



Children at transition from primary school reflecting on what schools are for – narratives of connectedness, (mis)recognition and becoming

Childhood

1–15

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journals.sagepub.com/home/chd**Daniela Sime** 

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Abstract

This article draws on a school-based case study carried out in Scotland with 11–12-year-olds reflecting on their views and experiences of school before transitioning from primary to secondary school. Drawing on Honneth's recognition theory, and the dimensions of love, rights and solidarity, the findings show that school was seen by children as a place of dialogue, reciprocity and recognition; the learning and knowledge activities cannot be separated from the relational and emotional aspects. When misrecognition happens, subjects' identity and sense of self-respect can be deeply violated.

Keywords

Becoming, belonging, children's friendships, children's perspective, children's rights, meaning of school, primary to secondary school transition, recognition theory, school community, school transitions

Introduction

Schools are important spaces in-between the intimacy of family life and the public sphere, where children begin to develop a sense of wider social structures and their place within them. There has been ongoing attention paid to children's educational outcomes and the

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impact that dimensions such as pupil-teacher interactions, race, gender and social class can have on children's school performance (Gorard and Huat See, 2013). Schools have increasingly become locations for interventions aimed at tackling a variety of social issues, from inequality and racism to well-being and environmentalism (e.g. Nieto and Bode, 2018) and institutions which influence and implement the norms of 'civilised behaviours' (Gilliam and Gulløv, 2019). The strong links between this body of research and policy and practice are evident. Schools are not only spaces which enable children's personal and social development, they also represent a significant investment in the transmission of social values and the development of desirable citizens (James and James, 2012).

The aim of this article is to find out how children make sense of schools and schooling in a Western context and what can be learned theoretically and methodologically from this approach. In recent decades, there has been greater acknowledgement of the need to understand children's lives in their own terms, respecting children's ability to speak for themselves. More studies have sought to explore aspects of schooling through the diverse perspectives and understandings of children themselves. A primary focus of this body of literature has been on questions of power and the ways in which school communities can give children 'voice', to express their ideas and participate in decision-making processes (Bjerke, 2011; Robinson, 2014). Other studies have focused on children's experiences of specific aspects of their school lives, such as learning (Sandberg et al., 2017) or children's transitions within the school system (Booth et al., 2019). However, there are surprisingly few studies that have aimed to achieve a more general understanding of children's perspectives on what '*school*' means for them as a space of (non)belonging, as a collective experience and also as a process of becoming. What do children think that schools are for, how do they experience their relationships with others in schools and what gives them a sense of recognition and belonging in school? These are important questions, as they can inform approaches to improving formal education structures by centering future education reforms on children's views.

Children's sense of school connectedness and belonging

Chung-Do et al. (2013) describe school connectedness as referring to 'how involved students are at their school, how academically motivated they are, how positive they feel about school, and the quality of students' relationships with their teachers and peers' (p. 3). The concept of school connectedness, also referred to as 'school belonging', recognises the value of schools as communities which should make individuals feel emotionally involved. Research has consistently shown the direct benefits of school connectedness or belonging to aspects such as academic motivation and achievement (Gorard and Huat See, 2013), mental health (Lester & Cross, 2015) and prosocial behaviours (Loukas et al., 2016). Greater school connectedness was associated with better adjustment during the transition from primary to secondary school (Lester & Cross, 2015). However, Loukas et al. (2016) have also shown that a sense of school connectedness is in decline at transition to secondary school, with direct risks for individuals' mental health, attainment and sense of purpose.

Children's sense of what makes schools conducive to a sense of community and individual belonging has not been explored in great depth. Research however exists

on what children see as central concerns in relation to their lives at school. School work, school rules and friendship and social interaction are central aspects in children's accounts. Alderby's work (2003) revealed that learning and developing knowledge were generally positive experiences for children. Children value opportunities to be challenged, stretched and rewarded for achievement in school. However, there are aspects of schooling that elicit feelings of boredom and a sense of being regulated and controlled by strict time structures and rules. Thus, unsurprisingly, research has shown that children value enjoyment, variety and flexibility in their experiences of school. Kostenius (2011), in her study of children's views on improving their schools, emphasised the value of fun activities, the need for child-friendly spaces, suitable for different activities from learning, to physical activity, to socialising or being alone. Achieving a balance between work, fun and play seems a central concern for young children.

School offers children opportunities to form and manage friendships, build social networks and develop social skills. Children place high value on social relations at school and these relationships are key to their positive views on their time in school. Studies have highlighted the significance of positive relationships with both peers and adults (Kostenius, 2011; Robinson, 2014). Similarly, pupil-teacher relationships built on care, mutual respect and trust are vital for promoting a positive learning environment. The significance of positive relationships in producing a school environment conducive to personal growth has led to research which highlights the inclusionary or exclusionary processes within the classroom and playground dynamics (Sandberg et al., 2017; Warming, 2019). School is thus a space which clearly locates children in a process of social and personal development, a process of '*becoming*'. However, it is also a highly interactive, relational space in which children are important actors, physically but also emotionally involved in the complex interactions that take place between them, their peers and adults they encounter at school.

Research into children's views on their school experiences highlights the value they place on opportunities for learning and development in an environment in which they feel cared for and respected. According to Kostenius (2011), a child's dream school is a place of 'friendship, freedom and fun' – where children can enjoy themselves, feel involved and able to influence aspects which concern them. One's feeling of belonging in the school has direct implications for their ability to engage in learning, but also to develop as human beings and be willing to engage in education later in life. In examining children's understandings of what makes schools positive and supportive places, it is therefore important to explore what opportunities exist to enhance children's school experience.

Concepts and theoretical aspects

In theorising children's views of schools and schooling, we draw on Honneth's theory of recognition and its application to research with children. According to Honneth (1995), the possibility of identity formation (or self-realisation) depends on an individual's development of three modes of relating practically to oneself – self-confidence,

self-respect and self-esteem. As identities are socially acquired, identity formation becomes a matter of social justice, as developing individual self-esteem and self-respect are at the foundation of individual agency. Honneth (1995) argues that these three modes of relating to oneself can only be acquired and maintained relationally, through a process of mutual recognition. This is an intersubjective process, in which one's attitude towards oneself emerges in their encounters with another and modes of relating to self are dependent on Self-Other relationships.

In addition to the three modes of relating to one's self, Honneth (1995) proposed a threefold conceptualisation of how intersubjective recognition works, based on the pillars of *love*, *rights* and *solidarity*. By *love*, he refers to an individual's primary relationships, such as parent-child or friendship relationships, all that are 'constituted by strong emotional attachments among a small number of people' (p. 95). *Rights* refer to respect for persons implied in modern legal relations, whereby 'subjects reciprocally recognise each other with regard to their status as morally responsible' (p. 110). Finally, *solidarity* mainly concerns the networks of support and shared values within which the particular worth of an individual member of a community can be acknowledged. This is the outcome of 'social relations of symmetrical esteem' (p. 129), where an individual's sense of being 'valuable' depends on being recognised for accomplishments that are specifically theirs, but also shared with others. The significance of *love*, *rights* and *solidarity* in relation to children's sense of belonging and development of self are thus important dimensions which need exploring as synergies which develop during their social connections with others in school. The development and maintenance of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem are therefore dynamic processes in which individuals come to experience themselves as having a particular status, be recognised as responsible agents or valued contributors to shared projects. According to Honneth (1995: 94), 'in the sequence of the three forms of recognition, the person's relation-to-self gradually becomes increasingly positive'.

By drawing on Honneth's principles, we aim to contribute to the ongoing work on the value of recognition theory in analysing children's everyday lives, as this is both a theory of individual development and a theory of social change, which can be used to interrogate any social setting (Thomas, 2012). For Honneth, human flourishing is a matter of justice, which is achieved through intersubjective recognition (Rossiter, 2014). Given the mission of schools as places of inclusion, rights and identity formation, we find the application of his work particularly relevant. While we recognise that not all schools are positive and inclusive of all children, we focus on one case where children's inclusion and rights were seen as central to the school ethos. Others have drawn on recognition theory to examine children's experiences in schools (Graham et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2016) or care settings (Warming, 2016), particularly in relation to children's well-being. With an emphasis on empowering relationships and a holistic view of becoming and development (Hakli et al., 2018), we aim to add to the evidence on children's own accounts of schools as institutions designed to enable their social and personal development and as places of meaningful belonging.

Research methodology

This qualitative study aimed to explore children's understandings of schools as places of learning, self-development and becoming, drawing on their memories of primary school. Sunny Hill Primary (a pseudonym) is a primary school in a deprived urban area in Scotland. At the time of the study (June 2017), children at the school were predominantly White Scottish, although the school also had some newly arrived children from migrant background, predominantly White Europeans. The school ethos was one of inclusion, equal participation and ambition, and the school staff were explicitly working towards developing a 'rights respecting ethos' (Robinson, 2014), by considering not just curricular expectations, but also children's own expectations. While improving attainment was a key priority in line with the Scottish Government's ambition to reduce the so-called 'attainment gap' between the lowest and highest achievers, the staff believed that providing a supportive school culture was an essential requirement for children's successful learning and development. The school was thus consciously cultivating an environment of recognition, where children's achievements were encouraged and celebrated.

To identify participants, we visited both Primary 7 classes to explain the project and distributed written materials about the project for children to take home to discuss with their families. From over 40 children in two Primary 7 classes, a sample of 24 volunteered to take part, with their parents'/carers' permission. We have no way of knowing if children who did not volunteer were perhaps the ones most likely to experience misrecognition; however, we ensured children knew all were welcome to join in and could withdraw at any time and the project was presented in open terms, as being about their views of primary school. Children were interviewed in self-selected friendship pairs or groups of threes, mainly gender-based. In total, 10 girls and 14 boys took part, all aged 11–12. They were invited to talk about their first memories of school, their best and worst time at school, spaces they liked/disliked, significant people and how they thought the school had changed during their time there. We also asked them to reflect on their transition to secondary school and their feelings about this transition. The research approach was informed by ethical guidelines for researching with children (Alderson and Morrow, 2011) and followed ethical procedures at the first author's university. We used an informal conversation-like style and aimed to let children lead the discussions. To prompt them to think of significant spaces, we used photographs of spaces in the school, such as the canteen, sports hall, a classroom, the main entrance etc. The use of visual methods recognises the multi-modal nature of children's everyday lives and helped engage children in vivid discussions about meaningful spaces.

Once collected, the data were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Initially, an overview thematic grid was produced, mapping out descriptive summaries of the issues emerging. Relevant sections of the transcripts were then assigned appropriate thematic codes and refined sub-categories emerged. We used this grid to then systematically code all transcripts. We looked for meaning in children's accounts, then organised and mapped these meanings thematically. Our thematic analysis of the interviews revealed four main themes emerging. Since this study is based on an interpretivist paradigm, transferability of the thematic findings to other schools or cultural contexts is neither possible nor the aim of the study, although we aim to conclude with some

principles on school connectedness and what helps children belong. All names used are pseudonyms.

Findings

School as a community fostering connectedness

Children spoke about the sense of belonging they felt at school, a community they were part of and which they thought they were going to miss in secondary school. A sense of emotional connection with teachers and classmates came through very strongly in interviews:

being in Sunny Hill for seven years now, we know everyone. It just feels like I don't really want to leave everyone. . . It feels that everybody is really kind and they care.

The familiarity of being classmates for years was important to children's sense of belonging. *'Knowing everyone'* is different to being friends with everyone, but for many children, it gave a sense of belonging and opportunities for recognition.

Children described staff members as kind and approachable and this also added to their sense of belonging. Teachers were seen as helpful and caring, from the head teacher who offered a child a cup of tea when the child was upset to playroom monitors and canteen staff they could chat to and laugh with together. They spoke of times when teachers had helped them out in mundane, but challenging situations, like understanding a Maths problem or solving a sticky friendship situation. Others remembered how teachers had made them feel 'special' and valued, something they might miss later on:

I'll probably miss the teachers; there's some teachers that you grow in really strong friendships with and just leaving that behind will be quite upsetting.

The school had a number of initiatives that facilitated a sense of community, such as the Playground Squad, which was about *'making sure we all have friends to play with'* and a Buddy programme. A 'House' system inspired most of those who were in leadership roles, like House Captains. Aspects of school life such as being part of a class, sharing common roles and responsibilities led to a degree of perceived cohesiveness: the school helped one *'to make friends, fit in with the class and to feel like a part of something'*. Feeling part of an inclusive community which recognises individuals' talents and supports one's sense of self were clearly important aspects of the school experience.

Children valued the school because of the friendships formed, as well as the learning opportunities it provided. For some respondents, their friendships were what they thought they would remember most fondly in the years to come. Many felt this school was 'different' or 'special', because of the friendships which flourished:

you make more friends, because people are friendlier in this school than the other schools I went to.

These friendships continued outside the school. Children described visiting each other, *'taking our little sisters to park together'* or connecting virtually after school, through computer games, texting or online chatting. Friendships were also important sources of support when navigating the school as a newcomer. A participant described how having friends to *'help her around the school and help her find places'* transformed her experience of school from *'a grey, dull place. But it is also true more generally'*. When friends were separated, either because they were moved to separate classes or children left the school, the experience was painful and led to a process similar to grieving: *'I just sat there looking at his old seat, missed my friend for a full year'*. Friendships were not just emotional, they were also a source of motivation for learning. Friends helped with academic work or motivated each other to enter competitions or succeed.

Children's accounts of the emotional connection they felt with adults and other children in the school and how these relationships fostered a sense of belonging resonate with Honneth's first form of recognition, *love*; the primary relationships of mutual recognition are the close relations of love and friendship. Although Honneth (1995) was primarily concerned with parent-child relationships, he also acknowledged the role of friendships and adult relationships of love, as it is in these primary relationships of mutual recognition that individuals experience themselves as a focus of concern. These relationships of affection are crucial to the development of trust in oneself and play an important role in the development and maintenance of self-confidence. Moving from a world of close relationships with parents and other family members, schools are the first spaces in which children encounter a 'generalised' other. Meeting different people means that school can be a place which is *'quite intimidating'*, which *'can make you feel very nervous'* and make one feel *'small'*. This explains why children valued opportunities they had to connect and develop a sense of belonging to a community of peers and adults who seemed to care about them and their personhoods.

School as a social space of (mis)recognition

Children's sense of connectedness and belonging to the school was also facilitated by the perception of the school as a social space, which welcomed them and generated feelings of inclusiveness for all. The social spaces in school were among the most valued – a special corner was *'fun'* because *'we hang out there and just talk'*, the green space was also popular, *'a place where you play football and catch up if you are super early to school'*. Others mentioned the corridors *'to have a chat'* or meeting people in the morning at the school front door, waiting for the school to open, chatting to janitors and staff arriving early.

Moments like break time, lunchtime, reward time were opportunities when *'you can do whatever you want basically'*, have fun and socialise. Fun was seen as an important part of the learning process; children talked about enjoying learning more when classes had a fun element or teachers were humorous on occasions. Equally, opportunities to exercise agency in class were valued – teachers who *'let us choose'* or *'who ask us what we want to learn'* were particularly valued. By contrast, not being stimulated, feeling lost or excluded made children disengage, in situations of misrecognition of their interests, talents and personhoods – *'you can be a bit dozy some years, and some teachers won't notice'* or *'you can get to Primary 7 and still have no idea of what you are doing'*.

Through their relationships with individual teachers, most children experienced school as a nurturing environment – a space where they felt cared for and cared about. Perhaps the most supportive space, according to the children, was that provided by a guidance teacher whose room was described as *'a really nurturing space [where] you feel safe'*. In this space of solitude, children felt that they could get support whenever they needed, *'where if you have something wrong, like if there was something happening at home, there's is somewhere where you can go and calm down'*.

Other favourite locations in the school were places where *'kids just hang out and talk'*. The following response from one participant highlights the value of relationships beyond one's family. According to her, the school is a place where you can:

just be with your friends, have someone to talk to - of your own age. You can talk to your parents, but it's not like they're your age. Your friends know what you are talking about.

School was spoken of as a place of recognition, being acknowledged, supported and understood by others, where you could find your friendship group and socialise with others with shared interests *'the footballers. . . the creative. . . the funny and jokey and, you know, just sensible boys'*. Places in the school were important for allowing affirmative group relationships to develop and many children spoke of the support and care they received through these connections (see also Korkiamäki, 2011).

However, social relationships at school did not always go smoothly. As the following excerpt from one of the interviews highlights, encountering others involves the risk of being ill-treated or ignored. In Honneth's terms, misrecognition of one's personal attributes and needs and the struggle for recognition have a direct impact on individuals' self-esteem and well-being:

I always have worries, and then. . . I just feel like people are not going to be very nice to me or. . . you know, not look out for me and just ignore me.

The risks of misrecognition became reality in certain social encounters and several children shared stories about times when they felt isolated, excluded or bullied by their peers. One of the girls, who had moved to the school from Poland, talked about being misrecognised and excluded for years from friendship groups. Similarly, relationships with teachers could also give rise to a sense of misrecognition. Children spoke about occasions in which they felt they had been unfairly disciplined, misunderstood or ignored:

When I moved here [from Poland], the children would make fun of me, because I wasn't speaking English, or my accent. I had no friends, but then I managed to get some respect. And my teacher didn't do much.

One time, it was Primary 4, I'm walking back to class, after an assembly, and then this girl in my class stopped and I thought we had to stop. . .so I got a yellow card for something I didn't do. . .

School spaces can be spaces of rejection, victimisation and exclusion, where children struggle at times to get recognition. Children's interviews showed that

their past interactions had given them valuable lessons in how to relate to others and an understanding that misrecognition can happen on occasions for most or for some, on a more regular basis.

The school, its ethos and environment, play a central role in teaching pupils that all members of their community are worthy of recognition. Children articulated clearly their rights to care and respect and their responsibilities to recognise others. Unsurprisingly, many children spoke of how their experiences of being respected increased as they got older, becoming more '*responsible, respected*' and this increase in respect was often linked to responsibility. This resonates with Honneth's second form of recognition, *rights*, and his point that recognition is not only constitutive of a person's self respect, but also for *Self-Other* relationships and social integration. However, when misrecognition happens, subjects' identity and sense of self-respect can be deeply violated. Korkiamäki and Gilligan (2020) showed how young people's experiences of misrecognition may affect levels of trust and engagement and prompt young people's behaviours through individual acts that may seem transgressive, yet these are ways of re-gaining agency and developing positive identities.

School as a place for learning and becoming

Learning was discussed at length, in terms of the range of topics children covered over the years and the knowledge and skills they had acquired. Children remembered stumbling blocks and how they had overcome these, like learning the times table, a long poem or scientific concepts:

Learning to count to 20. God, that was difficult. . . I kept getting 16 and 18 the wrong way around.

In addition to learning challenges and the type of learning activities they liked (cooperative learning, learning by discovery, learning through technology use etc.), children talked about school as a place for personal growth and becoming. Many children spoke a great deal about how learning new things helps one develop:

School is a place where you can learn different things that you maybe haven't learned before. Also a place where you can understand yourself more.

They mentioned favourite activities in school, like podcasting or sports activities, and how these had enhanced their personal qualities:

Podcasting builds up your confidence and speaking in public (. . .) it's fun and entertaining, it just helps you be more out into the world and be heard.

Some reflected upon the changes they experienced over the course of their time at Sunny Hill. These changes included ways in which their personalities had developed and how teachers treated them now that they were older- the idea of respect featured highly:

I used to be shy up to P5 and then, in P6 and P7, I've come out of my shell a little bit. I'm really, really confident with my work now.

Like in P1, [the teachers] talked to us in nagging ways, it's changed a lot, how we're being treated and we are respected in a way. Like we're getting treated more, I wouldn't want to say like adults, because we are only 12, but like teenagers.

Some respondents spoke about how, by building on increased self-esteem, they challenged themselves by taking on responsibilities and becoming a 'better person' in the process, and 'a lot more confident'. Many reflected on their personal journey through school: 'I went from being the class joker, to becoming more of an artist, and then really responsible when I became House Captain'. It was clear that the last year of primary school was seen by teachers and children as a preparation for transition: 'you are seen as a role model for the rest of the school'; 'you feel more respected, a bit more responsible'. For some, there was pressure, which could be 'annoying', but this was mostly seen as a good thing, in preparation for more independent learning at secondary. For young people who were entrusted with roles such as House Captain, this was 'a big honour, a big responsibility to step up'. Overall, children were taking a considered approach to their experiences of school and actively making assessments about what aspects of their experiences were valuable and potentially beneficial in future and what aspects of school life should be criticised or rejected.

The third form of recognition in Honneth's social theory is *solidarity*. Honneth argues that individuals gain self-esteem as they grow in their confidence that their achievements or abilities are recognised as 'valuable by other members in society' (p. 76). Children's interviews highlighted the crucial role that the school played in this aspect of identity development. They were becoming more reflective on the meaning of schooling and were actively contributing to the development of solidarity through their agency. The school was a space in which they were supported to develop the skills and abilities for later in life, through contributions they were encouraged to make to the school community. At the same time, children's responses to questions about the benefits of school revealed their understanding of the institutionalised attempts to instil values that will contribute to the 'common good' (see also Gilliam and Gulløv, 2014). For example, one of the children felt that:

It is a good thing to have discipline, otherwise you just end up being rude to everyone and not having manners. . . it's a good thing to be free, but it's also good to have some manners, so that you're not constantly getting in trouble.

The sequential nature of different forms of recognition is clearest at this level. The sense of self-confidence that stems from feeling cared for and the sense of self-respect that comes from a right to human autonomy and dignity clearly underpin a person's sense of being a valued contributor to a community. Not only this, but children also highlighted how the support they received from teachers and other staff had helped them gain confidence in their abilities. Children's accounts showed their appreciation for the kindness, support and concern they received from particular teachers who are 'just always helping', helping 'if you were stuck', helping one 'to learn things I couldn't do by myself'. One of the girls explained how a teacher's faith in her made all the difference:

Miss Campbell, she had a lot of faith in me. . . and she like pushed me to what I could do- 'cause I also used to think I couldn't do that well, and she was like 'come on, keep going, you can do it'. She helped me see I shouldn't keep having low confidence 'cos that's what I had - a lot.

As this example suggests, the risk of misrecognition at this level of school life is high. Other examples included children experiencing a sense of pressure and anxiety about their self-worth or strong personalities closing down spaces to participate for others. It is clear that some groups of children may be more likely to experience misrecognition, either because they do not conform with the school norms of a 'good pupil' or because of other contextual and societal structures. The important role of supportive adults and peers to be in tune with individuals' well-being was highlighted here, as a teacher's kindness and perseverance or a friend's moral support could make a significant difference to an individual's sense of recognition, hopes for future and becoming.

School as a springboard for life

Given the project involved interviewing children in the last few weeks of their primary school, it was timely to ask them to look back on their journey and reflect on the meaning of primary school. Many spoke with a sense of nostalgia over leaving Sunny Hill Primary. We asked what they'll miss most, and answers ranged from mentioning everyday routines, like *'everybody just laughing and eating their lunch together'*, to exceptional events, like school trips. Children also mentioned special places they would miss, like the playground *'meeting with my friends'*, the school office – *'the first place I saw when arriving at school'*, the nursery where older children could go to help out – *'just mucking about and having fun'*, the support teacher's quiet room, certain adults (teachers, auxiliary staff) and friendships which they knew might dissolve in future.

We asked children what words they would use to describe Sunny Hill and they said: *'big, colourful, intelligent'; 'fun, annoying, horrible at times'; 'friendly, proud of ourselves'*. Looking back, they talked about how much they had developed and learned, but they also recalled unhappy moments, like falling out with friends, being excluded or bullied. Reflecting on improvements to provision, children suggested the school could increase provision for art activities, languages other than English, drama or sports – and encourage individual interests and talents, *'because normally everybody does the same thing'*. Children also said they would have liked to experience subjects which are likely to feature in secondary school: *'they should bring in some secondary subjects'*. Bullying was mentioned by some as a form of misrecognition they encountered, and they suggested improvements to existing mechanisms of reporting bullying incidents.

Looking to the future, children's feelings on moving to secondary school ranged from positive excitement: *'excited to go'* and *'look forward to something different'*; to mixed feelings – *'sometimes I don't want to leave, other times I do'*; and anxiety and nervousness – *'I'm completely not sure about it'*. Children imagined their secondary schools based on their visits, but also on what they had heard from other children: *'I've heard you don't just sit in one class'*. While some were looking forward to having more independence and a change in culture – *'they'll be talking to you like a young adult'* – others were slightly concerned about being part of the youngest group in a new school and the potential for bullying.

Finally, on the meaning of school, children spoke about school as preparation for life. Many explicitly linked learning in school with achieving later on in life – *‘learning – for like a future job’* or *‘to get a good degree, then some really good jobs when we get older’*. This clearly links to messages from adults that employment and good careers are desirable. Children mentioned life skills, like reading, writing, confidence as skills they were taking from primary education, as these *‘help you achieve higher in life’*. They were grateful to the school for instilling a positive growth mindset, that is, not thinking *‘no, I can’t do this’* and give up, but rather *‘I think I can do this and give it a go’*. School, according to one of the respondents, *‘is a place where you can keep going for your dreams and try to accomplish things’*. Children also valued the safe space for learning and exploration they had found in the primary school, not as *‘risky’* and pressuring as they imagined secondary school or the life of work in adulthood.

Discussion and theoretical conclusions

This ‘lookback’ study asked a group of children to reflect on their overall experience of their time in primary school. The children seemed broadly, but not uncritically, positive about their time in school. While they may not have used such terms explicitly, the ideas underlying Honneth’s concepts of ‘recognition’ and ‘misrecognition’ resonated with their experiences. Their accounts illustrated how the concepts of *love, rights* and *solidarity* played out in meaningful ways in their everyday engagement in the school community. Yet, there were also echoes of misrecognition in accounts of daily school life and concerns about actual or potential misrecognition related to past experiences or concerns about their imminent transition to the unknown world of secondary school. Beneath their appreciation of what the school had offered them, there were signs that children may find many ambiguities in their school experience. They saw school as a space where to feel safe to socialise and have fun, a space for the important ‘business’ of learning, but also a space where the risk of victimisation and misrecognition was real. School therefore seemed a more ‘spacious’ place, where there was more happening than adults may acknowledge. Adults value the manifest functions of school teaching and learning, and so too did our young participants, but they also made it clear that they were much more aware of the latent functions and shadow worlds of the school. Curry et al.’s (2011) study also showed that there is a powerful children’s world in schools that lies beneath the gaze of the adults.

Our findings also suggest the school contains many physical and social spaces beyond the classroom which are meaningful to children in deep ways. In these spaces, children encounter the satisfactions and the challenges of life beyond the gaze of adults. Children here seem broadly to endorse the ‘agenda’ of parents and teachers about school, but they also reveal a broader vision of how they see the wider purpose of school. While adults may be aware of the social nature of the school community, this aspect emerges much more centrally in children’s responses. School is an environment potentially rich in relationship opportunities with peers and sympathetic adults. However, the vein of ambiguity in children’s accounts reminds us that the world of relationships is not always uncomplicated territory. There may be harmful or hurtful experiences, misrecognition, as well as recognition. There may also be ambiguities in the formal school world, as relations with teachers and peers are not always positive.

School is widely understood as a space enacted by adults – but in reality, as this study suggests, it is arguably better seen as a set of interacting spaces co-enacted by children

and adults. Our study suggests that in those parts of the school world where children may lead in enacting the social space, they bring at least some elements from the more shared and co-enacted spaces. They may be aware of values and expectations from the wider school agenda, aware of the importance of ‘boundaries’ imposed by teachers (see also Gilliam and Gulløv, 2014), even if they make clear that they are not always able to implement the ‘official’ norms and values that promote a ‘recognition-friendly’ environment. The importance of ‘fun’ is a recurring theme in children’s responses, reported as a treasured part of the daily life of school. But there is also a sense that such fun is more accessible to those children for whom recognition in its various forms is a familiar and routine experience. Our data hints at the potency of inequalities of recognition in children’s lives, and the important role of adults in efforts to reduce such inequalities.

These findings point to some clear theoretical implications in relation to the value of recognition theory in framing children’s development and learning. In recent years, researchers have started to acknowledge that recognition theory provides a valuable lens for the deeper examination of the social conditions necessary for young people’s personal development, well-being and engagement with learning (Graham et al., 2017; Rossiter, 2014; Thomas et al., 2016). Our study contributes to this body of evidence by demonstrating that self-confidence built through positive experiences of oneself as a respected and morally responsible agent and valued contributor to a community is foundational to a positive educational experience and positive identity. Our findings revealed the significant value children placed on feeling supported and cared for in school and on the sense of belonging and participation in a community. They also show the emotional labour involved in the processes of constructing belonging and achieving a sense of ontological security (see Sime, 2018) and the everyday challenges, especially for some children who might experience misrecognition more regularly, such as those who might be perceived as ‘different’ or non-conforming. The value that children placed on the forms of recognition identified by Honneth (love, rights and solidarity) undoubtedly has practical and ethical implications.

Opportunities for recognition of personal abilities, contributions and accomplishments within the school community have an important impact on children’s positive sense of self. School is where such skills and abilities can be explored, developed and nurtured. Time spent in school forms an important part of children’s biographies, providing an inter-relational space in which to discover and explore personal traits, develop skills and capacities and gain a sense of esteem that are at the heart of successful agency and self-realisation. As Dum and Guay (2017: 294) argue: ‘[s]chools teach individuals to reconcile the various kinds of normative demands that they are subject to, to assert their own identities and find those identities confirmed by others, to make their own demands on the social world’. In this sense, Honneth’s theoretical tools provide useful pillars in analysing the interplay of school-based activities and interactions and children’s identity development.

However, the use of Honneth’s theory as an all-encompassing, normative framework for securing positive outcomes in people’s lives is not without its limitations. As our study makes clear, attempts to secure norms and practices that would ensure young people’s recognition, equality and their contributions are open to contestation and will on occasions fall short. Misrecognition, non-recognition, misunderstandings and conflict are inherent features of social life. Educational institutions need to engage in thoughtful consideration of what an ethical, fair, heterogeneous approach to individual flourishing and personal well-being might look like and Honneth’s theory offers relevant concepts

and a holistic framework which resonates with the interests and concerns of children. Nevertheless, it is also undeniable that children need to be given the resources, perspectives and support they need to mitigate the impact of misrecognition on individual identity formation. This requires economic and social resources from beyond the sphere of educational institutions and the development of a way of relating to oneself that is not only rooted in recognition from others.

Methodologically, the ‘lookback’ perspective provided a useful lens to see how children recall vividly incidents or moments that stand out in their school journey. In part, their accounts showed the influence of the everyday and the mundane, but there were also decisive one-off or uncommon experiences which anchored their perceptions and framed their sense of connectedness. Due to its timing, at transition from primary to secondary school, the study also revealed children’s apprehension and anticipation in relation to their future status and engagement in the new world of secondary school. It underlined the value of the two lenses used in understanding the reality of school worlds. The first is children’s retrospective reflections on their long-term school experience and anticipation of an imaginary future. The second is Honneth’s theory of recognition. We suggest that our study merits replication in other school settings and cultural contexts.

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