"Look at them! They all have friends and not me": the role of peer relationships in schooling from the perspective of primary children designated as "lower-attaining"

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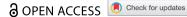
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the peer relationship experiences of 23 primary-school children who had been designated as "lower-attaining". It is written against the backdrop of the mental health crisis among young people in Britain. Using John Macmurray's principles of equality and freedom as underpinning positive personal relationships, it investigates how "lower-attaining" children experience their peer relationships in a climate where attainment in mathematics and English is politically prioritised over the nurturing of positive relationships. We drew on the recent literature pertaining to peer relationships in general; and peer relationships among "lower-attainers" in particular. We build on the assumption that positive personal relationships support creative learning and high attainment. Using 107 extended individual and paired/triad activity-interviews as well as lesson observations every term over six school terms, we carried out research in four sample primary-schools. Our findings illustrated the high value put on friendships by sample children, despite a strong emphasis in schooling on individual competition. The children described instances of feeling troubled by their relationships; and their "low-attainment" status appeared to be linked to some, if not many, of their troubles. They sometimes felt excluded from the main body of their classes due to emphasis on high-attainment. We conclude by proposing a greater emphasis on collaboration and the nurturing of relationships in schooling, which in turn could support these children's creative learning and attainment.

Introduction

There is a limited field of research focused on children's lived experiences of peer relationships in primary-schooling (but see Burke & Grosvenor, 2004; Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2004; Williamson et al., 2020). This article seeks to address this gap and also contribute to the literature on the influence of grouping by attainment on peer relationships (Papachristou et al., 2020; Webster & Blatchford, 2013; Woodgate et al., 2020). This article is written against the backdrop of a mental health crisis among young people in Britain today (Mínguez, 2020; OECD, 2019). The first study of its kind, its overall aims were to investigate the personal and social aspects of children's experiences in schooling,

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especially those that have been highlighted as playing a key role in this mental health crisis. We planned to study across 13 consecutive school terms how individual pupils, designated as "lower-attaining", experienced the following personal-social aspects of their school-life:

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

In the following paragraphs, we first attempt to define "good" relationships with reference to John Macmurray's philosophical principles which foreground progressive pedagogies; we then explore literature related to peer relationships generally; next we briefly survey the literature on peer relationships within the context of grouping by attainment specifically; and finally, before presenting our methodology and our findings, we suggest some possible barriers to children's establishment of good peer relationships in primary-schools with particular emphasis on those children designated as lower-attaining. All these aspects are then brought into the discussion at the end of the paper and implications for schooling suggested. The aim of the paper is to illustrate how this particular sample of primary children described their own experiences of peer relationships. The purpose is that educators, including academics, can draw on insights from those most affected by peer relationships – these children themselves – when understanding and making decisions about appropriate schooling.

The value of good peer relationships in schooling

We draw on studies of 20th century philosopher, John Macmurray's, work for their timely focus on the central place of relationships in schooling; and equally timely emphasis on freedom and equality in personal relationships (Fielding, 2012; Stern, 2012). Michael Fielding (2012) explained:

> We are, in Macmurray's view, deeply and irrevocably relational beings whose creative energies are best realised in and through our encounters with others: as he said … 'We need one another to be ourselves' … We should educate the emotions, place relationships and care at the heart of teaching and learning. (p. 654, citing Macmurray, 1961)

Stern (2012) elaborated further:

> For Macmurray, it is the personal relationships that are the main purpose of schooling … the purpose of the learning is not the subject itself, what is taught is not arithmetic or history, but people. (p. 732, citing Macmurray, 1946)

Fielding (1996) outlined how in personal relationships, we were free to be "most fully ourselves, most fully human" (p. 51). He reiterated Macmurray's emphasis on equality and freedom:

> Equality is a condition of freedom in human relations. For if we do not treat one another as equals, we exclude freedom from the relationship. Freedom, too, conditions equality. For if there is a constraint between us then there is fear (p. 10).

In this paper, we therefore consider "good" personal relationships to be those in which children feel they can be most fully themselves, most fully human and in which they feel free and equal with their peers. The consensus in recent research literature indicates that good peer relationships are of central importance to school-children for a range of social as well as cognitive developmental reasons (e.g. Sellars & Imig, 2021; Tze et al., 2021; Wentzel, 2017). Williamson et al. (2020) challenge the assumption that it is resources that lead to children's cognitive development, suggesting rather that as children interact with peers and engage playfully with concepts and ideas, this is how they develop. This claim is underpinned by Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, that learning is fundamentally social and cultural as well as cognitive. In his theory, new knowledge is not acquired by being presented with it by a teacher. Rather, an idea is seeded by a teacher but will not become integral to the thought, speech and action of the learner, in a creative sense, until the individual has tested it through interaction with others – including peers – in the cultural environment. Then the learner may become creative with their use of the new knowledge.

The key role of relationships in such creative learning is echoed in the Relationships Motivation Theory (RMT) of Ryan and Deci (2019), one branch of their Self-Determination Theory (SDT). These theories embraced the idea that to enjoy the intrinsic motivation required to learn creatively, the learner needed to feel not only competent and autonomous (SDT), but also *personally connected to their peers* in the immediate community. They needed:

> … a sense of belongingness and connectedness to the persons, group, or culture disseminating a purpose, or what in SDT we call a sense of relatedness. [This means] feeling respected and cared for. (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 64)

These theories, like Vygotsky's, suggest that peer relationships are a key aspect of creative learning. The satisfaction or frustration of this need for relatedness leads people to "differentially invest in the activities or goals they are actively pursuing" (Ryan & Deci, 2019, p. 115); that is, where children feel less connected, they are less likely to engage creatively with learning. At best, peers form a learning community through a network of egalitarian peer relationships to enjoy the respect and care that is necessitated for the act of creative learning. Even when learning is not creative or is measured through formal examinations, good peer relationships seem to be associated positively with academic accomplishments throughout school (Guo et al., 2018).

Secondly and relatedly, time spent with peers and/or friends can provide personal help for children to develop identity and emotional wellbeing, in addition to cognitive development. Mínguez (2020) provided evidence for personal relationships being the strongest factor for predicting happiness according to the Subjective Wellbeing literature. One aspect leading to wellbeing is that peer relationships can buffer the negative effects of stress or fear (McMahon et al., 2020). For example, Baines and MacIntyre's (2019) research illustrated that enjoyment of sitting with peers to eat a meal was positively related to greater liking of lessons in school and school liking generally. Sadly, there is also a substantial literature that documents the deleterious effects of unsupportive, conflicted social relationships on children's mental health and wellbeing (Maunder & Monks, 2019; Ng-Knight et al., 2019). For instance, poor-quality friendships have been identified as a risk factor for the onset and persistence of depressive disorders in school-aged children

(Goodyer et al., 1991). Ryan et al. (2019) distinguish between three predominant roles that peers play in relation to identity development and emotional wellbeing: as socialising agents; providing emotional and social support; and providing a context where a social status hierarchy is established – which can be either positive or negative. Maunder and Monks (2019) and Ng-Knight et al. (2019) both proposed that children with a reciprocated best friend had higher friendship quality and higher peer identification than others. This is partly because friendships provide a source of companionship and entertainment for children. Baines and MacIntyre (2019) noted that boys were more likely than girls to express the view that they had lots of friends and that conversations amongst boys in particular often contained references to humour. Humour and fun may function to build a sense of affiliation and cohesion within the group and help foster acceptance and respect for diversity.

The role of attainment grouping in disrupting good peer relationships

We designed our research on the assumption, drawn mainly from secondary-school studies, that grouping by attainment could lead to unsatisfactory peer relationships. These could then interfere with the social and/or cognitive development and wellbeing of lower-designated children. Increasing numbers of studies (e.g. Francis et al., 2019; Hallam & Ireson, 2003; Hallam & Parsons, 2013) have demonstrated that attainment scores are negatively affected by low-set grouping, potentially due to "lower-set" children's poorer sense of belonging in class or school; reduced motivation and aspiration; general feelings of unhappiness or anger; and a dislike of school (Boaler et al., 2000; Reay, 2018). Significantly, a recent paper by Papachristou et al. (2020) used quantitative data from the Millennium Cohort Study and found a strong correlation between grouping by attainment *within the classroom* and peer relationships, with those designated as "lower-attainers" within the class having the least satisfactory peer relationships. However, scant attention has been given to the experiences leading to these outcomes as narrated by the pupils who have been subjected to such grouping.

A few researchers have, however, collected some qualitative data in primary-schools to investigate the human experiences of attainment grouping there. For example, Webster and Blatchford (2013) investigated experiences of pupils with Special Educational Needs/disabilities in primary-school, many of whom were in "lower-attainment" groups. These children described their limited access to other pupils, compared with "higher-attainment" groups, which made relationship-forming more difficult. The primary-school studies by Hallam et al. (2003) and Dunne et al. (2007) used stand-alone interviews to explore primary pupils' experiences of grouping. In these, pupils emphasised difficult social and behavioural issues within "lowest" groups (Hallam et al., 2003); and illustrated pupils' resistance to being taken away from "higher-attaining" peers for "lower-attainment" group work in mathematics or English (Dunne et al., 2007). Marks's (2013) work illustrated "lower-attainment" group primary pupils' vivid awareness of their comparative deficiency and how this depressed their motivation and ultimately learning. It also suggested that attainment-grouping may happen at least as much *within-head* (our term) by the teacher as in physical placement; in other words, how teachers *perceive* children's attainment may determine how teachers treat them differently, more than

any actual measurement of attainment. Teachers' treatment then influences how children relate to peers, which influences how children learn.

Differentiated "attainment" only came to be measured in English primary-schools when National Assessments were introduced in 1988. Ofsted inspectors in the 1990s specifically required categorisation of primary-school pupils as "high", "middle" or "low" attainers in selected subjects, thereby separating children out according to their attainment (Hart, 1998). This shift in policy occurred at the same time as the increased global acceptance of neo-liberal values politically, in which competition and measurement played a defining role (Baumann & Harvey, 2021). One outcome appears to be the increase in some children's experiences of exclusion within school. According to The Children's Society, 50% of children in the UK have reported being left out by other children in school classes at least once in the last month (Mínguez, 2020). Grouping by attainment is likely to contribute to this sense of exclusion. Where diverse groups within school do not enjoy equal status in terms of attainment, negative patterns occur in what Devine (2013) calls "a circular dialectical loop that naturalises under achievement" (Abstract).

Ambreen (2020) reported how, in her study, the presence of children from lower-attainment groups in mixed-attainment groups:

> … was not appreciated by those children from both the average- and high-ability groups. They stigmatized their peers from the low ability group (Hallam & Parsons, 2013) as 'low knowledgeable and unhelpful.' This could explain their sense of 'uncertainty of feeling a part and apart'.

This sense of exclusion thereby becomes a barrier to good peer relationships as well as an outcome of these, leading to concerns about the quality of children's learning, social life and wellbeing generally (Dunn & Layard, 2009).

Further barriers to the nurturing of good peer relationships among children

Children who find peer bonding difficult are likely to have more difficulties at school in general (Papachristou et al.,2020). Children with disabilities such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may find it particularly difficult to relate to peers. Mikami (2010) has illustrated in particular that such children are often peer rejected; and rated by parents, teachers, and observers to have poor social skills compared to their peers. There is much literature emphasising the need to support such children to feel included in their classroom communities (e.g. Abed & Shackelford, 2020; Allan & Omarova, 2020; Schuelka et al., 2019; Vitalaki et al., 2018). However, Woodgate et al. (2020) provide evidence that despite society's efforts to promote social inclusion, children with disabilities continue to report feeling lonely and excluded, having limited contact socially and encountering systemic barriers (e.g. bullying, discrimination). Children designated as "lower-attaining" are more likely than others to have ADHD or ASD.

However, inclusive practice needs to extend even beyond disability to all aspects of difference that might make children "other", such as ethnicity or home background (Veck et al., 2021), in order that these children's opportunities for learning flourish. Reay's (2006) study of pupil narratives about the social conditions of learning uncovered "aspects of

both pupil peer group cultures and classroom dynamics that work against fairness, collegiality and a sense of community in classrooms" (p. 171). Peer relationships were made less satisfactory by competition among the peer group within a power hierarchy strategised by social class, gender and ethnicity differences. Reay emphasised the importance of recognising "the school's role in the development of such invidious pupil hierarchies" (p. 179). These power dynamics inevitably silenced certain, marginalised groups of pupils and made bonding with other peers more problematic for them. In such an environment, children who attain consistently highly might come to prefer to work alone than engage in peer work (Ambreen, 2020), thereby reducing opportunities for all children to talk and form relationships during class. Indeed, any instructional methods that aim to foster competition or even "independence" may obstruct the fostering of good relationships (Juvonen, 2018). Other barriers to the creation of good peer relationships may relate to the fact that opportunities are declining for children to engage in enjoyable face-to-face interaction with peers in "open settings" both in and outside school (Baines & Blatchford, 2009). Children are spending less time socialising with peers and are less engaged in play outside the classroom (Baines & Blatchford, 2009) especially because, in nearly all schools, breaktimes and lunchtimes are used as occasions to catch up on incomplete work. Other barriers may include lack of information or guidance for children about feeling comfortable with initiating new relationships and the close proximity of adults which may hinder peer interactions (Leigers et al., 2017).

Research design

The originality of this paper lies in its in-depth exploration of peer relationships among children designated as "lower-attaining". It also lies in its use of comments by children themselves over six terms of their schooling, to illuminate how designation by attainment and peer relationships might interconnect; and what the consequences for their learning and wellness might be. We investigated the following sub-questions within our main research questions:

> How do these children experience peer relationships in schooling?
>
> What barriers do they describe to the nurturing of good peer relationships in their school learning?

Sample

We gained access to two inner-city schools, to which we gave the pseudonyms Brandon Grove and Jayden School, in addition to one suburban academy, Sandown, and one rural school, Sunnyfields. All the schools had relatively disadvantaged demographics, had been assessed as good or outstanding by Ofsted and had at least two classes in each year group. We recruited them by asking among our professional networks of educators for possible schools and then approaching the schools to see if they were interested. Once they agreed, we asked each school to invite six pupils to participate, whom they had identified through testing as their lowest-attainers at the end of Year 3 (aged 7–8). We excluded children with a state-funded designation as having a learning disability

(Education and Health Care Plan, EHCP) but some of the children had been categorised, or became categorised later in the project, as having Special Educational Needs including ADHD and ASD. One child in our sample moved away, leaving 23 of our original 24 children. By the end of the second year, our 23 children were attending seven different schools because three children moved schools locally. Our sample consisted of 12 boys and 11 girls with the following characteristics: 14/23 spring/summer-born children born between April 1st and 31 August 2010, indicating their relative young age compared to their peers; 14/23 children classified as non-white British; and nine children with Pupil Premium status indicating social disadvantage. This informally reflected the attainment grouping research that spring/summer-borns, ethnic minorities and those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately assigned to low groups (Francis et al., 2019) although we did not find the anticipated majority of boys; and no child had English as a second language (ESL). In our first meeting with each child in the sample, they chose a "secret" name, which became their permanent pseudonym.

The four schools in the sample used a mixture of attainment grouping strategies and these shifted over the two years within each school. Two schools had top, bottom and middle sets for either mathematics or literacy – but not both until Year 6. In one school only, multi-grade class grouping meant that those who struggled most with maths sat in a class with children of a lower age. Three schools had withdrawal groups for the "lowest-attainers" for part of each day. All four schools had some form of *within-class* attainment grouping whereby children sat in groups according to their attainment for all or part of the time. We propose that many of them were also grouped according to the teacher's *within-head* attainment grouping (our term; based on Marks, 2013) ie they were categorised by teachers' perceptions of their attainment; if not also through physical placement.

This paper draws on data collected up to the end of the sixth visit of the project, the third visit of its second year, addressing data from Term 1 of the project [TERM1] through to Term 6 [TERM6]. We report how we started in summer 2018 when the sample children were aged 7–8, and cover the time up to the end of the second term of their Year 5 school year (aged 9–10) in 2020, just before the first Covid19 Lockdown in England.

Instruments

We developed a range of child-friendly data collection activities that were simultaneously productive in data and enjoyable for children. Altogether, we carried out 107 activity-interviews of 50–90 minutes each, meeting with every child once per term in most cases. We conducted 22 activity-interviews with two or three children at a time; and 85 individual ones. We also carried out a 20 minute classroom observation for each child on nearly every visit. All interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. Before each visit, the research team planned to explore a specific research focus for the visit, for example, one focus was "children's responses to tests". During each visit, we carried out two or three activities through which the children's responses around the chosen focus could be recorded. For example, to address children's responses to testing, we provided a dolls' house and invited children to set it up with toy furniture, ready for a test; and then populate it with plastic animals to represent children taking a test. This allowed them to express their thoughts and feelings in an indirect way that seemed to encourage honest,

unguarded responses. Other activities included drawing, modelling, playing games, carrying out rating exercises, sorting quotations and informal conversations.

As we worked for 50–90 minutes with each child every term over six terms, and observed most of them each time too, we built up close bonds with the children which further encouraged them to speak with us freely. We also aimed not to discuss the children with teachers or parents so that our data were based exclusively on the children's own ways of seeing schooling.

Analysis

We analysed our data inductively, aiming to let themes emerge from the data. Initially, as a team of three researchers, we developed codes inductively for eight pupils each; then discussed and refined codes collaboratively. After the first term, we fed all our data into NVivo11 and applied the codes we had previously agreed to the new data-set. As we coded each term, we constructed new codes inductively, which we discussed frequently to make sure that we were all satisfied with new additions. We then agreed as a team on appropriately identified themes and which aspect of our findings each theme represented. At the end of six terms, we were then able to print out reports for all children for 36 codes from 107 interviews. For this current paper, we drew primarily on data labelled under the following themes: Relationships with peers and friendships; Helping among peers; and Status subordination, exclusion or isolation. Our analyses aimed to provide rich illustrations of themes that emerged among the 23 children, providing educators and researchers with an insight into how peer relationships were described by these children themselves, across six terms, in light of their designation as "lower-attainers". Such detail has not as yet been shared by other researchers (see above). While some patterns were observed across children, our emphasis was on the child's individual experience as we learnt about it over time. We therefore did not seek to generalise our findings but we aimed to make our findings detailed enough that other educators could relate the details to their own situations.

Ethics

We followed British Sociological Association (2017) guidance on ethical procedures and had clearance from our university Ethics Committee. We gained pupils' verbal and written consent and emphasised that the process was voluntary and they could leave at any time. We explained in writing and verbally what the project would entail. We shared this with parents and teachers and gained all participants' opt-in consent at repeated intervals. We found ways of explaining why children had been chosen, without suggesting that children lacked talent. We maintained with the greatest rigour the confidentiality and anonymity of the interview data.

Findings

The importance of good relationships

Anna and Summer were two of seven children in our sample of 23 who told us explicitly that the *only* part of school they liked was friendships:

> The only thing I like about school is that I get to meet my friends [Anna, TERM4].

Summer [TERM6] explained that, for her, the whole point of school was:

> That I get to see my friends. … I want to see my friends because like it makes me happy.

Max [TERM6] similarly explained that what he really wanted to gain from schooling overall was "to make friends" because "making friends is a key part of being happy". Ryan [TERM5] told us that he believed that good relationships were more important than high attainment. The children described enjoying being liked by their friends, playing with them, belonging to a little group of them, being calmed by them or finding that "they are always nice to me" [Jake, TERM3]. Zack explained how his friends gave him status as they were "always making me feel like I'm a grown up" [TERM3].

There were many instances that suggested children enjoyed a potentially free and equal relationship with at least one best friend. In TERM4, Summer explained: "She's like the only person out of my friends that I have her phone number and like, we text every night". Alvin [TERM2] described his friendship with Jade: "I play with her more than other people … she's my best friend". Mohammed [TERM3] described his fun-filled friendship with Latham: "Me and him say we're funny … And he says weird stuff and makes me laugh".

Britney [TERM1] felt that one of her strongest points was caring for others and helping children who felt excluded:

> My best things about me is like I help people when they're upset or like hurt. And if they don't have anyone to play with I can play with them.

Other children also demonstrated that they gave and received emotional support from those people with whom they had the most positive relationships. Jerry explained in the 6th term:

> I think it is important to be happy because if you're not then it affects your learning … Whenever I'm not happy it's hard for me to like work - whenever I'm not happy I just stop doing my work … [but] whenever I'm sad about anything my friends do come over … They really care about me and whenever I'm like hurt they would just help me out.

Jerry was not alone in recognising that friends in class could transform one's state of mind and hence one's learning. Despite the lack of emphasis on collaboration that we often noticed in the schools, the children seemed to want to help each other. Bella liked most about herself that: "I have a lot of friends, and my friends support me" [TERM4]. Ben explained in TERM3 that he was a shy person and therefore benefited particularly by being in "teams" to learn. Britney [TERM1] and Mohamed [TERM3] described how good they felt about their work when their peers all cheered for them in class. We therefore had evidence that some children in the sample enjoyed the social and cognitive benefits from having good friends.

Troubled relationships within schooling

However, among our sample of 23 children, we coded 20 children as expressing the concern that other children caused trouble for them. Most prolific with these expressions was Ryan, who expressed these concerns during all six interviews. We have little evidence

as yet to suggest that the sample's status as "lower-attaining" children was the cause, or indeed of any significance, in most of these troubles. However, our findings illustrate that many of these children, who already found schooling hard in some ways, were experiencing other children as fearsome or as intrusive, potentially undermining their sense of competence. Jerry [TERM5] summed this up neatly, saying:

> A lot of people are sad in this school … Because like either they get told off by other children or other children be rude to them.

The term "bullying" was used by eight children. The children additionally described how other children were violent to them, kicking them, spitting, punching and hitting them. As Ryan told us fearfully in TERM3:

> One of the bullies said … "If you say that again I'm going to- I'm going to punch your head like a little egg".

Behaviour that troubled our sample children included peers being "rude" to them, shouting at them, calling them names, humiliating them on purpose, scaring them or being "mean". For example, Chrystal complained during the first term:

> What I really hate is people bullying me and people just think they can just be rude to me whenever they want.

Equally troubling was the not uncommon description of peers deliberately placing the sample children in a position whereby they would be admonished by teachers and possibly punished. For example, Eleanor told us in TERM6:

> I was about to get a red [sanction] card because one of my friends, Amy, yeah, she was lying, yeah, and then she made me and somebody else in our class, yeah, get in trouble.

The sample children described peers telling lies about them as well as being selfish, unfair or arrogant towards them. These miscarriages of justice appeared to be sources of considerable pain to the children and presumably made it more likely that they felt subordinate, excluded or angry; all of which would interfere with the flourishing of future relationships as well as learning and overall wellbeing. Several of our sample children expressed their feeling of anger at school, when provoked by others, again suggesting fear and vulnerability. For example, Zack [TERM2] told us that he became "really angry when no one listens to me". Landon [TERM3] described feeling "really mad" when Alex was picked to answer a question in class and he was not. Of all the children in the sample, however, it seemed that Summer had most particular issues with anger related to schooling. She explained in TERM4:

> When someone's mean to me, like I find that really, really hard. Because like I start shouting … Because like I do like to shout, but like I shouldn't because I'm going to break my ears and lose my voice. So like yeah, I do want to fight, but I can't fight. So at home I just have to have a wrestle, things like that. And I have this bean bag at mine, like when I punch it all the beads come out.

Such anger could have negative consequences when expressed within peer relationships, as well as being troubling to the children themselves and therefore potentially disruptive of their learning. It would be very important for teachers and carers to understand the depth of – and provocations for – such anger; and work through this caringly with the children.

Feeling alone: "look at them! They all have friends and not me"

The sample children described instances of feeling lonely. In TERM3, Britney told us, "Whenever someone tells me 'I'm not your friend' or when I'm alone – that's when I'm stressed". In TERM4, she said: "I'm lonely – maybe when, like, no one wants to play with me". In TERM5 we asked all the children to relate their school-life histories to date, and Britney explained how she had felt even when she first arrived in school:

> [I felt] not that great because - Look at them! They all have friends and not me.

Bella described how in her nursery, "People didn't like me … So like the first two months I was basically walking around alone". In TERM4, when Anna was in Year 4 (aged 8), we asked Anna who her best friend was. She replied: "Not really anyone because I don't play with anyone". At the end of TERM3, we asked Jeff to place a model of himself on the middle of concentric circles drawn on a table-top, and place figures representing friends, family and teachers at appropriate distances from himself depending on how close he felt to them. Unlike the other children, who all put family closest to them and teachers furthest away, Jeff did not place anyone close to him. He placed one friend relatively close. This isolation might suggest that he was even more dependent on peer relationships than others and that his learning and general wellbeing might have suffered without them.

In summary, several children in our sample had periods of feeling lonely while they were at school that were painful for them. We also discovered that, in two different schools, the children did not know the names of all the children in their own class by the end of Year 3, partly as a result of segregation by attainment. This suggests a gap in the school's efforts to support thriving relationships, despite national policy guidance on relationships in school (see for example, GOV.UK, 2020). Some affirmative remedies had been put in place to address this loneliness – for example, a friendship bench in the school playground [Jeff, TERM3]; and a breaktime supervised-activity room for those who did not want to play outside [Bella, TERM4]. However, more transformative remedies appeared necessary which addressed the wider causes of loneliness and isolation including, potentially, "lower-attainment" status.

Exclusion related to attainment

While feelings of loneliness could be experienced by any child, there were some instances in which this loneliness was perceived as exclusion directly linked to *lower-attainment*. This may suggest that this group of children were particularly vulnerable to feeling excluded. For example, it was striking that when Eleanor described the feelings of someone who did not do well at school, she used the words "*Lonely* and sad" [TERM3], making an explicit link between lack of friendship and lower-attainment. Chrystal also suggested that when a child (like herself) did badly in mathematics or writing, she felt dissociated from the others:

> [Lower-attainers feel] sad …, no-one cares; and they feel lonely … Because they have no friends to stand up for them.

When we asked her to take a photo of somewhere in school where she felt upset, she photographed the school playground where no-one would play with her [TERM2].

Ryan related his lack of good relationships to his status as "lower-attaining" as well as to being of different ethnic origin from most children at Brandon Grove School. He moved schools at the end of Year 4 and was able to reflect back on his previous experience at Brandon Grove. He told us: "I think the reason I felt so nervous in Brandon Grove: because I knew no-one". His family were of a different ethnic origin to many of the children at Brandon Grove and this difference, compounded by his designation as a "lower-attainer", may have combined to make relationships troubling for him at Brandon Grove. When he moved to a new school where the children had more similar backgrounds to his, and he was not segregated into a "lower-attainers" group, he claimed to have made friends more quickly. This highlighted the importance of schools consciously celebrating and nurturing diversity so that all children could feel included, whether that diversity pertained to attainment, class, gender or ethnicity.

Physical isolation from higher-attaining friends could lead the children to feel more alone and this could exacerbate their feelings of difference. Several children described feeling a loss when the children had to move physically to their attainment sets or "intervention groups". For example, Summer explained: "I need my friends. I need them to stay in the same class as me" [TERM2].

There prevailed a sense of resentment around some "higher-attainers" having privileges not available to the sample children. For example, Alvin noticed that the teacher talked differently and more intimately to the "clever children" [TERM1]. Alvin also related that the teacher humiliated the "lower-attaining" children specifically, as she liked giving them sanctions. When asked for evidence of this, he explained: "Because sometimes she laughs [when allocating sanctions to us] and I don't like it" [Alvin, TERM2].

Overall, we found ten examples of the sample children feeling humiliated when they contrasted themselves to those designated as "higher-attainers" (or those whom they perceived as such). For example, Summer wanted to do the "hard work" rather than the easier work she was given [TERM3]. She admitted, "I feel embarrassed when I get different work" [TERM4] and she suggested that the teacher should disguise the easier work at least to look like the harder work. Anna [TERM3] said that she felt embarrassed about exposing her relative lack of skill in maths by risking putting her hand up:

> Other people put their hand up and they get it right … If they're in the same year group, like in the same maths group as me, then they probably know more than I do.

Eleanor [TERM5] was explicit about the pain she felt when comparing herself to others, and how helpless she felt:

> My friends understand and get the answers right … It doesn't feel good for me, because I don't understand thousands … people try their hardest, but sometimes they fail.

Bob told us he felt "really mad" when he had to stay in at breaktime and had to watch the faster children go outside to play [TERM3]. Watching faster peers go out to play was perhaps a physical reminder of his comparative incompetence which led to perceptions of exclusion and then anger. Perhaps even more painful was the "walk of shame" (as the children named it) from the Year 4 to the Year 3 classroom. This was just for Jeff, Bella and Anna whose mathematics was deemed best suited to the Year 3 classroom which they had otherwise left behind last year.

Learning as a competitive, individual activity

Exclusion and the feelings of being devalued was perhaps exacerbated by the competitive climate of the classroom. Although some teachers and some schools emphasised competition less than others, the ubiquity of competitiveness was obvious across our schools. Rather than schooling being the opportunity for each person to contribute to the community, children in our sample sometimes seemed to experience school as a futile competition for highest attainment among peers. It was therefore not, perhaps, only physical grouping by attainment that troubled children and their relationships; but the general climate of valuing high-attainment in maths and English above other characteristics. Learning as a social activity, that was worthwhile and enjoyable in its own right, did not seem to be emphasised in this schooling system. Many references made by the sample to the process of "cheating" in class reinforced this concept. For example, Zack explained why he sometimes did not want to help peers: "I don't want people stealing my ideas" [TERM6]. Such experiences were counter to the concept of the learning community where peers could extend and inspire each other's ideas.

Competition seemed to be encouraged by a range of rewards, such as [digital] "dojo" points, golden tickets, certificates and being allowed out to break early. For example, Zack described his motivation for reading books [TERM3]:

Zack: For reading a book I get three dojo points …

Interviewer Denise: How many dojo points do you have to get, to get a prize?

Zack: Um, no you just have to get the most out of everyone.

A counter-motivation was the individual sanction. All the children admitted being kept in alone at breaktime or lunchtime (or both) for not fully completing set tasks. The children seemed to view such punishment as something that must be tolerated. For example, we asked Summer whether she thought it was fair. She replied, not noticing the incoherence of her argument:

> It doesn't really sound fair when you think of it, but it actually is, because otherwise I'll have to stay in for my *next* lunch break [TERM4].

The primacy of completing the curriculum for mathematics and English, and then being assessed in it, seems to have justified deliberate exclusion of these children from break or playtime, despite their prime importance as sites for building and enjoying relationships.

Our data also provided evidence that the children felt burdened with responsibility for their own failures as they often blamed themselves (and other children) for not achieving what they were supposed to achieve – rather than blaming the schooling context or the curriculum within it. For example, Landon blamed the children:

> It's the children's fault they didn't learn, and if the teacher said learn it at home and they didn't learn, it's their fault [TERM4].

Jerry alluded to this emphasis on the individual rather than a collaborative community: "If you have no friends … you will work easier". [TERM6] Hard work done individually was perhaps emphasised at the expense of (potentially richer) collaborative learning through peer relationships. Bob [TERM3] for example, told us: "I work hard a lot in maths and

I listen quite a lot … and do less talking … Because most of the people on my table aren't really my friends".

We also coded a different six children within our sample as complaining that they did not receive the help they needed from peers, again suggesting that the collaboration aspect of the learning community was under-developed. For example, Eleanor in TERM2 told us:

> Sometimes … it's hard for me and no one helps me. Sometimes I feel [my friend is] not always here to help me.

Although there were other examples (see above) to show that peers did sometimes enjoy helping each other, these pleas for additional help from friends may suggest that some children did not experience the classroom as fundamentally conducive to peer support.

Discussion

This paper has explored children's peer relationships against the backdrop of John Macmurray's focus on freedom and equality in personal relationships and their central role in schooling (Fielding, 2012; Stern, 2012). Its assumptions accord with Fielding's (2012) explanation that people, including school-children, are "deeply and irrevocably relational beings whose creative energies are best realised in and through our encounters with others" (p. 654, citing Macmurray, 1961). More recent research literature, as we show at the start of this article, suggests that those children who experience good peer relationships – in Macmurray's sense – engage in stronger and more adaptive prosocial forms of behaviour and social interaction than children who do not; and tend to attain more highly (Guo et al., 2018). Our data illustrate how peer relationships had the potential to provide a source of companionship and entertainment for the sample children, including humour and fun, which could also function to build a sense of belongingness within the group. The group could then help in providing emotional and practical support, potentially leading to increased cognitive learning and enhanced wellbeing.

However, while some children in our sample of "lower-attainers" clearly enjoyed good friendships (indeed, these were the only part of school enjoyed by some children), others may have been among the few who did not claim to have many friends (Baines & MacIntyre, 2019). Indeed, several of our sample described loneliness and exclusion, sometimes directly relating to their "lower-attainment" status. There were examples of sample children like Alvin believing higher-attaining children to be more privileged within his class than lower-attainers like himself (Ambreen, 2020; Hallam & Parsons, 2013). This sense of exclusion is in keeping with the finding that half of UK children reported having been left out by other children in school classes at least once in the last month (Mínguez, 2020). Our data supported such evidence by indicating that where the group of lower-attainers did not believe that they enjoyed equal social status in their classrooms, negative patterns could occur which may have led to them having their freedom curtailed as they came to feel excluded as legitimate members of the community (Reay, 2006). Peer relationships (and the creative learning they could promote) were evidently made less satisfactory within our study, by competitiveness among the peer group within a hierarchy strategised by attainment differences as well as social factors. As noted by Baumann and Harvey (2021), being competitive seemed to have become an essential aspect of doing well.

Several children, like Summer, expressed their feeling of mad anger at school, when provoked by others. This could well have resulted from the sense of exclusion and lower status. More than that, competitive comparisons of attainment may have threatened their status further. Marks's (2013) work illustrated "lower-attainment" group primary pupils' vivid awareness of their comparative deficiency and how this depressed their motivation and potentially impeded "free and equal" relationships outside the group. This vivid awareness was evidenced in our children's words. For example, when Ryan moved to a new school where there was no formal grouping by attainment, he claimed to have made friends more quickly, reflecting the importance of schools celebrating and nurturing diversity (Allan & Omarova, 2020; Schuelka et al., 2019; Vitalaki et al., 2018). The absence of emphasis on developing good relationships that our data illustrated could be especially destructive to both relationship-forming and formal learning if other opportunities for collaborative work across groups were not available.

However, as Jerry told us: "If you have no friends … you will work easier". He was among at least six sample children who remarked that they could work or learn better when they were not sitting with friends, as suggested in Jerry's quotation. This finding reflects the non-collaborative, non-interactive nature of learning tasks that were often set. On the other hand, we also coded a different six children within our sample as complaining that they did not receive the help they needed from peers. References to collaboration across diverse peers was noticeable by its absence in our data, thereby suggesting a reduction of these children's opportunities for peer validation and emotional support which would help develop identity and emotional wellbeing and both social and cognitive development (Maunder & Monks, 2019). Further barriers to good peer relationships suggested by our sample children concerned the fact that opportunities are declining for children to enjoy face-to-face collaboration with peers both inside and outside the classroom (Baines & Blatchford, 2009). This is especially serious because, in nearly all schools including our sample schools, breaktimes and lunchtimes were used as occasions for children to stay in class to catch up on incomplete work, a sanction that particularly afflicted the lower-attaining children.

Some implications

Practical implications from this study are relatively clear. Although the purpose of the study was insight into experience rather than the development of practices, some messages emerge from our data that directly imply some possible changes in the daily routines of schooling that would immediately help some children. For example, the competitive atmosphere described by our sample of "lower-attaining" children clearly seemed to obstruct their relationships and sense of belonging (as well as possibly their sense of competence and potential for creative learning). This obstruction is likely to add to the current mental health crisis in Britain (Mínguez, 2020; OECD, 2019). To address this problem, educators can make a point of not comparing children by attainment and of trying not to *identify* children by their attainment but rather, know children by other characteristics such as their interests or sensitivities. If the teacher could see all children as equally valuable and as entitled to equal freedoms, this would help avoid children seeing themselves as lower-status according to attainment; and it might encourage them to see a range of other children as a resource for learning and a source of wellbeing. In the classroom, making more efforts to introduce truly collaborative learning, in which all

children can play a valuable role, where competition is superseded by collaboration, stands to enhance both the wellbeing and the formal learning of all children including those currently considered "lower-attaining". In such a climate, the label of "lower-attaining" or "higher-attaining" would not be used in any form.

Beyond the classroom, schools can emphasise the value of social collaborative time, including lunchtimes and breaktimes. Rather than being continually reduced, every effort needs to be made to preserve these times which are conducive to relationship-building which in turn enhances children's wellbeing and their learning. Collaboration and social interaction may not occur satisfactorily without support from adults, both within the class and during lunchtimes and breaktimes. As proposed by Macmurray, educators in schools can prioritise relationships as not only the means to wellbeing and learning but also as the purpose of these (Fielding, 2012; Stern, 2012). Adults could learn how to support children's relationships by listening to the children's own expressions, as exemplified in this paper. In particular, the feelings of children should be elicited (in a safe environment), to help them redress beliefs about being less valuable than their peers; and so reduce the sense of loneliness, exclusion and incompetence described by the children in our study.

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