

## **Finding our feet: unschooling the production of normativity**

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This paper is written from inside a Year 1 classroom at Alma Park, a primary school in Manchester with a diverse community and longstanding commitment to inclusive education. The Senior Leadership Team and staff at the school all make every effort to provide the most exciting and stimulating educational experiences for the children and their families. We take time here to think about how life in that classroom is nevertheless deeply affected by the demands of the increasingly regulated apparatus of the UK education system, currently held tenuously together by a regime of testing and league table reporting that puts immense pressures on schools (Stephen Ball, 2018).

The paper is located somewhere in-between the soles of our feet and the classroom floor, the light and shade of surfaces and undersides; conceptual spaces that help us find ways of living together "in the presence of differences" (Masscheleina and Verstraete, 2012: 1190). Our collaborative writing emerged from Gabby's preference to take off her shoes when teaching and whilst this creates consternation for some of her colleagues at school as they find it odd and uncomfortable, it has led to interesting shared moments between us in relation to thinking about time, connection, and children's sensory or somatic encounters with school.

Gabby is a teacher of 5 and 6-year-old children, working in 1B at Alma Park. Rachel is an educational researcher and has been working on the Odd project with me for almost two years.

## School time and the production of normativity

This research is founded on the assumption that, deep within the socializing, disciplinary and normalizing work of social institutions, there is always a counter-tendency toward *odd-ness*, transgression, new thought and productive discomfort. Schools are key sites where these entwined tendencies – toward normalization and idiosyncrasy - deeply affect the futures of the children who are caught up in their forces. This paper attempts to attune to those tendencies by focusing on how Gabby's idiosyncratic teaching without shoes escapes normalcy into what might be a form of *odd-ness* that is productively disruptive to school's normalising social order.

There are many studies that claim the linear processes and temporal flows of the UK schooling system re-produce an overwhelming sense of 'normalization' that shapes the public imaginary of the developing child. Deborah Britzman contemplates the entanglement of quantitative time, child development and the production of schooling, "If one could magically blow away the concept of development which, after all, keeps time running in place, the entire edifice of schooling would crumble" (Britzman. 2021). In school, we witness structures that perpetuate beliefs in age-related maturation, for example from class organisation, curricular structure, pace and progression of learning, to a sense of 'competent' social relations, and 'acceptable' behaviour in the classroom, which all serve to render a young child's body 'school ready' and docile enough for effective learning. Webs of assessment, points of measurement, processes of standardisation and intervention collectively sustain the apparatus of the educational system and the chronological flow of school time. Britzman continues,

It must be said that for the field of education, time is felt as a terrible harried matter and a time of anxiety... Indeed, it is typical for students and teachers to worry there is never enough time, that we are too late, that we wait too long, and that we are unprepared. We may worry that knowledge comes too early before we know how it may be handled. We are urged to consider a future we do not yet know (Britzman. 2021, <https://educate.bankstreet.edu>).

Always '*looking ahead*' in order to '*keep up with*' to avoid '*losing time*' and '*falling behind*', or '*catch up*' by filling in '*the gaps*', schools are always measuring and working to time.

School's experiencing of the child is always the becoming pupil, the subject of a flightpath algorithm, a projection and prediction of outcome and attainment.

Drawn to that which escapes, yet is nevertheless folding in and out of such extensive forms of relentless measurement in school, we also pay attention to what Bergson (1991: 81) refers to as duration, where all the events of our daily school lives are preserved, but indistinctly. We cannot overlook the deeply connected processes, unquantifiable and incomparable time that is a continuous flow, elastic and malleable, the time of the classroom moment, lived school time. This paper documents something of the interstices of measured *and* malleable time spent with 1B. We try to sense how a teacher, together with the 32 young people she works with, find ways to navigate the webs that anticipate and stabilise, whilst always being connected beyond and into different kinds of duration, rhythms and movements, refusing to be defined by fixed subject positions in advance of children's multiple encounters with the world.

The school day in 1B runs almost identically to other classes in Alma Park School and to other classes in other schools across the UK with children being welcomed at 8:45am and leaving at 3:15pm. Classrooms are typically arranged around configurations of tables and seating clusters for children to do their individual, as well as group work. There is usually a carpeted area near the front of the classroom where the class might gather together for a story or some other whole class activity. Gabby recognises how the layout encourages a more docile body in the classroom, especially as Catherine Burke would argue that "denies the lower half of the body in favour of the upper parts in defining what it means to be educated" (2018: 32). It allows for the development of highly prized senses, vision and hearing, engendering a more sedentary perception of the world.

Structure and predictability for the school day is a necessity for some pupils, allowing them a sense of continuity and security about what each day will consist of. Similarly, wearing a school uniform, having regular seating positions, predicting the daily timetable, knowing the behaviour rules all contribute to familiarity, routine and collectivity. Within any intensely organised day, there are always missed opportunities for change and variety as well as a

chance for many children to develop alternative styles of learning, social skills and time to explore personal interests.

Mindful of this, Gabby tries to engage children in a variety of learning experiences, attempting to use both the indoor and outdoor space around the school premises. Whilst there are some opportunities for self-directed learning within activities, for example the particular use of materials and apparatus in Maths and other subjects that acknowledge how “concepts gradually emerge within the folds of material encounters” (de Freitas and Farrara, 2015: 567), for the most part methods are dictated due to perceived time limitations and the need to meet the requirements set out in the National Curriculum.

### **Being drawn to the floor**

Amongst this pacy classroom learning and teaching environment, Gabby remains cognisant of the children caught up in its fast-flowing rhythms. Children find ways of keeping their heads above the swirling water; some comfortably buoyant, confident and independent swimmers, whilst others receiving a range of specialised support from teaching assistants and other resources to stay afloat. The role of movement in the ebb and flow of the classroom is something we’ve become drawn to and are mindful of the impact bodily stillness might have on the child’s learning processes. Tim Ingold reminds us of how, over time, we have come to understand the process of learning as being about the stillness of the body to facilitate the development of cognition and consciousness,

Where the boot... deprives wearers of the possibility of thinking with their feet, the chair enables sitters to think without involving the feet at all. Between them, the boot and the chair establish a technological foundation for the separation of thought from action and of mind from body (Ingold, 2004: 323).

The Year 1 classroom is full of tables, chairs and shoes. The classroom organisation seems to dislocate bodies from minds held solely responsible for thinking, and to still motion to encourage thought in the process of becoming pupil. The furniture and uni-form ways of behaving somehow disregard bodily movements as resources for learning, with little acknowledgement of “how thinking occurs in the gestures and the bodily movements

themselves rather than behind them” (de Freitas and Farrara, 2015: 566). Being asked to sit still, use quiet voices and concentrate on the task-at-hand poses challenges when inhabiting a young body with urges to move. We ponder with Murriss and Babamia (2018) what it means to be a ‘fidgety child’ in a classroom. Although specifically talking about her autism, Raya Shields’ experiences of the classroom resonates across settings today, where teacher expectations require such a lot of young bodies that need to fidget, rock, dance, slide, call out.

Many classroom practices and research studies focus on activities going on above tables. The tables mark the threshold of above and below worlds that bodies inhabit, the light and shade of the classroom. Yet the shadowy underworld of legs and feet is not absent, or diminished but has just as much reality as above. Becoming mindful of this space adds a new quality to the textures, timbre and shades of the classroom. Gabby’s preference to teach without shoes led us under the tables where we encountered a material world of feet and shoes, shoes and chairs, chair, table and human legs, legs and socks, socks and feet, feet and carpet, carpet fibres and strands of hair, where things are always happening in-between. A classroom full of seated 5 and 6-year-olds, where legs and feet are always on the move; they shake, bend, rock, balance, tilt, tap, slide, pile up, walk past. *I could hear their feet moving but was amazed how much feet move without us realising* (extract of communication from Gabby after seeing the under the table film). We could variously read these as ‘fidgeting’ feet, legs treading water, an inability to sit still, necessary processes of self-soothing and self-regulation in times of anxiety, distress or discomfort. However, drawing from Patty Douglas and her colleagues who urge us not to see embodied difference as individual ‘problem bodies’ in need of fixing, we want to place “a few drops of doubt in an ocean of certainty” (Deligny, 2015: 73) and look at how improvisational relations between learning and teaching *with* bodies, feet, chairs and floor constitute each other in duration, in the making of the world of 1B.

### **Unschooling time: a manifold of sensations**

Dinneen (2004) points out that educational apparatus has created a disproportionate measuring system in schools that causes difference to suffer and within such a regulated

regime it is hard to understand how difference thrives. But in Alma Park, it does; difference proliferates in the classroom, in every encounter, in each moment. Despite being immersed in a classroom where each child is exposed to similar education and expectations, it is still noticeable that every expression of a child is wonderfully nuanced, with singularities flourishing. Gabby is acutely attuned to how these subtle connective details, and ways of being are expressions of difference but also opportunities for getting to know how children and adults alike, live with deeply connected bodies and minds within a busy head-led space; bodies are the connective tissue that link children, and teachers to the environment of the classroom. Knowing that it is through bodies that the world is encountered, bodies are how we explore our place in the world and grow our knowledge of it (Rubige, cited in Ashley, 2012: 33). It could be looking down when feeling too nervous to answer a question, or sitting on top of their feet for comfort, holding onto a special object or it may even be repeatedly asking to go to the bathroom as a way of finding something vital in things, in gestures and in movement when feeling overwhelmed. Each of us has ways to keep connected.

Gabby stays connected by taking off her shoes. Gibson reminds us that, “it is surely through our feet, in contact with the ground that we are most fundamentally and continually ‘in touch’ with our surroundings: (1979: 195–7). Observing Gabby’s shoeless practice feels like an affective charge, a tiny gesture but intense force, somehow destabilising a classroom that is otherwise characterised by quantifiable time and normative standards. Taking her shoes off, being in touch with the floor, Gabby productively undermines something of the authority sustaining the system of schooling. This minor gesture momentarily loosens her from the system’s webbed regimes that fix habits and expectations in school - she feels strangely grounded whilst still suspended in these sticky structures. The risk of being without shoes refuses something of the cramped and customary space of being teacher, allowing other ways of connecting and expressing to emerge - a small gesture with generative potentiality.

In 1B, Gabby’s shoelessness is full of sensations and affective textures. It is a tactile experience, simultaneously touching and being touched by the environment. It is an interruption. Dropping not only from her head into her body, Gabby allows herself to sink

down through her body and into her feet, a gesture that momentarily loosens the hold that fast-paced, head-led, linear time has over the school day.

*The removal of my shoes has been an automatic process since qualifying as a teacher almost 5 years ago. I often liken school to my second home, and at home I am never seen with shoes on. When at home, I want to feel comfortable and free of worries and for me taking off my shoes is of high importance. Despite the school day being fully accounted for and designated towards head-led teaching, being barefoot allows me an opportunity to bring my own personal sensory experience into my day (Gabby, Blog, 17th Feb 2021).*

Catherine Burke recounts how thinking with the feet satisfied her curiosity “to engage with the overlooked, forgotten, or undervalued aspects of the experience of schooling” (2017: 32), which together with Gabby’s reflections prompts the question how can we better attune to often overlooked sensory experiences and how they affect us in the school day?

The soles of Gabby’s feet are acute sensory receptors absorbing the ground’s composite heterogeneity – her skin against the fine grain fibres of her cotton socks in touch with the floor, a place where the skin of the school meets the sole of the foot. It is a reciprocal touching, a secret point of contact and connection registering her body in space, a point from where movement and sensation comes. Cooper-Albright proposes it is in the midst of such a connection that allows us to feel most intensely the edge of difference (2019: 180). Perullo (2019) refers to this kind of knowing as ‘ecological aesthetics’ or ‘haptic perception’, a knowledge through movement instead of through cogitation – challenging more official school curricular and pedagogical business, this knowledge is not knowing *about* things but *with* them (Ingold, 2017). In a busy head-led education system, where standardisation and knowing *about* number, or phonics is valued, we attend to the proliferation of difference and the ways that knowing *with* our bodies in time and space of school matters.

*I wore my shoes pretty much all day on Monday and it was the weirdest thing, I really did not feel like myself at all. My head just didn’t feel right. The action of removing shoes and allowing the freedom of my feet almost releases creativity and a sense of being myself. My thoughts are somehow freed into thinking about other things, like the sensory feel of*

*different surfaces beneath my feet allowing me to ground myself to my environment or to focus that energy onto my teaching practice* (Gabby, Blog, 19th Feb 2021).

Gabby's connection to the ground vitalises her body. She describes how she becomes free, released, creative, energised. Confined to wearing shoes, Gabby is somehow regulated by their inflexible shape and suffocating internal space, determining how she walks, stands, and relates to children, perhaps feeling compromised, distanced from them and the undulations of the school environment. Shoes conceal and in doing so, seal the edges of difference from instability. Reflecting on the role of uniform in wider society, Tynan & Godson (2019) might suggest shoes maintain a sense of order in the classroom, co-constituting *one* way of being that works to arrest the uncertainty and flux of life. Far from the head-led sedentary impetus of schooling, the important work of education requires life *and* thought, engagement *and* movement.

### **Confined bodies that refuse to stand still**

*As I was reading Ingold's paper, I started thinking about school, the curriculum, sitting at tables, on chairs, wearing shoes, I feel that way. Life is already sketched out. Educators aspire for pupils to engage with education, parents for their children to meet a partner, have children. All these plans and events furnished with inanimate objects, things, lead us along an already paved path. We crawl, walk, talk, go to school, learn, drive, learn more, get a job, following in the footsteps of those before us, in shoes like they would have worn* (Gabby, Blog, 24th Feb 2021).

The linear trajectory of time is intensified by repetitious acts that confirm schooled identities, yet being captive in this system can frustrate and agitate. Simon Springer (2016) in his work on anarchy reinforces the idea of being confined by the apparatus of the education system, whilst recognising within the conditions of being schooled, children take opportunities to be non-compliant. The suggestion is that within the logic of the present system, there is always potential for refusal, spaces for transgression and idiosyncrasy.

*You can physically see how children get frustrated with sitting for too long, or feeling uncomfortable with the work they do. For me, I take my shoes off. Sometimes I feel like when I take my shoes off the worries about being perfect or specifically following the*



*expected routes can be challenged. I can somehow feel like we can be different, do things another way, and it will still be okay.*

*There is a child in my class who walks his own route. He too enjoys taking off his shoes every now and then, at one point even throwing them across the room. When he's too warm, he walks around the classroom in just a vest. He comes in and has no filter. He asks questions other children are too nervous to ask, such as why someone needs a wheelchair or why there was a spot on my face. For so many, such direct questions may come across as rude and impolite however for me, it is simply this child being curious of the world around him and learning through observation and questioning. I love that. He is a great example of someone who is able to adapt to the school environment in his own way whilst still being true to himself. This is his method of being able to cope and still being engaged in his learning in a positive manner. He will ask those uncomfortable questions, it's his own way of learning and understanding the environment around him without conforming to what others may deem the 'norm'. Taking this independence and curiosity away from this child would lead to him being concerned about his own self, opposed to the learning he could be immersed in (Gabby, Blog, 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2021).*

Patty Douglas and her colleagues usefully remind us how it is the “relationships *between us* [that] become the focus of concern, rather than the identification and remediation of atypicality” (2021: 620). This child may well be read as ‘atypical’ in the Year 1 environment, where he is expected to understand the conventions of classroom behaviour. In Gabby’s relationship with this child, there is both connection and attunement, as well as discord and apprehension. This child physically removes or resists what confines him: clothing, shoes and classroom rules such as calling out. He is exploring the world through unschooling, as Springer (2016) might suggest, living into his creative potential and opening an aperture on alternative ontologies more in tune with the possibilities of dis-order. This child is existing in the classroom space differently than a sedentary child. Together with Gabby, they make more visible the habitual controlled workings of the classroom. The irrepressible dichotomy for all teachers however lies in how permissible *is* resistance in a classroom saturated in measured time with a large class of children, whilst ensuring that compromise and

conforming to some rules does not make the classroom a place where any child feels out of place? Honouring the child's need to connect with the world of schooling in different ways, whilst always being conscious of behaviour management, through manifold sensations, Gabby somehow has to hold onto the classroom as a place for idiosyncrasy where both these problems are ongoing and anomalous. Taking her shoes off keeps her in the middle of these things, a place traditionally repressed by the system of linearity, cancelling out the "teleological idea of a definite beginning and end" (Yountae, 2014: 288). In a process of undergoing with all the children of 1B, how does a body's duration engage with what the education system and process of schooling find anomalous? How can Gabby's feelings of groundedness help resist being complicit with the pervasive and perpetual demand that difference must be fixed?

*As teachers, our job is to educate. Rather than imposing an environment which can feel overwhelming and difficult to 'fit into', it is more about creating a space which gives children a sense of safety and welcome no matter what their quirks and differences. A space where they are able to display these differences without fear of judgement (Gabby, Blog, 15<sup>th</sup> April, 2021).*

Gabby's teaching without shoes is part of how she creates a sense of common ground in the classroom, opening up a space for thinking-feeling and doing differently. Cole (in Semetsky & Masny, 2013: 98) articulates how teachers and children learning about each other could be understood as tentatively moving with an energy field or being in a dance, where teachers undergo a process of acclimatisation and become one with the atmospheres of the class. Attuned to, and supportive of each other's tentativeness allows trust and confidence to flourish.

Although deeply caught up in the apparatus of the education system and the relentless demands it makes on already heavily-burdened schools and their communities, Gabby works in a place that welcomes measured resistance. Whilst working with the practices that feed into the regime of testing and league table reporting, Alma Park holds onto their commitment to finding ways of living together in the presence of differences. Deborah Britzman draws on the work of Jonathan Silin (2018) when he discusses the importance of working with common ground as, "holdings of soft situations made from being with others

in vulnerability, dependency, curiosity, and care. This common ground might overtake our passion for the disavowal of bodies, so operative in education” (cited in Britzman, 2021, <https://educate.bankstreet.edu>).

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