

Do children perceive social class in children's fantasy texts?

Initial findings from research in a Year 6 classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article is an account of fieldwork carried out in a school in East Sussex, in the south of England, with a group of 10- and 11-year-old children, to discover whether they perceive social class in a selection of children's fantasy fiction texts. The methodology will be described, and there will be a discussion of the initial findings. I am grateful to University of East London's School of Arts and Digital Industries for the funding that enabled me to buy the books used in this research.

INTRODUCTION

This research was carried out as part of my PhD fieldwork. My PhD is entitled 'White working-class children and children's fantasy fiction'; my PhD is interdisciplinary in nature, working in the fields of both children's literature and education. The purpose of my fieldwork was to find out whether children identify class in fantasy fiction, and if so, whether it affects their enjoyment. My fieldwork was carried out in a one-form entry Church of England school in a small town in East Sussex, at the foot of the South

Downs. The school serves a small housing estate with a mixture of social and private housing and a wide range of family incomes. The majority of the residents are White British. It has a smaller than average number of children in receipt of free school meals, but a significant band of children whose family income is just over the threshold for free school meals. The Year 6 (10- and 11-year-olds) class teacher Ms S. expressed concern over the latter group, who significantly underperform in comparison with their more affluent classmates. After obtaining ethical clearance, I sent letters and consent

KEYWORDS

READING
COMPREHENSION
SOCIAL CLASS
PRIMARY EDUCATION.

forms to parents of all 30 children in the Year 6 class; 12 parents agreed to allow their children to participate, of which 3 children identified as girls and 9 as boys. One boy disclosed that he is dyslexic ('Severus', 19 January 2020 (19/1/20)) and one that he is on the autism spectrum (Asperger's syndrome: 'Sonic', 19/1/20), and one girl, 'Hermione', is of White British and Black African Caribbean heritage. I visited the school fortnightly on Friday afternoons from October to February, with some disruption in the lead-up to Christmas and because of some other special events going on in the school.

BACKGROUND READING

The purpose of my fieldwork was to explore the understanding of social class with a group of 10- to 11-year olds in a primary school. I wanted to find out whether the children recognised markers of social class within fantasy fiction, and whether or not it affected their enjoyment of what they read. Konstantoni & Kustatscher (2016) argue that ethnography is the pre-eminent research methodology in childhood research. They outline the importance of both reflexivity and informed consent; and locate ethnography in a 'childhood studies paradigm which recognizes children's competencies and agency' (p. 223), underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef 1989).

Punch (2002) discusses the methodology of working with children, suggesting that the differences in experience, knowledge and power require a specific approach. She outlines differences in approach needed to 'design, methods, ethics, participation and analysis' (p. 321). While she does consider children as a different group of humans from adults, requiring a different approach, she acknowledges that a range of methodologies are necessary to enable the full participation of children from a range of age groups, experiences and capabilities – she outlines drawings, photographs, participatory workshops, diaries and worksheets as examples. Tisdall & Punch (2012) summarise more recent moves in childhood studies that reject the conceptualisation of the child as an unfinished adult.

In contrast to Punch (2002), Mendlesohn (2012) and Gubar (2016) advocate for a more individualised method of conceptualising children and childhood. Mendlesohn outlines 'that the homogenization of "the child" in the work I read is in part a direct consequence of the insistence on the cultural construction of "childhood"' (2012, no page number);

that is, that children are often supposed to have more in common with other children, rather than with adults who share their characteristics: thus, white working-class child readers from East Sussex are expected to enjoy the same cultural experiences as middle-class children from North Yorkshire because they are children, rather than because they play the same video games, or follow the same YouTubers. As Gubar (2016) states, '[g]eneralizing about what powers and abilities children do (or do not) have is problematic because children, like adults, are a heterogeneous bunch' (p. 294).

The school places a high value on arts-based learning. Theodotou (2019) argues that previous studies of the use of arts-based literacy research have been carried out through the use of adult-led, planned activities rather than child-led, creative activities, where children are assumed to be competent learners with the agency to make their own decisions about their learning. I felt that this approach would be familiar to the group, and that they would feel comfortable using arts and craft activities to explore their ideas.

METHODOLOGY OF THE FIELDWORK

Radway's (1984, 1991) use of ethnography to determine the meanings of texts to readers was an inspiration for this study. She used questionnaires, a focus group and individual interviews to investigate the importance and meanings of reading to women romance readers, analysing the responses by use of reader response theory. I intended to carry out the focus group and interviews with my group of children (Team Awesome) but unfortunately the Covid-19 outbreak has not, at the time of writing, permitted me to carry out the interviews.

Ethical considerations were at the heart of my research design. In particular, I designed my research around Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which states:

Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (Unicef 1989).

With this in mind, I designed my research to adapt Theodotou's (2017) Play and Learning through the Arts (PLA) model. Theodotou (2017) noted that when arts are used to develop literacy skills with children and young people, the research tends to focus on one art practice, and through the medium of predetermined, adult-led planned interventions. By encouraging the children to determine the method of response to the texts, they had a voice in the methodology of the research. I cannot make claims of co-production in the research, since the choice was limited to the resources I could provide; also my fieldwork notes state, 'the group looked at me after others suggested activities. They may have been looking for approval or preference from me' (25/10/19).

Punch's (2002) article argues whether methods commonly used with adults may or may not be appropriate with children. She outlines that ways of seeing children, either as exactly like adults or as entirely different from adults, can affect the methodology used by researchers and, in the case of the former approach, ignore the power imbalance between adult researcher and child participant. With the latter approach, researchers may not recognise the need to carry out the long-term ethnography needed to properly understand their lives and experiences. Even while using participant observation, it is not possible for adults to fully enter the world of the child, because they can never be children again (Fine & Sandstrom 1988, Hill 1997, in Punch 2002: 3). Conversely, Gubar (2016) argues against seeing children as one undifferentiated group. It is possible, for example, for a wheelchair-using nine-year-old to have more in common with a wheelchair-using

adult than a non-wheelchair-using nine-year-old.

Punch suggests that methods often categorised as ‘child-friendly’, such as drawing, may be appropriate with children. Firstly, because children are accustomed to such activities and they may feel more comfortable. Secondly, because children are not always used to being taken seriously by adults, and one-to-one interviews with strangers may be uncomfortable. Thirdly, it is important for researchers to note that young children, in particular, may have much shorter attention spans than adults. Using methods that engage and interest them may enable children to participate more fully.

For these reasons, I used a mix of the kind of ‘book talk’ (Corbett 2008) discussion that the class teacher informed me that she used during guided reading lessons, and creative activities such as making peg dolls, drawing and drama. Of these, the children enjoyed drawing the most. By talking to the children about their choices during the activities, I was able to gain information about their understanding of social class, where they saw themselves fitting in or not within the social class of the texts I chose, and the power relations within the texts.

THE PARTICIPANTS

The children chose their own ‘research name’ during the initial meeting. I ensured

that they understood that these were the only names that I was allowed to use within the research. Some had a couple of attempts before finding a name that they were happy with; in those cases I will refer to the children by the final name that they selected. All the children were from the Year 6 class, so are 10 or 11. I did not ask the child their gender but noted the pronouns by which they referred to themselves.

As you can see (Table 1), there were seven participants using he/him pronouns and three using she/her. The two who withdrew before the end of the fieldwork used he/him pronouns. I am using ‘girls’ for she/her users and ‘boys’ for he/him.

On reflection, it might have been better for me to have given them options to choose from, or more direction in picking their own names. Willy happens to be a common British childhood informal term for a penis, and Gay, while a diminutive for some given names, is an informal term for homosexual and is used as an insult in some schools (Stonewall, ND). Embarrassment over their name choices may be the reason that these participants withdrew.

FINDINGS

The first of the texts that the group (Team Awesome) were given to read was J. K. Rowling’s (1997) *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. At the initial meeting, all the children confirmed that

they had either read the book or had watched the 2000 film. I reiterated that the children did not need to finish the book if they did not want to.

During the discussion, three of the group (Jeffy, Grace and Severus) expressed unequivocal liking for the book. Jeffy liked the ‘imagination and fantasy’ (25/10/19) and Severus liked the ‘word choices’ (25/10/19). Grace said she liked it. Hermione and Seasons felt that they would have enjoyed the book more if it had had pictures. Gay did not enjoy the ghosts and ‘spooky things’ (25/10/19), and Peppa Pig said ‘I don’t really like fantasy. I like books about things that could really happen. Like realistic books’ (25/10/19). Spanic said that he didn’t read it. Sonic the Hedgehog said that he preferred the writing of Philip Pullman, his favourite author, whose language he found more interesting.

The boys in the group found it easier to find a character that they thought was like them. Severus related to Dumbledore’s wisdom and to Severus Snape because he was bossy. Sonic the Hedgehog felt that his enjoyment of reading and finding things out was similar to Hermione Granger’s character. However the girls felt that there was a lack of girl characters, and that their default character was Hermione due to a lack of other options. Gay and Peppa Pig only named characters that they didn’t like because they were bullies: Dudley Dursley and his friend Piers.

None of the children wanted to go to Hogwarts. Most stated that they would miss pets, family and the familiarity of home. Grace expressed concern about new food, saying that she had eaten Bertie Botts Ever Flavour Beans, and they were disgusting. Gay explained:

‘I play football and they play Quidditch. I don’t think I could play Quidditch.’
(25/10/19)

This could demonstrate his fear of not fitting in, and a recognition of the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) required to be

Name	Pronoun the child used	Length of involvement
Jeffy	He	To the end of the research
Sonic the Hedgehog	He	To the end of the research
Grace	She	To the end of the research
Hermione	She	To the end of the research
Seasons	She	To the end of the research
Peppa Pig	He	To the end of the research
Spanic	He	To the end of the research
Gay	He	To the end of the fourth session
Severus	He	To the end of the research
Willy	He	Halfway through the first session

Table 1: Participants’ (Team Awesome) research names, their pronouns and the length of their involvement

socially as well as academically successful in the Wizarding World. It may be that Gay has social capital among his peers for his skill at football; none of the group contradicted him or challenged his claim.

I thought that the novel of Pullman's *Northern Lights* (1995) may be too challenging for some of the group to read, so I chose the graphic novel adaptation (Pullman, Melchior and Oubrierie, 2015). My fieldwork notes from the day of the book group meeting (29/10/19) state that the group were excited by the pictures, and Spanic, who had told me three times that he hadn't read *Harry Potter*, told me that he had read it, then his dad had read it. Coincidentally at the time of this meeting, the BBC adaptation of *His Dark Materials* was being screened. Five of the children confirmed that they were watching it and talked about it with enthusiasm.

The children initially found it hard to determine the setting and genre of the book, because few of them knew where Oxford was or had ever been there. Grace thought that it was set in 1898, due to the reference to the 1898 Tokay that the Master orders to be opened for Lord Asriel. However, the illustrations of the graphic novel helped them identify that Tokay was a wine, and Peppa Pig and Severus knew that wine is not drunk straight away:

Peppa Pig: But people drink wine a long time after it's made.

Severus: Yes, because it has to settle. (29/10/19)

It appears from this interchange that Peppa Pig and Severus have lived experience of cultural practices (Skeggs 1997) involving wine that Grace and other children do not. However, through conversation and looking at the text together, the group worked out that Oxford is a city with a university, and that the narrative took place in an alternative version of Oxford, because there were 'spaceships' (Severus, 29/10/19) and

daemons (Severus, 25/10/19). Severus suggested that daemons are 'them in [non-]human form'. Some children associated daemons with the Devil; this may be because of the Church of England faith of the school.

The group decided to draw their daemons.

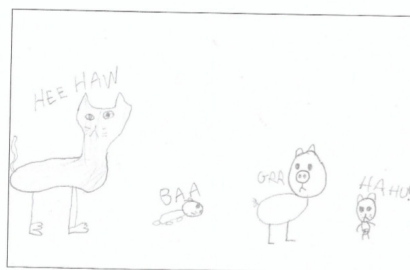
The Daemon python



Severus wrote, 'My demon is a python because I'm strong, smart and cunning [cunning]' (29/10/19). Severus's writing demonstrates his confidence in himself, but in conversation he stated that he wanted a 15 m python who could protect him, perhaps demonstrating that he does not see himself as powerful, despite being strong, smart and cunning. However, he did not show that his daemon could still change and drew a 2 m tall adult as the person with the daemon.

Spanic, who had passed the graphic novel on to his father, demonstrated that he was considering a daemon for himself now, as he drew one that was mutable.

The Daemon TACKS



Underneath this picture, Spanic wrote:

CAT: this is the animal to cuddle up to at night

OTTER: this is [the] extremely strong one to help you swim

PIG: the strongest one to help you fight

MOUSE: a spying one, yeah

He said that because daemons can talk, they might make other animal noises to confuse enemies. Like Severus, Spanic wants power and strength, but also recognises the comforting relationship between Lyra and Pantalaimon, who are often shown in bed together, comforting each other: see, for example, Melchior & Oubrierie (2015: 35). Spanic here has demonstrated some essential parts of Lyra's character: she has power due to her connections and those protecting her; she herself is an accomplished spy, but she still needs the comfort of Pan in his pine marten form to cuddle.

It is possible that through sharing and discussing the graphic novel with his father, Spanic has deepened his understanding of the multifaceted role of daemons, and the power imbalance in *Northern Lights*; Lyra may be the child of two powerful people from the theocratic government and academia as well as the answer to the witch's prophecy of a new Eve, but she is also an emotionally neglected child who relies on her daemon for protection and comfort.

The third text studied was the graphic novel adaptation of *The Amulet of Samarkand* (Stroud & Donkin 2011). The novel (Stroud 2004) has been mentioned in connection with *Harry Potter* (Collier 2004; Wagner 2003); they are both stories about neglected children absorbed into the world of magic in an alternative Britain. However, in the world of *Harry Potter*, non-magical people are referred to as Muggles and only dark wizards seek to control or exploit them, whereas in Stroud's *Bartimaeus* trilogy (2003–5) non-magical people are called commoners, controlled by magic and have no right to political representation, fair employment or legal equality. Ms S, the Year 6 class teacher, believed that

some members of the Team Awesome group would find the text of the novel too challenging to decode, meaning that they would be unable to comprehend the subtext. Tennent (2015) outlines that in order to understand (or comprehend) texts, children need not only to be able to decode unfamiliar words (and have the vocabulary to make sense of them), but also:

- Prior world knowledge
- Knowledge of language
- Memory
- Monitoring
- Inference making (cohesive and interrogative). (Tennent 2015: 167)

The children's prior knowledge of fantasy fiction meant that they were able to apply their knowledge of both Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (1997) and Northern Lights (1996, 2015) to the graphic novel The Amulet of Samarkand (2011). Sonic the Hedgehog demonstrated his understanding of both the daemons in Northern Lights and the demons (or djinni, as Bartimaeus prefers) in The Amulet of Samarkand.

Jeffy: I liked how they had the real demons that changed shape.

AB: That's so interesting! Because we read another book with shape changing daemons, didn't we?

Sonic: Yes, but they were different.

AB: Tell me a little bit more about that. Why were they different?

Sonic: Well in one book they're people's souls but in this one they're creatures (17/01/20).

When talking about the characters that the children liked best, Peppa Pig indicated that he liked Nathaniel, one of the protagonists, the best. Spanic was able to indicate that he understood the link between Harry Potter and Nathaniel, by shouting 'Harry Potter!' when I asked which character he liked best. Peppa Pig and Sonic the Hedgehog were the only

members of the group who understood the ambiguous nature of Nathaniel in this text:

Peppa: Maybe he didn't intend to do something good, but in the end it did help.

Sonic: Well, maybe he didn't intend to, but he did, and one of his less good features was his revenge, but it did end up doing good and saving [everyone]...

After discussion, the group did understand the neglect and emotional coldness that Nathaniel experiences; however, they did not discuss the exploitation of the magical creatures by the magicians. I hope to follow this up in one-to-one interviews once schools reopen.

The group decided on drama as a response to The Amulet of Samarkand. I brought two pairs of glasses and two scarves, one white and one in Gryffindor colours, and the group decided to act out a meeting between Harry Potter and Nathaniel. Through these dialogues and freeze frames, the children showed that they understood the difference between the magic systems in the two worlds – that Harry's magic is innate and his education is to learn how to direct it through spells and

wand work, while Nathaniel's is external, and he must learn how to control djinni and other magical creatures.

The final reading group meeting was to discuss Carter's (1958, 2015) The Children Who Stayed Behind. Set in Brighton, this is an alternative history of World War II where Brighton, in the front line for invasion, is evacuated, but in the confusion at the station, Drake, Gillian and Sammy Hartford are left behind, and must survive alone (as they think) as the danger from the invaders comes closer.

The group excitedly showed me the book's illustrations of Brighton (their closest city) that they recognised: Brighton Pavilion from East Street (2015: 70) or the Palace Pier, now the Brighton Pier (2015: 107). Grace and Seasons both felt that Gillian was like them, in her love for animals, and Peppa Pig enjoyed the book as 'realistic'. Sonic and Jeffy recognised that it was not realistic as Brighton was not invaded, but the group were not sure whether Brighton had been evacuated.

The group were disappointed that their next choices were novels rather than graphic novels, so one of the suggested activities was to make their own. I suggested that they start with a familiar place. Every member of the group chose



The secret door



Amphibious



turns completely into an amphibian and falls into a water world.

to depict a portal fantasy (Mendlesohn 2008) where the protagonist goes to secondary world through a portal.

Grace's story, 'The Secret Door', starts off in a local historical monument. Inside it, Grace falls through a trap door which is a secret portal, but something goes wrong and she ends up in an old people's home. I noted that while *The Amulet of Samarkand* has a lot of humour from Bartimaeus the djinn's sardonic footnotes, we had not explored the long tradition of British comic fantasy for children.

'Amphibious' starts in Jeffy's back garden, where he falls into the pond, grows gills and goes to Amphibious World.

All of the texts created in this session were centred in the area local to the

children, most of whom were readily able to imagine themselves in a fantasy story that starts in a familiar location. The only group member who chose not to complete this task was Hermione, who did not read *The Time of Green Magic*. I hope to follow up with her at a one-to-one interview.

CONCLUSION

Initial analysis of my findings indicates that children do perceive power imbalances, including those of social class, in children's literature. Gay articulated his inability to see himself as a Hogwarts student through his focus on himself as a footballer rather than a Quidditch player; Grace expressed her concerns about unfamiliar food;

and none of the children wanted to leave the familiarity of family and home to go to a magical boarding school. During the discussion about *Northern Lights* most of the group did not have the cultural capital to understand the time or location that the book is set in. Team Awesome could see power imbalances in adult/child relationships, and between children, but lacked the language to discuss the exploitation of magical creatures in Rowling and Stroud's work. It is not possible to make recommendations from the findings of such a small group, with incomplete data, but to further this research I would like to explore giving children the vocabulary to discuss inequalities of social class in children's literature. ■

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