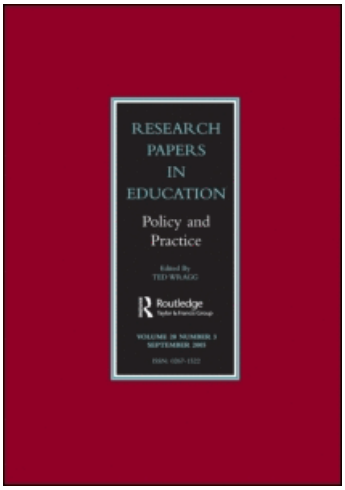

Research Papers in Education
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713707783

Children's perceptions of themselves as learner inside and outside school

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First published on: 15 October 2009

To cite this Article Singal, Nidhi and Swann, Mandy(2009) 'Children's perceptions of themselves as learner inside and outside school', Research Papers in Education,, First published on: 15 October 2009 (iFirst)
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/02671520903281617
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02671520903281617

Research Papers in Education
2009, 1–16, iFirst Article

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Children's perceptions of themselves as learner inside and outside school

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(*Received 15 September 2008; final version received 8 July 2009*)

This exploratory study set out to investigate how a group of children, who were identified as underachieving in school, constructed understandings of themselves as learners inside and outside school. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and image-based methods with the children. Interviews were also conducted with their parents and teachers. Findings of this study highlight the centrality of the children's relational world and the richness of their learning experiences and capacity for learning outside school. Significant differences were evident in their descriptions of learning processes inside the classroom and outside the formal school setting. Outside school learning experiences, both structured and less formalised were perceived by the children as being more active, collaborative and challenging. Knowledge and understanding in these contexts seemed to be located within the children. In contrast, learning inside school was characterised by dependence on the teacher. Knowledge and understanding in this context appeared to be located within the teacher.

Keywords: learning; home and school; partnership

Background

Much has been written about the influences of home and school on children's achievement (see, inter alia: Edwards and Warin 1999; Elliott, Arthurs, and Williams 2000; Farrow, Tymms, and Henderson 1999). Yet, little is known about how the dual contexts of home and school may impact upon children's confidence and perceptions of themselves as learners. We believe that a child with a positive self-image is more likely to have a positive image of herself/himself as a learner. This exploratory study set out to investigate how a group of children, who were identified as inexplicably underachieving in school, and who were from ethnically diverse backgrounds, constructed understandings of themselves as learners inside and outside school. Learning inside the school was primarily construed by children in terms of their experiences in the classroom.

As government reports detail on an almost daily basis, in every school in the country, there are some children who inexplicably coast beneath national expectations, and do not academically attain what their teachers, and often parents, believe them to be capable of (DfES 2006). There is general acknowledgement amongst politicians and researchers that parents are influential in children's academic achievement. A substantial amount of the home–school literature focuses on a sociological analysis of the

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ISSN 0267-1522 print/ISSN 1470-1146 online

DOI: 10.1080/02671520903281617
http://www.informaworld.com

relationship between social class, ethnicity and underachievement (Bhattacharya, Ison, and Blair 2003; Harry and Kalyanpur 2001; Lareau 1989, 2003; Reay 1998), on the partnerships between parents and teachers (Crozier 2000; Crozier and Reay 2005; DfEE 1997, 1998a, 1998b; DfES 2004; Hallgarten 2001; Ouston and Hood 2000; Pinkus 2004; Tomlinson 1991; Vincent and Martin 2005), and the dissonance experienced by some children when their home cultural practices do not match their experiences in different learning contexts (Fleer 2001; Gregory 1994, 2000; Lave and Wenger 1991; Pollard and Filer 1996; Whiting and Edwards 1988).

As far back as 1987, Resnick, in her seminal presidential address to the American Educational Research Association, identified 'four general classes of discontinuity between learning in school and the nature of cognitive activity outside school'. Resnick concluded that, given this discontinuity, we should be cautious about imposing our knowledge and understanding of learning derived from school contexts onto fostering learning outside school. There is a growing body of evidence on children's cultural experience of learning and learner identity developed through researching their lives outside school, and recognition that this has a significant impact on their learning inside school (Bottle 1999; Brooker 2002; Davie et al. 1984; Dunn 1988; Maddock 2006; Mayall 1994, 2001). However, the cultural experience that children bring with them into school is less well understood, particularly by teachers, though recent studies have begun to explore the possibilities (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005; Hughes and Project Team 2007). Where school teachers are unaware of or unable to take account of home culture, children often meet a mismatch of experience and expectation between the home and school settings which can prevent them from learning successfully in school (Bernstein 1975; Brice-Heath 1983, 1984; Gregory 1993, 1994, 2000; Lareau 1989, 2003). The experience of dissonance can take many forms: for example, contradictory experiences of expectations, interactions, practices, interpretations of meaning and forms of relationship. Fleer (2001), for example, found that Australian indigenous learners valued interdependence and the sharing of knowledge which was at odds with the emphasis on individualism in school and led to a misconception of cheating by teachers. Similarly, ways of knowing are socially and culturally driven (James and Prout 1997; Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 1990).

Research into the 'funds of knowledge' or 'strategic and cultural resources' (Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg 2005) in families has shown that people have 'funds of knowledge' derived from their life experience which gives them competence, and forms the lens through which they interpret new experiences and information. The task for teachers is 'to unlock and capitalise on the knowledge students already possess' (González, Moll, and Amanti 2005). The assumption is that education is likely to be more successful when teachers know about children's everyday lives. This aspiration is, of course, complex and challenging for teachers in school. It means being able to cope with diversity, a diversity that can seem at odds with the search for uniformity and conformity in school as Hughes and Project Team (2007) found when shoeboxes containing 'personal possessions and artifacts from home' were shared with teachers in school. This research attempts to make a contribution to this area of debate by exploring how children in the UK make sense of learning inside and outside school.

Focus of the research

It is proposed that this exploratory study will provide rich data which will help to develop deeper understandings of children's learning, of their strengths and needs

both within, and beyond, the formal school context and the factors which they identify as nurturing their learning capacity. We primarily focused on children's construction of themselves as learners but also interviewed their parents and teachers to develop a more holistic understanding of the child's world. Here, the focus was not on triangulation but on contextualisation of the data gathered from the children.

Research sample

We began by identifying a London Borough where the Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS[1]) survey was conducted by most schools in the Borough. PASS is an electronic rating scale, developed through collaboration between UK universities. It provides a profile of the students on a range of variables, such as *self-regard, perceived capabilities, preparedness for learning* and so on. PASS seemed a useful tool for helping us begin to understand how children were feeling about themselves as learners and their learning environment in school. It therefore provided us with the information to select children who identified themselves as 'lacking in confidence as learners at school'.

We began with the intention of including three schools using the PASS survey in our sample. However, on closer investigation, we soon discovered that very few schools were using the full capacity of this survey. Rather, the self-administered questionnaire was being used by the educational psychology service to screen only a few 'targeted' children, who they felt were in need of help. These children were preselected by teaching staff as being at risk of having low confidence, such as those children who are 'looked after' or have a statement of special educational needs. This practice in itself raises interesting issues around the assumptions educational professionals make about children who need help and those who do not. Based on this knowledge we decided that we would work with one mainstream school in the Borough which had been administering the PASS survey to its entire population of students for the past two years.

The school is a mainstream middle school, and caters for children at the primary level. Children in this school come from very diverse and rapidly changing socioeconomic backgrounds, and there is a much higher than usual proportion of those learning English as an additional language (EAL). The composition of the teachers and support staff reflects the diversity of the adjoining community. However, the school has also faced a high teacher turn over in the recent past.

To identify our sample we began by initially focusing on children in Years 5 and 6, who had three or more amber and/or red identifiers on their PASS profile.[2] Within this sample we then focused on areas of the survey that were of particular significance to our project, namely:

- perceived learning capability;
- self-regard;
- preparedness for learning; and
- learner confidence.

From this pool of students we then maximised the variability of the sample in terms of ethnicity, sex and academic attainment in the core subjects. As shown in Table 1 we ended with a total of 11 children. Some of the children have EAL and almost, but not all, of them were identified on the special education needs (SENs) register as

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample group.

Year 5	Sex	Ethnicity	SEN	EAL	Ac/performance
	F	White Brithish	SAP	–	Lower than average (LTA)
	M	Japanese	SA	Yes	LTA
	F	White British	SA	–	LTA
	F	Somali	SAP	Yes	LTA
	F	Nigerian	–	–	Above average (AA)
	M	Indian	–	Yes	AA
Year 6					
	M	White British	–	–	Average (A)
	M	Pakistani	SAP	–	LTA
	M	White British	SAP	Yes	LTA
	M	White British	SA	–	A
	M	White British	SA	–	A

School Action (SA) or School Action Plus (SAP). As mentioned earlier, the parents and year group teachers of these particular children were also invited to participate in the research in order to help us develop a more holistic understanding of the children.

Even though we focused on a range of variables in our sample selection, we were unable to follow this through into the analysis primarily due to the small sample size and exploratory nature of this study. Nonetheless, the shared characteristic of children perceiving themselves as lacking in confidence as learners at school became the most important dimension for our analysis.

Methods of data collection

Interview (Kvale 1996; Powney and Watts 1987) and image-based data (Prosser 1998) were gathered from the 11 children. Initial semi-structured interviews were conducted with the children where the focus was to develop an understanding of how they perceived themselves as learners in a range of different settings at school and at home. This was followed by a drop-in fortnightly lunchtime club led by a teacher–researcher where some children found an informal space to discuss their lives inside and outside school. It was our endeavour to provide these children with an informal setting where they could come and discuss any concerns about the project, or discuss any related pressing issues, such as use of cameras. Participation in these drop-in sessions varied. Subsequently, children were given disposable cameras and were asked to take pictures inside and outside school on the following themes:

- Things that are important to me.
- Things that I find hard to learn.
- Pictures of me learning.
- Things that make me happy.

The photographs were developed and children arranged them in albums provided by us. Photo-elicitation interviews (Rose 2007) were conducted which directly engaged with the images. These interviews assisted in in-depth exploration, and enabled children to reflect on their view of themselves and their learning as captured in the images.

The richness of data gathered is reflected in the following account, where a child is discussing one of her pictures under the theme 'things that are important to me'. The picture shows ten young girls dressed in their school uniforms, in the school playground. They are grouped close together, striking a pose, and smiling widely at the camera:

R: *Can you tell me about this picture?*
Femi: I took that picture because most of them they are really kind and funny and I can always remember them as well and sometimes I can remember the good things they have done for me and the bad things.
R: *Do you want to tell me a little bit why this photograph is important to you?*
Femi: Eh, it was because most of my friends are really nice and some of them are really funny and because I was in it because I can remember the time I was with my friends and when I was really good friend for them and they were really good friends for me so …
R: *Is making friends important to you?*
Femi: Eh, it's important because if you are in … secondary from primary school and you don't have any friends and you go to secondary school you'd better be good at making friends or you'll be around by yourself and then that is not that good.
R: *Would you like to give this photograph a title?*
Femi: Me and my friends?

Using images made the interview situation less strange to the children. It not only provided them with a shared visual context but also enabled them to reflect more deeply. Allowing children to capture images that they wanted to share with us, and then have control over their discussions, enabled them to have some power in the research process (Hurworth 2003).

Interviews with teachers provided an insight into how they perceived the child as learners and their perceptions of the kind of support for learning the children received at home. These interviews also aimed to gather teachers' perceptions of the relationship between home and school and its impact on the children's learning.

Similarly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the parents of eight of the children.[3] Even though all parents were invited to be interviewed, three sets of parents did not participate either because we could not find an interpreter or because they declined to participate.[4] The focus was on exploring the parents' perception of their child as a learner and the kind of activities they undertook inside and outside the school.

All the interviews, with the children, parents and teachers were fully transcribed. An inductive approach to data analysis was undertaken (Robson 2002). After familiarisation and immersion in the data-set, open coding was carried out, which primarily involved giving descriptive codes, and a low level of abstraction was used to flag the emerging themes in the data. A second pass through the data involved clustering the various codes into different themes. The final step entailed collapsing the overall analysis around a few core ideas and an analysis of the interrelationships between them. In this article we use pseudonyms for participants.

Ethical issues

In conducting the research we followed the ethical guidelines laid down by British Educational Research Association (BERA 2004). Herein, we sought informed and voluntary consent from all the participants. We explained to children in appropriate

language why we were doing this research, why it was important to us, what would be involved, and their right to decline to participate and withdraw at any point and/or withdraw any part of the data at any time. We adhered to the ethical guidelines developed by the Visual Sociology Study Group of the British Sociological Association (BSA 2006) in using images generated by the children.

Findings

Analysis of the data revealed that there were significant differences in how teachers, parents and children constructed the child/themselves as learners and their perceptions of the learning experiences inside and outside the school setting. In this section we discuss our findings under the prominent themes emerging from the data.

Constructions of the children as learners

When describing themselves children always seemed to begin by focusing on themselves in relation to other people (Denham 1998). Here, the centrality of the family and friends they made at school was prominent:

> Without [my parents] I wouldn't be alive … if they would go away for the rest of my life, I would not cope with anything. I would be able to do nothing in life. (Oliver)

> I like school because I have my friends and I like to play with them … I really like my family because family is just so important in your life cause they are the people that would care for you most. I like school because if you have a problem there's lots of people to talk to and that can help you in all your problems and difficulties. I like my friends because they keep me happy and they make school a better place. (Kaito)

> I really like my family because family is just so important in your life 'cause they are the people that would care for you most. (Ram)

This relational world and interdependency that children talked about was experienced in different forms, ranging from participating together in different activities:

> [Watching … football matches with] My dad, my brother and sometimes other friends … all my family supports them. (Oliver)

to the reciprocity experienced by the children:

> When we get free time to play I send nice messages to my friends and they send them back and they care about me and I care about them. (Nadifa)

This prominence of family and friends in the children's world has been acknowledged by various development psychologists (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Guaze et al. 1996).

An analysis of the language that children used in talking about themselves reveals that their relational worlds were characterised by their experience of 'being'. This theme of being together with that of connectedness were identified by the Early Childhood Education Forum (1998) as learning behaviours of educational significance. In our research, these themes took the form of a need for being supported, being able to cope, being cared for, being helped and establishing friendships.

As with the children, the parents also talked about their children in relation to others in their lives:

> He really loves his family. He shows it as well and says it. He gets on very well with his brother, they fight a lot like two brothers and tell each other off and call each other names, but generally … he gets on with most people, he has very few issues about getting on with people. (Ram's Mother)

When the parents talked about their children their descriptions were in-depth, nuanced, recognised divergent characteristics and presented a holistic view of the child. Their descriptions of the children also embraced both affective and cognitive attributes:

> He likes doing, he is fairly academic but he gets distracted now and again, but I think his passion is mainly sport … There are times when he gets a bit upset or we tell him off and he does take it a bit too hard and we have to talk things through to him. (Ram's Mother)

> He is quite a sensitive child. He loves doing things like technology, building things. (Tom's Mother)

Parents were accepting of their child's vulnerability:

> I think he is quite critical of himself. You know, things like the archery, not in school, but things like the archery he gets really cross with himself if he doesn't get it right. And I say 'you're learning new things and you are practising new things and you are too hard on yourself' sort of things but he can be quite like that. … many times I tell him that everyone learns differently … he comes across as quite confident socially when he meets people he is quite a sociable child and people say to me 'oh, he's really confident', but I think he is not so confident in himself … which is probably quite hard for him because people think he is really confident and actually it might not be because he struggles. (Tom's Mother)

> I think he doubts himself and his abilities. (Oliver's Mother)

In contrast, this relational dimension and the complexity of the child's self did not emerge as a category when teachers talked about the children's learning. Teachers focused firstly on behavioural dimensions of each child, as evident from these broad brush descriptors which were commonly used by them in describing the children:

> Very confident. (T1)

> He talks an awful lot and he finds it difficult to concentrate, you know, quiet and independent work. (T2)

> Quiet. (T3)

> Has very low confidence and self-esteem. (T2)

> Quite a confident lad. (T4)

Subsequently, in the teachers' interviews, two distinctive themes emerged from how the teachers described children's learning.

The children's capacity to stay on task:

> Huge improvement [in behaviour] he has been able to focus, concentrate, his work output has increased. (T2)

> He finds it very difficult to concentrate and complete a task. (T2)

and the 'production of work':

> Always gets things done fast. (T1)

> Does his homework always on time. (T1)

> She is confident and when she is not confident with work she will show it with delaying tactics of chatting or drawing, or walking around and delaying her from getting the task done. (T2)

Thus, when talking about learning, teachers appear to focus on children's behaviour and the 'production of work' rather than on their knowledge and understanding. This is in line with the findings of Bennett and Kell's study of the nature and content of the classroom activities of young children. They concluded that for teachers 'behavioural rather than intellectual activity served as criteria of success' (Bennett and Kell 1989, 74).

Children's experiences of learning inside and outside school

During the interviews, children drew contrasts between learning inside and outside school. When children talked about learning inside school, they didn't see this learning as relevant in the 'here and now'. School learning was seen as being relevant to an unknown adult world in the future:

> Without school I would not know anything. I couldn't get a job or anything … without school when I am older I just sit somewhere and do nothing. It's like I can't do anything in life. In this school I learn things. (Oliver)

> In school you have to learn stuff like for when you grow up so if you are in an office, you do need to know a lot of stuff. Outside school you learn the stuff you want to … There is stuff that you would want to learn here [at school], but it's not that much. It is stuff that you have to learn. (Arif)

Friendship seemed to be a theme that children were reluctant to let go off. Even when asked about learning inside school they continued to talk about it in relation to their friendships and their sense of connectedness:

> What's important to me in this school is my friends and some of the subjects.

> Researcher: Why are your friends important to you?

> Because they are always caring for me, standing up for me, and they all play with me. (Femi)

Children seemed to regard learning in school as 'work'. This notion of work was regarded as being disconnected from their wider world and in most cases was also experienced as being hard. The magnitude of the children's experience of disconnection and difficulty is highlighted in the following two quotes:

> School is something totally different … it is to do with, like, work and subjects but when you do different things you are still learning like swimming and kick-boxing. You are still learning these things but the difference is that you do school work at school. (Ram)

> I'm not very good at Science because it is all scientific stuff, like gases and liquids and it is hard to get…it is hard to learn it and focus on it because there is a lot of different meanings in it and I think I find it a bit hard … and they are all like big words that I have hardly ever heard of. (Eva)

For one child, learning was so hard that he took a photograph of his homework and titled it 'I hate you' (Kaito's photo). Another child commented that 'I just dislike being at school' (Nadifa).

It is interesting to note that the category of 'work' does not appear when children discuss learning outside school. They do see learning outside school as hard, but hard is not experienced in a negative light. For example, Tom spent a considerable time in an interview talking about archery, an out-of-school activity and spoke very passionately about it:

> I really like learning archery because if you fail … I like it because next week you improve and while you're improving you're hitting goal, goal, goal. It is not boring because if you fail you know that next week you are going to hit it and you can get better and better … there is a lot to take in (with archery) so it was a bit of ups and downs with it, but I stuck to it and I'm quite good now. (Tom)

> I really like sport … I am good at sport, but I can get out of breath sometimes. (Oliver)

Whilst the children in this sample were identified on the PASS survey as lacking confidence in themselves as learners in school, a view supported by their teachers, their description of themselves in activities undertaken outside school demonstrate that this was only one piece of the puzzle. Dweck's (2000) concepts of 'helplessness' and 'mastery' are relevant here. On the PASS survey, and in their conversations with researchers, children identified themselves as lacking in confidence as learners at school. In their own narratives of learning outside school, children presented a mastery orientation towards learning. As Dweck elucidates, this mastery orientation is marked by children's ability to be persistent and resilient even in the face of failure, and to make continuous efforts. For example, Tom told us:

> I'm not one of the brightest people in the class.

However, outside school, as Tom puts it:

> I took up archery well … I concentrate a lot with it and I really like it and I am a good shot.

He went on to talk at length about the intricacies involved in learning archery:

> It's a lot to take in because … [lots of detail] … you have to concentrate a lot [lots more detail] … it depends which way you shoot … [even more detail].

Such a wealth view of themselves as learners outside school was evident across children's narratives. For example, Arif's description of himself learning to ride a motorcycle in his mother country:

> Basically, it is like they let you drive it… but before you do that… it's automatic balance so you can't actually drop and when you are quite good at it they keep taking the automatic balance on and off and the last thing is like you ride it and a cardboard comes in front of you and you got to stop. (Arif)

So, how is it that children hold such disparate views of themselves as learners inside and outside school? Analysis of the data revealed that learning processes are experienced differentially and hence are significant.

Differences in learning processes inside and outside school

Children's experience of *how they learn* inside and outside school were markedly different. Children had a lot less to say about how they learnt inside the school. The key category here was listening:

> Mostly just by listening … [the teacher] talks through the whole lesson but I understood the whole of it. If you just write it down and you've to read it … it is just easier to be telling it straight. (Oliver)

> It was quite fun today [the assembly] because we were doing about life guards and draw picture and the whiteboard and stuff, but normally we just talk and stuff. (Bella)

From the children's perspective the focus in classroom based learning was predominantly on listening to the teacher. So, rather than the much propagated focus on establishing dialogue in the classroom, discussion in these children's experience apparently 'takes the form of teacher dominance of teacher transmitted knowledge' (Pollard et al. 2008). Instead of genuine discussion, Edwards and Mercer (1987), in their classic study, conclude from their research into talk in classrooms that 'the basic process is one of introducing children into the conceptual world of the teachers'. Mercer (Mercer and Littleton 2007) has continued to document the importance of establishing authentic dialogue as being key to children's intellectual development in the classroom. However, the continued focus on passive listening seems to be dominant in the classroom experiences of these children.

Another key feature of children's experiences of learning inside the classroom was marked by the absence of the teacher's attention:

> Well, sometimes you cannot always have the teacher to yourself because (s)he has to do the whole class. But sometimes if someone else is doing something, then I can have her all to myself like that. (Eva)

> The teacher has like lots of other people to teach… but it's quite good at home because my mum has just one person. So I think it is a bit better. (Nadifa)

Whilst children recognised that they could not draw largely on the teacher's attention, they seemed to enjoy drawing on and sharing each other's knowledge (Fleer 2001):

> If we are doing literacy or something I like to do it in a class because then people, like, work all together and if we don't I might get stuck and they might help you, let's say, not like telling you the answer, or something, but just like explaining it to you so that you know. (Eva)

When recounting experiences of how they learn outside school, children gave nuanced (and sometimes very lengthy) descriptions. While listening seemed to be a key

component in children's descriptions of learning inside school, observing seemed to be more prominent in their outside school experiences:

> I watch how [friends] move the ball and I learn a couple of skills from them. I don't actually have to ask, but I watch them … I tried it myself and it did work. (Tom)

> Lots of footballers … just say that they make up their own skills and I take tips from them, like, when I am really having a good game I try new ways to pass the ball or stand on the ball and kick it with my other foot. (Oliver)

A further component of the theme of observation was the perceived competence of the person being observed. Children had great admiration for the perceived expertise of their out-of-school 'teachers':

> At acting, I have my teacher … who's been playing in the West End and things. (Oliver)

> At taekwondo my teachers, they're black belts, and they've been in the Olympics … They're quite good so … they are at the Olympics, they always say that, if you are in the Olympics … it has to be exactly perfect. (Oliver)

> The thing with my kick-boxing teacher or my swimming teacher … because they are all trained people because in martial arts you have to be a black belt to be a teacher, then they are qualified to do it. (Ram)

> Listening to my mum and helping my mum cook because when I grow up I want to cook. (Nadifa)

This feeling of admiration and regard for the 'teachers' expertise' did not disempower the children or fill them with feelings of awe. Instead children retained a sense of their own competence. This seemed to be possible as a result of the nature of the interactions that children had with these out-of-school 'teachers'.

An important feature of these interactions is illustrated by the children's concept of the 'tip'. Children said that teachers outside school gave them 'tips':

> My acting coach telling me some tips. (Oliver)

> They are really friendly down there [sports centre] and it is not just, like, there's not just proper teachers, but also people giving you tips all the time. (Tom)

Even though we are cautious in our discussion of 'tips' as used by the children, as this notion needs more probing, its recurrence in the data makes it an interesting concept to explore. Children used tips in the out-of-school context and in relation to how teachers there gave them useful advice in developing their skills. This provides an interesting contrast with the notion of continuous 'listening' in the classroom that was highlighted previously. We tentatively suggest that there is a difference between listening to a tip and listening to teachers talking. In a classroom where the focus is on listening to the teacher, there is a sense of the teacher maintaining control and owning the expertise. However, the notion of a tip recognises the competence of the child and their agency to develop their own expertise. This difference between listening to a tip and listening to a teacher might be further reinforced by the child being regarded as a passive recipient of information from the teacher, whereas in the outside school activity the notion of the teacher as an expert and the added dimension of the activity-based learning being undertaken, makes tips more attractive.

Children learnt from co-participants as well as from teachers outside school. Whereas anybody can share a tip outside school, this learning process is not always welcomed inside school:

> I would ask some people on my table and they wouldn't tell me what to do because they think I might copy them. But I just want to know what to do, but they still don't listen. (Nadifa)

Another contrast in learning experience inside and outside school was evident. Lack of teacher attention inside school was an important factor for these children. However, when learning outside school they felt confident enough to 'find their own way'. For example:

> I just make up my own skills. (Oliver)

When referring to how he learnt to ride a motorcycle at a very young age Arif reflected:

> I always liked to work stuff out. I like challenges. (Arif)

Similarly, Kaito when describing an image he had clicked under the theme 'picture of me learning' gave the following account:

> This is a website that you find things like goggles or something … so that I can find anything … so like learning stuff from the website … I like watching movies … I couldn't read it but I can hear the words. [He gave the picture a title] 'Finding things machine'. (Kaito)

As evident from the children's descriptions when engaged in learning outside school they were confident to try things, face challenges and explore the world. Knowledge and understanding in these contexts seemed to be located within the children. In contrast, learning inside school was characterised by dependence on the teacher. Knowledge and understanding in this context appeared to be located within the teacher.

Children's view of themselves as learner outside school is relational, confident and competence based; their view of themselves as learners inside school, according to their PASS profile, is marked by lack of learner confidence, low self-regard, and lack of learning capability and preparedness for learning. Children described themselves as learners in school in absolutes: can or cannot, difficult or easy, good at something or not good at it. The language used by children when talking about themselves as learners in school is very different from that used when talking about themselves outside school. For example:

- Average
- Good
- Top group
- Slow pace
- Best
- Difficult

It is mystifying that children who are so confident in their learning outside school should feel so inadequate inside school:

> It was obvious that everyone in that group would get 5 in Maths, but me … the teacher would say 'I'm expecting all of you to get 5 in SATs' but … help? … I feel under pressure a bit because even when it is practice, they are acting like it is a big test and you have to get them all right. (Oliver)

> In school it is difficult because I don't really understand it and at work … when it comes to … I'm quite … I am not that … I'm quite … I don't … really get it. (Femi)

Conclusions

Findings of this research document the richness of children's learning outside school, their enthusiasm, and their demonstrable capacity for learning in that setting. The centrality of the children's relational world came across as a significant feature of the children's conceptualisation of themselves as learners. The first of Resnick's (1987) four classes of discontinuity between learning inside and outside school is relevant here: 'schooling focuses on the individual's performance, where as out-of-school mental work is often socially shared'. An appreciation of the relational component of learner identity was neglected in the teachers' accounts of children.

Learning processes were experienced differentially by the children depending on whether they were inside or outside school. Outside school learning experiences were perceived by the children as being more active, collaborative and challenging. The kind of relationships developed with 'teachers' and others outside school seem to be significant in fostering learner confidence. Out-of-school teachers were perceived as experts and connected to the 'real world'. Their interactions with the children seemed to suggest a focus on building the confidence of the children and developing her/his existing skills. In contrast when children talked about themselves as learners in school they described themselves in deficit terms: what they don't know and can't do.

The findings of this exploratory research have implications for a range of different stakeholders. We highlight the importance of listening to children and understanding the experiences of learning from their perspectives, which could offer useful insights into teaching and learning in the classroom. As suggested by previous research (such as González, Moll, and Amanti 2005) there is a need to bring together the disparate worlds which children occupy to enrich learning within the school setting. We acknowledge that this is a challenging task for the lone teacher in the classroom on whom multiple and complex demands are already being made. Teachers need to be supported through professional development programmes in order to explore this challenge. It also requires teachers being supported at systemic level. It is clear that more research is needed. Both research that addresses the unnecessary gap in children's learning capacity and experiences inside and outside the school setting, and research which explores the differences between learning inside and outside school and focuses on what teachers can learn about learning from approaches to learning in out-of-school contexts. This needs to be researched with particular reference to enabling teachers to integrate the diverse worlds of learning that children experience.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the children for making space for us in their worlds and for sharing so candidly their experiences with us. We would like to thank the parents and teachers for their time and support. We would also like to thank Dr Susanna Pinkus in the development and data collection phases of the project. This research was funded by the University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education, Research and Development Fund.

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Notes

1. http://www.w3insights.pass-survey.com/pass.htm
2. PASS enables each student to be classified on the red (indicating that the student is of great concern), amber (indicating some concern) and green colour (no concerns) code system.
3. Although we emphasised that we would welcome the input of both parents, as is common, in all cases the interviews were with the mothers of the children concerned.
4. This was interesting in itself, as it allowed us to reflect on the feasibility of establishing dialogue when individuals do not share a common language and how this is likely to impact on the interactions between home and school settings.

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