

**The curriculum as a site of counter politics: theorising the 'domain of the sayable'**

Laura Teague

(l.teague@gold.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

Whilst there has been increasing focus on the impact of neoliberal education policy on the curriculum covered in schools, as well as on teacher and student subjectivities, less research has been done on the possibility, or otherwise, for teachers to challenge curriculum constraints. Arguing that these curriculum constraints are not simply imposed by an external censor, this paper takes up Judith Butler's (1997) concept of the 'domain of the sayable' to theorise what it is possible to imagine teaching in the primary school classroom in the first place. I draw on two different ethnographic data episodes to explore the parameters of the 'domain of the sayable' in the space of the classroom in which I taught, mapping the silences and sudden swerving away from topics that seem to be straying close to what is impossible to say or hear. This process offers new insight into how we might conceptualise teacher resistance and counter politics within the current educational policy milieu in the UK.

**Keywords**

Curriculum; counter politics; resistance; teacher subjectivity; censorship; Judith Butler

## **Acknowledgements**

\*I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on this work and for their encouragement.

## **The curriculum as a site of counter politics: theorising the 'domain of the sayable'**

'The question is not what it is I will be able to say, but what will constitute the domain of the sayable within which I begin to speak at all' (Butler, 1997, p.133).

### **Introduction**

This article is concerned with the parameters of the domain of the sayable in relation to aspects of the curriculum in a primary school classroom. I draw upon ethnographic data generated during the year I spent working as a teacher in a school in London, Greenfield Infants, for an ESRC funded study focusing on pedagogy and counter politics. I take up Butler's (1997) notion of the domain of the sayable in order to argue that curriculum constraints are not simply externally imposed but, rather, the kind of curriculum counter politics possible to conceptualise in the first place is a result of censorship that is internalised.

Whilst the curriculum has traditionally been a very obvious site for research and counter politics (Apple 2004), the decades since the introduction of the National Curriculum in the United Kingdom, in 1988, have seen focus on this area of schooling decline due to statutory specifications of curricula form and content (Stobart 2008). There has been less space for debate as prescription over what is taught and how has increased with the main focus in primary and secondary schools shifting to preparing students for statutory testing. Indeed, much research has demonstrated the impacts of marketization and standardised testing on practice in classrooms in terms of the stress and alienation experienced by both teachers and students (Reay and Wiliam 1999, Ball 2003, Hall, Collins et al. 2004, Perryman 2006, 2007, Brooks, Hughs et al. 2008, Bibby 2011). These moves towards increased testing, competition and managerialism can be understood via a conceptualisation of the neoliberal policy

agenda in education which imposes an economic model on schools (Ball 2012). There is also a significant body of research, primarily conducted in North America, concerned with the extent to which high stakes testing influences the curriculum (Au 2011, Grinell and Rabin 2013, Stone-Johnson 2016). This research, often looking at global trends and impacts in education policy, tends to concentrate on the way in which particular curriculum subjects, not the focus of high stakes testing, such as art or history, are side lined whilst increasing time is spent teaching students material they will be tested on (Stone-Johnson, 2016). There has been less attention paid, however, to individual teachers' engagement with, and potential challenge to, the increasingly controlled curriculum material they are required to teach. It is to this issue I turn my attention in this article.

As I carried out my field work, in my role as teacher to the six and seven year old children in Oak Class, I became aware that I was often generating data about counter politics unfolding in liminal times and spaces between formal learning. This is perhaps not surprising given the research literature which indicates how tightly controlled and constricted the curriculum is. However, I became interested in returning to the idea of the curriculum as a potential site of counter politics in the context of current tendencies, internationally, to constrain curriculum content more tightly in response to high stakes testing. This article, then, focuses on the pedagogical politics around aspects of the curriculum taught in Oak Class. My attempts to trouble the curriculum; to introduce topics not usually brought into the primary school or to open it up to students to suggest what should be learnt, are fraught with difficulty and disappointment for both myself and the students, as well as offering moments of excitement, engagement and the potential to shift normative discourses of teaching and learning. I conceptualise my resistance to particular curriculum content and practices to be mobilised from within the neoliberal discourses that produce me as a teaching subject in this space. I theorise the moments of simultaneous possibility and foreclosure that I encounter when taking up the curriculum as a site of counter politics in the classroom and explore the way in which the domain of the sayable actively produces what it is possible to think and say in the official times and spaces of teaching and learning.

### **Ethnographically researching my teaching practices**

The data I discuss in this article is part of a larger project exploring pedagogy and counter politics. I spent a year working part time as a teacher to a class of six and seven year old children (year 2, in UK school years) to investigate the possibilities and limitations of enacting counter politics to disrupt normative practices and discourses that perpetuate educational inequalities. Whilst scholars within the sociology of education have argued that educational inequalities are produced in the mundane, everyday moments of teaching and learning in classrooms (Gillborn and Youdell 2000, Youdell 2006, Gillborn 2008, 2011, Bradbury 2013), there has been less research regarding pedagogy that might interrupt, disrupt or challenge this production of inequalities. The larger project from which this article is drawn is an ethnography of my subjectivity and pedagogic practices over the course of the year I spent working at Greenfield Infants. I took up the post at Greenfield Infants specifically to carry out this research. I wrote to hundreds of schools in an attempt to find a part time teaching post where I could also carry out ethnographic research. Greenfield Infants contacted me after receiving my letter because they were finding it difficult to fill a teaching position for September. The post was for one year only, and was part time. I informed the head teacher about my research at interview and she agreed to me collecting data on my pedagogy and events in my classroom. Although I offered to develop policy and do staff development training around issues of equality, as favour for the permission to carry out my research in the class in which I worked, I was not taken up on my offer. This was due, at least in part, to the Ofsted inspection that impended during my time at the school and the fact that all staff development training focused on raising standards in literacy and numeracy and on policy around marking and feedback to students.

Greenfield Infants itself is a school for three to seven year old children situated on the edge of a large council estate in outer London. At the time of my employment there (September 2011 to July 2012), the school was in flux. Following a series of Ofsted inspections in the years prior to my arrival which graded the school 'satisfactory', and the adjacent junior school being placed in 'special measures' at the beginning of the academic year, plans were made to amalgamate the two schools and for the resulting institution to become an academy. The school that appears in this article no longer exists.

Whilst the project is not a straightforward ethnography due to my dual role as researcher and research participant, the detailed descriptions of the place of the

research and the other participants, as well as my focus on the political effects of the pedagogic politics I pursue, rather than only on my own experience, extend this research beyond autoethnography. I generate the data I present in this article via scratch notes which I write up into more detailed field notes at the end of the day. Adopting a stance of 'uncomfortable reflexivity' (Pillow 2003, Youdell 2010), I record times of seeming political impasse, impossibility and pedagogic failure as well as moments where there seems to be some kind of shift in terms of what is sayable in the space of the classroom. I deliberately write in my affective responses to the classroom events I detail to provide an account of the emotional labour of pursuing counter politics in the classroom. These affective accounts are interwoven into other accounts in the data detailing what happened and who said what to whom.

### **The domain of the sayable and recognisable subjectivity**

Remaining legible subjects at Greenfield Infants is a matter of survival for the students and myself. In the extreme, it is about maintaining my job and the students avoiding exclusion from school. On a more mundane level, it is about being seen and recognised as legitimate subjects within the space of Greenfield Infants. The absence of this recognition results in alienation and exclusion and is not an easy position to maintain (Youdell, 2006). As Butler writes, '*To move outside of the domain of speakability is to risk one's status as a subject. To embody the norms that govern speakability in one's speech is to consummate one's status as a subject of speech*' (1997, p.133, emphasis in original). The domain of the sayable is, then, productive. In relation to classroom practice, it moves us away from the notion of an external censor, refusing permission for our plans but, rather, suggests that the plans we come up with in the first place are already censored: they are formed in the domain of the sayable. This is significant in terms of how counter politics is conceptualised in the space of the classroom and leads me to consider what constitutes the domain of the sayable at this site and how it appears in the everyday moments of my pedagogic practice. As Foucault (1991) argues, part of the work of power is to remain invisible. Butler further develops this idea, stating, 'the conditions of intelligibility are themselves formulated in and by power, and this normative exercise of power is rarely acknowledged as an operation of power at all' (1997, p.134). Thus, the articulation of the domain of the sayable in the classroom is impossible to fully produce. Rather, it is through the



moments of silence encountered when we stumble towards what is unsayable or the seeming impossibility of speaking some words out loud, that I become aware of its presence. This article then, is concerned with what happens at the perimeters of the sayable in order to begin to understand what the sayable is at this site and, then, furthermore, what constitutes taking the 'risk of redrawing the distinction between what is and is not speakable' (p.139).

I begin with an exploration of data generated from a lesson in which I introduce the idea of conscientious objectors to a unit of work on 'Poppy Day', looking at the way in which dominant discourses around World War 1 are upheld alongside dominant conceptualisations of the adult/ child and teacher/ student binaries at Greenfield. Assertions of these binaries appear again in data I go on to discuss, which focuses on the process the students engage in when I invite them to consider what topics we could learn about in the summer term. Here I explore the way in which the politics of this session is enacted both on and beyond discursive symbolism. The domain of the sayable becomes visible through words spoken in whispers and then denied and the writing of words under erasure which leave traces of the difficult negotiations that occur around the idea of sex education as a possible future topic. My aim here is not to evaluate the success or otherwise of the interventions in the curriculum, in terms of troubling existing normative ideas, rather, I am seeking out the moments when the borders between the sayable and the unsayable come into view and are maintained or, sometimes, shifted. This has important implications in terms of conceptualising where and how counter politics might be enacted in classrooms.

### **World War 1 and the impossibility of imagining refusal to comply**

Remembrance Day is a prominent event in many schools in the UK. In the days leading up to November 11<sup>th</sup>, curriculum time is often given over to learning about World War 1 and the symbol of the poppy (Aldridge 2014). Despite the absence of statutory guidance on the teaching of WW1 and Remembrance Day, this topic continues to feature prominently on school calendars and in curriculum planning. Aldridge (2014, p.18) raises concerns about the way in which Remembrance Day is taught in schools, arguing that students are often presented with a romanticised view of war whilst Basham (2015, p.1) argues that the narratives of collective mourning produced by the Royal British Legion's Annual Poppy Day Appeal are deeply

gendered and racialised. She goes on to suggest that ‘the Poppy Appeal invites communities of feeling to remember military sacrifice, whilst forgetting the violence and bloodiness of actual warfare’ (ibid). These narratives that are constructed around the poppy are very powerful and, as I shall go on to explore, difficult to challenge. At Greenfield Infants, Remembrance Day has been on the year 2 curriculum for many years. According to the information leaflet sent out to parents and carers at the beginning of the year, the purpose of this work is to ‘find out the importance of Remembrance Day, why we wear poppies and how we can show our gratitude and respect to those who have died in war’. There is no space here for the complexity of war or even its horror. In the lead up to Remembrance Day, there are themed assemblies; poppies sold in each classroom; displays featuring poppies children make during art activities, and a compulsory church visit for each year group to see the WW1 memorial. In advance of this work commencing, I decide that when Oak Class learn about this topic in the classroom, I will devote some time to learning about conscientious objectors in WW1 in order to provide a different perspective from the one the students are receiving elsewhere. The following data excerpt is from an account of a lesson I teach as part of the Poppy Day unit of work. I am interested in exploring the moments of silence here because I want to suggest these generate important insights into the domain of the sayable at this site.

I begin by asking the children who went to fight in WW1 and the reasons why they fought. Lots of children remember it was men who fought in the war, and that they went to fight to ‘save the country’. I explain that not everyone did decide to fight in the war but that it was a very difficult decision to make, just as it might have been a difficult decision to fight. I introduce the term conscription and we discuss what it means. I then ask them to imagine an assembly led by Mrs Andrews or Mr Bell, where everyone is being given instructions to do something and they are the only person who refuses.

There is silence as the children seem to be imagining this. Some of them gasp and others smile, as if acknowledging the absurdity of what I am suggesting. I ask how they might feel about doing this.

Mary: You would have to be really brave

Me: Why?

(Lots of children begin talking at once and I quieten them down before asking individual children what they think. Lots of children have their hands up)

Diola: Everyone would be looking at you and you'd get in trouble.

Lee: I'd .... I'd be actually scared.

Me: (to whole class) Do you think there would ever be any reason for you not to follow instructions in assembly?

Lukaz: You have to follow instructions at school... you have to be good.

Me: Do you always have to be good? Are there times when other things are more important than being good?

[None of the children respond to this so I continue on a different tack]

Me: Some of the men who lived during WW1 did not believe in fighting in the war... This was for different reasons – they might have believed that hurting other people or animals is wrong for religious reasons, because of their religious beliefs, they might just think that all wars are wrong – that there are different ways to solve problems, or they might have just disagreed with WW1 but not necessarily all war.... What reasons might people who did not want to fight in the war give, do you think? (I ask the children to talk to each other about this for two minutes).

(Field notes, November, 2011)

In this context, a lesson on conscientious objectors seems to be entering a realm that strays close to the unspeakable. The children mention the saviour of the country and bravery as a reason that men fought in WW1. This is the message they have been receiving in other parts of their learning about Poppy Day. Creating space for alternative narratives is difficult. In this data excerpt, I present the idea of conscientious objectors as if it is an alternative choice to conscription: some men fought, some men did not fight; both choices are equally valid. This simplifies the complex issues of choice and agency in relation to conscription and conscientious objection as well as making the difference between the two positions seem polarised. Yet my decision to put conscientious objectors on the curriculum at all feels surprisingly risky in that it calls into question the valorisation of war seen in the dominant narratives about Remembrance Day in school assemblies and the QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) guidance the school follows. This

valorisation of war, however, is exactly what I struggle to call into question as I am speaking with the students. The students are tentatively presented with an alternative view but in such a way that they do not have to engage with it. The link between conscientious objectors in WW1 and daring not to comply with adults in school seems a difficult one for the students to think about. Indeed, there is silence when I ask the students to consider whether there is something more important than being good and I 'continue on a different tack'. It is as if neither I nor the students can explore this possibility as it questions the messages they receive daily about the importance of following instructions. In this lesson, where the students and I, as in every other lesson, are attempting, both consciously and unconsciously, to embody good teacher and good student, the suggestion we might do otherwise brings us into a silence we all collude with. Our bodies sit docilely in their places, mine upon a chair at the front of the carpet area, the students', crossed legged, on the carpet. As is familiar to us, we act our places in the discourses of schooling, as good and proper teacher and student subjects. We are doing what is expected of us in this everyday scene of teaching and learning: thinking our way beyond being good and following instructions as the most important thing to do, calls into question our embodiment as recognisable subjects of schooling at this moment. This is not to say we are all, always, compliant. Indeed, daily, in different ways, we transgress what we know is expected of us. However, here is a reframing of such transgressions via the questioning of a dominant narrative of Greenfield Infants which is that following adult instructions is necessary and important. The ground beneath us is shaky and I move back to the, somewhat, safer territory of the past.

### **Students deciding the summer term curriculum**

In the previous data excerpt, the unspeakable is encountered and backed away from. In the data excerpt that follows, some of the students approach what seems unspeakable but, when I try to take their lead, others police my words, and, in so doing, insist that I return to my position as recognisable teaching subject. This raises further questions for me which are inextricably tied to questions of speakability: What is hearable in the classroom and what can be made sense of? From here, I extend the notions of speakability and hearability to what can be written and enacted and explore the relationships between these different forms of communication production and its reception. The data I use here is an account of a lesson where I invite the students to

make suggestions about what they would like to learn in the summer term. Whilst not common practice at Greenfield Infants, this move is one that can be read in terms of student voice and participation, absolutely in line with 'good practice' in terms of government education policy and Ofsted requirements. Indeed, schools are increasingly required to take account of 'pupil voice'. The statutory guidance from the Department for Education explains that 'the term 'pupil voice' refers to ways of listening to the views of pupils and/or involving them in decision-making' (DfE 2014, p. 2). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is not statute law in the UK but these guidelines do make reference to the relevant sections of the UNCRC document concerning children's free expression of views and their right to participation in decision making effecting their lives. The term 'pupil voice' and the way in which it is frequently put into practice in schools has been criticised by a number of scholars. For instance, both Roche (1999) and Noyes (2005) have argued that the term 'pupil voice', and the discussion around it in policy documents, is problematic in that it is presented as inherently and uncomplicatedly positive. As Lundy (2007) explains 'One of the inherent difficulties with this is that the initial goodwill can dissipate when the rhetoric needs to be put into practice, especially when the effect of this is to challenge dominant thinking, generate controversy or cost money' (p.931). The result of this is that many schools take up the idea of pupil voice superficially and children are not, in reality, able to express their views on issues that matter to them (ibid). Furthermore, Wyness (2013) argues that the emphasis on voice in relation to issues of children's participation privileges a Western conceptualisation of the individual rights-bearing, schooled child. He argues that 'this powerful unitary notion of children's participation [...] has had the effect of constructing less affluent 'Southern' children's social and economic 'material' activities as deficit forms of participation' (p. 341). I find Wyness' arguments useful here in drawing attention to the way in which discourses of children's participation produce normative conceptualisations of who a participating childhood subject is and, therefore, the kinds of activity that count as legible participation. The question of what counts as legible participation is one that Rosen (2015) takes up in her ethnographic study of an early years setting in London. She argues that children's screams in play, often quietened by adult practitioners, are productive forms of political participation and negotiation but ones that we might miss if we only consider participation to occur on a symbolic level. Hickey-Moodey (2013) has also theorised student voice, arguing that affect should be recognised as a legitimate component of

young people's participation. The issue of political participation that exceeds the symbolic is an important and I shall return to it in my reading of the data I discuss below.

I continue to read the following data via Butler's notion of the domain of the sayable. In addition to these readings of the data, but nevertheless directly linked to them, I will explore the diverse forms of participation, and, indeed, resistance to participation, enacted in response to the invitation to contribute to discussions about the curriculum. The students in the following data excerpt do not always take up my invitation to suggest topics and areas of interest to learn about in the way I anticipate. Indeed, their negotiations with each other sometimes occur via corporeal jostling for space around the large sheets of poster paper I provide them with. They are enacted via scribbles, lines and overwriting with the coloured marker pens they use as well as via suggestions whispered conspiratorially in each other's ears and ideas shouted out across the classroom and taken up amongst other groups of students. The affective reactions of the students infuse and exceed their written and spoken comments. There is a sense in the following data of the students playing with risky ideas. They sidle up to the unsayable then back away; speaking it then gasping and refusing to hear it from anyone else, especially their teacher; writing it on the poster paper then erasing it; letting it exist in whispers between themselves but not in the official realm of classroom discourse, mediated by me. This playfulness occurs amongst the, perhaps, more recognisable negotiations around whether Japan would be a better topic than crisps or how easy it would be to learn Russian in the summer term.

#### Attempting to set up the activity: an invitation to the students

It is Monday afternoon. I am not usually in school at this time but tomorrow is a mock Ofsted inspection that has been arranged by the head teacher. She sent me a text message at half past 2 in the morning this morning asking if I could teach on Tuesday. I told her I could not but offered to come in this afternoon. I anticipate being asked to help with planning or to put up displays but instead I am asked me to teach the class. I have not prepared anything but Jean informs me that we are to go into the ICT suite to produce pictures of Easter eggs for the Easter cards. It is not our usual time to be in the ICT suite but I assume that arrangements have already been made. The children are coming in from lunchtime play. They are fractious. I hear

the lunchtime supervisors shouting at the class to line up. I go out. The children are pleased to see me. Some shout my name, others rush up to give me a hug, asking if I'm staying the afternoon. I reassure them that I am staying the afternoon and say that I am pleased to see them. I then encourage them to line up sensibly, aware of the frustration of the lunchtime supervisors. Eventually, the children are standing quietly enough for the lunchtime supervisors to send them in. I sit on my chair with the register, waiting for the children to settle on the carpet. They are noisy, grumpy with each other, fussing, fidgeting. Once they are all seated, I do some clapping games with them which usually helps to calm them. Today this does not seem to be working and children continue to talk and laugh and complain about the heat. I open windows, suggest jumpers are taken off. I go through the register as quickly as possible. I send a child to see if the ICT room is free and she comes back to say it is not. Having no other activities planned, I have to think on my feet. I decide I will ask the children what they would like to learn next term. They are so noisy that I cannot explain what I want them to do. I take the big timer.

Me: This is a five minute timer. I will turn it over. I promise that I will not speak longer than the timer. I just need to explain an activity to you.

The children respond to this and quieten down long enough for me to explain to them that I would like them to write on big bits of sugar paper what they would like to learn next term. I tell them that they can suggest anything they like and although we might not be able to learn about everything they suggest, we would see if there are certain things that lots of them would like to learn about.

I send the children to their mixed ability 'home' tables. There are enough marker pens for the children to have one each but they have to collaborate over the paper. It is big enough for all the children in the group to be writing on it at once but they have to ensure it stays in the middle of the table for this to be effective. The classroom is very noisy but all the children do seem engaged and involved in the task set. Some collaborate in twos or threes, others work alone (although still sat in their groups).

(Field notes, April, 2012)

The pre-Ofsted panic in school produces this situation which may otherwise not have occurred. I want to draw attention here to my own precarious subjectivity, produced simultaneously within and against current neoliberal education policy discourses. The spectre of Ofsted is omnipresent in this scene. It operates through me, producing my subjectivity yet I experience it outside me: it is the external gaze upon me and the classroom and students for which I am responsible; it is the finger tapping upon my shoulder as I teach, calling into question my every move. This Ofsted spectre emerges implicitly in my account in the above excerpt of data. The children do not sit where they want to sit in the room. They sit at their 'mixed ability 'home' tables' which have been chosen by my job share partner. This seating arrangement alone normalises the idea of 'ability' as innate and fixed in children: the echo of the morning ability grouped tables present in this opposite afternoon seating arrangement. A sense of adults' fears about the uncontrollability of children are also inscribed and called up, again and again, in these seating arrangements. The idea that children could sit where they want and with whom they want to sit, perhaps not even at tables, remains unthinkable even in these moments of off timetable, unplanned activity. Particularly revealing here, in terms of the Ofsted spectre I imagine, is my observation towards the end of my account: 'the classroom is very noisy but all the children do seem engaged and involved in the task set'. Although I am not aware of it when I write up this event as data, my words here repeat, almost verbatim, Greenfield Infants' interpretation of the Ofsted grading criteria. This criteria includes a section for 'pupil engagement', stating, under the 'good' heading, 'the teaching is consistently effective in ensuring the pupils are motivated and engaged'. Whilst the act of perceiving this scene as data and writing it up as such, is constitutive of my subjectivity as a researcher, I do not, indeed cannot, erase my desire to be constituted as a good teaching subject.

This reminds me of Butler and Athinasiou's (2013) reading of Spivak and the idea that liberalism is that which we cannot not want. There is no option for me but to remain passionately attached to my own production as a recognisable, good (enough?) teaching subject in this space even in my repudiation of this subjectivation. I am not suggesting here that these unavoidable passionate attachments erase all other possibilities for ways of being a recognisable subject within the space of this school. Rather, I am suggesting that in my attempts to enact counter politics in the classroom and to account for these enactments within my research, I cannot let go of this teacher self who conceptualises her invitation to her students to reflect upon what



they would like to learn about as a 'task' and who remains concerned that all students are 'on task' and 'engaged' at all times. I conceptualise my subjectivation here as occurring through multiple, often contradictory, discourses which make possible the counter political moves I detail in the data excerpt above, and those to follow, but also undercut, derail and sometimes contradict these. As I progress through my analysis of this data, I want to hold on to the idea that radical politics and neoliberal education discourses do not always run counter to one another. Sometimes this becomes the case yet often they are mobilised together.

### The permission to transgress: what is it possible to think, here?

Mary: Can we write anything?

Me: Yes, anything.

Mary: What? Sex education? Can I write sex education? [falls about laughing, hysterically, incredulously]

Me: Yes Mary, you can write sex education.

Mary: [in between giggles] You would teach us about sex education?

Me: Yes. Would you like to do sex education?

[Diola has overheard and comes over from her table]

Diola: Miss, we're children. We're not supposed to learn about that stuff.

Me: Oh? Really?

Diola: No, we're not supposed to know that stuff.

Me: Ok, well, you can tell me what you would like to learn about.

[Diola goes make to her table, looking somewhat puzzled]

Tia: Gay! Can we write 'gay' Miss?

Me: Is that what you would like to learn about?

Tia: [falls about giggling with Mary] Gay boys!

Me: Gay boys?

Tia: [rolling her eyes] You know [purses her lips and makes kissing noises] boys kissing and hugging [more falling about laughing]

Me: You would like to learn about relationships between gay people?

[The students on the table are whispering to each other and laughing]

[Tia writes 'gay' on the paper and also writes 'sex']

[Students on other tables are talking, in hushed but legible tones, about whether they should write sex on their papers].

(Field notes, April, 2012)

Mary's question 'can I write sex education?' exposes the boundaries of the unspeakable in this classroom. Sex education is an unspoken but known about forbidden topic. In asking this question, Mary is also questioning the perimeters of my invitation to 'suggest anything'. Am I serious? What happens if the forbidden is suggested? Whilst the suggestion of learning about sex is made with much laughter, deflecting any notion that this is a serious suggestion, it does ask me whether I am serious. Do I really want the students to suggest anything? Although my response may communicate the integrity of my invitation to the children, it refuses to engage in the transgression we all know has occurred (even if we do not agree that the mention of sex in a year 2 classroom *should* be a transgression). Mary's question here does open up possibility for discussion around why sex education is not on the year 2 curriculum and why it feels so dangerous to suggest. I do not attempt to move the discussion to these questions, however. It is Diola who provides the policing intervention that is perhaps already occurring, to some extent, inside myself. Indeed, Diola tries to rescue me from being an adult who permits six and seven year old children to discuss issues of sex. Her assertion that 'we're children. We're not supposed to learn about that stuff' attempts to return me, and herself and her peers, back to our proper places: Me as a knowing but responsible adult teacher and they as innocent, unknowing, children in need of protection.

I would like to return again to my precarious constitution as a subject here. The question of how to remain legible (to myself and the students I teach as well as the spectre of Ofsted) within this space whilst acknowledging the possibility that the students I teach might want to do sex education is difficult. The two positions, as Diola points out, are not compatible. The students and I reach a point where sex is permissible to say, and write, in the space of this classroom, yet we cannot move beyond this point. Perhaps searching further for what is unspeakable here, Tia suggests 'gay' as a topic for next term. Her mocking references to gay boys kissing and hugging are homophobic. Looking back now, in retrospective horror, I am wondering why I did not challenge the comments more directly. Instead, I opt again for an unruffled response and encourage Tia to write down her suggestion. My reaction here is interesting in relation to Mary's earlier sex education suggestion. Tia refers to sexual attraction between boys (kissing and hugging) yet I reconfigure this as

'relationships between gay people'. What becomes unspeakable, indeed, unhearable, is the idea of sex for pleasure. The comments may have been homophobic but they open up the possibility for further discussion here which I do not attempt. Sex for pleasure, pleasurable sex, children talking about pleasurable sex: these expressions are beyond the domain of the sayable in this classroom space, at this time. Sex education is not usually taught until upper Key Stage 2. In Key Stage 1, the focus is on baby animals and humans, without detail of conception. However, absent from all curriculum guidance is the idea that sex can be pleasurable and fun. And this is what is unspeakable here too.

As discussed earlier, Butler uses the concept of censorship to explore the foreclosures which make speech possible in the first place. I find this productive when trying to think about why I find these conversations with students difficult to navigate despite having written and taught on issues of queer theory in the primary classroom prior to beginning this research (see, Cullen and Teague, 2008 and Cullen and Sandy, 2009). I want to suggest that part of my production as a legible teacher in this space is the disavowal of children and sexual pleasure. I am not conscious of this when I teach in the classroom, nor when I write up this classroom scene as data. However, it seems I cannot hear it, think about it or discuss it in this space because, to do so, would be to jeopardize my own viable subjectivity. Unbeknownst to me at the time, my response to Tia's reference to sexual pleasure in terms of relationships is absolutely in line with the government's 'Sex and Relationship Education good practice guidance' document (DfE 2000), which states in relation to 'good' sex and relationship education:

'It is lifelong learning about physical, moral and emotional development. It is about the understanding of the importance of marriage for family life, stable and loving relationships, respect, love and care. It is also about the teaching of sex, sexuality, and sexual health. It is not about the promotion of sexual orientation or sexual activity – this would be inappropriate teaching' (p.5).

The issue of the domain of the sayable is always political. It is about what can be said, where and by whom. Sex is an issue that impacts on the lives of the six and seven year olds in Oak Class. They see it represented in the media they access; they are aware of it happening between older people in their lives; they will have

experienced their own sexual pleasures and desires; they will have heard reports about childhood sexual abuse on the news and some of them will have direct and indirect experiences of sexual abuse. These children are aware of sex as something pleasurable but also as something potentially dangerous or harmful and certainly as something forbidden. Along with many other issues that impact their lives, however, their thoughts and feelings about it are not discussed within the official space of their school. I want to suggest that the acknowledgement of sex as a legitimate year 2 topic does produce a micro shift in the boundaries of the domain of the sayable here. Traces of this discussion remain in the erased, yet readable, word on Tia's poster paper: ~~sex~~. This erased word captures the simultaneity of the possibility and its foreclosure. Yet the foreclosure follows the discussion and the indelibility of the scribed representation of this discussion on the poster paper indicates a micro movement of the boundaries of the domain of the sayable here. Important to note is where this shift is situated. It is not within official school discourses around the curriculum nor is it situated within the classroom itself. Rather, the shift is situated within the relationships in the classroom. The domain of the sayable between us, as teacher and students of Oak Class, is called into question and contested: the process of this contestation captured in the word under erasure. The domain of the sayable is not fixed but is constantly produced through these sorts of discussions, and just as importantly, the retreats from them, that occur in the everyday moments of teaching and learning.

#### Scribbles, overwriting and the refusal to think

I go over to another table and kneel down between Oluwaham and Dillon because there seems to be conflict beginning between the two of them.

Oluwaham: Dillon drew on my writing [begins to cry]

Dillon: No! He drew on mine and his pen is darker. My pen is light.

[Oluwaham is using a red pen and Dillon a light blue pen. I notice they have each crossed out words written by the other].

Me: Hey, can't you just use the area of paper nearer to you and not draw on each other's writing? Wouldn't that be better?

Oluwaham: But he is rude.

Dillon: Haha! You are crying [he scribbles across Oluwaham's writing and Oluwaham immediately scribbles over Dillon's writing. Their bodies are pressed up against one another. Each holds a pen in his hand and

pushes against the hand of the other, attempting to write over the marks of the other. Dillon is breathing very heavily. Oluwahan begins a low growl, then Dillon joins in, slightly louder].

Me: Let's stop now. You've both scribbled across each other's writing.

You both feel bad.

[The growling ceases].

Dillon: I don't.

Me: Well, you did seem to get cross.... Anyway, maybe you can leave each other's spaces on the paper alone now.

[Both boys refuse to write any more for the remainder of the session].

(Field notes, April, 2012)

The students' suggestions about what we learn are shot through with their affective responses to the presence of each other, myself and the task. Hickey-Moody's (2013) discussion of affect, as 'a relationality of the body' (p.127) is useful here. She argues that affective responses of students generated through arts making practices constitute an important aspect of voice and expression. If voice is conceptualised as spoken or written language alone, important communication can go unseen. Dillon and Oluwahan's participation in shaping the classroom curriculum, official and non-official, occurs on and beyond the terrain of symbolic discourse and opens up new directions whilst simultaneously attempting to shut them down. Dillon and Oluwahan *are* participating in the task. They enact the impossibility of reaching consensus over what is learnt in the summer term. Their responses are not those of the unitary, rational student subject of schooling. They do not write their suggestions neatly, or, even, not so neatly, on the sugar paper, as their peers do. What, then, to make of these scribbles, these hands pressed against one another, rigid bodies and raging, growling breath? I read their response here as an important defiance of the knowing, rational subjects I require them to be in this moment. In order to participate meaningfully in this task, they need to be able to reflect on what they would like to know and to come up with topics that might be viable to put on the curriculum the following term. This request imagines a subject who can identify and use their 'voice' to participate in discussions about the curriculum. It also assumes a subject who feels hopeful enough to believe their suggestions will be taken seriously and believes that they could come up with something they would want to learn about. No space is left

here for not learning or, indeed, for uncertainty and discovery. It also assumes that what is underneath and around the learning of curriculum (the seating arrangements, the ability and mixed ability groupings, the timetabling, the assessments, the assemblies, the carpet and the register and the whiteboard and who writes on it when and so on), is not up for question. This takes me back to my earlier suggestions that radical curriculum material is distilled in the banal constraints of lesson plan proformas. Perhaps what Dillon and Oluwaham are speaking to, not necessarily with intent, are the banal constraints of their everyday experience of being schooled at Greenfield Infants.

Despite the inability of this intervention to shift the schooling practices around and on which it is enacted, it is not futile. Indeed, the learning in the summer term that results from this invitation to the students is exciting. Dillon and Oluwaham's responses, however, enable me to tell a tale of this intervention that is more complex. The very act of asking students what they want to learn cites a chain of assumptions about learning, choice and subjectivity which is embedded in neoliberal educational discourses yet, in this space, it is also an important counter political move. It is an intervention that manages both to offer some recognition to the students as having views worth contributing whilst also, simultaneously, failing to move beyond neoliberal discourses of the rational, agentic and choice making subject.

## **Conclusion**

The pedagogic counter politics I detail in this article do not run counter to the neoliberal discourses that might appear to censor them: They are unavoidably intertwined. A complex process begins to emerge in my theoretical exploration of my pedagogy whereby neoliberal discourses of teaching and learning are taken up in the counter politics which call them into question. Whilst this might seem to lead to an impossible impasse, I hold on to the way in which neoliberalism itself is not monolithic or fixed, but is also, always in constant production. As Butler (1997) asserts, it is in this repeated rearticulation of dominant discourses that the opportunity arises to repeat differently. Micro shifts occur in such moments that create possibilities for thinking and being differently in the classroom. The theoretical work I do in this article offers ways to think about censorship not as the external force preventing counter politics but as the implicit, internalised force which produces the conditions upon which counter politics is enacted in the first place. This conceptualisation opens possibilities for

thinking about and enacting future counter political interventions in education differently.

## References

Aldridge, D. (2014). "How Ought War To Be Remembered in Schools?" Impact: Philosophical Perspectives on Education Policy(21): 1-45.

Apple, M. W. (2004). Ideology and Curriculum Third Edition London, RoutledgeFalmer.

Au, W. (2011). "Teaching under the new Taylorism: high-stakes testing and the standardization of the 21st century curriculum." Journal of Curriculum Studies **43**(1): 25-45.

Ball, S. (2003). "The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity." Journal of Education Policy **18**(2): 195 - 214.

Ball, S. (2012). Global Education Inc. New policy networks and the neo-liberal imaginary. Oxen, Routledge.

Ball, S. and A. Olmedo (2012). "Care of the self, resistance and subjectivity under neoliberal governmentalities." Critical Studies in Education **54**(1): 85-96.

Basham, V. (2015). "Gender, race, militarism and remembrance: the everyday geopolitics of the poppy." Gender, Place and Culture: a journal of feminist geography.

Bibby, T. (2011). Education - An 'Impossible Profession'? Psychoanalytic explorations of learning and classrooms. Oxon, Routledge.

Bradbury, A. (2013). Understanding Early Years Inequality: Policy, assessment and young children's identities. Oxen, Routledge.

Brooks, J. S., et al. (2008). "Fear and trembling in the American high school: Educational reform and teacher isolation." Educational Policy **22**(1): 45-62.

Butler, J. (1997). Excitable Speech A Politics of the Performance. Lonodn, Routledge.

Butler, J. and A. Athanasiou (2013). Dispossession: The Performative in the Political. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Cullen, F. and L. Teague (2008). Subversion and the Carnavalesque: Breaking Rules in the Queer Classroom. Queering the Body; Queering Primary Education. University of Exeter.

Cullen, F. and L. Sandy (2009). "Lesbian Cinderella and other stories: telling tales and researching sexualities equalities in primary school." Sex Education **9**(2): 141 - 154

DfE (2000). Sex and Relationship Education Guidance London, Crown Copyright.

DfE (2014). Listening to and involving children and young people. London, Crown Copyright.

Foucault, M. (1991). Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison. London, Penguin.

Gillborn, D. (2008). Racism and Education Coincidence or Conspiracy? Oxon, Routledge.

Gillborn, D. and D. Youdell (2000). Rationing Education: Policy, Practice, Reform and Equity. Buckingham, Open University Press.

Grinell, S. and C. Rabin (2013). "Modern education: a tragedy of the commons." Journal of Curriculum Studies **45**(6): 748-767.

Hall, K., et al. (2004). "SATurated models of pupilhood: assessment and inclusion/ exclusion." British Educational Research Journal **30**(6): 801-818.

Hickey-Moody, A. (2013) Youth, Arts and Education: Reassembling Subjectivity Through Affect Oxen, Routledge

Lundy, L. (2007). "'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child." British Educational Research Journal **33**(6): 927-942.

Noyes, A. (2005). "Pupil voice: purpose, power and possibilities for democratic schooling." British Educational Research Journal **31**(4): 533-540.

Perryman, J. (2006). "Panoptic performativity and school inspection regimes: disciplinary mechanisms and life under special measures." Journal of Educational Policy **21**(2): 147 - 161.

Perryman, J. (2007). "Inspection and emotion." Cambridge Journal of Education **37**(2): 173 - 190.

Pillow, W. S. (2003). "Confession, Catharsis or Cure: Rethinking the uses of methodological power in qualitative research." International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education **16**(2): 175 - 196.



Reay, D. and D. Wiliam (1999). "I'll be a nothing: structure, agency and the construction of identity through assessment." British Educational Research Journal **25**(3): 343-354.

Roche, J. (1999). "Children: rights, participation and citizenship " Childhood **6**(4): 475-493.

Rosen, R. (2015). "'The scream': Meanings and excesses in early childhood settings." Childhood **22**(1): 39-52.

Stobart, G. (2008). Testing times: the uses and abuses of assessment London, Routledge.

Stone-Johnson, C. (2016). "Intensification and isolation: Alienated teaching and collaborative professional relationships in the accountability context." Journal of Educational Change **17**: 29-49.

Wyness, M. (2013). "Global standards and deficit childhoods: the contested meaning of children's participation." Children's Geographies **11**(3): 340-353.

Youdell, D. (2006). Impossible Bodies Impossible Selves: exclusions and student subjectivities. Dordecht, Springer.

Youdell, D. (2010). "Queer outings: uncomfortable stories about the subjects of post-structural school ethnography." International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education **23**(1): 87-100.

Youdell, D. (2011). School Trouble Identity, Power and Politics in Education. Oxon, Routledge.