
ESZTER NEUMANN

Problem students, problem classes:
Polarization, differentiation and language about disruptive
student behaviour in Hungarian primary schools

Intersections. EEJSP

8(1): 72–89.

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v8i1.776>

<https://intersections.tk.hu>

[neumann.eszter@tk.hu] (Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest)

Abstract

While the effects of social and ethnic segregation in schools have been thoroughly studied, much less attention has been paid to the internal, more subtle forms of classification, selection, and exclusion at work in Hungarian primary schools. This paper focuses on the characteristic features of the language about classroom disruption and norm-breaking behaviour in socially mixed primary schools and how internal grouping structures frame this language and teachers' perceptions of disruptive student behaviour. In the empirical analysis, two key notions by which teachers conceptualize norm-breaking behaviour emerged: the 'problem student' and the 'problem class'. While the notion of the 'problem student' dominated the behaviour-related narratives of both schools, the notion of the 'problem class' was more prevalent and influential in one school, and specifically in those cohorts who attended a rigid, selective internal grouping structure. The in-depth analysis explores the discursive construction of the 'problem class' and the ways in which students identified as 'problematic' narrated their engagement in an anti-school student culture in the latter school. The findings suggest that inflexible internal grouping structures facilitated pathologizing language about 'problem classes' and these two factors together contributed to the polarization of student attitudes and to the development of an anti-school culture, and ultimately played a powerful role in the naturalization of classed educational trajectories.

Keywords: anti-school culture, classroom disruption, Hungary, internal selection, problem student, school discipline

1 Introduction¹

Since the political transition in 1989, Hungary has seen the emergence of one of the most selective early tracking school systems in the world (Horn, Keller & Róbert, 2016). The combination of multiple forms of internal and external selection, competition between schools in

¹ I would like to express my thanks to Sharon Gewirtz, Meg Maguire, Ábel Bereményi, Rita Hordósy and the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript for their help in improving the text.

the primary-school market, strong tracking at the secondary level, as well as various forms of differentiation and exclusion within schools effectively hinder intergenerational mobility and increase intra-generational inequalities in Hungary (Horn et al., 2016). While the effects of social and ethnic segregation among schools have been widely studied by social scientists, much less attention has been paid to internal, more subtle forms of classification, selection and exclusion at work in Hungarian schools and their impact on learner identities. Moreover, while the forms of symbolic domination and the misrecognition of Roma students have been thoroughly explored by Hungarian sociologists in the last decades, research has paid much less attention to the symbolic violence suffered by working-class students. Contributing to filling this gap in the literature, my paper pays special attention to how a working-class family background features in school language and how this affects teacher-student relations, forges learner identities, and contributes to the disaffection of working-class students. Furthermore, the novelty of the paper is that it explores the interaction between rigid internal school structures and teachers' perceptions of differences between student groups and approaches to student behaviour in the Hungarian context. Through the lens of the school-level narrative framework on classroom disruption and norm-breaking behaviour, the analysis reconstructs the ways in which 'problem identities' are being imposed on working-class students in the studied primary school.

The empirical discussion unpacks two key concepts which teachers used to conceptualize norm-breaking behaviour: the 'problem student', which seems to be a more general feature of the behaviour-related language in Hungarian primary schools, and the 'problem class', which seems to correspond with rigid internal structures. The core part of the paper involves a 'thick' case study on the discursive construction of the 'problem class', and throws light on the ways in which behaviour-related 'problems' are bound to school structures and deeply situated in the perception of social class. The case study suggests that the combination of internal selective practices and pathologizing, essentializing school narratives on student behaviour powerfully cement classed educational trajectories.

2 Theoretical background: The systemic production of educationally problematic identities

The ways in which education systems subtly but powerfully shape class and class inequalities have been thoroughly examined and consistently confirmed by sociologists of education since the 1950s (Weis, 2010). It has been compellingly argued that ethnic and class disparities translate into different family and school practices that lead students from less educated backgrounds to resist learning (Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1980, 1984; Lareau, 1987).

Schools reward the social and cultural resources of middle-class students whose behaviour represents what is 'proper', 'normal' and expected by teachers. These expectations make up the implicit system of normativity in schools (Calarco, 2014; Lareau, 2011). A school's institutional habitus (Ingram, 2009), similarly to the habitus of individuals, is a 'system of lasting, transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 82); the product of historical, social and cultural actions and interactions. Amongst other key aspects of the school ethos, the institutional habitus, built up from taken-for-granted assumptions, powerfully influences the ways in which disruptive behaviour is tackled (Deakin & Kupchik, 2016), the collective under-

standing of what constitutes disruptive behaviour, interactions between teachers and students, as well as the language used to describe these incidents (Deakin & Kupchik, 2018).

Language plays a significant role in the exercise of power and domination (Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991). Language operates as a structuring force in shaping classifications and assumptions about expected knowledge and behaviour in the classroom. In educational contexts, the power of language becomes palpable when certain students are labelled naturally inferior because they fail to conform to the expectations of the school. When these students react against labelling by performing some form of norm-breaking behaviour, they are sanctioned (Marsh, 2018; Shalaby, 2017). Labelled individuals may eventually embrace their deviant status (Becker, 1963). Repeated interactions and interplays of norm-breaking behaviour and sanctioning responses confirm the immanent problematic personalities of those labelled deviant in the eyes of the dominant groups and thus legitimize the punishments used to discipline them (Vesikansa & Honkatukia, 2018).

The tradition of British school ethnographies similarly placed class relations at the centre of understanding the reproduction of social inequalities, the ways in which schools act as institutions of social control, and the causes of the academic underperformance of working-class students (e.g., Lacey, 1970; Willis, 1977; Llewellyn, 1980; Abraham, 1989; 1995; Ball, 1981). In the following analysis, I will greatly rely on the theory of differentiation and polarization developed and refined in three British English ethnographic monographs written by Hargreaves (1967), Lacey (1970), and Ball (1981) and tested in several consecutive studies. The heuristic potential of these studies lies in the fact that they discuss the structures of schooling, schools' language about abilities and behaviour, and student attitudes to education using a common framework. According to Lacey (1970, pp. 49–73), typically in schools with inflexible, internal grouping structures, the differentiation of pupils based on an academically oriented value system leads to the polarization of students' attitudes toward schooling and into the development of pro-school and anti-school student cultures. Such polarization in attitudes, Lacey found, tended to further strengthen the original differentiation and influentially shaped students' study pathways. Lacey (1970, pp. 172, 178) argued that 'teacher behaviour, conditioned by the reputation of the pupil, is one of the central factors producing differentiation'. While British school ethnographies predominantly concentrated on secondary schools, similar processes seem to be in operation from the early years onwards in Hungarian primary schools.

Another robust stream of school ethnographies has focussed on student resistance rather than school structures and sought to explain how working-class youth (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1977) and students of colour (Ogbu, 1987; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Cumins, 1986) become more likely to resist school values and develop an anti-school culture. Perhaps the most influential work on working-class boys' resistance to learning is Paul Willis's (1977) book on how English working-class boys actively rebel and reproduce their class position. However, more recent studies have once again emphasised the significance of school structures and the situated development of anti-school student cultures. McFarland (2001), from a study of everyday forms of active resistance in US secondary schools, challenged the causal link between race, class and classroom disruption established in the above-cited literature and contended that resistance does not necessarily relate to class or ethnicity but to school and classroom characteristics, the organization of

classroom activities (instructional forms and taught content), as well as to the characteristics of classroom social networks and the quality of friendships and cliques. We could argue that in the Hungarian context, where students study in and belong to the same group throughout their eight years of primary schooling, stable friendship ties may have even stronger effects on the dynamics of classroom disruption, the formation of defiant class identities, and teachers' labelling practices.

3 Methodology

The findings presented hereunder come from a larger-scale doctoral project which compared categorization processes related to ability grouping and managing behaviour in English and Hungarian schools (Neumann, 2018). The following analysis builds on ethnographic data collection in two Hungarian primary schools over a period of five months in the 2014/2015 school year. The Hungarian fieldwork was conducted in a mid-size Hungarian town. I aimed to select 'ordinary schools' (see Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2011, p. 13) which were not outliers in terms of the relevant aspects of the local educational market, such as size and social and ethnic heterogeneity. The two case-study schools, anonymized as the Nuthatch and Sandpiper schools, were typical examples of socially and ethnically diverse, mixed intake, state-maintained primary schools in the Hungarian urban educational landscape.

I analysed school documents and conducted non-participant classroom observation in the schools. I conducted 22 semi-structured focussed interviews (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 416) with teachers, which alongside other themes concentrated on their views about classroom behaviour and discipline, both generally at the schools and in the observed classes specifically. In addition, I conducted a total of eight group interviews with 14–15-year-old eighth-grade final-year students who attended the observed classes (with six or seven students in each group). During the fieldwork, I aimed at making sense of the dynamics of the class and peer relationships, as well as of the ways in which authority and power relations were exercised in the schools. I took notes of the interactions between teachers and students, as well as of the use of space and time in the school and the classrooms.

The coding process focussed on identifying key concepts of categorization and classification processes. The interviews and the field notes were processed with the NVivo qualitative data-analysis software. During the first analytical immersion in the data, I coded the interviews and the field diary. Following a within-case method, I identified the emerging themes and key categories related to the theme of student behaviour and wrote up the findings into separate institutional case studies. These case study reports aimed to identify the relations between categories and the constellations of the themes within the institutions with a view to identifying the institutional habitus and the specificities of the school cultures. The institutional accounts provided contextual richness and institutionally specific information and unravelled the ways in which the institutional habitus defines the studied themes. This process highlighted the codes which appear across cases and national settings and singled out those codes which appear in only one setting. For the former, the category of the 'problem student' is a good illustration which was found to be highly relevant across Hungarian case-study schools.

4 The policy context: Social selection, differentiation, and polarization in Hungarian primary schools

A national survey conducted in 2005 found that every fourth primary school operated some sort of selection procedure during their admissions process, with one-fifth of the principals reporting that entrance examinations were in place (Halász & Lannert, 2006). Education research conducted in the 2000s documented that, primarily due to the prevalence of selective practices at the point of school entry, student performance (Csapó, 2003; Tóth et al., 2010) and social status (Horn et al., 2016) in parallel classes within primary schools significantly differ and these differences tend to grow throughout primary education. The ministry of education of the incumbent government between 2002 and 2010 made sure that selective mechanisms and social segregation in primary schools were at the centre of the policy agenda. Primary-school entrance examinations were banned in 2005, although streaming and ability-setting in primary schools were not disallowed by regulatory means. Schools committed to abandoning streaming and rigid internal selection practices were entitled to supplementary per-capita funding and could apply to EU-funded professional development programmes centred on inclusive pedagogies. However, political attention turned away from this area completely after the 2010 elections, and the earlier measures aimed at tackling between and within school segregation were discontinued. Education policies implemented since 2010 have reinforced segregation processes and further exacerbated the social polarization of the primary school system (Fejes & Szűcs, 2018; Bazsalya & Hórich, 2020).

The transformation of the primary school landscape in the studied town is a typical example of how Hungarian urban education contexts changed after the regime change. Like in most Hungarian towns, a competitive and hierarchical primary school market took shape in the 1980s and 1990s. Due to decades of steady population decrease, the municipality gradually rationalized its emptying, overdeveloped school infrastructure. By the end of the 2000s, due to the combined effect of rationalizing measures and the national desegregation policy, all but one segregated school had been amalgamated into bigger schools located in urban transitional zones. In my research project, I was interested in how these schools responded to their changing status and intake and to the turbulent policy context.

By the mid-2000s, the local primary-school landscape was split between large-size, mixed-intake schools and high prestige downtown schools which continued to offer specialized streams. Therefore, while between-school segregation pertained within the town, the heads of the mixed schools primarily affected by the redistribution of the towns' marginalized population faced the challenge of rethinking their internal selection procedures and pedagogical approaches. In the mid-2000s, the catchment area of a closed segregated school was integrated into each case study school. While the leadership of Nuthatch school decided to carefully distribute newly enrolling pupils to ensure a social mix in each enrolled class, Sandpiper's leadership decided to continue to enforce a rigid logic of status-based separation in its enrolment procedure. The case study included below concentrates on a cohort enrolled in this period. Later, in 2011, a new head was appointed who had previously taught notoriously difficult classes. He instantaneously changed the first-year enrolment procedure and

balanced the social intake of the new classes because he wanted to ensure the fair distribution of teacher workload.² Neither of the schools applied for EU project funding for the professional development of inclusive pedagogies.

The comparison of the two schools highlights the interactions between internal selection mechanisms and the school language about disruptive behaviour. The core analysis concentrates on Sandpiper school, and Nuthatch school will only be used as a reference point for exploring the emerging themes and conceptual constellations in the school's behaviour-related language.

5 School language about disruptive behaviour in the two schools: 'Problem students' and the interest of the community

In the past three decades, behaviour management has evolved into a complex, highly professionalized domain of education policy (see Slee, 1995; Millei et al., 2010; Robinson, 2011; Deakin, Taylor & Kupchik, 2018). In contrast, Hungarian national education policies have not so far paid focussed attention to behaviour management, and consequently the language about behaviour is deeply situated in schools' institutional habitus on the one hand and firmly bound to the discretion of teachers on the other. The most manifest, regular, and formalized way of narrating and regulating student behaviour is associated with the longstanding practice of marking students' 'behaviour' (*magatartás*) and 'effort' (*szorgalom*). During my fieldwork, I found that while official house rules were rarely referenced and consulted during the day-to-day operation of schools, marking students' effort and behaviour in their report books firmly signposted the semantic field about behaviour. Staff meetings at which 'behaviour and effort' are graded – where marks are discussed and decided – and form-teacher's lessons during which marks are announced to students were important sites of negotiating school norms and classifying students in both schools.

The analysis of the interviews, field notes on formal teacher meetings about marking behaviour, as well as on their informal chats highlighted that the notion of the 'problem student' was a key element in the teacher narratives about classroom disruption in both schools. As a recurrent element of these narratives, teachers raised concerns about the impact of 'problem students' on classroom order and the class as a community. The interviewed teachers assigned great importance to stability and attachment dynamics within classes, and the removal of pupils from classes by various means was generally justified as a way of defending the 'class community'.

The meaning of being a 'problem' could not be dissociated from the relations between the class and the individual, and tackling classroom disruption was typically narrated as a zero-sum game whose solution was removing the 'problem' – the term was associated with individuals – for the sake of the classroom majority. Notably, in both schools, even though teachers commonly referred to the interests of the class as a community in the interviews, when talking to students, norm-breaking behaviour was primarily framed as insulting to the teacher and rarely as a matter of disrespect to peers or damaging to the class as a com-

² I have analysed the enrolment procedures and the internal selection practices of the two schools in detail in Neumann (2018).

munity. In the dominantly frontal classroom practice of the studied schools, the significance of peer relations was much less frequently verbalized and considered than teacher-student relations.

A school's institutional habitus in relation to student behaviour is guided by underlying beliefs, values and emotions both at the institutional and teacher level (Maguire et al., 2010). In both studied schools, this belief system interpreted 'problem behaviour' as the defective performance of a child, thus the solution to behavioural issues was removing disruptive students from the class community. The 'control framework' (Deakin & Kupchik, 2018) applied by the studied schools which considered 'problem students' as threats to order and the community of the class seems to be the polar opposite of the inclusive behaviour approaches and professional perspectives which view such students as members of a community 'whose behaviour can be corrected for the good of that community' (Deaking & Kupchik, 2018, p. 512). Although the school language that centred on the opposition between the 'problem student' and the 'class community' was strikingly similar in the two schools, the analysis showed that the concept of the 'problem class' – even though it was present – was much less central in the language of Nuthatch school compared to Sandpiper's.

6 Differentiation, polarization, and the discursive construction of the 'problem class' at Sandpiper school

Alongside references to 'problem students' (*problémás tanuló*), the coding process shed light on the widespread mentioning of 'problem classes'³ (*problémás osztály*) in the interviews conducted at Sandpiper school. Upper-school teachers had a shared understanding of which classes were 'problem classes' and what made them so in the school. At the time of the fieldwork, Sandpiper had two infamous problem classes. One of them was Class 8B, of which I conducted classroom observations. In the following, I will concentrate on how internal selection mechanisms and behaviour-related language co-created a school environment in which this particular class had come to be discursively constructed as a 'problem class' over the years.

There was a reputation, 'oh my God, this class!' So, in each cohort there is an 'oh my God class' This was established when the pre-retirement generation [of teaching staff] chased two children... of course. Or when we closed the door to stop them sneaking out, or begged the children to come down from the top of the stairs – and not by leapfrogging please, because you'll fall over and break your face! (Lower-school 8B head of class)

In the eighth-year cohort, the school had two classes, 8A and 8B. My discussions with the class heads suggested that while Class A had a predominantly middle-class character, parents in Class B typically had blue-collar jobs. Official statistical categories about social disadvantage also confirmed the disparity between the two classes (with three socially disadvantaged students from eighteen in Class A and thirteen socially disadvantaged students out of twenty-six in Class B).

How did this polarized structure, which Lacey (1970) argues tends to generate polarized attitudes towards learning and school norms, occur in the first place? The cohort in dis-

³ Ball (1981, p. 40) also discussed classes that had obtained a reputation as 'problem' classes in his ethnography.

cussion was enrolled in 2007, two years after the school's catchment zone had been expanded to include a stigmatized, poor-reputation area inhabited by Roma families.⁴ In the same year, the educational administration of the municipality limited Sandpiper school to launching two first-year classes instead of the regular three classes. Mrs Bluebell,⁵ class teacher of Class 8A in lower school, reported that even though Sandpiper did not have specialized streams, at the time of the former's enrolment the principal aimed to favour middle-class parents by offering them the possibility to choose between the two future class teachers in the first year. Therefore, the internal class structure was shaped by the strategic and voluntary class-based segregation of the parents. Mrs Bluebell recalled that her class was heavily oversubscribed.

The parents selected, so in this respect, I was lucky – many parents wanted to bring their children to me. So, this effectively meant a selective, essentially selected, class. (Mrs Bluebell, lower-school class head of Class 8A)

Moreover, two teachers from Sandpiper school also enrolled their children in Mrs Bluebell's class. Both former lower-school class-heads primarily associated the resulting social disparity with parental choice. Mrs Bluebell was widely known in town for her middle-class habitus, which was also noticeable in our interview and in her teaching style. Hence, the two classes 'naturally' separated along class lines.

This was the class that I felt that [parents] had brought kids here because of me. [...] The parents calculated in advance when I would teach the first year again⁶ [...] and they asked me how they should plan, because they were prepared to keep their children back in kindergarten for one more year. (Mrs Bluebell, lower-school head of Class 8A)

Reay (2010) notes that schools cater for middle-class parents who aim to ensure that their children are educational winners, in this case by meeting their wish for the latter to be separated from working-class and Roma students, which 'also helps reinforce the position of losers' – otherwise, what is viewed as educational success would lose its value. At Sandpiper school, the selected Class A with a middle-class intake ascribed an inferior position to Class B from the first day of schooling.

When I interviewed the class head of Class B in the lower school, Mrs Liliu, she bluntly said that she didn't have 'positive memories [of that time]. It was perhaps the most difficult four years of my twenty-six years [of teaching]' – she explained. Bourdieu (1986) argues that the 'legitimate addresses' of pedagogical work are groups who have already acquired the dominant habitus through childrearing and other cultural experiences. The illegitimacy of Class B was typically narrated by teachers in highly emotional, moralizing terms – they felt that their work and efforts were not valued or responded to in the expected way. These working-class students may not have engaged in the 'politics of politeness' (Bourdieu, 1986) that their teachers were anticipating. Mrs Liliu emphasized that she did not feel that her extreme effort had been appreciated.

⁴ However, there was only one Roma student in each class by the eighth year. Due to lack of space, I will not discuss their position within the classes in this paper, but instead concentrate on the effects of social polarization according to social class.

⁵ Pseudonyms have been used to preserve anonymity.

⁶ In most Hungarian schools a primary class teacher spends a consecutive four years with the same class (years 1–4). Following a four-year stint, they repeat the cycle starting again with first-year students. The same process applies to years 5–8.

They were extremely exhausting over those four years, even though I loved them the same way and I gave them everything as usual. But no, they did not value it, they took it as natural. (Mrs Lilium, lower-school class head)

Similar to Gast's (2018) findings, the themes of race and class were overlooked or dismissed by the teachers and replaced by the use of language about 'family values'. The in-depth analysis of teacher interviews highlighted that 'family values' were a core theme in the teachers' discourses which shaped the conceptualization of social and ethnic differences and what was considered 'normal' behaviour and family background. Mrs Lilium never referred to the social background of the families explicitly; instead, she discussed the challenges stemming from mental distress related to the families' unstable structures and 'bad' parenting. She described her current class in a much more positive tone. She argued that while the social intake of the two classes was roughly similar, the difference lay in the fact that 'problem students' had been more fairly distributed across the three classes when her current class started school. Moreover, she attributed the difference between her two consecutive classes to the fact that, in contrast to the emotionally troubled pupils of Class 8B, in her current class, due to the students' 'more caring parental background' she felt it was easier to establish emotional ties and consequently, her authority.

In this cohort, I feel that they are like those more docile children from the past, they are more devoted: the type that is truly in love with the teacher, perhaps from a more caring parental background. Perhaps it seems so because [the children in] my present class are easily guided, docile folk. So, they can be guided 100% even now, in the fourth year, and I can make them do things without any problem; they would just do anything for me. (Mrs Lilium, lower-school class head)

Notably, there was dense language about affections and emotions in play when teachers narrated their failed efforts to engage the 'problem' class. The difference between Class A and B was explained by the children's perceived attitudes and emotions towards their teachers: while pro-school, middle-class normativity was perceived as 'true love' towards the teacher, a working-class family habitus was translated into insolence, disciplinary problems, and the teachers' inevitable frustration about the lack of 'love' and their failure to maintain classroom control. Quite deterministically, Mrs Lilium also recounted that in her earlier class (the present 8B), racist slurs and the marginalisation of Roma pupils had been a recurrent issue. She remembered that these incidents were initiated by white boys from unstable families. Arguing – and accepting – that exclusion from the peer-group is a common phenomenon in this age-group, Mrs Lilium illustrated the contrast between the racist atmosphere of her previous class and the 'intelligence' of her current fourth-year class with a story about a recent case of an infection of lice, which, she inferred, originated with a Roma girl, Vanda.

Honestly, there is no such case that no-one is excluded. But they do it intelligently. [...] So, they can deflect in a way that does not hurt anyone. [...] Okay, one or two would run away here too, because they don't want to stand next to Vanda, but no one will admit it. [...] So, they are mindful and do not hurt anybody. I reckon this is clever of 10–11-year-old children. (Mrs Lilium, lower-school class head)

Mrs Lilium also told a story about the celebration of St. Nicolas from the time when the class in discussion had just started school in the first year, when she invited her previous

– then year-five – class to dress up, recite seasonal poems, and distribute presents to her new first-year class. ‘They [the first-years] jumped on the desks and started to shout “Get out! You are not Santa, there is no Santa anyway, you think we are stupid?”’ – remembered Mrs Liliium. Mrs Columbine presented the story to illustrate how the children had been untameable and hopeless. Yet the incident arguably manifests how these children felt deeply failed by adults and were suspicious of any expression of ‘love’ on behalf of their teachers at a very early age. Arguably, Mrs Liliium’s frustration about failing to establish and maintain classroom control reveals a more general experience of the failure to make these children conform to the meritocratic educational myths ingrained in the school’s institutional habitus. It is striking that children in their very first years of schooling had not only internalized their lack of worth but were already reacting to the symbolic violence enforced by the school’s structures by showing ignorance, ‘being bad’, and engaging in resistance.

Sometimes you felt that you could stand on your head, and [there would still be no success]. They did not let themselves be enchanted, you know? They shut the gates. [...] For them, playing meant crawling under the desks, fighting, running around, destroying the others’ games. It was a rough four years – said Mrs Liliium, in summarizing her experience.

In her elementary school ethnography, Shalaby (2017) argues that the school-imposed labelling of children as ‘troublemakers’ gradually leads to punishments and different forms of exclusion from a very early age. Interviews about the lower-school career of the class showed that the polarization of the two classes had already started in the first years of schooling. By the time of the research, Class 8B had become the school’s renowned ‘problem class’. Their head of class in upper school, Mrs Gerbera, especially struggled with their persistent defiance, and I observed her standing helplessly behind her desk in front of the class in her lessons several times. A few ‘problem students’ were particularly well known for their defiant behaviour, and it was suggested that they were the cause of the defiant attitude of the whole class. Mrs. Bellflower characterised Daniel as the ‘contagious element’ in the class, and Mrs. Tithonia commented that he was ‘one of the cleverer ones, but he is evil, I don’t like his nature’ (field diary, 9 October 2014).

Although it was general practice to discipline learners with the threat of secondary entrance exams in the final year classes I observed in both schools, in Sandpiper’s Class 8B these utterances first of all concentrated on shaming pupils by asserting that they would be rejected from schools they aspired to go to. ‘The entrance exam will slap them in the face’ (field diary, 6 November 2014), Mrs Trollius, their physics and mathematics teacher, commented remorsefully after I visited her class. Eventually, the secondary progression patterns of Sandpiper’s two graduating classes solidified the class-based educational trajectories of the two polarized classes, clearly fulfilling the predictions of the teachers.

Table 1: Secondary progression in the two classes (2015)

	8A	8B	Both classes
Academic	14 (50%)	5 (19.4%)	19 (35%)
Secondary general	13 (46.5%)	12 (46%)	25 (46%)
Vocational	1 (3.5%)	9 (34.6%)	10 (19%)

Source: Sandpiper school statistics

7 The anti-school culture of the ‘problem class’ at Sandpiper

When I asked teachers to compare the two classes, Mrs Trollius described 8B as ‘hopeless’ and expressed regret for those pupils who were willing to study within such a disturbing environment. Throughout my teacher interviews, Class 8B was described as ‘nobody’s children’, a class ‘without cohesion’; and also as a ‘riffraff’ class because of its unstable and frequently changing composition. Psychological studies highlight that educational performance and behaviour can be profoundly influenced by the way students feel they are seen or judged by others. Working-class children often experience routine everyday humiliations in the classroom, feel they are treated unjustly, and, in reaction to these experiences, develop a ‘sense of righteous indignation’ (Reay, 2017, p. 77). As students internalize negative labels, they also gradually come to understand the educational trajectory the school has created for them and their incentive to adhere to school norms weakens (Noguera, 2003). In the following, I turn to discussing how pathologizing teacher language centred on problem students and problem classes and the selective and differentiated class structure together prompted an anti-school culture in Class B.

Students were clearly aware of the different reputations of the A and B classes. In one of the group discussions, the 8B girls, having discussed how the class community could be improved, concluded as follows:

Student A: I just hate it when, for example, Miss Buttercup despises us, saying that A Class is much better (others: ‘yes!’), they study much better, they behave much better, while we... So, after [we were asked to organise] the school disco, they said that they wouldn’t have expected such a good job from Class B, such nice decorations.

Student B: Yes, they reprimanded us.

Student C: They always look down on us.

Interviewer: Why do you think is that?

Student A: Because of the boys.

Student D: Because we behave worse than them.

Student A: No, because the boys here are literally losers.

Interviewer: So, is it only because of the boys?

Student B: I would add that there are many teachers’ children in Class A, and everybody knows that this is quite a preference thing – all the teachers’ children are there. (SP-GD4)

Students in both classes valued their class communities positively and had strong bonds to their classmates, yet the 8B girls’ sense of belonging was formed in relation to A Class. The girls endorsed the negative stereotypes about the behaviour of their class and made a causal link between classroom disruption and weaker attainment. When I asked members of 8A about what distinguished the two classes, naturalizing the difference, they concluded that, after all, the differences stemmed from their personalities.

Student A: [...] We have a very good class indeed. Especially in relation to the other class, (others: ‘much better’); ours is much better than theirs.

Interviewer: What is the difference?

Student B: They are too relaxed.

Student A: So, they are completely different folk there, I don't know how to...

Student C: Different personalities. (SP-GD4)

Ball (1981, p. 53) viewed the gradually unfolding sub-cultural polarization in selective secondary schools as 'lines of adaptation' and argued that this process is fuelled by the experience of 'failure' in groups perceived as inferior by the school (see also Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970). Ball (1981, p. 40) argued that anti-school values are based on the negative polarity of the dominant school culture. In line with this, I observed that pupils who adhered to school norms and showed a willingness to learn were often mocked by their peers. The group discussions highlighted that 8B students were well aware of how teachers perceived them and characterized them as a problem class amongst themselves. Throughout the group interview, 8B boys often responded to my questions about their experience of schooling with anger and defiance. But this did not mean that they had not interiorized their teachers' shaming discourse about their further career chances; while they picked on the 'nerds', they were also convinced that in the long run the 'nerds' would become their 'bosses'.

Student A: The nerds.

Interviewer: Do you pick on them?

Student A: Yeah, like we pick on Gergő.

Student B: Yeah, now they pick on him, and in 10 years: 'Yes, boss!' (SP-GD2)

The class dynamics of Sandpiper's 8B class were primarily shaped by a ubiquitous anti-school culture, and classroom interactions were dominated by constant, collective attempts to challenge the competence and authority of teachers as well as mocking and teasing peers. In the group discussions, students were verbally aggressive to each other and repeatedly referred to recollections of physical violence and verbal aggression between students or between teachers and students. In these stories, teachers were depicted as oppressive and distrustful adults.

For girls, friendship ties were primarily associated with standing by others on occasions of peer bullying. While the girls in Class 8B agreed that they were inclusive towards newcomers, the boys recalled how they challenged newcomers and tested whether they were 'cool' (*menő*) or *csicska*.⁷ 8B students often used the word *csicska* in relation to another expression, which could be translated as 'playing at being cool' (*menőzik*). 'Playing at being cool' basically referred to the performance of anti-school behaviour, and the fine line between arrogantly showing off and being *csicska*. *Csicska* meant faking being cool but also submitting to teachers' authority. In discussing a film excerpt which I used as a prompt in the group discussions, the following conversation unfolded in the 8B boys' group:

⁷ *Csicska* is a difficult-to-translate slang word with pejorative connotations. Its primary, rather archaic meaning refers to 'a subordinate person or a person dependent on others who has to be obedient to them' in a military context. In contemporary spoken Hungarian, it mainly refers to a person engaged in an exploitative relationship with an employer who provides them with shelter in their household in exchange for humiliating, unpaid work.

Interviewer: Why would a student possibly decline to read in class and hence provoke the teacher?
[...]

Student A: She thinks it's cooler.

Interviewer: She plays at being cool?

Student B: And she is *csicska*.

Student C: I don't think so.

Interviewer: Is she *csicska* or playing at being cool?

Student A: She is playing at being cool, but in reality, she is *csicska*.

Interviewer: What do you mean by saying that she is playing at being cool, but in reality, she is *csicska*?

Student A: That's why she is playing at being cool, because she is *csicska*.

Student B: She is *csicska* because she apologized; if she starts to play at being cool, she shouldn't retreat.

Interviewer: She wasn't seriously apologizing. Her apology was not serious.

Student D: Still, I wouldn't apologize.

Interviewer: Have you ever apologized to a teacher?

Student D: Maybe once.

Student E: I never did.

Student A: Oh, D., you are so cool! Really, never? Let's see, in first year, second year, third year...

Student D: When? Oh, leave me alone, five years ago. Did you think I was serious about that?
(8B boys, SP-GD2)

This excerpt gives a taste of the anti-school culture of the class, in which classroom disruption is considered cool, and making apologies for such disruption is considered submissive behaviour, which is incompatible with the anti-school norms of the class.

In the group discussions, one of the central concepts for making sense of classroom social relations was respect. In different ways, students expected to be respected by teachers and hoped to be respected by their peers. Students understood the teachers' practice of stigmatizing 'problem classes' and 'problem students' as morally inferior as an expression of withdrawing respect. In Class 8B, respect was primarily invoked in relation to disrespectful and domineering teachers who demotivated students from engaging with their subject.

Student A: They [teachers] expect us to do everything, but they don't show that attitude either.

Student B: Mutual respect.

Student A: Yes, because they despise us, some teachers treat us with contempt, and we won't learn for them then. [...]

Student C: You are not learning for them; you learn for yourself.

Student A: Yes, but you see what I want to say. You just simply cannot get yourself to sit down and learn that subject [if you think that] I will be with this moron again, eh, I don't care and that's it!
(8B girls, SP-GD3)

8 Conclusion

In the work for my dissertation (Nemann, 2018), I found that alongside the discourse on abilities, the national and institutional discourse on student behaviour is a key means of categorizing students. Critical studies have highlighted that behaviour management involves more than just a value-free effort to maintain classroom order; instead, these discourses and practices respond to students' different backgrounds in ways that impact their future educational pathways (Deakin & Kupchik, 2018). However, research into behavioural discourses and practices can also help to identify promising policy directions with the potential to facilitate social mobility.

In the analysis of the schools' language about student behaviour, the notion of the 'problem student' emerged from the data as a core classification device in both Hungarian schools, irrespective of their grouping structures. In the teacher narratives it typically gained meaning in relation to the perceived interest of the class community and the school. Students identified as 'problematic' those who failed to adhere to classroom norms, and considered them students that posed a risk to the majority. Furthermore, 'problem' behaviour was conceived as being due to the defective nature of the child, and classroom disruption was considered an 'individual pathology' (Slee, 1995, p. 37). According to the literature, such behavioural narratives enact a 'control framework' of discipline (Deakin & Kupchik, 2018) that seeks to draw a line between 'good' and 'bad' students and tackle disorderly behaviour by removing 'bad' students in various formal and informal, temporary and permanent ways (Noguera, 2003). Due to the lack of wider professional debate and policy initiatives supporting alternative approaches to behaviour management, it can be presumed that my findings point to more ubiquitous trends concerning how disruptive behaviour is narrated and managed in Hungarian primary schools.

Against the backdrop of this broader picture, the main part of the paper explored the possible effects of inflexible grouping structures on school language and on teachers' perceptions of disruptive student behaviour. Alongside the notion of the 'problem student', the 'problem class' was found to be a central element of school-level behavioural narratives in the school, whose internal hierarchies were profoundly segmented along class lines in the upper classes in which students were enrolled following a selective logic. The case study has documented how the label of the 'problem class' was affixed on a predominantly working-class group, and, in turn, how an anti-school culture developed among the white working-class children, mostly boys. The moralizing opposition between middle-class and working-class attitudes towards schooling, and the presumed inadequacy of the working class were key aspects of the production of the 'problem class' (Power, 1996, pp. 97–98). However, the findings suggest that this opposition was generated by the rigid, inflexible internal grouping structures and that the selective structures created a social context in which whole student groups were more likely to be labelled with the self-fulfilling attribute of 'problematic'.

Teachers' language is framed by school structures, the school habitus, and the discursive constraints defined by the wider policy and professional context. In the context of Sandpiper school, this meant that teacher responses to disruptive behaviour involved little or no consideration of the interactive nature of the learners and their environment and the impact of such labelling practices on learner identities. Instead of using pedagogical reasoning, teachers typically employed a highly emotive and moralizing language to describe norm-

breaking behaviours and their experience of failure to engage working-class students in learning, and explained the habitual clashes with the working-class students as the latter's inability to develop the expected emotional bond with the teachers.

Students narrated their learning experience and the causes of their disaffection by referring to the general sense of disrespect they received from their teachers. Such repeated interactions and interplays of norm-breaking behaviour and sanctioning responses confirm the immanent problematic personalities of those labelled as deviant in the eyes of the dominant group and thus legitimize the punishments used to discipline them. Symbolic violence exerted its power by being transformed to the psychological level and producing a hierarchical system of learner identities (Vesikansa & Honkatukia, 2018).

Applying Lacey's theory of polarization and differentiation to my case study helped pinpoint how school discourse about the 'problem class' developed through interplay with the school structure and enrolment practices designed to cater for the social-separation demands of middle-class parents. These two forms of symbolic violence – the differentiated class structure and the 'pathologizing' language about disruptive behaviour (Crozier & Reay, 2005; Vincent, 2003) – cumulatively exerted symbolic domination. The comparison of the secondary progression patterns of the two parallel classes confirmed that the discursive construction of the 'problem class' and corresponding labelling practices were capable of producing 'losers' and thus enforced classed education trajectories. The ways in which the enrolment strategy of the school produced a socially polarized class structure and attracted group labelling practices shows that internal selection and tracking plays an important role in producing non-middle-class disaffection with schooling. While it cannot be deduced that this happens in all schools with rigid internal structures, it can be argued nevertheless that socially selective grouping structures provide particularly fertile ground for pathologizing behaviour narratives.

The concepts of the 'problem student' and the 'problem class' exemplify a behavioural narrative which implicitly assumes that norm-breaking behaviour is the fault of the individual student and does not take into account the influence of the institutional environment. While rigid internal structures further entrenched this discourse, the pathologizing behaviour language centred on 'problem students' and the lack of more professional approaches to behaviour seem to be widespread in the Hungarian school system, independent of grouping structures. Alongside the necessary structural changes, transforming the professional culture of behaviour management is a central means of creating a more inclusive school environment. The currently dominant framework seems to hinder the adoption of more inclusive models of school discipline and of positive behavioural strategies which would facilitate the integration of troublesome students into the school community. To move towards such restorative models of inclusion an essential step would be to explicitly reconsider behaviour-related language at the school level and to adopt a perspective capable of engaging with the underlying causes and conflict dynamics, as well as with social and emotional aspects such as frustration, indignation, and the sense of being unsafe and disrespected that is experienced by both teachers and students – all in all, an approach that focuses on the problem instead of the person.

References

- Abraham, J. (1989). Testing Hargreaves' and Lacey's differentiation-polarisation theory in a setted comprehensive. *British Journal of Sociology*, 40(1), 46–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/590290>
- Abraham, J. (1995). *Divide and School: Gender and class dynamics in comprehensive education*. Falmer.
- Apple, M. W. (1979). *Ideology and Curriculum*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Ball, S. J. (1981). *Beachside Comprehensive*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ball, S. J., Maguire, M. & Braun, A. (2011). *How Schools do Policy: Policy Enactments in Secondary Schools*. Routledge.
- Bazsalya, B. & Hórich, B. (2020). Iskolák közötti egyenlőtlenségek alakulása 2010 után (Inequalities between schools after 2010). *Educatio*, 29(3), 425–448. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2063.29.2020.3.7>
- Becker, H. (1963). *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. Free Press.
- Bourdieu, P. & de Saint-Martin, M. (1970). L'excellence scolaire et les valeurs du système d'enseignement français. *Annales*, 25(1), 147–175. <https://doi.org/10.3406/ahess.1970.422204>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood.
- Bourdieu, P. (1989) Social Space and Symbolic Power. *Sociological Theory*, 7(1), 14–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/202060>
- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J-C. (1990). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. Sage.
- Bourdieu, P. & Thompson, J. B. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard University Press.
- Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in Capitalist America*. Basic Books.
- Calarco, J. M. (2014). The Inconsistent Curriculum: Cultural Tool Kits and Student Interpretations of Ambiguous Expectations. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 77(2), 185–209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272514521438>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research Methods in Education*. Routledge.
- Crozier, G. & Reay, D. (Eds.) (2005). *Activating participation: Parents and teachers working towards partnership*. Trentham Books.
- Csapó, B. (2003). Az iskolai osztályok közötti különbségek és az oktatási rendszer demokratizálása (Differences between school classes and the democratization of the education system). *Iskolakultúra*, 13(8), 107–117.
- Cumins, J. (1986). Empowering minority students: A framework for intervention. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(1), 18–34. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.56.1.b327234461607787>
- Deakin, J. & Kupchik, A. (2016). Tough Choices: School Behaviour Management and Institutional Context. *Youth Justice*, 16(3), 280–298. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473225416665610>
- Deakin, J. & Kupchik, A. (2018). Managing Behaviour: From Exclusion to Restorative Practices. In J. Deakin, E. Taylor & A. Kupchik (Eds.), *The Palgrave International Handbook of School Discipline, Surveillance, and Social Control* (pp. 511–528). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Deakin, J., Taylor, E. & Kupchik, A. (Eds.) (2018). *The Palgrave International Handbook of School Discipline, Surveillance, and Social Control*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fejes, J. B. & Szűcs, N. (2018). Az oktatási integráció ügye a 2010-es évek végén (The cause of educational integration at the end of the 2010s). In J. B. Fejes & N. Szűcs (Eds.) *Én vétkem* (pp. 11–30). Motiváció Oktatási Egyesület.
- Fordham, C. & Ogbu, J. (1986). Black Students' School Success: Coping with the "Burden of 'Acting White'". *Urban Review*, 18, 176–206. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01112192>
- Gast, M. J. (2018). 'They Give Teachers a Hard Time': Symbolic Violence and Intersections of Race and Class in Interpretations of Teacher-student Relations. *Sociological Perspectives*, 61(2), 257–275. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121418756044>
- Giroux, H. (1983). Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education: A Critical Analysis. *Harvard Educational Review*, 52(3), 257–293. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.53.3.a67x4u33g7682734>
- Halász, G. & Lannert, J. (2006). *Jelentés a Magyar Közoktatásról* (Report on Hungarian Public Education). Országos Közoktatási Intézet.
- Hargreaves, D. H. (1967). *Social Relations in a Secondary School*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Horn, D., Keller, T. & Róbert, P. (2016). Early Tracking and Competition – A Recipe for Major Inequalities in Hungary. In H-P. Blossfeld, S. Buchholz, J. Skopek & M. Triventi (Eds.), *Models of Secondary Education and Social Inequality. An International Comparison* (pp. 129–147). Edward Elgar.
- Ingram, N. (2009). Working-class boys, educational success and the misrecognition of working-class culture. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 30(4), 421–434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425690902954604>
- Lacey, C. (1970). *Hightown Grammar*. Manchester University Press.
- Lareau, A. (1987). Social Class Differences in Family-School Relationships: The Importance of Cultural Capital. *Sociology of Education*, 60(2), 73–85. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2112583>
- Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life, with an Update a Decade Later*. University of California Press.
- Llewellyn, M. (1980). Studying girls at school: the implications of confusion. In R. Deem (Ed.), *Schooling for Women's Work* (pp. 42–51). Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Maguire, M., Ball, S. J. & Braun, A. (2010). Behaviour, Classroom Management and Student 'Control': Enacting Policy in the English Secondary School. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 20(2), 153–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2010.503066>
- Marsh, L. T. S. (2018). Symbolic Violence: School-imposed labelling in a 'no-excuses' charter school. *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education*, 15(1).
- McFarland, D. A. (2001). Student Resistance: How the Formal and Informal Organization of Classrooms Facilitate Everyday Forms of Student Defiance. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107(3), 612–678. <https://doi.org/10.1086/338779>

- Millei, Zs., Griffiths, T. G. & Parkes, R. J. (Eds.) (2010). *Rethorizing Discipline in Education: Problems, Politics and Possibilities*. Peter Lang.
- Neumann, E. (2018). *The 'Soft' and 'Hard' Processes of Categorizing Students – Ability grouping and managing behaviour in English and Hungarian schools*. PhD thesis, King's College London.
- Noguera, P. A. (2003). *City schools and the American dream: Fulfilling the promise of public education*. Teachers College Press.
- Ogbu, J. (1987). Variability in Minority School Performance: A Problem in Search of an Explanation. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 18(4), 312–334.
- Power, S. (1996). *The Pastoral and the academic: Conflict and contradiction in the curriculum*. Cassell.
- Reay, D. (2010). Sociology, social class and education. In S. J. Ball, M. Apple & L. Gandin, L. (Eds.), *Handbook of Sociology of Education* (pp. 396–404). Routledge.
- Reay, D. (2017). *Miseducation: Inequality, education and the working classes*. Policy Press.
- Robinson, J. (2011). *'Troubling' Behaviour Management: Listening to Student Voice*. PhD thesis, Murdoch University, Australia.
- Shalaby, C. (2017). *Troublemakers: Lessons in freedom from young children at school*. The New Press.
- Slee, R. (1995). *Changing Theories and Practices of Discipline*. The Falmer Press.
- Tóth, E., Csapó, B. & Székely L. (2010). Az iskolák és osztályok közötti különbségek alakulása a magyar iskolarendszerben (Trends in the differences between schools and classes in the Hungarian school system). *Közgazdasági Szemle*, 58(9), 798–814.
- Vesikansa, S. & Honkatukia, P. (2018). School Violence as a Complex Social Problem: Trends in Managing Discipline in Finnish Educational Policy. In J. Deakin, E. Taylor & A. Kupchik (Eds.), *The Palgrave International Handbook of School Discipline, Surveillance, and Social Control* (pp. 129–148). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vincent, C. (Ed.) (2003). *Social justice, education and identity*. Routledge.
- Weis, L. (2010). Social class and schooling. In S. J. Ball, M. Apple & L. Gandin (Eds.), *Handbook of Sociology of Education* (pp. 414–423). Routledge.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. Saxon House.