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**Cooperative learning and embodied accountability: an
ethnographic analysis of classroom participation in an
English school**

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Citación: Luna, L. (2015). Cooperative learning and embodied accountability: an ethnographic analysis of classroom participation in an English school. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 23(99), <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v23.2050> Este artículo forma parte del número especial *Etnografía y sociolingüística de la interacción* editado por Ana Inés Heras y Virginia Unamuno.

Abstract: Based on a school ethnography carried out in an English primary school in the last years of New Labour Government, this paper examines the processes and dynamics involved in the introduction of a cooperative learning method as part of the Success for All Literacy Program, which was being implemented in the school for the first time. I discuss the difficulties and resistances showed by children's interactions and teachers' declarations during the development of the program as the sign of competing agendas within the school and within the educational policy as well. They also manifest the deep penetration of a model of participation and learning that suits the neoliberal educational policy embraced by the British governments since the Education Reform Act in 1988 up to the present time. The establishment of a culture of performativity and accountability is revealed in children's behaviour during cooperative tasks as they tend to work in a competition rather than in a cooperation scheme and perceive their peers more as threats to their individual performance than as a support in their learning process. On the other side, teachers struggle to rely on a method more process-oriented than product-oriented as they feel that, with no individual and written tasks, they are not able to give account of children's progress and therefore, of their work as

teachers. The paper shows that a conception of learning (as private achievement), of person (as individual) and of classroom participation (as competition) are at play within the accountability educational system.

Keywords: Cooperative learning; accountability; New Labour; ethnography.

Aprendizaje cooperativo y *accountability* corporalizada: un análisis etnográfico de la participación de clase en una escuela inglesa.

Resumen: Basado en una etnografía escolar realizada en una escuela primaria de Inglaterra durante los últimos años del gobierno laborista, este artículo examina los procesos y dinámicas involucrados en la introducción de un método de aprendizaje cooperativo como parte de “Success for All”, programa para el fomento de la lectoescritura, que se implementaban en la escuela por primera vez. Se examinan las dificultades y resistencias que muestran las interacciones de los niños y las declaraciones de los profesores durante el desarrollo del programa como señales de agendas opuestas dentro de la escuela y dentro de la política educativa. Esas dificultades son también la manifestación de la profunda penetración de un modelo de participación y aprendizaje que se adecua a la política educativa neoliberal adoptada por los gobiernos británicos desde la Ley de Reforma Educativa de 1988 hasta la actualidad. La instalación de la cultura de la performatividad y de la rendición de cuentas se revela en el comportamiento de los niños durante las actividades cooperativas, porque ellos y ellas tienden a adoptar un esquema de trabajo más competitivo que colaborativo y perciben sus pares más como amenazas para su desempeño individual que como soporte en su proceso de aprendizaje. Por otra parte, los profesores tienen dificultad para confiar en un método orientado más hacia el proceso que hacia el producto porque sienten que, sin contar con tareas individuales y escritas, no pueden dar cuenta de los avances de los niños, y de su trabajo como profesores. El artículo muestra que una concepción de aprendizaje (como logro privado), de persona (como individuo) y de participación en la sala de clase (como una competencia) están en juego en el sistema educacional del *accountability*.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje cooperativo; *accountability*; Gobierno laborista; etnografía.

Aprendizagem cooperativa e *accountability* corporalizada: uma análise etnográfica da participação nas aulas em uma escola inglesa

Resumo: Baseado em uma etnografia escolar realizada em uma escola primaria da Inglaterra durante os últimos anos do governo laborista, este artigo examina os processos e dinâmicas involucrados na introdução de um método de aprendizagem cooperativa como parte de “Success for All”, programa para o fomento da alfabetização, que se implementavam na escola pela primeira vez. Se examinam as dificuldades e resistências que mostram as interações das crianças e as declarações dos professores durante o desenvolvimento do programa como sinais de agendas opostas dentro da escola e dentro da política educativa. Essas dificuldades também são a manifestação da profunda penetração de um modelo de participação e aprendizagem que se adéqua a política educativa neoliberal adotada pelos governos británicos desde a Lei de Reforma Educativa de 1988 até a atualidade. A instalação da cultura de performatividade e da rendição de contas se revela no comportamento das crianças durante as atividades cooperativas, porque eles e elas tendem a adotar um esquema de trabalho mais competitivo que colaborativo e percebem seus pares mais como ameaças para seu desempenho individual que como suporte em seu processo de aprendizagem. Por outra parte, os professores têm dificuldade para confiar em um método orientado mais ao processo que ao produto porque sentem que, sem contar com tarefas individuais e escritas, não podem dar conta dos avances das crianças, e de seu trabalho como professores. O artigo mostra que uma concepção de aprendizagem (como

logro privado), de pessoa (com indivíduo) e na participação na sala de aula (como uma competência) estão em jogo no sistema educacional *accountability*.

Palavras-chave: Aprendizagem cooperativa; *accountability*; governo laborista; etnografia.

Introduction

Accountability has been a major object of analysis in the educational literature of the last two decades. The mechanisms and effects of the post-welfare formula in education, which combines neoliberal market regulations and technologized mechanisms of State control and pressure, have been widely studied (e.g. Ball, 1998; Gewirtz 2002; Gleeson and Husbands 200; O’Day, 2002).¹ The notion of *post welfare* alludes at the withdrawal of the State as the main provider of the basic services to citizens —a picture which had characterized European and US economies in the post-war (Morgen & Maskovsky, 2003; O’Connor, 2000; Tomlinson 2005). Privatization and deregulation by the State take place in order to enhance opportunities based on meritocracy and to promote economic growth at the expenses of public properties and State assistance. However, there is consensus on the fact that the State has not renounced to play a crucial role in the services delivered; in fact it has become the main manager, contractor, and evaluator of market actors. The predominance of its role in this new scenario has been conceptualized by Bobbit as the “market state” replacing the XIX century “nation state” (Bobbit, 2002).

Education is the main field in which this new role of the State has come into play because it is considered the crucial ground where opportunities for individual competitiveness and merit might develop. Therefore, the State, while apparently leaving autonomy to schools —in line with the free choice ideology of the market— strongly intervenes in the way education is delivered by means of a complex set of regulations (Falabella, 2014), which consists of standards of achievement, centralized mechanisms of assessment and supervision, and the dependence of state subsidization on the evaluation of school effectiveness. Accountability, as the quality of being “held to account” (Ranson, 2003, p.460), always entails a performance to be evaluated against given standards (Elliott 2001, cit. in Ranson, 2003). As Ranson (2003) explains, its inherent logic requires that it is no longer a specific event in the activity of the subject whom at some point is demanded responsibility for something. It rather becomes a *habitus*, a regime that orientates choices, actions and practices; in other words, it creates a culture. Falabella (2014) illustrates, from a critical sociology framework, the effects of the “performing school” as they have been discussed in the accountability literature. The damages of the accountability policies, she suggests, can be evidenced in three dimensions: pedagogical innovations which are dismissed in favour of traditional practices and “teaching to the test methods”; selective practices between and inside schools which undermine social equality; organizational school life and teachers’ professional experiences where stress and dilemmas predominate. This analysis leads her to conclude that the performing school has implied a “profound ethical transformation of the way schooling is understood and experienced” (Falabella, 2004, p.15).

In this paper I am interested in contributing to the comprehension of the deep penetration of the “accountability culture” in education by analyzing the experiences of teachers and children of a British school coping with a pedagogical innovation such as cooperative learning. In the context of a school ethnography carried out during the last period of the Labour Government, I was able to study the early process of implementation of the Success for All (SFA) Literacy program focusing on cooperative learning, its main pedagogical component. Accountability culture, with its emphasis on

¹For an exhaustive review of the literature see Falabella (2014).

individual performance and competition, emerges in teachers' dilemmas and struggles with the application of a program imposed by the school management but also, and particularly, it comes into sight through children's classroom participation. Their resistance to take on a new form of learning is expressed by their tense and awkward (when not explicitly confrontational) interactions during peer work.

The effects of neoliberal and performativity educational policies on school members' subjectivities have been brilliantly discussed by Ball (2003) and recently by Niesche (2015) and Stahl (2015). Other works show the impact of market policies on school and classroom practices analyzed at a micro level: e.g. Youdell's (2004); Bialostok & Kamberelis (2010); Bradbury (2013). The focus of this paper is, instead, on the children as the main receptors of the neoliberal educational system and reproducers of the "performativity culture" which moulds their classroom learning. By understanding learning as an intrinsically social phenomenon and, particularly, as a form of participation where the content of what is learned and the process of learning are embedded into each other (Lave & Wenger, 1991), I look at the social interactions that take place around academic activities as the manifestation of a particular idea of learning and of the person that has been promoted by schooling, specially under educational market policies, and that children have embodied.

The policies of accountability in British education

British education is a striking example of the global tendency to subordinate educational policies to the principles of neoliberal economy. As Ball (1999) states, it reflects a "paradigm convergence" (p. 198) between countries, based on the market idea that educational provision can be improved by fostering consumers' choice and competition which turns into a commodification of education and an impoverishment of school learning. The Education Reform Act of 1988 launched by the Thatcher government was inspired by this neoliberal ideology. It generated a major turn in British education which persevered, even with several changes, throughout the following years of the Labour government. A National Curriculum was established, which "brings with it the possibility for national testing and hence provides a basis for the comparison of individual school performance" (West & Mujis, 2009). Following the 1988 Education Reform Act and the 1992 White Paper, British education was deeply marked by the following features: centralized control of both school funding based on measured performance and teaching strategies was applied; the publication of exam results by school through the League Tables; regular school inspections conducted by the newly created OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) and the imposition of targets to schools, teachers, and students after assessed performances, making the British experience an emblematic "high-stakes accountability system" (Mujis & Chapman, 2009).

This trend was kept unvaried with the political shift in 1997. The New Labour Government built on the conservative educational agenda but added to it a new one, by endorsing the international movement towards inclusive education (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Dyson, 2005). The Old Labour preoccupation for social justice and equality of opportunities seemed to have come back with a new attention paid to the social and educational exclusion of children due to socio-economic disadvantage, ethnic or racial issues, and "special educational needs" (Tomlinson, 2005). Investment on education was incremented and special attention to schools in vulnerable areas was given. School inclusiveness was introduced as a new criteria for school inspections by OFSTED and the harsh critics to the unfairness of the publication of school performances through the League Tables were taken on with the introduction of a "value added model": an attempt to establish a fairer picture of school performance by comparing similar schools in terms of their intake of pupils (Mujis & Chapman, 2009).

However, there is consensus among analysts that continuity more than change predominates in the educational policy carried under the New Labour government and that the standard agenda was boosted rather than softened with a detrimental effect on educational equity (Ball, 1999; Power & Whitty, 1999; Tomlinson, 2003; West & Pennell, 2002). Furthermore, the current crisis within job market that has restricted possibilities for social mobility due to “social congestion” or “labour market crowding (Brown 2013) may have contributed to the exacerbation of a model that holds the standardized measurement of individual performances as its core. According to Brown (2013), the increased race for achieving an advantaged position in order to obtain a middle-class employment has pushed even further towards the aim of using “the education system to ‘stand out from the crowd’. This fact has accentuated competitiveness within the system, as well as the instalment of a “performocracy ideology” which, in Brown’s view, particularly suits the current UK conservative government and its emphasis on market competition. Since its appointment in 2010, David Cameron’s government has continued the standard agenda keeping, on the one side, the regulatory role of the State in education through OFSTED inspections (Baxter, 2014) but also promoting schools autonomy by encouraging the formation of academies (independent from Local Educational Authorities) and free schools, to be supplied by parents, teachers or private companies, with even less restrictions than academies (Goodwin, 2011).

In terms of educational practices, “performocracy” and the culture of performativity, pose the need both for permanent and standardized testing and for the organization and control of differences between learners through their grouping into ability levels. Hart, Dixon, Drummond, and McIntyre (2004), have profusely discussed how the idea of ability is embedded in British education and how rooted is the conviction about the need for comparing, categorizing and differentiating children according to their perceived abilities. The Education Reform Act of 1988 promotes the view that adequate teaching can be delivered only if a clear understanding of children’s abilities is achieved, which makes of assessment measuring a crucial practice. Youdell (2004) shows how this strategy is enacted in British schools through what she calls “education triage”:

(...) the ‘safe’, perceived by the school to be already on track to attain benchmark grades; the ‘dead’ or ‘hopeless cases’, perceived by the school to be incapable of attaining these benchmarks; and those ‘suitable for treatment’, perceived by the school to be likely to attain benchmarks if provided with additional resources (Youdell 2004, p. 410-411).

Ability grouping and target setting as key strategies for improving performances in national tests stayed as permanent features of educational practices even when, at the end of the second period of Blair’s government, some measures to relax centralized control of teaching methods and contents were taken. With the Primary National Strategy launched in 2003, schools were encouraged to look for autonomous and innovative ways to meet standards (Webb, 2009). Furthermore, in 2004, the promotion from the Department of Education and Skills of “personalized learning”, as an education tailored to the learner’s needs, abilities, and motivations, was based on the idea of “differentiation” of children and teaching strategies according to students’ abilities. While strong criticism has been raised by educational theorists against “ability labelling” (Hart et al., 2004; Ainscow, Dyson, & Weiner, 2013) because of its non inclusive effects on children, the idea of personalized learning together with the notion of *learning styles* has known a wide spread in UK in the last years. Personalization, Robertson (2005) argues, boosts individual competitiveness and, at the same time, it is promoted as the way for innovating school pedagogy in order to respond to the needs of the current knowledge economy. Indeed, some authors have argued that promotion of personalized learning has made school teachers more concerned for creating suitable learning environments for their children (West & Mujis, 2009).

The invitation that during New Labour is made to innovate and take on personalized learning turned, for schools and teachers, into a double pressure: towards performance and

standards on the one hand, and towards a focus on pedagogy and process on the other (Webb, 2009). However, despite the tension between these two opposite aims, there seems to be also enough room for an encounter, especially since pedagogical innovations as personalized learning rely on the idea of different individual abilities which need to be captured through standard testing. It is in this context that the Success for All Literacy Program was implemented by Saint Elizabeth's Primary School as an innovative teaching and learning strategy to raise students' literacy levels. Success for All combines different features of the accountability schema—a 'soft' view of ability, as something that is not fixed and can be improved (Hart et al., 2004); the enhancement of individual performance; ability grouping—with pedagogical innovation like cooperative learning methods.

In this paper I argue that children's difficulties in making sense and taking on cooperation give account of an embodied individualism which is embedded in the school culture, particularly as the effect of decades of neoliberal policies in UK education. However, individualism in education is not a prerogative of the instalment of the market model in education. According to Robinsons (2011), formal schooling has taken on and reinforced the notion of human being as a rational and free agent spread from the Enlightenment (Robinson 2011). The concept of *individual* condenses the features of consciousness, self-determination, and rationality: attributes of the moral person that emerges as the outcome of Western historical and philosophical tradition (Mauss, 1985). Embracing this view of the person, while also having social, cultural and economic aims, education has been particularly concerned with developing individual's abilities and attitudes. Hargreaves (1980) that the "cult for individualism" in education has taken, especially in Britain, three main forms: developmental individualism which, associated with a child-centred pedagogy, has focused on the development of intellectual abilities and individual morality; meritocratic individualism, based on the idea that individual merit can and must be encouraged by providing equal opportunities; and moral and ethical individualism.

The rise of middle class after the industrial revolution has also contributed to consolidate the enhancement of individual abilities as the main aim in education. 'Abilities' mean performance of required knowledge in those subjects which are particularly necessary to get into the labour market (Robinson, 2011) and which are taken to be the sign of innate intelligence. Rationality and 'cleverness' are deemed to be core values of middle class families and became central in the model of the person that schools try to reproduce (Evans 2006; Jung, 2007). Since cognitive abilities associated with the mastering of academic subjects has been seen as the maximum expression of individual rationality and intelligence, schooling has put an out proportioned emphasis on its development at the expenses of other important dimensions of the person (Robinson 2011). As a logical consequence, testing of individual abilities has become one of the most characteristic schooling practices. Accountability policies in education, in the context of increased competition within the labour market—as discussed above—have exacerbated the practice of measuring individual performance. At the same time, they have expanded the idea that academic learning is necessarily an individual and private matter.

The ethnographic context and the Success for All Literacy Program

Saint Elizabeth's Primary School is a Church of England school located in a deprived area of a northern town in England with a varied multiethnic population.² At the time when I did my fieldwork (from September 2006 until July 2007), 233 children were registered from Foundation

² For ethical reasons the name of the school is a fake one and the name of the city where it is located has been omitted.

Stage to Year 6. Students' main 'ethnic' groups as classified by the school were Somali (47.6%), African-Caribbean (19.7%), (non-Somali) African (9.4%), White British (9%). However, 10 different nationalities were present. Over half of the children were considered 'EAL', meaning that they did not have English as their first or home language and overall 14 different languages were spoken. 30% of children used to spend only a few years in the school reflecting the high mobility into and out of the area. This fact represented a major challenge for the school in terms of raising attainment which was below the national average because children entered the school with low levels of attainment for their age. The proportion of children entitled to free school meals was four times the national average and the percentage of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities was twice the national average.

The school had an interesting history because it was put in "Special Measures" after OFSTED Inspection in 2000 evaluated it as "Inadequate".³ With a strong leadership as well as a very committed staff, it managed to be classified as "Good" in 2006 and then as "Outstanding" in 2009. The school was known for its multicultural and inclusive approach, meaning that they were considered particularly welcoming to children's diversity of culture, language, and abilities, and for making students with challenging behaviours and backgrounds progress noticeably. This led me to choose Saint Elizabeth's school to study how multiculturalism and "diversity" are tackled and constructed in British schools (Author, 2010). However, despite children's good progress, students' attainment levels were still below national standards, which motivated the Headteacher to invest a remarkable amount of the school budget in the purchase of the SFA Literacy Program, hoping to raise attainment in such a key area as language.

Specially designed for children at risks and whose first language is not English, Success for All (SFA) was developed by a group of researchers at the John Hopkins University led by Robert Slavin on the assumption that success in reading at an early stage increases children's self-esteem, enhances motivation for learning and improves academic achievement in different areas (Slavin, Madden, Dolan and Wasik, 1996). A rich set of books and materials are meant to engage children in reading and commenting on stories from the time they are in Reception and Year 1 where the 'Root program' focusing on phonics is applied. In the Wings program (which covers Year 2 to Year 6) a variety of cooperative learning activities are carried out around fiction and non-fiction texts involving prediction, summarizing, vocabulary building, decoding practice, and story related-writing (Slavin and Madden 2001). During the delivery of SFA, children are grouped according to their reading abilities and not by age as they usually would be at school. Therefore, during SFA classes of 90 minutes (which is the duration of a daily SFA lesson), the age range can be highly heterogeneous. After 8 weeks students' reading level is assessed and accordingly children are regrouped and moved into a different level.

SFA cooperative learning, based mainly on Slavin's approach, is incorporated in the curriculum and structured in specific tasks that are predefined in the instruction packages. It consists of both team work and pair work. The "reading partner" and the "talk partner" have particularly important scaffolding functions. Social skills for cooperative learning are developed through the Getting along together program that has to be worked through during SFA literacy lessons but also integrated into the general curriculum. Children, during the execution of cooperative tasks are given scores on the basis of 5 criteria: "Practice active listening"; "Explain your ideas and tell why"; "Everyone participates"; "Help and encourage others"; "Complete task". Individual children, pairs and teams are given scores for their performance in one of these components, which are written

³ Ofsted evaluates schools according to 4 grades: Grade 1 "Outstanding", Grade 2 "Good", Grade 3 "Satisfactory", Grade 4 "Inadequate".

down on a scoring sheet. At the end of the week every team counts the total of individual scores and the sum of the scores obtained as a group in order to compete for the team award.

Grounded on motivational theory from social psychology, Slavin's approach to cooperative learning distinguishes itself from other perspectives that support this method because of its emphasis on group rewards and individual accountability. Different from cognitive and developmental perspectives, the motivational theory does not hold the idea that interaction among students per se will enhance learning (Slavin, 1987), but it needs to take place under certain conditions and, particularly, when group goals are defined and when individual children are motivated to help their peers to learn. Group reward is achieved only through the sum of the individual scores of children, which are assessed separately. Johnson and Johnson (1994) also stress the importance of group goal and group rewards; nevertheless, children are given individual scores as a bonus, only after the group as such has achieved certain goals. Therefore, although in both perspectives there is interdependence between group goal or success and individual achievement, the relationship between the two varies. In Johnson and Johnson's method the success of the group appears to be in the foreground, while from Slavin's point of view individual achievement is the first goal and the crucial stage that leads to the group success. According to the former perspective, positive interdependence, if properly transmitted to children (by using also a reward system) should act as an "intrinsic motivation" to work together and achieve a common goal (Johnson & Johnson 1994: 40); whereas, for the latter, students will help each other to learn "at least in part because it is in their own interests to do so" (Slavin 1996: 46).

In the United States, where it was first implemented in 1987, Success for All has proven to be particularly effective in improving achievements in reading and in diminishing retention at grade and special education placements, among other outcomes (Borman & Hewes, 2002; Slavin & Madden, 2001; Slavin, Madden, Dolan, & Wasik, 1996). In the United Kingdom it started being applied in 1997 in a few schools in Nottingham where the University of Nottingham carried out a study on the effects of the program on reading achievements. By 2005 a total of 39 schools in London, Nottingham, Hull, Essex and Leeds had adopted SFA showing positive results, especially in comparison to those obtained through the National Literacy Strategy (Jolliffe, 2006; "Success for All. Foundation UK," n.d.). At present, more than 100 schools have successfully implemented the Program which has proved to be effective (Tracey, Chambers, Slavin, Hanley, & Cheung, 2014).

Despite the fact that individual interest is a key feature in the design of SFA cooperative practices my ethnography shows that children struggle to implement cooperative learning strategies and that their difficulty is associated not only with "lack of practice", but also with their apparent lack of motivation in helping partners which is considered by them at best, a waste of time and at worst, a threat to their individual performance. Similarly, teachers are confronted with new dilemmas and tensions introducing cooperation in their teaching practice.

Without denying that there are several interwoven "contextual features" (Jacob, 1997) and different cultural or contingent factors (Sharan, 2010), that may explain the working or non-working of cooperative learning, in this paper I am interested in showing the very political nature of teachers and children's difficulties by reading teachers' conception of learning and achievements as well as children's interactions as expressions of neoliberal policies in education. The implementation of cooperative learning within the Success for All Program makes explicit and tangible what my school ethnography shows, (Luna, 2010): that the stress on individual achievement—which can be measured only through individual assessment—and the praise and reward method—meant to enhance individual merit by distinguishing it from the rest of the group—make of the enhancement of individuality and competition a central aspect of the hidden curriculum of the British school system (Ball, 1994).

An ethnographic approach to the study of classroom interactions

In line with the work carried out by the ethnography of communication or microethnography (Cazden & Hymes, 1972; Erickson, 1996; McDermott, 1977; Mehan, 1979), I approach the situational character of learning which takes place through practical activities and *participation structures*. Particularly, I focus on children's verbal and nonverbal interactions while carrying out academic tasks. However, my interest is not in examining the interactional sequence or turn-taking, for example, in order to understand *how* social meaning is constructed by the contextual use of language or discourse (Hicks 1996). I rather seek to bring to light *what* specific forms of classroom interaction tell about social or cultural ways of life. In particular, I analyze children's engagement in academic-cooperative activities as the expression of a tension between different social normativities and of the conflict between opposite models of person or "ways of beings" (Herrenkohl & Mertl, 2010) which concern classroom life but goes far beyond it. The notion of "ways of being", as Herrenkohl and Mertl (2010) put forward, include interests, motivations, emotional commitments, and personal and social judgments about what is worth learning. They are built up in the negotiation between individuals and the social world together with "ways of knowing and doing".

My analysis relies on the ethnography that I carried out throughout a whole academic year (from September 2006 until July 2007) in Saint Elizabeth's Primary School, allowing me to situate and interpret children's interactions within a broader study of the school social practices and preoccupations. My participant observation took place in every school or school-related situation I was allowed access to: classroom lessons, playground, lunch time, staff meetings, staff training sessions, staff room, parent evenings, school trips, school events, among others. My classroom observations were restricted to the year groups I chose to focus on: Year 4, Year 5 and Year 6, which represent Key stage 2. Therefore I assigned one day a week to spend in the classroom of each of these groups. There were two main reasons for this choice: 1. issues related to the construction of identity and the appropriation of the school discourse could more likely emerge at this age and at this stage of the school life rather than with younger children in the first years of their school experience; 2. since expectations on the behaviour and attainment of elder pupils are higher, the school agenda could more likely be seen through the demands exerted on these pupils. Within this cohort, I picked 4 children to observe more closely. I selected them on the basis of different gender, different ethnic background, different time experienced in the school and different degree of 'success' in school. I established a closer relationship with them which to some extent, went beyond the school context, involving also their families and home environment.

I closely observed these 4 children during class time and play time. In particular I watched them during the delivery of the Literacy lessons within the Success for All Program. Therefore, I designated one day per week to each child, following them in the 'SFA group' they were assigned to according to their reading ability level and tracking them throughout their shifts to the different reading ability groups, which followed periodic assessments. During the hour and a half of SFA-literacy lesson I usually sat at the table where 'my case-study child' was sitting and took notes of his/her behaviour and attitudes towards peers (particularly those s/he was paired to) and of his/her table mates. Whereas I used to assume a more collaborative attitude towards teachers in other lessons, actively helping children out in their tasks, during SFA I mostly observed and only occasionally intervened to try to facilitate children's relationships and understanding. My account of their interactions is based on the ethnographic field notes of 50 observed SFA Literacy lessons. This is complemented with the transcriptions of the in-depth interviews I had with teachers and children, of which I will give only a partial account in this paper.

My study lacked of a technically assisted method for the recording of the verbal and nonverbal interactions —audio or video means— which would have provided me with an even more detailed and comprehensive description of the situations observed. However, extensive and systematic observations during SFA classes, together with a situated approach to look at children's interactions within my general understanding of both school activities and children's practices, provided me with sufficient and reliable data to carry out adequate interpretation of children's behaviours. As an anthropologist, I hold Wolcott's view on "cultural interpretation" as the very essence of ethnographic work (Wolcott 1993). It means that, in the context of this study, I look for what children's activities and relations characterized by resistance against the cooperative scheme *stand for* in social and cultural terms. In this sense my works follows many others which have looked at students' behaviour in different contexts as the sign of a confrontation with institutionally imposed forms of participation (Evans, 2006; Willis, 1977; Wolcott, 1974, among others). However, in this case, children's behaviour does not manifest opposition to the hegemonic "way of being", that is, the kind of person culturally produced in the school (Levinson & Holland, 1996), but it is rather the sign of the appropriation of a political and economic model which shapes the way children learn and make sense of learning in schools.

Legitimizing the partner and dealing with "diversity": the challenges of learning together

In Wings 3 group, the teacher starts the lesson by asking some questions on the book that has been previously read. She asks what infer means and tells the children to discuss it with their partners. Fatima (Year 5) nervously moves her head around, several times, as if she was looking for somebody. She gives a quick look to Adam (Year 5), her partner, as if it was unintentional, and whispers something without looking at him. She keeps moving her eyes anxiously. Her partner does not look at her either but, unlike Fatima he seems to be addressing his body directly towards his partner. They are both quite clueless about the question. The second question to discuss in pairs works slightly better. Fatima turns her body towards her partner. She avoids holding her eyes on him only at the beginning and then she progressively establishes her look on him while commenting on the answer. "What about you?", she asks and listens. The interaction gets even more fluent for the third question. The answer has to be reported to the teacher in plenary. Adam is called by the teacher. Fatima tries to whisper him the answer. The teacher asks again: "What does infer mean?" Fatima starts fidgeting in her seat and does not turn to look at Adam, who decides to comment on the answer with the boys sitting in front of him. After exchanging some words with them he puts up his hand and, interrogated, he gives the right answer. His mates immediately raise their hands and complain: that was the answer they have given to him. The teacher replies that it doesn't matter; that it is not about copying but learning from others and learning together.

Now there is a new subject to discuss in pairs and within the team group. Adam immediately approaches one of the boys in the other pair. Fatima stretches her head to join the conversation but remains out of it, until a new instruction is given: the partner reading has to be carried out on the text book that every pair shares. Fatima and Adam's book is promptly put in between them. They both look focused on the reading, even when, in turn, they have to follow silently when the partner is reading. Now, on the basis of the story read, everybody has to answer some questions on an individual sheet that is given. Fatima and Adam start working on

their own notebook having a quick exchange from time to time and having a look at each other's notebook to check their own answer (Field notes, 6/12/06).

The situation portrayed illustrates the awkwardness that characterizes most of the beginnings of the SFA classes. Every day, when SFA time comes, children either move to a different classroom or wait for children from other cohorts to come, in order to join their SFA reading ability group. When the SFA teacher starts the lesson, they are required to adopt a completely different work scheme: they are paired with another child they may not be familiar with, they must share the book with him or her and interact in order to carry out the task submitted by the teacher. Eventually, children are reminded of the importance of learning together and of the 5 criteria of cooperative learning according to which pairs and teams are assigned scores ("Practice active listening"; "Explain your ideas and tell why"; "Everyone participates"; "Help and encourage others"; "Complete task"). However this is not a consistent practice, especially after the very first days of the implementation of the SFA Program. These contextual aspects may partially explain why Fatima seems quite unfamiliar with having to work with the partner. Her nervy personality makes her particularly uncomfortable at the teacher's requests and, either because of lack of trust or lack of self-confidence she struggles to acknowledge her partner, avoiding having to approach him and showing a bodily disposition to communicate with him. Her first words seem not to search for any recipient. On his side, Adam does not make any special move towards his partner either apart from slightly turning his trunk towards her.

In different ways, the awkwardness of this encounter among partners is not an unusual situation throughout the whole delivery of SFA classes, but it most frequently occurs at the beginning of each SFA. Children struggle to recognize their neighbour as a potential partner when pair work is required and instead of approaching him/her they wait for instructions or start working on their own. Mostly they tend, in a state of inertia, either to keep focusing on the teacher or to sort out the task by themselves or to whisper the answer as they were thinking aloud.

Fatima did make an effort to establish a communication with her partner. The "what about you?" question marks a radical shift in her approach and in fact, the pair work does eventually become effective. But even after this successful performance Adam does not show much engagement towards his partner and sets up a conversation with the other pair at the table leaving Fatima at the margins of it. The pair relationship is then re-established through the pair reading carried out on a common book.

Sharing the key resource for the task required and utilizing it at the same time creates a sort of intimacy between partners. This also represents a relevant change for children's classroom life, because objects turn frequently into a matter of dispute and a field in which to compete for a sort of spatial occupation or territorial control. This tendency can be problematic when there is some tension going on within the pair, so the book can be dragged to one side, instead of being put in the middle, both as a strategy to forbid access to the partner and as a desperate attempt to claim one's own independence. Such a stand cannot be kept up for long though because children know that they have equal rights on the book and that according to SFA rules, the resource has to be utilized by partners not by turns but simultaneously.

In Fatima and Adam's case the intimacy of the pair reading task is easily created and it even helps to re-establish the compliancy among partners that has been diluted during the interactions with the other table mates, from which the most shy or least proactive mate (Fatima) was left apart. After pair reading, Fatima and Adam work separately but cooperatively: doubts are shared and sorted out in collaboration and notebooks are not protected as private property, because partners allow each other to have a look at their own work without claiming the exclusiveness of their answer.

Sharing answers or solutions and, therefore, taking part in the success of the completion of a task is a basic principle of cooperative learning strategies. It represents a rupture with the traditional pedagogic and schooling rationale by which the child's true achievement is obtained and can be monitored only when it follows a private, individual and independent effort. Cooperative learning holds Vygotsky's notion of 'zone of proximal development' explained that more precise evidence of the cognitive capacities of a child can be found in a guided or assisted performance (by an adult or more expert peer) rather than in an independent one. It follows that children are not only not censured when whispering to each other or looking at the neighbour's book, in order to avoid 'copying' and to stimulate independence; they are even encouraged to do so and praised for it.

From Fatima and Adam's case, however, and other interactions observed it seems that children struggle to take on this new learning game where cooperation and not competition is the main rule. Children need to unlearn what the schooling system has been transmitting for generations, values which have become intrinsic to didactic practice i.e. that learning is private and individual and competitive in nature. As it has been argued, school learning is strongly associated with the development of cognitive abilities, that is, the expected performance in academic subjects. Therefore, children struggle to understand, in first place, that they need to learn something different than academic contents while executing academic tasks, that is, to cooperate, and secondly, that they truly demonstrate cognitive abilities if solutions to academic problems is not the outcome of an individual process. This explains why, since the perceived mandate is for each student to give account knowledge of his/her abilities, by means of an individual performance, the relation between them is necessarily competitive, because what it is at stake is the chance of displaying the answer as an individual merit. Sharing a solution or answer undermines the possibilities of demonstrating mastering of knowledge.

In the SFA Program, competition rules between teams and not between table mates are made explicitly part of the game. However, the introduction of individual scores within the teams does not allow a true rupture with the dynamics of the regular lessons where individual performances are publicly measured. Therefore, tablemates who are supposed to be allies in the new achievement game, in order to obtain team scores, still tend to be seen as opponents in SFA and, even more, as the most dangerous ones because they are more likely to 'steal' the right answer by copying from peers' books or catching a word from a tablemate's mouth, like Adam did in the interaction illustrated above.

My observations show that diversity of skills, which is another pillar of cooperative learning philosophy, is also one of the most problematic aspects of its implementation. In SFA this component should be moderated by the differentiation of ability groups based on the children's reading levels, which creates rather homogenous environments in terms of skills. Nevertheless, skill heterogeneity is still an issue for both teachers and children, due to several factors. Firstly, every SFA group suits a range of reading levels, which is rather narrow compared to what is normally found in regular classes but it still comprehends a significant degree of diversity. On the other hand, children's similarity in their reading level does not make them similar in other kinds of skills that need to be employed in a SFA literacy lesson as well. Writing, listening, being focused and grasping the problem are some of the many other abilities which are necessary to carry out any task. Furthermore, the difference of age among children gathered in the same group increases their heterogeneity in a variety of ways. More simply, a diverse degree of self-confidence and other aspects of personality can make a huge difference even between partners without a remarkable difference of age. The most talkative or self-confident one may automatically lead what should be a cooperative activity while the other assumes a more passive position. The dynamic is different when a partner A and a partner B have been previously defined and the teacher herself gives them turns, by asking for example, partners A to start and then to swap with partners B. However, questions like

Fatima's "what about you?" or "do you agree?" are not usually asked to the interlocutor in order to have their feedback. Children on both sides, whether the passive or the active one, tend either to assume the roles that they are given by the dynamic established by partners (as if it were something that does not depend on their behaviour) or to resist them by maintaining a conflictive attitude towards the partner. It is quite rare to see a child claiming his/her right to actively contribute to the making of the task or alternatively to push the partner to participate. Assertiveness seems, in this sense, a highly sophisticated skill for children used to working on their own.

The following descriptions illustrate two different kinds of dynamics caused by a situation of diversity of skills. The first one is characterized by the explicit lack of consideration of the partner: the most skilled child tries to ignore both her partner and the fact that they are required to work together, as the activity is considered "a waste of time". The second shows a rejection and an attitude of superiority towards the less skilled partner who tries to react but finally accepts the authority of the brightest.

In Wings 4 group the "idea-tree" that helps in organizing the ideas on the story read, has to be sketched in pairs. The teacher reminds children, from time to time, that the task has to be carried out with the partner. Fatima (Year 5) immediately writes down the question in her notebook that she demarcates with a curved and twisted line. She rushes everything as if she were in a competition. Her handwriting is all run-down. Shamsa (Year 5) is very behind her in the completion of the task. I suggest to Fatima to help Shamsa, because the work has to be done in pairs. Fatima complains that Shamsa's is too slow and that it is a waste of time. I insist so she grabs Shamsa's pen and starts writing on her partner's notebook. I tell her that it is not the right way to help her, so she drops the pen and crosses her arms assuming an annoyed expression. After a few seconds she starts looking for the answer in the text again. She doesn't listen when the teacher says that the answer has to be found on page 9. She keeps searching on page 7. I tell her more than once but she keeps writing and doesn't even lift up her head. She gives attention only to the teacher who approaches her and tells her to turn the page. Meanwhile Shamsa has found valuable information on page 9. Fatima picks it up, exchanges a few comments with Shamsa and starts writing quickly again, while Shamsa is again behind her (Field notes, 1/3/07).

The idea that Fatima has got about her partner as "too slow" does not allow her to see the contribution that she might make to her successful completion of the task. Her concern about 'getting on' and finishing as quickly as possible, which is both a feature of her personality and a reflection of the more usual ethos in the classroom of individual competition, makes her overlook her partners' achievements and then utilize them as though they were accidental, not enough to make her think about cooperation with her partner as anything other than a waste of time. The concern to finish the task as soon as possible is also shown in the interaction between Robert, a Year 6 White British boy and Mustafa, a Year 5 Somali boy, which actually turns into the only common interest that allows Robert and Mustafa to put aside other tensions and incompatibilities and implicitly 'agree' on a unequal division of roles:

After several reproaches by the teacher, Robert finally decides to turn his chair towards Mustafa, his partner, but keeping it quite far from him. A list of words has to be read in pairs and by turn. In case of struggling, partners are supposed to help each other with some strategies for the correct reading. After the instructions Robert and Mustafa start a new argument. Robert turns towards me and says that Mustafa always copies him. Mustafa reads the words and Robert looks at him, skeptically. Then a bitter smile fills his face: "You got it wrong!" he exclaims. Mustafa gets mad and hits the book against Robert. Change of turn. Robert reads (perfectly) while Mustafa

criticizes his pronunciation. The activity is interrupted many times. They seem not to be able to stand each other. The teacher asks to whisper to the partner what “dumpiness” means. Mustafa approaches Robert from behind (as he is giving his back to his partner again) and whispers to him something but Robert doesn’t turn so Mustafa starts mocking him. The teacher asks Mustafa to spell a word. Mustafa struggles and Robert keenly puts up his hand to answer. This seems to motivate Mustafa to work out the correct spelling. They keep arguing until they get a new warning from the teacher. They start working on the “idea-tree”. Robert finds the answers and tells Mustafa what to write down. With a certain authority he gives him detailed instructions about the content, the spelling and the punctuation. Mustafa doesn’t look very pleased to execute Robert’s orders but accepts that uncomfortable position, as he had no other option. Suddenly they both cheer up because the teacher says that they have finished before the others (Field notes, 14/11/06).

Despite the fact that children are grouped by reading ability levels, children must cope with partner’s diversity of skills, attitude, personality and in all those features that are involved since they have to carry out a task together. The reported interactions show that they if they struggle to understand that they have to work cooperatively, it does not make any sense at all for them to work with somebody with different skills so that they have to adapt their pace of work or, alternatively, they have to accept their condition of “less skilled” by assuming a passive position in the learning activity.

Resisting cooperation: the gifted child’s case

Robert is a highly talented child. None of the other children in school can equal him, not only in reading but also in most of the other abilities required by the curriculum. He has always shown a noticeable reluctance towards cooperative work, no matter who his partner is. A more skilled partner like Mustafa could only make him engage in a sort of permanent conflict and competition, but never pushed him to look for a more equal exchange. His full awareness of being superior to anybody else in academic terms did not make him give up needing to demonstrate or perform his superiority to his partners. On the contrary, he did not miss any occasion to attest to his partners’ ‘inadequacy’, either by pointing harshly to their mistakes or by questioning their opinions or simply by taking over the completion of the task without even giving the partner the chance to think about the answer. “I usually do the thinking, he does the writing”, Robert says to me in front of Afrim (Year 6), his partner. And when I suggest that he should do more writing and that Afrim should do more thinking, he replies: “He barely thinks”.

Some educational studies on cooperative learning have pointed to the unsuitability of this method for gifted children, who have shown a tendency to get bored, develop arrogance and not improve their achievements during cooperative learning (Feldhusen & Moon, 1992). Sharan (2002) suggests that these studies do not give account of the particular type of cooperative learning used and of the relationship between means and ends established in the practice of a cooperative learning strategy. This fact, in her opinion, makes questionable the dismissal of cooperative learning for the education of gifted children. However, what from my perspective it is worth trying to understand is Robert’s refusal to get engaged in the cooperative game in terms of the more usual classroom ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) where he is confident that he has already ‘learned how to learn’. Changes going on in the wider community of practice (the school) are requiring of him that he gives up his expertise achieved during years of attendance and learns to perform in a different way. For a boy like Robert who has proved, with his outstanding outcomes, full mastery of the learning strategies offered to him by that community, and more broadly, by the schooling system, the change might be particularly hard. In fact, Robert does not show boredom and lack of

motivation, he rather explicitly resists cooperation either by diminishing his partners or by confronting them as if they were his opponents or by preventing them from participating to the tasks required. He seems to have no faith that any child chosen to partner him at Saint Elizabeth would be an equal match as a partner and he has not developed a discourse about the positive value gained from helping others to progress where he would be the more experienced peer, scaffolding down to the less experienced class-mate.

Robert's resistance to cooperate with his partner was particularly manifest in his interactions with Afrim that I observed during 6 SFA lessons. Afrim is a bright and committed child, like Mustafa, but he is also Robert's class mate. Perhaps for this reason Robert seems to accept him more, at least as a 'desk mate' but he still refuses to see him as a legitimate work partner. Even in those moments when Afrim is slightly ahead of him in the completion of the task he manages to ignore him or to distract him instead of approaching him in a constructive way. The following example illustrates the role that the exertion of power either over classroom skills or classroom tools plays in the relationship between them.

Children are asked to work in pairs on a spelling task. One has to read the words and the other has to spell them, then roles are swapped. Robert and Afrim tear the book from each other's hands in order to be the first one to start with the reading of the words. They start taking turns after having read just a few words, they tease each other when they miss a word in the spelling. Then, the teacher dictates the word and everybody has to write them down in their own book. The teacher says not to worry if they are wrong, it might depend on his teaching or on pair work. After the task, books are exchanged with the partner who has to check the correctness of the spelling. Robert and Afrim from time to time have a glance at the marking that is going on in their own book while correcting their partner's. Afrim looks especially concerned about both the crosses that Robert is putting on his book and of the ticks he is compelled to put on his partner's. The task ends with the frustration of Afrim who complains about having 50 mistakes on his book while Robert cheers up because he has got only 10. The teacher shows a text with many spelling mistakes on the interactive white board. Pairs have to discuss and spot the mistakes. Robert, without even turning towards Afrim starts listing the mistakes he is finding in the text. Afrim does not say anything; he looks around as if he were distracted and not interested. During the following minutes of explanation Afrim keeps disengaged and fidgeting, the teacher reproaches him a few times. The text on the board has now to be rewritten in one's own book but working together. The teacher announces that he is going to give scores during the activity for "helping and encouraging each other". Robert and Afrim start working. Robert holds the dictionary and reads the words. He writes on his book keeping his finger on the dictionary under the word that has to be written to show Afrim. He is leading the task and Afrim easily follows him and writes on his book as shown. Assuming a sort of didactic role, Robert comments a few times about the importance of "double check" even when one is confident about the spelling. After a while he gains a point by the teacher for "helping and encouraging". He cheers up. After the task, the teacher introduces the team scoring activity explaining how scores have to be calculated. After an exemplification he adds the comment: "...only Robert could obtain such a score". Robert does not react while Afrim looks at him and with a sarcastic smile gives him a little slap on the head, saying something. The distribution of the calculators to the teams, as always, raises a few controversies at the tables. Robert claims that it is his turn to do the scoring. The teacher establishes that Afrim has to write on the scoring sheet while another girl in

the team will count the scores. Robert keeps complaining. “Just get on with it Robert”, the teacher says. As always, the scoring is carried out in the middle of a big fuss and several discussions. At some point, Afrim with a peremptory voice breaks out: “I don’t want to listen anymore either your voice, or yours or yours (referring to Robert’s) but only hers who has to count the scores”. Everybody falls silent and the rest of the activity proceeds easily. The scoring ends and the teacher praises the group. Robert and Afrim play and laugh together. Afrim stands up and Robert takes his seat. There is still some tension among the two (Fieldnotes, 10/12/06).

Clearly there is rivalry between Robert and Afrim. The teacher’s reassuring words about possible mistakes committed during the individual spelling task and the responsibility of the pair work for them are useless. The pair’s mutual assessment that follows the individual task is, as usual, charged with tension and anxiety, especially for the weakest part of the pair who is aware of how tough it is to compete with Robert and, indeed, Afrim turns to have far more mistakes than Robert. Then the frustration for being left out of the competition —by a partner that does not consider him at all during the following task— adds to the existing frustration for having ‘lost a game’ and makes Afrim fully disengage from the whole classroom activity. The new pair task makes him participate again, although he assumes the role of a ‘passive pupil’ towards his partner, who apparently gets motivated in helping him by the perspective of getting new scores for helping and encouraging Afrim. The teacher’s comment on Robert’s unquestionable superiority in literacy skills clearly makes Afrim particularly sensitive and might have been taken as a sort of public legitimization of Robert’s patronizing attitudes. Interestingly, a kind of balance is brought to this inequality through Afrim’s appointment to the scoring activity, which is always highly contentious. Counting the personal and team scores is a very exciting job for children, as it classifies within that range of classroom activities that have the double feature of escaping from the ordinary attainment-oriented tasks and, on the other side, of being carried out only by a few entitled children (who are momentarily put in a privileged position compared to others). Afrim’s designation by the teacher, despite Robert’s protests, establishes a sort of balance between the power gained over classroom activities by Robert through his skills and the one obtained by Afrim through his exclusive access to a key classroom tool, which is the scoring sheet. Afrim’s empowerment allows him to play an authoritative role in the arguments that are raised at the table so that the order is re-established and the task is carried out successfully. Afterwards, Robert and Afrim apparently restore a more equal relationship, competition is still performed but in a more playful and friendly way.

The extraordinary distance between Robert’s abilities and anybody else’s necessarily exacerbates the difficulties that partners normally have at working together because, as I have shown, heterogeneity of skills can be an obstacle for cooperative work. Nevertheless, the difficulty that Robert has in taking on cooperative work is not only proportionally higher than usual, but it is also different from a qualitative point of view. As I already pointed out, Robert does not only skip the instructions about working together by ignoring his partner but most of the time, he also boycotts the cooperative work by either explicitly or implicitly denigrating his partner. As if cooperating might undermine his identity and public image of being ‘the brightest child’, most of the time the relationship with his partner seems to be focused around the attempt of counterbalancing the threat represented by cooperation. His tendencies to be patronizing towards and denigrating of the partner as well as exhibiting his skills and outcomes might be read as part of this attempt to restore his identity.

Being officially appointed by the teacher to a ‘scaffolding’ position does not predispose Robert better to cooperative work, not even when the difference with his partner’s skill is so huge that it does not motivate him to establish any sort of competition, as he shows during the SFA lesson in preparation for SATs:

Robert swings on his chair, looking thoughtful and barely convinced when the teacher reminds him of his role with Jim (Year 6): “Don’t say that you have done it on your own. Your role is training. You are Level 5, Jim is almost Level 4. You have got to help him to reach Level 5”. Robert quickly whispers his partner the answer and goes back to his work. Other reminders of this kind follow but they are all ignored by Robert who, at his best, supports his partner by ‘sharing the answer’ with him (Field notes, 6/2/07).

It might be argued that Robert does not know how to *train* his partner and to help him in any other way than revealing the answer. However, what is relevant to point out is the lack of motivation that he shows towards cooperative work, despite the awarding system based on the cooperative learning points. Why do teacher’s encouragements fail to raise his enthusiasm towards cooperation? Why does the perspective of obtaining new scores in the cooperative learning standards not move him to behave differently? By being a stable Level 5 child, Robert is already acknowledged as the brightest child of his class and, perhaps, of the whole school. He might know that, at the end of the day, that is the only thing that really matters in the educational system and that cooperative learning points are a marginal issue that certainly will not help him to have a brilliant SATs score and to fulfill his aspiration (that he expressed to me) of going to a highly competitive private secondary school.

Therefore, with skilful partners Robert engages in a competitive relationship and constantly underestimates them, as he needs to protect his identity as ‘the brightest child’ threatened by cooperative work. Instead, with a struggling partner like Jim, he simply tends to ignore and only repeatedly encouraged by the teacher does he ‘share’ task solutions. What I stress here is the fact that for a boy like Robert who has a total mastery of the skills required in the schooling system, whose special status has been moulded and constantly reinforced by it (see for example the teacher’s comment), there is everything to lose in cooperative work. It may be simply time and concentration on the task (which does not make him keen on helping Jim) or even worse, the exclusiveness of that mastery and, therefore, the weakening of his prominent position among the other children. Robert has learned well how to be a successful pupil and he refuses to give up his achievements for the sake of cooperation. So he keeps applying the same criteria that made him such an exemplary student before, which is focusing on the task and working out the solutions on his own.

Cooperative learning and accountability: tensions and dilemmas

Cooperative lessons highlight the emblematic role of the task in classroom practice. In the standard teaching-learning system the task is usually addressed as the main object of the learning process and as the main objective of children’s activity. Children are expected to make the task the main focus of their attention and the purpose of all their efforts. Within the SFA cooperative learning scheme, the ‘completion of the task’ is established as a central purpose of classroom activities but it is also turned into a means to develop cooperation skills, which is added as a new learning objective: “...Because in this work what are we learning?”, the Wing 3 teacher asks during the introductory session to a new cycle of SFA. “Cooperative learning!”, the class shouts.

Nevertheless, as it has been shown, all children (Robert is not an exception at all) prefer, by default, to look at the book or at the board in order to solve the task when they are asked to work with their partner. This tendency, I argue, not only gives evidence of the difficulty for children to learn and take on a new mode of being in the classroom, but it is also related to the ambiguous way in which cooperative learning is introduced by teaching practice. As I mentioned, children are systematically reminded about the pillars of the cooperative learning philosophy during the SFA introductory session that takes place every 8 weeks, after a new redistribution into the reading ability groups. Children’s previous knowledge about both the value and the practical ways of helping each

other is recalled. “If you share your knowledge you will make much progress”, the Wing 4 teacher says. He then illustrates his point with examples taken by the last children’s outcomes: “Two children have both improved because they have worked well together, while another child, who had not been paired up with anybody has not shown much progress”. Cooperative work, then, is presented as the key strategy and the main tool for “making progress”, that is, for academic achievement which is the very goal of any classroom activity. On the other hand, completing the task is only one of the cooperative learning standards, as if the task was only a means for establishing cooperation.

Theorists of SFA cooperative learning might suggest that the completion of the task and cooperative work are both, at the same time, the means and objective of one another. However, as a matter of fact, there is an ambiguity at the heart of cooperative learning that is confusing in children’s eyes and does not favour the implementation of cooperative practices. In fact, children lacking clarity about the relationship between cooperation and completion of the task, tend to apply the old criterion they had previously learned: they make the task the main object and objective of their activity, while cooperation practices are relegated to a complementary aspect. As I have mentioned, children tend to cope with the task on their own or to approach an adult, not only when their partner is not a good interlocutor (because slower, not focused or less skilled) but also when they are in difficulty. The fact that when interviewed about SFA, children rarely mention cooperative learning or paired work as something that is particularly relevant for them, might be read in this sense to indicate that they have not understood or have understood and rejected the idea that cooperation itself is both a means as well as a valued end product. In fact, when interrogated about what they like about SFA, children never mention working together; they usually refer to the kind of activities and tasks that are carried out.

It should be noted also that the official assessment that takes place every 8 weeks concerns only the child’s reading level, while the writing part is monitored in standard periodic assessments. However, the development of cooperative skills, which is, as it has been mentioned, not only a strategy but a primary purpose of the program, is assessed rather informally, through the cooperative points. Furthermore, this method seems to be meant mainly to engage children in the cooperative learning competition rather than to monitor children’s progress in that area. This fact seems to corroborate the position of cooperative learning as a means rather than as an end product of children’s classroom activity. In fact, only targeted achievements are legitimate objects of measurement and, therefore, can be officially assessed. This feature may also support my hypothesis about the lack of motivation in taking on cooperative work that has been expressed by Robert. A bright and competent child like him, indeed, might have caught on to this aspect of the SFA program and might consider that no advantages at all were offered to him by cooperative practices. Moreover, despite being a mean, cooperation is not really a strategic one in the context of the task. If the task would be designed in a way that cooperation were a crucial and unavoidable step to carry out the task, it would play a different role and would be seen with different eyes. The ambiguity of the status of cooperative practices which, therefore, appears to be an intrinsic aspect of the SFA program rather than originating from the teaching practice which delivers it, might be overcome or compensated for by constantly monitoring children’s cooperative performance and redirecting them towards a focus on the cooperation process at least *alongside* the completion of the task. But this is not a regular practice and, as I will argue, assessing the cooperative work of all the children is, for practical reasons, extremely hard for teachers.

On the other hand, the completion of the task, which implies the performance of proper literacy skills, is no longer displayed as the main unquestionable objective of the lesson, becoming a problematic issue for teachers’ classroom practice. James, a teacher, despite recognising the value of the cooperative learning process and of “giving more responsibility” to children “for their own

learning”, confesses the difficulty found in shifting to a system in which the learning or the teaching cannot be “measured” in terms of written outcomes. The lack of an objective product of the work done by the children (and therefore, also by the teachers) also puts the adults in a vulnerable position within a system that is organized around the principle of accountability and measurement:

Well, the contradiction has always been for me: how much work the children produce. And I always put a lot of pressure on myself for there to be a decent outcome from the lesson. Now, sometimes in SFA there is not a huge outcome, like today a group wrote one sentence, that’s it, for an hour and a half work. Do you understand what I mean? So, that’s quite difficult for a teacher because you sort of think: “What evidence have I got to show for what the children have achieved today?” But I think it’s not. Because we are scrutinized constantly in this profession and it’s all about providing evidence. I think a lot of pressure is put on us and I think we put ourselves under a lot of pressure to have a specific outcome. So that’s what I found most difficult, not letting go from saying, right, actually they carry on the cooperative learning now, I am not gonna do independence every day (Interview, 12/4/07).

The above extract illustrates the dilemmas that a teacher experiences when he is confronted with a teaching practice that does not rely on objectified outcomes, such written tasks are but only on processes and situations that are meant to be created under the cooperative learning scheme but that can be neither registered nor measured. The impossibility of providing evidence for learning, makes him question the nature of the learning produced, showing how the accountability system has deeply penetrated the very notion of learning teachers hold. In the teacher’s opinion independent work guarantees evidence, while the process of learning that goes on through cooperative practices does not. He associates “independence” with the production of a written work by an individual pupil who works in a non-interactional way. Not having to exchange opinions and discuss solutions with the partner allows the child to focus on the task and being more ‘productive’ in terms of written work. This explains why independent or individual work, is more suitable for a system where learning tends to be objectified.

Furthermore, what is or is not written on the book is deemed as an accountable way to give feedback about children’s learning not only to teachers but, apparently, to children themselves too. The opinion given by Hannah, another teacher, who is somewhat more sceptical about cooperative learning, may account for the belief that children are supposed to work things out while writing or because they are motivated by the task to write down the answer:

I am not sure that they are skilled enough at it yet, they can help if they can help. They have done their partner reading and they’ve got to answer the questions Today without doing it in the book and it’s when they’ve got to write the questions they suddenly realize: “I don’t know the answer”. And they should have known the answer, they should have been talking about it, and they do that, but they obviously haven’t worked and its only until they’ve got to write it down...: “I don’t know the answer”. So I am not sure (Interview, 5/5/07).

Therefore, writing or providing evidence is considered an effective tool not just for teachers to prove the evidence of their teaching, but also for children’s progress as well, because it is the only way children can become aware of their own understanding. The evidence based system creates the illusion of registering the child’s cognitive process and of turning learning into a ‘public’ and observable object. Achievement and evidence, learning and outcome get mixed up. Teachers seem to believe either genuinely or forcefully (because of pressure by the accountability system) that the process of learning becomes accessible through the reification of the answers on a piece of paper. At the same time, the independent, written work as opposed to the interactional, verbal one, can be

considered a better tool for learning, because children have the chance to probe their knowledge in the process of objectifying it on a piece of paper.

The evidence issue is closely related to the assessment practice. In SFA teachers are required to assess not only the product, the completion of the task or the written outcome; they are supposed to supervise and assess also the process which is the cooperative work. This makes assessment much more complex, as teachers themselves declare in an SFA training session. Paradoxically, the teacher, through the cooperative work, has some kind of access to the cognitive process that is behind the outcome reported in the notebook. However, because the cooperative practices are usually 'internal' processes —made of associations, questions and recall of previous information— that have to be externalised to be turned into a social practice, the teacher can access this process only through observation. This means that the child is not only externalizing the cognitive process that has been internally experienced but s/he is making sense of things by engaging in an interactive process where subtle social dynamics are put into play. These dynamics that constitute the learning process can be caught only by a careful and constant eye that the teacher, for obvious practical reasons, cannot have all the time for all children. The teacher's assessment is applied only on the basis of 'bits' of scenes that are interpreted out of context. Marcia, a teacher whom I expressed my concerns to about the way cooperative practices were assessed, argued that teachers, by utilizing the evaluation 'structure' given by the program —the 5 learning standards and the team score assignment— were able to make a reliable assessment of children's performances and if they did not it was just a matter of lack of practice. However, most of the time my table observations of the cooperative work did not match the teacher's one and I used to find inappropriate the assignment of scores for 'completing the task' or 'everyone participate'.

The issues arising out of the assessment of SFA cooperative practices show also the anomaly or the inconsistency of a programme that while shifting the responsibility of the scaffolding function from the teacher to the peer, does not empower the children to evaluate either their own performance in partnership or their partner's. Teachers are asked by the program to give up the monitoring of children's learning by relying more on the 'immaterial' interactive process that takes place between them rather than on the written outcomes shown in the books but teachers still withhold full control of the evaluation of that interaction. Cooperative learning is an observable and public process only if it is persistently observed, which cannot occur when the teacher's observation is divided by the high number of partnerships in the class. What are visible are only fragments of interactions but the whole process lived within the partnership remains rather private.

The specific dynamics that take place in the paired or team work seem to be concealed even to its participants, as children usually do not have the chance to be aware of them. What would have happened, for example, if Afrim had had to give Robert a score out of ten for cooperation? Would Robert have tried harder to work in a pair, especially if the ranking of that score was high compared to other scores, like individual outcomes? In a learning program that emphasizes the importance of making children "connect with what they learn and how they learn", as teachers were told during an SFA training session, children usually are not given the conditions to "connect" with their own practice or with their partners' after the instruction of paired and team work. The allocation of scores for having met any one of the learning standards is keenly taken by children (who rush to write down the score on the team score sheet) even when the paired work has been quite useless and troublesome. In other words, children are not empowered to evaluate the cooperative work they have taken part in and in this way, to become accountable for both theirs and their partners' learning. Thus, while the control of children's learning is given up by teachers, adults still retain the function of assessing each child's performance. This anomaly, I argue, corroborates my argument that the new conception of learning as a social process that the SFA Program has endorsed coexists

with a traditional one related to the idea of individual and private achievement that seems to be more suitable for the accountability system that both teachers and children have embodied. In fact, in this more traditional system, learning, of any kind, needs to be translated from practice to a measurable object and only teachers, legitimate representatives of the educational structure, are entitled to carry out the ‘measurement’.

Conclusions

In this paper I examined how the introduction of cooperative learning practices in a British school under the neoliberal educational framework challenges and therefore highlights the specific social structure and didactic character of the more established form of participating in the classroom. This supposes that children relate individually with the topic to be learned and individually perform or give account of what they have learned. This practice is, on the one hand, associated to the idea that learning is a private process that occurs in the mind and, on the other, it serves the accountability system at the heart of British education. In fact, the individual production of a (written) work is believed to provide objective and more reliable evidence of students’ achievement than a social activity where students, through exchange, have to make sense of the challenges posed. With cooperative practices, intersubjectivity becomes explicitly part of the learning process, making it more observable, as it is made more public, but, therefore, less tangible and measurable. This is the main difficulty teachers have with the implementation of cooperative learning, because the accountability system requires that they are able to demonstrate students’ achievement by means of a standardized system of assessment.

Students show a similar concern. If they are not worried about how their work will be proved or measured they are, indeed, preoccupied with making, within the social context of the classroom, their individual performance distinguishable from the others. This entails, in first place, participating in the learning activity as it was a race and secondly, making sure that the ownership of answers is clearly established and that their abilities, when higher than their partner’s, are acknowledged. Diversity of skills, which gets highlighted within the cooperative work activities, only makes sense in a framework of competition but not in a cooperative one. The preoccupation with completing the task (whether on their own or by relying on the partner’s higher skills) rather than with establishing a common pace of work with their partner could be also seen as a search for the objectification, through a tangible piece of work, of those personal achievements and abilities.

The case of the talented and successful child and his explicit resistance to cooperative work is particularly emblematic of the rooted belief that learning in school is a mainly individual matter and that sharing it, through a process of co-construction of meaning, may undermine the authenticity of knowledge and put individuality into question, as individuality is built up through competition. The idea of competition rather collaboration and of private achievement rather co-construction of meaning fits the educational political agenda which has stayed substantially unvaried since the Thatcher’s government until the present time. In fact, in the quasi-market educational British system, children, like schools, need to give account individually of their progress. The accountability system, as children’s interactions show, has been embodied and it is deeply embedded in British school culture.

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