

Life-history research with children: Extending and enriching the approach

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Abstract

This article explores the life-history research approach, outlining its key aims and traditions. It suggests that what is often missing from life-history research is the inclusion of young children as life-history participants. This paper considers some innovative means for constructing children's life-histories across 5 years of their primary schooling in Britain. These include interviews based on activities, games, role-play, pictures and filming, and photography. The article concludes by narrating a short life-history of one child who is a participant in our life-history study of 23 'lower-attaining' children. To close, I consider the critical role of life-history research in highlighting social injustice.

KEYWORDS

joys and suffering, life-history, lower-attaining children, Nancy Fraser, subjective

INTRODUCTION

Life-history research sits within the Longitudinal Qualitative Data framework and has been used over many decades and in a range of countries, to capture the “concrete joys and suffering” (Plummer, 1983: p. 4) of individuals—sometimes within education (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Dhunpath, 2001; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Lanford et al., 2019; McLeod & Yates, 2006; Plummer, 1983, 2001; Thomson et al., 2018). The vigour of the life-history as a research approach undulated in the decades following its instigation in Chicago in the 1920s but was reinstated after Plummer's publication of ‘Documents of Life’ in 1983. It then received a further boost as the benefits of

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Longitudinal Qualitative Research became more obvious (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003) and was celebrated at a very recent symposium on life history at the 2017 AERA conference (Lanford et al., 2019).

In this article, I aim to explore the methodological tradition of life-history research and consider its potential for recognising and representing the experiences, including the concrete joys and suffering, of young children in schooling. In keeping with the earliest life-histories, its focus is the highlighting of gaps in the knowledge of social injustices within the system. Although the vast majority of life-histories are retrospective and may include an individual's *memories of childhood*, very few have employed the life-history approach to the lives of children who are currently children; or within primary school. Given the long-standing and critical interest in children's experiences of 'Life in School' (Hammersley & Woods, 2020), the relatively recent and critical focus on 'pupil voice' (Fielding, 2004; Flutter & Ruddock, 2004), and the emphasis on childhood as a stand-alone experience worthy of attention (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003), the absence of critical, school-life-histories is troubling. This article considers how the approach may need to be adapted for use with young children in schooling and what the methodological problems, and also benefits, are likely to be. I end with my own attempt to narrate the life-history of one child in primary school, Jeff, to exemplify some points that have implications for social justice, drawing on data collected by the research team of our ongoing CLIPS project.

LONGITUDINAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Longitudinal Qualitative Research [LQR] combines attention to *changes over time* in relation to an individual's social environment, in our case schooling, with a focus on the *individual's here-and-now experience* at regular points of time. Not all LQR takes a critical approach with the aim of revealing injustices. However, life-history research, originating in Chicago where the influx of immigrants was frequent (Kourizin, 2000), often sought to grapple with social injustice through the detailed study of one marginalised individual. These sought to challenge traditional forms of knowledge with alternatives, to challenge dominant and unjust power mechanisms. As Dhunpath (2001) suggests:

It is a truism that individual experiences are inherently political and deeply embedded in relations of power. And it is also true that traditional epistemology has largely ignored this (544).

In our life-history study, our overarching theoretical and critical frame of reference was Nancy Fraser's (2008, 2019) conceptualisation of social justice as parity-of-participation. We aimed to explore this through our methodological 'conversation', firstly, between each individual's schooling experience and the trends we noted across 23 individuals; and secondly between individual events and events across time. One was 'privileging the individual accounts and the other privileging the social and the spatial context' (Thomson, 2007:p. 575), thereby covering both 'the temporal and cultural dimensions of social life' (Neale & Flowerday, 2003: p. 192).

In particular, in our life-history study, we sought out examples from the children's narratives whereby they seemed to face systemic obstacles to participation in schooling; in other words, evidence from them of aspects of the system of schooling that mitigated against their sense of full, active participation. These might relate either to perceptions of misrecognition, that is, to

others considering them as having reduced social status compared to themselves; or of misrepresentation, that is, to their voices being misconstrued or silenced altogether. In either case, since parity-of-participation was not being achieved, wider issues of social injustice might be glimpsed that dominant forms of knowledge did not reveal.

THE FEATURES AND AIMS OF THE LIFE-HISTORY

Thomson (2007) suggests that the aim of life-history (or case history) is:

To provide a compelling account of the individual, of how and why events unfolded as they did and of the transformation of the individual over time (574).

To this, our study had the added aim of making unjust aspects of children's lives and the schooling system manifest. The completed life-history may be seen as an art-form as much as an object of science (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Lanford et al., 2019; Plummer, 1983) in that it displays the concrete joys and suffering of one individual in a vivid and grounded way that other data collection methods would not allow. The individual is painted by the life-history researcher in collaboration with the agentic participant who is recognised as having her/his own ambiguities, eccentricities, contradictions, humour and personality. The life-history explores how the individual is involved in creating changes in her life in a specific temporal and social context (Thomson, 2007: pp. 577–578).

Knowledge constructed through life-history research, in contrast to traditional research approaches, depends on the researcher perceiving the individual not as a research 'subject' but as an active participant who can thereby provide unique insights and who has agency over their life-course. Plummer (1983: p. 6) describes the life-historian's 'compassion' towards her participants compared to other approaches' 'neutrality'. Although the life-history is ultimately written by the compassionate researcher, the individual participant shapes its completion via their close relationship with the researcher.

Life-histories contextualise the participant's life within their socio-historical and political context in order to privilege knowledge about social injustice. Webb (2019) expressed how he positioned the voice of his participants:

... within the structural inequalities of fields (education in this case) that restrict possibilities for action. The doing of telling lives is an act of conveying both personal and institutional meanings that position individuals within particular social hierarchies

(529).

However, the aim of life-histories is not to generalise from an individual's experiences but rather to make these deeply relatable to other individuals, who may then reflect on the issues of social injustice that emerge. The relatively recent post-modern turn to focus on subjectivities, especially those of children, has helped to give credibility to such studies of subjective perspectives. However, along with subjective insights must be attached an overview of how these relate to social structures.

COMMON PRACTICES FOR DOING LIFE-HISTORY RESEARCH

Most researchers emphasise the many hours of talking that life-history research demands. There is no question that LQR is labour intensive. In order to make the account faithful to the subjective perspectives of the participant, the researcher needs to listen deeply, extensively and openly, using prompts sparingly (Plummer, 1983). Unlike in much post-positivist research, the researcher revisits the participant on several occasions, often across months or years and captures the participants' words and actions, recognising that both researcher and participant will filter their understandings in different ways at different times. Although a life-history may not cover a participant's whole life, as a history, it will provide the chronological framework of the trajectory of the participant's life, as well as individual snap-shots of particular points in time. Data from each individual research visit contribute towards the life-history as a whole. The choice of time-period under study may relate to a particular aspect of the participant's life at that time or a specific era of policy history.

In education, the vast majority of life-histories are carried out with adults who reflect back on a particular issue in their life such as being a teacher (e.g. Goodson, 1991) although similar retrospective life-histories have been gathered from adolescents and/or students in Higher Education (e.g. Thomson et al., 2018). The researcher/participant may also use other artefacts to enrich the life-history account, such as records, pictures, Memory Books, photographs, diaries, and interviews with other people who know the participant and observation.

REASONS FOR ADAPTING LIFE-HISTORY RESEARCH FOR CHILDREN AT SCHOOL: THE CLIPS PROJECT

The CLIPS project emerged out of a concern that some primary-aged children were being marginalised in the current schooling system because of their lower-attainment in tests of mathematics and English. This concern emanates from the introduction of national assessments following the 1988 Education Reform Act in England and Wales. After this date, children in England and Wales started to be categorised within schooling according to their test results. This had been less than the case previously, where other talent such as in sport or music might have been given more weight. Indeed, post-1988, many primary classrooms started to divide children physically into groups according to their mathematics/English attainment (Marks, 2013), potentially suggesting that those on 'lower' tables or in 'lower' sets had subordinate status to other children. Quantitative data studies across the past 30 years have repeatedly shown that those children in the lowest groups, when grouped according to attainment, experience an additional lack of confidence and attain even lower grades than comparable children in other groups, because of their designation as lower-attainers (Francis et al., 2019). Loneliness, often leading to depression and other mental health issues, has also been shown to relate to low-attainment in secondary school (Qualter et al., 2021). The data show that negative effects can persist and indeed increase as children move up the schooling ladder, potentially leading to obstructed educational and life opportunities and thus, systemically generated social injustice (Boaler, 2005).

Our research team watched the 7-Up series (Apted, 1965) with great interest, in which a group of children from different social groups was followed through TV film, being interviewed every 7 years of their life from age seven. Inspired by this, our team aimed to explore marginalised children's progression across the last 4 years of their primary schooling and into their secondary schooling. We aimed to provide vivid life-histories of 23 children as they progressed and

developed across this transformative era of their school-lives. We wished to gain their immediate responses to the social institution of schooling from within their designation as lower-attainers, and revisit this across 5 years in order to explore in depth and in a nuanced way, their concrete joys and suffering in schooling, with the ultimate purpose of tackling social injustice.

We therefore recruited four primary schools in SE England, themselves in disadvantaged communities (and all highly rated by Ofsted). We invited their Year 3 (ages 7–8) teachers to nominate six children, each of whom were lowest-attainers of the Year 3 class but did *not* have an Education Health and Care Plan (which would have indicated impairment). Since 2018, we have been interviewing each of the 23 selected children every term, as well as filming them and observing them in class (apart from one term in which Covid19 prevented us attending).

USING THE LIFE-HISTORY APPROACH WITH SCHOOL-CHILDREN

Although life-history research has a long-established, albeit ‘outsider’, research tradition (Lanford et al., 2019), authors stress that there is no fixed way to do life-history research and that every life-history will be different. Lanford et al. (2019) have emphasised the need for ‘highlighting novel life history projects that can stimulate further dialogue about the future of qualitative inquiry’ (462). These authors urge for ‘an extension of life history strategies and a recommitment to the documentation of [individuals’] lives and struggles’ (461). Indeed, from this perspective, life-histories can be liberating for researchers who are used to more traditional research approaches. This is because the life-history must be adapted to the participant, rather than the reverse. For example, Antikainen (2019) has illustrated how the life-history approach has been adapted to accommodate the lives of feminist participants for whom life-histories (unlike those of men) must include the analysis of both ‘the so-called productive factors (education and work) and reproductive factors (family)’ (134). We therefore felt convinced that, in the interests of social justice, especially its misrecognition and misrepresentation aspects (Fraser, 2008), we should embark on adapting the life-history approach for school-children as participants.

In many ways, we followed the guidance of Plummer (1983), Goodson and Sikes (2001) and Thomson (2007) in relation to common practices of using the life-history research approach. For example, we strove to portray our participants as agentic individuals and to have compassion for participants, to support them with a caring, respectful relationship, as we built up a vivid picture of how they grappled with their worlds within the schooling system. We contextualised our life-histories within the children’s socio-historical context of globalised, neo-liberal governance and how this contributed to the exclusionary emphasis on measurement of attainment in schooling.

As with most other life-histories, our research methods included semi-structured and unstructured interviewing, in which we aimed to listen deeply to each participant on multiple occasions, allowing us to approach the same participant afresh on each occasion as when using a kaleidoscope (Thomson & Holland, 2003: p. 237). We also used observation and film.

ETHICAL ISSUES

Explicitness in selection of sample

The life-history researcher encounters many ethical issues that do not characterise other qualitative data-collection methods. In the CLIPS study, our first issue was selecting a sample of

'lower-attaining' children without by default identifying our participants as subordinate. In our case, we asked the class teachers to select children who did not have Education, Health and Care Plans (indicating impairment) but attained below national expectations on standardised tests. However, we told the children themselves that they had been selected because we were interested in talking to children who found some aspects of schooling difficult. Only as the project proceeded did we explain the specifics of their selection.

Meaningful consent

Another issue was our request for consent from 7-year-old children in a study that would end when they were 5 years older. We struggled with the issue of how competent the children were to predict whether they would be happy about their participation in later years. This particularly affected our dissemination plans, which included filming the children. One way of addressing this issue was to keep confirming with the children that they understood what the project was about and that they were still happy to be filmed and have their narratives recorded. Every term we reconfirmed their commitment.

However, when we started to consider publishing our findings, we found that academic publishers were unwilling to publish life-histories and requested instead thematic analysis, considering life-histories to be not 'academic' enough. Our study was a life-history study for all the reasons given above. We had also promised the children their own chapter in our proposed publication. We are therefore debating having two different types of publication, one for children and their families and one for the academic world. However, our funding covers only the latter.

Emotional attachment

Another unexpected issue related to the attachment that developed between the research team and the children. Although the children seemed to greatly enjoy their interviews and their participation in the project, as researchers we found ourselves becoming emotionally attached to our 23 children. We thereby encountered difficulty when our participants described painful experiences that we had no power to ameliorate. Given our promise of complete anonymity (except in the rare event of a safeguarding issue), we had to refrain from intervening. On the other hand, the children's enjoyment of the interviews (indicated by the fact that we only lost one child out of 24 across 4 years) suggested that they were finding fulfilment in the interviews albeit not therapy (see Thomson & Holland, 2003 for further discussion).

DIVERSIONS FROM TRADITIONAL PRACTICES OF LIFE-HISTORY RESEARCH

There were four key ways in which our CLIPS life-history study innovated beyond the traditions of life-history research. These were:

1. The inclusion of young school-children as participants;
2. The synchronous aspect of the life-history;

3. The exclusive child-only perspective; and
4. The emphasis on child-centred activities as data collection tools.

The inclusion of young children as participants

Our participants were 7/8-year-old school-children when we began the CLIPS project. Some researchers or educators might believe that this was too young to engage fruitfully in life-history research which may explain why we could find no other life-histories with such young children in school (although see Pollard and Filer's "pupil careers", 1998). Our own previous interviewing of young children, however, had shown us that these young children could be insightful and forthcoming (see, for example, Gipps et al., 2016). Indeed, we believed that without their actual voices being elicited, attempts at improving the learning and social justice of primary-aged children's schooling could not be complete.

The synchronous aspect of the life-history

As pointed out by Thomson and Holland (2003), most LQR studies consist of retrospective reflections on a participant's life (although see McLeod & Yates, 2006; Thomson et al., 2018 for synchronous studies with older children). Our life-histories, however, could be called *synchronous* life-histories (although also containing elements of retrospection) in that the children's life-histories were literally unfolding under our eyes as we engaged with each child every term. This was indeed *living* history, in which 'contemporaneous insight' was complemented by 'retrospective hindsight' (Thomson & Holland, 2003: p. 243). The synchronous aspect of our study provided, in our view, a particular immediacy in our findings and an attention to chronological detail that a purely retrospective account may not have provided so effectively. However, it also meant that we as researchers took a more dominant role in imposing interpretations and representing continuity in the life-histories.

The exclusive child-only perspective

As indicated above, some life-histories include the narratives of other people from the participants' lives, who provide additional information. For example, teachers' and parents' comments on a child. After much debate, our team decided to construct our life-histories solely from the perspective of the child. Although this opened us up to the criticism of constructing an unbalanced view of the child's life-history, we believed this to be a benefit rather than a disadvantage, given the ubiquitous absence of the child's view in research literature. However, we sought from each child their narratives about their wider social environments not just their subjective experiences.

Because of our focus on attainment, however, we did make one exception: we asked each child's teacher for their Key Stage 1 attainment results (i.e. at age seven/eight, teacher-assessed) and their Key Stage 2 attainment results (i.e. at age 10/11, teacher-assessed rather than externally, due to Covid19). At the same time, we asked the teachers whether any child was on the Special Needs Register which some of our participants were (indicating them as having a particular learning difficulty such as dyslexia). Other than these pieces of formal information, we made a point of not engaging in conversation about the children with their teachers. However, we did

carry out observations of each child in their classrooms, so that immediately afterwards, we were able to ask the child how they perceived the lesson; as well as mediate the child's words using our own visual observations. The truths we learnt from the participants were therefore their own truths, which may or may not have tallied with teachers' or parents' truths. Indeed, there were a few participants who appeared to enhance their profiles, finding it difficult to admit to any kind of weakness or failure. However, we understood these participants as exercising strategies to cope with their specific predicament of feeling subordinate. We saw this as an important insight in its own right. Indeed, some insights were gained when a participant specifically juxtaposed their own view against that of parent or teacher, for example, when Bob told us that the 'calming' music played by his teacher in a lesson was really quite distracting for him.

The emphasis on child-centred activities as data collection tools

Most life-histories depend on questions and expanded answers during interviews. However, young children may not find questions/answers the most conducive means for expressing their joys and suffering (Clark & Moss, 2005; Coyne et al., 2021). Avoiding verbal data was a huge challenge, which we did not fully achieve. Much of our data remain speech-based. However, we often did manage to avoid simple question-and-answering which we substituted with a range of activities, games, role-plays, drawing and photography as described below. Given that our participants sometimes had particular difficulties with sitting still, we took playdough to our interview sessions. From the second visit onwards, we encouraged the children to play with the playdough throughout the interview if they wished to; and many of them did so, and continued to do in all subsequent interviews. We also provided fruit as a snack where permissible which made the interviews feel more sociable. We aimed through all our data collection activities to provide choices, emphasising the individual's agency and keeping the participants actively involved.

Activities

For each interview, we addressed a particular theme which had emerged as important during previous interviews. For example, one visit we were exploring each child's response to testing in schooling. A very effective activity to explore this theme involved use of a dolls-house in which each child constructed a classroom, using toy school furniture and small plastic animals as pupils. They set the classroom up ready for a test day, choosing which animal represented the teacher and particular children, and how each child was feeling. This play activity allowed children to dissociate themselves from their own actual struggle of being tested and to express views and feelings safely through the disguise of the animals. In another activity, each child was presented with a wooden frame into which 10 wooden pins of ascending height could be placed. To better understand the child's conceptualisation of 'ability', we invited each child to show where, out of 10, their teacher would *position* their peers and the child her/himself. In a further cloze-procedure activity, each child was read a story which had some key words missing, concerning a character called 'Me'. Me was wondering what the transfer to secondary school would be like. Although nearly all the children filled the gaps with words which clearly applied to themselves, the distancing of the individual into a story may have helped them to give more honest and spontaneous answers than would have been the case with direct questioning. For example, one child was quick to admit that Me was 'terrified and scared' about going to secondary school, whereas

another openly declared that she feared children at secondary school would 'laugh in my face'. A further activity involved us showing each child a clip from a video in which someone in the classroom was being marginalised. We introduced it by asking: 'How do you think these people are feeling in this video?'

Games

A game we played with the children more than once was the 'quote-sort' game whereby we presented the children with some provocative quotations, gathered in the previous round of data-collection. We read out one quote at a time to them and asked them to place the quote (each one glued to a colourful card) under one of three columns: Y for yes, agree; N for no, disagree; or M for maybe, not sure. We listened to their explanations as they decided in which column to put the card. These thinking-comments unveiled some useful insights. A simpler version of this game was to ask each child to pick the start of a sentence from face-down cards on the table and invite them to finish it in any way they liked. For example, we provided 'I learn best when...' and each child finished this in their own way. A further version included the researcher providing four boxes labelled 'always', 'often', 'sometimes' and 'never'. The child had to put the toy animal they had chosen to represent themselves into the appropriate box, once the researcher had read out a sentence; for example, 'Your teacher understands what you need for learning'.

Role-plays

In another visit, we presented different coloured cut-out figures who came to 'visit' the child. Two were friends, two teachers, and two or three family members. They visited one at a time and the participant child was invited to tell us what this person would say about them. We were looking to see whether a sense of subordination was included in these reflections. A further part of our role-play regarding testing included the participant advising an 'alien' from another planet how to manage doing tests; and whether or not to introduce tests for the first time ever to the children on her/his planet.

In an activity that sought to gain some retrospective data from our children, to complement the synchronous data, we placed five A3 sheets of paper on the floor, linked with a piece of tape. On the sheets were written: nursery/pre-school; Reception; Year 1; Year 2; and Year 3. Each child was invited to close her/his eyes and stand on each Year group sheet and say what they could see and feel in that year group. We repeated this activity at the end of Year 6, seeking the children's reflections on their development across Years 3–6.

Drawing and filming

We provided the participant children with an A4 sheet of paper showing the faint outline of a person's head. We asked them to draw in the face of a child who had not done well in a test and then to draw this child's *teacher's* face on another sheet. We also encouraged the children to draw self-portraits at various intervals, to accompany our annual filming sessions, both of which tracked the physical changes of the participants.

Photography

Each child was given an iPad and invited to take photographs of places in school where they experienced specified emotions including happiness, boredom, stress, loneliness, interest/excitement and fear.

Sample

All four of our initial sample schools were in South East England for convenience, given the many visits we anticipated making. One was a small rural school serving some disadvantaged pockets of mainly white British citizens; one was a large, sub-urban academy serving a range of ethnicities, including white British and black Caribbean; a third was an inner-city school which mainly Bangladeshi-heritage children attended; while the fourth was an inner-city school with primarily black, African-heritage pupils. However, the school itself was not our focus as we sought to perceive how our participants' life-histories unfolded within the context of the globalised, neo-liberalised schooling system. In any case, by the end of the participants' primary schooling, they were attending seven different primary schools and then transitioned to 13 new secondary schools.

A LIFE-HISTORY OF JEFF

I now illustrate how these methodological considerations, and our aims for carrying out life-history research with children, culminated in one of our life-history narratives. This is theorised by drawing on Nancy Fraser's (2008) conceptualisation of social justice as parity-of-participation, including parity of recognition and parity of (self) representation.

[Numbers in brackets denote the number of terms Jeff had been in the project when this particular point was made. The final interview which informed this article was TERM 10, at the end of Year 6 (aged 11)].

Jeff's designation as a lower-attainer

Jeff was a white, British boy. When asked how his teacher would assess him overall for his school work, Jeff suggested five out of 10. We asked if he would like to be rated higher and he sighed, paused, nodded and explained: 'Because I'm working as hard as I can' [8]. At the start of Year 3, Jeff had been assessed as working 'well below age expectations' in reading and writing and 'below age expectations' in maths. By the end of Year 6, Jeff's formal assessment ratings were the same. It was not surprising, then, that a sense of subordination, of feeling misrecognised and often subordinate, permeated his interviews. I asked Jeff what he really wanted from learning at school most of all, and he replied, 'To be smart' [6]. However, 'being smart' in a school-approved way was a tall order for Jeff. In the face-drawing activity, after Jeff had drawn the face of a non-identified 'lower-attainer', I had the following conversation with him:

Interviewer Eleanore: What do you think they're thinking – this poor person? They've just found out that they've got low marks again for their writing.

Jeff: [They are thinking:] 'Can I please have one mark?'

Interviewer Eleanore: Okay. Is that what you felt like saying the other day?

Jeff: Well I got a couple of zeros [3].

In the next step of this activity, the teacher in Jeff's scenario was not sympathetic, and scolded, 'You didn't get the answers correct, so you don't get no marks!' On the other hand, the 'higher-attaining' child whom Jeff drew felt happy and proud and was demanding more House Points [3].

Although Jeff told us that the teacher in his own real-life withdrawal groups for lower-attaining children helped him to understand and complete the lesson (She 'shorten it up so we understand' [6]), he frequently described his ongoing difficulties with writing in the main class [3]. Jeff struggled particularly with hand-writing and when we first met him in Year 3 he could barely write at all and he could not read. He said that writing hurt his hands and took too long [3]. He remarked, 'The first time I done handwriting it wasn't that actually hard... but when you get higher in the year it gets harder and harder' [4]. This aversion to writing continued throughout his history, although by Year 6 he could write readable sentences and was also reading books both at school and at home. One of his main fears about starting secondary school was 'lots of homework' and 'lots of writing' [9].

He was a little more positive about maths. However, when asked why someone might get stuck with division, Jeff strayed into another area of difficulty: 'He might like do the wrong question' [4], which suggested an overall confusion and difficulty when responding to maths tasks. However, his evident sense of subordination had been relieved recently, when his Year 6 teacher had given him an award for maths, which had greatly encouraged him. He also told us, 'She writed a purple comment in my book. And if it's purple, that means it's good' [6].

Jeff feared to express his own needs and preferences: Injustice through misrepresentation

When Jeff realised that the Covid19 lockdown was going to last several weeks in the summer of 2020, he told me that he had felt excited 'because I didn't have to do no learning!' [8] This suggested that school-learning was hard for him and indeed, he expressed fear and anger throughout his interviews. He was particularly upset by tests, which made him frustrated because he became stuck and confused; and scared that he would fail or get a zero [5]. When role-playing the classroom test-scene with animals in the dolls-house classroom, he described how the ankylosaurus-pupil was telling the hedgehog-pupil: 'It's okay, there's nothing scary!' but the hedgehog admitted, 'I feel so scared!' [5] Jeff said that he even felt scared in normal, everyday writing lessons: 'Normally I don't know what to write or how to explain it or something... So whenever my teacher says like you need to write a whole paragraph, then—and I'm a slow writer—so it's kind of stressful for me' [9]. He begged us to tell teachers, 'If people don't understand, just give them easy work' [9].

To deal with his fear and anger, Jeff developed two obvious coping strategies, which could at times themselves lead to demanding and disturbing experiences for Jeff. When asked if he shared

his troubles with anyone, he revealed his first strategy, explaining: 'I actually just keep it down, like super-down inside me'. He told me that he would 'normally just scream into my arm and just forget about it' [9] when facing difficulties. This suggested his lack of opportunities to represent his feelings. He felt isolated, even ashamed, in sometimes failing to do what this system wanted of him, so he kept what he saw as his inadequacies to himself. His sense of self-responsibilisation—that he was at fault and must bear this heavy load alone—was perhaps not surprising given his schooling's neo-liberal context within which the individual is expected to carve out their own success.

Another coping strategy Jeff portrayed in interviews was behaving as an extremely polite, considerate and caring person who wanted the best for his friends, teachers and family. For example, when asked what he would say to his mum if she won the lottery, he replied, [I'd say] 'Well done, mum!' [10] It could be theorised that by conforming closely in his social behaviour with adults, he was compensating for his lack of parity in terms of school-work and peer relationships, and trying very hard not to allow his real fear and anger to show through. It was notable that his polite demeanor slipped during an end-of-term party in which he started messing around when encouraged by a less restrained child.

Jeff therefore tried to embrace a positive outlook towards his learning, keeping his anger and his fears under wraps and conforming to adults' behavioural expectations as much as possible. Presumably following his teachers' encouragement, he claimed to believe that 'if they try their hardest' [3] anyone can be successful—even though his belief in hard work leading to success had scant evidence in his own experience. Similarly, when advising the toy hedgehog (representing a peer in his class) how to do well in a make-believe classroom test, he recommended it to 'feel confident' [6]. However he could not advise the hedgehog how to achieve this confidence.

Jeff's strengths and interests were not recognised: Status subordination through mis-recognition

Jeff's sense of less than full participation within the schooling system was not surprising, given that his real interests did not reflect the system's priorities and norms. Firstly, he came from a family in which holidays were not taken as they were too expensive [6] and was the only child in his school's sample who received Pupil Premium. These factors indicated his disadvantaged socio-economic status, putting him into a different category from some peers, teachers and policy-makers. Perhaps more significant for disassociating him from schooling, however, was Jeff's key passion for computer games—a skill that came low down in terms of social recognition by the schooling system but which remained a constant passion throughout Jeff's life-history. Computer games were so important to him that, when asked in Year 6 whether he had changed across the years of primary school, he readily agreed that he had changed a lot because 'Like when I first met you I didn't have the Nintendo Switch [computer-game console]' [9]. From the first time we met him in Year 3 (aged 8), he aspired to be a YouTuber in adulthood and this aspiration continued up to the end of Year 6 (aged 11). Indeed, he told us, 'I was born by being good at computer games' [4] and the Covid19 lockdown gave him plenty of time to indulge in these fulfilling pleasures, despite his mother's attempts to limit him. As he expressed it, under lockdown 'I was sad of not seeing my friends, but I got to do what I liked most' [8].

To become recognised, or at least to cope with his lack of recognition, Jeff believed that he had to work hard to complete the attainment tasks presented to him by schooling. However, he did not seem to perceive these tasks as fulfilling his own goals; nor did he find them engaging in the way that computer games were. This hard work at school did not come easily to him. I observed

him in class, constantly moving about on his chair, chewing his thumbs, laying his head on the desk: constantly active but rarely engaged [9]. Perhaps due to his strengths and talents being *misrecognised*, Jeff therefore displayed a primarily instrumental approach to his school learning throughout. That is, he rarely if ever suggested that work was something he engaged with willingly or with enjoyment. Instead, he aimed to get enough done to avoid being punished [3]. This approach may have helped him sustain an outwardly positive profile as he progressed through his life-history. Given a hypothetical scenario whereby he was faced by some very difficult work and the teacher offered to sit with him all day to help him understand it, he reposted, 'I'll just do it as quickly as I can, and just go away' [5].

Jeff's peer interactions in schooling were often poor: Injustice as lack of social recognition

During one early interview [3], Jeff described not having any friends to play with in the playground. Within this social system, he seemed not to be a full participator. When looking back over his years at school, while he remembered the name of every teacher, he could not name his friends. However, as his interviews progressed across the years of his life-history some names of friends did start to appear and were given high worth by Jeff. They tended to be other children who also had some difficulties in coping with school. This was perhaps because Jeff was frequently taken out of class to work with a small group of children who had Special Educational Needs [SEN] like Jeff and who seemed to cling together socially. In particular, he developed a friendship with Anna, another project participant, as they both attended the 'lower' maths group. Jeff claimed that, although he and Anna would be going to different secondary schools, 'We won't forget each other' [8]. In our final primary-school interview with him [10], when asked whether he had any news, he announced that yes, he had news: he had a *new* friend! A similar high value on friendships was expressed when Jeff explained why he felt pleased to return to school after lockdown: 'Just seeing my wonderful friends' [8]. However, perhaps more representatively, Jeff felt scared about starting secondary school because he 'might get picked on' by 'bullies' [9]. In particular, he feared getting bullied because he was not very tall. This fear became more obvious near the end of primary-school and we noticed at that time that he depicted himself as a baby gazelle in an animal role-play, because it was the smallest animal available [10]. A sense of being small physically may have exacerbated his beliefs about being subordinate socially and academically.

On the other hand, we came to perceive that Jeff had a particularly close relationship with most of his teachers. He referred to teachers as if they had encouraged him a great deal with his learning. We hypothesised that his warm interactions with teachers helped compensate for his otherwise fragmented sense of belonging in school and helped him navigate the rocky road ahead. When setting up the dolls-house for the pretend test classroom in which he played the squirrel-pupil and the teacher played the tarantula-teacher, he claimed that the tarantula-teacher liked the squirrel-pupil *best* of all the children in the class as they were 'good friends' [4]. Indeed, Jeff gave himself, the squirrel-pupil, a fancy VIP chair at a special desk in the make-believe classroom.

Concluding thoughts

This life-history narrative suggests a young boy facing some issues of misrecognition and misrepresentation, leading to a sense of subordination to which he responded with fear and anger.

Jeff could not fully participate within the demands of a schooling system that valued high test results in mathematics and English above all else. To compensate, he developed strategies that allowed him to persevere and cope—with the help of primary-school teachers—but these strategies led him to hide away at school aspects of himself that he himself felt were important to him. This may have led him to play a partial role at school, seeking more to cope than to participate with his whole self, acting the part rather than embracing the show. Given that he had failed to find systemic opportunities to express or act on his joys or his suffering, he may have particularly benefited from being part of the CLIPS project in order to enjoy some chances to share with the world his subjective life-history.

DISCUSSION

This article has considered how and why the life-history approach may be adapted for use with young school-children. In the article, I have attempted to illustrate that Jeff's life-history is one written with compassion (Plummer, 1983), reflecting the close bonds I feel with Jeff and my concern about his joys and suffering. I feel that we have developed a trusting relationship whereby we enjoy each other's company increasingly and which, evidently, allows Jeff to express himself more authentically. As a research team, we experienced this development of trust among all 23 participants, to the extent that over 4 years only one child withdrew from the study. Early in the final year, we therefore had to start planning to protect participants against the inevitable separation at the end of their Year 7. It would be beneficial and rewarding to both researchers and children if we could continue the project until the participants reach school-leaving age or even beyond. However, funds are not currently forthcoming.

As my life-history of Jeff indicates, feelings of subordination and lack of voice can be triggered within the current schooling system where a limited range of attainments is valued. Jeff's passion for and skill with computer games, for example, although they define Jeff, are not formally recognised in the schooling system. Neither is he given systemic opportunities for putting his preferences across or suggesting changes. I propose that his life-history goes some way towards allowing him to represent himself and have his skills and capacities recognised so that he no longer has to scream into his arm and try to forget about them. Taking 23 such life-histories as one unit, we will be able to start to see patterns across the range of children in the cohort, across all 5 years, allowing the research team and our readers to weigh up their implications for social justice.

Dhunpath (2001) suggested 'that the life history approach is probably the only authentic means of understanding how motives and practices reflect the intimate intersection of institutional and individual experience in the postmodern world' (544). Our experiences back up this observation, especially as the interviews continued over time, improving like a good wine (Thomson, 2007: p. 573). Our perseverance with a range of accessible data-collection approaches allowed us insight into the lives of children who could not always express themselves through words or in response to direct questions. In particular, we found that role-play using toy animals and other objects such as the dolls-house permitted some children to express their experiences vividly. This might have been difficult or impossible just through question and answer, or indeed without having first built up a trusting relationship with each child.

I have tried to place Jeff's experiences within the political context of a neo-liberally driven schooling system which tends to focus on measurement of attainment in mathematics and English above other achievements. It will be in relation to the other 22 life-histories in our study

that we can make claims about social justice more generally. Currently, however, our data highlight how a neo-liberal agenda of acquiring and proving personal worth through high attainment at school can have isolating influences on those for whom this is difficult (Owens & de St Croix, 2020; Reay, 2020). Through persistence in our innovative approach to interviewing across 4 years, we seem to have provided spaces for our participants to construct their own knowledge about experiences of misrecognition and misrepresentation within the system, providing an alternative version of what schooling entails. This has helped to highlight our awareness of social injustices being systematically sustained which would otherwise have remained concealed. I hope thereby to have portrayed one child, Jeff, as an individual grappling with an unjust schooling system, providing his truths in a highly relatable way—the life-history narrative.

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