Including 'difficult' students: counter politics, play and liveability in the primary school classroom

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Drawing upon Judith Butler's conceptualisation of performativity and subjectification, this article explores the effects of different kinds of counter political action to disrupt exclusionary school practices that further marginalise children who are, often already, on the edges of school life. Firstly, tracing the impossibilities sometimes encountered when taking up a politics of reinscription, the article goes on to argue that the role of the pedagogue engaged in counter politics needs further disruption in order that children themselves have more space to determine who and how to be. Here, I explore how the rigid teacher/ student hierarchical binary can be unsettled through play. A more intersubjective relationship emerges between teacher and student which can make school feel more liveable and sustainable. Given the highly pressurised conditions in schools, globally, in this time of late neoliberalism, finding ways to make school more liveable is essential work. This article suggests that whilst moments of play, such as the one detailed here, are often fleeting, their effects can be felt afterwards. Finding opportunities for play is an important counter political strategy in schools at this time.

Keywords: liminality; counter politics; primary school; Judith Butler; play; liveability

Introduction

The conditions in schools operating in neoliberal systems, globally, are becoming increasingly unliveable (Butler, 2004b, p. 226) for students and teachers. Within a context of continuing and unrelenting expectation around high stakes testing (Ball, 2016; Bradbury, 2018; Bradbury & Robert-Holmes, 2017; Braun & Maguire, 2018); tight surveillance (Kulz, 2017; Simmons, 2010; Taylor, 2013) and often increasing teacher workloads as a result of cuts to funding (Fitzgerald & Lupton, 2015; Traianou & Jones, 2019), finding time and space for play, even with young children, becomes difficult (Bibby, 2010). In this article, I argue that playfulness can constitute a form of counter politics that has the potential to provide some resistance to the toxic effects of high-pressured school environments and to trouble, at least momentarily, the hierarchical constitution of the teacher/ student binary. I think about this here particularly in relation to children who are constituted as 'problematic' within school discourse as it is these students who are often pushed to the margins of their schooling experience (Gillies, 2016; Harwood, 2006; Youdell, 2011).

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There is a small but significant body of scholarship that takes up a politics based in poststructuralist theory, notably the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, to explore possibilities for disrupting school discourses perpetuating inequality, for instance, those of 'normal' development; student ability and 'inappropriate' behaviour (see Blaise, 2005; Laws & Davies, 2000; MacNaughton, 2005; Youdell, 2011). This scholarship concerning counter politics and schooling differs significantly from work in critical pedagogy which takes up politics based in Marxism to address issues of power and oppression in schooling structures. Whilst the former finds its roots in the latter, the way that power is conceptualised is fundamentally different with scholarship based in poststructuralism taking the position that the power relations constituting the pedagogic relationship cannot straightforwardly be overturned in order for students and teachers to collaborate on equal terms. However, I want to suggest in this article that closer attention needs to be paid to intersubjectivity in poststructuralist writing on counter pedagogy. Indeed, within such accounts, the pedagogue is often unproblematically centred as the person enacting the politics and effecting change, however contingent or transient this change is (Laws & Davies, 2000; Teague, 2014a). This is unsurprising given the way in which students and teachers are often understood in oppositional relation to one another in a way that shores up institutional requirements for teachers to be authoritative, knowing and knowledgeable and students to be docile and 'teachable' (Ball, 2013; Cannella, 2000; Osgood, 2006; Teague, 2017). In such conditions, it is difficult to conceptualise counter politics in school that foregrounds a more intergenerationally intersubjective approach, but it is exactly this that I argue is important for understanding the place of counter politics in the everyday of school life.

In this article, I draw on ethnographic data from an Economic and Social Research Council-funded study which explores teacher subjectivity and counter politics on a micro level. Simultaneously in the role of teacher and researcher, I carried out the research with a class of six and seven-year-old students in an outer London infant school, which I refer to as Greenfield. I will first theorise the places of seeming political impasse I encounter when my subjectivity as a teacher is made possible only through the othering of particular student identities. I then move on to consider the different kind of counter politics made possible in everyday moments of play and connection within the pedagogic relationship. Whilst this is difficult to explore in the formal times of teaching and learning, there are times between lessons; spaces at the edges of the classroom; in corridors, travelled along as we move between different places in school, are where I find other ways to be a teacher in relation to the students I work with and the students can find other ways of being with me and each other. This is important within a context which requires teachers to prioritise student compliance in the service of academic progression and successful performance in high stakes tests and is particularly significant in terms of inclusion of those students who are often on the borders of exclusion from the classroom, or, even, the school.

Subjectivation, recognisability and liveability

The ways in which categories of identity operate in schools has been a focus of scholarship within the sociology of education for some time. Such categories are never neutral descriptors around which the subjects of schooling are organised; they are always implicated in power hierarchies which allow some subjects to succeed whilst others are marginalised (Bradbury, 2013; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Kulz,

2017; Rasmussen, 2006; Youdell, 2006). I am going to briefly review Butler's understanding of the process of becoming a subject as this is necessary to understand her concept of liveability, which I will engage with in this article.

Subjectivation, the process by which subjects are produced as intelligible, is key to many poststructuralist understandings of educational inequality and performativity is a central concept in understanding this process. Butler builds on Austin's (1962) theory of speech acts and Derrida's (1988) response to Austin to suggest that identity is not a matter of having or being but of doing. Subjectivation is simultaneously constitutive and productive. It is a process, which, according to Butler (1997, p. 83), makes us subjects of power and provides the conditions for our recognisability. Indeed, Butler writes –

> 'subjectivation' carries the paradox in itself: assujetissement denotes both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection – one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency. (p. 83)

The process of subjectivation involves the discursive production of identities through which a subject is made coherent as, for instance, a woman or a teacher or a student. According to Butler, these categories of identity act as performatives, producing rather than describing subjects. Key here, however, is that this production is never certain. Categories of identity gain the appearance of being fixed through their repeated enactment but these repetitions are open to misfire or misappropriation. Recognisability via identity categories is crucial to survival as a subject. The failure of a subject to enact their identity correctly, calls into question their very subjecthood. Key here, is also Butler's idea of performativity.

There is ambiguity at the site of subjectivation, the performative process by which a subject is produced and made legible as a subject. Indeed, Butler argues that in order to become proper and recognisable, the subject must identify with a fiction of itself and simultaneously disavow this process of identification. The subject must identify with that which it will become (for instance, female, feminine, straight) which will always be a fantasy in that it is an identity that is not fully realisable (due to the absence of a natural sexed or gendered essence) and yet, the subject must not see that this is what it does. It is this not seeing, or disavowal, that ensures the continuation of the illusion of an identity that is enduring and fixed. As already mentioned, the subject is conceptualised here as produced by the performance rather than existing prior to it. This understanding of subjectivity has been taken up by scholars within the sociology of education and applied to school settings.

Butler's conceptualisation of necessary recognisability informs my politics in the classroom and both brings me to places of impossibility as well as opening up ways to make life in school feel more liveable, particularly in times and spaces of less formal learning. Indeed, Judith Butler (1997) writes about the necessity of recognisability in terms of making life liveable. In her discussions of precarity, Butler points to the capacity for both vulnerability and violence in all humans. Violence towards another, suggests Butler, becomes impossible when that other is not othered (2004b, p. 27). Whilst Butler discusses the difficulty of determining what makes life liveable (2004a, p. 226), she does situate relationality as a necessary condition. The recognition, identified by Butler as key to a liveable life, occurs relationally and, when this happens, violence against the other becomes less possible (2004b, pp. 138–140). A liveable life, then is about being in relation to others, being recognised by others and without a constant threat of violence. Butler suggests we ask ourselves 'what are our politics such that we are in whatever way possible, both conceptualizing the

possibility of the liveable life and arranging for its institutional support?' (2004a, p. 39). I take up this question in relation to lives of teachers and students in schools in this article, eventually exploring how the conditions for a more liveable life might be found in everyday playfulness occurring in the gaps between times of official, timetabled subjects.

Methodology

The data in this article were generated via an ethnographic research project exploring subjectivity and counter politics, over the course of a year in which I taught a class of six and seven-year-old children. Specifically, I investigated how poststructuralist informed pedagogy, drawing on the work of Judith Butler, could be used to trouble normative schooling practices that produce inequalities. Whilst there is a significant body of scholarship demonstrating the way these inequalities are produced in everyday practices in schools such as ability grouping, behaviour management procedures, school reports and curriculum content (see, for instance, Bradbury, 2013; Gillborn, 2008; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Reay, 2006), there has been less focus on pedagogy that might intervene in this production of inequality.

Greenfield Infant School, where I carried out this research, is a school for three to seven-year-old children situated on the edge of a large council estate in outer London. I use pseudonyms for the school, the students and the other teachers to protect their anonymity. I joined the school (specifically for the purposes of this research) at a time of transition from local authority infant school to academy school, following a series of school inspections (from Ofsted, the official school inspection organisation in the UK) in the years prior to my arrival which graded the school 'satisfactory'. I took up a maternity cover for one year, working two days a week (sometimes three days, as the year went on).

I initially sought consent for my research from the headteacher of the school prior to taking up my position. I made her aware of my research in broad terms, informing her that I was interested in exploring my own pedagogic practice in relation to issues of equality and inclusion. Once I began working at the school, I reminded the headteacher about my research and also informed the staff at the school, during a staff meeting, that I was carrying out ethnographic research. The parents and carers of the children I taught were informed about the research in a letter home from me and were given the option of talking further to me if they had any questions or concerns although none chose to do so. Throughout the year, I had ongoing conversations with the children I taught about my research and about how I would use some of the events in the classroom to help me think about how to make schools fairer and more fun for all children. The school were expecting another Ofsted inspection imminently so there was much focus on assessment data and improving teaching quality during my time there. Partly as a result of the increased surveillance of lessons and students' work by senior management, I found that much of the data I generated was about incidents occurring as we moved (temporally and sometimes spatially) between lessons or points in the school day. Being in the dual role of teacher and researcher meant it was difficult to write ethnographic observation notes continually throughout the school day, but I wrote brief scratch notes in break times, lunch times and once school was finished and then wrote these into full field notes at the end of each day. I wrote about the possibilities opened up by pursuing counter politics on a micro level in the classroom as well as detailing the places of impossibility I encountered in my

pedagogic practice. In so doing, I provided insights into what counter politics might look like in a contemporary UK classroom as well as mapping why it is sometimes so difficult to challenge normative practices that perpetuate inequality.

For the purposes of this article, I have selected two excerpts of ethnographic data that particularly exemplify the different kinds of politics I pursue at different moments, and their effects. I have chosen to focus in closely on these two excerpts of data to allow me to fully explore and discuss the implications of the politics pursued in each.

Political impasses: a 'bitch' or 'disturbed'

The following data excerpt is a conversation between myself, Katy (my job share partner) and Paul (the deputy head teacher) about a six-year-old child named Mary. The members of staff are white whilst Mary is black, of African Caribbean heritage. The conversation concerns school reports which are being written for all children at this time of year; Mary's behaviour and whether she can be referred to a counselling service, Place2be, which runs at the school. Place2be (P2b) is a UK charity that works therapeutically with children in schools in areas deemed to have high socio-economic deprivation. In her absence, Mary's subjectivity becomes a site of contestation for the adults in this conversation.

Katy: I don't even know what we're going to write about Mary in her report.
Paul: Just be honest … she's such a little cow.
Katy: I know. I saw she was outside your office again today.
Paul: Yep, the dinner ladies brought her in for screaming in the faces of some year 3 girls when Oak Class were over visiting the junior playground earlier this lunchtime. Apparently, she pinched someone as well, although she's denying it.
Katy: Little liar. I know she did it. She's such a bitch. I can't believe she's already trying to pick fights with the older children before she's even started in the juniors.
Me: I think she might be really disturbed. She's got lots going on at home – she might benefit from P2b sessions.
[Both Katie and Paul look at me, then look away]
Katy: Oh no, she's definitely a madam. We've been too soft on her up 'til now. She shouldn't go to P2b until her behaviour improves. There're loads of other kids who'd benefit.
Me: She genuinely struggles to relate to other kids. It might not be entirely intentional.
Paul: Well, I wasn't taken in by her lies today. She flat out told me she hadn't screamed in the faces of those girls in the junior playground and said she knew nothing about the pinching when various adults and other children had seen her. I told her she was not getting away with it this time. I've kept her in my office all this lunchtime and told her she needs to come back tomorrow to write apology letters to those she hurt and those she has lied to.
Katy: Good. I'm glad she has someone who is putting their foot down with her.
Me: I think she's struggling, she needs help. She's one of the most disturbed children I've met.
Paul: Hmmm … she needs firmness. I'd better get back. Return the form to me when you've done it.
[He walks out of the classroom. Katy and I resume our previous tasks without saying another word about it to each other]. (Fieldnotes, summer 2012)

Mary is constituted as a 'bitch', a 'cow' and a 'bully'. Youdell's (2006) concept of the 'impossible' student is useful here in understanding this conceptualisation of

Mary. Drawing on Butler's theory of subjectivation, Youdell argues that students who in some way challenge normative categories of identity in schools become unrecognisable and, therefore, impossible within the space of the school. Mary becomes an impossible student in the pejorative framing of her in relation to these undesirable descriptors of adult femininity. According to Paul, Mary is reported to have screamed in the faces of some children in the junior school playground. The screaming, pinching and, then, the assumed lying about these behaviours place Mary outside expected behavioural norms for a year two girl and thus she is othered in the abject descriptions of her. Mary's screaming could be read as assertiveness or appropriate defence against older children or simply as an expression of her feelings in the moment (bearing in mind she is six years old), yet she is positioned as a bully. Simmons (2002) highlights the way that African Caribbean girls are frequently caught between the demand to be 'nice' (and express no anger) and being a 'bitch' (if they express anger). She argues that when African Caribbean girls are assertive, they are pathologized as 'mean' and 'bitchy' (p.1 78). Similar to my findings here, Morris's (2007) data indicates the way that African American girls are seen as 'unladylike' if they scream. According to Morris –

> perceptions of the loudness and aggressiveness of Black girls translated into discipline aimed at curbing this behaviour […] The intention of this discipline appeared to be to mould them into exhibiting more 'acceptable', stereotypical qualities of femininity such as being quieter and more passive. (p. 506)

The behaviour Mary is said to display in the data above is incongruous with normative notions of western femininity and girlhood. Indeed, within the negative commentary on Mary is contained the notion of an ideal year two girl to which she is being unfavourably compared; someone compliant, kind and studious. Mary's behaviour is read as manipulative, defiant and belonging to a person older than her age. Indeed, it seems she stops being understood as a school child and, in this failure, she is denied what a school child might need in terms of adult care, protection and guidance.

My contribution to the conversation I describe in the data above is strategic but is ultimately part of the violent response to Mary. To call out the intersecting racism and sexism in this conversation would be to call into question my position as a recognisable teacher. Indeed, this is compounded by the fact that the comments come from the deputy head himself. Working out how best to act in Mary's interests in this moment is not easy. Broader cultural discourses of sexism and racism intersect with notions of proper school behaviour and conduct here, meaning that to challenge the way that Mary is positioned also seems to suggest Mary's behaviour is not completely unacceptable. Directly challenging the racism and sexism of my colleagues would call into question their behaviour which would unsettle the taken for granted assumptions of the adult/ child and teacher/ student hierarchical binaries. Exposing and troubling these would be to call into question my own subject position as proper teacher. As I mention above, Butler (1997) writes that failing to act one's proper place in discourse, can jeopardize one's recognisable subjectivity. Whilst being in places of uncertainty is a corollary of pursuing counter politics in the classroom, to put myself in that place too often is to risk my teacher subjectivity altogether. Negotiating my way between recognisability as a teacher and providing some counter discourse to the normative sexism and racism privileged in the conversation is difficult. Indeed, rather than directly challenging the language of my colleagues, I insist Mary is 'disturbed' and needs 'help'. Even this suggestion from me, however, is met with a literal turning

away from me by my colleagues: It is as if my suggestion almost makes me as invisible as a teacher as Mary is as a student. Perhaps Mary's behaviour has located her so far away from a school student subject position that my attempt to put her back there is unthinkable. Indeed, her position is so contrary to the 'ideal student' that she is situated as being beyond help and beyond the 'saving' that a referral to Place2Be could produce. The options presented for Mary here are not particularly hopeful; a 'bitch' or a 'troubled child'.

The ways in which performativity has been taken up in relation to pedagogy tends to foreground the teacher as the person who can, with the right theoretical tools, alter the trajectory for a particular student or group of students (see also, Blaise, 2005; Davies, 1989; Davies & Gannon, 2009; Laws & Davies, 2000; Teague, 2014b). Indeed, this is what I attempt in the data episode above. Yet when the alternative to being a bitch is being disturbed, the paradoxes at the very centre of subjectivation come to the fore and leave me feeling stuck. My attempts to discursively locate Mary differently in order to enable her to escape being a 'bitch' choose for her a different label. Valerie Harwood (2006) writes about the problematic way in which diagnoses and pathologising labels are taken up in schools. Not only do such moves serve to describe the whole child in deficit terms, they also eclipse the ways in which, for instance, discourses of racism or sexism operate in the situation. So my move in the data above to claim these labels for Mary, to ask that we take up a discourse of 'the disturbed child' when thinking about her, is problematic both in terms of the implications for Mary as an individual student but also in terms of the wider pedagogical politics I pursue. Indeed, it turns attention away from the discourses around gender, race, and childhood, implicit in the judgements made about Mary and her behaviour, thus removing responsibility from the institution of the school and the adults who work there, including myself.

Indeed, in being an 'insider' researcher, I am caught up in the violent practices (discursive and material) of Greenfield Infants. They impact on me and are perpetuated by me. I need to be recognisable enough within the terms of the school and the wider political context of schooling (discussed in the introduction) that informs this. I can never operate from outside the discourses that make me a teacher. However, whilst I maintain the pedagogic relationship is an important site for counter politics, it is the students' experiences I focus on here as, for them there is no escape. As a teacher, I experience the violence of the system within which I work but, particularly as a researcher with funding and university links, there is a way out for me. Therefore, the violence done to me and my need for a more liveable school environment are not my focus here. I am interested, however, in taking up an issue that has been of concern to feminist scholars and educators critiquing more traditional forms of critical pedagogy, namely, the decentring of the pedagogue as the central actor. This is something that has been taken up by Ellsworth (1989), hooks (2003), and Lather (2001), and in relation to a patriarchal tradition in critical pedagogy. Indeed, as Lather explains, critical pedagogy is still very much a 'boy thing'. She states –

> This is due not so much to the dominance of male authors in the field as it is to the masculinist voice of abstraction, universalization, and the rhetorical position of 'the one who knows,' what Ellsworth (1997) calls 'The One with the "Right" Story'. (p. 184)

Whilst my pedagogic practice is informed by a poststructuralist politics that aims to unsettle the, often, taken for granted assumptions of knowledge, the paradox at the core of different kinds of counter pedagogical approach is that the role of the

pedagogue is to know differently to the students and, in most mainstream educational settings, part of a pedagogue's role is to maintain some kind of authority over the knowledge in the classroom. In the following section, I suggest that whilst I cannot step outside my position of teacher, it is sometimes possible to perform teacher differently, in order to become less the 'one who knows', and thus open up more space for children's knowledges and ways of being.

Making school more liveable

To return to Butler's suggestion that recognisability is key to viability as a subject, I wonder what this means for children at Greenfield School. In this context behaviour management, at best, uses exclusion to shame children into compliance and, at worst, more violently coerces children through shouting (for further discussion see, Teague, 2014a, 2014b); where the curriculum is overloaded; staff sickness levels high and standards are scrutinized, making the life of a child more liveable might be to make a case for them being disturbed. Yet in relation to the data excerpt above, I am left wondering what space there might be for the students to experience their own discursive agency. Does it always have to be the pedagogue determining an alternative subjectivity for a child to assume, or might a child be able to find another way of being for themselves or, even, could a more collaborative form of counter politics emerge? Butler (2004b) writes that 'a life for which no categories of recognition exist is not a liveable life' (p. 8). Butler's reference here is to particular gendered bodies and the possibility, or otherwise, of exceeding the demands for identification, but this is a serious question for pedagogical politics too. What meaning does liveability have for the students at Greenfield School? Whilst liveability seems to go beyond recognisability, the need to be recognisable enough to remain in the classroom or playground, rather than sitting outside in the corridor or spending playtimes with the headteacher, is a key starting point.

I should not be the one determining for Mary what will make her school life liveable. Indeed, Butler (2004a) writes about the difficulty of determining what makes a liveable life but suggests that we create space to explore this. Elsewhere, Butler (2005) writes about the importance of allowing 'the other' to speak an account of themselves, no matter how full of knots, repetitions, ellipsis, gaps and contradictions such accounts may be. When the only options available to Mary are to be 'bad' or 'disturbed', it is difficult to see where she might have space to assert some discursive agency to enact a version of herself that she determines. Again there is a paradox in pursuing a performative pedagogical politics here: Remaining recognisable as a teacher means I need to maintain my position of authority yet in order to create space for students themselves to speak and be heard, to find their own ways of being in the classroom and to exercise some discursive agency, necessitates a disruption of my own normative enactments of teacher.

Determining another's subject position is not only precarious in its potential for recuperation or misfire, it can also be stifling in relation to the life of the other. I am not, for example, suggesting I can consciously and rationally step back to create space for Mary to establish her own sense of a liveable life in school. Subjectivation is ongoing and constitutes me as teacher with authority again and again however much I dislike it or may want the situation to be otherwise. But there are other moments where possibilities emerge for myself and the children I teach to become something other, if even momentarily. Subjectivating processes continue to act upon us and

through us but the focus of my politics shifts from trying to intervene in these to processes to participating alongside the students. Interestingly, these moments often occur on boundaries and thresholds and offer glimpses of something other. As I will go on to explore in the next section, other ways of being and relating playfully bubble up having been pushed under by the tightly regimented practices of the official daily timetable, played out in the official spaces of the classroom, the school hall and the playground. As I mention in the introduction, it is during these moments, that the teacher/ student binary can be troubled. I am not suggesting that I can ever step outside of my teacher subjectivity but, rather, the kind of teacher and adult I can be in these times is different, as I shall demonstrate in the following discussion.

The appearance of play in an in-between moment of transition

I am now going to explore the role of play, as an act of subversion which can unsettle processes of subjectivation without arriving at the apparent place of impasse seen in the data above. Interestingly, Butler's questions about viable life are echoed by the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1971) when he asks in relation to his patients, 'What makes life worth living?' I mention him here because he develops an understanding and appreciation of the importance of play for both children and adults in his text 'Playing and Reality'. He argues that play between people, constitutes a particular intersubjective space which is neither the inner psychic world nor the outer world of the social (pp. 72, 86). Bibby (2010) writes about the ways in which play has been relegated to the playground and the nursery within UK state primary schools and points out that this move forecloses possibilities for learning and connection that play can produce. The absence of play from the infant school classrooms in which I work serve to produce particular kinds of students ready to work to the rigid timetables necessary to get through the curriculum content set down. In line with other state schools in the UK (Ward & Quennerstedt, 2019; West, 2010) from year one onwards at Greenfield, the teachers and students work to timetables which reflect the hierarchy of curriculum subjects in terms of numbers of hours allocated to them and the time in the day in which they are taught. Thus, mornings are given over to English and maths whilst the humanities, science, music, PE, and art are taught in afternoons. Yet it is not just that the days are divided into strict segments of time for different activities and subjects, each lesson (especially in the core subjects) is divided into three distinct sections; introduction, main part, and plenary. There is little space for playfulness on the part of the children or myself.

The sanctity of the three-part literacy lesson is troubled by the presence of play, yet playing risks placing me outside the bounds of recognisability of teacher. The following excerpt of data occurs at a time of transition in the choreography of the lesson. It is a moment when my body can risk performing teacher differently without jeopardising my legitimacy to the extent it might be if this moment occurred in another part of the lesson. I argue here that the temporal liminality of this moment (occurring, as it does, at a moment of transition between one part of the lesson and another) makes possible the playful counter politics that emerge here.

Mirroring silly faces

The following data excerpt outlines a morning literacy lesson in Oak Class. I focus on my interactions with Adam, a six year old boy in the class who is finding it difficult to concentrate on the lesson and I explore what happens when I do something other than follow the school behaviour management policy of giving two warnings before removing a child to the next door classroom.

> It is Friday morning and we are in the middle of a literacy lesson. We are coming to the end of the carpet session and I am about to send the children to their tables. We have been retelling the beginning of 'Percy the Park Keeper' by Nick Butterworth. Adam is finding it difficult to remain focused during the session and has been calling out and poking children around him. He sits with his legs crossed but with his heels underneath him so his knees touch the floor, he rocks back and forth, bobbing up and down, in this position. I have been gently shushing him, telling him to keep still so the children behind him can see and reminding him to put his hand up, none of which have been particularly effective. I've been resisting issuing warnings and threats of having to work alone in the parallel classroom. After reiterating the retelling task and establishing the 'success criteria' with the children, I send them off to work. There is a bit of noise as children get themselves into groups and move to the tables. Adam is sitting at the front of the carpet and is telling me he cannot be bothered to do this activity and that it is boring. He begins making faces and making noises. He puts a finger in each corner of his mouth and pulls his fingers in opposite directions, he sticks out his tongue, waggling it around and opens his eyes big and wide. I ask him to calm down. He continues. I then move from my chair on to the carpet with him. I sit crossed legged, facing him. The rest of the class have gone to the tables to do their retelling. Adam puffs out his cheeks. I copy him, puffing out my cheeks too. He and the other boys become immediately quiet, then begin to laugh. I keep watching Adam. Adam makes another face at me, this time pulling his lower eyelids down and poking his tongue out of the corner of his mouth. Again, I copy him. Again, Adam makes a face at me, sticking his tongue out straight and screwing his nose up. I copy what he does. This time he stops. He is quiet. I ask if he feels like doing the activity. He shakes his head. I ask if he would like to retell the story with Wesley (the class wolf puppet). He agrees, enthusiastically. He remains engaged in his retelling of the story and by the end of the session is keen to share his retelling of 'Percy the Park Keeper' with the rest of the class. (Field notes, summer, 2012)

Adam and I play together in the middle of a literacy lesson. Neither of us is performing recognisable year 2 student or teacher here. This is a move which prevents Adam's exclusion from the group or the task but it is also one that risks my own exclusion. This feels very different to the political tactics deployed in the previous data excerpt I discuss. I, momentarily at least, stop performing teacher as I have been doing and also stop requiring Adam to perform year 2 student. We play a face copying game together, on the carpet when he is supposed to be engaged in his task of retelling the story. I follow his lead and copy the faces he makes. I enact a different teacher subjectivity here, perhaps calling into question what it means to be 'teacher' in this space. I do not follow the behaviour management policy which states that I need to issue warnings and time outs if a child does not comply with my requests. In sitting on the carpet with Adam and copying the different faces he pulls, I give further attention to a child who has been disruptive. Rather than surveying the class, making sure they are settling down quietly or going to work with the group I have allocated myself to work with, I have placed myself on the carpet where I cannot properly see the class. My body is doing the opposite of normative teacher in this moment by sitting crossed legged on the carpet opposite Adam. The making of silly faces within the literacy lesson seemingly has nothing to do with the story retelling task, although I do retell the visual story he tells me. My shushing and instructing during the carpet session does constitute Adam as the disruptive student. The way he raises himself up higher than the other students by sitting on his heels, his calling out and his eventual

rejection of the task as boring contravene the classroom requirements of neat, cross legged bodies, compliant in their physicality and commitment to the task set. To remain in this classroom, as a recognisable school student, it seems that the notion of recognisability needs troubling or that Adam needs to shift categories from 'naughty' to something else. The political move being made here does not ask for this unruly body to be included in the choreography of the lesson. Indeed, there is no attempt by me here to discursively shift Adam from one subject position to another. Engaging playfully with Adam by copying the faces he makes at me might offer him some recognition in this space. Whilst I do eventually ask him to take part in the story retelling with everyone else, requiring he act out his proper place in this classroom scene, I do not insist he takes up a subject position I determine for him. Rather, we become something different in our game. We are not abject in our refusal of proper teacher/ student subjectivities in this moment but neither are we completely recognisable as a proper teacher and student. It is in this discursively and temporally 'inbetween' place that we glimpse another way of relating. Life at Greenfields becomes momentarily more liveable as the rigid positions of the teacher/ student binary are troubled. These repeated small moments of liveability found in play, can make school life more liveable and sustaining overall.

Conclusion

Drawing on a Butlerian framework of performativity, I have specifically focused on issues of liveability and recognisability in this article to explore what this might mean in relation to counter political pedagogy in school. This has particular relevance in the context of the conditions in contemporary schools, globally, as outlined in the introduction. In exploring the political impasse reached in taking up a politics of reinscription, I am able to trace the way in which school can be an unliveable place for children who are recognised only in pejorative terms. Whilst I acknowledge the violence done to children in school, is also experienced, as well as perpetuated, by teachers, I have chosen to focus more on how it might impact on children here as they are the group with the least agency in this school context.

I go on to explore the subversive potential of play in school, arguing that whilst play does not remove the violence of the labelling, judgement and categorisation that occurs, it creates an intersubjective space which disrupts rigid hierarchical binaries of teacher/ student, and, in so doing, makes life in school more liveable. In the second data excerpt I explore, exclusionary practices are challenged without insisting a child comply with teacher demands that they take up another subject position. This is significant because it hints at the possibility of a more collaborative counter-politics which, rather than being completely teacher led, allows for the development of an intersubjective space between student/s and teacher. From this place, the potential for a more liveable school experience emerges.

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