'I got rejected': **investigating the status of 'low-attaining' children in primary-schooling**

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Abstract

This text makes a significant contribution to the debate on within-class attainment grouping in primary schools, by portraying the views and perspectives of children themselves, labelled as "low-attaining". Extensive, active individual interviews plus observations over three terms of schooling facilitated rich insights into whether, and if so, how 23 "low-attaining" primary-school children assimilated cultural values designating them as having subordinate status to other children. We consider the implications of our findings for social justice, employing an innovative analysis framework which takes Nancy Fraser's conceptualisation of justice as "parity-of-participation". Our research illustrates that these children had absorbed some values about "success" that posed considerable obstacles to them, which led to feelings of isolation and lack of social participation. In particular, the children found some aspects of attainment grouping obstructive to social interaction. Reactions to these discomforts sometimes led them towards subtly subversive behaviour or alternatively to flat denial of difficulty.

Introduction

Extensive, active individual interviews plus observations over three terms of schooling facilitated insights into how 23 primary-school children, who had some record of 'low-attainment', experienced institutionalised cultural values of schooling. In this paper, we investigate whether, and if so, how the children have assimilated these values in relation to their status as 'low-attainers'. We consider the implications of these findings for social

justice, employing Nancy Fraser's framework of justice as 'parity-of-participation' to support our analysis (2000, 2003, 2008, 2018, 2019).

The institutionalised practice of categorising primary-school children according to specific attainments

The practice of categorising primary-school children according to attainment in nationally-prescribed tests is a common practice the world over in high and low-income countries alike (Agnich & Miyazaki 2013). However, as an institutionalised policy, it is a surprisingly new phenomenon in England. During the 1970s and 1980s, primary curriculum contents and pedagogies were decided at local, not central government, level. Centralised policy documents in England however encouraged primary-school teachers to orchestrate participatory classrooms where children of all backgrounds, interests and strengths were invited to participate in the school's opportunities for social interaction (Dann 2012). While Jackson (1968) and Rist (1970) in USA and Boaler et al. (2000) and Pollard and Filer (1999) in England have illustrated certain differentiation processes during that era, in which ethnicity and social class were key discriminatory factors, prior to 1988 there were no formal policy directives to support systematised grouping according to attainment in primary schools.

While current debates about schooling continue to emphasise the role played by ethnicity and social class in schooling placements globally, the manifestation of the differentiation issue became more complex when a National Curriculum and its Assessment became law in 1988 in England. Children were now systematically categorised according to their 'attainment' in these National Assessments. Ofsted inspectors in the 1990s required categorisation of primary-school pupils as 'high', 'middle' or 'low' attainers in selected subjects, thereby linking children's worth directly to their attainment (Hart 1998). This

dramatic shift occurred at the same time as an increased global acceptance of progressive neo-liberal values politically, in which meritocracy played a defining role (Fraser 2019).

The significance of this article is its attempt to draw on rich qualitative data about the day-to-day lives of individual primary-pupils across time, within this starkly different schooling context where the child's worth had to be competed for. Our research approach is similar to some earlier ethnographic researchers in classrooms who focused on the perceptions and views of 'low attaining' children (e.g. Jackson 1968; Rist 1970; Pollard and Filer 1999; Hargreaves 1967; Lacey 1970; Ball 1981). Today, however, the issue has re-emerged under the guise of attainment *grouping*, encouraged by today's central policy, and alien to the primary classrooms of the 70s and 80s. This strategy of placing primary-pupils in physical groups according to attainment has now been officially justified on the grounds that it advances pupils' '*motivation, social skills, independence*' as well as academic success in national tests. According to policy documents, students in segregated groups become '*more engaged in their own learning*' (DfES 2005, 58). These reassurances led primary-schools at Key Stage 2 (for ages 7-11 years) to construct classroom 'attainment' groups (often misnamed 'ability groups'), for mathematics and literacy lessons particularly; and children also started to sit in these same groups for other lessons too. More recently, the practice of sorting by attainment has also prevailed in infant schools for pupils aged 4 to 7 years, due to the statutory Phonics Check assessment at that stage (Bradbury 2018). Sorting by attainment has gradually come to be seen as natural; efficient; and as the only possible way for teachers to manage all their pupils (Bibby et al. 2017; Francis et al. 2016; Fraser 2019), even if this sorting is done in the teacher's head rather than by physical placement of pupils. As Marks (2013) has noted, even in a classroom where children are not physically grouped

according to their attainment categories, children may become institutionally *perceived* according to these.

Recent research in primary schools, such as Marks', has indicated that this new practice of sorting by attainment may be neither natural nor efficient nor the only way (Hallam et al. 2003; Dunne et al. 2011; McGillicuddy and Devine 2018; Reay and Wiliam 1999; Webster and Blatchford 2013). Research in secondary-schools, where grouping has always been pervasive, has indicated that children in lower sets have tended to make less progress than those in higher groups, after controlling for academic starting points; while those in highest groups enjoy slight but exponential improvement of scores (Wiliam & Bartholomew 2004; Higgins et al. 2016). Francis et al's (2017) recent research importantly also suggested that the self-confidence of low-set pupils was eroded at secondary-school (as well as cognitive progress), while some pupils in top groups came to feel superior to others.

The significance of our own research, among such extant studies, is that it investigates the *experiences* of the recent model of institutionalised categorisation from the *perspective of the 'low-attaining' children themselves*. It explicitly explores how this categorisation influences children's social status in the classroom, and what implications this may have for their opportunities to participate in social interaction, as well as progress cognitively. Although the EEF (2019) has found evidence for benefits from in-class grouping, especially for higher-attaining children, the evidence base lacks substantiation according to pupils' voices and needs greater attention.

Nancy Fraser's philosophy of justice applied to schooling

This article uses an innovative framework to analyse its classroom data, that of Nancy Fraser's conceptualisation of justice as centring on people's parity-of-participation in social

interaction. Parity-of-participation in the primary-school context includes unconditional recognition of each child's worth and equal representation of their preferences (2008). This is an innovative lens through which to analyse the experience of primary school pupils, where emphasis has tended to rest on the efficiency of teaching techniques for raising attainment scores. Some authors have, however, drawn on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence to explore the phenomenon of grouping by attainment (e.g. McGillicuddy and Devine 2018). In addition, a human rights approach has been powerfully applied to primary schooling stressing every child's right to be valued (e.g. Osler 2016). However, few scholars have attempted to apply Fraser's conception of justice as embodied in parity-of-participation, to the current schooling system. We are still evaluating this application of Fraser's conceptualisation to this context. However, as we explain below, we believe it may have significant value for making sense of these current issues because of its focus not only on redistribution but also on recognition, representation and ultimately, participation. A particular aspect of interest is Fraser's emphasis that full participation, based on being recognised and represented, is enacted by an individual regardless of their group affiliation.

Fraser herself described a 'reduction of equality to meritocracy' (2018, 14), which would aptly describe the progression described above - from more participatory to more segregated primary classrooms. Such meritocratic practices accord with a world-view implying that some 'deserving' individuals from under-represented groups can attain employment positions on a par with their talented peers if they merit this through hard work and/or inherent talent (Fraser 2019, 16). Such meritocratic policies imposed on schooling, accompanied by a vast upward distribution of wealth globally, legitimates the 'exclusionary vision of a just status order' that leaves the majority misrecognised (ibid.). Fraser (2008) claimed that our global market-driven governmentality separates and tracks

individuals for the sake of efficiency and risk prevention, 'sorting the capable-and-competitive wheat from the incapable-and-non-competitive chaff' (128) and thereby constructing different life courses for each.

In this paper we explore whether, or how, Fraser's claims regarding justice as parity-of-participation can be applied usefully to a group of primary-school children who have been categorised as 'low attaining'. We use her framework to explore how their perception of status relates to the institutionalized patterns of cultural worth, in schooling. From this point of view with which we accord, injustice is enacted whenever a person is constrained from social interaction by obstructive patterns of cultural value. Fraser wrote:

> If and when such patterns constitute actors as peers, capable of participating on a par with one another in social life, then we can speak of reciprocal recognition and status equality. When, in contrast, institutionalized patterns of cultural value constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction, then we should speak of misrecognition and status subordination (2018, 24).

She went on to suggest:

> Misrecognition is wrong because it constitutes a form of institutionalized subordination – and thus, a serious violation of justice. Justice requires that institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem… It precludes institutionalized norms that systematically depreciate some categories of people and the qualities associated with them (26).

We explore below implications for justice in this sense among children from four primary-schools in or near London, UK. We ask what, if any, institutionalised obstacles these children face in their attempts to achieve social esteem. The juvenile identities of our research participants clearly make this a special case: but this does not change the fact of their humanity; or to their entitlement to opportunities for full participation within their day-to-day context of school. Obstacles to participation will influence their capacity to benefit from current schooling. Children's future lives will also be influenced by the experiences of participation they encounter now. In this schooling system, where attainment in mathematics and writing is emphasised as the most important measure of a child's worth, we question whether schooling is 'systematically depreciating some categories of people and the qualities associated with them' (ibid.) When children's attainment is low according to these cultural markers of worth, we ask whether they experience a sense of being 'inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction.' By using justice in this sense as our framework, we hope to explore our data from a fresh perspective and to evaluate its usefulness for improving our global schools.

Research design

Methodology

The study described below was the first part of a five-year longitudinal life-history study of 23 school-children from Year 3 (aged 7) to Year 7 (aged 12), called Children's Life-histories In Primary-schools (C.L.I.P.S). Funded by the Leverhulme Trust, the project's long-term goal is to construct with each child their school-life history (Goodson and Sikes 2016), exploring how their status as 'low-attaining' influences their participation in schooling. The approach

supplements and complements the quantitative data used in most studies of this theme to date, providing insights into some missing links between inputs and consequences. However, this current paper narrates analysis of data collected during the first year only, at which time life-histories were only in nascent form. Here we therefore present our data thematically rather than according to individual children's trajectories of schooling. None-the-less, our methodological approach is the same, in that we explored in great depth how schooling was experienced by these diverse individuals, interrogating their beliefs and perspectives and engaging with them in activities which allowed us access to views that were hard to articulate even using words. Our interpretivist stance meant that we did not look for an external truth in the children's narratives but accepted that each narrative was their version of the truth. However, we take a realist rather than a relativist stance (Maxwell 2012), believing that the institution of schooling is an indisputable truth in itself, but that how it is perceived varies from one person to the next and that each narrative sheds light on its truth.

Research questions

The research questions that underpinned our entire research project were:

1) How do primary-school pupils experience being members of a 'low-attainment' group, in terms of their personal/social flourishing and their learning, across five years of their school-life histories?

2) Which factors influence their experiences?

In this paper, we explore children's sense of status within their school context and how this might influence their experiences of participation in schooling and learning. We then extrapolate implications regarding social justice.

Research methods

Sample

We gained access to four primary-schools, two inner-city London schools, one suburban school near London and one rural school outside London. All the schools had relatively disadvantaged demographics; all had been assessed as good or outstanding by Ofsted; and all had at least two-form entry to Year 3 classes. They therefore had certain similarities but geographical differences.

We asked each school to invite six pupils to take part in the project, whom they had identified as the lowest attainers in their Year 3 class in terms of mathematics and/or writing assessments. We excluded children with an Education and Health Care Plan since Webster and Blatchford's (2013) work had already explored their experiences. One child in our sample moved away after the first term, leaving 23 out of our original 24 children. There were 11 boys and 12 girls in the sample; nine were summer-born (May to August, 2010); nine had Pupil Premium status, indicating socio-economic disadvantage; nine children could be classified as white British while the remaining 14 identified as Bangladeshi, Black African, Black Caribbean, Turkish, Moroccan and Portuguese; and one third of them did not live with their birth fathers. In our first meeting with them, we invited them to choose a 'secret' name, which became their permanent pseudonym.

Instruments

We conducted 12 paired interviews at the end of the children's Year 3 year, in June/July, 2018. We decided our data would be richer if we subsequently interviewed individually. We therefore carried out individual interviews in autumn, 2018, when the children started Year 4. One school was undergoing headship problems so we did not interview the six

pupils from that school during the autumn term. In the spring of 2019 we interviewed all 23 children individually. Altogether, we therefore carried out 51 interviews of 60-90 minutes each. In most cases, we also carried out a classroom observation for each child which we video-recorded and played back to them in interview for commentary. We observed the child, usually in their mathematics or English lesson, and noted down their actions and expressions during 20 minutes of the session, alongside video-recording.

We quickly discovered that we needed to involve activity and fun in the interviews to keep up the momentum. This provided us with an opportunity to develop a range of child-friendly data collection activities that were simultaneously productive in data and enjoyable for the child (and for us). For example, in one activity, we showed children the outline of a face and asked them to use coloured pens to show the expression of the child who gained poor marks for mathematics and English. They then had to tell us what to write in that child's speech bubble. The interviews were carried out in private spaces that the schools provided. All interviews were audio-recorded, with children's permission, and then sent to a transcriber using a secure transfer system.

Analysis

As a team of three researchers, initially we analysed our transcripts using pen and paper, making sure they were securely locked away at all times when not being used. For the first set of interviews, we each developed codes inductively for eight pupils; and then discussed and refined them collaboratively. We clustered codes under three distinct areas of investigation:

a) children's sense of confidence and competence in school learning;

b) children's sense of identity and relationships with peers, teachers and family;

c) children's overall attitudes to learning and schooling.

We fed all our second visit's data into securely-saved NVivo11 files and applied the codes we had previously agreed to the new data-set. As we coded, we each constructed new codes inductively, which we discussed until we were all satisfied with our list, at which point we re-coded all the interview transcripts from VISIT02 (autumn 2018) and VISIT01 (summer 2018). We followed the same procedure for VISIT03 (spring term 2019). At the end of the three terms, we were then able to print out reports for all children for each code from 51 interviews. We worked with 42 codes for the final analysis. For this current paper (below), we drew primarily on data labelled under the following codes that had emerged: beliefs about success/failure; expressions of competence/incompetence; resistance; conformity; attitudes to 'ability' grouping; views of the 'top' and 'bottom' of the class; and lessons as boring/engaging.

Ethics

Ethical issues were central, for three important reasons. Firstly, we were engaging with very young people who could be vulnerable. We had to meet their needs and engage with them in ways that suited them. We emphasised that the process was entirely voluntary and that they could leave at any time. We gained pupils' verbal and written consent. We explained in writing and verbally on several occasions what the project would entail. We also shared this with parents and gained both parents' and pupils' consent at repeated intervals. As part of our attempts to be attuned to the needs and perspectives of the children, we also examined our own experiences of schooling and of differentiation by attainment. We were aware that, as high-attainers in school ourselves, we needed to listen with particular openness to the voices of the participants.

Secondly, we were investigating a sensitive topic which needed to be handled delicately with children and their parents. We did not wish to cause harm by hurting the children's feelings or their parents'. In discussion with teachers, we therefore found ways of explaining why children had been chosen, without suggesting that children lacked talent. We emphasised that we were interested in talking to children who found some aspects of schooling easy and some aspects difficult. We stressed that we were focusing on either maths or English, leaving open the possibility that a child might excel in one but struggle in the other. We revisited this issue of explaining criteria for selection throughout the project and later proposed that once we had come to know the children and their parents well, we would be even more explicit with parents about our original criteria for selection.

Thirdly, we were inviting children to reflect on and critique the institution of schooling, which was potentially provocative for schools or policy-makers. We therefore had to make sure that participants were completely convinced of privacy and anonymity in relation to interview data.

We followed British Sociological Association guidance on ethical procedures and had clearance from UCL Institute of Education Ethics Committee.

FINDINGS

Children's perceptions of institutionalised cultural valuing in the primary-school

Children's beliefs about success

We inquired into the children's beliefs about success, which we paraphrased to mean 'doing well'. Some of the children's narratives about success related to future remuneration and employment while others emphasised personal characteristics as signs of success. A few

others embraced a pluralistic vision of success and a flattened view of its hierarchy and status. Bella, for example, suggested:

> Everyone can be [successful] because that's like- they're different. They can do a lot
> of things. So they can be like- they can be good in any way. [Bella, VISIT03]

Across all 23 participants, we found references to success as follows, all of which posed obstacles for them to overcome. We hypothesised that when they could not overcome these, they might feel inferior, powerless or isolated. Success meant:

- Working hard, listening, concentrating, doing what you are told

- Doing better than others in constant competitiveness

- Knowing enough of the *right* curriculum content.

Children perceived that hard work and good behaviour were key to success

Hard work is a route to success, even without controlling its conditions

Many of the children in our sample believed that the secret to long-term success was hard work and perseverance; concentration; listening carefully to the teacher; and doing what they were told. They seemed to believe that these classroom behaviours would lead them to good jobs and a good life. Dweck's (2008) research into 'growth mindset' as opposed to 'fixed mindset' had evidently left its mark on primary-schools. Saffa warned:

> If you didn't listen in class … then you won't do anything and you'll just be a
> McDonald's cooker, just flip patties. You will be unsuccessful. [Saffa, VISIT01]

However, it seems that Dweck's emphasis on the potential for growth through hard work, has been interpreted *without* attending to the need for accompanying creative support for hard work, on the part of schools and teachers (Dweck 2015). The children seemed to see

hard work as taking responsibility for their own fate, but at the same time, being urged to conform to classroom procedures in which they had no say. For example, children were not consulted about whether being kept in at break or lunchtime was effective for their needs. Some children did not find the current confines of their classrooms satisfactory for engaging in hard work. Neymar, for example, explained: 'You have to sit on the carpet or on the chair. I want to stand up and play something. Or like- run!' [Neymar, VISIT03]. Ben explained how sometimes working hard *conflicted with* listening to the teacher in class and yet he knew that both were essential for success. If he was struggling to understand a concept, he needed time to think; but time was not available:

> I get confused with the other bit and then I don't really listen to what the teacher's saying because I'm still trying to figure out why that answer is like that. [Ben, VISIT03]

In other words, Ben had been working hard, but the conditions in which he worked did not support his processing and he did not consider asking for changes to be made.

Hard work as the answer to failure

Bob reflected his belief in the remedial benefits of hard work by prescribing more hard work for a classmate who was not doing well:

> Interviewer Eleanore: And you said that Annie won't be successful – what do you think teachers could do to make Annie successful?
>
> Bob: Let her stay for her whole lunchtime… because that's one hour… Work! [Bob, VISIT03]

Landon went beyond hard work and suggested that when a child like him finds it hard to engage in hard work, he needs discipline to coerce him to work hard, 'And he has to go to

detention … So he can listen'. [Landon, VISIT02] In one school, most of the children believed

that it was necessary also to work at home after school-hours, in order to become

successful. Also, several children told us that when they did not finish their work at school,

they were held in during breaktime or lunchtime to complete their work. As Bob noted, this

appeared 'unfair' because, 'Some people don't get to have their breaktime, and some people

do' [Bob, VISIT03]. When we asked Jeff how he felt about being kept in at lunchtime, he

replied, 'Hungry'. In other words, because Jeff finds writing difficult in class he is penalised

both socially and physically as a means to make him learn more. Yet, research indicates the

importance of close social relationships, as well as physical comfort, for cognitive learning in

classrooms (Moore 2013; Niemiec and Ryan 2009). As for social participation, this is clearly

obstructed during Jeff's lunchtimes, spent indoors with a teacher. Fraser's (2003) words

about society as a whole are reflected here in micro-version: there is a universal call for

responsibilised self-regulation within a marketized system; but this leads to 'plain

repression' for those who exist within the 'marginal sector of excluded low achievers' (169).

Children perceived that success meant constant comparison with others

Chrystal had advice about how a teacher should help someone who was struggling: this

teacher should 'stand up' for that child and say to her, 'One day you'll be smarter than

everyone in the class'. [Chrystal, VISIT03]   Rather than school being the opportunity for each

person to contribute to the community by drawing on their agency and creativity, children

in our sample often experienced school as one big competition of attainment in comparison

with peers. Constant comparisons threatened failure for lower-attainment children. A key

pressure-point was when speedy writing was necessary. Many of the sample children

expressed frustration about having to speedily write up their science experiments, Religious

Education texts or humanities topic-work. They told us that they found such writing boring, tiring, stressful and pointless. Speed seemed to become a virtue in itself, leading to some children prioritising *completion* over learning which potentially denied them access to deeper understandings. In Summer's case, for example, we saw her writing fast and copiously on her whiteboard during class so that it appeared she were grasping the lesson: even though our observation suggested otherwise. Summer admitted that on one occasion, 'I finished my work and then someone was still working and they had to stay in, and I was like 'I'm glad that's not me''. [Summer, VISIT02] Watching faster peers go out to play was a vivid reminder of one's comparative incompetence.

Children perceived that success meant knowing enough of the right curriculum content

In schooling, 'deficit constructions' of those who challenged norms seemed to be legitimated by teachers as agents of schooling. It became clear from our data that some children felt misrecognised at school, both by being labelled as below 'expectations'; and for not being valued for what they could offer - when this did not fit the institutionalised norm (ie. Mathematics/writing). Fraser's words have poignancy here, that some people need 'to have hitherto under-acknowledged distinctiveness taken into account' (2008, 137). Anna's response as follows was representative of many children's views. Her long-held ambition was to become a policewoman when she grew up, but she suspected that her lack of success now in mathematics and writing, might prevent her from achieving this:

> Anna: Everyone else is smarter than me… I don't know mathematics and I don't know how to spell words properly- … Because I keep forgetting.

> Interviewer Laura: So if your future self was there looking down on you, what would your future self tell us about you?

Anna: 'In the future you're not going to be a policeperson, you're going to be at home in a flat… Because you might not have enough money to afford a house' [Anna, VISIT03].

It is noticeable that Anna did not attribute this failure to her teachers but to her own internalised judge. However, Anna alluded to rigid curriculum priorities as part of the problem. Anna had a passion for reading and drawing. However, she attributed her low status and likelihood of failure to her lack of knowledge in the *specific domains emphasised at school*, where even reading was seen as less valuable than writing; and artwork was lower-status still. Anna told us that she therefore consciously did not reveal her true self at school, which presumably made it harder for her to play a full part and be herself:

[The teachers] don't know how good I am at drawing… because I don't really feel like I have to show my true drawings or identity to the school. [Anna, VISIT03]

Similarly, Ben was passionate and knowledgeable about deadly animals but noted that the school as an institution 'wouldn't know how good I know about animals.' [Ben, VISIT03] In short, the children in our sample displayed a wide range of sophisticated knowledge, which they perceived was not the *right* knowledge. It was as if their other selves, their 'non-norm' selves, were silenced at school, reducing their status to how they performed within mathematics/writing. Even when they were invited to talk about themselves in all aspects of life at school, their mathematics/writing selves were seen as more worthy of focus. For example, Max was seen volunteering abundant knowledge about astronomy during a lesson on space, but no-one in class was listening to his wisdom. Each time his information – which was sophisticated and correct – was ignored by the teacher and classmates, it seemed to reinforce its low status [Max, VISIT02]. On the other hand, Max gathered that writing

mattered - because the teacher gave him attention during literacy lessons. In another case, Ryan described actually missing out completely on learning French, because he was being taken out to study mathematics. He vented:

> It was really annoying because one of the boring teachers took me out every single French [lesson] … Sometimes extra help doesn't help because you're missing out on something else... And missing all the learning. [Ryan, VISIT02]

Among our 23 pupil participants, all chosen for being below the norm in relation to either mathematics or writing (or both), there was a national Under 12s sports champion, an award-winning gymnast, very good swimmers, footballers and tennis-players, knowledge of other languages, cultures and countries, knowledge of animals and the natural world, expertise in computers, bravery in water and several artists. And yet, these skills were 'comparatively unworthy of respect', to use Fraser's (2000) words (113). The hierarchy of culturally valued learning seemed to have been reified to exclude several areas in which children excelled or showed passion, potentially reducing their access to rich learning and social interaction.

Yet, a handful of children recognised that there was no such strict hierarchy in reality. Alvin emphasised that in reality, 'Everyone is good at something'. [Alvin, VISIT02] A few children did associate being successful with alternative strengths, for example, being good at sports [Neymar, VISIT01]. Ryan chose singer David Bowie as the most successful person he knew [Ryan, VISIT01]. Several children felt that success meant being funny, fun, kind, hyperactive or loving, not just 'smart'. [Anna, VISIT03; Bella, VISIT03; Britney, VISIT01; Dragon, VISIT03; Chrystal, VISIT03] Bella notably prioritised health and family as symbols of success:

> Bella: I'm not as smart as the other kids and it doesn't really matter that everyone's the same.

Interviewer Eleanore: So you don't feel it matters. What is more important than that do you think?

Bella: Health… [and] mum and dad and my brother. [Bella, VISIT03]

Potential effects

The next section explores the potential effects on children of their perceptions of cultural values described above. We explore whether or how: their faith in hard work and conformity influenced their access to participation in learning; the constant competition affected their social interactions; and their expertise in non-norm areas related to their social esteem.

Children came to feel socially isolated and powerless

Our data suggested that some children did not find schooling either acceptable or well adapted to their needs (Osler 2016). Words they actually used for their discomfort included feeling: rejected, annoyed, sad, bullied, angry, embarrassed, lonely, isolated, frustrated, bored, nervous, stressed, really mad, upset, tired and sleepy. We tried to investigate whether or how these experiences related to a sense of status subordination. We saw close links between isolation, powerlessness and status subordination. For example, Chrystal echoed others by suggesting that when a child (like herself) did badly in mathematics or writing, she felt lonely and isolated from everyone else:

> [Low-attainers feel] sad…, no-one cares; and they feel lonely… Because they have no friends to stand up for them. [Chrystal, VISIT03]

Jake hinted that a child who struggled in mathematics and writing might be bullied:

> They might bully him… They will say that he's a dumb person… Probably they will say 'Oh you're bad at mathematics, oh you're bad at English'… 'Oh you're not smart' [Jake, VISIT02]

Alvin suggested that in his class there was a clear distinction between 'clever' and 'not clever' people, and the 'clever' people had preferential treatment from the teacher by being 'chosen' to answer questions more often. [Alvin, VISIT01] In other words, they had more direct access to the teacher who had the power. Anna also reflected this sense of rejection and relative weakness when she talked about how she felt when she put her hand up in class and gave the incorrect answer:

> Anna: It's a bit like I got rejected… And then other people put their hand up and they get it right.

Interviewer Eleanore: And then you feel- ?

Anna: Sad and embarrassed… Because if they're in the same year group, like in the same mathematics group as me, then they probably know more than I do.

It was surprising to hear of Ben's debilitating fear of isolation, every time he passed the head teacher's office:

Ben: I feel a little bit stressed because they might call me in about my school work.

Interviewer Eleanore: Right, and what would they say?

Ben: That you're not doing good, so I have to go down a year. And then I- and then I have to leave my friends because I would be still in Year 5 [while friends proceed to Year 6]. [Ben, VISIT03]

Despite his fear being unfounded, Ben lived in stressful anticipation of being isolated from his higher status friends, no longer part of the class.

Another feeling frequently described by our participants was boredom, which linked to isolation and powerlessness; and possibly subsequent disruption. When we asked the sample children to photograph somewhere in school where they felt bored, they found this an easy task. Only two children claimed never to be bored [Eleanor, VISIT02; Bella, VISIT03]. Most popular to symbolise 'boring' was the classroom, especially for mathematics and/or low-attainment groups. Summer seemed bored during the literacy group in which we observed her. Her detachment and lack of participation were striking. Our field-notes read as follows:

The teacher is asking for the spellings from children in the class in the order they'd written them. Summer isn't asked. … Children have their hands up to give the next spelling. Summer doesn't put hers up. Miss K asks them to rub out the spellings on

their whiteboards. Summer rubs hers out. She hasn't read any out and no-one has looked at her board. The class read a list of words from the board aloud in unison. Summer doesn't join in. The teacher doesn't pick up on this. They read the list aloud again. Summer moves her lips very slightly for each one but with no sound. [Summer, VISIT02]

Summer's comment after class was as follows:

I think I was just daydreaming because I got bored of one of the questions. And then I was just thinking, 'I wonder what I'm doing... I have no idea!' [Summer, VISIT01]

If this sense of impotence and isolation dominate, they potentially distance the children from fruitful participation in that community. It is of course possible that other children in the class, not just our sample, experienced these feelings too.

Children found low-attainment groups obstructive

The issue of being separated from friends was of concern to most participants. Isolation from higher-attaining friends could exacerbate their feelings of inferiority and lead the children to feel more detached from schooling. For example, for Bob, friends were the only good part about school, and he told us he suffered when he was separated from them in his [low-attainment] mathematics group [Bob, VISIT03]. Several children described feeling a loss when children had to move physically to their 'attainment sets' or 'intervention groups'. For example, when we asked Summer how she felt when her friends left her for the higher groups, her feelings were:

'Don't leave me! ... No! You guys can't leave me!'... I need my friends. I need them to stay in the same class as me' [Summer, VISIT02].

This reaction to grouping was not universal, however. In some cases, children enjoyed the help they received from a teacher (preferably) or teaching assistant in a low-attainment group. Some of them described, rather than low status, feeling special in a positive way, especially in the school where children moved fluidly in and out of the 'intervention group', according to need; and were taught in rotation by one of the main class teachers. Mohamed told us he preferred this 'people-that-need-help group' because it was really fun, and this helped him to access his learning. [Mohamed, VISIT02] In other words, creative thought seems to have been given to providing for particular children who were part of this group.

In contrast, several children complained about people they worked with in other 'low-attainment' groups, whose company further alienated them from a sense of mutual participation at school. Dragon felt angry with the teaching assistant he was working with in such a group. Despite her best intentions, he wanted to be left alone:

> I was thinking 'You get out of here, I hate you'… I say it in my head. I'm thinking, like, 'Shoo off'. [Dragon, VISIT01]

A couple of other children told us that they were distracted in their segregated set, by children there who found concentration difficult and became disruptive. Ryan, for example, explained how he was better off in the new 'mixed-ability' class he had joined in a new school: 'I'm not stuck with people that don't- can't really focus… the bad people that were catching up… I found that annoying- we were in the bad group'. [Ryan, VISIT03] Jeff, in his school, spent much of his classroom life paired with a boy whom he described as loud, disruptive and a 'big bully' [Jeff, VISIT03]. At other times, Jeff worked amicably with Bella and Anna in a different small group for mathematics, but they all three stood out in an uncomfortable way as the only Year 4 children who still had to work within a Year 3 class.

Another discomfort was expressed by Saffa, who explained how the intervention group disadvantaged you in the class 'competition', thereby imposing obstacles to your success:

> You get to leave all the smart girls and you have to start from the bottom again and work your way all the way back to the top. [Saffa, VISIT03]

Children expressed their frustration through slightly resistant behaviour

A few children fought back against their sense of powerlessness by engaging in subtly resistant behaviour. In some cases, this resulted in increased engagement because of their strong aspiration to please the teacher and prove their worth. Alvin, for example, explained how his aim at school was as follows: 'To get more marks, and be very clever at mathematics and English so I can impress my teacher and my mum and everyone in my family' [Alvin, VISIT02]. However, for some individuals there were nascent signs of less productive resistance. As Hargreaves suggested, is this 'an attempt to create among themselves badges of dignity that those in authority can't destroy (1982, 20)'? For example, as Year 4 progressed, Chrystal started to feel 'annoyed' by being in the 'bottom' set for literacy. 'That's for beginners!' she claimed. [Chrystal, VISIT03] She also expressed her accompanying feeling that ultimately, 'success' was beyond her reach:

> What I want to do is just have a job and *not* be successful… I just want to carry on with my job I'm going to have when I'm bigger, and just keep going to get paid… I just want to carry on with my life and have a good time… And not be successful. [Chrystal, VISIT01]

We observed Jerry and Rosy reading a book together in their segregated literacy class. Soon they became bored. Jerry closed the book, having completed only two thirds of it, and

looked up at the teacher, smiling. The teacher praised them both for finishing the book just in time; and gave them each a golden ticket as a reward. Afterwards, Rosy said:

Rosy: The teacher said 'Well done! You finished!', but we actually didn't.

Interviewer Denise: So do you wish that Jerry hadn't told the teacher you'd finished?

Rosy: Actually I wanted him to because then the teacher said well done.

Jerry reported another recent occasion, on which he had been kept in over breaktime because he had asked aloud in class, 'Can I go and explore? Because this is too boring!' [Jerry, VISIT03] He had wanted activity in the fresh air instead of sitting in class; and had risked expressing his needs. However, this expression cost him the very thing that he most needed: outdoor activity. Other subtly resistant behaviour we observed among our sample included Dragon hanging upside down under his desk; Chrystal wandering around the classroom; Anna doing drawings during mathematics lesson; and JohnWick copying other people's work. JohnWick also confided how he reacted when his teachers threatened him:

JohnWick: When she says detention all the time I like get 'Ahh …'

Interviewer Eleanore: What, you get anxious?

JohnWick: No, you pretend you're doing work, because when you do that she thinks 'Oh you don't need detention. You're doing your work'. [JohnWick, VISIT03]

Neymar described hiding in the toilets to avoid mathematics tests (despite having described how bad they smelled!). We asked him whether the teachers discovered him. Neymar explained, 'I came back and then I said 'Miss, I had a tummy ache'… and they believed me'. [Neymar, VISIT01] Our findings echo those of Fisher (2011) who wrote of pupils' 'veil of

compliance' which obscured their true dissatisfaction. The lack of opportunities for expressing needs and perspectives may have contributed to these resistant behaviours, especially as communal behaviour among the children as one group was not generally encouraged. Two children from different schools shared with us that they did not know the names of the pupils in their class, suggesting that every child was alone in their struggle. Expressing discontent or asking for something different was not part of institutionalized patterns of the classroom culture; and this made some children angry. For example, JohnWick complained that he might get into trouble if he said aloud, 'I hate mathematics!' [JohnWick, VISIT03]

We suggest that the children's need to resist in order to win the right to participation and control, is itself an issue of representational injustice (Fraser 2008). In other words, despite being affected negatively by certain institutionalised practices, the children were also excluded from the frame in which their claims could be made.

Children put up a defence against being perceived as less smart than others

An alternative reaction to sensing one's subordinate status was to deny it. Among the 23 children, there were some [e.g. Jeff, JohnWick, Chrystal, Eleanor, Britney] who resisted all acknowledgement that they were not doing well. Despite evidence, including video-evidence, they continued to claim to be as competent as the rest of the class. For example, Eleanor challenged the video-recording of herself in her literacy lesson:

> Interviewer Laura: Quite a lot of the time you were looking around and I was wondering how the work was for you… Your face is going like this (*Laura copies the anxious face in the video playing*)… Yeah, I don't think you look very happy.

> Eleanor: I *did* look happy! [Eleanor, VISIT02]

Similarly, Britney initially admitted to feeling embarrassed when she got a question wrong in public, but quickly corrected herself, maintaining 'Oh wait! Oh no, no, no! I don't get it *wrong*!' [Britney, VISIT02] It seemed that pressure to be good at mathematics and writing and to work hard and be happy, was so great that they also felt the need to engage in pretence. When actual attainment was undeniably low, they strove for us to think that at least they were 'happy' or 'trying hard', perhaps as the only way to make their status palatable. This fear of facing up to the painful reality may have led them into *acting a part*. Perhaps they felt that their authentic selves were not good enough to participate in normal social interaction so they needed to play the game to wrest back some sense of power and control.

Discussion: institutionalised norms systematically misrecognised some people and the qualities associated with them

The significance of our study was its rich detail in portraying how current education policy in England institutionally subordinated children who were 'low attainers' in maths and/or writing, as seen from the perspective of those children themselves. Among our 23 participants, we found that most had assimilated into their own beliefs the institutionally embedded value of working hard, listening, concentrating and doing what they were told; the value of doing better than others in constant competitiveness; and of knowing enough of the right (prescribed) curriculum content. Our findings suggest that these assumptions and the exclusionary practices associated with them played a role in children coming to feel socially isolated, powerless, and in some cases, subordinate. A clear symbol of subordination was the low-attainment group where they were physically as well as cognitively and socially separated from the rest of class. This may have exacerbated their

sense of subordination and made it more difficult for them to feel fully valued members of class.

There appeared to be few 'fair and open processes of deliberation, in which all can participate as peers' (Fraser 2008, 29), suggesting that injustice in this situation related both to recognition and to representation. Whilst this was probably true for all pupils, it was particularly acute for 'low attainers'. In other words, these children were misrecognised *and* had no means through which to address their misrecognition. They had absorbed the cultural rules for success but creative measures had not always been taken to tailor these rules to their own needs and intentions. The resulting sense of powerlessness and isolation led to some destructive distortions of self as children tried to compensate for feelings of status subordination through resistant – sometimes creative – means, such as pretending, withdrawing or behaving disruptively. None of these reactions were likely to support their inclusion as full participants in the culture of schooling but perhaps they seemed like the only means towards reclaiming self-esteem. Such was the extent of some children's shame, they worked hard to pretend even to us researchers that they were, after all, worthy of our esteem. We hope that their participation in this research project will provide them with further opportunities for feeling that their contributions are institutionally valuable.

The strategy of categorising by attainment in mathematics and writing was originally justified as advancing pupils' '*motivation, social skills, independence*'; improved academic success; and making pupils '*more engaged in their own learning*' (DfES 2005, 58). The data presented above illustrate in vivid detail how some children found precisely the opposite to be true for them: their institutionalised categorisation as low-attainers limited their motivation, restricted their practice of social skills, reduced their independence, eroded

their academic success, obstructed their learning engagement, and led to a sense of subordinate status in the school context. This finding has implications for primary-schooling systems around the globe where children are categorised – whether physically or in professionals' minds – by attainment scores. This includes the many low and middle-income countries where children who find the cultural norms of schooling problematic have been labelled as not only low-attaining, but as deviant (Young 1971; Hargreaves et al. 2018).

The innovative aspect of this current study is our application as our analysis framework of justice as 'parity-of-participation'. By drawing on Fraser's status model of justice, this paper has been able directly to explore the justice of schooling, rather than mainly investigating the relative effectiveness or merits of school practices. Pinpointing parity-of-participation as justice itself has enabled a sophisticated and focused analysis of these data using this framework which steers clear of technicist approaches to pedagogy and reconsiders pedagogy in light of facilitating children's access to social interaction – now and in the future. This analysis indicates the need for transformation in the institutionalized patterns of cultural value in primary-schooling in order to better promote social justice. Using Fraser's lens, it becomes clear that reciprocal recognition and status equality can only become a reality in schooling if we rearrange and even reconstitute some cultural patterns to better facilitate all children's access to participation. Assimilation to cultural norms in primary-schooling will be justified when norms facilitate, rather than obstruct, parity-of-participation in social interaction. All children need access to parity-of-participation during their schooling and, through education, to be prepared to participate as adults in wider social interactions.

In navigating a pathway through this dilemma, Fraser has identified two broad approaches to remedying injustices – affirmative and transformative. Affirmative remedies are designed to correct inequitable outcomes without substantially disrupting the structures underpinning them. Transformative remedies, on the other hand, work to reform the structures that generate injustice (Mills 2012). Affirmative remedies to injustices narrated by children in our study could include school-level and classroom-level changes. At school-level, staff and children could avoid using the words 'low' or 'high' in relation to performance and instead focus on creativity, agency and community in learning; more support could be given to teachers and teaching assistants in using participatory pedagogies; published research could be disseminated to parents, teachers and children on the negative impact of categorisation by attainment. At classroom-level, we could introduce: continuous, rigorous research by children and others into how, when and where children learn best; use of particular teaching strategies that draw beneficially on diverse strengths (such as the Jigsaw Method in which each child becomes a teaching expert in a specific field); children having equal access to their playtime, with alternative provision for those who learn more thoughtfully or slowly; intervention groups which are fluid and tailored, led by main class teachers if at all; more attempts to know and understand each child as a human being, primarily using expressive arts and outdoor pursuits; and finally, specific channels for hearing about children's expressed needs, enabling children to participate in creative, agentic negotiations within their school community.

In terms of transformative remedies, challenging the very grammar of schooling itself, these would include actions by policy-makers and other educational leaders such as: first and foremost, a deliberate separation of schooling from the business models of governmentalized neoliberalism; secondly, more democratic processes for selecting

curriculum content, including children as decision-makers; also mandated emphasis on the creative arts, sports and outdoor pursuits in schooling; using assessment for accountability very sparingly if at all; and finally, introducing an inspectorate that takes pupils', teachers' and head teachers' perspectives seriously and aims to support rather than categorise them.

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