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# 1

## Children's experiences of classrooms: why they matter

During a visit to a year 5 classroom in which we had asked children their views about classroom learning, Sara expressed her appreciation for being asked what she thought:

“ I'm very, very joyful as this is the first time someone has come into our classroom and asked me my opinion. I am REALLY joyful! I am almost flying! I LOVE YOU! (Sara, year 5) ”

This book starts with children like Sara. Children like Sara are the focus of this book. The book, and the children's words within it, owe their existence to many children like Sara who have sat and talked, often in classrooms, and shared their experiences about classrooms. This book takes children's words as its essential reference point. Strange though it may seem to person-focused educators, children's words about their perspectives and feelings are notable for their *absence* in educational literature. Their insights into classrooms are rarely portrayed. This book, against the trend, provides insights into children's perspectives and feelings by presenting their own words verbatim, thereby allowing readers an opportunity to notice and reflect on these. This book is for teachers, parents and other educators who want to understand more about children's experiences in classrooms in order to improve these.

### **Four reasons why it is valuable to listen to children's words**

Although children's views on classrooms have been rarely publicised, there are a select handful of key texts which do address these. Catherine Burke and Ian Grosvenor's (2003) survey of British pupils' perspectives on 'The school I'd like' is an excellent example. They cited one pupil who commented that, in her ideal school,

We will no longer be treated like herds of an identical animal ... It will be recognised that it is our world too. (p.7)

In other words, this student was expressing a need for pupils in classrooms to be recognised as authoritative individuals who were worthy of being listened to. Drawing on this belief, published authors have categorised at least four key reasons why it is valuable to listen to children's words about classrooms. First, children can tell us more about their own learning and what helps or hinders it than any adult can imagine and therefore, in this area, pupils are by necessity the prime authority (Burke and Grosvenor, 2003; Hopkins, 2008). Second, children *learn* through the process of talking about their own learning and its conditions (Fielding, 2004; Watkins, 2015). Third, students' engagement with classroom learning and their sense of self can be enhanced if they have had a critical voice about how learning is orchestrated and what is learnt (MacIntyre et al., 2005; Niemi et al., 2015). Fourth, children have a human right to make decisions about how and what they learn because they are valuable as human beings (UNCRC, 1989; Devine and McGillicuddy, 2016).

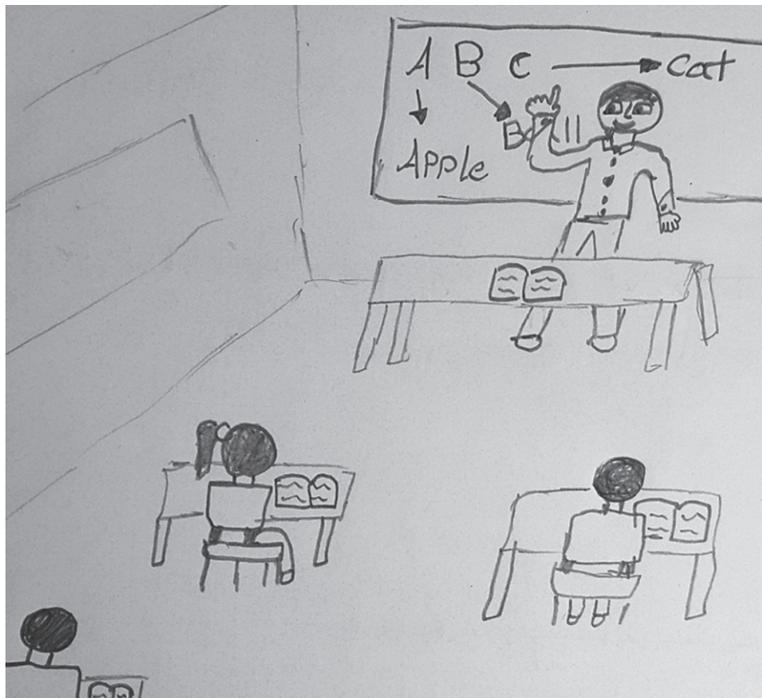
### Children can tell us more

John Dewey, father of active and socially oriented learning approaches in the USA, warned over 100 years ago: 'Our social life has undergone a thorough and radical change. If our education is to have any meaning for life, it must pass through an equally complete *transformation*' (1899, p.14). Schooling could be said to be for the benefit of pupils, not only now but for their unknown futures. Their futures could contain more of the same schooling, including the wasteful or stressful moments described by children in Burke and Grosvenor's study. Or the future could witness a transformation of classrooms into something different. It is pupils who are in the best position to reflect on and advise on what this 'something different' might embody. They are in the strongest position actually to help adults in classrooms to reconsider the unhelpful habits that they have developed. For example, Elizabeth Hopkins (2008) explained how the pupils in her study criticised as unhelpful to their learning 'every day being the same'. The concept of 'doing what we always do' was expressed as especially negative. Given that most classrooms still do what we have always done – looking surprisingly similar to the classrooms of 5,000 years ago (Watkins, 2005) – children may be the only people who can successfully overthrow the 'dictatorship of no alternatives' in the classroom (Unger, 2011). This is especially likely given their superior expertise with digital technology. It is after all the child who articulates, in the story, that the emperor has no clothes.

### Children learn through the process of talking about their own learning and its conditions

Since many educators now consider learning to be more than 'being taught' by the teacher (Watkins, 2010), they recognise that inviting pupils to express their critical views regularly allows them to construct their own knowledge and make meanings from their experiences. This is in contrast with the traditional (authoritarian) classroom which does not foster exploratory two-way interactions but instead emphasises the teacher's voice which often silences that of pupils. The picture in Figure 1.1 by a year 5 pupil is a good, standard example of the traditional classroom where the teacher talks and pupils are silent.

Michael Fielding (2004) emphasised the notion of 'student voice' on the basis of needing to deconstruct the presumptions of the present and the past. These presumptions included the tendency for adults (teachers) to talk *about* or *for* others. He contrasted this tendency with the practice of teachers and pupils speaking *with* others and pupils becoming *co-researchers* with their teachers, in classrooms. Therefore, as well as providing information to adults, when pupils talk about classrooms with their peers and teachers their learning is enhanced as well as their competence in relating with others through verbal communication. The point is that individuals actually do their learning *through* regular participation in social activities including school classroom interactions.



**Figure 1.1** The traditional classroom, picture by year 5 pupil (Hargreaves et al., 2016)

**Students' engagement with classroom learning and their sense of self can be enhanced if they have had a critical voice about how learning happens and what is learnt**

Several published studies have noted that pupils' talk can not only lead to pupils' increased engagement in learning but also to an enhanced sense of self if children have a chance critically to evaluate their learning situation. In the research of Donald MacIntyre and colleagues (2005), the pupils themselves told the researchers that, for richer learning, they needed more opportunities in the classroom for fostering a sense of agency and ownership. John Dewey (1899, p.14) used the word 'self-direction' in this context. He stressed the urgency for individual pupils to communicate and then to act, rather than just to listen:

The ordinary schoolroom, with its rows of ugly desks placed in geometrical order, crowded together ... it is all made 'for listening' ... The attitude of listening means, comparatively speaking, passivity and absorption ... the moment children act they individualise themselves; they cease to be a mass, and become the intensely distinctive beings that we are acquainted with out of school. (p.15)

Educator Alfie Kohn (1996) has written about potential ways of increasing the distribution of authority among teachers and pupils in classrooms so that pupils have more opportunities to act on their own decisions:

Each aspect of life in a classroom offers an invitation to think about what decisions might be turned over to students or negotiated with students individually and collectively. (p.85)

Paulo Freire (1972), famously critical educator from Brazil, described how the 'oppressor' (authoritarian teacher) was characterised by the tendency to *prescribe to* rather than *negotiate with* the 'oppressed' (pupil):

Thus, the behaviour of the oppressed is a prescribed behaviour, following as it does the guidelines of the oppressor ... Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. (pp.23-4)

These words reflected Plato's 2000-year-old description of a slave. Dewey (2011) portrayed this as someone who, like the school student in some classrooms, 'accepts from another the purposes which control his [or her] conduct ... whose service they do not understand and have no personal interest in' (pp.48–49). Freire believed that any situation in which some people prevented others from engaging in active inquiry was 'one of violence' and oppression (1972, p.58). By preventing active inquiry in classrooms, including the chance to express and explore views critically or to make decisions and act upon them, students were denied the opportunities for growing up into mature, autonomous people who could start critically reflecting on their world in order to make the world a better place. This mattered at two levels:

- at the individual level, human beings could not enjoy full humanity without exercising their autonomy; and
- at the social level, society could not remain peaceable if large sections of it were kept silent by the rest.

### **Children have a human right to make decisions about how and what they learn because they are valuable as human beings**

Clive Harber (2015) suggested that in a world context, most classrooms

reproduce and perpetrate – not only the socio-economic and political inequalities of the surrounding society, including gender relationships, but also the violent relationships that often go with them. (p.243)

Classrooms can either be places where traditional and often oppressive power relationships are sustained, or they can act as models of transformed social and political relationships, where every child learns to understand their own and others' rights, including the right to talk and to participate in decisions that affect them. By asking pupils to talk about their experiences in classrooms and to describe these in relation to their own aspirations, identity and personality, the inequalities within the classroom and beyond may become a clearer focus of attention (and see Chapter 5 on social class inequality in the classroom). Dympna Devine and Deirdre McGillicuddy (2016) have suggested that despite the neo-liberal thrust of education today, there is concurrently a global recognition of the need to value children for themselves, including championing children's rights to express critiques about classrooms. They suggested:

The UNCRC [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989] has been pivotal in this changing discourse, providing a template for working towards, albeit minimum, standards of rights for all children, including provisions directly related to education ... Article 29 defines the

purpose of education. This latter embraces holistic concepts that include recognition [during education] of culture, identity, and the development of the child's personality in a spirit of peace, tolerance and equality. Of equal importance are more general principles expressed in Articles 2, 3 and 12 that underpin all other articles. These relate to non-discrimination with respect to different groups of children (birth, race, colour, sex, language, religion, politics, birth or other status), *as well as the right for children to have a say in matters directly affecting them ...* This can be articulated not only in terms of considering the quality of teaching and learning that children receive, but also in equalities in learning that may be provided to different groups of children. (pp.424–5; my emphases)

In other words, these authors suggested that a transformation towards increased recognition of children's rights in classrooms was gradually occurring, especially in relation to how children actually experienced the quality of classroom learning and to their having some control over this. This book aims to feed into this transformation.

### **Pupils' perceptions are different from adults'**

Recently I noticed my daughter, Jasmine, doing her GCSE revision at the living-room table while sending WhatsApp messages on her phone and watching YouTube videos on her laptop. I remembered that for my own studies, I literally studied in the silence of a cold attic, unconnected with the rest of the world, with the attic door carefully closed. When I mentioned to her how I used to study and why it was effective, her response, quite reasonably, was:

Well, I'm not like you.

One good reason to explore children's perspectives of and feelings about classrooms is this disparity, noted by Piaget (1925), between how teachers conceive of classrooms and how pupils do. Piaget suggested that the starting point for teachers' effective planning was to acknowledge these differences between children's and adults' ways of seeing (and feeling) the classroom. The mistake of traditional classrooms was the expectation that the child's experience of the world would be, or should be, similar to that of an adult. Noddings (2005) illustrated this same point with descriptions of the gaps and misunderstandings between children's expressed needs and the adult's inferred ones in the classroom. As a result of these gaps and misunderstandings, the classroom became an embodiment of assumptions and interpretations by adults rather than a place which started with how children saw and felt the classroom.

This disparity is important because, as explored further in Chapter 2, the teacher's authority (the right/power to make decisions and have them acted on)

can only be legitimately sustained if the teacher has her/his pupils' willing consent to obey. This is only likely to happen if the teacher understands or at least values and respects the experiences of the pupils, and also makes efforts to share rather than protect her/his decision-making powers. If this is not the case, the teacher's *authority* may slip into *authoritarianism* – in which teacher coercion replaces pupil consent. A classroom based on coercion rather than consent is likely to reduce children's opportunities for proactive engagement and self-direction, which has potential long-term disadvantages for the pupils as well as the society they will become part of as adults.

In a significant piece of research by Alex Moore (2013), the disparity between teachers' and pupils' perceptions and feelings became vividly evident. In a nutshell, while the teacher seemed to focus primarily on pupils' cognitive gains, the pupils were much more motivated by affective and social factors: specifically, how they felt, and their relationship with the teacher and each other. In Moore's words:

Whereas the teachers self-perceived as caring, loving practitioners who had their students' best interests at heart, the children's view of their teachers tended to be of a group of adults who did not understand their differences or their needs, who did not care for or about them, and who did little to make learning the enjoyable experience it was supposed to be. (p.285)

In this situation, the pupils were therefore carrying out actions in the classroom like the slave described above, accepting from another the purposes which control conduct, 'whose service they do not understand and have no personal interest in' (Dewey, 2011). Without the teacher's understanding or personal interest in the pupils' own agenda, it is unlikely that children will engage proactively or responsibly with the learning s/he offers them.

Another example of the mismatch described by Piaget – probably common in many traditional classrooms – became clear during our recent project carried out in Alexandria, Egypt. A startling mismatch was detected between the pupils' stated purposes for learning English and the way English was actually taught to them in the classroom (Hargreaves et al., 2016). In this study, nearly half of the 394 ten-year-old children in the study said that their aim for learning English was to *speaking English with others*, and over a quarter of them saw the purpose of learning English as for use when *travelling abroad*. And yet in the nine 45-minute English classes we observed, there were almost no occasions on which the pupils practised speaking English at all. Despite the pressure on these pupils to do well in their exams, it seemed likely that they would take a more genuine interest in engaging with the English lesson in the future if it addressed directly their deeply-held personal goals. Instead, those who had access, practised speaking English using YouTube clips and talking with older siblings at home.

A very different kind of study noted that teachers and pupils differed in their experiences of which events actually *happened* in the classroom. In a national survey carried out by the Ministry of Education in Macedonia (2016, p.38), the following results were found: pupils estimated that about 32 per cent of class time was taken up with group activities, while teachers rated it as 63 per cent (nearly double!); pupils estimated that 24 per cent of time was taken up discussing topics chosen by the students while teachers rated this as 57 per cent of the time (more than double); pupils thought that about 25 per cent of time was spent in carrying out their own research activities while teachers rated this at 53 per cent of the time (more than double). This study simply reinforced the different perceptions of pupils and teachers and emphasised the need for talk among both groups in order to understand what is happening within the classroom from both groups' perspectives, and which activities might be most helpful to achieve each group's aspirations.

### **Children's classroom learning: a cognitive, affective, social and physical experience?**

#### **What is meant by learning and experience**

Borrowing from Marton and Booth's (1997) construct of phenomenography, I propose that 'learning' and 'experience' are more closely linked than traditional models of learning implied. *Learning* and *experience* can both be conceptualised as multi-faceted, involving the child's cognition (knowing, thinking, understanding), affect (feelings, emotions), motivation (incentives, personal goals, aspirations) and their understanding of the context (both immediate and wider). To *experience* the classroom implies being affected or influenced by the cognitive, affective, motivational and contextual aspects of *being in* the classroom. These diverse experiences become *learning* when the child tries to make sense of these or attributes some meaning to them.

I stress experiences as the basis for learning in order to illustrate the thinness of how the word 'learning' has traditionally (and popularly) been used: its traditional use has tended to ignore the affective, social and physical aspects of the child that are, none the less, always dominant in the classroom. It has also neglected the fact that children make meaning, construct knowledge – or *learn* – by drawing on all of these aspects. Many educators and parents still focus on learning as cognitive 'input' and attaining learning 'objectives'. But the cognitive aspects of the child are only one part of her/his meaning-making, knowledge-constructing tool-kit. The exclusively cognitive view of learning is a relic from the traditional classroom in which the transmission of information was emphasised (see Chapter 2). Learning, instead, can more comprehensively be said to refer to the child's past experiences, including relationships, *and the meaning/knowledge they have constructed from these*; their current experiences and relationships *and the meaning/knowledge they are currently creating from these*; and the *ways in which they will respond* cognitively, affectively, socially and physically to future experiences and relationships, based on what has come beforehand. All these aspects will be functioning in the classroom and the full spectrum of these aspects constitute the basis of children's learning there.

### Pupils' learning through relationship

Anne Edwards (2005) suggested that it was through the *relational experience* that the child came both to conceive of and to act on the world in a particular way. In other words, individuals learn and develop through participation in social activities in the world. Tone Saevi described the teacher's role with the child in the classroom as something ongoing, non-tangible and fluid, as a 'relational and existential endeavour without a specified end'. She believed that: 'As an adult I ought to ask myself what [students] learn from *being with me*' (2015, p.347; my emphases). Saevi continued:

The pedagogical relationship is vital to children to allow them to speak of that which can only partly be spoken of ... What is lived and experienced is more basic and must have existential priority over what is thought and said. (p.349)

However, as a teacher, it is possible to hold two parallel conceptions of learning simultaneously and act as if both are appropriate. In fact, many of us find ourselves trying to do just that. There is one voice saying that learning means acquiring cognitive content and reaching academic targets: schools emphasise this version because of policy pressure relating to global economic competition. Another voice inside the head of many teachers says that learning means having a nurturing relationship with the child: we became teachers because we wanted to support and inspire young people; as teachers, we therefore want to nurture all aspects of the child into appropriate ways of being and seeing, through the relationship we have with the child. However, while we are pressured by policy to focus on cognitive and measurable outcomes, this focus often comes at the expense of affective and social (relational) aspects. In the chapters in this book, especially in Chapter 2, I explore how this pressure sometimes leads teachers unwittingly to buy into authoritarian approaches to classrooms in which the cognitive aspects of the child are directed, rather than the relational aspects being nurtured.

Alex Moore's (2013) research suggested that pupils' classroom experiences could be heavily influenced by any of the following relational aspects of the classroom, all of which would be likely to dominate the child's capacity to process cognitive input:

- emotional states brought about by factors 'external' to the immediate teacher-student relationship (e.g. friendship or family issues);
- the teacher's response to these;
- the teacher's own emotional behaviour (e.g. displays of anger or stress);
- the way in which the teacher (as well as the other students) displays affection and (in a pupil's words) 'love' to the student, demonstrable both through words and through a reward system.

The child's relationship to the teacher as an *authority* is likely to affect significantly the child's experience of the classroom, and thereby their learning (see Chapter 2). Saevi suggested that in the classroom, the experience of pupil and teacher *being together* constitutes, and at the same time brings about, learning and guides the child to *see themselves in a different way*. How the adult behaves, and how the adult relates specifically to the child, gradually brings about cognitive, affective or social change in the child as they make sense of this relating. They gradually come to see themselves in a different way – at best, in a positive different way.

Based on his research work with adults, Jack Mesriow (2006) suggested that 'transformative learning' involved seeing oneself in a positive different way. This entailed understanding more fully one's role in the world in relation to others and in relation to social structures. According to Tone Saevi (2015), children learn most transformationally in this positive sense through the experience of being with teachers who are responsive to their individual existence and open to their dynamic and unpredictable development. Saevi stressed that the pedagogic relationship had to do with 'the necessary tension between authority and freedom expressed in the asymmetric relationship between adult and child' (p.345). When this tension is dealt with by the teacher in a responsive and open way, the child's transformation is likely to consist of seeing themselves and their role more positively. However, if the teacher is neither *responsive* to the child's individual existence nor *open* to their dynamic and unpredictable development, this does not signify that the child will not change. When the child's relationship to authority is not sensitively managed in the classroom, *the child may come to see her/himself in a different way, but this time in a more negative way, as less powerful, less competent or less valued than they previously believed*.

The meanings children derive from their classroom relationships may not be observed by an outsider or even perceived by the child (Torrance, 2012); but in the sense of *seeing oneself in a different way*, learning may be happening little by little as the child engages (or fails to engage) with others in the classroom, especially the teacher. Once a student makes sense in a particular way in the classroom, this then can become the basis for future action, which in turn can reinforce the stance taken, forming either a positive or negative loop (Williams and Ivey, 2001). This book explores children's experiences of relating to the teacher and the opportunities this entails for changing how they see themselves as a person.

The child's encounter with the teacher will evidently be a crucial factor in her/his learning. However, encounters will also take place with other children. In this sense, learning can come about through *building knowledge as part of doing things with others* (Watkins, 2005, p.14). Others may be peers in class, children in the same so-called 'ability' group, children in a previous classroom or brothers and sisters at home. The important point is that, whether it is recognised explicitly or not, all learning occurs within the context of relational experiences. It is with this relationship-based aspect of children's learning in mind that I consider children's experiences in classrooms in this book.

### **A focus on the classroom emphasises each pupil's experience**

The recent film called 'The Class' (*Entre Les Murs* in French but renamed 'The Class') was distinctive because it actually portrayed how things happened between the walls of a normal classroom in France. The tradition of the teacher shutting the classroom door carefully behind them and savouring the privacy of her/his own classroom, as depicted in this film, still runs deep in England's schooling system too. But what really happens between those walls each day and how does each pupil experience it?

When my son, Wesley, arrives home from school each day and I ask him 'How was your day?' it's rare to receive more than a one word answer: 'Okay'. But what this word really denotes, I have no way of knowing. He possibly feels that it would be too complex to tell me what it was really like. Since the safeguarding of children became an increased priority in schools in England, access to classrooms has become more difficult for other adults, so even less is known about what happens there. But it is here that pupils have many formative – both positive and negative – experiences, uncharted even by the pupils themselves and shut carefully away from the outside world like the attic. Schools have prospectuses and documents laying out how things should be done. But the classroom is not the school. Every classroom is different. And every pupil's experience of every classroom is different.

In one primary school where I planned to interview pupils, a few parents were worried about me talking to their children and observing classes. They refused to sign the consent form. They said that they did not know how their children would be 'used'. What struck me as strange was the fact that the children's teacher and teaching assistant worked with their children all day every day without the parents knowing what happened to them from one week to the next. Perhaps these parents perceived that the classroom adults had a legitimate authority that I did not have as a researcher.

All those hours, days and years that children sit in classrooms: What's it really like for them? How will it affect them now and in later life? And is this really the richest experience we can offer them?

My purpose in this book is to explore these issues from the perspective of the pupils themselves. The book asks the question of how children talk about their experiences of authority or authoritarianism in the classroom, and how they perceive that their relationship with the teacher influences them and their learning (Chapter 2); whether they experience and exercise autonomy in the classroom and whether/how this might happen more extensively (Chapter 3); it explores children's descriptions of how they experience the teacher's feedback in the classroom and how this might influence or silence their own voices (Chapter 4); it explores how social class might be perpetuated in the classroom and what children's own experiences are of this (Chapter 5).

### **Schiro's purposes for schooling: the effective classroom is one that achieves its purpose**

Whether children's experiences in classrooms are in fact the richest we can offer them, and how the 'richest' is defined, depends on each person's values and what

they believe the purpose of schooling to be. This in turn will influence what they believe 'learning' to involve. When authors talk about 'effective' classrooms, it is sometimes assumed that this means that the classroom 'gets' good test results. However, whether a classroom is effective or not depends what the end-point is against which it is evaluated. Good test results alone are not the only possible outcomes of a classroom.

Michael Schiro (2013) has categorised four ideologies or philosophies of state-funded schooling which help define the effective classroom in terms of how well four different purposes are achieved (cited in Moore, 2015, p.150). These purposes are referred to throughout the chapters that follow in this book as a framework for considering the conflicting contexts within which classrooms are situated and how effectively they are seen to be operating according to each purpose.

1. 'Scholar academics' believe that *'the purpose of education is to help children learn the accumulated knowledge of our culture: that of the academic disciplines.'* Valuable topics are divided into subject areas, for which knowledge and facts are identified as most important for pupils to learn at particular stages of their schooling. This purpose fits with that of traditional classrooms where the emphasis is on the transmission from teachers to students of the 'accumulated knowledge' of their culture. Those teachers who hold this ideology would therefore value those conditions in classrooms that best foster memorisation, retention and understanding such as focusing on pupils' physical and emotional comfort, quietness for memorising and peaceful peer-peer and teacher-pupil relationships to ensure minimal emotional or physical distraction from cognitive action. This is what Bernstein referred to as the *collectionist* approach (1971, p.47). In this book, children's experiences of classrooms dominated by this approach are explored.
2. Advocates, on the other hand, of the 'social efficiency ideology' 'believe that the purpose of schooling is to efficiently meet the needs of society by training youth to function as future mature contributing members of society'. For supporters of this ideology, classroom learning is about learning skills and knowledge which will be useful for future employment, such as employability, flexibility, collaborative skills plus practical expertise. In such classrooms, the relevance pupils see in their curriculum to their real future (economic) lives will be of key importance, as well as pupils' practical experiences in particular expert areas. In my experience, this is the purpose often assumed by pupils: that school is there to prepare them for employment in the society that already exists.
3. In the 'learner centred' ideology, 'the goal of education is the growth of individuals: his or her own unique intellectual, social, emotional and physical attributes.' In classrooms which entertain the learner-centred ideology, the pupil's everyday cognitive, affective, social and physical development and flourishing will be the principal means and ends of classroom learning, including how pupils perceive themselves, how they relate to each other, and how they relate to other adults. This approach relates to Bernstein's *integrationist*

approach (1971, p.47). Many of the children's words in this book relate to children's affective, social and physical experiences of classrooms.

4. The 'social reconstruction ideology' suggests that the purpose of education is the development of a 'critically educated citizenry able to engage reflectively and reflexively with the wider society, opening up greater possibilities for radical societal change'. In classrooms where this philosophy is highly valued, it will not just be the individual's development and flourishing that matters but also their relationships with the fluctuating social contexts outside the classroom and pupils' awareness of justice and power imbalances both within and beyond the classroom. The nurturing of pupils' critical reflection and their awareness of the historical, sociological and political contexts of schooling will be essential components of their day-to-day classroom experiences as illustrated in particular in Chapter 5 of this book.