

## Article

# Children's Right to Belong?—The Psychosocial Impact of Pedagogy and Peer Interaction on Minority Ethnic Children's Negotiation of Academic and Social Identities in School

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**Abstract:** Migration across the OECD this decade is reflected in increasingly diverse societies. Although migration into Ireland remains relatively low, increasing pupil diversity is evident in the physical, pedagogical, curricular, and socio-relational aspects of schooling. While the intensity of such changes are evident in teacher pedagogy, children's social worlds, and classroom/school dynamics, most notable is the lack of policy development to support school practices. Drawing on two in-depth case studies, this paper aims to foreground minority ethnic children/young people's voice(s) as they negotiate the complexity of identity (re)formation and belonging in school. It explores whether mis/recognition impacts teacher pedagogical practices through ability grouping, and minority ethnic children's navigation of social spaces within/between the classroom. Using a children's rights lens, this paper interrogates whether minority ethnic children's right to education preparing them "for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace (and) tolerance" (Article 29 (1), UNCRC, 1989) is being realised. Findings indicate the need to foreground minority ethnic children's voices and rights to ensure how they "do"/"feel" learning is in their best interests and affords them equal opportunities in their school lives.

**Keywords:** identity; belonging; misrecognition; primary school; children's rights; pedagogy; ability grouping; minority ethnic; childhood; migrant children; multilingualism



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## 1. Introduction

Migration is "the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State" [1] (p. 137). Patterns of migration across the OECD have grown over the past decade with 1 in 10 people identified as foreign-born [2]. While migration was historically low in 2020 due to COVID-19, it is expected to increase post-pandemic [3]. The flow of migrants across the globe, driven by the economic market, educational opportunities, familial reunification, and humanitarian need [3], contributes to population diversification reflected not only in societies, but also within education systems and schools.

Migration into Ireland has resulted in an increasingly diverse pupil population in schools [4,5]. Although rates of migration into Ireland remain relatively low [3], increasing diversity is reflected in physical, pedagogical, curricular, and socio-relational aspects of schooling. While the intensity of such changes are evident in teacher practices, children's social worlds, and classroom/school dynamics [6,7], most notable is the lack of contemporary policy development to support school practices. Most concerning are patterns and experiences of racism in Ireland, most recent figures for 2020 identifying an increase in reporting, particularly hate speech which doubled since 2019 [8]. Largely absent from discourse are minority ethnic children's voice(s) to understand how they navigate their identities in the education system while engaging with pedagogical practices shaping how

they “do” and “feel” learning. This paper seeks to contribute to the dearth of research foregrounding minority ethnic children’s experiences and voices.

### 1.1. UNCRC, Minority Ethnic Children’s Rights, and the Spaces to Belong in School

While the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides a clear measure against which state parties can be held accountable for ensuring they are working in the best interest of children under their jurisdiction, it is rarely used within education to interrogate whether school practices are promoting children’s right to be treated in a fair and equitable manner. Indeed, the UNCRC provides a useful measure against which pedagogical practices can be evaluated as working in children’s best interests, ensuring equal opportunities to learn [9]. Article 29.1 of the UNCRC is especially important when considering children’s right to belong where state parties must ensure “the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin”. Lundy (2019) [10] argues that “human rights are under fire right across the world” (p. 595) stating the unequivocal importance of using a child rights lens, not as pity, but rather to interrogate how children experience their rights in their everyday lives.

While it is incumbent on educators to develop pedagogy which teaches children about their “rights and responsibilities” [11], this paper argues that children understand who they are through/in/with everyday pedagogical interactions. It is within these pedagogical sites that children’s rights have the potential to be contravened/realised. Responsiveness to student diversity is at the core of rights-respecting pedagogy [12,13]. Such an approach nurtures student voice and partnership contributing meaningfully to active participation in learning and the realisation of their full potential [12].

Rau and Ritchie (2011) [14] argue pedagogy is critical to affirming minority ethnic group identity within the learning environment. This is enshrined in UNCRC Article 8;

*“States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference” and “where a child is illegally deprived of some or all of the elements of his or her identity, States Parties shall provide appropriate assistance and protection, with a view to re-establishing speedily his or her identity”.*

Educators and researchers have a responsibility to advocate for these rights by creating spaces for children to access and recognise their minority identities [14]. It is imperative children’s rights are placed at the heart of experiences and practices in school [15], something expressed by children themselves with ‘feeling cared for’ highlighted as important [16]. This paper argues that it is vital that schools create safe spaces for minority ethnic children to belong and failure to do so contravenes their right to engage in a spirit of freedom and understanding.

### 1.2. Minority Ethnic Children, Cultural Identities, and Belonging in School

Identity is “multiple, changing, overlapping and contextual, rather than fixed and static” [17] (p. 133). It is constantly in flux, entwined with the affective [18], and formed through discourse where individuals play roles expected of them. Identities are re/negotiated and re/constructed at both macro (educational/economic experiences) and micro levels (private decisions about ways of living) [19]. Language (including the mother tongue) constitutes an important marker of social and ethnic identity, existing as “the default medium of their (individual) self-concept, their self-awareness, their consciousness, their discursive thinking, and their agency” [20] (p. 202).

Otherness arises from “a lack of wholeness which is filled” through our own imagining of ourselves as seen by others [21]. If a child is perceived as different, they are likely perceived through the lens of that difference and ultimately develop “self-as-Othered” [22] (p. 17). Belonging to the majority group in Ireland is associated with middle-class values, status, and ability to access ordinary privileges [23]. As such, aligning to the majority ethnic group is

associated with upward mobility. Consciously adapting majority ethnic youth behaviours in line with social norms and beliefs increases greater acceptance of minority young people as peers [6]. Adopting bicultural identity increases social acceptance by peers and there is less preference for within-ethnic friendships, particularly among older children [24]. Indeed, cross-ethnic friendship is associated with reduced peer rejection from same and cross-ethnic peers [25]. At the heart of crossing this identity boundary is the need to change values to be accepted instead of “othered”. Cross-ethnic friendships are more likely to be evident in contexts where inclusive norms are actively promoted [26].

In Ireland, Eastern European children have been identified with the smallest friendship networks while African and Asian children also have fewer friends than their Irish counterparts [27]. Assimilationist practices offer minority ethnic children membership and belonging with outer/native communities [6]. While children can conform naturally to ways of acting, thinking, and speaking [28], entering new communities (as minority ethnic) means accessing new Discourses (D in the word “discourse” indicates it is more than ‘just language’) and requires taking on an identity that is congruent with the Discourse operating in a particular group, time, and place [29]. However, there is a “price” [30] for membership an individual pays in highly diverse contexts, as “the degree of a student’s success in school . . . is a direct measure of the degree of first language and culture loss” [31] (p. 243). Key signifiers typical of racial and cultural difference/stereotype are often identified as skin colour, distinct accent, and facial features which act to exclude minority groups from belonging [32].

### 1.3. Schools as Sites of Mis/Recognition—Pedagogy and the Psychosocial

Schools are critical sites for children as they engage in/with/through pedagogical practices that not only shape how they ‘do’ and ‘feel’ learning in school, but how they are mis/recognised as valued learners and peers within the classroom.

#### 1.3.1. Pedagogic Divisiveness

The pedagogic device [33] used by teachers as “specialised agents” [34] is considered as a key tool for social reproduction within societies. Within this framework, teachers engage in a process of sorting and classifying knowledge, defining the boundaries between what may or may not be transmitted through the pedagogical relationship between teacher and pupil [35]. Defining these boundaries within the socio-spatial structures of the classroom (such as implementing ability grouping) serves to classify and define learners, exposing them to different knowledge and ways of understanding their place in the world [36];

*“By converting social hierarchies into academic hierarchies, the educational system fulfils a function of legitimation which is more and more necessary to the perpetuation of the ‘social order’ as the evolution of the power relationship between classes tends more completely to exclude the imposition of a hierarchy based upon the crude and ruthless affirmation of the power relationship (p. 84)”.*

Ability grouping, conceptualised as an “act of symbolic violence” [37], shaping children’s understanding of who they are and who they are expected to be through the “power of suggestion” [38]. Misassignment to an ability group level is of particular concern within the literature as it directly impacts on student trajectories and academic outcomes [37]. It has been reported that minority ethnic children often report being misassigned to lower ability group levels [37,39].

#### 1.3.2. The Emotionality of Learning and the Psychosocial

The emotionality of learning is particularly important when understanding how children ‘do’ and ‘feel’ learning and their social worlds within/between classroom environments [40]. The “psycho-social-affective-spectrum” [18] provides a lens through which we can understand the complex intersection between pedagogical practices and emotional realms of learning. It is characterized by feelings such as resentment, defensiveness, guilt,

shame, envy, deference, contempt, arrogance, pride, rage, satisfaction, embarrassment, and pity [18]. The meaning-making intersection of learning and identity (re)formation is replayed in stories and emotions [41] shaping the embodied learner. It is within the complexity of the social encounter within the “figured world” [42] of the classroom that the psychosocial emerges [43]. Academic labelling contributes to how children understand themselves (and others) shaping expectations associated with who they ‘are’, who they ‘should be’, and how they should be treated [44] within this figured world. The “emotional labour” associated with negotiating the “social geographies of embodied encounters” [45] (p.499) is evident in the relational process of affecting and being affected. The socio-spatial practices in primary schools, such as grouping by ability, impact how children experience learning, how they negotiate their social worlds (belonging), and how such experiences are embodied and manifest as a psychosocial response.

This paper contributes to growing literature exploring the psychosocial impacts of pedagogical practices on children’s sense of identity and belonging in school. There are particular implications for children who are on the margins of our society who have to work especially hard to negotiate their identities as valued learners/peers.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This paper draws on two Irish studies; an ethnographic study of identity with 4 Polish families and children aged 12–14 and a mixed methodological exploration of the implementation and perceptions of ability grouping drawing from a national survey (685 teachers) and intensive case studies in 3 primary schools (100 children).

### 2.1. The Polish Ethnographic Study

The Polish ethnographic study explored how heritage language socialization (Polish) goals impact children’s identity negotiation as they grow up in Ireland and try to find their place in a new country/society.

#### 2.1.1. Polish Ethnographic Study Sample

The sample encompassed four Polish immigrant children aged 13–15, their parents, and their teachers (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Polish ethnographic study sample.

<i>Child Participants</i>	<i>Parent Participants</i>	<i>Teacher Participants</i>
Kasia (12)	Agata Adam	Peter (previous English teacher) Debra (current English teacher) Ann (Maths teacher)
Wiktoria (12)	Ala Rafal	Gretta (ESOL teacher) Danuta (Polish teacher PWS)
Janek (14/15)	Ewa Marek	Paul—Maths teacher Ann—English teacher Adam—Polish language and culture teacher (PWS)
Marcin (13)	Anna Patryk	Debbie (Primary school teacher)

Two broad educational contexts, English-speaking mainstream schools (EMS) and Polish weekend school English mainstream schools (PWS + EMS) were purposefully selected (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Polish ethnographic study—educational contexts.

<i>Mainstream Schooling Context Monolingual Educational</i>	<i>Heritage Enriched Educational Context Bilingual Education</i>
English language mainstream school (EMS) (n = 2)	Polish weekend school and English language mainstream school (PWS + EMS) (n = 2)

#### Mainstream Schooling Context—Kasia and Marcin

Kasia (12) attended first year at a newly established mainstream school within an interdenominational ethos catering for 450 students housed in temporary premises at a local hotel. Kasia was in the first year of the Junior Cycle and insisted that the researcher refrained from using Polish in any interaction with her in school. As such, it was decided that the researcher was to be presented to her classmates as a university trainee studying to be a teacher.

Marcin (13) attended a mainstream senior primary school (3rd–6th class) with a Catholic ethos in the eastern region of Ireland. The school was also newly established and had 12 mainstream classes. Marcin was undertaking the Irish primary school curriculum and engaged in numerous extracurricular activities (Green school, Christmas and Easter plays, international day).

#### Heritage Language Enriched Context—Janek and Wiktoria

Janek (14) and Wiktoria (12) attended both Polish weekend school (PWS) and EMS (Janek, first year of post-primary school/ Wiktoria final year of primary school). This heritage bilingual education aims to foster the minority language and culture in the child. Polish weekend schools in Ireland aim to develop Polish language skills to full proficiency and full biliteracy. Polish heritage language education takes place through weekend supplemental schools (n = 38) in Ireland (supported by Polish government) and is restricted to one day tuition per week. These schools connect the local Polish migrant community in Ireland with the Polish education system, providing a link between an individual's personal past and first-hand cultural and linguistic experience.

#### 2.1.2. Methodology

The Polish ethnographic study encompassed an ethnographic approach including observations and in-depth interviewing. Discourse analysis was undertaken to facilitate emic and etic analysis of communication/discourse to examine “talk” as social action. The approach to data collection and analysis focused on exploring and collecting a wide range of materials without constraint from specific hypotheses. All audio recordings were transcribed and coded for narratives and small stories. This analytical process was informed by speech acts and actions (social acts) with a particular focus on stance-taking and social identity construction as it is negotiated over time.

#### Children's Narratives

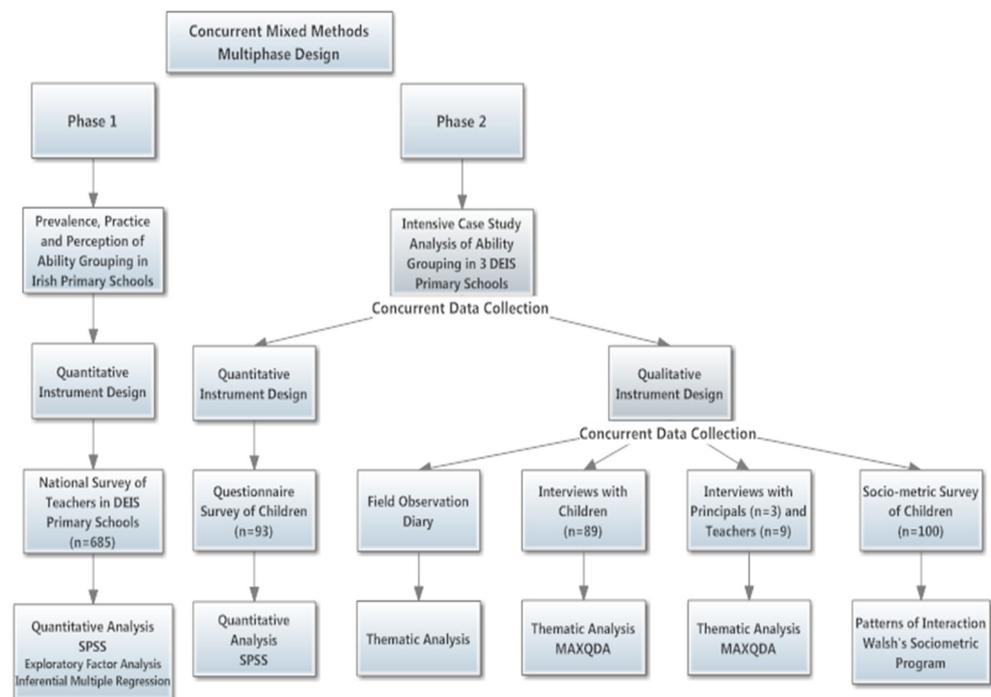
Narratives, particularly small stories, constructed by children, were used as a tool for examining identity. Small stories research is a model for narrative analysis and forms the basis for interactive practice through which interlocutors elicit, explain, justify, tell, and solve problems; establish cultural norms, ideologies, and values; and negotiate their identities. Excerpts from small stories in this paper are combinations of saying-doing-being-valuing-believing. They are safe spaces where children negotiate and articulate their identity. The importance of fragments of these stories was evident in their reoccurrence in the children's narratives as they explored the various themes. Children's voices are central in this research process and the researcher becomes the new apprentice in the discovery process [6]. This methodological framework is grounded in Lundy's model providing children with affordances (space) to express their views (voice) while also creating opportunities for their voices to be listened to (audience) and acted upon (influence).

### 2.1.3. Discourse Analysis

The analysis in this study draws on Gee's theory of Discourse [29] as a lens through which we can identify "identity kits" comprised of appropriate costumes and instructions on how to act, talk, and write, how to interact, and what to believe and value in order to provide access to a social network. Every individual (including children) acts within a framework of mixed Discourses which define common or normative ways of doing, being, and feeling as part of operating within a common social group. As such, Discourses operate to include as "insider" or exclude as "outsider" or "other". Schools operate as meaningful sites where children negotiate these powerful Discourses and experience peer inclusion/exclusion.

### 2.2. The Ability Grouping Study

The study of ability grouping in Irish DEIS primary schools adopted concurrent mixed methodological multiphase design encompassing national teacher surveys (n = 685) and in-depth qualitative case studies in three co-educational primary schools serving socioeconomically challenged communities in Ireland (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The ability grouping study research design and methodology overview.

#### 2.2.1. National Survey of Teachers

Phase 1 encompassed a national survey of teachers working in DEIS schools across Ireland. A total of 1781 questionnaire surveys were posted to teachers working with 1st, 2nd, 5th, and 6th grades in 512 DEIS schools across the country. Of those, 685 questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 38.4%.

#### 2.2.2. The Case Studies

The second phase study encompassed three intensive case studies in DEIS schools (two senior/one junior). The perspectives of teachers (n = 9), principals (n = 3), and children (n = 100) were captured through interviews and through a questionnaire survey and sociometric measures with the children (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Ability grouping study—methods and instruments.

<b>Quantitative Data Collection</b>	
<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Themes Explored</b>
National survey of teachers (n = 685)	Demographics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher (age, gender, ethnicity, qualification, length of experience)</li> <li>• School (level, DEIS categorisation gender composition)</li> <li>• Pupils (age, gender, ethnicity, dis/ability)</li> </ul> Grouping practices & composition, Ability group assignment Curricular and pedagogical practices, Definitions of “ability” Pupil experiences of ability grouping
Child questionnaire (n = 93)	Classroom organisational practices Ability group practices Child culture and peer dynamics Self-image and self-perception Teacher interaction and bonding to school
<b>Qualitative Data Collection</b>	
Child focus group interviews (n = 89)	Ability group practices Child culture and peer dynamics Self-image and self-perception Teacher interaction and bonding to school Attitude to intelligence
Child sociometric survey (n = 100)	Instrumental ties (three children chosen to help with work) Expressive ties (three children chosen to sit beside) Proxy of instrumental & expressive ties (three children chosen as your friend)
Teacher semi-structured interview (n = 9)	Classroom organisational practices Ability group practices Child culture and peer dynamics Self-image and self-perception Teacher interaction and bonding to school Attitude to intelligence Pedagogy
Principal semi-structured interview (n = 3)	Classroom organisational practices Ability group practices Pedagogy Policy and external influences

### 2.2.3. The Ability Grouping Study Sample National Survey Sample

A total of 14,301 pupils were being taught by the 685 respondents. The majority of teachers (68.7%) were working in co-educational schools, 15.3% were working in all boys' schools and 16% in all girls' schools. The majority of schools in the sample were vertical (ages 5–12 years), 10.4% were infant/junior (ages 5–8 years) schools, and 19.1% were senior schools (ages 9–12 years). Finally, 30.6% of teachers were working in mixed aged classrooms (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Overview of school contexts.

Category	n	%
<b>Gender Intake</b>		
All girls	109	16
All boys	104	15.3
Co-educational	467	68.7
<b>Grade Level</b>		
1st	123	18
2nd	126	18.4
5th	98	14.3
6th	127	18.6
Multigrade Junior	78	11.4
Multigrade Senior	131	19.2
<b>School Type</b>		
Infant (Inf-1st)	10	1.5
Junior (Inf-2nd)	61	8.9
Senior (2nd/3rd–6th)	131	19.1
Vertical (Inf-6th)	480	70.4

In the sample, 15.7% of respondents were male and 84.3% female, reflecting the proportion of male/female teachers (13.1%/86.9%) currently working within the profession in Ireland. Analysis revealed a younger, less experienced cohort of teachers who had not engaged in additional professional development (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Overview of teacher characteristics.

Category	n	%
<b>Teacher Age</b>		
20–25 years	137	20.1
26–30 years	221	32.4
31–40 years	136	19.9
41–55 years	150	22
56+ years	38	5.6
<b>Length Teaching Experience</b>		
Up to 5 years	272	40.7
6–15 years	202	30.2
16–30 years	136	20.3
31+ years	59	8.8
<b>Additional Professional Development</b>		
Yes	231	33.5
No	451	66.5

Other contextual factors included class size (average 21 pupils), number of minority ethnic/migrant pupils (average 3 pupils), and prevalence of children with additional learner needs (average 2 pupils). A typical class consisted of 4 pupils classified as “high” ability, 10 as “mid” ability, and 7 as “low” ability. Such classifications were also informed by the ethnicity of the children with clear attributions of ability as high/low depending on the ethnic background of the pupil. Irish Traveller children and those from Romania, Slovakia, Brazil, and the Czech Republic were more likely to be identified as low ability, Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, and Nigerian children as average ability, and Filipino, Indian, Russian, and Chinese pupils as high ability.

#### Case Study Sample

In the case study sample, 58.1% of children were male, the majority were in 5th class, aged 10–11 years (69.9%), and of majority ethnic (75.3%) background. Of those who were

of minority ethnic groups, 12.9% of children identified African, 8.6% Eastern European, and 3.2% Traveller.

Group assignment patterns in Mountaingrove indicated gendered and ethnic patterns across groups (Figure 2). Boys and majority ethnic children were more likely assigned as higher ability, while girls and minority ethnic children were more likely to be in a mid/low ability group.

<b>Mountaingrove Senior Primary School</b>					
<i>Co-educational (285 pupils, 22 teachers, 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> class (8 – 12 year olds)). Setting: reading and maths.</i>					
<b>Subject Area</b>	<b>Pupil Numbers</b>	<b>Minority Ethnic Pupils</b>	<b>'Above Average' Pupils</b>	<b>'Average' Pupils</b>	<b>'Below Average' Pupils</b>
<b>Ms Gallagher's 5<sup>th</sup> Class</b>					
<b>Reading</b>	23 (13 boys, 10 girls)	2 Nigerian	9 (6 boys, 3 girls)	3 (3 boys)	11 (4 boys, 7 girls, 2 Nigerians)
<b>Maths</b>			5 (4 boys, 1 girl)	17 (8 boys, 9 girls, 2 Nigerian)	1 (1 boy)
<b>Ms Burke's 5<sup>th</sup> Class</b>					
<b>Reading</b>	25 (15 boys, 10 girls)	3 (1 Nigerian, 1 Somali, 1 Romanian)	9 (6 boys, 3 girls, 1 Somali)	7 (4 boys, 3 girls, 1 Romanian, 1 Nigerian)	9 (5 boys, 4 girls)
<b>Maths</b>			5 (3 boys, 2 girls, 1 Somali)	16 (11 boys, 5 girls, 1 Nigerian)	4 (1 boy, 3 girls, 1 Romanian)

**Figure 2.** Mountaingrove pupil cohort.

This gendered and ethnic pattern was again evident in Daisybrook, with boys and majority ethnic children more likely to be considered high ability while girls and minority ethnic children were assigned to mid and low ability groups (Figure 3).

<b>Daisybrook Junior School</b>					
<i>Co-educational (460 pupils, 45 teachers, Preschool – 2<sup>nd</sup> Class (3.5 – 7 year olds)). Within-class ability grouping for reading.</i>					
<b>Subject Area</b>	<b>Pupil Numbers</b>	<b>Minority Ethnic Pupils</b>	<b>'Above Average' Pupils</b>	<b>'Average' Pupils</b>	<b>'Below Average' Pupils</b>
<b>Ms Callaghan's 2<sup>nd</sup> Class</b>					
<b>Reading</b>	16 (8 boys, 8 girls)	4 (1 Cuban, 1 Zimbabwean, 2 Congolese, 1 Romanian, 1 Traveller)	4 (3 boys, 1 girl, 1 Congolese)	8 (5 boys, 3 girls, 1 Cuban, 1 Zimbabwean)	4 (4 girls, 1 Traveller, 1 Congolese, 1 Romanian)
<b>Mr. Kiernan's 2<sup>nd</sup> Class</b>					
<b>Reading</b>	16 (10 boys, 6 girls)	10 (3 Travellers, 1 Bulgarian, 2 Romanian, 3 Nigerian, 1 Somali)	4 (4 boys, 1 girl, 1 Traveller, 1 Nigerian)	5 (3 boys, 2 girls, 1 Bulgarian, 1 Romanian, 1 Nigerian)	6 (3 boys, 3 girls, 1 Romanian, 1 Somali, 1 Nigerian, 2 Travellers)

**Figure 3.** Daisybrook pupil cohort.

The pattern varied in Pinehill where boys were more likely assigned to both the high and low ability group (Figure 4). Minority ethnic children were distributed evenly across all ability levels.

<b>Pinehill Senior Primary School</b>					
<i>Co-educational school (383 pupils, 37 teachers teaching, 3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> class (8 – 12 year olds)). Within-class ability grouping for reading.</i>					
<b>Subject Area</b>	<b>Pupil Numbers</b>	<b>Minority Ethnic Pupils</b>	<b>'Above Average' Pupils</b>	<b>'Average' Pupils</b>	<b>'Below Average' Pupils</b>
<b>Ms Byrne's 5<sup>th</sup> Class</b>					
<b>Reading</b>	22 (12 boys, 10 girls)	6 (2 Travellers, 1 Cuban, 1 Romanian, 1 Congolese, 1 Nigerian)	9 (5 boys, 4 girls, 1 Cuban, 1 Congolese)	8 (3 boys, 5 girls, 1 Nigerian, 1 Traveller)	5 (4 boys, 1 girl, 1 Romanian, 1 Traveller)

**Figure 4.** Pinehill pupil cohort.

Of particular note for this paper is the overall distribution of minority ethnic children across ability group levels. While Eastern European and Traveller children tended to be assigned to lower ability groups, majority ethnic children were more likely assigned to high ability groups. Ability grouping structures the social space of the classroom as a

segregated space, not only in terms of “ability” but also in terms of ethnicity (Table 6) [40] (p. 4). Such identified groupings are not generalisable as they are limited by small numbers and parameters of the qualitative case study.

**Table 6.** Ethnic patterns of group level assignment.

Ethnic Identity	N	% of Total	Above Average	Average	Below Average
Majority Ethnic	75	73.5	38.7	29.3	30.7
Irish Traveller	6	5.9	16.7	16.7	66.6
African	13	12.7	30.8	30.8	38.4
Eastern European	6	5.9	0	50	50
Cuban	2	2	50	50	0

#### 2.2.4. Analysis

Data from the teacher questionnaire (n = 685) and child questionnaire (n = 93) were inputted into SPSS Statistics 22.0 and analysed using descriptive and correlational procedures. Thematic analysis (TA) was employed when analysing interviews with children (n = 89), teachers (n = 9), and principals (n = 3) using MAXQDA 12. Initial codes were identified across the data and, through an iterative process, collapsed into broader themes. Network analysis (n = 100) was conducted using Walsh’s Classroom Sociometrics 1.0, with a particular focus on centrality (number of realised/identified ties with others in the class) and reciprocity of nominations between peers.

Cross-cutting themes from the Polish ethnographic and ability grouping studies will be presented under the following headings:

1. Pedagogy and peers—Meaning making and re/negotiating identities in school, and
2. The psychosocial impact of working to belong.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Pedagogy and Peers—Meaning Making and Re/Negotiating Identities in School

Pedagogy emerged as a strong cross-cutting theme influencing and shaping how minority ethnic children experienced learning in class. Findings from the ability grouping study indicated that teachers were more likely to use ability grouping as pedagogical practice if minority ethnic/migrant children were present [37]. It is also notable that children from minority groups (Travellers/Eastern European) were more likely to be assigned to the lower ability level (Table 6). The positioning of migrant children as learners was further evident in the Polish ethnographic study.

Wiktoria (12) was a year older than her schoolmates when starting school (aged 8/9) and, as such, it was suggested to assign her to a younger class group as she would feel better with younger classmates. She was also assigned to a low ability group as she was perceived as struggling with English. Wiktoria’s mother rationalised this decision:

“We decided, I mean there was such a suggestion from a teacher here in Ireland, that both of our children should be moved one year back so that they have a chance to learn the language. But all in all it was just Wiktoria who was moved back.”

Differentiated pedagogical practices emerged in both studies with lower ability groups or when supporting minority language children. In the ability grouping study, teachers reported differentiated practices with children assigned to lower ability groups including lower expectations, less freedom for independent learning and increased reporting of behavioural management issues [37]. Teachers employed stringent differentiated and structured pedagogical approaches when working with the lower ability groups [37]. Such overt interactions between/within ability groups contribute children’s embodiment of identity as learners and social actors within the classroom.

This was evident in the Polish ethnographic study where Wiktoria believed revealing her Polish identity aligned with different treatment:

*“When you say you are Polish they just treat you differently, they talk to you less and they talk slowly so as you could understand” and she did not want to be treated that way, “I do not need this!” (Wiktorina)*

The “fixity” of learner identity had particular implications for minority ethnic children. A follow-up visit to the 2nd class/grade children when they were in 6th class identified the majority of children had remained in the ability group assigned to them four years previously (Table 7) [7] (p.11). Majority ethnic children benefitted from upward movement while minority ethnic children were more likely to experience downward movement.

**Table 7.** Patterns of movement between ability groups.

Ms Callaghan’s and Mr Kiernan’s Second Class			Reading Group Level	
Child’s Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Second Class	Sixth Class
<i>Upward movement</i>				
Shannon	Girl	Majority Ethnic	Average	High
Sophia	Girl	Majority Ethnic	High Average	High
Pól	Boy	Majority Ethnic	Average	High
<i>Same level</i>				
Keane	Boy	Majority Ethnic	High	High
Odhrán	Boy	Majority Ethnic	High	High
Jamie	Boy	Majority Ethnic	High	High
Rose	Girl	Congolese	High	High
Gabriella	Girl	Majority Ethnic	High average	High average
Sally	Girl	Traveller	Below average	Below average
JoJo	Girl	Majority Ethnic	Below average	Reading unit
<i>Downward Movement</i>				
James	Boy	Majority Ethnic	Average	Low average
Eric	Boy	Russian	High average	Low
Ryan	Boy	Majority Ethnic	Average	Low average
George	Boy	Majority Ethnic	Average	Low average
Tommy	Boy	Traveller	High	Low
Jeff	Boy	Majority Ethnic	High	Average
Princess	Girl	Nigerian	High	Average
Berry	Girl	Majority Ethnic	Average	Low

This “fixity” in ability grouping assignment/learner identity was also evident in the Polish ethnographic study whereby Wiktorina remained in the low ability group for the duration of primary school.

Ability grouping, as a structured space, defined boundaries of social interaction between children contributing to meaning-making between peers within children’s social worlds. Network analysis of patterns of interaction between children identified clear boundaries in inclusion/exclusion within peer networks, with particular implications for minority ethnic children [40]. Children assigned to higher ability groups and identified as majority ethnic were most likely chosen as a source of help (Table 8). In contrast, those assigned to lower ability groups, girls, and minority ethnic children (especially Traveller girls) were at the periphery as a valued peer in helping others [40] (p. 7).

**Table 8.** Patterns of exclusion and popularity—peer tutoring (n = 100).

		<i>Excluded</i>		<i>Popular</i>	
		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Gender</b>	Boys	14	25.5	7	12.7
	Girls	8	17.8	5	11.1
<b>Ability</b>	High	3	8.6	9	25.7
	Mid	3	11.1	2	7.4
	Low	16	43.5	1	2.9
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Majority Ethnic	17	22.4	9	11.8
	Minority Ethnic	5	20.8	3	12.5
	Traveller	3	50	0	0

A similar pattern was evident when the children were asked to identify those they would choose to sit beside. Again, minority ethnic children were more likely to be excluded from peers (Table 9) [40] (p. 7).

**Table 9.** Patterns of exclusion and popularity—seating partner (n = 100).

		<i>Excluded</i>		<i>Popular</i>	
		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Gender</b>	Boys	6	10.9	9	16.4
	Girls	5	11.1	7	15.6
<b>Ability</b>	High	3	8.6	8	22.9
	Mid	3	11.1	3	11.1
	Low	5	14.3	5	14.3
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Majority Ethnic	8	10.5	13	17.1
	Minority Ethnic	2	11.1	3	12.5
	Traveller	1	16.7	0	0

Friendships were especially important to children as “if you didn’t have friends you would feel lonely” (Joey-HA-Pinehill). Analysis of sociometric data identified clear friendship patterns within/across ability group levels [40]. Most notable was the positioning of majority ethnic children as higher status and those from minority ethnic backgrounds (especially Traveller girls) more likely to experience exclusion (Table 10) [40] (p. 8).

**Table 10.** Patterns of exclusion and popularity—friendship (n = 100).

		<i>Excluded</i>		<i>Popular</i>	
		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Gender</b>	Boys	10	18.2	10	18.2
	Girls	7	15.6	4	8.9
<b>Ability</b>	High	6	17.1	8	22.9
	Mid	1	3.7	4	14.8
	Low	10	27	2	5.4
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Majority Ethnic	11	14.5	13	17.1
	Minority Ethnic	3	16.7	1	4.2
	Traveller	3	50	0	0

These status differences were depicted in the Polish ethnographic study as children invested in re/constructing their bicultural identities to fit in with majority peers. Kasia and Marcin resisted being positioned as “other” by affiliating strongly with Irish socio-cultural norms and seeking membership of Irish peer communities, while also distancing themselves from Eastern European peers. One teacher commented:

*“It’s funny as well that like in the second year groups those people arriving . . . those people who are from Eastern Europe the first year very much group together even though they are not from the same country [ . . . ] while Kasia would very much not at all—and she would be the opposite also.”*

Marcin and Kasia’s full participation in Irish children’s social practices and adherence to majority language and cultural norms/values granted them membership to majority peer groups. They resisted “otherness” by assuming the identity of “insiders within majority”, complying with primary discourses in Irish society.

Kasia, for instance, did not share her cultural identity unless asked. Debbie (Kasia’s English teacher) stated “you would not know where she was from unless you would have asked her”. Kasia never volunteered to share her cultural identity, frequently rejecting her Polish origin “not to draw attention” (extracted from fieldnotes). Kasia adopted several strategies to deconstruct her immigrant identity to gain access/actively participate in majority peer groups. Many involved rejecting her minority identity including negative stance-taking toward “Polishness”, performing social acts (choosing English native speaker accent), diminishing her cultural heritage, favouring English over Polish, affiliating strongly with Irish peers, and avoiding contact with Eastern European schoolmates.

Marcin also de/constructed his identity as “insider” and “other”. He used several strategies to achieve this goal, e.g., displayed strong allegiances with Irish ethnic identity; identified himself with a native speaking peer group; exerted conscious efforts to be mis/recognised as a native speaker; and positioned himself as a popular /good student. Marcin overtly participated with peers outside school, building strong ties with them.

Evident from the children’s narratives in the two studies was the psychosocial impact of working to belong while engaging in the re/negotiation of their identities as valued peers within the classroom.

### 3.2. The Psychosocial Impact of Working to Belong

Striking from both studies was children’s engagement in the emotional labour of working to belong. What emerged was a psychosocial response to how children perceived themselves and others and how this shaped their experience of teasing, especially racism, in school.

Pedagogy (ability grouping) attributed status/value to social and academic structures in classrooms. Spaces occupied by high ability groups were defined as “smart”, “good”, “advanced”, and “liked”. In contrast, low ability spaces were considered “bad”, “poor”, “dumb”, and “not liked”. The dichotomous values attributed to these structured spaces as “good” (high ability) or “bad” (low ability) are also attributed to the children assigned to each one. Children negotiated learner identities defined by these structured spaces in terms of how they see themselves and how they think others see them as learners [7]. Children clearly communicated the spectrum against which they were measured as value(able) learners/peers (Table 11).

**Table 11.** Learner identities—positioning self and others.

<i>The group to which I am assigned</i>		
<b>High</b> Boys African High Ability	<b>Mid</b> Girls Mid and Low Ability	<b>Low</b> Eastern European
<i>How I see myself</i>		
<b>High</b> Boys Traveller High Ability Younger Children	<b>Mid</b> Majority ethnic African Eastern European Girls	<b>Low</b> Boys Mid and Low Ability
<i>How others see me</i>		
<b>High</b> Boys Traveller African High Ability Younger children	<b>Mid</b> Boys Majority Ethnic Mid Ability	<b>Low</b> Girls Eastern European Low Ability
<i>How teacher sees me</i>		
<b>High</b> Boys Traveller African High Ability Younger Children	<b>Mid</b> Majority Ethnic Eastern European Mid and Low Ability	<b>Low</b> Girls Mid Ability

The emotional labour of fitting into ability-defined structured spaces had particular implications for children assigned to lower ability groups (including minority ethnic pupils) who reported ability-related teasing “because when you are in the lowest everyone slags you” evoking a strong psychosocial response whereby “you just feel bad and all” (Edel-L/A-Mountaingrove).

The children embodied these feelings of shame as inferiority, “if you are in the lowest (group) they treat you like a low person” (Sebastian-H/A-Mountaingrove). The psychosocial spectrum ranged from “upset” and “shame” for children assigned to lower ability groups and feeling “proud”, “happy”, and “good” when identified as higher ability.

*“... that would probably make you feel ashamed that you are not in the higher group and especially if you were in the special group you would be ‘why am I not in there? I know how to read!’” (Robbie-M/A-Pinehill).*

The psychosocial impact of being considered as low ability was expressed as “it would make someone else feel bad... if you start going in, ‘oh, we are in the highest group’ it might make someone feel bad and they might get upset” (Joey-H/A-Pinehill). The powerful impact of the psychosocial was identified by Kyle(H/A-Pinehill) who voiced that such feelings could “get their confidence down and saying ‘oh I am not a good reader’”. The children reported a deeply psychosocial response to experiencing teasing, reporting feelings of shame, anger, and “it makes me feel sad and it makes me feel like I don’t want to come to school” (Joyce-LA-Mountaingrove). Teasing was perceived to shape future aspirations for lower ability groups as “they could grow up thinking ‘I am never going to amount to anything’” (Tom-M/A-Pinehill).

Perhaps most profound of all is the psychosocial dynamics impacting children as they negotiate their social worlds. As discussed earlier, pedagogy (ability grouping) directly impacts and shapes the nature of children’s peer interactions, contributing to the emotional labour of working to belong. Such psychosocial responses were stark in how minority

ethnic children across the ability group levels experienced patterns of exclusion from the majority. Wiktoria worked to be part of majority peer groups while also re/negotiating her position within two discourses (newly observed cultural norms and her moral standards). As a result, she was often withdrawn from social interaction, positioning herself outside dominating discourses underpinned by school norms/values drawing on her moral codes to justify her exclusion.

Wiktoria positioned Irish peers as “liars” or “just children”. She adopted a negative, recurrent, and affective moral as “outsider”, “other”, and “novice”. She consciously decided to remain outside of majority peer groups, rejecting dominant discourses that positioned her as “other” or “novice”. Her small stories were heavily laden with disappointment and grief as earlier attempts to be included in peer groups were rejected. Wiktoria found it difficult to participate in peer discourses and, as such, felt excluded from their community. She deeply embodied these exclusionary experiences as fear, rejection, and worry.

Teasing emerged as a cross-cutting theme between the two studies. Teasing was of concern to the majority of children in the ability grouping study, particularly girls, older pupils, those assigned lower ability, and minority ethnic children. Teasing was also reported in the Polish ethnographic study and was pertinent for Janek, with accent signifying difference from peers. Janek was the eldest participant and explicitly identified himself as “strange” or “other”. He found pronunciation of short/long vowels challenging meaning “they tease me so when I say this word ‘sheet’”; “they want to hear this [shit] word”. Janek actively worked to disassociate himself from majority peers, deliberately avoiding adopting a similar accent and actively resisting “otherness”. He positioned himself outside of their discourses, expressing having different interests, considering himself to be smarter (he was assigned to lower ability group), being bilingual/biliterate and proud of his Polish background. He was the only participant who openly used Polish with the researcher in front of his majority classmates. His agency was also manifested through “a lack of participation in the celebration of Irish holidays”, “not writing enough for his English assignments”, or by demonstrating a lack of interest in Irish socio-historical norms and traditions. Janek intentionally avoided celebrating St Patrick’s Day and successfully rejected all aspects of Irishness infiltrating his life.

Most profound findings from the ability grouping study was that minority ethnic (Eastern European/African) children were significantly more likely to experience teasing ( $p < 0.05$ ). The children reported racism as a form of teasing, further compounding exclusion/otherness from peers (Table 12).

**Table 12.** Minority ethnic children’s experience of racist teasing in school.

Racist Name Calling	Children’s Quotes
‘their colour’	“People that are black as well, they call them niggers and stuff”
‘a different colour’	(Rachel-Mountaingrove-White-Irish).
Nigger	“And like do you know different people, they are not from our country
Black	and some people slag them” (Paddy-Mountaingrove-White-Irish).
Knacker	“Yes mainly ‘cos of my colour or over something very stupid that
Brownie	doesn’t even make sense. Like we’re just friends and then they just
Black Monkey	slag you” (Tanisha-Pinehill-African).
Black fat bitch	
King Kong	
Paki	

Rose (African-Daisybrook) spoke about being called “black” and that she “didn’t like that”. Such racist experiences evoked feelings of “sadness” (Jacob-Eastern European-Daisybrook) and anger (“wanting to punch them”) (Ben-African-Daisybrook). Minority ethnic children reported that telling the teacher did not result in any affirmative action, to the point where they did not bother to report racism when it occurred “because they don’t do anything” (Ben-African-Daisybrook).

This experience was echoed by Norma (African-Pinehill) who indicated that “I don’t bother anymore” as “she (the teacher) will just say, ‘I will talk to him,’ but she doesn’t do nothing”. This lack of response from the teacher resulted in despondency and feeling “sad and angry” whereby “sometimes I just sit there and I say to myself, I hate this girl, I just want to get out of here” (Norma-African-Pinehill). Norma’s experience of othering was frustrating and her desire to “be like everyone else” was clear as she believed “I deserve better than this and you just want to leave and get away from it all”. Most concerning was her belief that “it is getting worse” as she is getting older as the perpetrators “know already what hurts you” which makes “themselves feel good after making you feel bad” (Norma-African-Pinehill). She was especially aware of profound consequences of racism sharing a story of a “boy in America, he was bullied a lot and one day his mum was calling him for dinner and when she went up to his room he hanged himself, and he got bullied and the teachers never did anything”.

Evident from the ability grouping and Polish ethnographic studies was the complex intersection of ethnicity, social, and academic position/value among peers informed and shaped by pedagogical practices (ability grouping) evoking a deeply embodied psychosocial response from children, particularly those from minority ethnic backgrounds.

#### 4. Discussion

The intensification of migration across the OECD and into Ireland is increasingly represented in diversifying societal and school populations [3,4]. While research has highlighted the challenges migrant and minority ethnic children face when assimilating into a different school environment bound by cultural norms and protocols [5,6], little is known about how such experiences are embodied within the psychosocial, as these children engage in deeply emotional labour to belong in school. Children’s rights provide transformative possibilities for ensuring all children (including those most marginalized) are afforded agency and fully included within an education system which teaches about/through/for rights [46]. This paper problematises minority ethnic children’s experiences of “doing” and “feeling” learning challenging hegemonic discourse by applying a children’s rights lens to interrogate whether education systems are working in their best interests, affording them equal opportunities to learn, belong, and express their ethnic identity.

Echoing previous research [24–26], it is clear from the data that minority ethnic children work extremely hard to belong in school. The Polish ethnographic study highlighted the complex interplay between accepting/rejecting cultural/ethnic identity in order to belong among majority peers. The cost on the children’s heritage identities was evident. For one child, rejecting majority peer norms/values came at the cost of exclusion and being perceived as “other”/“strange”, resulting in teasing for sounding different. The other children, however, embraced majority ethnic discourses, at a cost to their heritage identities which they worked hard to overtly/covertly reject. The benefit of investing in cultural rejection was acceptance into peer groups for one child, while the other two children experienced rejection and exclusion, failing to affiliate with their peers. The emotional labour of belonging came at great cost to the psychosocial wellbeing of minority ethnic children, as well as to their ethnic identities which were, at times, perceived as burdensome to acceptance amongst their majority peers.

Pedagogy plays an integral role in shaping children’s experiences in spaces within/between classrooms. This is evident in the pedagogic device [33] where teachers as specialised agents [34] overtly adopt an approach which “funnels and filters” [37] children into groups based on perceived ability shaping how children experience learning and interactions (with peers and teachers) and re/negotiate their academic and social identities. Such practices profoundly impact minority ethnic children who were more likely assigned to lower ability groups and less likely to experience upward movement as they progressed through school. The peripheralization of minority ethnic children was further compounded by interaction patterns between/within classes. Minority ethnic children (particularly Traveller girls) were most likely to be excluded from peer interactions. While patterns of inter-ethnic interactions are concerning,

it is vital to consider the power of the pedagogic device in defining/compounding how children see themselves and others as valued social and academic members within the school community. It is imperative to question whether pedagogical practices (such as ability grouping) are working in the best interests of minority ethnic children and affording them equal opportunities to learn and to their ethnic identities. Evidence from this paper builds on previous research [30,31] highlighting the labour associated with working to belong at cost to heritage identity and/or exclusion from peers.

Most striking was the emotional labour associated with working to belong. Minority ethnic children defined how they saw themselves and others through the structured spaces of ability grouping, evoking an embodied psychosocial response which included “pride” and “happiness” associated with high ability and “shame” and “upset” when being considered low ability. Minority ethnic children’s response to exclusion from peer groups was profound, embodied as “grief” and “fear”. Perhaps one of the most profound findings was the significant level at which minority ethnic children were experiencing teasing. Given the increased reporting of racism in Ireland more generally [8], findings capturing children’s experiences of racist teasing are concerning. Such experiences further compounded children’s exclusion from peers evoking a deeply embodied psychosocial response characterised by anger, frustration, fear, and sadness. The implications for considering how children “feel” such experiences in school are profound and warrant immediate and swift attention. The paucity of updated policy informing intercultural practice and addressing racism in schools is especially stark and is, without doubt, a failure of the state to ensure children from minority ethnic backgrounds have their best interests and right to ethnic identity realised.

## 5. Conclusions

Changing patterns in migration across the globe due to economic, educational, familial, or humanitarian factors means that the presence of transnational families will continue to ebb and flow through our societies and school systems. We are duty-bound to ensure minority ethnic children have a right to an education which prepares them “for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin” (Article 29 (1), UNCRC, 1989). It is incumbent upon states to ensure that children of a minority ethnic background have a right to their identity, a right to belong, and a right to equal opportunities to engage in a system that works in their best interests. Findings presented in this paper would suggest the contrary. In a globalised world where people have the right and freedoms to move to/between countries, there is a moral and ethical imperative for our institutions within our societies to ensure all children of all ethnic backgrounds are cared for in an equitable and fair manner.

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