for boys and girls, different ethnic groups, EAL pupils, SEN?
12. Could you explain in terms for the layman, how these pupils are different from each other? (labelled as ‘top’, ‘middle’, ‘low’ on list)

B: Classroom practices (have ability groups list)

13. How did the ability groups go this year? Did you think you got them right? Did you change them often?

14. Is it easy to put pupils into groups? Does the FSP help with this or not?

15. How do the scores fit with the groups – does it matter that they don’t match up? How would you explain that to an outsider?

16. Do the children know they are grouped by ability do you think?

17. What would happen if you had an all-girl ‘top group’?

18. Do you think the balance is right between child-initiated and teacher-led work in your classroom?

19. Do you think that you spend equal time with all the pupils? If not why not?

20. Do you know the pupils equally well? How does this fit into compiling the FSP?

21. Do you think you take other issues into account – like parents?

22. If you could describe the FSP process in terms of the whole year in 3 words, what would they be?

C: Research

23. How has it been having a researcher in your classroom?

24. Do you think you have acted differently or not?

25. Is there anything you think I have missed? Or anything else you would like to say?
Appendix 4: List of codes
(organised alphabetically)

Fieldnotes codes:
• Ability, development, grouping
• Assessment and FSP practices
• Behaviour
• Class and family background
• Environment
• Gender
• Ideal learners
• Research issues
• SEN
• Specific race issues, religion and EAL
• Teacher professionalism

Interview codes:
• Ability discourses

• Ability grouping and organisation

• Compliance with FSP requirements
  o Folders
  o Final results

• Development discourses

• Difficult intake

• Learner identities
  o Age
  o Behaviour
  o Class
  o EAL
  o Gender
  o Race
  o Parents/home
• Positive comments about children

• Producing results

• Teacher ‘knowledge’ discourses
  o Through the year
  o Used to complete FSP

• Teacher stress and assessment
  o Details of FSP
  o FSP practices
  o Local authority
  o Training

• Teacher stress in general
  o EY isolation
  o Management
  o Planning
  o Staff

• Variable time spent with children
Appendix 5: Information for participants

This is a copy of the information sheet provided to the participating schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundation Stage Profile Research Project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information for Schools</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Aims of the project:**
- To explore how the introduction of the FSP has impacted on Reception classrooms and teachers
- To explore how the FSP profile fits into a wider system of assessment in schools
- To explore how children from different groups experience the FSP process

**Methods:**
- A short initial interview with a teacher involved in the profile, in the summer term if possible
- Short informal interviews with the Reception teacher at different stages of the year and the assessment coordinator (once)
- Observation in the classroom, during each half-term of the year (possibly one day per week, or for a week block in each term – to be organised when convenient)
- Collection of documents – e.g. policies on assessment, FSP results

**Ethics:**
- The name of the school, the borough, and all participants will be anonymised
- The research will be carried out within the British Education Research Association (BERA) and Institute of Education ethical guidelines
- The research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), and so will also be bound by their ethical guidelines
- The researcher is an ex-teacher and has a CRB check

Alice Bradbury
Faculty of Policy and Society, Institute of Education
Appendix 6: Consent form

This consent form was signed by all the adult participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consent Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I understand that the researcher will be abiding by the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association and the Institute of Education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand the nature of this research and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I understand that my name, school and any other identifying features will be changed to ensure my anonymity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consent to this interview being recorded and transcribed, and the information I give being used for the purposes of research.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Signed: Date:
Appendix 7: The Reece/Ryan observations

These extended observations (discussed in Chapter 5) were written by a supply teacher and were copied down exactly on a later occasion. The names on each had been crossed out and changed.

Observation 1 (originally labelled Reece, then changed to Ryan)

As part of a group (about 8 children) R is helping to group the animals on certain sections of the mat. ‘Let’s put all the pigs over here on the mud’ he says. R collects all the pigs and stands them up. ‘Now let’s do all the cows. Where should they all go?’ he asks a friend. Friend replies ‘On the grass’. ‘Yeah that’s a good idea, we can put all the babies with their mummies’. R helps friend. R continues to group the different types of animals together. He then takes the farm vehicles and puts the trucks on the road. R plays very quietly, often on his own, which he seems to enjoy. It doesn’t seem to phase him when other children join in. He just continues his own solitary play, alongside other children.

Observation 2 (originally labelled Ryan, then changed to Reece)

R is playing a fishing game. ‘I’m going to choose a number. This is number 9’ he says. R points to the fish card displaying number 9. ‘This is the card I need to get’. He continues to fish. ‘I got it, I got the number 9’ he is very excited and seems to enjoy the game. R then takes another rod which isn’t being used. He is asked to put it down and only use 1 at a time. Says ‘I need 2 to get lots of fish’. He is asked it to hand it to the child. He does and continues playing the game.
Appendix 8: Final FSP Results

This appendix provides detailed results from the final FSP results, as discussed in Chapter 8. Results are given for each area of learning without dividing up the three ‘core’ subjects; this firstly to simplify the data for ease of understanding, and secondly to increase the anonymity of the pupils. The areas of learning and their abbreviations are as follows:

- Personal, social and emotional development (PSED)
- Communication, language and literacy (CLL)
- Problem-solving, reasoning and numeracy (PSRN)
- Physical Development (PD)
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World (KUW)
- Creative Development (CD)

Gatehouse

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>PSED (3 scales)</th>
<th>CLL (4 scales)</th>
<th>PSRN (3 scales)</th>
<th>PD (1 scale)</th>
<th>KUW (1 scale)</th>
<th>CD (1 scale)</th>
<th>Total FSP score</th>
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</tbody>
</table>
The different areas of learning are difficult to compare given the differences in the potential number of points given to each. However, if the numbers of points are worked out as a percentage of the potential points (see Table 2 below) we can see that the pupils at Gatehouse scored a greater proportion of the potential points on the PSED and physical development scales, and the lowest proportion of points on the creative development scale. There was, however, not a striking difference between the areas of learning. The children’s scores (in order) and ethnic groups at Gatehouse are shown in Table 3. Using the government’s official ethnic groups (ONS, 2010), the average results for each group are shown in Table 4.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Total FSP score</th>
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Table 3: Total scores and ethnic groups at Gatehouse
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group (number of children)</th>
<th>Average total points score</th>
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<td>Other Asian (12 children)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other ethnic group48 (3 children)</td>
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Table 4: Average total points scores and government ethnic groups at Gatehouse

The numbers involved here are obviously very small, and this data should be treated with caution. However, it is noticeable that the average for the Bangladeshi pupils is quite low compared with the Other White group (the Kosovan children).

48 The Moroccan children are in this group.
### St Mary’s

<table>
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<th>Name</th>
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<th>CLL (4 scales)</th>
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**Table 5: St Mary’s FSP results by area of learning**

As for Gatehouse, the breakdown of average points scores for each area for St Mary’s is shown in Table 6 below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of learning</th>
<th>PSED (27 points)</th>
<th>CLL (36 points)</th>
<th>PSRN (27 points)</th>
<th>PD (9 points)</th>
<th>KUW (9 points)</th>
<th>CD (9 points)</th>
<th>All areas (117 points)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average points score</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>19.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average points score as percentage</td>
<td>67.1%</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
<td>71.2%</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
<td>80.7%</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
<td>70.1%</td>
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</table>

Table 6: Average total points scores and government ethnic groups at St Mary’s

The ethnic groups of the children and their scores are shown in Table 7. Note that the ethnic groups are those listed on the official register, which were decided by the parents from a list of possible categories. The Tables using the government’s official ethnic groups are shown in Table 8.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Total FSP score</th>
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<tr>
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<td>White British</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Ryan</td>
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Table 7: Total scores and ethnic groups at St Mary’s
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<th>Ethnic group (number of children)</th>
<th>Average total points score</th>
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<td>Black groups (6 children)</td>
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<td>Mixed groups (4 children)</td>
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<td>Other ethnic group (1 child)</td>
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Table 8: Average total points scores and government ethnic groups at St Mary's

The results sheet as used at St Mary’s (with colour-coding) is shown overleaf.
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