

Children who experience misrecognition in primary education: A social justice perspective

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Abstract

Our research constructed school life histories with 23 'lower-attaining' primary school children in England. Previous research has often failed to focus on the social justice aspects of this group, and no attempt has been made to contextualise children's misrecognition experiences within their full school life history, nor to hear primarily from children. Our results reveal for the first time the feelings, thinking and actions of lower attainers across 5 years of schooling, in response to the institutionalised practice of grouping by prior attainment. Nancy Fraser's conceptualisation of social justice as parity of participation provides our analysis framework, incorporating concepts of redistribution, recognition and representation. We focus primarily on how some low-attaining children experience misrecognition. Our results indicate how lower-attaining children sometimes identify themselves as less worthy, less connected, less similar and less visible than others. This construction allows for less respect to be shown to them and could block the fair distribution of schooling resources, and limit their opportunities for achieving social esteem.

KEYWORDS

misrecognition, Nancy Fraser, social justice, status subordination

INTRODUCTION

The Children's Life-histories in Primary Schools (CLIPS) longitudinal research project aimed to provide first-hand evidence, from 2018 to 2023, for whether or how 23 children designated as 'lower attaining' experienced 'status subordination' in schooling (Fraser, 2008).

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The paper explores and illuminates social justice issues in terms of misrecognition, experienced by children who attain less well than other peers in tests of mathematics and English at primary school in England.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The paper demonstrates how lower-attaining children sometimes identify themselves in terms suggesting misrecognition. This construction allows for less respect to be shown to them and could block the fair distribution of schooling resources, and limit their opportunities for achieving social esteem.

We constructed school life histories with these 'lower-attaining' children, a project never previously attempted, revealing for the first time how such children described over 5 years their feelings, thinking and actions in response to the institutionalised practice of grouping by prior attainment. Our ultimate purpose was to help in the psychosocial task of investigating and understanding aspects of the social world, thereby laying the ground for future actions to improve social justice. We have presented excerpts from the children's life histories in order to make public their experiences, 'opening up the inside life of schools to democratic scrutiny and public challenge' (Lynch & Baker, 2005: 140). We thereby also provide the children with one vehicle through which they can represent their voices. This paper therefore provides verbatim illuminations of when project children appear to feel 'inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction' (Fraser, 2018: 24).

Social justice as parity of participation

We drew on Nancy Fraser's (2008) conceptualisation of social justice as parity of participation, incorporating three integral aspects: redistribution of resources, recognition of worth and representation of voice. Human rights underpin all three aspects. Fraser (2008) emphasised that recognition could not be disentangled from redistribution or representation, the three making an integrated whole to represent parity of participation as social justice. In relation to schooling, redistribution might refer to resources becoming equitably available to everyone in and through schooling. Representation signifies that every school child has the means to contribute their perspectives and have proposals acted upon. The aspect of social justice that has so far been most interrogated in schooling is the redistribution of wealth, how this relates to class, race and gender, and what its implications are (e.g., Ball, 2021; Mowat, 2020; Neumann et al., 2020; Parsons et al., 2016; Reay, 2018; Richardson et al., 2020; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018). This research suggests that institutionalised patterns of cultural value in schooling operate to advantage some groups and disadvantage others in gaining ever-diminishing employment opportunities and thereby potentially moving upwards socially. In England, the majority of young people remain in the same income bracket as their parents across the lifespan (Parsons et al., 2016). While income and wealth inequalities

cannot be eliminated by schools, their influences on schooling practices can be interrogated and exposed.

Recognition and misrecognition

Although developed by Fraser in a US political science context, we harnessed her theorisation of social justice as parity of participation because of Fraser's specific depiction of the recognition of worth aspect; that is, status subordination or misrecognition. This aspect has special relevance to children designated as lower attaining in a system where attainment in mathematics/English has extremely high cultural value. In this paper, we explore messages children receive about their (lower) worth. Misrecognition practices included—most obviously—their separation from others according to their prior attainment in tests of mathematics/English, with its systemic stigmatisation of lower attainment.

Recognition implies people being respected as of equal social status across all groups and individuals, regardless of how they identify themselves or the groups with which they identify. Fraser (2018) emphasised that status is not dependent on one's religion, [dis]ability, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, wealth or culture but on one's human right for respect as a member of a common humanity, which is also substantiated through the fair distribution of resources and representative powers. She wrote how some institutionalised patterns of cultural value could confer lower status:

[When] *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... Misrecognition is wrong because it constitutes a form of institutionalized subordination – and thus, a serious violation of justice.

(Fraser, 2018: 24–26, our emphasis)

In the schooling context, status subordination can manifest as some children constructing themselves as less competent, more separate, different or not as visible as others, with the result that their participation in social interaction is limited and opportunities for enhancing social esteem curtailed. Obstacles to participation will influence children's capacity to benefit from schooling, potentially reducing the quality of their current lives at school as well as threatening their future wellbeing. A sense of misrecognition, or low status, during schooling can linger and even escalate in adulthood (Clark et al., 2018).

Fraser's concept of misrecognition should not be confused with Bourdieu's equally important but different conception of misrecognition (James, 2015). Bourdieu's conceptualisation of misrecognition related to the fact that disadvantage across the whole schooling system is not recognised or brought to people's awareness. On the other hand, Fraser's theory, a 'radical-democratic interpretation of the principle of equal moral worth' (James, 2015: 98), referred to the individual's feelings, thoughts and perceptions of themselves as less worthy than others, as well as others' perceptions of these individuals as inferior. From Fraser's perspective, the school child is misrecognised when their abilities and intelligences 'are either excluded, minimally assessed, or accorded a lower status within a given subject when fully assessed' (Lynch & Baker, 2005: 139). In particular, when knowledge is divided into school subjects and mathematics and English are given a monopoly of prestige, other abilities and intelligences can appear subordinated. Fraser's perspective therefore relates specifically to the individual's experiences of subordination within the system, while Bourdieu's relates to the absence of focus on this aspect of schooling across the system (see Figure 1).

They construct themselves, and are constructed by others, as less worthy, less connected, more different and less visible than others;

how they identify themselves is not respected by all;

the groups with which they identify are not respected by all;

they experience unfair distribution of resources;

they experience inadequate representational opportunities.

=>*which suggests*

they have diminished opportunity for achieving social esteem;

they encounter systems, or common practices, that fail to confer respect equally to all categories of people and the qualities associated with them;

their life and cultures are absent in school studies

=>*which suggests*

their participation in social interaction is obstructed;

their common humanity is denied;

they are inequitably disempowered

=>*which suggests*

recognitive social justice is denied.

FIGURE 1 Children who experience misrecognition in primary education: a social justice perspective.

Policy context perpetuating status subordination among some individuals

The practice of categorising primary school children according to attainment tests is common in high and low-income countries alike (Agnich & Miyazaki, 2013; Trinidad & King, 2022). In the 1940s and 1950s, differences in attainment in the 3Rs (reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic) were also emphasised in English primary schools (Hallam et al., 2003). By the 1970s and 1980s, in contrast, many local authorities in England prioritised curiosity and creativity over performance of attainment (Simon, 1994). It was not until National Curriculum and Assessment became national law in 1988 that children again became systematically categorised—and potentially stigmatised—according to attainment as higher, middle or lower attainers in mathematics/English. This linked children's worth directly to specific attainment.

The placing of primary pupils in physical groups according to attainment—mainly in mathematics/English—soon followed: apparently, students in segregated groups became 'more engaged in their own learning' (DfES, 2005: 58; but see Ireson et al., 2005 for alternative evidence). Key Stage 2 classrooms (age 7–11) became divided into attainment groups (often

misnamed 'ability groups') for mathematics/English lessons particularly, and extending into other lessons too.

While the policy directive to group physically by attainment has not been reinforced among this age group more recently, the practice of sorting by attainment seems to be deeply embedded throughout primary schooling and now also prevails in infant schools (age 4–7), as illustrated by Bradbury (2018). As Marks (2013) and Campbell (2014) noted, even in a classroom where children are not physically grouped by attainment, children may become discriminated against by (lack of) attainment in the conceptualisations and actions of staff. Lynch and Baker (2005) described how children in lower-attainment groups, or perceived by teachers to be lower attaining, can be:

Subjected to a kind of cultural imperialism that renders them either invisible or, if visible, subject to negative stereotyping or misrecognition... Negative images portray subordinate groups variously as 'native', innocent, inferior, deviant, ugly or threatening. In so doing, they legitimate acts of disrespect, disdain and violence. (p. 142)

Researchers of attainment grouping in primary schools have mainly focused on how the *attainment* of those in lower-attainment groups in schools appears overwhelmingly to be damaged rather than enhanced by attainment grouping, when all factors are considered (Hallam & Parsons, 2013; Higgins et al., 2015; Ireson et al., 2005). However, a few researchers have also collected some primary school interview data relating to pupil experience. Keddie (2016), writing in the context of Fraser's concept of status subordination, described how low grading threatened their sense of 'survival' (p. 113). McGillicuddy and Devine (2020) illustrated how 'ability' grouping produced strong emotional and psychosocial responses, which were characterised by feelings of 'shame', 'upset' and 'inferiority' for those in the 'low-ability' groups. Blatchford and Webster's (2018) research described the limited access pupils had to teachers, friends and materials when frequently withdrawn into intervention groups. In the primary school interview study by Davies et al. (2003), children emphasised difficult behavioural issues in the lowest groups, which interfered with their learning. Dunne et al.'s (2011) interview data illustrated pupils' resistance to being taken out of subjects such as art and physical education for remedial work in mathematics/English. Marks's (2013) work showed lowest-set primary pupils' vivid awareness of their comparative deficiency, specifically in mathematics, and how this depressed motivation. Boone and Demanet (2020), based in Belgium, concluded that primary school teachers played a key role in labelling students as academic or non-academic, thereby affecting their future careers.

In terms of longer-term social influences of attainment grouping, Papachristou et al. (2021) noted that when children were physically grouped by attainment within the primary classroom, those categorised as lower showed more hyperactivity and emotional problems compared to non-grouped children, and to children categorised in higher groups. Francis et al.'s (2020) secondary school research suggested that overall self-confidence was eroded by being in a lowest set, not only in specific subject lessons but overall. To sum up, being placed in lower-attainment groups seems to be associated with weaker engagement in learning, poorer sense of relatedness, fear or anger and dislike of school. Although the above data are limited and partial, they are illuminating entry points into further research. To date, no attempt has been made to contextualise each pupil's experience within their school life history, nor to focus on the social justice of these experiences.

RESEARCH PROCESSES

Life-history research

Funded by the Leverhulme Trust [no. 413], the CLIPS project drew on interpretivism (Schwartz-Shea, 2020) to portray how individual children experienced their social status at school across ages 7–12. Our school life histories captured the ‘concrete joys and suffering’ (Plummer, 1983: 4) of unheard individuals (Goodson & Sikes, 2016) in order to highlight social injustices. Life-history methodology was in keeping with our desire to capture vivid concrete detail over several years of school experience, in drawing directly on lower-attaining children's own voices through repeated individual interviews. Gathering children's perceptions makes possible the opportunity to have these acted on. This is not only a human right, it might just be that the children themselves can help to transform and improve our schooling system. As an accompaniment to less sustained data about how primary schooling is experienced across time by lower attainers (e.g., Blatchford & Webster, 2018; Davies et al., 2003; Dunne et al., 2011; Hallam & Parsons, 2013; Higgins et al., 2015; Ireson et al., 2005; Keddie, 2016; McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020), our life histories are an essential contribution towards understanding how specific children actually respond to the social system of schooling.

Sample

In summer 2018, through personal contacts and recommendations, we gained access, as designed in our proposal, to four demographically diverse primary schools, two inner city, one suburban and one rural, in South-East England. As we had proposed, three of the schools had pupil intakes comprising above national average numbers of children eligible for free school meals, indicating economic disadvantage. This ensured that we had a range of socioeconomic backgrounds represented. A range of ethnicities was also represented. However, these were not ‘failing’ schools but schools where we would expect to find good practice, assessed as at least *good* by national inspections in 2018. Given that there was no centralised policy direction regarding grouping strategies, it was not surprising that our four schools had a range of grouping practices, which even varied across classes as children moved up: some had attainment sets for mathematics/English; some had within-class grouping by mathematics/English attainment; others had intervention groups in mathematics/English for some children; and all schools differentiated by attainment through physical division of some sort.

Year 3 teachers from the four sample schools selected six children each for the project. These were children whose school records designated them, aged 7–8, as ‘below age-level expectations’ for attainment in mathematics and English (*not* including children who had Education and Health Care Plans indicating impairment). While this process of selection was mainly systematic, in one school, the children we worked with were only ‘below age-level expectations’ in one core subject, not both. This made our findings in that school marginally different from the others.

We initially informed children that they had been chosen because they found some aspects of school difficult. Later, in TERM9, we explained that it was specifically test scores in mathematics/English we had used as selection criteria. We knew that half our sample had Pupil Premium status (indicating social disadvantage) and half were Black British. We chose not to ascertain further details on ethnicity, parental occupation or parental education, except for snippets of information volunteered by the children in interview, in order that we see the children's accounts only from their own perspectives and without prior judgement.

We also did not make ethnographic studies of the schools in this research as these changed each time children moved school.

The 23 children are referred to below using pseudonyms, which were unknown to those outside the interview spaces. The school term in which a quotation was collected, from TERM1 to TERM13, is indicated in square brackets after the quotation (e.g., [TERM1]), giving a sense of the stage in each child's school life history.

Research processes

Methods

Across the project, as a team of three researchers, we used the following data collection instruments:

- 12 (or 11) audio-recorded and transcribed activity interviews of 40–90 min with each child every term for 13 terms (missing one, or in rare cases two, under COVID-19), in a few cases using dyads/triads. TOTAL = 230.
- Short observations of each child in their primary classroom every term, where possible.

During interviews, we each built up a strong relationship with a designated subsection of the sample, forging relationships that endured between and beyond interviews (e.g., in the exchange of birthday cards). This allowed for greater openness between the sample and the researchers.

In all interviews, we substituted straight questions and answers with innovative activities including games, role play, drawing and photography. For example, we drew a graph frame with 2010 written in the top left-hand corner. We invited children to draw a line from their birth in 2010 to the present day in 2020 at the bottom right-hand corner, stopping at any point when something they considered significant occurred in their life history and explaining its significance. This allowed us to gauge what was most meaningful to them. We also developed innovative interview techniques, inspired by play therapy and drama exercises. These allowed for working in metaphor, where children could explore uncomfortable feelings safely given the 'psychic distance' these techniques offered (Drewes & Schaefer, 2015: 39). The findings presented below are accumulated from all interviews in response to such complex activities. Because we had at least 11 interviews with every child, we were able to choose quotations to present what best represented each child as we had grown to know them. We also try to give some description of whole life-history trajectories with some examples, although this was difficult in the limited space.

Observations were short and used primarily as starting points for interviews, whereby both child and researcher had shared a little of the same classroom process. We asked children to tell us about the classroom experience and used prompts such as '*How did you find that?*' or '*What did you think/feel about that?*' These were not ethnographic observations but starting points for dialogue.

Analysis

We analysed all interview data inductively, letting themes emerge (Jeong & Othman, 2016). We fed data into NVivo11/12 and, as we coded across the years, constructed new codes inductively, which we negotiated collaboratively as a research team. For the analysis in this paper, we had these additional stages:

1. We wrote a 1500-word life history for each child, drawing on all interviews and all codes ($n=21$ codes; 11 or 12 interviews).
2. We then focused closely on the following codes: expressions of competence/incompetence; grouping by attainment; school as unfair/difficult; fear and anger; and status subordination.
3. We developed, manually, a new set of themes around status subordination, including: realising one's attainment position; smart people as happy; unfairness; feeling singled out; confusion and being overwhelmed; work as hard; needing help; school as intolerable; not caring; and pretending, in order to avoid punishment.
4. These themes were then clustered within the three-point framework quoted by Nancy Fraser, feeling: inferior; excluded; wholly other or invisible.

Ethical procedures

We had full ethics approval from the UCL Research Ethics Committee (REC 1079) and were guided by BERA's ethical code. Full consent was regularly reconfirmed by both children and parents. We also frequently reconfirmed that both children and their parents were pleased to be included in the project. We ascertained that children did not feel coerced to talk to us or do our activities, always allowing them to miss an interview if they wished or finish it early. We checked that they seemed to find activities manageable and enjoyable, knew why we were doing the research and that we planned to publish a book and film with the results. No child missed any interview across the 5 years, apart from those constrained by COVID-19. This indicated to us that our interviews were not unenjoyable to the participants, even when they were mentioning difficult emotions. In extreme cases, such as when Mark started to cry, we stayed longer with the child until we could sense that they had regained emotional equilibrium.

FINDINGS

In the pages below, we focus on individual children's experiences to illustrate key emphases across the 23 life histories. As an overarching summary, we found that across ages 7–11, four children did not seem to suffer from misrecognition, perhaps because they were 'below age expectation' only in one of the two core subjects. In contrast, we concluded that five other children in the sample had more or less given up on school by the end of the project.

Feeling lower status or inferior

The life histories illuminated Fraser's reference to feelings of inferior worth to others at school, owing to common practices that encouraged comparison of attainment among the children and the accompanying stigmatisation of lower attainment. For example, several children referred to having their work ripped up in public, or having poor scores read out publicly. Edith was one child who could easily compare her attainment with others and thereby construct herself, and who believed she was constructed by others as less worthy than they were. She described the feelings of loneliness and sadness of such a child:

She feels really sad because all her other friends have high marks and she's the only one who has low marks... Lonely and sad and very disappointed. [TERM2]

She used the word 'sad' again to illustrate her awareness of inferiority when test scores were announced publicly:

I'm a little bit sad, because I'm not very good at maths tests and sometimes... um sometimes you need to write [publicly] your score. I think for my last maths test I got 4 [out of 20]. [TERM4]

On the other hand, any child who achieved high marks could compare themselves favourably to others and gain prestige by exhibiting this prowess to those in authority:

[The high-marks child] is super happy – really, really happy. Extremely excited about her scores [especially] when they show the head teacher. [TERM2]

Edith went on to recommend that the low-scoring child take private tutoring, despite the fact that she and many of her peers were on Pupil Premium (indicating economic disadvantage). Perhaps she saw this as a means to becoming more like her economically advantaged peers:

She should ask her parents to book a tutoring programme so she could get more better at mathematics and stuff like that... [Or] they might send them to a school which costs a lot of money so they can learn better maybe. [TERM6]

This quotation illustrates awareness that she needed special treatment and did not fit in adequately to the existing system. Edith described the fear that accompanied her sense of inferiority, being 'very worried for the test' in case she achieved 'zero' [TERM4]. She expressed a sense of powerlessness in changing the situation but just wished she were better at mathematics. Even by the end of the project, she was still dreaming of future higher grades in mathematics:

I want to be good at... good at mathematics so I don't struggle with it... [With guaranteed good grades], I wouldn't have to worry about revising for exams too much because I would know I'm going to get good grades. [TERM13]

Edith's peer, Laurie, told us that he scored 6/20 on the test referred to by Edith. However, as he had interpreted the status of this test to be informal, he managed to reign in his sense of shame:

I would be crying if it was a real test, but it was a practice [so] I wasn't that angry – but... if it was a real test I'd be ashamed. [TERM5]

It was perhaps Laurie's neo-liberal belief that individuals were responsible for their own success that led to his shame (Ball, 2021). He expressed early on in the project that it was not the system's fault or the teacher's fault or due to the curriculum, one brought failure on oneself for not being able to do what others did easily:

If the teacher said 'learn it at home' and they didn't learn, it's their fault. [TERM5]

From the beginning, Harriet was mortified by her perceived lack of competence and the accompanying stress of being reprimanded and feeling further humiliated. She described feeling rejected, which led her to denigrate her competence in mathematics and spelling:

It's stressful when I put my hand up and get it wrong. It's a bit like I got rejected. And then other people put their hand up and they get it right... Everyone else is smarter than me. I don't know mathematics and I don't know how to spell...

Shouting at us doesn't make it better. It just makes it worse. Because then we start to hate them and we start to not come to the school. [TERM3]

That is, in addition to feeling rejected, she also suffered when teachers shouted at her for not knowing the answer (as she perceived it) and this led her to dislike teachers and school altogether. This was only in TERM3 when she was 8 years old.

From early on in her schooling too [TERM5], Ellie seemed to accept that some people, like herself, simply did not understand certain subjects, while others were lucky enough to understand them. The former group, with which she identified, was less respected by others:

I do listen in mathematics, but I'm very bad at it so like I can't get it. But like Ray and all that people that I said, like they do it like really goodly, and like... they get it a lot. And I'm like... I don't get it a lot. [TERM5]

However, for Ellie, this acceptance could have the benefit too of taking the pressure off her. She had written herself off when it came to mathematics and could relax for the rest of her school life. On the other hand, since she was most interested now and for the future in dog grooming, the insistence in school that mathematics was of highest importance suggested that her own life and her culture were less valuable than the school subjects she could not do.

Some children expressed a sense of injustice in the teacher's preference for 'good, smart' children. They experienced this as an unfair distribution of teacher resources and a reduction in their own opportunities to contribute too, and this bothered them. Michael pointed out very near the start of the project:

The smart people, they get a lot of chances because if they get – so we do reading... Whoever's reading that much, they [teachers] put their name up in the star, and then... (pause) but he never picks me. [TERM2]

Three terms later he was emphasising the distinction between himself and these 'smart' people in an even more exaggerated way, as 'like the maths gods' and 'like the maths angels' [TERM5]. His peer, Sam, explained how this discrepancy also deprived him of some social time that 'smart' children enjoyed, perhaps limiting unfairly his opportunities to gain social esteem:

I'm just carrying on and then I finish like ten minutes later than the other people... [they] are just messing round on the board because they've finished.

These examples suggest that institutionalised patterns of cultural value allowed these children, even aged 7 or 8 years old, to construct themselves, and be constructed by others, as less worthy than others who understood better and received higher grades. While some blame was attributed to teachers, mainly the individuals already seemed to blame (and shame) themselves. These feelings of inferiority are likely to obstruct their ongoing and future participation in social interaction; their sharing of common humanity and their empowerment.

Feeling excluded

Feeling excluded could result from—or result in—a sense of inferiority but it appeared to be a distinct experience too. It could be provoked simply by a child sitting physically in a different space from others owing to their prior attainment; that is, sitting in a lower-attainment group with which no-one wanted to be identified. Ellie felt excluded from the green and yellow groups for mathematics:

If you're on green then it means you're good with mathematics. If you're on yellow then it means you're kind of good with mathematics. But if you're on red it means... you wouldn't like be getting it. [TERM3]

Nine terms later she was still expressing how angry this sense of exclusion made her feel:

When I feel left out, I feel mad! [TERM12]

On several occasions she expressed anguish when her friends went out to their (higher) literacy attainment groups. Ellie felt she did not have equal opportunity for achieving social esteem, as the friends she normally socialised with were taken away:

I'm like '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. They're the friends I usually play with. [TERM1]

On the other hand, when she did work within the whole class later in her life history, she was sometimes given easier work than others, which made her feel different:

I feel embarrassed when I get different work... Like I get a sheet like full of other stuff... But like everybody else just does it in their book. [TERM6]

Her solution for the tension between not feeling excluded and yet getting what she considered to be appropriate work (within the limitations of the current classroom) was for the teacher to be subtle and support her to look the same as others:

Make it not look like I have that worksheet! ... Make it look like I had the book. Because you could stick them in the book. [TERM6]

Jack experienced teasing because he was in a low-attainers' intervention group, which made it difficult for him to defend himself as worthy and similar to others:

Some people might tease you for it, [being] in the bottom group for everything. But if they just tease you, just tell them, 'So what if I'm in the bottom group for everything, I'm still catching up to just learn stuff'. [TERM9]

Jack perceived himself as excluded from his peers in another way too, suggesting that in schooling, the way he lived his life outside was not acceptable like others:

It's harder for me because normally other people like practise 24/7 with their mums and dads. [But] I'm not a practice person. [TERM9]

Fin described being deliberately excluded from teachers' attention, even within his main class when he was 9 years old. He experienced an unfair distribution of the teacher as resource and had his opportunities for representing his voice limited. He expressed how this led to his sense of disempowerment and isolation:

I don't like showing other people my work because they could barely read it. And then like it doesn't really help my confidence! Because most [teachers] just sort of walk straight past [me] because they know they can't read my handwriting. They don't talk to me much. [TERM6]

On the other hand, Fin's ADHD diagnosis singled him out as finding it more difficult to concentrate in class and, yet again, his ADHD characteristics were seen as negatives within the institutionalised patterns of cultural value in school:

When you're just daydreaming, like the teacher might just ask you [a question], and then you're just like 'Oh!' and then everybody stares at you, and it's really humiliating. [TERM6]

A further and obvious source of exclusion was children being kept in at break/lunchtime because they had not completed as much work as other children. This strategy of deliberately separating children from their friends during their social times was an example of unfair distribution of resources as they were denied the playground experience; it denied them opportunities for contributing socially and for achieving social esteem. Britney expressed frustration from early in the project:

I don't know why they have to like say if you haven't finished you have to stay in for break. Why can't we just do it after lunch? [TERM2]

Edith was still angry about being kept in to finish work at the end of primary school:

Very upset, angry or furious... Very upset because I have to miss all my friends playing outside. [TERM10]

In these among other examples, the sample children felt excluded from others on the basis that they were not as adequate as others, denying them equal opportunities to participate in mainstream school processes, both academic and social.

Feeling invisible or wholly 'other'

The lower-attaining children at times seemed to feel 'other' in the sense of being so far misunderstood in school that they felt inscrutable or even invisible to others. Their very core was felt to be invalid within the schooling system. Their sense of exclusion went beyond being outside the norm, to feeling actually alien to the norm, as if they were made of different material, a difference of which others in the schooling system were probably unaware. Several children expressed a particularly extreme state of anxiety, which could be devastatingly intense, related to the fact that mathematics/English seemed so difficult. For example, even in TERM2 when Ellie was 8 years old, she described her intense fear of the teacher choosing her to answer a mathematics question in class as she perceived that she simply did not have enough fingers to work it out:

I'm like, 'Not me, not me! I don't know the answer' ... I was sitting down in my chair and I was like... (stunned pause) I don't have that much fingers! [TERM2]

For Ellie, simply sitting in class looking at the mathematics display board brought on panic, something of which the teachers may have been completely unaware. This was an example of Ellie encountering systems, or common practices, that did not respect equally all categories of people and the qualities associated with them:

Every time like I look at the mathematics board I'm just like, 'Oh, hopefully we're not doing that today... I'm just like 'No, I'm not going to look at it' ... I'm just like 'No!' – I'm so stressed. [TERM3]

And she went on to say how angry these unusually intense experiences made her:

I do want to fight, but I can't fight [at school]. So at home... I have this beanbag at mine, like when I punch it all the beads come out. [TERM4]

Mark's anger stemmed from finding writing very difficult, as well as writing hurting his hand and arm physically. He commented that he simply did not have the capacity to manage what was asked of him. Reflecting back a whole year later on a teacher he used to have when he was 9 years old, he reported tearfully:

She was saying like, 'You have to do this and that!' I kind of got confused and didn't know what I was doing. There was too much stuff in my head at once and I couldn't work things out (starts crying). [TERM10]

Jack seemed to experience a similar confusion, which was exacerbated by classroom noise that other children may have found normal. For him, however, this noise was an intolerable obstruction to his engagement:

It's because when there's an easy question, when people are talking so loud I can't think so then I get it wrong... it gives you quite a headache and it does annoy me when people are talking when I'm trying to do my work. [TERM6]

His solution was similarly out of the ordinary and perhaps more extreme than would occur to the rest of his class—to provoke the teacher to send him out of class, making it impossible for him to participate. This was unjust in its limitation of his opportunities to benefit from school resources and would have led to a sense of disempowerment in which he purposely 'othered' himself:

If you like constantly be on Miss's case, you'll get sent out, so your brain can relax. [TERM4]

Similarly, Salah said that when he was expecting a test he also absented himself, blocking participation completely:

I might not come [to school] ... I might hide in the toilets ... I'm scared that if I get it [the test] wrong, then I'll get in big trouble. Today I got 7 out of 30 in my maths test and I started crying. [TERM1]

Gemma experienced a different but equally distinctive manifestation of anxiety with mathematics when she was 9 and 10 years old, whereby she heard voices. She confessed later that no-one had known about these voices, not even her parents, leaving her to deal with the issue alone:

Sometimes like bad voices come in my head and my head starts spinning... Sometimes, when I can't do my work... when there's so much noise and so many people, your head just starts to spin. [TERM10]

Michael found it very hard to concentrate. However, his tendency to lose concentration was constructed as shameful rather than normal (in current classroom conditions), leading to the reprimand of the teacher, which Michael reported emotionally:

He gets so angry and he will say 'Did you get distracted?' If I said 'yes, yes sorry' ... he will make me in big trouble... He took out the paper, he um, he (pause) he ripped out the paper and then I had to start again. [TERM6]

All the sample children associated tests with stress and nerves. For Jack, fear of tests obstructed his participation in schoolwork, perhaps in a more exaggerated way than for others, because his brain 'crumbles up' and 'just goes blank':

I'll do it when it's on a piece of like paper in my book and then I would just answer it, but in a test it's just weird... It's like my brain – weird. It's just like it... like it crumbles up and once I'm trying to figure out a question it just goes blank. [TERM13]

Nonetheless, all children (except Sam and Ellie) simultaneously believed the narrative that tests were good for children, even when they could see no evidence, thus suggesting that their own experiential knowledge was subordinate to what adults told them.

In terms of feeling invisible, many of the children perceived that they were not receiving the help they needed in class. This seemed to suggest to them that they were constructed by teachers as less worthy of attention than others, and less worthy of having a share of the available resources. Dragon was particularly angry when he reflected back on his primary school years:

Sometimes if you like call their [teachers'] names like about... like a thousand times, they will just, won't – they can't hear you like. I wasn't getting literally – literally not enough help, like basically no help whatsoever. [TERM11]

Similarly, Eden told us of his perceived lack of help even into secondary school:

I just need much more assistance. I just want like learning assistance that I could have like more time with the teachers. [TERM11]

Fin described how the teacher actually did not see him at all:

I do put my hand up. But she doesn't see me because I'm at the end of the classroom. [TERM5]

In these ways, the children conveyed feeling othered or invisible, being denied their full participation in social interaction and experiencing less empowerment than other children.

Two life-history examples of misrecognition

While we acknowledge the fundamental flaws in the school competitive assessment system as explored throughout this paper, using the school's internal system, we found that by the end of the project (children's 13th term), eight of the sample children who had been designated as *below* age-related expectations in the first term were now designated as *reaching* age-related expectations.

Fin's life history is particularly relevant in terms of how his status subordination shifted across the 13 terms of the project. Fin struggled with his writing throughout his school life history, construing himself as deficient in this area (not only as dyslexic). During the fifth to tenth terms, he referred to himself as '*dumb*' for not knowing enough about the '*right*' topics, despite his in-depth knowledge about wild animals. Even at the end of the project, he longed for his friends to say that he was really smart as he believed that this would raise his social status [TERM13]. He told us how one teacher in the sixth to eighth terms had particularly led him to construct himself as less worthy, less connected and less similar to others: '*She didn't think my work was very good... So she ripped it up and threw it in the bin*' [TERM12]. At this stage in his school life history, he had felt that he was invisible to the teachers or at best, considered inferior.

However, close relationships seemed to play a transformational role in his life history, their importance being indicated by Fin mentioning them in every interview. He had a long-standing friend, Lucas, whom he had met at preschool, then been separated from prior to the project, and then reunited with in the fifth term at a different school. Sharing diagnoses of ADHD and dyslexia with Lucas, Fin found great comfort and fulfilment through this one friend in whom he perhaps found someone like himself, lessening his sense of exclusion and otherness. When we asked Fin to highlight the most important moments in his whole school life history [TERM12], he singled out reuniting with this friend; getting his own dog during lockdown; along with meeting a teacher in the eighth term whom he found singularly affirming of his worth. It was forging these three very special relationships that allowed him to experience being valued for himself. This helped him to improve his capacities rather than being dismissed as having subordinate status. By the end of the 13th term of the project, although still in the lowest sets at secondary school, Fin was not only working at age-level expectations in mathematics/English but was also participating in a range of school-level activities such as drama performances.

On the other hand, five children seemed to give up on school learning by the end of the 13th term of the project. These five children told us in final interviews that they did not care about doing well in schoolwork anymore. Gemma is the most extreme example of someone who seemed gradually but vigorously to reject her status subordination as the end of primary school approached. In the first few years of the project, Gemma was very obliging and hard working at school and never admitted to feeling subordinate and never criticised the school or her peers, or complained about her substantial discomfort with mathematics. However, at the end of her last year at primary school, in a role play, she showed herself to be getting angry with the teacher for keeping her in for further mathematics at break, and angry with peers who did not complain. The three 'important' events she highlighted in her life history were a holiday, finally leaving primary school (which she said she hated) and her recent birthday. Although she also got a dog during lockdown, she did not count this as significant. By the start of secondary school she could say:

I hate most of my lessons, they're very boring. [TERM11]

By the end of her first year in secondary school, she exclaimed:

I hate mathematics so much... We had a test today and I didn't even start it... I didn't want to do it... I don't care... I know I'm going to be in the bottom set, because I don't do any work in maths... Because I don't care about tests. [TERM13]

Unlike Fin, she did not have a close friend with whom she could identify, and the constant support of her teachers in primary school did not seem to reduce her sense of inferiority, exclusion and otherness in mathematics. Despite her many other skills and charms, it seems that working

hard during mathematics lessons, alone with a teaching assistant separate from her peers—to no apparent effect on her comfort with mathematics, eventually became too much for her to bear and she rejected the whole system. It seems that she perceived that her participation in social interaction had been overly obstructed: she had been disempowered and constructed as different and inferior, and had come to believe that this was true.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper goes some way in opening a window onto the school life histories of individual lower-attaining primary school children, to allow democratic scrutiny and public challenge (Lynch & Baker, 2005: 140) and provide one vehicle for these children to represent their perspectives as a step towards parity of participation. The paper builds on the decades of research underlining how inequalities of wealth disadvantage whole cohorts of children (e.g., Ball, 2021). It also enriches the specific but limited studies into the experiences of children in primary schools who are designated as lower attaining. These suggested that such children might experience weaker engagement in learning; a poorer sense of relatedness; fear or anger; and dislike of school (Blatchford & Webster, 2018; Davies et al., 2003; Dunne et al., 2011; Juvonen et al., 2019; Keddie, 2016; Marks, 2013). Our research reinforces all these findings, in particular the lack of equitable relationships among lower-attaining children and other people. Through isolating and highlighting this particular issue, we hereby contribute richer understandings to Fraser's concept of misrecognition, on this occasion within the domain of schooling. This is a key and as yet under-researched and under-theorised concept.

We have enriched our understandings of these children's sense of misrecognition by interviewing them not just on one occasion but regularly over 5 years. We have enriched these interviews by attempting to use Fraser's concept of misrecognition as our vehicle for analysis of our qualitative data. In [Figure 1](#) we present a diagram of the aspects we interpreted as being experienced by some of our sample children. It illustrates that, on many occasions, they were constructed by both others and themselves as less worthy; less connected to others, less similar to others and less visible than others. This construction allowed them to feel that less respect was shown to them, even when they had other strengths than in mathematics/English and even when they did not share the perception of the importance of mathematics/English. We have illustrated how they perceived that their exclusion, otherness or invisibility sometimes blocked the fair distribution of schooling resources, especially the teacher's favourable attention, and how their lower perceived status limited their opportunities for achieving social esteem, especially when punishment for low attainment involved exclusion from social times such as playtime. In some cases, the children's perceived otherness was manifest when they felt that everyone else could cope but they could not, when their particular discomforts were confused with laziness or naughtiness. In particular, some children felt especially other or deficient because they found mathematics and/or English disempoweringly difficult, but rather than being supported to take alternative actions, they were pressured to believe that these were the subjects that guaranteed success in future life. This was despite the fact that some of the sample children had no interest in mathematics, for example, but an exceptional interest in other topics including those not mentioned in school at all (e.g., wild animals, dog grooming). In all these ways, the sample children have expressed experiences in which recognitive social justice is obstructed.

From the quotations and the two summary life histories we provide of Fin and Gemma, we make some inroads into identifying the intensity and ubiquity of these feelings of status subordination, but it also becomes clear that the situation differs dramatically depending on each child's own interpretations. As we note above, Fin felt his status to improve over the

5 years of the project, despite having felt 'dumb' in the first few terms. His progress seemed to be due to an equitable relationship with one like-minded friend, love of his dog and the particular care and attention of one teacher who believed in him. Gemma, on the other hand, did everything she could to please parents, teachers and peers in the early terms of the project, but continued to experience such intense anxiety around her mathematics attainment that eventually she rejected not only mathematics but respect for schooling overall and seemed to give up hope.

We have shown that eight children completed the project by appearing less subordinate in terms of the school's age-level expectations (in as far as these figures can be used validly). This still leaves 15 out of 23 children who embarked on secondary schooling from a similar subordinate position they held when they embarked on Key Stage 2, 5 years earlier. Indeed, we note that there were five children at least who followed Gemma's trajectory and seemed to give up on schooling by the end. This, in Fraser's terms, seems to be a clear 'form of institutionalized subordination – and thus, a serious violation of justice' (2018: 26). Our quotations from children's life histories suggest that the child's responses depended on a complex web of factors that demand future research attention: for example, teacher and parental expectations and pressure; too much or too little support received at school and at home; and in particular, their access to relationships where they felt respected and valued for what they were rather than what they were not. When they felt out of control or overwhelmed, they felt even less powerful and less agentic and therefore more subordinate. Embedded schooling hierarchies appeared to exacerbate their predicament but often in an unnoticed manner, to which we hope we have drawn attention.

We suggest that the concept of recognition of worth, as a core condition of social justice, provides a basis for teachers and children to disrupt and transform the persistent trend of misrecognition of children designated as 'low-attainment' pupils. To pursue this goal, children themselves suggested, for example, that efforts can be made not to hurry, threaten or shout at children in relation to formal schoolwork. Children's marks need not be made public, and differentiated work can be provided in a private rather than a public manner. All staff can challenge competitive language and derogatory behaviour among peers; they can allow friendship seating in class wherever possible and provide quiet places for children to sit and recover. Within the indisputable limitations of maldistribution of wealth in relation to class, race and ethnicity that need addressing at a global level, our data suggest that work on developing genuinely respectful—or at least tolerant—relationships among teachers and children, and among children themselves, can begin at classroom level, at the same time that action is taken to transform policy. This potentially transformative nature of pupil–teacher and pupil–pupil relationships is one that warrants following up in both theory and practice as an area immediately available to impact through our research (see also Bradbury, 2018; Campbell, 2014; Lynch & Baker, 2005; Marks, 2013).

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