‘My life is like a massive jigsaw with pieces missing’. How ‘lower-attaining’ children experience school in terms of their well-being.

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Abstract

‘Lower-attaining’ children are known to encounter negative experiences in school, including experiencing feelings of upset, shame and inferiority. Using extensive interview and observation data from the first two years of a five-year longitudinal study of 23 ‘lower-attaining’ children (age 7-9), we draw on Seligman’s theory of well-being to identify the children’s experiences of school in terms of their emotions, relationships and sense of achievement. Our analysis finds that on balance, these children are experiencing threats to their well-being in relation to their perceived lack of attainment and its associated shame, in an increasingly performative educational culture. We conclude that such threats are hampering the well-being of these children, which may cause both immediate and longer-term damage.

Keywords: well-being lower-attaining children mental health

Performative educational culture Martin Seligman

Introduction

The importance of considering the well-being of children accords with the increasing emphasis within schools, to pay attention not only to the educational progress of their pupils but also to their pupils’ sense of well-being (GOV.UK 2018). This is particularly important given the conclusions from a synthesis of international longitudinal studies by Clark et al. (2018, 213) which found that ‘mental health is the single biggest predictor of individual happiness’. When applying this result to schoolchildren, the findings are worrisome. For

example, the latest international assessment scores (OECD 2019) reported that although the United Kingdom (UK) attainment scores for 15 year olds had gone up, only 53% of pupils reported being satisfied with their lives at home and at school, compared to an international average of 67% of pupils reporting that they were satisfied with their lives. This below average result corresponds with the finding that the number of young people and children in the UK with reported mental health problems rose in 2017, and that one fifth of five to ten year olds had at least one mental health problem (NHS 2018). Consequently, well-being is an urgent matter to examine in relation to schoolchildren.

Well-being and schools

Although the term well-being is increasingly used in relation to mental health, a consensus on how to define it is difficult and so for the purposes of this article, the word well-being was taken as referring to a child's 'mood and feelings' (Clark et al. 2018, 5). Similarly, as it is difficult to reach a consensus on how best to analyze well-being, for this article we chose to do so using Seligman's theory of well-being (2011), as it is an established psychological theory that draws on a multiplicity of factors which in combination influence a person's sense of well-being.

Evidence collated by Clark et al. (2018) found that schools can play a major positive role in the well-being of a child and that the best predictor of adult well-being was not qualifications but one's 'emotional health in childhood' (Clark et al. 2018, 21). So, although we would argue that schools should not be health care providers, it must be acknowledged that schools have the potential to significantly enhance a child's well-being. Yet for some children schools fail to do so and numerous negative effects relating to schooling may happen, such as causing pupils to develop a lifelong dislike of formal learning. Schools may also lower a pupil's self-confidence level as school performance can affect the 'way we feel we are seen and judged

by others' (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, 113). Similarly, for pupils who are perceived as 'different' by other pupils and staff, possibly in terms of disability, class, or sexual orientation, they may experience exclusion and discrimination leading to lower self-confidence levels. Lastly, schools have also been accused of being a means by which the inequalities that are inherent in society generally, are reproduced (Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz 1996; Bourdieu 1998; Jackson 2010; Hargreaves 2015; Francis and Mills 2012; Warwick and Aggleton 2014; Schuller et al. 2004). Arguably, many of these negative effects have escalated since schools in England have increasingly been subjected to a culture of surveillance and accountability, resulting in a performative climate. This change followed the introduction of a National Curriculum in 1988 and an increasing politicisation of education by the New Labour government, as outlined in GOV. UK (1997). This was alongside the publication of school performance tables which compromised curriculum and pedagogy, as well as giving increasing emphasis to assessment (Roberts-Holmes 2015; Ball 2003) and in so doing, lowering the autonomy of teachers. In terms of the curriculum, timetables became heavily weighted towards the nationally assessed subjects (literacy and numeracy), which in turn left less room for non-assessed subjects such as music, drama and art, wherein less academic children may have the opportunity to thrive (Devine 2003). In terms of pedagogy, this led to increased teaching-to-the-test and collaterally to more emphasis being put on attainment grouping in which certain groups, such as those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic families (BAME) and white working class boys, have been found to be more disadvantaged (Bradbury 2018; Taylor and al. 2018; Hallam et al. 2003). Finally, in terms of assessment this performative culture has led to an increased frequency in testing, which is still present today and which exerts more pressure on children generally, since 'ability as measured on test scores' has become 'the be-all and end-all of education'(Reay 2017, 62).

Well-being and 'lower-attaining' schoolchildren

Considering these negative aspects of schooling, one would surmise that such damage is even more likely in the case of 'lower-attaining' children, and it has been found that 'lower-attaining' children were less positive about their schooling than higher-attaining children were (Konu and Lintonen 2006; Hascher 2007). In our study 'Children's Life-Histories in Primary Schools' (CLIPS) on which this article is based, we sought to examine the experiences of 'lower-attaining' children, though we excluded children with a special educational and health care plan, among whom research has already been carried out (Webster and Blatchford 2013). While we do not believe that a child should be defined according to their attainment levels, for the purposes of this article the term 'lower-attaining' has been applied, as it is commonly used within education. Likewise, it is important to note that although the words achievement and attainment are usually used synonymously, in this article they will not be. Rather, we use the word achievement to denote the positive feelings that may result when one has accomplished something that has required effort and the word attainment will be used to refer to educational attainment in school tests. The latter does not necessarily correlate with the former, as we are at pains to emphasize in all our work.

Previous evidence has suggested that 'lower-attaining' children can encounter several negative experiences in school. For example, they are more likely to be taught by less qualified staff, such as teaching assistants or newly qualified teachers (in secondary schools), alongside an increased possibility of being misallocated to 'ability' groups (Francis et al. 2017; Hallam et al. 2003; Marks 2016). McGillicuddy and Devine (2020, 1) found that when researching among 100 primary (*elementary*) schoolchildren, those who were in lower 'ability' groups frequently used words such as 'shame', 'upset' and 'inferiority' which contrasted with the positive words expressed by the children in higher 'ability' groups, such as 'pride', 'happiness' and 'confidence'. As there is an increased likelihood that some 'lower-attaining' children may also experience disadvantaged home circumstances such as poverty,

unemployment, debt and overcrowding (Marmot 2020), it may be that exposure to challenging school experiences encourages further feelings of fearfulness and powerlessness in them (Hobbs 2016; Muijs and Dunne 2010). Given this potentiality, it is imperative to identify how schools may negatively influence the well-being of 'lower-attaining' children.

Well-being theory

The theory of well-being proposed by Seligman (2011) purported that for a person to thrive, their well-being would be dependent on five elements: positive emotions; engagement; relationships; meaning; and accomplishment (or achievement). Due to limited space, this article will consider only three aspects of Seligman's theory, as these were the elements that emerged most clearly during our initial thematic analysis. These are:

- Positive emotions: feelings such as pleasure, love, joy, pride, hope.
- Relationships: which are positive and life enhancing.
- Accomplishment or achievement: feelings of having accomplished something which has been pursued for its own sake or achieving a recognised qualification. In this article we will focus on the achievement element only as it is more relevant to a school setting.

Seligman's theory (2011) arose out of the positive psychology movement that emerged following the discovery that there was a significant link between optimism and a strong immune system (Kamen-Siegel et al. 1991). Prior to this, psychology mainly tended to focus on examining people who had mental health problems, but this link between optimism and health led psychologists to change their focus; now they sought to identify the strategies that mentally healthy people used in order to recover from setbacks and remain optimistic. It was from this stance that Seligman (2011) developed a theory of well-being which has since be used in various contexts among both adults and children (Seligman 2018; Schueller and

Seligman 2010; Shoshani and Slone 2017). Although the theory is not without its critics (for instance Cigman 2012; Dodge et al. 2012), in this article we wanted to see if it could provide a helpful lens through which we could explore the well-being of 'lower-attaining' children.

Research design

Methods

This article involved the analysis of data that was collected during the first two years of our current research study (CLIPS), in an attempt to balance the previous survey-based studies that have been carried out among 'lower-attaining' children (e.g. MacIntyre and Ireson 2010). The study, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, is a longitudinal one using a life-history approach (Goodson and Sikes 2001) of which we are currently in the third year of five. It follows twenty-three children from age seven (year 3) until age twelve, (year 7: first year in secondary or high school) and is being carried out in southeast England, involving three researchers. Based on their professional judgement, the teachers identified these children, who did not hold a special educational and health care plan, as being the lowest-attainers in their classes for numeracy and/or literacy. The focus on these subject areas was because these are the core subjects within the English National Curriculum and the subjects most likely to involve attainment grouping. The overall aim is to discover the children's' experiences of school over five years of their schooling, which includes following the children if they unexpectedly change schools, as has already happened with three of them.

An interpretivist approach was adopted as we regard the social world as being 'an interpreted world' (Altheide and Johnston 1994, 489), an approach that accords with life histories, which we believe emerge from a 'joint product of the teller and the told' (Bruner 1990, 124). The research questions which guided the project were:

1. How do children who are identified as being ‘lower-attaining’ in numeracy and /or literacy, experience school in terms of their personal/ social flourishing and their learning, across five years of their school-life histories?

2. Which factors influence their experiences?

In this paper we report only on an exploratory analysis that was carried out using the narratives from twelve of our cohort, as the lead author had interviewed these twelve children herself over the first two years of the project and therefore understood their individual characteristics and behaviours well. This involved examining what the children had expressed in relation to positive emotions, relationships, and achievement.

Sample

The CLIPS project involves four schools who agreed to take part in the study: two are inner-city London schools, one suburban school near London and one rural school. In terms of demographics, all the schools are in relatively disadvantaged locations in relation to housing, income, education, and health. The schools had all been rated good or outstanding by the national Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED), when the project began. Six children, who their teachers identified as being ‘lower-attaining’ in literacy and /or numeracy when aged seven/eight, were recruited from each school. Of the twelve children on whom this article is based, eleven children self-identified as BAME and one as white British. Seven of this group had Pupil Premium status, denoting socio-economic disadvantage and for which schools receive extra educational funding; six were among the youngest in their classes; four were girls and eight were boys. During our first interview, the children chose a pseudonym and we assigned permanent pseudonyms to the schools too.

Data collection

Each term, the children were interviewed in a private room in their schools, mainly on their own, although twice in pairs. The interviews lasted 50-90 minutes which were preceded by the researchers observing them in their classes for twenty minutes to see how they interacted with their work, their teachers, and peers. These observations took place within a variety of lessons including music and physical education (P.E) and were then discussed with the children at the beginning of their interviews to ascertain what their reflections were on the observed lessons. We devised a variety of child-friendly activities such as sculpting, taking photographs, role play, and other play based activities in order to access their thoughts about school, similar in style to those outlined by Koller and San Juan (2015). By the end of the 2nd year we had conducted 107 interviews, 85 of which were conducted individually. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using a secure transfer system.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out to identify and report themes (Braun and Clarke 2006), initially by paper and pen, and then by using qualitative software (Nvivo) given the volume of data. This involved developing codes inductively as a team and revisiting the codes after each round of interviews and analysis, to ensure consensus in our coding. For this article, because the children were not asked directly about the concept of well-being, inferences were made from what emerged in their interviews. To do this, we drew on the codes: expressions of competence; expressions of incompetence; school as painful and difficult; and school as safe, supportive, comforting. We felt that these codes may contain the data most relevant to exploring what the children said in relation to their emotions, relationships, and achievements. In this article, Seligman's theory of well-being (2011) was used to analyse the narratives of 'lower-attaining children' in relation to their emotions, relationships and

achievements, as we drew upon some of the relevant codes which had emerged through our initial thematic analysis.

Ethics

The British Sociological Association (2017) ethical guidelines were used for this study and ethical permission was given by the university ethics committee as we ensured confidentiality, anonymity, non-traceability, informed consent and the right to withdraw. As we were engaging with children, we were careful to ensure they were not coerced into taking part. The project was explained orally to the children and assent was obtained from them. Written consent was obtained from their parents and their teachers, in whose classes we carried out observations. Recognising the sensitive nature of our study, we did not refer to the children as being 'lower-attaining', but emphasised that the study's aim was to hear of the experiences of children who struggled with their numeracy or literacy at times. In addition, given the longitudinal nature of this study, we regularly ask the children if they still wish to take part in the project, in case as they mature, they wish to withdraw.

Findings

Emotions

Overall children reported the following positive emotions: experiencing fun, happiness and excitement in school. These occurred in two contexts primarily: in their play and in their in-school friendships.

Positive emotions relating to play

In visit 4 children were asked to recall their memories from the Nursery to year 2 before we began interviewing them in year 3 and all spontaneously mentioned how much they had enjoyed playing during those years. For example, Saffa said:

> Yeah, I liked to play a lot. I think when I was in Reception, we had our own playground and we had a tree house that we always climbed into.

However, the happy memories from their early school years, appeared to diminish as the children progressed up the school. Zack (visit 5) observed that once he reached year 4: 'We didn't have toys. We only had books…it was boring. Too many books'.

Many children also mentioned how much they loved 'Golden Time' on Friday afternoons when they could play with any toys they wanted in class, and in one school the children spoke regularly of how much they loved their monthly sessions called 'Creativity Time'. During Creativity Time, children could choose to join in with an organised creative activity, which would last for a whole afternoon and crucially involve working alongside children from different school years. Even though Ryan moved schools six months into our study, he kept referring to how much he missed Creativity Time in his first school. However this only happened in one of the schools which may reflect the wider social and political discourses which prioritise academic subjects over creative ones (see Devine 2003, ch.3 for further discussion).

Negative emotions due to classwork

Notably, as the children began to speak of their later years, their positive emotions tended to be replaced by painful emotions, which were in relation to two areas: their classwork and the sanctions used within school.

Many children mentioned painful emotions around difficulties with their classwork, particularly numeracy or literacy, which their schools tended to spend each morning focusing on exclusively. Ryan (visit 3) spoke of having felt very nervous in years 2 and 3 because:

> I just felt really worried about everything…and then I was worried 'cos you don't have lots of time to think and sometimes doing times tables I hear the pencils back in trays and that noise makes you worried because I was going slowly.

When Neymar (visit 2) was asked to draw a face on a picture of a child who gets low test marks, he drew a sad face and wrote in a speech bubble that the child would be thinking: 'Why am I getting all of the things wrong…All these bad marks?'.

Negative emotions due to sanctions

Some of the painful emotions reported were as a direct result of having to miss playtime when they were unable to complete their classwork on time and so had to 'catch up' (*their term*). All the children found this to be upsetting and unfair, as Britney related:

> Britney (visit 4): Um, sometimes some of us must do the spelling test on Fridays and we must miss our golden time…because our teacher thinks it helps our learning.
> Interviewer: How come?
> Britney: I need more practice…but I think it's really unfair.

This issue was noted by Ryan (visit 3) when he compared his new school to his previous one and commented:

> One of the things that happens often in this school – the teacher makes you miss your break if you're not focussing and it's really annoying…so when I started here, I was quite nervous that I wouldn't get out to play. And sometimes you must stay in after you have eaten your lunch.

In Ryan's case, this stopped happening when his mother complained about this to his teacher. However, such parental intervention was less likely to be available for the other children whose parents lacked the confidence to challenge a teacher.

Such restrictions on playtime meant that for these children, who were already struggling in certain prescribed areas of the curriculum, there was the additional burden of being sanctioned for being unable to complete their work on time. Yet arguably one would surmise that in terms of well-being, these children were even more in need of their playtimes, than those who had been struggling less with their classwork. Baines and Blatchford (2019) reported that set play opportunities have increasingly diminished in school timetables and additionally that in over 60% of primary (*elementary*) schools, teachers kept children in

during break or lunch times due to poor behaviour or having to finish their classwork. So, in the case of ‘lower-attaining’ children, their play opportunities were more likely to have been more frequently diminished. Such an omission we would argue is isolating and potentially stigmatising for these children, as not only does it visibly amplify their academic struggles, but it also thwarts their opportunities to socially participate on parity with other children during playtime (Fraser 2019). Essentially this is denying their human right to ‘play’ (UNICEF 1989, article 31) and so in this way, the two key areas in which our children had expressed experiencing positive emotions, play and friendships, were being obstructed. Finally, missing play contravened another human right, to ‘relax’ (ibid.), despite relaxation being important for a child’s well-being, as it redresses the impact of stressful experiences (The Children’s Society 2015). Given that many ‘lower-attainers’ will spend most of their morning working on subjects they struggle with and may well dislike (numeracy and literacy), it is vital that this source of stress is counterbalanced by the opportunity to enjoy positive activities, free from the ‘continual compliance’ and ‘surveillance’ of their classrooms (Devine 2003, 123).

Relationships

The relationships in school that the children spoke of most were with their peers and their teachers, which in both cases contained positive and negative aspects.

Peers

Positively. The abiding impression which all the sample children gave about their experiences of school was of how much they enjoyed playing with their friends. This was noticeable when they spoke retrospectively of their early schooling days, as their recollections all focussed on their play, their friends and some of their teachers. Lucy

appeared to sum up the general feeling as she recalled her early school days: 'We used to do a lot of fun things together' (visit 4).

Seligman (2011, 20) proposed that one of the main reasons why relationships promote well-being is because it is only in relationships that we can show kindness to others, a positive trigger for feeling good. This was illustrated by Alvin (visit 3) as when he was asked to take a photograph of a place in school where he felt cared for, he chose his classroom because:

> I love it because a lot of people take care of me, they play with me. When I'm upset, they come to me and I love it because they're so nice to me.

Several children mentioned appreciating the help they received from the other pupils in their class, although Lucy and Zack felt frustrated at times when they had to sit beside pupils who tried to copy their work.

Negatively. However, like many other schoolchildren, peer relationships could also bring pain when friends argued in the playground. Consequently, when Britney was asked to photograph a place in school where she felt most scared, she chose the playground. Another negative aspect of peer relationships was a fear of being laughed at if they gave the wrong answer in class. This was expressed by Lucy, Mohammed, Saffa and Landon, which may have been more pronounced due to our children being 'lower-attaining'.

Teachers

Positively. All the children spoke of experiencing several positive encounters with their teachers even though they were critical of them as well. Revealingly, in visit 5, the children watched a video clip in which a child actor was being treated unkindly by the school staff and this clip evoked a stronger emotional response than we had anticipated. As Mohammed said, '…the kid's being kind to the teachers, and the teachers don't even care' and Alvin said that if he were treated like that in his school, he would say to the teachers:

> “Get another job, I don’t want you here, you are just too rude to the children” – teachers are here to make the children behave and to learn things and…to make their lives better. It’s not to shout at them and be bad at them.

The children’s responses revealed that they had certain high expectations of how a teacher should behave. It emerged that their expectations of teachers were that they should be kind, helpful and friendly towards children. For example, Britney (visit 2) likened her teachers to being her parents as they ‘…look after us, so no one can like hurt us or do anything that is really bad to us’.

Negatively. However, there were negative aspects to their relationship with their teachers too, as several children (Mohammed, Neymar, Eleanor, Landon, and Alvin) spoke of fearing teachers who gave out sanctions too frequently. They also feared teachers who shouted a lot. For instance, Alvin spoke of how their teacher had shouted at some of them severely due to their low-test scores, which he then appeared to rationalise by saying:

> Yeah, the teacher gets tired, because we done that like five times and we just didn’t get it still… then people keep forgetting, and the teacher was like screaming… but when she screams they make tears come out.

Interestingly, Alvin was not alone in such a rationalisation, as Max, Landen and Jake also did this. Rather, all four children showed great loyalty to their teacher, despite expressing their upset at her publicly reprimanding them. Reflecting on this loyalty, suggested to us that the children were trying to make sense of how to cope with their teacher, who was sometimes responsive to their needs and sometimes not. Pace and Hemmings (2007) proposed that authority relations between teachers and students are inherently capricious, and listening to the narratives suggested that although at times their teachers relied on traditional authority (that they should be obeyed because of their designated role as a teacher), at other times the teachers appeared to rely on different strategies. Metz (1978) suggested that these strategies could be: exchange (using incentives in exchange for cooperation); personal influence (use of charm to cajole or

persuade students) or coercion (reprimanding or embarrassing students). In the examples given above and from the children's other descriptions, we would speculate that the authority this teacher appeared to exercise involved a combination of all three such methods, which led to the children experiencing an unpredictability with their teacher. One would surmise that such an unpredictable core relationship adversely affected their sense of well-being in school.

Achievement

Positively. Seligman spoke of how feelings of having achieved or successfully completed something could positively influence a person's sense of well-being. Many of our sample children spoke positively of how much they loved art (Saffa, Lucy), computing (Ryan), P.E. (Mohammed), drumming (Alvin) and outer space (Zack), possibly as these subjects did not involve assessments and so the children felt more confident and relaxed in them. Importantly, we would like to emphasize that we considered the children in our study to be 'lower-attaining' in only a limited aspect of the curriculum, as we know that they had many achievements and interests in other areas. Yet there appeared to be an awareness among the children that such interests had 'little status and recognition' educationally (Reay 2017, 65) and the relative lack of 'value of some forms of learning and intelligence' (Devine 2003, 44).

Negatively. In contrast, many of the sample children spoke negatively about their literacy and numeracy lessons in school as they seemed to assume their attainment scores represented their achievements. For some, these struggles were connected to being in the lower 'ability' groups which has been shown to lead to a 'double disadvantage' (Taylor et al. 2017, 328) but for nearly all the children, their negative emotions centred around expressing fears of failing and how this might impact on their

future vocational prospects. Such a high frequency of negative emotions associated with these children's fear of failure is particularly alarming given that, although other kinds of fear can diminish as a child grows older, test anxiety tends to rise with age (McDonald 2001).

Fears of failure. In one data collection activity (visit 5) the children were asked to set up a doll's house as a classroom in preparation for a test, using toy animals as pupils. This task elicited much insight into their views of testing and reinforced the relationship they made between getting high marks in tests and feeling happy. This was epitomized by Ryan (visit 2), when he was asked to describe how a child who had scored high marks in a test would feel, he said: 'Well, he's calm – he's ecstatic….because he doesn't need to worry about anything'. However, the overwhelming feeling in relation to testing, was a fear of performing badly. Fear can denote an anticipatory thought that something unpleasant might be about to happen and can encompass emotions such as anxiety, worry and nervousness; these three words were used many times by our sample children as they played in their mock test classroom. Zack (visit 4) spoke of dreading the teacher saying 'time up' before he had finished his test, as this would make him feel like crying, in case he got into 'big trouble' with the teacher, and Landon (visit 4) spoke of 'badly shaking' during some tests. Neymar (visit 1) also spoke of how much he feared doing badly in tests:

> Today I got 7 out of 30 in my test and I started crying. But there's going to be another test, on 11th July and it's going to be hard because you only have two minutes to do it.

Later he spoke of planning to pretend to be ill on the day of the next test. He also feared changing year groups because: '…the lessons get harder and harder, and I'm scared that if I will get it wrong then I'll get in big trouble'. It was unclear who Neymar thought he would get into 'big trouble' with as he told us that he liked his teachers, but he did speak often of how his older brothers had dropped out of their secondary (*high*) school prematurely because they did

not like their classmates, so it may be that part of this anxiety stemmed from home. Jackson (2010, 45) contended that for some working-class children there can be a pressure 'to do better' than their unsuccessful parents or unsuccessful siblings, as appeared to be the case for Neymar. Nonetheless, regardless of where the pressure was coming from, Neymar felt anxiety around testing and by visit 6, Neymar's views about school appeared to have become more negative:

> Interviewer: So how do you feel each morning when you leave your house to come to school?
>
> Neymar: I feel like my life's getting worser.

One wonders whether his motivation levels may diminish and so lead him to becoming disaffected by school as he reaches his teenage years.

A sense of how invested the children perceived their parents to be in their children's achievement appeared in many of the interviews. When Mohammed (visit 2) imagined what a higher-attaining child might be thinking, he said: 'His mum will probably be so happy'. Neymar (visit 4) spoke of wanting to focus more in class 'Because I want to make my mum happy'. Conversely, when Alvin (visit 5) spoke of his latest low result in a test, he said: 'And then I felt embarrassed, because my mum was like "You're getting 6 out of 20? – you should do better"'.

These ever-present negative experiences were most salient during visit 5 in one school, as our visits coincided with the class receiving the results of a test, in which several of the sample children had scored low marks. The teacher gave these results out verbally to the whole class whilst we were observing them and so we asked them in their interviews later that day, how they had felt when this had happened. They all spoke of feeling upset by it. Alvin said the teacher had 'got angry' because he had only got 6 out of 20. Landon said he felt 'depressed' and that if it had been a real test and not a practise one, he would have felt 'ashamed'. Max

said: ‘So, the teacher got so mad when I got 7/ 20…it was embarrassing…I felt very sad and disappointed’.

Later in the same interview, Max continued:

> Max: …welcome to my world. In another test I only got 2.
> Interviewer: What does it feel like in your world?
> Max: Sad…disappointing… My life is like a massive jigsaw with pieces missing. It’s like a story and then there’s a missing page.

Given that this was not a high stakes test, it was alarming to hear the crushing effect that Max’s low-test score had on him alongside the public humiliation he endured. Strikingly, it was obvious that although these boys were disappointed in their test results and even though most of the class had also gained low marks, they all blamed themselves for underperforming, rather than their teacher. This is not surprising in light of Layard (2009, 104) construing that ‘lower-attaining’ children have ‘significantly lower self-esteem’ since the introduction of national tests in England.

Fears of future failure. Not only were the children in our study disappointed about their low performance in tests, but they were also fearful that their present difficulties prophesised an unsuccessful adult life. When Saffa (visit 2) was asked what the child who got low marks might be thinking, she drew tears on the child and wrote ‘I’m crying because I always get low marks and what happens when I get to my GCSE’s?’ Later she spoke of failure at school possibly leading to homelessness and becoming a ‘nobody’. Saffa’s response probably reflected the messages she was hearing both at school and at home, as she had older siblings sitting high stakes exams. Nonetheless it was concerning that at eight years of age, Saffa conflated performing well in school exams with thriving in adulthood, thus confirming research by Reay and William (1999) which showed how children’s identities as learners were constructed through the assessment process. This then led the children to believing that

poor academic performance at 11 years predicted an unsuccessful adult life, rather than to 'good jobs and a good life' (Hargreaves, Quick, and Buchanan 2019, 8).

Discussion and conclusion

Seligman's theory (2011) did prove to be a beneficial means by which we could gain insight in relation to the well-being of these 'lower-attaining' children. By using this lens we found that many of our findings echoed aspects of prior research (Devine 2003; Hallam et al. 2003; Jackson 2010; Marks 2016) as well as extending them, as we heard that although there appeared to be a balance between the children's positive and negative experiences in relation to their emotions and relationships, this was not the case when it came to their sense of achievement. This is a significant finding as Seligman reasoned that although no one element defines well-being, each contributes to it and so the existence of a lack in one element, will invariably affect a person's overall sense of well-being.

The importance of achievement

Although many of the children spoke positively of enjoying art, computing and P.E, such instances were outweighed by numerous negative stories relating to failure in core curriculum areas, as well as their worries of how their current 'failure' could impact their future lives as adults. Their stories suggested that the frequency of these negative experiences was detrimental to their well-being as they spoke of feeling anxious and fearful often. This is not surprising given that these children spent every school-morning working on their most challenging subjects, which must have affected their general feelings about their difficulties. Their anxiety and fear were also not surprising as having to undergo regular assessments, in which the children were less likely to reach the expected level of attainment than other children in their class, must have been a powerful source of worry and a threat to their self-confidence. Such frequent tests provided multiple opportunities to reinforce these children's

status as ‘lower-attaining’ pupils to themselves, their peers, and their teachers. Also, it served to remind the children that the knowledge they did have of other subjects, had little status within a school setting. Although we would suggest that such school attainment scores applied only to certain aspects of the curriculum and did not reflect on the child’s overall potential, how can a young child see that? Marmot (2004) argued that the imbalance between effort and reward was detrimental for an adult’s well-being and so by extension, we would argue that it would be even more detrimental for the well-being of a child, who despite trying hard, still does not manage to ‘achieve’ in terms of the knowledge that school values. Our findings have highlighted how the current results-driven competitive system that values high-attainment in very limited curriculum areas and assessments, is itself contributing to a diminished sense of well-being among certain children. One can only speculate that such perpetual unrewarded effort may lead to educational disenfranchisement during adolescence and beyond.

The importance of play

One major finding in this study was that the children’s lack of achievement in certain prescribed school tasks curtailed their opportunities to play, despite play and friendships emerging as their most enjoyable activities in school. Frequently missing playtime to finish classwork essentially denied these children opportunities to participate on parity with other children, which was both isolating and stigmatising. Therefore, we would argue that imposing ‘catch up’ sessions during playtimes, can be seriously damaging as not only does play contribute to children’s physical well-being but also crucially to their mental well-being, as it gives them the opportunity to unwind and rebalance the strain they experience in the classroom. However, for schools to refrain from this practice, policymakers will need to cease prescribing one-size-fits-all curricula and assessment tasks that demand children to sit

inactively in class and which may be inappropriate for some of them. We would argue that the habit of using playtime to 'catch up', reflects the immense pressure that schools feel to complete the government prescribed tasks and which teachers themselves feel unhappy about and constrained by (Devine 2003). Nonetheless, it is imperative that 'lower-attaining' children are protected from becoming collateral damage in such a climate.

The importance of well-being

In view of these exploratory findings, we can come to some conclusions about how several of the 'lower-attaining' children in our study experienced school in terms of their well-being. Seligman reasoned that achievement was an important element that contributed to one's well-being, so to have a deficit in this area is significant. Thus we would conclude that on balance, these children were experiencing challenges to their well-being in relation to their perceived lack of achievement and its associated shame, endemic to the current climate of emphasis on high-attainment in tests of extremely limited curriculum areas. Considering the combination of the socio-economic disadvantage of many of the children in our study, with their low-attainment, we would suggest that several of our children would have been adversely affected by the classroom experiences they recounted to us. Therefore, as part of the drive to improve the experiences of 'lower-attaining' children, it is essential that they are given more opportunities to have their views about this matter heard, in accordance with their human rights (UNICEF 1989, Article 12; Lundy 2007).

Given Clark's claim that the best predictor of adult well-being is not qualifications but one's 'emotional health in childhood' (Clark et al. 2018, 21), it is important that the school system enhances rather than hinders the sense of well-being experienced by all children, especially by those designated as 'lower-attaining', and thereby equips them to become socially participatory adults. To ignore doing so, may have mental health consequences both in the

immediate and in the future, not just at a personal level but also at a societal and economic level as well as in terms of the children's basic human rights.

Lastly, at the time of writing, schools are closed due to a pandemic and so it may be that we can learn more about the role that school plays in terms of the well-being of these 'lower-attaining' children, when we later ask them to reflect on this enforced period out of school.

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