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Learner agency in urban primary schools
Executive Summary to Society for Educational Studies
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Introduction

This project aimed to develop new theoretical understanding of the nature and extent of children's learner agency. From a sociocultural perspective, having the capacity to exercise learner agency (LA) is essential for meaning-making and therefore deep and effective learning (Bruner 1996). Existing international research suggests that children attending schools with significant intakes of children from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds may develop 'passive' and disengaged orientations to learning in response to the strong pressure on many of these schools to raise attainment (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen 2012, Mills & Gale 2009; Johnston & Hayes 2007; Thrupp 1999; Haberman 1991).

The research objective was:

- **To develop theoretical understanding of the nature of children's learner agency in 'disadvantaged' urban primary schools**

LA can be defined as volitional activity which has an effect on learners' peers and teachers', for example in terms of their understanding of a concept or phenomena (Blair 2009). Meaning-making can be defined as a process where learners reconstruct new knowledge by integrating it into their understanding of the world, using their existing experience, knowledge and concepts (Bruner 1990). In a classroom this occurs through talk and activity with peers, including those who are more experienced, and teachers who act as expert guides. LA is both constrained and enabled in socio-cultural practices, including, as in this research, the modes of pedagogy used by teachers (Bernstein 2000):

- *The performative mode* is characterised by a strong focus on assessment through tests, time-keeping and discipline. Children's perceived success in learning is measured through their outputs which are judged against standardised external criteria.
- *The competence mode* (also known as child-centred pedagogy) is defined by a focus on children's perceived 'innate' characteristics related to their ethnicity, gender or social class (Iverson & Duveen 2006; Hempel-Jorgensen, in press) and the presence of an 'invisible' pedagogy (low focus on discipline, assessment through tests and time-keeping) which relies on children's self-regulation.

The study

A multiple case study design (Yin 2009) was selected to enable collection of rich data using multiple methods within and compare across different schools. Four case study schools with above national average (26.7% in 2013) proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (as a proxy for 'disadvantage') and located in urban settings in Greater London. The schools were located in three different local authorities although one of the two in the same LA had academy status.

Table 1: Proportion of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) in case study primary schools¹

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4
Children eligible for FSM	68%*	46%*	29%*	45%*
Main mode of pedagogy	Performative	Performative	Competence	Competence/performative

*Numbers rounded to nearest decimal point

Data was collected in the four schools through semi-structured interviews with Year Five teachers and children and Year Five lessons were observed by the researcher as a non-participant observer, across the curriculum. Three focus children were identified in each school to provide a focus for data collection. These children were considered low, average and high attainers by their teachers and were selected as their experiences were likely to differ. In each school three numeracy, literacy and non-core lessons were observed resulting in 36 lesson observations across the four schools. The data collection instruments were based on key concepts from the literature review as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Key themes informing data collection instruments by data collection type

Data themes	Data collection type
Pupils' sense of agency <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Belief that actions can have an effect on others 2. Sense of purpose/volition in actions 3. Sense of commitment to learning activities/motivation 	Individual interviews with children
Pupils' actual agency <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Making choices and decisions 2. Taking initiatives 3. Developing and using learning strategies independently 4. Meaning-making 	Lesson observations, Individual interviews with teachers and group interviews with children
Socio-cultural practices/discourses: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pedagogical mode 2. Teachers' pedagogical practices 3. Discourses on gender, ethnicity, social class, 'ability' enacted in pedagogical relationships and practices 4. Discourses on discipline and knowledge 	Lesson observations, individual interviews with teachers and group interviews with children

All interview data was transcribed from audio-recordings. Transcripts and observation notes were initially coded using open and closed codes based on key concepts from Bernstein's (2000) theory of pedagogy and socio-cultural theory of LA from which themes were generated. The data was initially analysed separately for each school which included a comparison of children according to their attainment ranking and within respectively numeracy, literacy and non-core lessons. The data was then compared between schools.

Findings

All four classrooms were characterised by a mixture of competence-based and performative pedagogy, although the dominant mode varied across schools. The higher the proportion of disadvantaged children at the school, the more performative the pedagogy was.

¹ Free school meals data from Ofsted School Data Dashboard 2013: <http://dashboard.ofsted.gov.uk/>

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The pedagogy in Schools 1 and 2 was predominantly performative, which meant that:

- Children's behaviour was regulated by a visible discipline system;
- Children were very regularly tested in numeracy and literacy lessons which informed children's 'ability' labelling and teachers' pedagogical practices;
- Learning activities were tightly timed and paced;
- Children's talk was highly regulated and constrained, particularly in core lessons, resulting in less opportunities for meaning-making;
- Children had less if any choice of seat-mates which also constrained talk;
- More time was spent on whole class teaching, which was highly teacher led, in core subject lessons;
- Children's access to digital technology was limited to occasional use of the electronic whiteboard and otherwise mini whiteboards, worksheets and writing books;
- Teacher led sessions typically consisted of teachers giving instructions and asking more closed questions which required pre-defined brief answers from children testing their knowledge;
- Children's learning activities were highly structured and monitored by the teacher
- Opportunities for learner agency were found in the 'gaps and cracks' of teacher control by children taking initiative to use their extensive understanding of language to compose creative jokes or other humorous contributions to learning activities which were subversive in nature;
- There were few opportunities for choice in lessons and when they were offered, usually in non-core lessons, these not necessarily valued by children as the options were seen as teacher defined.

In School 1, there were also elements of competence pedagogy in which children were judged in terms of perceived deficient, innate characteristics related to their ethnicity and social class. The teacher positioned children, who were largely from British Minority Ethnic groups, as lacking White British linguistic and cultural competence. This was expressed in the teacher preventing children from developing activities or topics for discussion, which she perceived as requiring such competence. This was despite the fact that children had initiated these activities and topics, which they clearly had a strong interest in. The teacher effectively shut down potentially powerful opportunities for children to exercise LA.

In schools 3 and 4, pedagogy was either mainly competence based (School 3) or mixed with equal measures of performative pedagogy (School 4), which meant that:

- There was a relative lack of focus on discipline in that children's behaviour was regulated by an invisible pedagogy based on self-regulation;
- Children were allowed to choose seatmates for many activities and peer relations were mainly positive with a strong sense of solidarity;
- Children had greater access to information technology including iPads which were used to make films and conduct research on topics chosen by children;
- Teachers consciously strove to teach children skills for meta-learning strategies or self-determination;
- In school 4, where the influence of performative pedagogy was stronger than at school 3, more lesson time was teacher-led than at school 3 where children were expected to work autonomously, usually in groups, for a significant proportion of lessons;
- Teachers used more open questions, encouraging longer and original responses from children with a focus on understanding rather than testing knowledge;

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- Children felt trusted by the teacher to be autonomous as learners, to make ‘sensible’ choices
- Peer talk was less regulated by the teacher providing more extended opportunities for meaning-making;
- Children’s initiative-taking was encouraged and validated by the teacher. This took the form of children asking questions inspired by their own interests and making suggestions for lesson content or structure.

In school 3 where competence pedagogy was strongest, children were allowed higher degrees of autonomy in managing their own learning. However, their LA was constrained by teachers’ judgements of children’s gender in relation to learning. A particular masculinity was associated with the ‘ideal learner’ which meant that girls’, and some boys’, learner agency was constrained in subjects such as numeracy and physical education. This also applied to children with lower attainment in most subjects, who struggled to participate in group work without expert teacher or peer guidance.

Conclusions

The following new aspects of learner agency were identified, which can enrich and enhance existing understandings in the socio-cultural literature. The data suggests:

- Elements of both performative and competence-based pedagogy can act to constrain children’s capacity to exercise LA. While LA was generally more constrained in classrooms where performative pedagogy was more dominant, elements of both modes of pedagogy were associated with significant constraint on children’s LA.
- LA was constrained in different ways according to the mode of pedagogy. With performative pedagogy, LA was constrained by stronger teacher regulation of children’s talk resulting in significantly reduced opportunities for children to talk freely with peers and teachers. This minimised opportunities for meaning-making.
- In relation to competence-based pedagogy, learner agency was constrained through teachers’ perception of children’s gender, ethnicity and/or social class. This was a powerful way in which children’s learner agency was effectively shut down by the teacher.
- Self-regulation, as a key feature of competence-based pedagogy, enabled children’s autonomy. However, this can privilege the autonomy, and hence agency, of children who meet teacher expectations. If all children’s gender, ethnic and social class identities are not valued in the classroom, as in School 3, some children’s learner agency will be unequally constrained.
- Trust between teachers and children enabled children’s capacity to exercise LA. When children felt trusted and valued by their teacher they became more engaged with learning on affective and intellectual levels.
- Friendship and positive peer and teacher-child relationships were vital to enabling LA. When children were allowed unregulated talk with peers they considered as friends – as opposed to a child selected by the teacher to encourage ‘good’ behaviour – and teachers, with whom they had positive relationships, the resulting quality of talk was more likely to engender meaning making.
- Infusing pedagogy with emotion, in making life connections with learning activities, elicited children’s engagement and agency for meaning-making.

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When teachers trusted children to be autonomous, valued their social class and ethnic identities and connected with them on an emotional level, as observed in School 4, this provided a powerful context for enabling learner agency.

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