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# *Cypriot Journal of Educational Sciences*



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## Maintaining the balance: teacher control and pupil disruption in the classroom

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### Abstract

A class of 8-9 year-old children in England was observed for several months in order to explore their experiences of everyday schooling and especially the way they themselves understand these experiences. The research focused particularly on the way they experience and understand non-educational classroom activities like rituals and routines, classroom management and control, rewards and punishments. It highlighted the differences between the perceptions of the children and those of adults. One finding was that in the primary classroom children are under constant surveillance and control by the teacher, and that they may respond in a variety of ways. Sometimes they apparently accept the teacher's discipline and authority, but other times they appear to subvert the teacher's regulations and order through minor distractions, disruptions, attention-seeking and time-wasting activities. In the specific research described in this paper the focus of attention was on the informal learning that goes on in the hidden curriculum as a result of these classroom routines and subversions, especially in the domain of values and attitudes. A variety of research methods was used to gather data, including small group interviews, informal conversations and group activities as well as observation. Relevant adults were also interviewed, especially the class-teacher himself, but the main focus of the research was always on the children's own perceptions. The findings, which are rich in their implications for teacher training, show that in the children's subversion of the teacher's authority there is a fine balance of power between them and the teacher. Even more importantly, they indicate that the pupils are consciously reflecting on and learning from their own behaviour and experiences and are thus taking the first steps towards becoming morally autonomous individuals.

*Keywords:* Classroom; control; surveillance; disruption; behaviour

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The classic French crime film *La Balance* (dir. Bob Swaim, 1982) is constructed around the assumption that in the underworld there needs to be some kind of balance maintained between the criminals and

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the police.

The research reported in the present article suggests that there is a similar balance in the classroom between teacher control and pupil disruption: the more the former increases, the more the latter follows suit. Conventional wisdom assumes that the problem starts with the bad behaviour of some children that requires teachers to be constantly vigilant and to exert tight control over the class. Thus the primary task of the teacher is to 'get the buggers to behave' (Cowley, 2001). Our research suggests that children's disruption, time-wasting and 'messaging about' is itself mainly reactive – a response to feelings of boredom, personal inadequacy, powerlessness and being treated disrespectfully by the school – and that if the teacher responds in turn by ratcheting up discipline and control, this merely sets in place a vicious cycle of ever increasing control and disruption. However, the situation is not irretrievable, for several reasons. First, in primary schools at least (where this research was conducted), pupil disruption mainly manifests itself only in minor misdemeanours like talking to friends, fidgeting or throwing things across the classroom, not in physical violence or anti-social behaviour. Second, the children's reactions to their classroom situation shows that they are thinking about it and therefore learning something, and in choosing whether or not to obey the teacher they are actually taking the first steps towards autonomous decision-making. Third, as teachers become more aware of the process, they can adapt their own behaviour in the classroom and pre-empt further escalation of the teacher control/pupil disruption scenario.

### *1.1 Theoretical background*

Children's experience in schools involves many things that are not part of the formal curriculum, including structured activities like registration, assemblies, grouping strategies and classroom organization and responsive activities mainly concerned with keeping order, like rewards and sanctions. Although these classroom routines and rituals have long been acknowledged as educationally significant in terms of school culture and the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968), and have been looked on as a sign of social control (Bernstein et al, 1966) and cultural reification (McLaren, 1986) in social critiques, children's own experiences and their responses to these structured activities have not been adequately studied in their own right. Indeed, even though children's experiences of everyday schooling may lead to important learning, they have been largely invisible in educational research until very recently, or else limited to incidental references in traditional inquiries into such topics as the curriculum, teaching and learning or educational management.

It is only with the development of a qualitative interpretative approach to social phenomena that children's experience, like human experience more generally, has begun to receive sustained significant attention. The recent wave of studies advocating the 'voice of the child', under the influence of the emerging 'new sociology of childhood' (Qvortrup et al., 1994; James & Prout, 1997; Christensen & James, 2000; Mayall, 2002; Powell et al., 2006; Thornberg, 2008), raises the further issue of listening to children talking about their own experiences and opinions. Even if the emphasis on 'experience' in social research is seen mainly as belonging to the phenomenological tradition (Pollard, 1985) and is thus marginalized by other researchers, the recent development of childhood studies has presented a 'shift in emphasis and ideology' that is gradually shaping a new approach based on children's experiences of their own worlds (Greene & Hill, 2005, p. 1).

The research reported in this paper is concerned with just one element of children's experience in school. The research reveals that the children are under constant control and regulation by the teacher, and that they may respond by attempting to subvert the teacher's order and control in the classroom through distractions, disruptions, attention-seeking and time-wasting activities. However, the terminology used here is adult terminology, and may not reflect the way that the children themselves understand these routines of school life. Much research still focuses on teachers' views of pupil misbehaviour (Stephens et al., 2005). The current paper in contrast seeks to illuminate children's own perceptions. The central research questions therefore are (a) how children experience non-educational classroom activities like classroom management and control, rewards and punishments; (b) how children respond in a variety of ways to these disciplinary and controlling dimensions of the teacher's work; and (c) what informal learning goes on as a result of these classroom routines and rituals, especially in the domain of values and attitudes. The paper focuses on just one out of many routines and rituals that characterise the classroom: the teacher's desire to watch everything that every child is doing in the class, in order to maximize order and control; and the tendency of some children to subvert order and control in the classroom through various disruptive activities. The result is that a kind of working balance is achieved in the classroom between the teacher's control and the pupils' disruption. But insofar as the disruption is a response to the teacher's behaviour rather than a random action, it implies that certain learning is going on. The intention of the paper is thus to raise to consciousness some aspects of children's experience in schools that are often merely taken for granted as a normal part of classroom life and that have been widely neglected in research. The research is intended to make teachers more aware of their own practices and of children's responses, so that they will be able to meet children's needs more effectively and improve the quality of their work, particularly in the field of values education.

## *1.2 Related Research*

There is a certain amount of existing research that focuses on the realities of life in the classroom, including the teacher's dominance and control and the cumulative effect of these on the children, but very little that explores them in depth from the children's perspective. McLaren (1986), for example, looks at the normal practice of giving instructions in the Catholic school. He finds that the pervasive tendency to accept instructional rites as 'sacred and unquestionable' occurs not just in religious education but also in all subjects. This taken-for-granted response, seen in modes of cultural reification and unproblematic acceptance, is experienced as 'natural' and part of the 'socially acceptable framework of schooling' (p. 216). Quantz and Magolda (1997) draw attention to the 'grindingly ordinary and mundane world of everyday school life' (p. 226), and Jackson (1968) explores this further. By pointing out the amount of time spent in school in total hours, its 'abrasive potency', and its shaping function for children's lives, he directs the reader to the deeper significance of daily routines. Jackson interprets trivial aspects of classroom life such as waiting, being delayed and being interrupted as a means to 'help to give structure to the activities of the room and to fashion the quality of the total experience for many of the participants' (p. 12). He identifies three basic features of school life: crowds, praise, and power. By these he means the normal schooling experiences of 'being lodged within larger groups, serving as targets of praise or reproof, and being bossed around or guided by persons in positions of higher authority' (p. 11). According to him, these 'much less obvious though equally omnipresent' experiences 'help to make up "the facts of life", as it were, to which students must adapt' (p. 10). Jackson believes that it is only through paying attention to children's 'subjective discomfort' that the 'educational significance' of life in the classroom becomes clear (p.168):

*Considered singly many aspects of classroom life look trivial. And in a sense, they are. It is only when the cumulative occurrence is considered that the realization of their full importance begins to emerge. Thus, in addition to looking at the dominant features of instructional interchanges and the overall design of the curriculum we must not fail to ponder, as we watch, the significance of things that come and go in a twinkling – things like a student's yawn or a teacher's frown. Such transitory events may contain more information about classroom life than might appear at first glance (Jackson, 1968, p. 177).*

Jackson's later work (Jackson et al., 1993) links the moral significance of the classroom atmosphere and the teachers' language (including body language) and practice, and tries to explore how the students perceive classroom events and teachers' characteristics against the more immediately noticeable background of their classroom performance. Although the instantaneousness of the classroom actions is emphasised in phrases like 'come and go in a twinkling' and 'fleeting and mundane events', the significance of those interactions is again highlighted in terms of their cumulative effect: '...formatively, they have the potential of adding up, over time, to a coercive force whose power far exceeds what any one of them might effect on its own' (1993, p. 184). Jackson et al. also emphasise the source of teachers' authority in the classroom: 'Classrooms are obviously workplaces for both teachers and students. If they were not, a large part of the moral authority of the teacher would disappear' (pp. 51-2). The classroom is described as linked to the role of teachers in 'the maintenance of a working environment and the transmission of a work ethic' (p. 52) and we are told that 'a relationship of domination and subordination' characterizes most classrooms (p. 50). The strategic maintenance of order, surveillance, organisation and enforcement of the moral intentions of the teachers on the students is 'the daily morality tale' that becomes 'the stories of school life'. They thus claim that the life lived in the particularity of the classroom has greater moral significance than any incidental happening.

Cullingford's work is based on the belief that an 'inside story' of childhood can be revealed through children's ability to express their own life issues (2007) and in several publications he presents children's experiences and their perceptions of school, curriculum, family, community, etc as unique, in contrast to the taken-for-granted views of adults (1991, 1997, 2002, 2007). In this picture, both the schooling system itself and children's perceptions and experience of it appear unchanging and inevitable. 'For their pupils, schools are a formal social system. For most of them it is the first experience of social hierarchies and social control' (1997, p. 52). Drawing on interviews with children, Cullingford reveals some of the 'inevitable' aspects of the institutional nature of school in children's experience, for example, routine and waiting (1991, p. 33), rules and discipline (pp. 68-81). According to his study, children have an apparently accepting attitude to rules, regulations and routines, as if they are taken for granted by the children as part of the system (pp. 55, 75). However, his claim that children accept that it is the teachers' role to make and impose rules (1988, p. 4) is challenged by more recent findings by Thornberg (2008), who found that children criticise school rules, distrust teachers' explanations of them, and perceive some rules as well as teachers' interventions as unfair and inconsistent.

Indeed, a whole new picture of the classroom emerges once children's own accounts of how they 'experience and deal with various forms of adult-determined regulation in their everyday lives at school' are taken seriously (Powell et al., 2006, p. 260). The views of children who are excluded from school (Munn & Lloyd, 2005) and who are regarded as rule-breakers (Woods, 2008) have recently been given attention, and for the first time research has been carried out into children's perspectives on minor classroom disruptions like 'passing notes' (Powell et al., 2006), moments of disobedience (Leafgren, 2008) and off-task behaviour (Tennant, 2004). These accounts have led to alternative interpretations of what has traditionally been considered indiscipline in the classroom. Tennant presents two significant conclusions: first, that 'what a teacher perceives as inappropriate behaviour may seem to a pupil to be perfectly reasonable and indeed laudable' (2004, p. 52) and second, that many children do not really understand 'the behavioural expectations of the classroom' (p. 57). Rather than simply being dismissed as indiscipline, their actions can be understood as early expressions of autonomous decision-making, active and strategic engagement in negotiation and spontaneous responses to classroom situations. Larger scale investigations carried out in different countries offer further insights into young people's views on teachers' discipline strategy: When teachers react to students' bad behaviour 'by increasing their use of coercive discipline', this inhibits the students' growth towards personal responsibility and moral maturity (Lewis, 2001, p. 307); and teachers' disciplinary behaviour in the classroom affects not only students' attitude to the teacher but also to their schoolwork (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 715).

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

An ethnographic case study was conducted in a large class of 8-9 year-old children in a mainly white primary school in the south of England. The school includes a variety of social backgrounds in its catchment area and has a well-established local reputation as a school of choice. The main contacts for this research (two class teachers and the head teacher) were all male. The large class size was an indication of the popularity of the school, and did not have any significant effect on the case study since the focus was on the normal practices of schooling and ordinary teacher-child interactions. This particular class may be considered typical of much contemporary primary schooling, although the aim of the research was not to make claims of representativeness or generalisability.

Several months were spent closely observing the chosen class being taught by Mr McGee, an experienced senior teacher who shared this class with another male teacher. This was followed by 19 formal group interviews with 23 of the children in the class, as well as several hours of initial conversations and group activities with them. Though the purpose of the research was to explore children's own experiences and perceptions in the classroom, the three relevant teachers were also interviewed - Mr. McGee, Mr. Opie and the head teacher Mr. Evans - for the purpose of accessing more contextual information relevant to the observations and to what the children said. Informal discussions about class management issues were also held with Mr McGee after the observation sessions, but these are not reported in the present paper because of its emphasis on the children's perspectives. The interviews were all tape-recorded and later transcribed. From formal access to the last interview, the empirical research spanned a whole school year.

A new approach to 'listening to children' was adopted (Powell et al., 2006, p. 260) in order to avoid the usual dominance of adult perspectives and the children were encouraged to negotiate their own agendas within a framework of non-structured friendship-group interviews. These methods were chosen in preference to surveys and questionnaires in order to prioritise depth rather than breadth, to acknowledge complexity and ambiguity in the findings, and to allow the children space to tell their own stories and express themselves as they chose. Fundamental to our methodology was the principle of respect for children, seen in the belief that they can be 'competent informants of their everyday lives' (p. 261).

The research was carried out in accordance with standard ethical procedures and principles including informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, the avoidance of risk, the right of participants to withdraw and the avoidance of leading questions or undue influence. Prior to the commencement of the research, consent was received from the teachers, the parents, the children and the headteacher following clarification of the nature and purpose of the research. In order to prevent the subsequent identification of participants and to encourage the free expression of ideas, participants were assured that all evidence (including the names of individuals, classes and the school itself) would be anonymised in any subsequent writing or publications. The intention of the research was in no way to judge the effectiveness of the teachers' work, and the teachers were happy to engage in informal discussions about their teaching and the children's responses after the observation sessions. The research methods were influenced most closely by Jackson et al. (1993) and Cullingford (2002, 2007).

The deeper an investigation like this probes, the more one becomes aware of the possibility of different ways of understanding and interpreting even the smallest incident. But this ambiguity (Tennant, 2004, p. 55) forms part of the richness of the findings. For example, the teacher was frequently observed touching his lip with his index finger, moving it slowly down, and then smiling. It is difficult to be sure whether this momentary action was intended to have a different effect from a straightforward telling-off, or whether it was simply a variation on the standard approach. Was the teacher really annoyed, or was he simply trying to encourage 'good' behaviour? Did the smile imply that the reprimand shouldn't be taken too seriously, or that he wanted the children to know that he still liked them and cared for them underneath, or that he saw the need to reassure them at the same time as telling them off? In order to capture as many different layers of meaning and significance as possible, the observational data were initially grouped into two separate categories: teacher-oriented organizational/ disciplinary activities, and child-oriented behaviour and responses. Similarly, the interview data were critically analyzed twice, from different angles – first, within the researchers' agenda focusing on specific repeated aspects of school life, and second, from the children's own perspective, focusing on their accounts in their own words of their experiences of schooling.

### 3. FINDINGS

The findings from the observations and interviews are many and varied, and only a few will be touched on in this paper. The teacher spent a significant proportion of his time maintaining control in the classroom, particularly through surveillance, issuing instructions, telling the children of for minor misdemeanours, and applying sanctions and discipline, though also sometimes praising children and issuing rewards. The children were well aware of the teacher's surveillance and dominance, and by and large were compliant most of the time. But the research tries to get behind this superficial co-operation to what they were actually thinking, and uncovers significant layers of negative feeling.

The first of these is a kind of passive acceptance of the teacher's dominance as inevitable, perhaps in a spirit of resignation, perhaps simply out of laziness. The second is a more active resistance to or subversion of the teacher's authority, sometimes expressed in acts of disobedience but more often in more indirect ways such as disruptions, distractions, time-wasting and attention-seeking. The third is reflection on the significance of the teacher's actions; only a few children did this, but with sometimes surprising results. These findings will now be explored in more detail, in an attempt to show how teacher surveillance is mirrored by pupil subversion, so that the two co-exist in a kind of balance in the classroom. In conclusion it is noted that children are able to develop important moral understanding from their observations of and responses to the teacher's activity in the classroom, and that an awareness of children's perspectives and children's experiences in the classroom can improve the reflective practice of teachers.

Mr McGee used three main strategies to maintain his surveillance over the children. First, he required them to stay in his sight at all times. He frequently reminded individual children to sit with their face towards him. No matter what he was doing, he made sure that he could always keep an eye on the other children. Once Oscar was standing up after returning from the toilet while Mr. McGee was explaining the writing task, and immediately Mr. McGee spotted him and said, 'Oscar, could you sit down? Just wait.' He always noticed the minor actions of deviant children and responded by moving one of the offenders away. Once while he was working with one group on the carpet he kept an eye on the others and on six occasions within a very short period of time reminded them to get on with their work.

Secondly, he used a wide range of bodily movements to maintain the children's attention and remind them that he was watching them. His facial expressions sometimes showed a silent power over the children. His eyes and the intensity of his glance were used to remind individual children of what they should be doing. Frequently he simply clicked his fingers to remind individuals not to do something. Above all he made use of his voice, and any variation in level was immediately noticed by the children.

The third main method he used to ensure the children knew that they were under his constant control was verbal reminding, including both frequently repeated instructions such as 'tuck your chair in', 'no moving', 'no calling out', 'stay in your place', 'sit down on your bottom', 'sit back down', 'don't get out of your place', 'don't mess about', 'don't cover your face', and more specifically focused statements like 'Bill, you have ten books. You don't need to go to the library', 'Kevin, you'll stay there today' or 'George, put your chair on the floor.' The children were repeatedly reminded to focus their attention on the teacher. At the end of one Maths lesson, Mr. McGee asked the children to have their 'arms folded, to show you're ready for the end of maths'. Because some children were still moving, he needed another set of instructions: 'Boys and girls, stop, and listen. Don't stand up and walk off before you really listen.'

It is clear that Mr. McGee's Panopticon-like surveillance is a tool of control over the children (Foucault, 1991), even if at first sight the repeated instructions made it appear that the children were out of control. He filled the classroom with his reminders and instructions: 'Jason, Andy, you find your place here and sit down here today', 'Lily, sit down. Jack, you concentrate on this, please', 'Joe, tuck your chair in please', 'George, I don't want your first reaction to be to find somebody to talk to. I want you to sit down and work for yourself.' Clearly it was part of the everyday experience of the children to endure this constant surveillance and control. Sometimes the reminders were so frequent that it seemed as if the name of every child in the class had been called out for some minor infringement. The behaviour and performance of those children who found it difficult to conform to the teacher's rules and instructions were monitored particularly frequently.

The observation of the children revealed an undercurrent of minor deviations from the required patterns of behaviour, which seemed on the teacher's view to justify his constant disciplinary instructions – though (as we note later) from our perspective it seemed more as if the constant attempts to control the class were the cause of the minor deviations. There were three categories of deviant behaviour. The first category was distractions: the children might be too easily distracted from their work by disruptive neighbours, or they might be actively seeking something to distract them because of a lack of interest in what they were meant to be doing. The second category was time-wasting activities, which were a particular kind of self-initiated distraction like asking to go to the toilet at regular intervals, or to get a drink, or to sharpen one's pencil. The third category was disruptive behaviour, i.e. behaviour which stopped other children from concentrating on their work, such as unauthorised noise and moving about the classroom or generally 'messaging about'.

The distraction, time-wasting activities and disruption may all have their roots in children's boredom or inability to concentrate for long periods. It was rare to find occasions when all of the children were concentrating at the same time. Most of the time there were children who were not really engaged with their work, and for some children this happened quite frequently. For example, it was observed that some children found it hard to concentrate on a maths activity after the first 5-10 minutes of a 20-minute session of work. On another occasion, Ann was sitting near the front in a state of distraction most of the time. She was supposed to be reading; but was just gazing at the activities on the front carpet. Another occasion again Mark (who was sitting by the work trays) pulled out one tray and gazed at it for several minutes during a writing lesson. The children's distraction might involve another person, such as quiet exchange of eye contacts or whispers among friends. Sometimes Mr. McGee asked children to move because of this kind of distraction. Another a series of quiet distractions occurred totally out of the teacher's sight during a music lesson:

*The recorder-playing for the music lesson started. But still Mr. McGee was reminding individuals continuously: 'Anna, we ALL need to sit down.' 'Andy, can you see me tomorrow?' 'Kevin, leave it.' 'You really have to sit down today.' 'Kevin, Bill...Bill, what did I say (with clicks of fingers)?' 'Joyce, if you hit the recorder, I'll take it away.' Then I saw Bill and Mark were close to the trays and they played a little bit without any noise. Also without being seen, Joe and Andy had already exchanged parts of their recorders. Around the tables, some boys rolled their recorders on the table. Mr. McGee spotted this and reminded them that they could stop the rolling by putting something stable beside it. But for a few, the recorder itself was still the focus of attention. I saw Mark was not settled. Then big Bill's recorder was taken by the teaching assistant and later he was told to sit in the front because of his tapping on the table. After the music when children were asked to sort out their stuff, Andy had the chance to be near to Henry; he called Henry and congratulated him on the performance of his group and especially his playing of the recorder: 'Henry, Henry, well done!' In the same period, Jason came to Andy to compare heights with him. Oscar was hugging the teaching assistant and encouraging her to feel his coat. After the stuff had all been collected, the children were asked to sit on the carpet. Mr. McGee continued to remind the children to sit up (field-notes, 17th Nov).*

Time-wasting activities included things like asking to go to the toilet or to get a drink. Also the big pencil sharpener fixed on the table next to the sink seemed to be a haven for some children wanting a break. For example, Bill and Ted made their visit to the big sharpener an excuse for a talk. Ted was asked to go back and Mr McGee told him he shouldn't come until Bill had finished, but he came back a while later when Bill was still there. Another time when the children were supposed to be working, Bill and Joe went to the bin to sharpen their pencils (using their own small sharpeners) and have a chat. Meanwhile, Andy struck up a conversation with Jim and Bill on his way back from the big sharpener, and Joe came to use the sharpener. On his way back Tim was laughing at him, and then it was Eve's turn to sharpen her pencil. Tim, Joe and Eve seemed to be in a competition to get the sharpest pencil. Lily came after that, and joined the game. Then Andy returned to the sharpener (the fourth time that afternoon). Interestingly, the constant to-ing and fro-ing at this table had no influence on the other tables, but after a while Mr. McGee noticed that the table was unsettled, and they started to work at last.

More serious disruption occurred when the children wandered round the class, made too much noise, or generally 'played around' rather than getting on with their work. And these kinds of deviation were often reflected in and challenged by the teacher's disciplinary instructions. For example, he once said to a girl, 'You're not having a walking-around-the-room day. You'll be sitting in your place, Alice'. When Bill needed some help, Mr. McGee asked him to 'Tuck your chair in. Don't wander about. I'll come in a minute'. These kinds of disruption were actually highlighted by the teacher's vigilance because he kept reminding some children to be more attentive and sit still: 'You're wanted to sit down, please, Joyce. Joyce, would you tuck yourself in, please. Joyce, would you really tuck yourself in, please.' 'Iris, Jackie, Jenny, sit down please' 'Sit down' in the classroom context usually meant to be quiet, not to interact with other pupils, to be quiet by oneself.

Apart from wandering out of their seats, the most frequent misdemeanour in the classroom was making noise. One afternoon Joyce was told off twice because she 'made noise' throughout the transition. Andy was told, 'Keep your noise down, please.' Some time later, Bill couldn't help drumming on the table with his fingers and was stopped by the teaching assistant. In another lesson, during the two carpet sessions, he made drum beats four times with his thumb or hand on the carpet or on the teacher's chair. One afternoon, Andy and Jason were spotted making noise, and Mr McGee said, 'Andy, Jason, you'll never sit together'. The children were well aware how common such disruptions were, as the interviews make clear:

*ANITA: Some friends will chat through lessons and teachers don't like that...*

*RORY: And I would say in lessons it's also quite noisy and busy. Everyone is excited running around, cheering. And people snapping their pencils... (Interview 15)*

'Messing about' seems to be caused by a general lack of interest or boredom, or perhaps in some children's cases a sense of inadequacy in their work resulting from the difficulty of the task. In maths work, for example, many children are simply far below the level of difficulty represented by the work, and work time for them is something totally painful. Thus the disciplinary reminders from the teacher have to be constant, especially for those children perceived as having disruptive tendencies. The regular distractions and disruptions call to mind the normal justification for disciplinary arrangements: to make sure there is a good learning environment. But if we dig deeper, it is obvious that superficial quietness does not guarantee concentration. This also raises further questions about the nature of distraction. Are there more complicated feelings on the side of the children that lie behind the distractions? What is going on in the children's minds when they are disruptive or when they try to waste time? Are they simply responding to the generally 'strict' atmosphere in Mr. McGee's classroom? Do they share the teacher's views on classroom behaviour?

Do they learn anything from the teacher's use of rewards and sanctions, or from his constant tendency to tell them off? Do they see anything positive or helpful in his actions? Why do they sometimes try to 'please teacher' and sometimes the opposite? Are their actions motivated by boredom or by feeling under pressure? Is life a constant struggle for some of them? To what extent is Mr. McGee consciously trying to modify the children's attitudes and values by making them more co-operative or obedient? Is he actually teaching them anything?

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Clues to the answers to some of these questions are found in the interviews with the children since issues such as resistance to school discipline and surveillance, deviance, disruption of lessons and related matters were raised spontaneously by many of the children. There seems to be a reactive mechanism going on in children's responses to the teacher's surveillance, and the children's clear expression of their subjective views, complaints and disagreements, represents attitudinal resistance to the teacher's practice of tight surveillance and strict discipline. This suggests, we argue, that the answer to the children's subversion and disruption may not be yet more surveillance by the teacher, because it seems to be the surveillance itself that causes the initial problem. Our findings thus reinforce those of Lewis, who points out the dangers of teachers escalating 'their use of coercive discipline' (2001, p. 307). At the very least, if the surveillance is continued, it needs to be balanced by an awareness of the effect it is having on the children. The children in our research revealed their consciousness of the restraints of schooling by describing what they perceived as the hidden intentions of the teacher in some specific practices. They were not surprised at the teacher's regulation and surveillance, because it had entered their consciousness as a normal state of affairs, but in contrast to Cullingford (1988, p. 4) we did not find that this implied an attitude of acceptance. On the contrary they were often either overtly or covertly critical of the teacher's intentions and interventions (Thornberg, 2008). For example, some boys were very certain that the teacher's intention in taking the register in reverse alphabetical order was to keep the children more alert rather than playing fair in terms of balancing the normal order. As for sitting next to friends, four boys revealed that on the carpet they could choose where to sit but at the tables they couldn't choose since the grouping is under the control of the teacher. All the children showed a concern about the teacher's disciplinary procedures and they were more critical of the teacher when he was 'telling off' individuals or exercising sanctions. Sometimes the children expressed their disagreement with the teacher or criticism of him openly. For example, although the boys knew that Mr. McGee stopped them covering their mouth to prevent them from talking, Gavin raised it as unfair. He said this was because he had a habitual pose with his face leaning against one hand. Some girls criticised the teacher for telling off the wrong person. Clearly the teacher and the children interpreted many activities in different ways.

The children were always aware of the dominating presence of teachers, even if their response varied:

JESS: *He [Mr McGee] like{s} easily snaps and picks you up a bit ... [But] I'm not too bothered by the rules. I'm not very scared (Interview 11)*

KEVIN: *Well, we've learned not to always talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, or ... he keeps us in for fifteen minutes (Interview 17)*

GEORGE: *But now I keep cool, I keep down. He doesn't really get to me. So now I can kind of see why he's making these rules and why he snaps at me, why he snaps at other people (Interview 11)*

At the same time as they were under the watchful gaze of the teacher, the children had become accustomed to keeping an eye on the teacher themselves, to check on his mood, his intentions and the likelihood that he would get angry. They seemed quite skilful at talking but paying a bit of attention to the teacher at the same time. It seems that such vigilance on the children's side paralleled the teacher's action of surveillance. Therefore, as well as their expressed concern about (and possible overreaction to) rules, discipline and sanctions, they showed that they understood the unarticulated regulating intention of the teacher. Their awareness of this was the explanation for the reactive mechanism that occurred whenever they perceived a threat from the teacher.

At the level of observable actions, strategies like distraction, disruption, time-wasting, daydreaming, fiddling with something, throwing a pencil, 'messing about', unauthorized talking and trying to have a laugh are well-documented as ways for pupils to get through the more mundane aspects of school life (Delamont, 1983, Pollard, 1985; Woods, 1990). The children in our research showed themselves to be easily distracted from their work by disruptive neighbours, or they may have actively sought some distraction because of a lack of interest in what they were meant to be doing or an inability to concentrate for long periods:

*RORY: It happens mostly in Maths when we go in. Bill and Joe are the worst of them there. They annoy Rose, who is new. They get stuff and fling it. They get rubbers and go, 'Hshhhh ...' They even annoy Andy. He gets upset and he hides 'cos he doesn't want to get hurt. And he throws the stuff back.*  
(Interview 6)

Sometimes the children expressed forceful attitudes and emotions about life in the classroom, but these responses were not necessarily reflected in their behaviour. Similarly, whilst most of the children interviewed described the teacher's 'strictness' and frequently mentioned discipline and sanctions, there was a gap between their perception of the threat of sanctions and their actual experience of them. For example, three girls revealed that 'time out' as a sanction had never been applied to them. When three boys were describing a severe system of discipline and sanctions that potentially threatened their everyday life, they revealed at the same time that 'time out' was rare in their own case. It seemed that the controlling attitude of the teacher was the cause of children's resistance, but this resistance was hidden in minor disruptions rather than expressed in open rebellion. The children's hidden expressions of awareness, concern and complaint were a kind of mirror that reflected the teacher's overt restraint and control. On the whole, we found (like Tennant, 2004, p. 52) that the children seemed to regard their own deviant actions as normal responses to the realities of classroom life. The way they expressed this aspect of life was straightforward without many attempts to defend of their disruptive activities. Only the more conspicuous disruptions that involved 'pestering' or 'annoying' others were described with a degree of criticism by the children.

The simple distinction made earlier between acceptance and resistance (or 'obedience' and 'disobedience') fails to capture the subtle, complicated process of personal development in children (Cullingford, 1991). 'Acceptance' implies passive tolerance (as opposed to the implicit or explicit enthusiasm they sometimes show, especially with regard to special or unexpected activities), but it may actually take different forms. For some children it seems that the inevitable deviance on their side and the discipline and sanctions that follow are simply accepted as part of their normal school life, as is their perception of teachers as punishers (Lewis, 2001, p 307). We agree with Lewis et al. (2008, p. 715) that the classroom disciplinary behaviour of teachers has an adverse effect on students' attitude to their work, but in fact the problem can go deeper than this: children's emotional lives and self-concept can also be affected. In Bill's case (Interview 3) he tried to make out that the constant surveillance and

discipline was not a problem, but beneath the surface of his 'acceptance' he was actually very sensitive to the situation in which he was probably regarded by the teacher, other children and even himself as 'always in trouble' and under the shadow of sanctions and punishment. Just like other children, he had strong emotional responses to discipline and rules if he was given opportunity to express them. But it is significant that Bill's apparent acceptance of the miserable state of being constantly targeted by discipline and rules corresponded to his unavoidable, spontaneous response of resistance to the rituals of schooling.

Resistance is a well-used term in investigations of children's response to schooling (for example, Woods, 1990; Alpert, 1991) although others claim there is no such thing as resistance to rules and discipline on the part of children (Cullingford, 1991). Our own research suggests that there is a dimension of co-existence, even overlap, in the responses of resistance and acceptance. Most of the time and for most of the children, this co-existence stays low-profile and the normal school day appears to run smoothly. The teacher's surveillance and control are practised openly and remain dominant, while the private distractions and disruptions stay at the children's level, and often go unnoticed. However, when the children are given a clear request for 'obedience', they still appear to have their own inner struggles. Even the so-called 'goodie girls' hinted that absolute obedience to rules could be unrealistic and arbitrary in reality. Our analysis and interpretation has shown that the children's resistance is a normal, expected response to the demands of schooling whereas their acceptance is mostly a superficial response based on practical considerations and the pressure to be passive in the face of the all-powerful schooling system. Whilst 'resistance' and 'rebellion' sound negative from the educationists' perspective, they actually demonstrate children's 'innocence', individuality and potential for rational autonomy. This is because they are actually engaging with the teacher's demands rather than being simply passive; and engagement is a positive learning outcome, even if the particular response involves resistance or subversion. In a sense, all children are resistant and subversive to some extent, and their behaviour becomes a mirror image of the teacher's surveillance and dominance, so that a kind of balance is maintained in the classroom between teacher and pupils.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that important learning is going on through the experiences described in this paper, though this learning may be linked mainly to the school's hidden curriculum (Halstead & Xiao, 2009). The children may be learning, for example, about the need for rules and about the impact rules can have on one's relationship with others. At a deeper level, they may be learning about moral values and moral judgments, but not necessarily the kind of learning that the teacher intends. The teacher may think that his dominating presence and his discipline are helping to guide their behavior and shape their values, but in fact it seems likely that they are learning values such as tolerance through reflection on his treatment of them, as well as how to make moral choices. Indeed, it may be their inner or overt resistance to his control that is leading them towards such reflection and thus towards moral autonomy.

This kind of research is designed to bring teachers new insights and enriched moral understanding by encouraging more reflective practice. For example, most teachers take it for granted that they need to use surveillance and control in order to regulate the children's behaviour, though Jackson (1968; see also Jackson et al., 1993) points out that the intention to manage classroom matters through discipline and sanctions is far more complicated than is normally thought. But from our own research into minor forms of deviance and disruption in the classroom a number of questions are raised. For example, is

behaviour management a matter of adults imposing their will on children? Is it appropriate or even possible for the teacher to confront and try to regulate children's behaviour issues effectively? Teachers need to interrogate their own practice (Are they telling the children off too much? Is their control of the classroom too tight? What effect is this having on the children?) and raise their awareness of the likely outcomes of their own practice (for example, the indirect moral education that is going on). The research also points to the need for teachers to pay attention to the balance between teaching and keeping order, between trusting the children and controlling their behaviour, and between offering immediate moral guidance and longer-term support towards moral autonomy.

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## Turkish Abstract

### Dengeyi sürdürmek: Sınıfta öğretmen kontrolü ve öğrenci düzensizliği

Öz: Öğrencilerin okuldaki deneyimlerini ve özellikle kendi deneyimlerini anlama yollarını keşfetmek için İngiltere'de 8-9 yaşlarındaki öğrenciler bir kaç ay gözlenmiştir. Araştırma, deneyerek öğrenme, sınıf alışkanlıkları, sınıf yönetimi, ödüllendirme ve ceza uygulamaları gibi eğitsel sınıf aktivitelerini anlama yollarına odaklanmıştır. Araştırma çocukların ve yetişkinlerin algılamaları arasındaki farklılığı öne çıkarmıştır. Ortaya çıkan en belirgin sonuçlardan biri ilkökul öğrencilerinin sürekli öğretmen kontrolünde ve gözetiminde oldukları durumlarda çok çeşitli yollarla cevap verebilmeleridir. Öğrenciler bazı durumlarda öğretmenin otoritesini ve disiplinini kabul eder bir tutum sergilerlerken, diğer zamanlarda öğretmenin emir ve yasalarına direnme gösterebilmektedirler. Bu araştırmanın odak noktası, müfredatin arkasında gizli olan, öğrenci davranışlarının ve sınıf içinde hakim olan değerler çerçevesinde ortaya çıkan resmi olmayan öğrenimin incelenmesidir. Veri toplama aracı olarak, küçük grup mülakatları, resmi olmayan görüşmeler, grup aktiviteleri ve gözlem gibi birçok çeşit araştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Sınıf öğretmenleriyle olmak üzere konuyla ilgili yetişkinlerle de mülakat yapılmış olsa da, araştırmanın temel amacı öğrencilerin kendi algılamalarının değerlendirilmesi olmuştur. Araştırmada en manidar bulgu öğretmen eğitime ilişkin olarak belirlenmiştir. Bu çerçevede, öğretmenler ve öğrenciler arasında kurulan güç dengesinin önemi belirgin olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Araştırma bulgularına göre öğrencilerin bilinçli olarak kendi davranış ve deneyimlerinden öğrendikleri ortaya çıkmıştır.

*Anahtar kelimeler:* sınıf; kontrol; gözetim; yıkım; davranış