Every *Different* Child Matters: understanding the construction of children's stories of difference and normalcy in the twenty- first century.

Gail Davidge

Supervised by: Dan Goodley   **March 2011**

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ABSTRACT

Within the context of this ethnographic study, children communicated a range of accounts that reflected the extent to which understandings of 'being' a child were grounded in the capitulation of normative practices of 'childhood'. An analysis of children's stories of school and family life provided an insight into the ways in which different 'pedagogic voices' (Hoskin, 1990, p. 37) and expectations of 'others' are internalised and constitute a basis for understandings of the 'self', especially in terms of normalcy and acceptable behaviour. According to Rose (1999, p.76) norms are 'socially worthy, statistically average, scientifically healthy and personally desirable'. Complicit acceptance of such 'norms' and the desire to please and conform to the narrative of the 'good child' featured as a fundamental theme. These stories also communicated temporal, spatial and structural aspects of children's experiences that positioned identity as a linear trajectory of development in terms of 'becoming' adult, within a variety of interdependent social systems. The ways in which children engaged with such institutional practices appeared to play an integral role in the shaping of their understandings of 'the self' and 'other'. This is reflected in the remaining themes that emerged; namely the 'celebrated' other and 'marginalized' other.

KEY WORDS:	CHILDHOOD	IDENTITY	NORMALCY	DIFFERENCE	SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

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Introduction

The construction of 'childhood' as a distinctive life stage has been subject to comprehensive debate within a multitude of academic fields. In order to further extend understandings of contemporary childhood identity, it is essential to consider the position of the political, economic and social context in which childhood has been historically situated. Extensive analysis of art and language throughout *Centuries of Childhood* suggest that, prior to the Middle Ages, children were invisible and divisions between adult and child appear to have gone undocumented (Ariés, 1962). Archard (1993) argues that childhood existed long before this period, claiming that prior discourses of childhood were grounded in biological development and immaturity. Christensen (2004) forwards the debate and maintains that Modernity constituted children as the 'cultural other of adulthood'. Prout (2005) extends this idea further and contends that modern notions of childhood created a dichotomy between child and adult that circulated essentialist assumptions of childhood, thus situating adults in a superior position.

Defining the social space and chronological age in which a child becomes an adult can result in a counter discourse of childhood as a time of immaturity, lacking in cognitive capability. Similar narratives circulate in the fields of feminist and disability studies where discourse concerning variations in gendered norms or ability often marginalise both adult and child in terms of 'difference' equating to 'deficiency' (See Oakley, 1994; Shakespeare, 1998; Thomas, 1999). Erica Burman (2008) highlights how the production of childhood discourse has also been influenced by the capacity of '…normative descriptions provided by developmental psychology [sic] slip into naturalised prescriptions (p.4). Moreover, Ian Hacking (1999) suggests that different 'kinds of children' are constructed as a result of ideas about childhood or children interacting with states, conditions, behaviours, actions and individuals. Hacking proposes that psychology needs to understand people as human agents who are self-aware and consequently adapt their behaviours as a result of social and biological classification. The power of the psychological gaze to mould and influence normative assumptions of behaviour throughout the lifespan has been highlighted by many academics both within and outside the discipline of psychology (*cf.* Billington, 2000; Burman, 2008; Hacking, 1999; Rose, 1989). However, the majority of post-modern childhood research assumes differences in behaviour and competence are inevitable products of children's age which '…tends to lead to the pathologizing of difference both within and across cultures' (James *et al.*, 1998, p. 174).

Archaeological findings suggest that as early as the Anglo-Saxon times, children were deemed to have 'adult' status by the age of ten (Crawford, 1991). Conflicting expectations of the 'natural', physical, emotional and moral development of children are highlighted by the transformation of institutional practices that have assumed a variety of age graded, 'appropriate' behaviours throughout history (Ariés, 1962). Notions of culpability are a case in point. Hugh Cunningham illustrates the stark contrast between the judicial and general public's treatment of child murderer Mary

Bell in 1968, compared to that of the response to Robert Thompson and Jon Venables twenty-five years later (*cf.* Cunningham, 1991, 2006; Jenks, 2005).

Therefore, continual changes in how children are understood and interact with societal change underlines the socially constructed nature of childhood (Jenks, 2005). According to Hultqvist & Dahlberg:

> …there is no natural or evolutionary child, only the historically produced discourses and power relations that constitute the child as an object and subject of knowledge, practice and political intervention (2001, p. 2).

Between the 1980s and early 1990s 'the sociology of childhood' (Corsaro, 1997) advanced traditional theories of childhood. This new paradigm of childhood development forwarded an understanding of the child that was focused upon children's everyday activities and ways in which they interact and are positioned within societal structures in terms of equality and social order rather than following the Piagetian, developmental path of decades before (James *et al.,* 1998; Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2005). Currently, transformations of the study of children and childhood increasingly adopt a more inter-disciplinary approach that draws from a variety of academic fields. This is reflected in the new terminology; 'the new social studies of childhood' (James *et al.,* 1998). Paradigmatic change offers a reconceptualisation of the child as 'being':

> The child is conceived of as a person, a status, a course of action, a set of needs, rights or differences- in sum, as a social actor…this new phenomenon, the "being" child, can be understood in its own right. (James *et al.*, in Holloway & Valentine, 2000, p.764)

In addition to transformations of the conceptual assertions of childhood, as mentioned above, stark changes in the cultural conditions that shape childhood identity are also widely debated. Tensions between firmly established boundaries of adult and child have become increasingly amorphous as the social, cultural and economic conditions in which children live and grow up are increasingly diversified, compared to the conventional social structures indicative of the 'golden era'(*cf.* Cook, 2004; Corsaro, 1997; Giddens, 1991; Postman,1983). Bob Simpson (1998) describes this as the shift from the 'nuclear to the unclear' family. Unprecedented advances in media communication technology have enabled a proliferation of diverse childhood discourses to circulate amongst an ever widening audience (Giddens, 1991). The erosion of 'innocent childhood' and concerns regarding children's increased access to information, no longer safeguarded by 'responsible' adults, have served to create what Prout (2005) terms as 'childhood's crisis of representation'. Continued 'moral panic' that predicts 'the disappearance of childhood', (Postman, 1983) has attributed cultural and technological change as instrumental in undermining the character of contemporary childhood. Others observe such changes as a positive transformation, affording children greater autonomy to question and participate in technological structures, thus allowing the parameters of childhood space to cross over into what has been historically an exclusively adult domain (Katz, 1997). David Buckingham draws attention to the fact that children have attained increased autonomy in their expertise with technology, which has enabled a reversal of the traditional adult-child power relationship. In this arena children are able to take on the position of 'expert' over the adult 'novice'

permitting 'access to new forms of culture and communication, that largely escapes adult control' (Buckingham, 2000, p. 5).

Cultural interpretations of 'natural' childhood are intricately tangled within modern, western discourses of normality that progress from initial concerns of 'normal' childbirth, to constant checks and measurements that record a child's progression through developmental 'milestones' and educational statutory attainment tests until maturity (Burman, 2008). Indeed, Hacking argues that the invention of statistics has had grave implications for human understandings of both social identity and normalcy in addition to the bureaucratic needs that are served:

> The normal stands indifferently for what is typical, the unenthusiastic objective average, but it also stands for what has been, good health, and for what shall be, our chosen destiny. That is why the benign and sterile sounding word 'normal' has become one of the most powerful ideological tools of the twentieth century (1990, p. 169).

The close relationship between science, technology and society in the twenty-first century calls into question historical assumptions of 'natural' childhood, redefines concepts of 'normal' and highlights the need for research that aims to produce relevant explanations of complex identity formation drawn from a variety of human, behavioural and scientific paradigms. As despite Mead's (1934) explanation of the development of the self being extensively researched and debated, the volume of research into the formation of *children's* notions of the 'social' self and other remains neglected in comparison to adults (Bennett, 2004). Research into female forms of understanding and experiencing disability through experiential narratives illustrates how research that locates the 'micro as constitutive of the macro' may offer 'a route to understanding the socio-structural' (Thomas, 1999) and thus enable more meaningful childhood research. A critical analysis of the power-knowledge relationships (Foucault, 1966/1989; Rose, 1998) that inform taken for granted assumptions of normative childhood practices will enable the progression of the debate on the structural positioning of childhood and normalcy to advance (*cf.* Burman, 2008; Prout, 2005; Walkerdine, 2001).

This research aimed to develop theoretical understandings of how children form notions of identity, shaped by normative assumptions of difference and normalcy, in the context of contemporary society by focusing on the following questions:

> *What can children's stories about their daily lives tell us about important aspects of their identities?*

> *How do children define normalcy and difference at the beginning of the twenty-first century?*

Methodology

Rationale

My engagement with the children who participated in this study allowed me a partial view of the ways in which stories of similarity and difference are constructed *by* and *for* children within the participation of family life and the institution of the school. Reflexive interpretation of the entire ethnographic research process was considered to be an integral part of communicating how I generated meaning to findings throughout the process of data collection and subsequent analysis (Carspecken, 1996). My epistemological leanings were towards a post-positivist hermeneutic approach to understanding children's worlds. My position incorporated that of researcher and of a previously employed nursery and teaching assistant who had intermittently worked with this group of children over a period of six years. Consequently an appreciation of my historical emotional investment with this group of children was also considered (Roberts & Sanders, 2005). This required me to stop and reflect upon how my own partial position of power privileged, and may have shaped, my subsequent interpretations of meanings conveyed within children's stories. As a result of viewing these children through two different lenses I began to reconsider some of the deep rooted assumptions of normative practices, barely conscious to me before I embarked upon becoming an ethnographic researcher (Richards, 2002). Davis (in Madison, 2005, p.7) highlights the need for 'reflexive ethnography' as a means to ensure that positionality is considered in addition to the methodological quandaries that surround representing and researching 'others', in terms of the inherent issues of power relations (Carabine, 1996).

Data Collection

The underlying ontological assumption of this research project constructed children as active agents, able to reflect on and verbalise meanings and understandings of the world around them, constructing the world in which they inhabit through different forms (Qvotrup, 1990; Scott, 2000/2009). In order to capture a 'variety of voices' (Goodley, 2006) and reduce the effects of 'impression management' (Orne, in Goodley, 2006) a plurality of methodology was employed. Field observations, group discussions and narrative writing tasks captured the multiple ways in which children generate meanings that produce, and are produced by, the social context in which they live and learn (Hacking,1999). A large proportion of research was undertaken by observing naturally occurring conversations throughout the course of school playtimes, whilst considering my complicity in their production (Charmaz, 2005). In addition children were invited to complete a creative writing task that asked children to describe what they regarded to be particularly unique and special about them, in comparison to their peers and significant others. Group discussions were led by initial questions set out in the form of a loosely constructed interview schedule (appendix 8). However, the aim of this unstructured approach was to facilitate as much of the *children's* talk as possible and so strict adherence to the schedule was rarely followed. On one occasion, a particular group of boys advised me that they liked being able to say 'exactly what they wanted without being told off' and surprised me by choosing to talk again instead of playing football. In addition, another particular group of girls regularly came and sat with me in the playground and asked to listen to music on my computer whilst we chatted. This reassured me that children enjoyed, and actively chose to participate in, the process.

Context and Participants

Research was undertaken within a 'smaller than average-sized' primary school located within an area of 'relative social and economic advantage' in the North West of England (OfSTED, 2009). A class of twenty-two Year 6 children aged between ten and eleven[1] were invited to participate in the research process. This particular cohort of children were selected as I had an established, trusting relationship with these children. In addition, I felt that the benefit of prior contextual knowledge (albeit partial) of this educational setting would enable me to overcome some of the inherent issues that surround establishing rich relationships, conducive to ethnographic data collection (Clarke & Moss, 2001). The purpose of this study was to provide a rich interpretation of a specific cohort of children, rather than an essentialist representation of children's experience in contemporary Britain.

Additional Ethical Considerations

I was mindful that my prior (employed) adult status might coerce children into unwanted participation. With this borne in mind, the option to withdraw from the research process was communicated repeatedly in a variety of formats (see appendices 2, 3, 4, 6 & 7). In addition, alternative (non-research based) activities were always offered for those who did not wish to participate at any stage of the research process. Three children chose not to participate in research activities. Permission to undertake research of this kind was sought from the school Head Teacher and was requested from the children and their carers in the form of a letter that explained the main aims and nature of research (See Appendices 3-7). An extensive explanation, sensitive to the equality of interaction between the child and researcher (Fine & Sandstorm, 1988) was verbally communicated by talking through the contents of the aforementioned leaflet. [2]

Issues of power, voice and representation

Historically the majority of research has mediated children's voices by proxy of an adult 'other'. Jacqueline Scott highlights the isolation of children from participating fully in research as 'the quarantine of childhood', represented by the exclusion of children from statistics and other social accounts (Scott, 2000/2009, p. 88). Although research aimed at improving the lives of children and adolescents appears in abundance throughout natural and social science, the ironic metaphor of 'The missing child' (Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005) conveys how the point is being missed. As an integral part of this study I also considered the consequences of spatial and relational aspects of particular 'child-adult' interaction, in response to

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[1]The names of children and respective school have been omitted from this document in order to ensure that anonymity was preserved for both the 'researched' and 'researcher'. This also reduces the possibility of any conflict of interest that may have otherwise biased the researcher's analysis (due to her dual position of researcher/ employed teaching assistant).

[2] This leaflet was constructed in collaboration with children of a similar age who attended a nearby school (see *'What on earth is Miss Smith up to?* appendix 7).

calls for the reframing of childhood research as 'a new important territory for this expanding field' (Mannion, 2007, p. 407).

Approach to Data Analysis

I assumed a post structural, hermeneutic approach to interpreting meaning from children's stories and their implied position within the institutional practices of childhood. The analytical framework incorporated elements of thematic and discursive analysis, informed by the bio political theories of Michel Foucault and Nikolas Rose. Initial thematic analysis, guided by the central research question, was selected as the most effective approach within which to generate a 'thick description' (Stake, 2005). Such a depth of understanding of the 'mundane' details of children's interaction would have been very difficult to achieve using a more universal approach. A worked example of the thematic process can be followed from initial familiarisation to the establishment of three underlying themes (See appendix 18)[3]. The next stage of analysis enabled critical consideration of how underlying contextual power-knowledge relationships may constrain or facilitate children's interpretations of identity. Throughout both the research and analytic process I continually checked and redefined the analytic framework, as part of the iterative nature of this enquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). My response to the initial research question was subsequently framed by a further examination that led me to consider:

> *Who is this dominant 'other' that children value and refer to?* And *how is this knowledge of 'other' produced and reflected upon within such narratives?*

Qualitative Analysis

Understandings of 'being' a child: the child of the new Millennium and the construction of children's stories of 'the self'

In terms of the central research question, *What can children's stories about their daily lives tell us about important aspects of their identities?* an examination of children's narratives of 'free time' revealed the extent to which organised and structured activity featured as a central component of their daily lives. Throughout my engagement in this study, the ways in which children's identities are constituted within particular 'temporal' and 'spatial' contexts of post-modern childhood (See,Jenks, 2001; Holloway & Valentine, 2000) became apparent in a variety of forms. When asked 'what are the sorts of things you like to do outside of school?' the majority of children's responses centred on their engagement with planned, 'productive' activity. Every child, with the exception of one, belonged to at least one

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[3] I have included a thematic worked example of the process that I followed from initial familiarisation through to subsequent re-workings in order to convey an accurate as possible reflection of this particular interpretative process. This has been provided as a counter to criticism (Hammersley, 1990) that qualitative research of this type is confounded by lack of prescribed analyses.(Appendix 18)

organised group outside of school and only a small proportion were allowed to play outside unsupervised (Appendix 14).

Children also enjoyed unstructured time whenever the opportunity arose:

> 'Watching television, shopping, relaxing, chatting to friends, playing on the computer, drawing, reading and walking the dog' (Appendix 14)

However, only a small proportion of children played outside of the home and opportunities for spontaneous, unsupervised activity were limited. The degree of negotiation required to organise the year six end of term celebration 'around the kid's impossible schedule' (field note 2) underlined how 'extra-curricular' activity assumed a dominant position within these children's lives. Alan Prout (2000, p.310) also identifies how '…the space of childhood, literally as well as metaphorically, may be becoming more specialised and more localised'. Furthermore, constraints upon the location, form and content of recreational activity were also demonstrated through analysis of circulating discourses, prohibiting access to particular knowledge and experience defined as 'inappropriate' for children. Adult surveillance and control of children's access to knowledge and experience of the world enables censorship of 'child appropriate' activities, indicative of a contemporary 'risk society' (Beck, 1998). One child in this study managed to actively resist this and confided that she regularly went to a friend's house to read teen magazines which her mother had explicitly stated were 'not suitable for your age' (field note 13). The impact of increasing amounts of surveillance and the imposed reduction of autonomous mobility serves to strengthen narratives that continue to position children as 'vulnerable' and 'incapable' participants of cultural life (*cf.* Cunningham, 2006; Prout, 2005). This negates opportunities for experimentation and learning through trial and error outside of the watchful gaze of the adult eye and renders children impotent bystanders when faced with potential incidences of risk and danger. Indeed, a recent government inspection of the school reaffirms the wider implications of circulating discourse that position 'feeling safe' and 'being healthy' as a fundamental concern of childhood.

> The vast majority of pupils *feel safe*. They are confident that their peers are kind and *pose no threat to them*… Pupils have a very clear understanding and respect for rules which ensure their *safety* in and around school and are confident that they would know how to respond to any *perceived dangers* by seeking help from sympathetic adults (Emphasis added, OfSTED Report, 2009, p5).

The inculcation of a number of Every Child Matters (DFCSF, 2004) outcomes (Be Healthy, Stay Safe, Enjoy and Achieve) employed as 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988) appear to have become an integral consideration that also penetrates family recreation time. Alan Prout (2000) reflects upon the current practice of parents 'chauffeuring' children from one 'island' of childhood to another as a construction of contemporary family life. Zeiher (2002) also expresses this as the 'insularization' of children's spaces.

In contrast, children's 'increasingly extensive participation in commercial life as consumers and beyond' (Zelizer, in Cook, 2004, p.151) positions children as able

participants within capitalist economic markets in contemporary society. According to Cook (2004, p.151):

> '[t]he place and status of children, and the meaning of childhood itself, are now inseparable from such things as branding and investment… Children have become thought of and treated as agentive social actors (by marketers, parents and academics alike).

Shopping also figured as a popular pastime with some children. Moreover, conversations with children about clothes shopping and image revealed the extent to which the 'indivualisation of the self' (Giddens, p.198) has become embedded within contemporary cultural interpretations of normalcy and identity, in addition to revealing differing levels of autonomous purchasing power. In one discussion children used branding to differentiate interpretations of 'ab/normal' identities:

> "Most people wear Nike" (Transcript 1: 258).

Furthermore, another child demonstrated her level of financial autonomy and capacity to employ 'pester power' (Cook, 2004):

> Researcher: What happens if you really like an outfit and your mum hates it?

> Child: Don't know. I say I'll pay for it then… If she doesn't like it I say I'll pay and then she ends up paying for it, or my dad does… (Transcript 3: 32-3).

Another group's discussion with regard to the relative 'safety' of wearing a school uniform highlights the anxieties that they experienced when asked whether they would prefer a 'non-uniform day' every day:

> …cos you'll be fussing every day like, what to wear, what's everyone else wearing today and you'll just want to put something on in the morning without any stress (Transcript 2: 177).

This extract highlights the extent to which children are painfully aware of the watchful gaze of the 'other'. The 'O/other' who models and judges acceptable *ways* and *forms* of 'being'. As I revisited these children's conversations, normative practices that endorsed the 'celebrated other' and denounced the 'marginalised Other' (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001) constituted an interpretative frame of reference for identity formation that penetrated the children's lives on a daily basis.

Valuing the 'other': positioning normalcy

Narratives that expound *how children define normalcy and difference at the beginning of the twenty-first century* are interwoven within institutional, social, familial and individual practices (Valentine, 2000). My response to this research question was subsequently framed by a further examination that led me to consider:

> *Who is this dominant 'other' that children value and refer to?* And *how is this knowledge of 'other' produced and reflected upon within such narratives?*

Adherence to the daily practices enmeshed within school life required a huge degree of compliance. Compliance to institutional forms of knowledge, time and spaces and embodiment of educational objectives were apparent in the (usual) ways in which children conducted their behaviour during class time. Abundant examples of how children wished to be considered as 'organised, tidy, well-behaved, polite and hard working' were repeatedly communicated via letters written to children's prospective high school form tutors. One child clearly demarcated her personality outside of school in the following way:

> I am helpful, kind- mildly organised. Very chatty *(only on weekends and holidays)*

> (Letter 11, emphasis added).

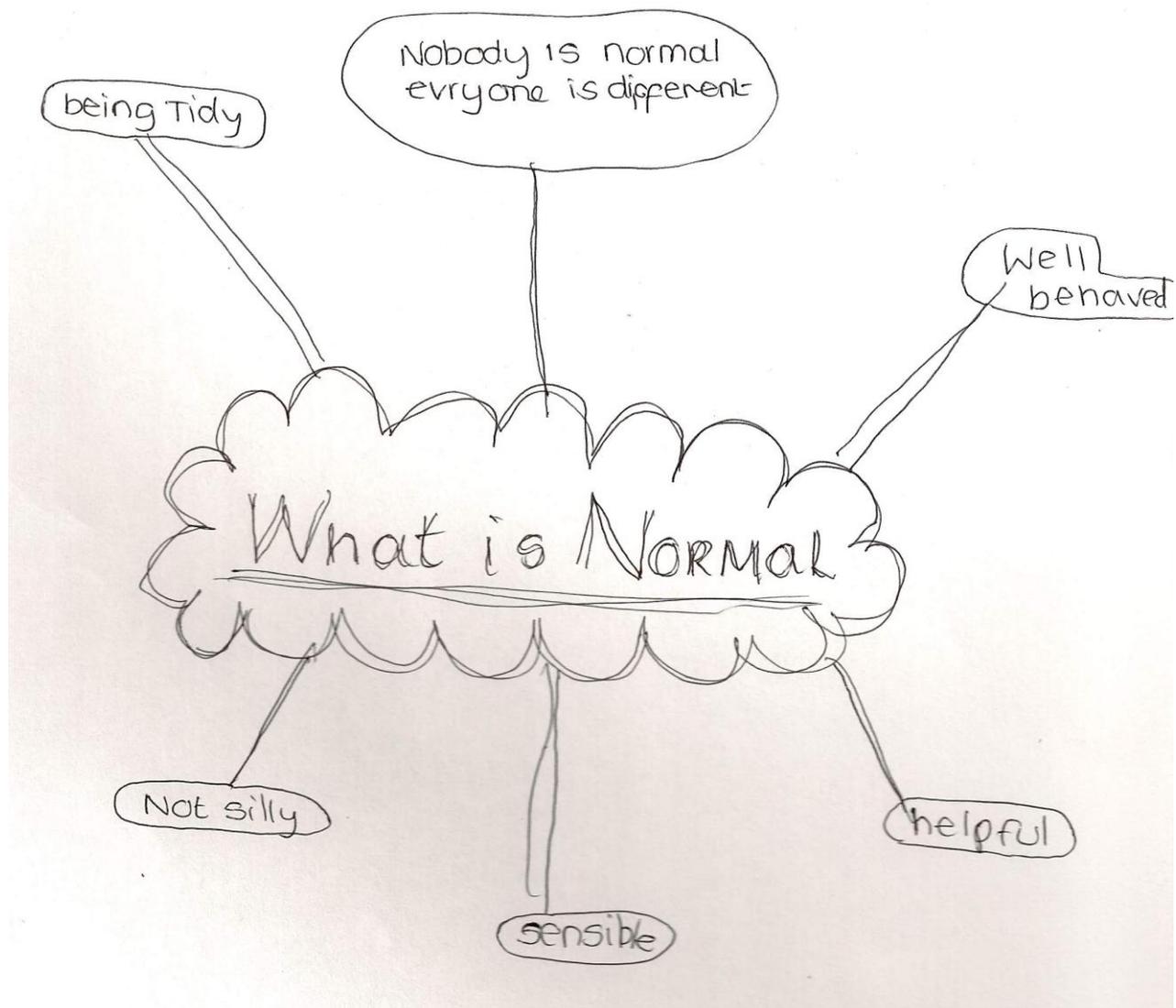A small group of children were invited to examine the concept of normalcy and defined 'normal' as:

Figure 1: Group interpretation of 'normal'.

Despite this group's admission that 'nobody is normal everyone is different', their definition of normal could also be interpreted as an understanding of compliance as a form of normalcy. According to Lyn Fendler (2001, p.127) the relationship between learned behaviours and 'learned responses' act as a form of 'demonstrated compliance' on the part of the learner. Here it appears that the narrative of 'the good child' becomes internalised through pedagogical example. The ways in which these stories are shaped by pedagogy and internalised as 'truths' highlights the powerful position of those who decide which behaviours are worthy of emulating. Fendler (2001, p.127) points to how contrary to 'Enlightenment learning' where knowledge 'stemmed from the unknown to the known', modern education involves 'assimilating the known to the internalised' and theorises that this impacts upon the types of knowledge produced as 'truths'. For, as the child is governed by the school and family, so the school is also governed by national standards and measurement by a variety of stakeholders that constitute a 'control society' (Fendler, 2001, p. 136). Indeed, according to Rose, 'childhood is the most intensely governed sector of personal existence' (1998, p. 123). The following observation is indicative of how 'exemplary' behaviour and attainment levels are prescribed as the 'norm' children should aspire to:

> In a small minority of lessons a few pupils are less attentive and slower to follow adults instructions and adhere to agreed codes of conduct. Although mostly short lived these episodes explain why a small minority of pupils and staff state that behaviour *is not always as exemplary as it should be'* (Emphasis added, OfSTED Report, 2009, p.5)

Exemplary behaviour was also observed as a collective source of celebration of group identity amongst the children. One particular group communicated to me how they perceived 'Others' at different schools in terms of measuring 'acceptable' behaviour, based on their experiences at local school football matches (see transcript 1:141-46).

The academic achievement culture that pervaded notions of acceptance and success was embodied by children's notions of 'self'. Practice and preparation for the forthcoming SAT (Standard Assessment Test) examinations appeared to be a process that begun with the transition into primary school. Whilst supervising children in the playground I was struck by the following conversation:

> Child: What level *are* you?

> Child: *I'm* a 4b but if I work really hard and get a tutor I might *be* a 5…

> (Field note 16 emphasis added).

This exchange demonstrates the extent to which some children internalised institutional categories and became attuned to measuring their capabilities in terms of educational jargon. Children appeared to be at ease and accustomed to the regular testing and target setting that occurred on a six weekly basis and although many voiced discontent at the process they appeared to accept this as the 'norm'.

> Pupils respond enthusiastically to teachers' rigorous target setting and marking (OfSTED, 2009, p.5)

Target setting employs an efficient form of 'governmentality' (Rose, 1989) and generates continuous monitoring, indicative of a 'control society' (Deleuze, 1992, p. 4). By positioning specific sets of skills and proficiencies as individual 'projects of the self', the child maintains responsibility for persistently achieving standards that are subject to continuous revision. This in turn propels the child into a project of the self that inculcates the skills of self-determination and regulation that will span his or her life course and ultimately never reach fruition. Valorisation of academic achievement is not only affirmed by the school and government policy, parents are also complicit in engaging with its celebration:

> Numerous questions asking not '*are* you getting anything for your SAT results?'

> BUT; '*what* are you getting for your SAT results?'

> Answers were varied but some children stated they were going to get the following; a laptop, holiday in Grand Canaria, £40, Trip to Alton Towers, £10 for every level 5, X-Box, Meal out, Paul Smith Bag, Pair of UGG boots… Only 2 kids said 'nothing' (Field Note 17).

Marginalising the 'Other': Defining difference

The impact of psychological measurement and testing has been critically deconstructed by many scholars (*cf.* Burman, 2008; Fendler, 2001; Hacking , 2007; Rose , 1998) who concur that the methodology employed throughout the psychological sciences has transformed the individual into a 'docile object' (Lynch, in Rose, 1998) subject to observation, measurement, classification and comparison and thus amenable to 'disciplines of difference' (Rose, 1998). In this study, children's stories reflected implicit understandings of difference, precariously positioning themselves and others along an ab/normal axis, based on unique experiences within particular contexts. Children often articulated their understanding of difference by comparison to others or with reference to a particular experience.

> He gets angry so he has some tablets… He's like [x] but not so bad (transcription 4:218).

> …can't wait to get to PHS cos there's lots of nutters like me, here I am on my own… except for [x]? I wonder why he doesn't go? He's nuts! (Field Note 9)

The demographic composition and size of this particular school[4] reflects few differences in ethnic background, ability and economic stability. This was articulated by one teaching assistant's comment:

> 'In a school this size anyone who isn't bright, minted [wealthy] and white stands out like a sore thumb' (field note 7).

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[4] Predominately white, middle-class, affluent, high achieving, with only 129 pupils (see Ofsted, 2009, p.3)

Therefore, this may have magnified particular differences as a result of lack of awareness. Moreover, throughout these children's stories the complex ways in which *knowledge* of 'O/others' (Walkerdine, 2001) was presented, perpetuated and experienced, ultimately shaped whether difference was accepted and celebrated or excluded and marginalised. Anthony Giddens (1991, p.126) proposes that basic trust constitutes 'normal' and 'predictable' life and that '[N]ormality is managed in fine detail within the textures of social activity'. He employs Erving Goffman's appropriation of *umwelt* to explain how individuals and groups 'surround themselves within a core of (accomplished) normalcy' in a bid to minimize risk of the unknown by adopting and conforming to routine everyday practices as a means to protect 'the self'. Children's stories often revealed discomfort and fear of the 'unknown' as a potential source of conflict and danger in a variety of contexts. As Giddens (1991, p.188) explains: 'avoidance of dissonance forms part of the protective cocoon which helps maintain ontological security'

Routine practices and codes of conduct were deeply embedded within the lives of these children. Those who challenged the status quo and did not always conform to explicit and implicit 'agreed codes of conduct' were often feared and marginalised as a result. Parents were also complicit in this to the point that a petition to remove one child[5] was presented to the head teacher during this study. In addition, a large proportion of children voiced many grievances at the perceived differentiation of treatment of children who had been identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN). One child who has been labelled with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) was often involved in conflict with peers as he regularly challenged the unspoken hierarchy of the lunchtime football game (*cf.* transcript 1 &4). Many children articulated much resentment of the way in which particular children (identified by the school as having SEN) were perceived to have different privileges and rights that challenged their understandings of equality and 'acceptable' behaviour.

> We could be expelled and told to go to another school. But if it's [X] he could do anything…because the teachers think he's got something wrong with him (Transcription 1:232).

A proportion of children voiced some appreciation of differing needs but struggled to rationalise their perceived injustice of the situation. Throughout other conversations and playground observations it became apparent that despite the school's best efforts to provide an 'inclusive' environment, children often misunderstood and resented differential treatment of behaviour. Often the intervention of an adult served to further exclude particular children. Children articulated their resentment of having their autonomy to resolve conflicts and disputes independently, undermined by adult intervention. In this instance the differential repartition of 'acceptable' behaviours reproduced new values and meanings that actually served to maintain and exacerbate difference rather than promote inclusion (Graham & Slee, 2008). As a result of much conflict and discussion with the class teacher, this particular group decided to 'include' the child in question, although somewhat begrudgingly.

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[5] Many playground conversations were observed that involved two parents requesting others to sign a petition to convey the extent to which that they felt one particular child posed a physical threat to the rest of the class and was deemed a 'disruptive influence'.

…You just have to leave it cos otherwise you just get told off
(transcription 1:189).

When difference presented itself as challenging the 'status quo' of the classroom or playground many children had great difficulty in rationalising deviations from normative practices.

I don't know if there's something wrong with him but… He suddenly gets mad. He doesn't know right from wrong really (Transcription 1: 176)

He gets angry for no reason. He just acts differently. In year 4 or 5 he used to go around on all fours as if he's a Minotaur or something. He just goes around the class and gets angry (Transcription 2: 202)

Jock Young (2007) describes how 'othering'can serve two distinct functions yet result in the same exclusionary outcomes, in terms of disassociating oneself with the 'Other' inorder to maintain ontological security and social order. Within children's stories, children who experienced difficulties in managing anger or who had no visible or apparently 'justifiable' explanation for their 'deviant' behaviour, were viewed with mistrust and were often excluded when out of sight of an adult gaze. Jock Young describes this type of 'Othering' as 'demonization' or a 'conservative form of cultural essentialism'. Yet, when children were able to position themselves as 'superior' either in terms of age or aptitude, they were extremely accepting of difference and readily included 'others' in their games. One child joined the school mid-term[6]and experienced great difficulty in communicating with other children and adults. A large group of year six boys took the initiative of helping him develop his speech during play time and actively sought out strategies to include this child within playground activities. This example implies a form of 'liberal othering'. Young (2007, p.5) draws a distinction here and suggests that this function of 'othering' situates 'others' as an object of pity or as a project in need of assistance due to a perceived 'lack'; 'they would be *just like us* if …circumstances improved'.

Discussion

A critical approach to the analysis of 'being a (normal) child' within the context of contemporary British childhood has illustrated how normative assumptions of 'natural' behaviour are firmly embedded within children's lives. Extensive research within this study has considered a transdisciplinary approach to the construction of childhood and revealed how seemingly benign assumptions of 'age appropriate' behaviour and biological development are the products of living in a complex social world drawing upon distinct and ambiguous contextual meaning (Prout, 2005). The ways in which this particular cohort of children engaged with, and made sense of, their position within contemporary cultural life has illustrated the capacity of discursive practice to shape children's understandings of 'the self' and 'other'. Children's stories conveyed how ontological security was constructed within a

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[6] This child joined the school temporarily under the foster care of a classmate's sibling and was only able to articulate a few words.

framework of acquired experience and knowledge that informed their position in terms of managing risk, conforming to the 'norm' and 'becoming' (more) adult.

In terms of 'managing risk' the governance of children's time and space has enabled a variety of adults to survey and restrict opportunities for spontaneous, unsupervised activity which could be said to result in affirming narratives of diminished capability and safety, consequently internalised by children's understandings of the 'self'. Along with others (Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Prout, 2000,2005) Hugh Cunningham (2006, p. 240) reminds us that the construction of 'risk', as a childhood concern, is a historical and culturally specific concept:

> [A]concern for safety, for assessing and managing risk, has become a dominant concern for many adults in their dealings with children. And children have taken on this concern. When some 700 children, mostly aged ten, were asked recently what they thought was of most importance in their upbringing, they placed the highest of all "stay safe". It is difficult to imagine that this would have been the highest priority for any previous generation of children.

Within contemporary childhood, an examination of the limitations impressed upon the activities, spaces and behaviours deemed (un) suitable for children could be said to highlight the embodiment of time as a seemingly natural developmental trajectory towards the ultimate goal of 'adulthood'. Jenks (2001, p.75) describes this as a 'hegemonic grasp of children's identity'. Rabello De Castro (2004, p.469) surmises the extent to which 'childhood' discourse positions adulthood as the 'Holy Grail' of childhood and thus shapes development in terms of overcoming 'childish-*ness*' as a future aspiration.

A recurrent theme that was articulated throughout children's stories was that of 'acceptance'. The importance placed upon the need to be valued and to be seen to be valued by peers, family and teachers appeared as a fundamental reflection of the self. In referring to *Le Souci de Soi* 'care of the self' (Hoskin's analysis of Foucault, 1990, p.37) Hoskin certifies the centrality of 'examination' as a third form of consideration within Foucault's hyphenated 'power-knowledge' relationship. Children's stories revealed the ways in which they considered and 'examined' themselves and others through narratives that generated prescriptive, normalised ways of 'being' a child (Graham & Slee, 2008). In considering the implications of children's interpretations of normalcy one needs to question whose interests are served in its universal production? Prout (2000) suggests that children are targeted by political policy as a means to control and shape future generations as a post-modern project.

The child that is valued therefore, is a child who conforms to adult idealised notions of citizenship, amenable to uniform prescriptions of 'natural' development, promoted and idealised by dominant 'others' who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo of future generations (Rose, 1998). Those who do not adhere to the culturally constructed notion of the 'perfect' child appear to be placed in a marginal position within the 'tyranny of normalcy' (Davis, 1995). The experience of marginalised children participating within this study and the deployment of extensive critical research that questions inclusive practice has underlined that; naming and differentiating others in terms of well intentioned inclusive practice can serve to further accentuate difference and further marginalise individuals (*cf.* Davis, 1995; Graham & Slee, 2008; Jenks, 2001; Walkerdine, 2001).

Graham & Slee (2008) advocate the need to question and decentre assumptions that enable people to think in terms of exceptionalities. Although this study is limited in the respect that it has reflected upon the stories of a very small proportion of children, situated within a specific context, an analysis of the normative practices of schooling has revealed that the production and position of knowledge of 'Others' impacts significantly upon whether difference is ultimately valorised or marginalised. This particular analysis of children's stories has implied that the fear of the unknown and the minimisation of the risk of rejection may shape children's identities towards the hegemonic developmental 'norm'. The potential to reframe and value difference ultimately lies within enabling the production of new knowledge that critically deconstructs taken for granted discourses of normalcy as a future direction.

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