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2018-05-02

Standardised assessment and the shaping of neoliberal student subjectivities

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Recommended Citation

Kelly, P. (2018) 'Standardised assessment and the shaping of neoliberal student subjectivities', *Testing and Inclusive Schooling International Challenges and Opportunities*, , pp. 66-78. Retrieved from <https://pearl.plymouth.ac.uk/pioe-research/156>

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Abstract

Focusing on the experiences of children in their final year of primary school in England, this chapter considers how standardized assessment shapes curriculum and pedagogy and supports the formation of stratified neoliberal student subjectivities, both broadly and specifically in relation to reading. This account is linked to the findings of an empirical study of 11-year-old students' experiences of national standardized assessment tests in reading. In all, 36 students – six students in each of six schools – were interviewed in boy – girl student pairs. These pairs were chosen as low-, middle-, and high-attaining students by their teachers. The analysis indicates that reading confidently affirms high-attaining students' beliefs about themselves and their place in the world and that theirs is a craft relationship to reading. However, low-attaining students are alienated from reading. Hence, it is argued that approaches invoked to improve student test performances will neither help raise the grades of those identified as low attaining beyond the mediocre nor have a positive impact on their reading outside of the tests.

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Standardized assessment and the shaping of neoliberal student subjectivities

Peter Kelly

Introduction: schooling in England

The neoliberal turn in education began in England more than 20 years ago ([Ball, 2013](#)), fuelled by the belief that human well-being is best advanced in all areas by individuals who are free to further their own interests through market exchange ([Harvey, 2007](#)). [Au \(2009\)](#) identifies competitive evaluation using high stakes testing as a central tenet of neoliberal education reform and fuelling a preoccupation with accountability. According to their proponents, such tests provide information for parents to make school choices and influence school agendas and for managers to make adjustments to meet market demand and increase parent and student satisfaction.

Standardized tests, particularly in English and mathematics, are used to monitor and compare student and thereby teacher and school performance. The consequences of poorer-than-expected test performances by students for teachers and schools are significant, damaging reputations and triggering increased scrutiny, often by the schools inspectorate, Ofsted. This can result in fewer pupil enrolments and lost income for the school. Students' views of themselves as learners can suffer, as can teachers' expectations of them as they move into secondary education. Together, these consequences heighten the stakes of standardized tests with negative effect. One British Parliament select committee report ([House of Commons, 2008](#)) identifies tests as narrowing the curriculum in favour of those subjects tested, increasing the amount of teaching to the test, promoting shallow learning and short-term knowledge retention, and increasing pupil stress and demotivation. Research also implicates testing in the curtailment of non-tested subjects, especially in the arts, increased teacher-centred instruction, the focusing of resources on groups of students identified at grade borderlines to maximize league table impact, and an increase in schools choosing and excluding pupils to raise scores ([Stevenson & Wood, 2013](#)). In 2014, my colleagues and I ([Andreasen et al., 2015](#)) undertook a study of testing in English primary classrooms. Children take common paper-and-pencil tests for reading, writing, mathematics, and science during one week in May in their final year at primary school, the year

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they turn 11 years old, and, as part of our research, we interviewed teachers and students following these tests. This chapter draws partly on this original study and the analysis of additional student interviews.

Marketizing education

We can trace the neoliberal governance of education by looking at marketization, managerialism, and performativity, intersecting practices and related artefacts deliberately deployed to shape and regulate human activity, which [Ball \(2013\)](#) refers to collectively as policy technologies. Elements of each are partly mobilized through standardized national tests, such as those taken by students at the end of their primary schooling in England. In the analysis that follows, I consider, in particular, how, by shaping children's experiences of schooling, these policy technologies in the guise of the national reading test for 11-year-olds also shape student subjectivities.

Alongside the development and appraisal of curricular understanding, [Biesta \(2009\)](#) suggests that socializing students into different cultures or ways of being is a second key educational goal. Whilst education might anticipate workplace or citizenship cultures, for the most part, it socializes students into classrooms, and, here, I explore some of the implications for students when testing dominates their classroom experiences of reading, writing, and mathematics. The socialization of students, combined with their curricular experiences, shapes them as individuals, or subjects, as Biesta calls them. This is Biesta's third educational goal: enabling students to become autonomous and independent thinkers. However, as I show, the nature of test preparation means this is not the case for all.

I refer to subjects' ways of being and thinking as their subjectivities. This view originates with Marx (1859), who, in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, identifies the social and material relations in which people live as regulating the way they think about the world. Adopting [De Lauretis's \(1986, p. 5\)](#) view of subjectivity as 'patterns by which . . . contexts, feelings, images and memories are organized to form one's self image, one's sense of self and others, and our possibilities of existence', [Ball \(2003a\)](#) regards education reforms such as those connected with policy technologies as bringing about changes in peoples' subjectivities and patterns of social and material relations. Whilst others have explored how testing in England sits within these policy technologies ([Stevenson & Wood, 2013](#)) or the construction of high-attaining primary students' neoliberal subjectivities ([Keddie, 2016](#)), my concern is the contribution stratified subjectivities make to widening the gap in student reading achievement. First, however, I elaborate a little on marketization, since it is so central to neoliberal reform.

Marketization involves the construction of markets. At face value, this can simply mean opening up the choice of education providers to prospective students and their parents or carers, creating a marketplace of provision based

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on competition between providers differentiated by what they offer. Marketization can also mean opening up the provision of services to education providers through the introduction of internal markets and sometimes competitive tendering. In this case, schools are the customers (acting with their own customers' – parents and students – best interests in mind) seeking, for example, support, guidance and professional development, subject resources such as mathematics schemes and services such as catering, cleaning, and management of the school payroll. Finally, in some contexts, the scope for marketization extends to exchanges in the ownership of schools and groups of schools such as would be possible in England between academy chains. This is what the marketization of education means in its common sense usage and these examples show it can occur at a number of levels simultaneously; however, we can also use the term relationally to imply the construction of the teachers and students themselves, as if they are competitively engaged in market exchanges or operate within a set of market relations and this will be my focus here.

Commodification can be thought of as the allocation of market exchange value to identified constructions. In the common-sense terms just described, for parents and students, the schools themselves and the opportunities they offer, including the subjects and ways they are taught, are commodities competing for their patronage, explicitly with fee-paying preschools, schools, colleges, and universities or in systems with vouchers or implicitly, but with equal influence, when pupil numbers are directly linked to institutional funding. However, more relationally, the commodities of the education that parents and children receive are those outcomes – including the knowledge, skills and broader outlooks, inclusion in social networks, and qualifications – that allow students to perform well in competition with others in the education and employment marketplaces, amongst others. In this case, the children appear to remain customers, but the nature of learning and developing means that one does not so much purchase an object as acquire an improvement that provides, in [Bourdieu's \(1986\)](#) terms, cultural, social, and symbolic capital, capital being a measure of the value of knowledge objects, skills and broader outlooks, inclusion in social networks, and qualifications as commodities. However, herein lies a tension: not all customers receive each of these equally; indeed, those who are otherwise advantaged often gain the greatest benefit. This disparity is defended through suggestions that it is the more merit-worthy, those who make the most of their talents, who receive more and those who work the hardest gain the most ([Ball, 2013](#)). Since it is the workers and not the customers whose merit can be thus rewarded, students are repositioned as employees. Indeed, this becomes their primary role, as I show.

Exploring student experiences

To consider this analysis in relation to students' experiences of and responses to national standardized reading tests, I focused on the experiences of 36 students: six students aged 10 to 11 in each of six primary schools in England, chosen to provide cultural, economic, and geographical diversity in settings. Two of the schools were rural and had fewer than 200 pupils, two were slightly larger and in towns of around 20,000 inhabitants, and two were in the inner-city areas of large urban conurbations and had over 350 pupils. All schools were of mixed catchment. Students were divided into three boy-girl student pairs in each school, chosen as low, middle, and high attainers by their teachers (where attainment is identified using students' anticipated test scores). Each student pair participated in one semi-structured interview of 30 to 45 minutes. Students were asked how significant or important they thought the tests were for their schools and teachers, themselves, and their parents or carers. They were asked about their experiences of the tests, how they had prepared for them, and what they thought they needed to do to be successful on them.

Children's experiences of performativity through standardized national tests

Many of the improvements identified above as possible education commodities, particularly those pertaining to increasing knowledge and skills and broadening outlooks, change the individuals who benefit from them. Relationally, however, it is students' test performances that are commodified by schools, teachers, and the students themselves and exchanged as schools engage and compete with other schools, teachers engage and compete with their colleagues, and students engage and compete with their peers in contexts where both teachers and students are positioned as employees. It is therefore this student performance alone that is used to demonstrate the worth of the organization and the actors within. This is performativity, and it comes about because so much rests on the test results and everyone involved has a stake.

The standardized national tests that students take at the end of their primary schooling in England are high stakes precisely because their intent is both summative and comparative, since they are used for school evaluation. According to one of the teachers interviewed for the original study ([Andreasen et al., 2015](#)), 'they are everything that the school works for, more than anything'. The results are used to categorize and compare schools and discern their year-on-year progress, with implications for the frequency and intensity of Ofsted inspection and intervention and ultimately continuation or change in the school and its staff. Not only that, but, as another teacher suggested, governors, colleagues, parents, and prospective parents make judgements about schools and teachers on the basis of their published results and associated commentaries in the local media, with implications for school

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popularity and recruitment and for the reputation of individual teachers. Hence, school leadership also puts considerable energy into anticipating what Ofsted will make of the results, their biggest concern, given the importance of Ofsted evaluations for both schools and the individual teachers who work there.

Teachers acknowledged that they are openly judged on test results. Especially, teachers of students in the final year of primary school say they benefit from the status afforded by their importance in preparing students well for the tests. However, according to one teacher, they are also in a risky position, since their reputation can be lost in one poor year. As a second teacher said, 'I feel a lot of pressure on me as a year 6 teacher because I cannot afford to let it go – with parents' expectations and the school'. However, to not be overly dependent on one individual teacher, all of the English schools that participated in the original study spread the responsibility for preparing the students and administering the tests across a team of teachers and teaching assistants. As one teacher indicated, 'The load is spread. Classes are delivered by six members of staff . . . including the deputy head and special educational need coordinator'.

Everything about their school's preparation of them or the tests told the children I interviewed that these were important, primarily, the children assumed, for themselves and their futures, since teachers tell them this rather than discussing the tests' wider significance for judging schools and teachers. In condensing the worth of students, the tests were significant in forming and re-forming what students thought of themselves and believed others saw them. Thus, testing and test preparation became identity work and children's responses were stratified according to how successful they expected to be.

Therefore, those pairs identified by their teachers as high attaining tended to discuss how the test results would help teachers know how clever the students were and how to challenge them. This included allowing the secondary school to put them in the right set, the expectation being that this was the highest set. The test results also provided a moment for both the children and their parents to stop and enjoy the children's achievements, spurring them towards further success rather than complacency. One child summarized the experience as follows:

[The tests are] for the teachers so they know what level you are working at and so they can challenge you. They are important to us as well; it helps tell us how good we are and whether we should push ourselves a bit more.

(High-attaining girl, rural school)

Middle-attaining pairs were more likely to focus on how the test results would help the secondary school put them in the right set as well, largely so that they

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If you get a few questions wrong, the worst that can happen is you will be in a lower grade at high school, but they'll soon figure that out and move you up again . . . the high school uses the results to group you so it will really change your life.

(Middle-attaining boy, inner-city school)

However, for low-attaining pairs, the primary reason for the tests was to help others decide how to help them, including when they arrived in secondary school:

The next schools are interested in the results and they look at them and see which form to put you in. Our school will find it useful because they might give us some different sheets to help us.

(Low-attaining boy, inner-city school)

Generally, the children had done so many tests before that when they arrived, the children knew what to expect, although they were all naturally a bit worried beforehand. High-attaining pairs were generally comfortable with the tests and confident in what the outcomes would be for them. One said, 'I didn't think about the tests before I did them, I felt confident, I wasn't worried because I've done tests before. The level 6 test was a challenge but the rest of it was pretty easy' (high-attaining boy, rural school). Another stated,

There was nothing in the tests that we didn't expect, the teachers didn't put any pressure on us, it was just try your best, leading up to the tests was a bit worrying [but] when they happened then it was just, we've done this so many times before it was fine.

(High-attaining girl, town school)

Middle-attaining pairs were generally more ambivalent, one suggesting, 'It's not easy but it's not really hard either – don't rush – on the first few, I knew them but when I actually came to them I couldn't do them – but if you are calm and relaxed, it definitely helps' (middle-attaining boy, inner-city school).

Low-attaining pairs, though, were somewhat negative. One said, 'The tests were horrible but you get used to it' (low-attaining girl, town school) and another stated, 'I was really nervous' (low-attaining boy, inner-city school), although a third said, 'It's not really that hard. I thought it was going to be really hard, but it wasn't and I worried but then, when I did them, I didn't worry' (low-attaining girl, inner-city school). Only one child offered a mid-way position: 'It was ok, some was hard and some was easier because we had

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practised' (low-attaining boy, town school). Later, when encouraged to be a little more reflective, high-attaining pairs were more likely to be positive about the tests, one suggesting, 'The tests were quite exciting . . . I like something different' (high-attaining boy, inner city school) and another saying, 'When I was doing [the tests] I felt much better [than leading up to them]' (high-attaining boy, rural school). Whilst middle-attaining pairs mainly expressed exhaustion, one saying, 'I felt relieved after [the tests and] my brain shut down' (middle-attaining girl, rural school), the low-attaining pairs emphasized how nervous they were before the tests, how they just did the questions that they could, and that they were relieved when the tests were over.

At the time of the interviews, none of the children had received their results, although the students were all pretty clear (and, it later transpired, accurate) about how they anticipated they would do. High-attaining pairs were, on the whole, positive, confident, and assured and expressed some excitement in anticipating their success and the praise they would receive. All knew the exact date when they would receive their results. One child said, 'We get our results on July 10th and it's like a birthday treat because I get to know how good I am' (high-attaining girl, rural school). Another said, 'My parents always love finding out [that] I do as well (high-attaining girl, town school), whilst a third said, 'We are going to have a party when we [get the results]' (high-attaining boy, inner-city school). Middle-attaining pairs were more realistic, pragmatic, and, again, slightly ambivalent, one saying:

I'm not really worried, because whatever you get, you get . . . there's no need to be worried. You just need to take it easy. It's not about how well you do. It's about whether you've done better yourself.

(Middle-attaining boy, town school)

The low-attaining pairs were generally disinterested or even worried; they just want to do sufficiently well to not be considered a failure. One child said, 'I am really worried about the results – I don't mind what my score is as long as it is an ok score' (low-attaining girl, inner-city school). They were all rather vague about when they would get to know their results, saying either that they didn't know or that it would be at the end of the school year.

Overall, the distinction between two of these three groups was stark; on the one side was the positive confidence of the high attainers, whilst on the other was the pragmatic dependency of the low attainers. Those in the middle displayed a vulnerability that comes with uncertainty. In each case, the views expressed reflected the group's sense of their own worth.

Children's experiences of management in response to standardized national tests

I have already suggested that, in seeking to identify themselves as contributing to the success of the school, teachers (as employees) and students (repositioned as employees) commodify student performances within those marketplaces pertaining to teacher and student success. Therefore, as workers seeking to improve commodified performances together, teachers and students are the subjects of school management.

Tightly controlled working conditions seek to ensure that performance at the required standard is efficiently and effectively developed so that it can be reliably produced when it matters most: during testing. The original study reported how teachers act in advance to ensure test results will be acceptable to Ofsted by strongly framing (Bernstein, 1990, 1996), or shaping, the content and form of teaching. This framing involved teachers constantly monitoring students' performance whilst coaching them to improve. In this context, data drove everything. Schools used pupil-tracking software to follow the progress of individuals and select groups of students. To allow for greater precision, levels were partitioned to identify higher, middle, and low achievement. This software is quite sophisticated and allowed children to be classified into groups (Bernstein, 1990, 1996) and then compared with both the national mean performance of similar groups and that of similar groups in similar schools on the basis of gender, ethnicity, learning needs, and their relative socioeconomic status (using their eligibility for free school meals as an indicator). Hence, students who might underperform were identified, allowing the school to intervene. Given their importance, the whole of year 6 was planned towards the tests. Indeed, to some extent, the whole of the school was geared towards tests, with children regularly taking 'optional' tests (i.e. optional to the schools, not the students), often each term and always at the end of each school year, from the age of seven onwards.

Students confirmed that their schools follow similar approaches, beginning in the term before the tests. Approaches were strongly classified as test preparation, in contrast to normal work, and included the teaching of techniques and strategies that aimed to ensure children were familiar with and did as well as they could on the tests. Pedagogy was highly framed by teachers and, in terms of the division of labour, teachers positioned themselves as being largely responsible for the students' learning. Teachers ensured that there was something relating to the tests in every literacy lesson, which took place once a day for about an hour at a time. Students took regular, often weekly practice tests under test conditions so that they could experience what it would be like to take the tests in the time given. Tests were followed up by teachers working with a different group each day, helping the children with the questions and their responses and marking these together. The children learned about the best ways of approaching the tests as a whole, how to make the best use of their time, the kind of questions they would be asked, including the style of

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individual questions, and what markers would be looking for. All the students were given regular homework involving the completion of booklets of practice tests targeted at different groups depending on their assessed level. In addition, individual students identified as in danger of not achieving the required minimum level were given further sessions, sometimes at lunchtime, working closely with the school's special needs coordinator and followed up in class with a teaching assistant. Weekly classes before school, called booster groups, targeted groups of children identified at the end of the autumn term as being borderline between levels and the students described these as being fun and relaxed.

Hence, all of the pairs experienced a combination of consistency, routine, and predictability in the buildup to and their participation in the tests. Whilst their teachers said that testing fitted into the normal school routine, what this meant for the students was that the normal school routine became centred on testing for much of the year. This meant that the actual testing week was not unexpected or too much out of the ordinary and therefore did not overwhelm or discourage the children. As one high-attaining boy in a rural school said, 'When we did the actual SATs [test] paper, it was the same as what we had practiced'. Nevertheless, the children did feel special and that this was an important time for them and they had (and could miss out on) an opportunity and needed to take responsibility. In addition, for many children, the tests were very much a rite of passage, marking their progression from primary education and childhood to secondary education and youth. In discussing their experiences of test preparation, high-attaining pairs focused more on their understanding of the criteria used by markers and how these could be met in the context of each type of question. Low-attaining pairs, though, were less specific when talking about techniques and meeting the marking criteria and focused more on identifying those questions that they could answer and attending to timing, particularly on using time well so that they could answer all of the questions they were able to do.

In relation to the homework they were given, the children received various levels of support at home. The parents of high-attaining pairs went through the work sent home and offered reassurance and advice, including one parent who went through the test questions with the child and talked about the kind of answers that would get the highest marks. Parents of middle-attaining pairs similarly offered reassurance; some bought commercial practice books, and all insisted on their children completing the homework, practice, and revision. This behaviour was described as nagging by two of the low-attaining pairs, but an issue for some was the lack of a space in which to work at home: 'I could only do it at my nan's or dad's but not at my mum's because she has got two little ones and they'd just trash my work' (low-attaining girl, inner-city school).

Shaping stratified neoliberal student subjectivities

Given that policy technologies are deployed to shape and regulate human activity, I now consider students' neoliberal subjectivities as the forms of identification and positioning afforded by performativity, management, and commodity exchange, before acknowledging what is, I believe, a significant observation: that what seems to matter most in the stratification of student achievement lies outside this frame. In condensing the worth of children to their test performances, as I have described earlier, academic identities are conferred upon the children. Therefore, high attainers expected testing to help their current and future teachers know what they were entitled to, whilst, for lower attainers, the tests confirmed them as needy and dependent on their teachers. Through this separation, the notion of a clear and natural hierarchy, or ordering, of people is reinforced. For those in the middle, concerned that their performance on the tests would fairly reflect the position they believed themselves to occupy in this hierarchy, this prompted a sense of helplessness, stemming from worry that disappointing test outcomes may lead teachers in their next school to assign them to the wrong class. The tests also confirmed high attainers' view of learning as exciting, confidence that they could meet any challenge, and pride in their success. However, for lower attainers, the tests were largely seen as an ordeal they had to face, one that would inevitably lead to a confirmation of their own lack of academic worth.

These positions were repeatedly reinforced by the approaches used to manage students that classified and labelled them according to their anticipated test grades. In so doing, particularly for the middle and low attainers, hard work was emphasized over talent; the meritocratic myths that those who work hardest will gain the greatest rewards and with hard work anyone can achieve whatever they want was regularly repeated. Alongside these exhortations, highly regulated management practices sought to ensure students did work hard, whilst reinforcing in them the belief that they could not be trusted to do so alone. Implicit and taken for granted in all of this was the value of competition, comparison, and quantification in the setting of targets and measurement of progress. Despite their apparent talent, the benefits of hard work were also emphasized with high attainers. Indeed, all of the children described big changes both between year 5 and year 6 and before and after taking the national tests. For them, year 6 was characterized by this focus on hard work and frequent tests, along with extra responsibility, freedom, and independence. In this, testing and test preparations together provided a rite of passage, an induction into the harsh adult workplace, as students yielded to management, accepting the regulation of their time and acting to demonstrate the commitment, effort, and hard work that together conferred merit upon them.

The combined effect of these policy technologies, acting through national testing, was to recontextualize (Bernstein, 1990, 1996) reading in neoliberal discourse as a family of interrelated commodities, an assemblage of

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knowledge and skills, each of whose exchange value lay largely in the capacity it had to bring benefit in reading tests. Therefore, aspects of reading were constructed as commodities exchangeable in tests, their exchange value depending on the extent of the benefit they brought in terms of grading. In all this, little attention was given in school to the intrinsic worth of reading. In this context, we can invoke Bernstein's (1999) notions of horizontal and vertical discourse: the vertical discourse is concerned with increased subject specialization and complexity whilst the horizontal links subjects to their presence and use in other contexts. Bernstein suggests a subject has a clear hierarchical order as knowledge is freed from its relation to the world and moves towards increased levels of abstraction. In reading, this might involve moving towards an understanding of characterization, genres, and, later, at a more sophisticated level, the metaphorical use of language, particularly in poetry. Successful pupils are able to access such knowledge, recognize and apply set rules, and produce particular forms of texts to allow evaluation. However, Bernstein also recognizes the importance in teaching of moving between vertical and complementary horizontal discourses that concern the knowledge required to participate fully in social activities. This places the horizontal discourse of testing as learning to successfully negotiate the process of reading within the context of the national reading tests, whilst the vertical discourse concerns becoming able to read increasingly complex texts in increasingly sophisticated ways, as rewarded by the marking criteria.

All of the children I talked to considered the tests to have been the most important thing they did in year 6, and the practices described earlier valorized the knowledge and skills required for test success over everything else. The tests became the most important commodity; everything else was considered trivial. When all of the tests were completed, the children talked of a more relaxed atmosphere at school and of having fun; doing more problem-solving activities, art, and physical education; putting on a school play; and going on a residential visit.

In terms of what was expected and which aspects of reading were valorized by the tests, the children consistently suggested that they had to do a great deal of reading in quite a short time in the tests and some of the middle attainers and especially the lower attainers who found it most difficult to read quickly were upset that this meant they had difficulties showing how well they could read. The higher attainers also discussed how they needed to find and quote evidence from the texts to back up their views in their answers if they were to do well and get higher marks. They reported that many important questions asked them to think and write about what had happened outside of what was written on the page, including anticipating what might happen in the future. Hence, for these higher attainers, to get earn high pass, they needed to do more than read quickly; they needed to also be able to find the evidence to back up their answers and write this down quickly. In all of this, they suggested it was more reading and writing speed – technical aptitudes – than understanding

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that led to success. It was only in an additional test taken by a small number of the highest-attaining students that the texts became harder, including more complicated sentences and new words. Reading and writing efficiency was the focus for high attainers from February onwards, when they were first told how to answer the questions and use evidence from the texts to get higher marks. With the middle and lower attainers, however, whose reading speed was slow or steady at best, the focus during this period was more on finding the questions they were good at so they could focus on gaining marks on these. Hence, reading and writing identities based on speed and efficiency were privileged alongside strategic and instrumental relations to texts, which were primarily concerned with exploiting the texts to provide answers that were exchangeable for marks.

These practices along with those described earlier tended to privilege horizontal discourse across all students rather than the vertical discourse of increasingly sophisticated reading capability. Indeed, low attainers and those identified in borderline groups reported that the targeted and additional instruction they received largely concerned knowledge about taking the tests. They were happy to accept this and felt it was beneficial, which fits well with Bernstein's (1975) suggestion that many pupils, particularly those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, favour learning presented as skills rather than the more esoteric.

This is not to say work within a vertical reading discourse did not take place in schools for students of different attainments. However, this appears to have been very much in the margins, since the horizontal practices identified above dominated. Nevertheless, there were other opportunities for the children to access and engage in a vertical reading discourse that were stratified and in all likelihood made a significant contribution to widening the gap in reading achievement. However, it is important to note that these opportunities lay somewhat beyond the gaze of schools and were thus less directly subject to their neoliberal disciplining. First, there was the influence of gendered preferences. From the accounts, it was clear most of the boys interviewed did not have a wider love of reading, whilst many of the girls, especially the higher attainers, read widely. Boys reported that they tended to read more non-fiction and found the fiction elements of the tests difficult. This was because they did not read widely enough to talk readily about emotions and to infer why characters acted as they did. Girls, on the other hand, tended to read more fiction than non-fiction, had a wider vocabulary, and better understood the characters' emotions, all of which would advance them within a vertical reading discourse.

Second, as Ball (2003b) has written and I alluded to earlier with regard to homework, home circumstances and the extent to which parents were able to and willing to work on behalf of their children brought advantages for some. In relation to their reading development, the activities which advantaged children included engaging them in elements of a vertical discourse. Although

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what often drove the children to read outside of school was an appreciation of the intrinsic worth of books, there were indications of variations between high, middle, and low attainers in the amounts and types of out-of-school reading they did. While this topic would benefit from further exploration, it is likely that the reading activities of higher attainers brought more benefit to their performance on the reading tests than those of the low attainers. All the children in the high-attaining pairs said they read frequently and for long periods. One student said, 'I do about an hour and a half of reading out of school a day and I have a lot of books at home' (high-attaining boy, rural school). The reading was often mediated by the child's parents or carers, who ensured that the reading was varied and challenging and, in some cases, acted to counter gendered preferences. For example, the same boy then added, 'We take it in turns; I choose one book, then my mum chooses the next'. Children in the middle-attaining pairs read slightly less. As one girl suggested, 'I read quite a lot at bedtime' (middle-attaining girl, rural school). In addition, boys in particular seemed to read less widely. For example, one boy said he read mainly graphic novels out of school, adding, 'I like graphic novels and detailed books like you're watching a film, I get them for my birthday and Christmas, or the charity shop and the school library' (middle-attaining boy, rural school). In this case, parental mediation focused more on the amount than the type of reading. The out-of-school reading of the students in the low-attaining pairs was more haphazard, providing little challenge. Parents were largely happy if their children read of their own volition at all. There was a preference among boys for information books and non-fiction but without the need for extended engagement. One said, 'I like to read knowledge books, the *Disney World of Knowledge*' (low-attaining boy, rural school), whilst another said, 'I struggle with reading. I don't do much reading at home; I like the *Guinness Book of Records*' (low-attaining boy, inner city school). Girls, however, seemed to read more and more widely, although they often preferred popular stories written for slightly younger children. One said, 'My gran has lots of books and at home I just read Jacqueline Wilson books' (low-attaining girl, inner-city school), whilst another said, 'I like reading true stories plus some books like Harry Potter and knowing I can read bigger books means I know more words, which helps me in the tests. I have a Kindle and read Jacqueline Wilson books' (low-attaining girl, town school). It seems that the influence of traditional and long-established gender and social class stratifications remain, whilst things that happen outside of schools continue to have a greater influence on student success than those which happen inside.

Conclusion

My concern in this chapter has been with the contributions stratified subjectivities make to widening the gap in student reading achievement. I have argued that these stratified subjectivities stem not so much from the work of

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schools as from the continued influence of gender and social class. However, from this basis, schools play a significant role in shaping these subjectivities, as I have described above, and the way they do so reinforces children's views of their own worth and of their place in their world as being relatively fixed and their destinies as somewhat determined, although these notions are coupled to a belief that both can, to some extent, be countered by hard work. Accompanying this is an instrumental understanding of reading born of neoliberal pedagogic practices that view expertise, for the most part, in terms of efficiency. Regarding hard work as the route to efficiency therefore reinforces a view of learning based on mechanical repetition over one seeking understanding through thoughtful engagement. Stratified subjectivities thereby prevent schooling from affecting a more equal distribution of those reading preferences and practices aligned with engagement and understanding, preferences that only some children, particularly the more socioeconomically advantaged, bring to school. Instead, a counter narrative is provided that largely misses the point. Hence, instrumental approaches to assessment afford, in students, instrumental views of learning and reading; yet, what counts more for both the achievement of higher test grades and valuing reading beyond testing is supporting children to help them read increasingly complex texts in increasingly sophisticated ways.

The subjectivities of those children about to complete primary school who participated in this study were clearly stratified in their relation to reading. For high attainers, reading confidently affirms who they are and their place in the world. Theirs is a craft relationship to reading, which is elaborated by [Sennett \(2009\)](#). Craft experts are dedicated to good work for its own sake, fully engaged in that work, and always aspiring to improve. Their skills evolve flexibly and are not directed towards a fixed end. In craft expertise, there is an intimate connection between doing and thinking, the physical and mental, and the how and why of activity, which evolves through the circularity of repetition and practice into habit. Therefore, high attainers enjoy much personal satisfaction and the respect of others. Low attainers, however, are alienated from reading, as [Marx \(1844, p. 30\)](#) eloquently expressed in his analysis of alienation:

The fact that labour is external to the worker, i.e. it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour.

Therefore, in terms of the long-term impact of such testing regimes, whilst tentatively inviting broader implications to be drawn for high-stakes testing

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beyond English reading tests at the end of primary school, it is unlikely that approaches invoked to improve test performances, despite their increased targeting and technical specificity, will either help raise the grades of those identified as low attainers beyond the mediocre or have much of a positive impact on their reading outside of the tests. More likely, it is the links that low attainers make between reading, work, struggle, and dependency which will be hard to undo.

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