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Parity of participation? Primary-school children reflect critically on being successful during schooling

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ABSTRACT

Nancy Fraser describes parity-of-participation in social interaction as an important component of social justice. In this paper, we explore the participatory experiences of primary-school-children who have been labelled 'lower-attainers' in mathematics and/or writing. The paper explores justice drawing on the perspective of these pupils, in relation to how they perceive success in their school learning. We link the concept of participation to the three components of social justice outlined in Nancy Fraser's definition: a) distribution of wealth; b) recognition of status; and c) representation of voice. Our findings indicate that children who do not excel in attainment in prescribed subjects may experience obstructions to parity-of-participation within schooling which are beyond those encountered by all children. We conclude that injustices in all three senses (above) are being experienced by specific children and these injustices need urgent confrontation.

Introduction: participation, social justice and schooling

Participation is central to schooling as well as to social justice. Participation is a noun of action, stemming from the Latin *participare*, which denotes an individual sharing in, partaking of and contributing to something. Nancy Fraser (2008, 2019) uses the words parity-of-participation to refer to an adult having 1) the resources to take an active and equal part in social interaction with others in society; 2) equal social status among others; and 3) equal access to political decision-making. Parity-of-participation in these three senses relates to opportunities to join in 'actively in community life and be creative in an environment of dignity and freedom' (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2014). Such participation has been acclaimed as 'crucial for health, well-being and longevity' (Marmot, 2004, p. 2). This article explores Fraser's conception of parity-of-participation in the schooling context in terms of these three pillars: 1) distribution of resources allowing all to take an active and equal part in schooling; 2) equal social status among all children; and 3) equal access to school decision-making. A particular aspect of interest in Fraser's definition of parity-of-participation is her emphasis that full parity-of-participation can be embodied by an individual regardless of their attainment, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or social background.

In the schooling context, the fulfilment of the three constituents of justice would imply that every school-child, regardless of their attainment, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or social background, has equitable access to material resources including teachers, lessons and subjects; equal status among all other children; and has their voice heard as they make an equitable active contribution to decision-making in schooling. The purpose of distinguishing among the three constituents is to provide more refined tools for interpreting children's words about social justice as parity-of-participation within the schooling context and to pinpoint the range of existing injustices in order to address them. Injustice in all three senses could have deeply troubling consequences for certain children which could lead them to deliberately violate schooling practices or reject the institution of schooling, potentially for their lifetime; and/or could lead to a child spending a 'wasted' life at school (McGregor, 2018, p. 88) leading to a later life of hardship or marginalisation.

The three pillars of parity-of-participation

Firstly, parity-of-participation can be seen as the equal distribution of material resources. This is the traditional conceptualisation of justice (e.g. Rawls, 1999), on which Fraser then elaborated (2008, 2019). Traditionally, this has meant the distribution of wealth in society whereby all sectors of society live at an equally high standard, have access to the same facilities and access to similar opportunities for gaining wealth. This would contrast to the current politico-economic situation which Fraser describes as pillaging 'the vast majority to enrich the top 1 per cent' (Fraser, 2019, p. 20). Fraser (2008) claimed that our global market-driven governmentality, far from redistributing wealth fairly, separates and tracks individuals for the sake of efficiency and risk prevention, 'sorting the capable-and-competitive wheat from the incapable-and-non-competitive chaff' (p. 128) and thereby constructing different life courses for each. In terms of schooling, such lack of wealth distribution might entail certain children having exclusive access to the best teachers, the most inspiring classes, the most lavishly equipped schools. For example, children in 'lower-attainment' groups might be taught mainly by a teaching assistant rather than their teacher.

Secondly, the recognition aspect of parity-of-participation includes the concept of recognition of *status*. Fraser wrote that when:

> Institutionalised 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. (Fraser, 2008, p. 24)

She went on to suggest:

> Misrecognition is wrong because it constitutes a form of institutionalized subordination – and thus, a serious violation of justice. Justice requires that institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem ... It precludes institutionalized norms that systematically depreciate some categories of people and the qualities associated with them (Fraser, 2008, p. 26).

In this paper, we explore how 'lower-attaining' children experience their own status in the eyes of teachers and other school-children and how their opportunities for full participation may thereby become eroded. For example, because of their designation as 'lower-

attaining', we explore whether they come to feel subordinate to 'higher-attaining' children.

Fraser's third pillar in parity-of-participation constitutes political voice and representation, by which she means all sectors of society taking part in deciding how wealth is distributed and how status is defined. In adult society, this might refer to citizens' rights to express their political views freely and access to fair electoral voting systems. Representation during schooling can be fulfilled by all children having a role in deciding what and how they learn, through decision-making bodies or through an ethos of open critique and action following pupil feedback (Kohn, 1996; Lundy, 2007; Thornberg, 2008). For example, we explore the ways in which 'lower-attaining' children believe they have control over their learning environment.

Injustice and the case of 'lower-attaining' children

In a sense, the label 'lower-attaining' is itself a manifestation of injustice, whereby a child's status becomes defined by their behaviour during a snapshot test in some limited curriculum areas. As authors, we fully recognise how such a label could lead to children feeling lower-status. This status is based on results from questionable tests, the use of which neither children nor teachers have any choice over; and from which neither group may benefit. However, we use the label to designate those children whom the system has labelled as 'lower' and it is this injustice that we seek to investigate and address. This official designation by attainment is a relatively new phenomenon in England, ushered in by the 1988 Education Reform Act. Prior to 1988, there were no formal policy directives to support systematised grouping according to attainment in primary-schools, although discrimination according to ethnicity and class were clearly identified (Ball, 1981; Hargreaves, 1967; Jackson, 1968; Lacey, 1970; Rist, 1970; Willis, 1977). However, it is only since National Curriculum and Assessment became law in 1988 in England and Wales that children have been systematically categorised according to their attainment scores in National Assessments, adding further potential for discrimination. Ofsted inspectors in the 1990s started to require categorisation of primary-school pupils as 'high', 'middle' or 'low' attainers in selected subjects, thereby linking children's worth directly to their attainment on these limited tests (Hart, 1998; Reay & Wiliam, 1999).

According to recent policy documents, students in groups segregated by attainment become 'more engaged in their own learning' (DfES, 2005, p. 58). Such claims have led primary-schools at Key Stage 2 (for ages 7–11 years) to construct classroom 'attainment' groups (often misnamed 'ability groups'), for mathematics and literacy lessons particularly; and children have started to sit in these same groups for other lessons too. More recently, seating in groups by attainment seems anecdotally to have declined in Key Stage 2. However, as Marks (2013) has noted, even in a classroom where children are not physically grouped according to their attainment categories, children may become institutionally perceived according to these. Recent research in primary-schools, including Marks', has indicated that this new practice of sorting by attainment – whether explicit or implicit – may be neither just nor efficient nor the only way to organise primary-schooling (Dunne et al., 2011; Hallam et al., 2003; McGillicuddy & Devine, 2018; Reay & Wiliam, 1999; Webster & Blatchford, 2013). Indeed, McGillicuddy and Devine (2018) have described the practice as 'symbolic violence' being systematically applied to children. Francis et al's

(2017) recent research in secondary schools importantly suggested that the self-confidence of pupils was eroded at secondary-school when students were placed in 'lower' sets; while some pupils in top groups came to feel superior to others, indicating an imbalance in perceived status between the two sets. This paper explicitly explores how this categorisation influences children's parity-of-participation in schooling, and what implications this may have for social justice in schooling.

Nancy Fraser's philosophy of parity-of-participation applied to primary-schooling

As long ago as 1979, Giroux and Penna were summonsing academics to: 'Shift their attention from a technical, ahistorical, view of schooling to a socio-political perspective which focuses on the relationship between schooling and the idea of justice' (p. 23). This call is due a renewed emphasis, in light of statistics indicating increased, not reduced, inequalities of wealth in the world (Strand, 2014; Thomson, 2007). In addition, the assumption that inequality is unacceptable can no longer be taken for granted in this century (Fraser, 2019). The significance of this current paper is its revitalised focus on the issue of inequality, in our case in relation to primary-schooling, and in particular to the practice of identifying children according to attainment. Nancy Fraser's particular concept of parity-of-participation lends itself pertinently to schooling because of *participation*'s central place in learning and schooling. However, although participation appears to lie at the heart of both schooling and social justice, as yet very few scholars have applied Fraser's concept of justice to schooling (but see Cazden, 2012; Keddie, 2010; 2016; Mills et al., 2016). Keddie's (2016) work specifically relates Fraser's three pillars of parity-of-participation to higher-attaining children's experiences of primary-schooling. Fraser herself described a 'reduction of equality to meritocracy' (2018, p. 14): rather than focussing on equality, meritocratic approaches in schooling have promoted competitiveness, legitimating an 'exclusionary vision of a just status order' and leaving the majority misrecognised and misrepresented (Fraser 2018).

In this paper we explore whether, or how, Fraser's claims regarding parity-of-participation can be applied usefully to a group of primary-school children who were designated as 'lower-attaining' in mathematics and/or writing at the end of their Year 3 at school (aged 7–8 years). We use her framework to explore their schooling experiences in terms of redistribution of material resources; social status; and representation of voice. We ask what, if any, institutionalised obstacles children face in their attempts to participate with parity in schooling. The young age of our research participants clearly make this a special case: but their young age does not change their entitlement to justice, through non-partial opportunities for participation within their day-to-day context of schooling.

Research design

Methodology

Our data take the form of life-histories in a five-year longitudinal study of 23 school-children from their Year 3 (aged 7–8) to their Year 7 (aged 11–12) (Children's Life-histories In Primary-schools project, C.L.I.P.S). Funded by the Leverhulme Trust, the project's long-term goal is to construct with each child their school-life-history as described by Goodson et al. (2016),

exploring how their status as 'lower-attaining' children influences their participation in learning and schooling. Plummer (2001) proposed that life-histories reveal the depth and complexity of human experiences, of power, and of other social dynamics and interplays, enabling the researcher to extend their analysis to consider multiple levels of the phenomenon under investigation. This methodological approach allowed us to investigate in great detail how schooling was experienced by these diverse individuals. Our interpretivist stance meant that we did not look for an external truth in the children's narratives but accepted that each narrative was their version of the truth, believing that the undeniable reality of schooling is perceived variously from one person to the next, as each narrative sheds light on its truth.

Research questions

The research questions which guided our life-history study were: *1)* How do primary-school pupils experience being labelled as 'lower-attaining', in terms of personal/social flourishing and learning, across five years of their school-life-histories? *2)* Which factors influence their experiences?

For the area of study referred to in this paper, our question was framed as: How can Nancy Fraser's model of parity-of-participation be applied to the schooling experiences of 'lower-attaining' primary-aged children? What evidence of injustice becomes apparent, using this framework, if any?

Sample

We gained access to four UK primary-schools, two inner-city London schools, one suburban academy near London and one rural school outside London. All the schools had relatively disadvantaged demographics; all had been assessed as good or outstanding by Ofsted; and all had at least two-form entry to Year 3. They therefore had certain similarities but geographical differences. We asked each school to invite six pupils to take part in the project, whom they had identified as 'lower-attainers' in their Year 3 class. We excluded children with Education and Health Care Plans since Webster and Blatchford's (2013) work had already explored their experiences. One child in our sample moved away after the first term, leaving 23 out of our original 24 children. There were 11 boys and 12 girls. Nine children had Pupil Premium status, indicating socio-economic disadvantage; and 14 identified as Bangladeshi, Black African, Black Caribbean, Brazilian, Czech, Turkish, Moroccan or Spanish while the remaining nine were White British. In terms of traditional models of injustice (e.g. Rawls, 1999), which focused on redistribution of wealth rather than social status or political voice, the disadvantages associated with poverty were well represented within our sample. Pupil Premium status, the government funds provided for the most impoverished children, had been an attempt by the government to compensate for poverty. However, as this article portrays, this model of injustice is limited in terms of parity-of-participation socially and politically for such children and rests on a deficit conceptualisation of those children as participants in society.

In our first meeting with them, we invited the children to choose a 'secret' name, which became their permanent pseudonym.

Instruments

We developed a range of child-friendly data collection activities that were simultaneously productive in data and engaging for the child. For example, in one activity, we showed children the outline of a face and asked them to use coloured pens to show the expression of the child who gained poor marks for mathematics and English. They then had to tell us what to write in that child's speech bubble. Altogether, we carried out 51 interviews of 60–90 minutes each. We conducted 12 paired interviews at the end of the children's Year 3 year, in June/July, 2018. We carried out individual interviews in autumn, 2018, when the children started Year 4, although one school was undergoing headship problems so we did not interview the six pupils from that school during the autumn. In spring 2019, we interviewed all 23 children individually. In most cases, we also observed the child, usually in their mathematics or English lesson, and noted down their actions and expressions during 20 minutes of the session, alongside video-recording. The follow-up interviews were carried out in private spaces that the schools provided. All interviews were audio-recorded, with children's permission, and then sent to a transcriber using secure transfer systems.

Analysis

As a team of three researchers, initially, we analysed our transcripts using pen and paper. For the first set of interviews, we developed codes inductively for eight pupils each; and then discussed and refined the codes collaboratively. We clustered codes under three distinct areas of investigation, all of which related to parity-of-participation:

  (a) children's sense of confidence and competence in school learning;
  (b) children's sense of identity and relationships with peers, teachers and family;
  (c) children's overall attitudes to learning and schooling.

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

Ethics

Ethical issues were central, for three reasons. Firstly, we were engaging with very young people who could be vulnerable. We had to meet their needs and engage with them in ways that suited them. We emphasised that the process was entirely voluntary and that they could leave at any time. We gained pupils' verbal and written consent. We explained in writing and verbally on several occasions what the project would entail. We also shared this with parents and gained both parents' and pupils' consent at repeated intervals.

Secondly, we were investigating a sensitive topic which needed to be handled delicately with children and parents. We did not wish to cause harm by hurting feelings. We therefore found ways of explaining why children had been chosen without suggesting that children lacked talent; a suggestion that we fully rejected in all cases.

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

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

Findings

Children's beliefs about how to succeed in schooling

In order to find examples of how actual practices in primary-schooling afforded or obstructed participatory possibilities for primary-aged children, we inquired into the children's beliefs about achieving success or 'doing well'. The children in our sample had been listed as attaining below expectations and relevant research has suggested that this status might limit their participation in schooling (Bibby, 2009; Darragh, 2015; Francis et al., 2017; Marks, 2016; McGillicuddy & Devine, 2018). We used the children's narratives about doing well at school as our entry into the topic of participation, especially the recognition aspect of participation. 'Doing well' suggested coping sufficiently with the schooling system as well as attaining good grades. Across all 23 participants, the practices that children associated with doing well (or coping well) could be categorised into the following two: 1) working hard and conforming; and 2) being 'smart', especially in mathematics and writing. We explored whether/how obstacles to participation were related to their sense of having failed to achieve social status in these respects and then investigated whether/how practices around these seemed discriminatory.

To be successful, work hard and conform

The children appeared to harbour the belief that hard work at school would lead in adulthood to wealth and a good job; and that this outcome would secure their well-being, regardless of other social or political factors. The degradation associated with failure to achieve a good job was like a threat hanging over all the classrooms (and possibly the children's homes as well): work hard or suffer the consequences! For example, two participants, Anna and Chrystal, expressed the belief that they needed to work harder because current poor mathematics and writing attainment would result in them ending up in adulthood without a job or a place to live [Anna, VISIT03; Chrystal, VISIT01]. Relatedly, Saffa warned:

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

Reward systems had been set up in all four schools to promote the necessary hard work and accompanying compliant behaviour. For example, there were team points, house

points, digital dojo points, certificates, Star-of-the-Week and golden tickets. Some children explicitly told us that any child who was not performing well simply needed to work harder. Landon, for example, explained that such a child needed more discipline and should go to detention 'so that he can listen.' [Landon, VISIT02] Bob prescribed more hard work for a classmate who was not doing well, despite evidence that this approach had so far failed: 'Let her stay in for her whole lunchtime . . . Work!' [Bob, VISIT03]

However, there were problems with this view of hard work being the most important aspect of learning. It seems that Carol Dweck's (2012) emphasis on the potential for growth through *hard work* had been moderated by a focus on its end-points (i.e. national tests). This seemed to be at the expense of children's rich participation in the process of learning *per se*, thereby contradicting the very concept of 'growth mindset'. The moderation of Dweck's original emphasis – on grappling with learning with support from others – potentially limited the status of those who did not attain highly on the end-point, the national tests, even if they worked very hard. Dweck's work can become skewed when both effort and attainment on tests are being emphasised, leading to attainment taking precedence.

Children were being urged to conform to un-negotiated distant goals, thereby evidencing the lack of voice over their schooling. In the immediate setting, some of our sample children found that current classroom norms of sitting quietly and working hard were unsatisfactory for their engagement in any kind of learning, thereby denying them access to some areas of the curriculum. Neymar, representing others, explained: 'You have to sit on the carpet or on the chair. I want to stand up and play something. Or like- run!' [Neymar, VISIT03]. Neymar's participation in learning – and thereby also his outcomes – may have been improved if learning processes themselves involved active interactions in the classroom, facilitating more dynamic experiences and therefore more of his participation. And yet, Neymar had little or no control over his learning conditions, evidencing representational injustice that disadvantaged most those who struggled most.

Non-participatory pedagogies, especially for mathematics and writing, were part of the reason for sample children's frequent experiences of boredom. Jerry reported a recent occasion, on which he had asked aloud in class: 'Can I go and explore? Because this is *too* boring!' [Jerry, VISIT03] But his expression cost him the very thing that he most wanted: breaktime. The pedagogy in class had thereby already denied him access to meaningful learning and subsequently, he was denied access to his right to physical well-being. Summer similarly seemed detached from her ('lower-attainers') literacy lesson that we observed. Her detachment was summed up by her comment after class which illustrated how her access to learning had been significantly obstructed by the pedagogy used:

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

As noted by Jackson (1968), these children had to learn the lesson of patience but 'not a patience rooted in mediated restraint, but one that is rooted in an unwarranted submission to authority' (as cited in Giroux & Penna, 1979, p. 30). This emphasis on conformity seemed to be at the expense of both engagement in learning and the child's representation in the learning process, manifesting injustice at the distributive and representational levels. The use of classroom pedagogies that did not take into account

children's preferences for learning blocked their access to the content of that learning but they had no forum within which to make their views heard.

Rewards and sanctions were used to motivate children to work hard because the intrinsic motivations for doing it were absent. In other words, learning tasks themselves did not seem to appear interesting or valuable. This then led to competition for rewards among the children in class. Constant comparisons threatened to belittle children who found normal hard work unacceptable, threatening their status in the classroom. Giroux & Penna's (1979) link is pertinent here, between marketised, competitive schooling systems and the necessary subordination of some: 'The hidden message is one that supports *alienation*' (p. 32). That is, where there is competition, there are losers who feel subordinate; and 'low-attainers' by definition were the losers in the schooling competition.

The alienating sanction of keeping children in the classroom during break or lunchtime also seemed most unjust to the children who already struggled. In fact, two children [Lucy, VISIT02; Ben, VISIT03] referred to their lack of access to this desirable resource, saying it was *unfair* because 'some people don't get to have their breaktime and some people do' [Ben, VISIT03]. In addition, when other children saw that 'lower-attainers' were staying in the classroom at breaktime, this threatened the social status of those kept in. In cases where our participants struggled with mathematics and/or writing but excelled at sport, nature studies, art or other playtime activities, this could mean denying them a valuable opportunity for gaining esteem through these. The assumption behind this punishment was that the child was deviant, not that the pedagogy, curriculum or community were unjust. However, we found that withdrawal of playtime was a sanction used in all project schools [e.g. Ryan, VISIT03; Alvin, VISIT02; Eleanor, VISIT02; Summer, VISIT02]. Baines and Blatchford (2019) have indicated that it is standard practice in 60% of primary-schools in England who deliberately deny only some pupils access to this opportunity.

Being isolated is a traditional form of punishment for deviance (Southgate, 2003) as it punishes the child by manifesting all three aspects of injustice: it denies them access to breaktime itself; it threatens to lower their perceived social status; and it exemplifies the lack of control the child has over their school environment. The children in our study described a range of other sanctions, also based around this use of alienation, whereby access was *withdrawn* in order to impose conformity to a pre-ordained set of actions. For example, as a punishment, children were separated from their own class and sent to a lower class such as Reception where their lower status was illuminated for all to see. Similarly, a child might have to sit at an unfamiliar table in class, sit at the 'time-out table', or stand outside the classroom. Bob said that he did not let his mind wander in class, *not* in order to participate in the learning process better, but because 'it's where you get detention' [Bob, VISIT03]. In other words, the threat of alienating sanctions was effective in persuading children to conform, but perhaps those children who already found it most difficult to participate suffered most by the distress of alienation and its threats to social status.

Britney's school had a chart on which children's names were physically moved up and down from green-zone to red-zone ('traffic lights') by the teacher, according to their behaviour. Britney was not always in the green-zone. But she perceived the children who were always in the green-zone as the '*nicest* in the class': she perceived them as most closely bound to high-status schooling norms because the class teacher 'actually likes them like best friends' [Britney, VISIT01]. This perception may have excluded Britney from

feeling a full member of that group of the teacher's best friends, denying her full access to the resource of the most powerful person in the classroom and simultaneously lowering her social status.

To be successful, be 'smart', especially at mathematics and writing

Some children complained directly about rewards and sanctions, in the explicit belief that they were organised, as Hodges (1996) expressed it, by 'structures of privilege that deny difference and diversity' (p. 278). For example, Alvin suggested that in his class, the 'clever' people received fewer sanctions than his group did [Alvin, VISIT01] but Mrs. A, the teacher, 'loves getting [sanction] cards to *us* . . . and loves getting *us* into trouble'. [Alvin, VISIT02] When asked for evidence of this, he explained: 'Because sometimes she laughs [when allocating sanctions to us] and I don't like it'. Here is a clear example of Alvin experiencing injustice as status subordination whereby participation was not on a par for all children.

Another potential obstacle to children's equal access to the curriculum was the emphasis on competence in mathematics and writing to the exclusion of other possible areas of expertise. It became clear from our data that some children felt misrecognised at school, both by being labelled as below expectations, and also for not being valued for what they *could* offer. Fraser's words have poignancy here, that for social justice as parity-of-participation, some people need 'to have hitherto under-acknowledged distinctiveness taken into account' (2008, p. 137). For example, Ben was passionate and knowledgeable about deadly animals but noted that the school as an institution 'wouldn't know how good I know about animals.' [Ben, VISIT03] In other words, an unwritten rule at school was that writing and mathematics were higher status than other areas of expertise. Indeed, children in our sample displayed a range of funds of knowledge (González et al., 2006), but which they perceived was not the *right* knowledge for success. It was as if their non-norm or true selves were silenced for fear of being seen as deviant at school, reducing the child's status merely to how they performed within mathematics/writing. Max, for example, was observed volunteering abundant knowledge about astronomy in class, but neither classmates nor teacher paid attention. Each time his sophisticated and accurate information was ignored, it seemed to reinforce its low status [Max, VISIT02]. Anna, similarly, told us that she consciously did not reveal her true self at school. This was a clear case of lack of representation as well as misrecognition. Her exact words were:

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

In another case, Ryan described actually missing out completely on French lessons which he valued, because he was being taken out to study mathematics which he valued less. He had no choice but to study mathematics on his own while all the other children learnt to speak French. Although implemented with the best intentions, this was a clear case of unequal access to teaching. He vented:

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

The many and diverse funds of knowledge held by the children in our sample seemed to be 'comparatively unworthy of respect' (Fraser, 2000, p. 113) and the basis for this respect was not challenged. The children had to choose between identifying with school subject-norms; or sustaining an alternative identity that they had developed outside school, potentially marginalising them from schooling. It was notable, however, that some children did indeed seem able to manage this balance and associate being successful also with alternative strengths, for example, being good at sports, being funny, fun, kind, hyperactive or loving, not just 'smart'. [Neymar, VISIT03; Anna, VISIT03; Bella, VISIT03; Britney, VISIT01; Dragon, VISIT03; Chrystal, VISIT03] Bella notably prioritised health and family as symbols of success as she commented, 'I'm not as smart as the other kids and it doesn't really matter that everyone's the same' [Bella, VISIT03].

It was also clear that some children felt unfairly discriminated against, specifically because they did not excel in mathematics and/or writing. Words they actually used for their discomfort included feeling rejected, lonely and stressed; in short, of lower social status than others and unable to change the situation. Chrystal echoed others by suggesting that when children (like herself) did badly in mathematics or writing, they felt sad and alienated:

> No-one cares! And they feel lonely . . . Because they have no friends to stand up for them. [Chrystal, VISIT03]

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

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

Anna also reflected this sense of rejection and relative weakness when she talked about how she felt when she put her hand up in class and gave the incorrect answer:

> It's a bit like I got rejected . . . And then other people put their hand up and they get it right . . . they probably know more than I do.

The issue of being separated out from friends on the basis of attainment was of concern to most participants. Isolation from higher-attaining friends could exacerbate feelings of inferiority and lead the children to feel more detached from schooling. For example, children described feeling a loss when their 'higher-attaining' peers had to move physically to their 'attainment sets' or 'intervention groups'. For example, when we asked Summer how she felt when her friends left her for the higher groups, her feelings were:

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

This reaction to grouping was not universal, however. In some cases, children enjoyed the help they received from a teacher (preferably) or teaching assistant in a 'lower-attainment' group. Some of them described, rather than low status, feeling special in a positive way, especially in the school where children moved fluidly in and out of the 'intervention group', according to need; and were taught in rotation by one of the main class teachers.

Approaching grouping from another angle, several children complained about people they worked with in their 'lower-attainment' groups, whose company further obstructed their learning. These findings echo those of Boaler, Wiliam and Brown (2000), who found that

'bottom' sets were often unruly and unmotivated. A couple of children told us that they were distracted in their segregated set, by children there who found concentration difficult and became disruptive. Ryan, for example, explained how he was better off in the new 'mixed-ability' class he had joined in a new school: 'I'm not stuck with people that don't- can't really focus . . . the bad people that were catching up . . . I found that annoying- we were in the bad group'. [Ryan, VISIT03] Jeff, in his school, spent much of his classroom life paired with another 'lower-attaining' boy whom he described as loud, disruptive and a 'big bully' [Jeff, VISIT03]. At other times, Jeff worked amicably with Bella and Anna in a different small group for mathematics, but they all three stood out in an uncomfortable way as the only Year 4 children who still had to work within a Year 3 class. There was no parity of status here.

When success is not possible, redefine or reject the norm

In the face of feeling lonely and not being able (or not wanting) to participate fully, some children redefined the schooling norms to better fit their current identities, while others rejected them with anti-conformist behaviour (Pollard & Filer, 1999). Perhaps these latter were attempting to assert their voices by the only means they saw possible. For example, Chrystal started to reject the idea that she had to succeed in the way assumed by school:

> What I want to do is just have a job and *not* be successful . . . I just want to carry on with my life and have a good time . . . And not be successful. [Chrystal, VISIT01]

We observed Jerry and Rosy reading a book together. Two-thirds of the way through the book, they became bored so Jerry closed the book and smiled at the teacher. The teacher praised them both for finishing the whole book and gave them each a golden ticket as a reward. By doing this, Jerry had craftily preserved his social status by manipulating the school emphasis on completion rather than engagement. JohnWick also confided that he acted deceptively when his teachers threatened him, seemingly participating while actually choosing his own, alternative activity:

> You pretend you're doing work, because when you do that [the teacher] thinks 'Oh you don't need detention! You're doing your work!' [JohnWick, VISIT03]

Neymar described hiding in the toilets to avoid a mathematics test (despite having described how bad the toilets smelled). Neymar explained, 'I came back and then I said "Miss, I had a tummy ache" . . . and they believed me'. [Neymar, VISIT01] Our findings echo those of Fisher (2011) who wrote of some pupils' 'veil of compliance' which obscured their true dissatisfaction, leading to a sort of school double-life which was likely to limit access to many aspects of learning. Lack of opportunities for voicing individual needs and perspectives may have contributed to these anti-conformist behaviours, especially as children could not rely on support from other community members or representatives of the system. Lack of a sense of social status primarily seemed to underlie their motivations for non-conformity. Some children claimed to be succeeding when clearly they were not, acting a role in order to preserve their social status [e.g. Jeff, JohnWick, Chrystal, Eleanor, Britney]. When actual attainment was undeniably low, they strove for us (as researchers) to think that at least they were happy or hard-working: in other words, participating

normally and worthy of social respect like everyone else. Such acting would have been tiring as well as potentially obstructive to help-seeking.

Discussion: parity-of-participation and social justice

Justice can be evaluated though adults' equitable participation with their contexts, economically, socio-culturally and politically. It can also be evaluated through school-children's equitable participation within their schooling context. Justice as parity-of-participation in schooling suggests equal access for all children to the best teaching and learning resources and environments; equal status as learners, regardless of attainment level, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or social background; and it suggests that children's voices are represented within the decision-making processes of schooling. Our data have indicated that on all three counts, participation in these senses was limited, particularly for 'low-attaining' children. While some obstacles to participation were faced by all school children, there were examples of 'lower-attaining' children being especially frequently obstructed from gaining parallel access to resources and status. With regard to representation, we noted that few children, regardless of their attainment status, had access to representing their preferences or influencing the schooling agenda.

Justice as equal access for all children to the best teaching and learning resources and environments

The sample children rarely referred to collaborative problem-solving, reciprocal teaching, Jigsaw teaching, group or online discussions, collaborative experiments, charity projects, outdoor explorations or creative arts events which we propose might have been more appropriate to support these particular children's learning, given that traditional approaches did not always serve them well. The imposed emphasis on learning as hard work and conformity sometimes led to children experiencing fear of sanctions, competitiveness to win rewards, limited experimentation and risk-taking, and subdued their expression of true strengths and skills. For these 'lower-attaining' children, these experiences may have obstructed their access to learning altogether, especially in the boredom they described, which contributed to distancing the children further from engaging in their learning and potentially from schooling more generally. In addition, when placed in special groups for 'lower-attaining' children, they were sometimes denied access to their normal teacher, normal peers and the full curriculum (Webster & Blatchford, 2013). Their fear of sanctions was greater than other children's because they sometimes found it harder to comply with norms, for example, finishing writing quickly before break. Their 'lower-attaining' status also denied them access to some curriculum areas. In addition, the school's prioritising of mathematics and writing was especially damaging to these children whose strengths often lay in alternative curriculum areas such as art, sport and nature study. Their access to intensive study in these preferred areas was limited.

Justice as equal social status as learners regardless of attainment level, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or social background

In keeping with Bernstein's theories (1977), our sample children were certainly being socialised – internalising school values which stress respect for authority, hard work and conformity – and as such, were discouraged from stepping outside classroom norms. Those who stepped outside the norms became stigmatised, often publicly in front of the whole class. Those who could not or did not wish to adhere to schooling's expectations – whether through classroom behaviour or attainment in specific subjects – tended to be marginalised and subordinated by teachers and peers. The children in our sample tended to blame themselves, rather than the schooling system, for their shortcomings (as they perceived them). Our study has not yet investigated differences among children on the basis of their ethnicity, gender, sexuality or social background. However, it was noticeable that nearly all these 'lower-attaining' children were either from impoverished social backgrounds or from ethnic minorities, or both, suggesting that the schooling system is unjustly prioritising middle class, white norms at the expense of others.

Justice through children's voices being represented within the decision-making processes of schooling

Children in schooling do not usually have influence over what or how they learn, and disadvantages of this lack of democracy in schools has been discussed at length elsewhere (Kohn, 1996; Thornberg, 2008). The children in our study similarly experienced a non-participatory model of school governance, in which rules were made *for* them rather than *by* them. Challenging classroom rules or pedagogic customs was rare and tended to meet with sanction rather than positive response. However, children who struggled with the two subjects emphasised in schooling – mathematics and writing – perhaps suffered more than others through this lack of participation in decision-making. Where our sample children felt alienated by the focus on mathematics and writing, it was more important for them to feel part of other aspects of schooling such as its organisation, including choice in subjects and teaching approaches. For example, the withdrawal of breaktime as a sanction possibly disadvantaged the sample children more than other children, because they in particular found the static, silent nature of the classroom, as well as subject matter, problematic. However, this withdrawal seemed to be accepted by most children as normal.

Final thoughts

Nancy Fraser's insistence on the interrelatedness of distributional injustice, misrecognition and representational injustice makes sense in the schooling context: the children whose requirements and expertise were least recognised were also the ones most in need of a voice in decision-making; and these children in particular were disadvantaged by lack of access to appropriate curricula and teaching. As Hodges (1996) notes, 'Marginalization, as a larger social effect, can be structured into participation in a community of practice, manifesting itself as repetitions of alienation and isolation' (Hodges, 1996, p. 285). This conception of built-in injustice reinforces Nancy Fraser's concept of the 'exclusionary vision of a just status order' that leaves the majority misrecognised (Fraser, 2019, p. 16)

and mitigates against parity-of-participation.

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