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“Please be seated”:

A study of pupils’ perspectives on the nature and purpose of seated learning activities within a year 2 class.

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Abstract

This research project investigates children’s views on the purposes of seated learning activities and what is important to them when completing such activities. Clark and Moss’ (2001) mosaic approach was used to explore the heterogeneous spatial literacy of a group of year 2 children, selected using random stratified sampling. Themes identified by the children included increased work output, spatial ownership, physical comfort and working independently. The latter provides a challenge to existing literature on Vygotsky’s (1978) notions of social learning and Alexander’s (2011) research into dialogic teaching. This highlights an opportunity for teachers to work with children at the beginning of the school year to discuss the varied purposes of different learning activities and to collaboratively create a learning environment that authentically reflects and facilitates these purposes.

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Introduction

In recent years, following the introduction of the National Strategies, attention has been paid to the layout of the classroom, including when and where children are seated. Previous research has explored and identified teachers’ views on preferred seating arrangements so as to support behaviour management and work output. However, the views of children with regards to seated activities have only been sought in a cursory manner. This research project investigates the views of children regarding seated learning activities. It is concerned with exploring the following research questions: what are pupils’ views on the purposes of seated activities; what is important to children when completing seated activities. A review of literature is presented, identifying themes of relevance to the research project, before considering the data generated from the project itself. The research project involved working with a group of year 2 children. I used observation, drawings and discussions to develop an understanding of the pupils’ perspectives on seated activities. Identified themes included quantity of work produced, spatial ownership, physical comfort and working independently. These perspectives necessarily have an impact upon how I will interact with a new class at the start of the next school year. These implications are discussed at the end of this report.

Literature review

Pupils’ perspectives

In the 1960s an investigation by Blishen (1969) into the views of secondary school children regarding school environments was published. At the time, seeking the views of pupils was considered unusual (Alexander, 2010). However, in subsequent years the prominence of pupil perspectives has increased (Rudduck, 2006). It has also expanded to include the views of younger children as is indicated by a repeat of Blishen’s investigation that included the perspectives of

primary school children (Birkett, 2001; Burke & Grosvenor, 2003). The increased importance accorded to pupil perspectives is seen as a result of the introduction of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Clark & Moss, 2006; Alexander, 2010; Clark, 2010; Robinson, 2014). Article 12 recognises the right of children to freely express their views on matters affecting them while Article 13 states that children should be able to express these views using a variety of media including art (United Nations, 1989). In addition to the UNCRC, in 2003 the UK government launched Every Child Matters (ECM) (DCSF, 2003), again emphasising the rights of children to have a say in their own lives (Rudduck, 2006; Alexander, 2010; McCarter & Woolner, 2011; Robinson, 2014). Both the UNCRC and ECM identified children as intelligent and insightful citizens, thereby challenging traditional views of children as naïve or unsophisticated (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Clark & Moss, 2006; Bucknall, 2012).

Pupils' perspectives of their physical environment

Burke (2007) has argued that children are particularly perceptive and well placed to advise on the impact of learning environments as a result of their spatial literacy. Moreover, when seeking the perspectives of children it quickly becomes apparent that how adults perceive a spatial feature may differ from the perception of the child (Pointon & Kershner, 2000; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). For instance, the classroom carpet area is a contested territory, representing both a useful input space for teachers and a site of physical discomfort for pupils (McCarter & Woolner, 2011). However, it must be recognised that pupil perspectives are not homogeneous (Reay, 2006). Meaning, the researcher of pupil perspectives must work from a subjectivist standpoint so as to identify both multiplicities as well as patterns (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008).

It is important to be aware of how children variously perceive their schools as the physical environment of the school impacts upon learning (Pointon & Kershner, 2000; Alexander, 2010; Pollard, 2014). In short, “space makes a difference”, with the physical having the ability to impact upon the psychological and social (McGregor, 2003, p.370). This was recognised by the Classrooms of the Future programme (DfES, 2003). Interestingly, despite this programme using the term ‘classroom’ in the title its aim was “to challenge current thinking on school building design” (DfES, 2003, p.3). This bias towards buildings has led in recent years to a range of new innovative structures but, within, the classroom has kept its perennial features (Pointon & Kershner, 2000;

Turner-Bisset, 2003). Moreover, the classroom interior has remained the responsibility of teachers (Galton, Simon & Croll, 1980; Moyles, 1992).

Groups at tables or individuals in rows

A major factor in organising the physical and social space of the classroom is seating. The Plowden report (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967), recognising both the value of teaching to the individual and the challenges of so doing in large classes, recommended the use of grouped seating arrangements around large tables. This would allow the teacher to work with small groups, as opposed to whole class teaching, and would facilitate learning between peers (Turner-Bisset, 2003). However, the ubiquity of table groups has not been accompanied by group working, with children being sat together but expected to work alone (Galton et al., 1980; Galton, Comber, Hargreaves & Wall, 1999; Turner-Bisset, 2003; McCarter & Woolner, 2011; Blatchford, Hallam, Ireson, Kutnick & Creech, 2012). It has been argued that this mismatch between a social seating style and independent working expectations is inconsistent and confusing for pupils (Wheldall, Morris, Vaughan & Ng, 1981; Hastings & Schwieso, 1995). Indeed, grouped seating encourages pupil-to-pupil discussion (Moyles, 1992). Unfortunately, this can occur at times when the teacher wants pupils to focus on individual work, meaning socialisation is re-interpreted as ‘time off-task’. The amount of ‘time off-task’ decreases when pupils are seated in rows (Wheldall et al., 1981; Wheldall & Lam, 1987). This has led to teachers identifying rows as preferable for seated learning activities because of its perceived behaviour management advantages and the subsequent increase in quantity of work produced (Bennett & Blundell, 1983; Pointon & Kershner, 2000).

Children have also expressed a preference for sitting in rows suggesting they too have identified the purpose of seated learning activities being the production of work (Wheldall et al., 1981; Wheldall & Lam, 1987). However, it is important to consider the origin of such preferences. The children may be attempting to provide what they believe is the ‘right’ answer; that being the opinion shared by teachers (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Alternatively, the children may have identified behavioural correlates: socialising and reprimands; working alone, an increase in work quantity and subsequent teacher praise. With regards to the latter set of correlates, the children may have subsequently internalised the perspective that more is better. However, although working in rows has been shown to increase the quantity of work produced, Wannarka and Ruhl (2008) highlight that this style of seating has little impact on the quality of work produced. This suggests that quality of work is

dependent on something more than increased ‘time on-task’. In turn, Wannarka and Ruhl’s critique connects with Vygotsky’s (1978) view of learning as a process augmented by social interactions, a position maintained by the research of the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2010).

Proponents of the Learning Without Limits project have put these ideas into practice by allowing children to choose where they sit and who they sit with so that learning is presented as a social activity (Swann, Peacock, Hart & Drummond, 2012). Therefore, instead of teacher’s selecting one seating arrangement for all types of learning activities, attention should be paid to the type of learning activities being undertaken and what seating arrangement would best facilitate them (Wheldall et al., 1982; Wheldall & Lam, 1987; Hastings & Schwieso, 1995; Hastings 1995). Most importantly, though, teachers need to be mindful of what children feel will help them with their seated learning activities. Not only does this then attend to the ideals of the UNCRC and ECM but also if children’s needs are met, following Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs, they are more likely to be motivated to learn (Pollard, 2014).

Friends and flexibility

In an investigation into inclusive practices in the classroom, Adderley et al. (2015) identified the needs of children to be seated with their friends. However, the children astutely acknowledged that this might affect their ability to concentrate meaning most were able to subordinate the need for social seating so as to privilege the teachers’ preferred seating strategies which encouraged ‘time on-task’. This suggests that children have identified the purpose of seated learning activities as being to increase work output. Nevertheless, the children in Adderley et al.’s research did object to rigid seating plans. Significantly, they did not object on the grounds of being placed in ‘ability’ groups but on the social limitations imposed by fixed seating arrangements. This suggests that, although aware of the importance of producing work when involved in seated learning, the children had identified an alternative function for seated activities: an opportunity to develop and maintain friendships. The children of Adderley et al.’s research demonstrate an awareness of a tension that exists within primary school between the importance of work output and that of cultivating social interactions (Alexander, 2010; Robinson, 2014).

Ownership and comfort

In contrast to the expressed desire for flexible seating arrangements, children have also expressed a need for a space to call their own. Pointon and Kershner (2000) cite the example of a child who placed drawing pins in a chair so as to claim it as his own. The teacher who worked with this child noted that this child-initiated demarcation of physical space extended the teacher-led practice of allocating labelled drawers as personal storage space for the children. This allocation of named drawers acknowledges that there is a need for individual space within a group-learning environment. Children want to feel like they belong and have significance as individuals in a space that they necessarily share with many others. In Adderley et al.'s (2015) research, the children felt this could be achieved through accessing varied abstract social interactions. Pointon and Kershner's (2000) research, by contrast, seems to suggest that children feel they can achieve this by marking out individuated physical territory. The sense of spatial ownership, according to Pointon and Kershner (2000), can be comforting to children. Indeed, the desire to create a learning environment that is comforting and comfortable is a key concern for children, with some suggesting this can be achieved through physically altering a school's seating provision; swapping hard chairs for sofas, beanbags and cushions (Birkett, 2001; Burke & Grosvenor, 2003).

Research design

A mixed-methods case study

This small-scale research project takes the form of a case study of a year 2 class. Originally, six children were selected to participate in the research, using a random stratified sampling technique in an attempt to gather the views of different groupings within the class (Cohen et al., 2008). However, consent was not obtained for two children, meaning four children participated in the research, two girls and two boys. Data relating to the children involved in this project has been given below in Table 1. Pseudonyms have been used so as to ensure anonymity. Cohen et al. (2008) acknowledges that case studies, with the diverse groupings to be found therein, provide multiple sources of information. This legitimates a mixed-method approach as it allows diverse data sets to be cross-referenced (Cohen et al., 2008). Additionally, when seeking the views of young children, using more than one method supports them at a time when they are developing myriad modes of

expression (MacBeath, Demetriou, Rudduck & Myers, 2001; Alexander, 2010; Niemi, Kumpulainen, Lipponen & Hilppö 2015).

	Gender	Age	School's 'ability' label	Reading level (A3 is highest)	Writing level (A3 is highest)	Maths level (A3 is highest)	Writing support given	Reading support given
Sean	M	6	Lower	A1	A1	A1	✓	✓
Oliver	M	7	Middle	A2	A1	A1	✓	
Nina	F	7	Higher	A3	A3	A3		
Felicity	F	6	Middle	A3	A2	A2	✓	

Table 1: School data on the four children involved in case study

The mosaic approach

Clark and Moss' (2001) mosaic approach has been adapted for use in this research project. This research strategy, originally created for working with pre-school children, builds upon the 'hundred languages' model of childhood communication identified by the Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards, Gandani & Forman, 1998). It invites children to create visual data and then interpret their data through dialogue (Clark & Moss, 2001). The approach's emphasis on personalised interpretation means it situates itself in a subjectivist position acknowledging that knowledge is not absolute, instead it is socially and culturally constructed (Thomson, 2007; Cohen et al., 2008). Although the children involved in this research project were older than the original cohort involved in the mosaic approach, I decided that this method was suited due to the varied communication skills of the children, as is indicated in Table 1. Moreover, by inviting year 2 children to collect and interpret data they assumed the position of experts of their own worlds (Clark & Moss, 2001; Clark & Moss, 2006). This reduced the power differential between them as participants and me as researcher (Cohen et al., 2008).

For this project, I conducted a discrete descriptive classroom observation, which aimed to assess the amount and type of seated learning activities taking place, thereby "making the familiar strange" (Simpson & Tuson, 2003, p.3). Children were then invited to create two sets of drawings over two consecutive group sessions related to seated learning. I chose group sessions so as to limit the children's inhibitions (Drever, 2003). In the first session the children were asked to draw themselves sat in the classroom. We then talked about their drawings. The second session involved

asking the children to draw themselves “learning in their perfect seat”. Again, the process of drawing was followed with a discussion.

Drawing and dialogue

The group sessions took place within the school’s library area. This was an area that was familiar to the children and where group work was normalised, thereby helping the children to feel at ease (Clark & Moss, 2001; Clark & Moss, 2006; Cohen et al., 2008, Clark, 2010). Each session began with me reiterating the nature of the research project, before inviting the children to draw.

Drawing, when used as a type of mediated consultation is seen as a way for children to create a symbolic narrative about their worlds that is not dependent on written or spoken communication skills (MacBeath et al., 2001; Clark & Moss, 2001; Punch, 2002; Anning & Ring, 2004; Dockett & Perry, 2005; Veale, 2005; O’Kane, 2008; Prosser & Burke, 2008; Adderley et al., 2015). Instead, drawing acts as a prompt for discussion (Kress, 1997; Anning & Ring, 2004). In order for the coupling of drawing and dialogue to produce genuine data pertaining to pupils’ perspectives, I was aware that I needed to privilege child-initiated discussions (MacBeath et al., 2003; Adderley et al., 2015). This meant, following the advice of Clark (2010), I asked open “why”, “how” and “can you tell me about...” questions. Additionally, I paid particular attention to the spontaneous utterances of the children produced during the process of drawing as Coates and Coates (2006) have highlighted their importance in providing insights into children’s thought processes.

Ethical considerations

The UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) created a cultural climate whereby the ethical treatment of children was prioritised. It identified the right of children to express their views on matters affecting them. Moreover, it noted that when actions relating to children are carried out the “best interests of the child” must be of pivotal importance (United Nations, 1989: Article 3). This has implications for education research, especially when children are active participants in the research. Indeed, the British Educational Research Association’s (BERA) *Ethical Guidelines for the Educational Research* (2011) makes direct reference to Article 3 of the UNCRC. This includes minimising intrusion and putting participants at their ease (BERA, 2011).

For this research project, this was addressed by scheduling, through discussions with the class teacher, two 20-minute sessions taking place on consecutive days so as to ensure the children did not miss out on whole lessons. This meant that the views of the class teacher, with regards to her teaching requirements and the needs of the children, were taken into account. Provision was also put in place to support the children as they returned to their lessons to minimise disruption to them and to those who remained in class. Moreover, the familiar setting in which the sessions took place, the use of drawing as a start point for each session and my being familiar to the children helped to put them at ease.

In spite of these efforts, research involves an element of disruption to the status quo. It is, therefore, imperative that all those involved provide voluntary informed consent (Robson, 2000; BERA, 2011). This project necessitated seeking the consent of the school's head teacher and the class teacher, meaning the research's aims were discussed and written consent was obtained. Additionally, written consent was sought from the parents and guardians of those children involved in the research and an ethics checklist was followed. However, as Robson (2000) states, the consent of the parent or guardian must be coupled with that of the child. Therefore, I explained to the children what the research was for, what information I would gather, how I would collect it and who would see it. This allowed me to address issues of confidentiality (Robson, 2000; BERA, 2011). Moreover, in order to attend to matters of privacy, I explained that all references to the school, teachers and children involved in the research project would be anonymised, as is the case in this report (Robson, 2000; BERA, 2011).

In accordance with BERA's (2011) guidelines on the right to withdraw, I explained to the children that they could decide to not take part in the research if they so wished. One child said that, although he wanted to be part of the activities, he did not want me to audio-record our discussions. I respected his wish and instead asked the children if they were happy for me to take written notes during our discussion. Drever (2003) recognises that note taking is a legitimate alternative recording method if audio consent is withdrawn. The children consented to my taking notes.

Findings and critical analysis of key findings

A descriptive observation

The purpose of the descriptive observation was to assess the amount and type of seated learning activities taking place during a whole day in school. Figure 1, below, presents data from one observed school day for the year 2 class used in this case study. It identifies the lessons and activities of the day and how many minutes were spent sat at tables, sat on the floor or moving around. Figure 1 shows that the lessons that made up this day were seated activities and all but one used table seating for the majority of the lesson. The data presented in Figure 1 illustrates the large amount of time children in this case study spend stationary. The small amount of time spent moving around during lessons was for transitions from carpet to tables and for tidying up. Having identified the large amount of time this class spend conducting seated learning, attention must now be paid to the type and purpose of such learning.

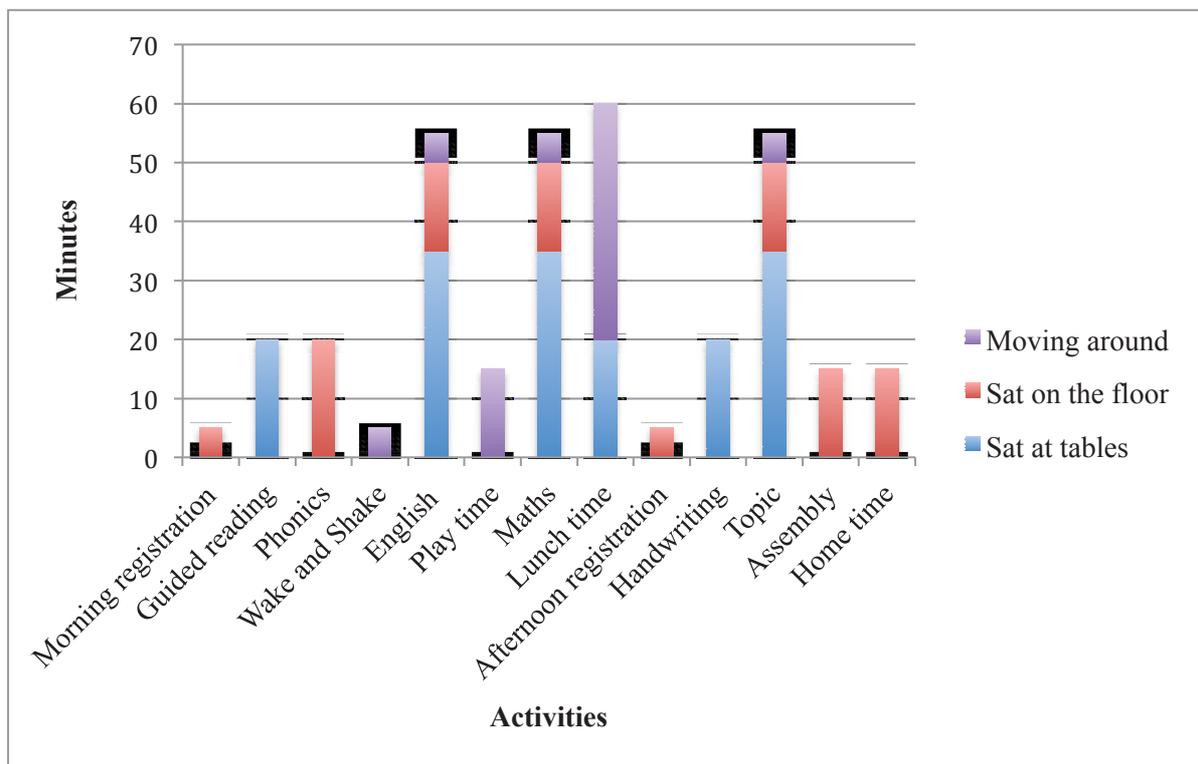


Figure 1: The amount of time spent seated or moving during a day in year 2

The tables in this class were organised into five group arrangements, seating in between four and eight children. The children were allocated a seat at one of the five arrangements. Although seated in groups, the children were predominantly expected to work individually. Indeed, the only regularly sanctioned collaborative activity was the use of ‘talk partners’, which took place during whole class carpet input. This suggests that the purpose of seated learning activities, as perceived by the teacher, was to increase ‘time on-task’ and to generate sufficient work output (Bennet & Blundell, 1983; Pointon & Kershner, 2000). This perspective will now be compared with the perspectives of the pupils by analysing the data generated from their drawings and the discussions held over two sessions.

Session One: drawings and discussions

In the first session, the children were asked to draw themselves sat in the classroom. From this initial instruction, Nina became instantly engaged in the task and provided a spontaneous running commentary of her artistic decisions: “I’m drawing a chair and it is going to be me sat in it. I’m going to draw the pencil pot. It’s going to be my pencil and my books”. Nina’s confident egocentrism was not an isolated case, with the other children, Oliver, Felicity and Sean also providing narrative that clarified artistic intentions and content.

Ownership

It has already been mentioned that the spontaneous utterances of children during the process of drawing can be illuminating (Coates & Coates, 2006). In the case of Nina and Sean’s descriptions of their drawings, both utilised the first person singular possessive pronoun, “my”, thereby establishing a sense of individual ownership over their seating. This reflects the needs of children for individuated spatial ownership previously identified by Pointon and Kershner (2000). Oliver also used a possessive pronoun to situate his drawing. However, he used the more inclusive first person plural to describe his drawing: “That’s the cushion in *our* book corner” [emphasis mine]. Felicity’s initial descriptions of her drawing were not orientated towards ownership: “I’m standing up and walking down to the carpet”. Although Felicity used the first person to identify herself as an active subject in her narrative, she is walking towards a generic space, “the carpet”, as opposed to her own specific space on the carpet.

Location and mobility

These preliminary child-initiated verbal descriptions indicate the divergent artistic content produced by the four children in response to my request that they draw themselves “sat in the classroom”. This is succinctly presented in Table 2. This table shows that, despite the observation data showing that the majority of seated learning activities in this class take place at tables, only two of the four children chose to draw table-based seating. The other two children, Felicity and Oliver, drew themselves at the carpet area and in the book corner, respectively. This reflects recent research by Niemi et al. (2015) into children’s favoured working locations, whereby children took pictures of themselves working in a variety of locations other than their designated desks.

	Tables	Carpet	Other
Sean	✓		
Oliver			✓
Nina	✓		
Felicity		✓	

Table 2: The different seated locations depicted in the children’s drawings of themselves sat in class

Returning to this research project, of the two children who depicted table seating, only Nina drew herself actually sat down (Figure 2), whereas Sean drew himself walking towards his table and chair (Figure 3). Despite this research project being a small-scale investigation that involved working with a small number of children, it is interesting to note that the theme of stasis and mobility repeats itself (Appendix 1). In total, two children drew themselves sat down, while the other two children depicted themselves as mobile, walking towards seating.



Figure 2: Nina's drawing

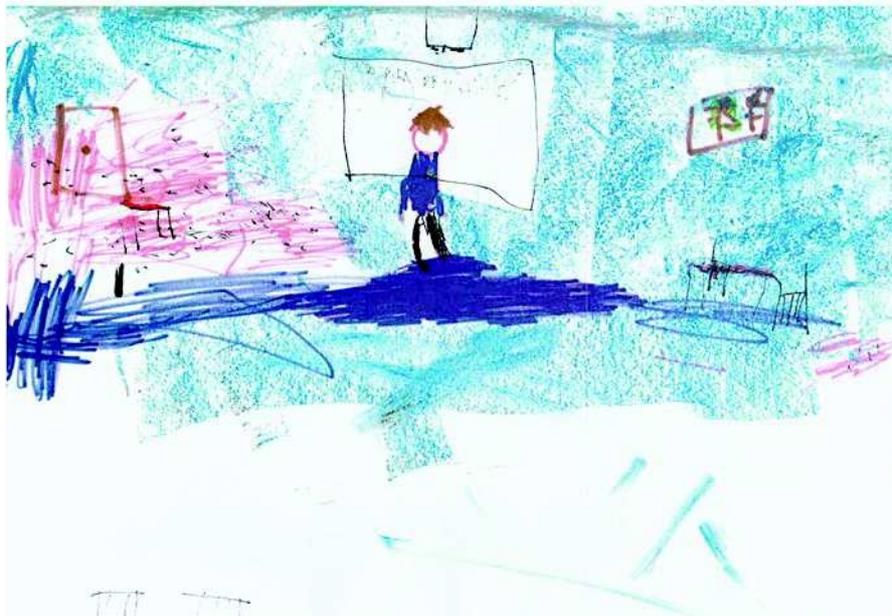


Figure 3: Sean's drawing

Once again, the interpretation of the data produced by the children is at odds with the data generated from the descriptive observation. The latter showed that the majority of the time that children spend in the classroom involves them being stationary, sat at tables, whereas only one of the four drawings depicts this typical scenario. This incongruity between the different data sets indicates the value of consulting pupils; they are able to reveal an alternative subjective interpretation of a quantifiable and seemingly objective situation (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004).

In order to investigate this difference further, I asked them to “tell me more about where they sit”. All four children were quick to respond with their designated tables (Appendix 2). Even though they did not indicate that they were aware of the ‘ability’ label associated with these locations, their definitive answers suggested that they were aware that these were fixed locations. One of the advantages of a mixed-methods research project is the ability to triangulate the data to see if there is common ground. Regarding the triangulation of the observational data, the children’s visual data and their verbal data, it is clear that there is a contrast not only between the quantitative and qualitative data, but also the perspectives within the qualitative data. This suggests a tension between the children’s understanding of where they ‘should’ sit and where they imagine themselves sitting, between what they think is ‘right’ and what they would like.

Purpose

The issue of what children think is ‘right’ extended into our discussions about what they did when sat at their designated table spaces. When asked to tell me more about this, Oliver quickly responded with a one-word answer: “work”. Although expressed in the negative, Nina’s drawing of herself declaring “no work today” concurs with Oliver’s view of the purpose of seated learning activities: work output. This agreement extended across all four children during discussions, with them identifying “literacy”, “numbers” and “writing” as typical seated learning activities. However, it is important to consider whether this is the children’s own opinion of what should happen as a result of seated learning or whether the children have internalised the practices of a typical school day as was previously discussed with regards to children’s expressed preference for sitting in rows (Wheldall et al., 1981; Wheldall & Lam, 1987).

In order to explore the question of how seated activities impact on learning, I asked the children to tell me more about what they needed in order to learn and concentrate. Their responses were coded thematically (see Appendix 3) and are presented below in Figure 4. Stationery appears to be the

primary need of the children. The materiality intimated by this theme is supported by the category of comfort, which included references to physical items such as “jumpers” and cardigans”. What is more, when the children referenced the need for seating it was done so in a purely functional manner, identifying the need to sit on chairs and lean on tables. They did not associate seating with more abstract qualities such as enhanced concentration. From the first session it is possible to assert that the children interpret the purpose of seated activities as being the production of work and that its impact upon learning is one of material concern. The drawings and discussions of the second session address what is important to the children when carrying out seated learning activities.

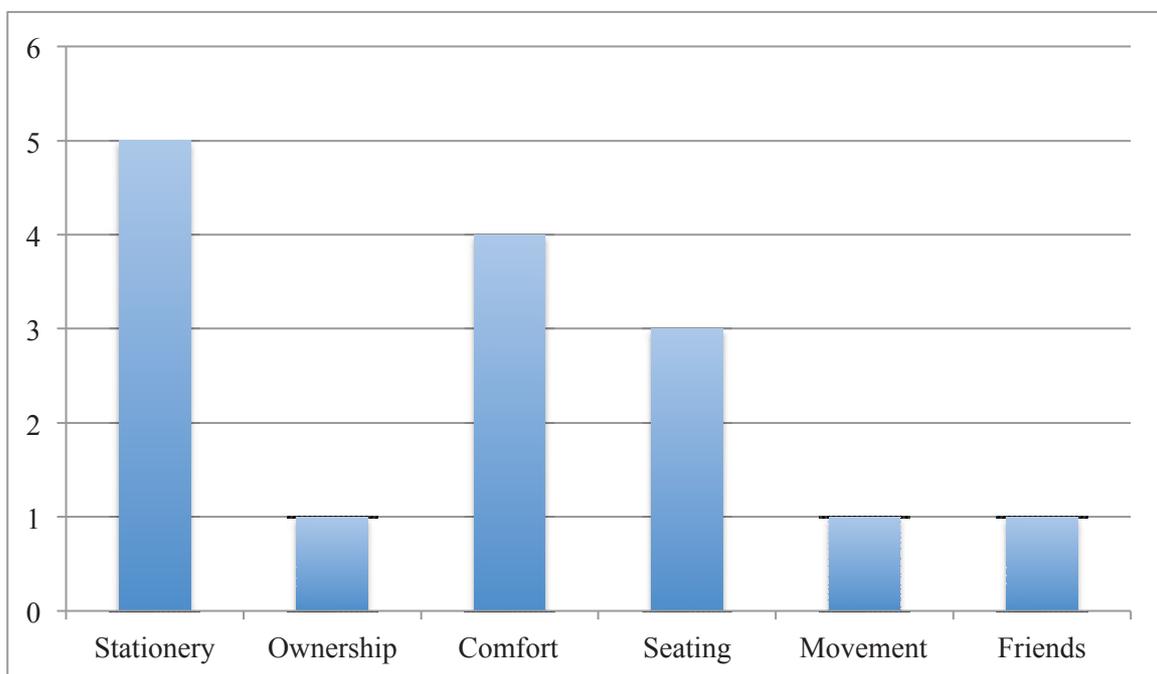


Figure 4: What children felt they needed in order to learn and concentrate

Session Two: drawings and discussions

In the second session, I invited the children to draw themselves “learning in their perfect seat” and we talked about what the children wanted to have around them when learning. Therefore, this session was concerned with addressing the final question of this research project: what is important to children when completing seated activities. Interestingly, and in contrast to the first session where only two children drew themselves seated and only one at a table, in this session, three children drew themselves seated and all four children depicted tables and chairs (see Table 3). Using this information it is possible to assert that when the children are considering ideal scenarios

for learning, they are more willing to position themselves as seated within a visual representation. What is more, they seem more willing to depict conventional seating arrangements using tables and chairs. Perhaps, because this is an imaginative exercise, they feel they have more control over the environment they are creating, meaning they can turn the seemingly conventional into a personalised and self-serving space.

	Depicting themselves seated	Depicting tables and chairs
Sean		✓
Oliver	✓	✓
Nina	✓	✓
Felicity	✓	✓

Table 3: Tabulation of the children’s second drawings

Ownership and comfort

This need to personalise space is supported by the verbal utterances of the children while they were drawing. Felicity spontaneously provided the following monologue to accompany her drawing (Figure 5): “This is my seat, this is me, this is my purple table, this is my chair. These are stripes. I’ve got a chair like that at home”. Again, the presence of the first person possessive pronoun “my” illustrates the importance of ownership for children (Pointon & Kershner, 2000). Additionally, Felicity’s final statement links her ideal seat with her home environment, which is something all four children did: Oliver by drawing a tent in his back garden (Figure 6); Nina by drawing herself in a room at the top of her house (Figure 7); Sean by drawing a large table in his bedroom (Figure 8).



Figure 5: Felicity's drawing of herself at her purple table and stripy chair



Figure 6: Oliver's drawing of his tent: "it's got heating"



Figure 7: Nina's drawing of herself sat at the top of her house "writing letters"



Figure 8: Sean's drawing of himself sat at his "own table" with his "info book"

This similarity suggests a connection between ideal seating and the need for comfort and familiarity. The theme of home and comfort repeated itself across both the visual and verbal data of the second sessions. This is shown in Figure 9. This consistency suggests its importance to the children when engaging in learning. Figure 9 also highlights the importance children place on having ample space in which to conduct their learning. This need has been consistently identified in previous research (Blishen, 1969; Birkett, 2001; Burke & Grosvenor, 2003; DfES, 2003). Interestingly, the children’s preference for physical space is coupled with a desire for concrete objects, including food and stationery, in order to conduct seated learning. The children appear to be mostly concerned with material wellbeing as opposed to social or psychological wellbeing. This is explored further with regards to whether they depicted themselves working alone or with others.

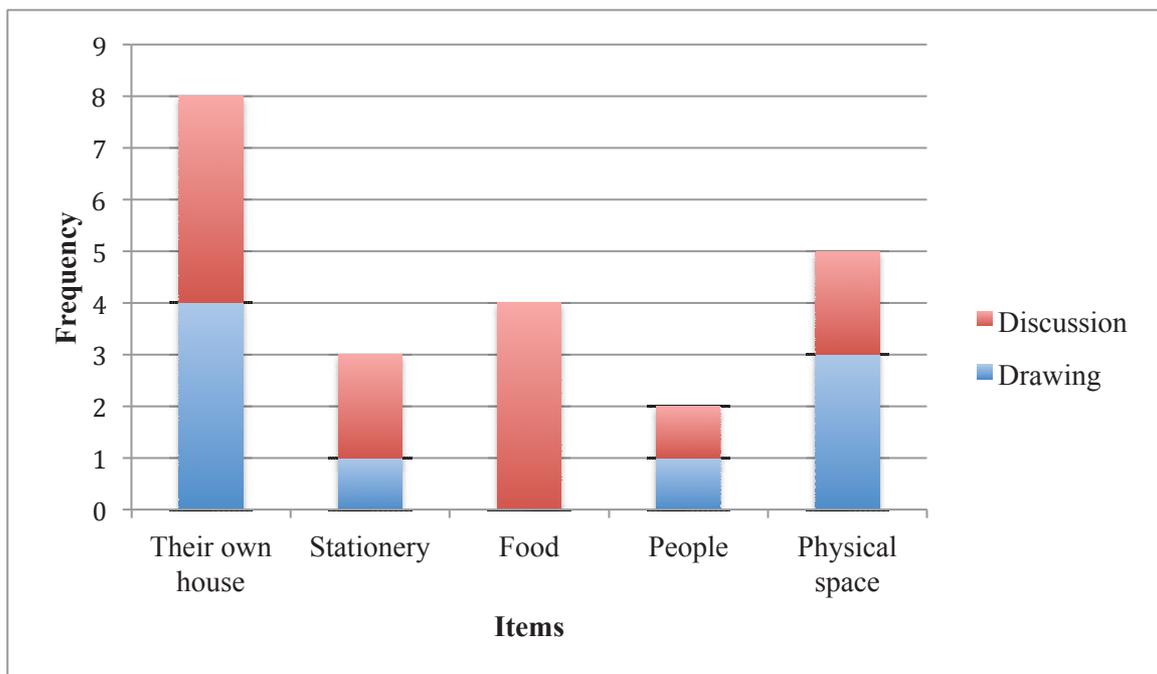


Figure 9: What children identified as useful for seated learning in their drawings and discussions

Working alone

In the second session, all four children drew individual seating and of the three children who drew themselves they were depicted alone. This mirrors the drawings from the first session where friends were absent in the visual data and only referenced as a potential source of distraction in the verbal data. Only one child drew another person in their second drawing. This was Nina, who drew her

mum at the bottom of the house, far removed from her position at the top of the house. It was also Nina who drew another person in her first drawing, this being a member of staff.

Friends are not present in the visual data, despite previous literature suggesting children want to work with friends (Adderley et al., 2015; Niemi et al., 2015). It would appear that the children in this research project see effective learning as an individual process. This might be because they have internalised the isolated learning practices encountered in their classroom. However, the data is not suited to either confirm or dispute this speculation. Only one verbal utterance by Oliver hinted that the children might have an understanding of the value of collaborative learning. When asked what they might want to have around them when learning, Oliver replied as follows: “I’d have someone”. When I asked him to tell me a bit more he said, “I’d have the man who made Apple because he’s the smartest and richest. I’d have him with me so he could tell me everything”. Oliver’s supplementary explanation quickly confounded my assumption of the child’s interest in collaborative learning. Instead, he was interested in a one-way exchange of information in his favour.

The second session with the children iterated the theme of comfort identified in earlier literature and from the data generated in the first session. Interestingly, it also established the theme of working alone. In this sense, the children are similar to those identified by Wheldall et al. (1981) and Wheldall and Lam (1987) who prefer working independently in rows. Seemingly, then, the children of this research study associate seated learning activities with the production of work and the presumed impact of seated activities is an increase in work output. It follows, that the objects and concepts of importance to these children when completing seated activities would be those which support their work output, such as the correct stationery or “someone” who could “tell [them] everything”. It is interesting to note that the children do not express a need to sit near friends. Instead, they associate sitting with their peers as a source of possible distraction.

Critical analysis of research method

My adaptation of the mosaic approach has been particularly useful in exposing the differences in perspectives held by young children with regards to each other and the existing literature. The combination of drawings and discussions provided children with different means of expressing themselves. The former appealed to the children who struggled with more formalised modes of

expression and the latter allowed the children to develop ideas together (MacBeath et al., 2001). Indeed, Rinaldi (2006) has noted that when children talk to each other they are able to refine their own understandings, as by articulating to others they are also articulating to themselves.

However, with regards to drawing, Punch (2002) has warned against assuming that it will appeal equally to all children. Indeed, during the first drawing session I became aware that Oliver and Felicity preferred to draw quickly and then declare that they were finished, whereas Nina and Sean preferred to spend longer amounts of time finessing their work. Mindful of these differences, I encouraged Oliver and Felicity to talk about their drawings while they waited. They were happy to do this, but they occasionally drifted onto other topics. MacBeath et al. (2001) have identified this as a weakness of the drawing method. I was cautious about reminding Oliver and Felicity to talk about their drawings because I did not want to impose the teacher-pupil relationship we shared in the classroom (Cohen et al., 2008). Instead, I wanted to be seen in my other role as a researcher interested in their perspectives. Therefore, I listened keenly to all of Oliver and Felicity's discussions, even those that were 'off-topic' and, when appropriate, invited Nina and Sean to talk about their drawings so as to draw Oliver and Felicity back towards the topics of concern to this research project.

Another challenge I encountered, which is acknowledged by Drever (2003), was managing the contributions of the children. Nina was a confident and engaging speaker, meaning she quickly dominated the conversation with her contributions. Again, I did not want to impose hierarchical rules upon the discussion so I was mindful of attempting to balance the act of listening patiently to Nina and encouraging the other children to contribute as well. This was complicated by the act of taking notes as was previously described in the section on ethical considerations. I am aware that, although I tried to note down all contributions, I may have privileged some over others. This illustrates the issue of researcher bias as recognised by Cohen et al. (2008). Meaning, if I were to do this research project again I would investigate alternative methods of recording, including the use of an independent scribe, should a child object to the use of audio recording equipment.

I am aware that this is a small-scale research project and, as such, it is difficult to claim that its findings can be generalised (Hamilton, 2011). If there had been more time, I would have liked to conduct the drawing and discussion sessions with more children so as to see if more patterns

emerged. However, the findings do contribute to the wider field of pupils' perspectives on their learning environment by highlighting the range of opinions even within a small group of children.

Implications and conclusion

The preceding presentation of findings and their analysis has revealed a range of pupils' perspectives, sometimes at odds with relevant previous literature and, at times, at odds with each other. This makes it hard to arrive at neat answers to research questions. However, this realisation in itself is of use as it draws attention to the need of education researchers and practitioners to recognise and work with the range of opinions held by pupils.

I am particularly struck by the children's interest in working alone and in the desire to exert ownership over spaces within the classroom. Being aware of the work of Vygotsky's work on social learning (1978) and Alexander's research into dialogic teaching (2011), I believe strongly in creating learning experiences that are shared and that value social interactions. This means that early in the next school year when I am working with a new class of children I will need to discuss with them what types of learning will take place in the classroom and what types of output are expected and valued. This will hopefully militate against excessive focus on sheer volume of work and instead emphasise quality of work. Moreover, it will necessitate discussing what format work can take. I hope to create a class environment, where work can be playful, spoken, drawn and acted; it is not limited to written content.

This research project has also highlighted the needs of children to have a learning environment that is comfortable and meets their material needs. The implications for me as a class teacher are, when I set up my new classroom, that I think about how the children will inhabit the space and how I can ensure they are able to independently access the resources and equipment they need to learn. However, such carefully made plans will have limited efficacy if I do not openly share them with children at the start of the school year. It is imperative that when I welcome a new class into a new classroom space I discuss with them the layout of the space, the resources available and how we can work together within it. In so doing, I will be able to share my perspective with the children but also understand theirs.

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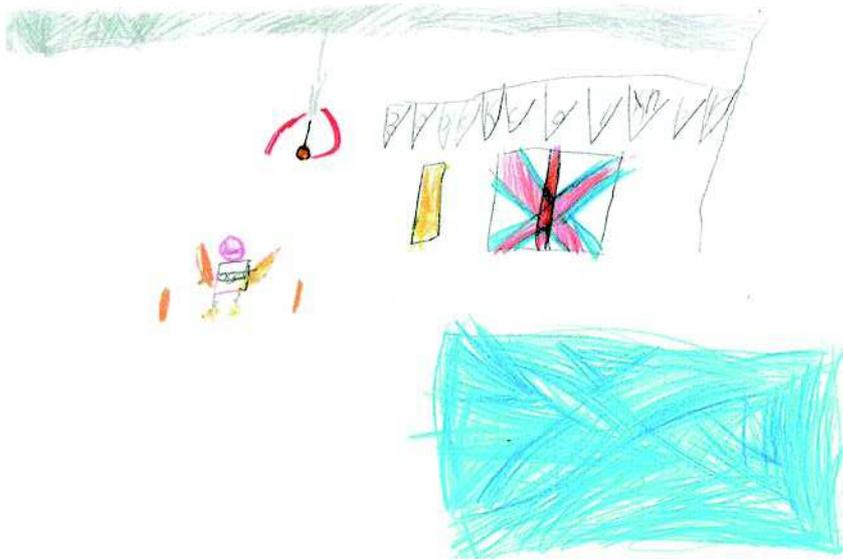
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Appendix 1: Oliver and Felicity's drawings from session one



Oliver's drawing: he is seated in the book corner



Felicity's drawing: she is standing on the carpet as opposed to sitting

Appendix 2: Transcription based on written notes from session one discussion

Me: So, can you tell me more about where you sit?

Sean: Table number 2, or 5.

Felicity: 1.

Nina: Table number 1 for maths. For literacy, table 4.

Oliver: 5 for stuff like literacy. Table 3 for maths.

Felicity: Sometimes, maths I'm table 5.

Nina: We also sit on the carpet.

Felicity: Carpet.

Sean: Sometimes on the carpet when teachers tell us what to do.

Appendix 3: How I coded what children said they needed in order to learn

Me: Tell me about what you need to help you concentrate.

Sean: A straight line, ruler, or a circle to trace around.

Felicity: Pencils, otherwise you're not able to write.

Nina: Books... You need a chair to sit on.

Oliver: You need to put your name on your work.

Sean: It needs to be warm, not boiling hot though.

Felicity: Jumpers, cardigans, otherwise you might get too hot or cold.

Oliver: A table, something to lean on.

Nina: Walking would be nice... The carpet, but if you sit next to someone.

Sean: If he's distracting you, you have to move.

Colour coding: Stationery - Comfort - Seating - Ownership - Movement - Friends