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National Curriculum and Assessment in England and the continuing narrowed experiences of lower-attainers in primary schools

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ABSTRACT

A considerable body of global educational literature has examined how schooling policy based on measuring and managing performance has narrowed children's access both to curriculum breadth and to diversity in pedagogy. This article approaches these curriculum dilemmas within the global concern for children's wellbeing and social justice. In particular, it focuses on the experiences of children designated by this system as lower-attaining, which is a much under-researched aspect of these concerns. Based on an innovative five-year life-history study of 23 seven to 12 year-old lower-attaining school-children in the English system, this article examines how these children themselves depicted their schooling experiences. We conclude, drawing on term-by-term experiences narrated by these children, that the current curriculum and assessment arrangements narrowed their opportunities for participation in engaged learning, especially in comparison to higher-attaining children; which undermined their wellbeing and brought social justice into question. The children highlighted the negative impact of curriculum emphases on mathematics and English rather than on non-core and outside-school curriculum areas for lower-attaining in particular; and the emphasis on attainment rather than participation in learning. They had few opportunities to have their specific preferences validated, leading in some cases to these lower-attainers being excluded from participation in school-learning.

Introduction: a curriculum of social justice

Nancy Fraser (2008) conceptualized social justice as parity-of-participation, suggesting that all people should have equal access to proactive social engagement. Using this framework, a socially just curriculum is one that serves all children equally, allowing all children to experience intentional engagement in learning and to gain respect for their curriculum-related processes and achievements. Although writing outside the context of education, Fraser perceived in the global socio-political arena, a 'reduction of equality to meritocracy' (2018, p.14). Fraser (2019) wrote that meritocratic policies may legitimate a social order as being socially just while in reality it is exclusionary in that it leaves many people *misrecognized* and *unrepresented*, thereby less able to participate socially and afflicted by reduced wellbeing. She is alluding here to meritocratic policies, including the Global Educational Reform Movement that has been applied increasingly

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to schooling systems across the globe (Au, 2007; Lingard & Lewis, 2016; Livingston & Doherty, 2020). While this performative accountability movement derives from USA and Britain, it has been superimposed on systems as far flung as Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe and the Middle East (Au, 2007; Lingard & Lewis, 2016). Fraser (2008) claimed that such a global market-driven governmentality actually separates and tracks individuals, 'sorting the capable-and competitive wheat from the incapable-and-non-competitive chaff' (p.128) and thereby constructs different life courses for each: one of wellbeing for the economically competitive; and another, of failure, for the rest. Injustice is enacted when a person is constrained from parity-of-participation by obstructive *institutionalized patterns of cultural value* - such as those assumed within curriculum ideologies. Fraser wrote:

> If and when ... institutionalized patterns of cultural value constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction, then we should speak of misrecognition and status subordination. (2018, p. 24)

She went on to suggest:

> Justice requires that institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem ... It precludes institutionalized norms that systematically depreciate some categories of people and the qualities associated with them. (p. 26)

Wellbeing and social justice

Parity-of-participation will promote every child's best interests and wellbeing, as laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). In terms of content, a socially just curriculum will provide parity-of-participation in children's 'opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity'. In addition, a socially just curriculum reflects participatory values by encouraging the development of every child's 'personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential' (Ibid.). The child's right to *autonomy* of thought, conscience, religion and expressing themselves, must be also be reflected in the curriculum if parity-of-participation is to be ensured.

From Fraser's perspective of social justice as including parity of recognition and parity of representation, social justice demands the experience of wellbeing. Our own interpretation of wellbeing in relation to school-children chimes with White's (2011) definition as follows, which emphasizes the child's autonomy:

> Autonomous, whole-hearted and successful engagement in worthwhile activities and relationships ... engaging *now* in worthwhile pursuits. (p.131)

Ryan and Deci (2019) claim that wellbeing is aligned to:

> The spontaneous propensity of people to take interest in their inner and outer worlds in an attempt to engage, interact, master, and understand'. (p.215)

This propensity relates to the intentional and engaged interest in learning referred to by White (2011) and may be fulfilled by the parity-of-participation emphasized by Fraser as the normative heart of social justice.

Other researchers have lauded the emotions or feelings that might accompany or constitute wellbeing, themselves conducive to further engagement and persistence in learning: excitement, enjoyment, calmness, and contentedness. Such feelings can in turn help foster creativity, imagination and flexible styles of thinking which then lead to further engagement and enjoyment (Helwig, 2006). For example, an experience of wellbeing might support a child in improving their time management; suffering fewer distractions during learning; increasing in cognitive performance; increasing in prosocial behaviour; and benefiting from improved physical health—all of which again promote further engagement (Alivernini et al., 2019, p.100).

High-stakes testing and the narrowing of curriculum in England: evidence of influence

This article illuminates in detail one example—that of England—of the Global Educational Reform Movement through which 'educational policy across the globe is converging around a language of targets and comparative tools that seek to manage "quality" by measuring and managing the "performance" of educational programmes' (Livingston & Doherty, 2020, p. 666). Our data from England (where it was claimed that children were the most tested in the world; Wyse et al., 2008) highlight what such a policy looks like from the child's insider perspective, and therefore aims to critique global policy by those who have first-hand experience of it. The article explores one particularly 'depreciated' category of curriculum-users of National Curriculum and its Assessment in England: those designated by the institutionized patterns of cultural value as 'lower-attaining' (inverted commas distancing the authors' association with this labelling, to be assumed in the rest of the text); that is, children whose attainment in *tests of core subjects* is below stage or age-related-expectations and whose wellbeing may therefore also become unjustly below expectations.

When it was introduced initially in 1988, the National Curriculum and Assessment in England mandated nationally-audited assessments for all 7, 11 and 14 year-olds. Tests for 7 and 14 year-olds were later dropped leaving the burden of nationally-audited testing on children at the end of a newly-constructed 'Key Stage 2': that is, 10 and 11 year-old primary-school children. The National Curriculum content was developed with an explicit policy aim of allowing *all* children to enjoy the full range of school-subjects (although division by subjects rather than aims or competencies was never considered; White, 2011). However, national tests came to assess only the core subjects of mathematics and English. Researchers have referred to the outcome of this process as 'the narrowing of the curriculum' (Boyle & Bragg, 2006) because content that was assessed dictated a) what was taught, b) how it was taught and c) how often: and limited participation of all in a well-rounded curriculum.

The Primary Assessment Curriculum and Experience project (PACE) found that even by the early 1990s, approximately half of curriculum time was devoted to the core curriculum of mathematics and English (Wyse et al., 2008). Boyle and Bragg's (2006) longitudinal survey indicated the gradual decline in time dedicated to non-core subjects, most significantly in the last years of primary school, where cuts included: geography 21.6%; history 21.6%; art 21.2% (p.379). The revised version of the curriculum, implemented in 2014, further subordinated creative and fine arts including music. These were radically reduced, despite evidence that these make a unique contribution to children's wellbeing (e.g. World Health Organisation [WHO], 2019). Leisure-time has been further reduced; and in 60% of primary and secondary-schools, children might miss their entire break or lunchtime as a punishment or to help them catch up with schoolwork (Baines & Blatchford, 2019). Cuts in Physical Exercise, have led to 90% of primary-school children failing to achieve the in-school 30-minute moderate-to-vigorous physical activity threshold today (Daly-Smith et al., 2021). In addition, nature and environmental study has been greatly under-emphasized, which takes especial importance for social justice in the era of climate change.

Focusing on a 'core' (inverted commas indicating authors' distance from this disputed designation, assumed in the rest of text) of mathematics and English was aimed at combatting what right-wing policy-makers conceived of as the trend of students opting out of 'harder' more 'academic' subjects such as mathematics, in favour of cultural, artistic, recreational or vocational activities, which they perceived as easier and less important (Berliner, 2011). According to Neumann et al. (2020, p.706), the 2014 curriculum emphasized teaching a 'narrow, centrally dictated and conservatively defined canon of core knowledge'. By 2012, Alexander was able to write scathingly about the 'three Rs' (reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic):

> Three subject syllabuses hardly constitute a curriculum (p.369) . . . what we have here are proposals not for a curriculum but for just three subjects . . . it makes no attempt to reach a consensus on values and rationale, presuming instead that it is entirely proper in a democracy for a national curriculum to serve as a vehicle for imposing upon the majority the values, beliefs and prejudices of an ideological minority. (p.379)

While each new version of the original 1988 National Curriculum and Assessment in England (ie 1993; 1999; 2002; 2007; 2014) has been much critiqued (e.g. Alexander, 2011, 2012; Berliner, 2011; Boyle & Bragg, 2006; Neumann et al., 2020), the experiences of children who are below state-prescribed age-related-expectations for attainment have not received critical attention despite being obvious potential casualties of social injustices in the curriculum. Alexander (2011) described how the British government explicitly expressed inclusion of all learners—including lower-attainers—as participants in its aims for the current, newly revised National Curriculum:

> To develop a modern, world class curriculum that will inspire and challenge all learners and prepare them for the future. (p.275)

In what follows, we explore in detail the ways in which this particular curriculum did—and did not—inspire and challenge all learners and prepare them for the future. We focus on how this neglected group—lower-attainers—responded to current curriculum prescriptions which were dominated by (some aspects of) mathematics and English, in terms of their rights and wellbeing as agentic human beings, in the context of parity-of-participation.

Influences of curriculum narrowing

Marginalisation of non-core subjects

According to Reay (2017), at the introduction of the 2014 curriculum, lower-attaining children began to perceive that their non-core interests had 'little status and recognition' educationally (p.65); and Devine (2003) noted that 'some forms of learning and intelligence' which they had once enjoyed or excelled in, were now considered less important (p.44). To add to the narrowness resulting from the reduced offer of subjects, lower-attaining students were also frequently withdrawn from other (preferred) classes (such as art, PE, ITE) for additional one-to-one or small-group 'catch up' provision and test preparation in core subjects. It meant some children having to make substantial adaptations in their learning approaches; or being excluded from the curriculum completely. In addition, children were not consulted about constraints, despite the stated policy emphasis on pupil voice in schools (Comber & Hayes, 2022). A tension therefore emerged between school-children's expressed needs and the needs inferred by the schooling system (Noddings, 2005).

This threat increased for lower-attaining children because, by definition, these children found it difficult to participate fully in the learning of mathematics and English: since it was on the basis of attainment specifically in these two subjects that had designated them as lower-attainers. Prior to the 1988 Education Reform Act in England, low-attaining was used in a non-specific way to describe children who found it difficult to participate generally within current schooling arrangements (see for example, Hutchinson (1986) RE Records of Achievement (RoA) and Low Attaining Pupils Programme (LAPP)). By mid-1990s, however, the government inspectorate in England (Office for Standards in Education) required primary class teachers to differentiate officially between 'high', 'middle' and 'low-attainers' against the new National Curriculum Assessment criteria (Hart, 1998). This labelling by attainment-differentiation has persisted till the present day (see Francis et al., 2019), depreciating those children who have interests and talents beyond formal mathematics and English schoolwork.

Narrowed pedagogies

In 2013, a group of academics had a letter published in the British Newspaper *The Independent*, in which they expressed how the new curriculum was likely to make children's comprehensive participation in engaged learning of the curriculum more difficult. This applied particularly to lower-attainers:

> The proposed curriculum consists of endless lists of spellings, facts and rules. This mountain of data will not develop children's ability to think, including problem-solving, critical understanding and creativity. Much of it demands too much too young. This will put pressure on teachers to rely on rote learning without understanding. Inappropriate demands will lead to failure and demoralisation. The learner is largely ignored. Little account is taken of children's potential interests and capacities, or that young children need to relate abstract ideas to their experience, lives and activity. The new curriculum is extremely narrow. The mountains of detail for English, maths and science leave little space for other learning. (https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/letters-gove-will-bury-pupils-in-facts-and-rules-8540741.html)

As a result of the implementation of the 2014 curriculum (and that of its immediate predecessors) schools did indeed feel pressure to raise test scores, leading to greater homogenizing of difference and promotion of deficit understandings of lower-attainment, likely to further lower the status of lower-attainers. This potentially eroded lower-attainers' self-esteem in a way that had not previously been the case given that there was no previous correlation between self-esteem and achievement (Wyse et al., 2008); and previously it was not only mathematics and English that were valued. Teachers became concerned that 'forcing' such students to take the narrowly defined core subjects would increase disengagement and disaffection (Neumann et al., 2020). Indeed, the Primary Review (Alexander, 2011, 2012) and contributing studies during the 1990s (Galton et al., 1999; Pollard et al., 1994; Torrance & Pryor, 1998) found that pedagogy—that is, the whole culture of teaching and learning—now disadvantaged those who preferred active, participatory learning approaches (White, 2011). Teachers also cut down the amount that pupils participated *during* lessons in order to 'get through' the core curriculum content (Galton et al., 1999); which also appeared to restrict thinking skills (Mills et al., 2016). Wyse et al. (2008) portrayed a more pressurized classroom environment which was 'more intense than hitherto and highly teacher controlled, with little scope for pedagogic flexibility and little pupil autonomy' (p.9). Crucially, this lack of pupil autonomy meant that students had no role in shaping the direction of their learning, negatively influencing their wellbeing: especially as teachers began to adopt a whole-class teaching style which emphasized transmission teaching.

The 'core' subjects: mathematics and English

Whether mathematics is deemed to be hard depends on how mathematics is taught (Boaler, 2015). Since 2014, there has been an increased swing towards basic calculation skills and mental arithmetic (numeracy), making the subject seem less relevant to children's normal lives. Boaler described how lower-attaining children in mathematics were those who had been taught to memorize methods instead of interacting with numbers flexibly. She concluded that memorizing methods made mathematics considerably harder for these children; and yet high-attainment on tests, given limited time, demanded memorization. Some student beliefs about mathematics could also be dominated by their perception that mathematics was both problematically difficult and rule-based (Larkin & Jorgenson, 2016) which led to students expressing hatred, anger, frustration, confusion, sadness and boredom in relation to mathematics. Larkin and Jorgenson (2016) cited one young student's comments to illustrate this claim: 'And it's just a big blob of confusion and it makes me frustrated that I can't understand it ... It makes no sense at all. It's really confusing' (p.914). Ironically, the National Curriculum's increased focus on mathematics might inadvertently have had the counterproductive effect of increasing children's mathematics anxiety rather than improving competence, for particular groups of children such as lower-attainers.

In relation to the other core, English (or literacy), important socio-cultural factors which enhanced participation tended to be accorded less value in the new curriculum, for example:

> How students feel about themselves, how they are positioned as literacy learners, their individual interests and aspirations to read particular kinds of texts, their membership of particular social networks and their visions of

the kind of readers or writers they want to become, [which] will influence their learning in school. (Haberman, 1991 cited in Ellis & Rowe, 2020)

This trend away from recognizing children's subjective differences in literacy was partly the result of commonly-imported literacy interventions emphasizing reading as based only on technical, cognitive aspects: phonics, fluency, vocabulary/language development and comprehension (National Reading Panel (US) et al., 2000 cited in Ellis and Rowe (2020), p. 420). As suggested by Haberman (above), reading also has emotional, social and intellectual aspects not included in this list, whose absence from focus might further alienate some students from participating in reading activities. In addition, there is no clear evidence for the efficacy of the current approach to teaching reading (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). In relation to writing, Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation tests were nationally mandated; but have had no clear benefits for narrative writing (Wyse et al., 2022). They also distanced writing skills further from children's own experiences of life (Braun & Maguire, 2020). Speaking, as a skill in English lessons, was not prioritized because of ministers' fear of it becoming 'idle chat' in the classroom (Alexander, 2012). Children's author, Michael Rosen suggested that the most important factor in children being motivated to write was having opportunities for *choices* in the content, format and publication of their writing (Rosen, 2013). Others go further to argue that National Assessment in English represents a form of linguicism 'which serves to entrench linguistic social injustices' (Cushing, 2020, p. 35).

Research processes

Using a unique, participatory life-history methodology in keeping with our social justice framework, our research drew directly on lower-attaining children's own voices to explore their perceived participation in the National Curriculum as applied in their diverse schools. Through their voices, we critiqued current curriculum policies which foregrounded attainment in tests of mathematics/ English above other goals for schooling, as they impacted specifically on lower-attainers. By drawing on their own perspectives, we aimed to redress in a small way the lack of representational justice that typifies curriculum and testing policy, whereby young people's own views are rarely considered. Indeed, our findings suggested that children's comments have been systemically excluded from many areas of schooling more widely. In keeping with our valuing of wellbeing, we aspire to thereby evidence that children can be 'agents of transformation in their own learning and schooling' (Cook-Sather, 2006, p.356). As Cook-Sather explains, expressing children's perceptions and having these acted on is not only a human right but is also part of any education system that promotes wellbeing; as well as of potential practical support to the system (Ibid.).

Sample

In summer 2018, we gained access, via convenient professional and personal school contacts, to four primary-schools: two inner-city, one suburban and one rural, in south-east England in and around London, UK. That is, six children were involved per each school in a total of four schools, i.e. 24 children altogether. Three of the schools had pupil intakes comprising above-average numbers of children eligible for free school meals (which in England indicates economic disadvantage). All four schools had been assessed as good/outstanding by national inspections in or prior to 2018.

We invited teachers to select six children per school for the project, who had been categorized, aged 7–8, as 'below age-expectations' for attainment in mathematics and/or English (*not* including children who had Education and Health Care Plans, which in England indicate impairment). We specified six children in four schools as our sample, to be manageable for our small research team but also to allow for drop-out. In the end, only one child dropped out leaving 23 for the full project. We maintained that this was an adequate sample, given the depth and breadth of our data collection

methods (see below) through which we constructed unprecedentedly detailed and extended life-histories.

While we did not choose the children ourselves, the sample consisted of groups of children that previous research indicated are often in low-attainment groups (Francis et al., 2019): of our 23 children, nine had Pupil Premium status (indicating their eligibility to further funding, because of particular social disadvantage) and over one third were of Black African heritage (while others represented a range of other heritages). However, we did not formally collect any data about their social-class or ethnic heritage, except from the children themselves, so our information about these are not included in our analysis. We had no further data on parental occupation or education. Nor did we study the research school cultures in this project, as the focus was the children's subjective experiences of the schooling system across all their schools. We expressly chose not to colour our own perceptions by hearing other people's accounts of their experiences.

By the end of the fourth year in summer 2022, the children were attending 13 different secondary-schools (although the examples given in this article relate mainly to their experiences at primary-school). The 23 children are referred to below using their own chosen pseudonyms. Their words are highlighted by being indented to emphasize their verbatim nature. Where possible we have tried to retain some of the life-history holistic approach to each child, in our analysis and presentation.

Life-history methods

Our school-life-histories captured the 'concrete joys and suffering' (Plummer, 1983, p. 4) of unheard individuals (Goodson & Sikes, 2016), drawing on interpretivism (Schwartz-Shea, 2020) to portray how individual children experienced schooling across their ages 7–12 years. The approach of building up qualitative data through face to face activity interviews with individual low-attaining children was a highly original one. Through life-history research we accessed a window into each child's life at regular intervals, allowing us to follow-up the themes that they themselves found pertinent to their experiences of curriculum and testing. We were able to track such themes through the five years and compare curriculum and testing factors that appeared to leave long-term damaging influences on the children with those that children more readily overcame. For each child, we aimed to sketch a profile initiated by their thoughts and actions, but crafted theoretically by the research team.

Across the project, we used the following data collection instruments:

- 12 (or 11) audio-recorded and transcribed activity-interviews of 40–90 minutes with each child every term for 13 terms (missing one, or in rare cases two, under Covid-19); in a few cases using dyads/triads).
- TOTAL INTERVIEWS = 230 = c. 230 hours of interview.
- Observations of each child in their primary class every term in primary-school, where possible.

During interviews, we gathered data using innovative activities including games, role-plays, drawing and photography in order to allow the children to express their thoughts and feelings faithfully. Findings presented below are accumulated from all interviews in response to these complex activities. The term of interview [1–13] is represented in square brackets alongside pupil quotations.

Analysis

We analysed all interview data inductively, letting themes emerge from the children's words and actions rather than looking in advance for likely topics (Jeong & Othman, 2016). We fed data into NVivo11/12 and, across the years, constructed new codes inductively, which we negotiated colla-boratively as a research team of three researchers. The amount of data we collected was huge but each researcher took responsibility for particular children across the five years and wrote the

summary life-history for those children. We therefore had cross-theme and cross-child summaries. We also categorized the children according to their readiness to engage intentionally in school-work (Strong/Weak). For the analysis in this article, we drew specifically on:

(1) The 1500 word life-history for each child, drawing on all final codes ($n = 21$ codes).
(2) The following selected codes: expressions of competence/lack of competence; lessons as boring/participatory; rewards, sanctions and rules; school as unfair, difficult/enjoyable, safe; fear and anger; and status-subordination.

Ethical procedures

We had full ethics approval from UCL Research Ethics Committee (REC 1079) and followed special protocols for data collection during Covid-19. Our research was guided by British Sociological Association ethical code (2017). Full consent was regularly re-confirmed by both children and parents. We ascertained that children: did not feel coerced to talk to us or do our activities; that they seemed to find activities manageable and be enjoying themselves; knew why we were doing the research and planned to publish a book and film with the results. We were pleased that no child missed any interview across the five years apart from those constrained by Covid.

Findings

According to our sample of children, their experiences of the National Curriculum and Assessment were negatively influenced by the following: curriculum emphasis on mathematics and English rather than on non-core and outside-school curriculum areas; curriculum emphasis on attainment rather than participation in learning; and the limited emphasis on developing their socio-emotional wellbeing. Through addressing these areas, we analyse below how the children actually experienced these influences; and we draw conclusions also about fruitful future developments in curriculum, pedagogy and research into both.

Curriculum emphasis on mathematics and English rather than on non-core and outside-school curriculum areas

Experiences of lack of emphasis on the non-core curriculum and aspirations of the sample children

One part of the 23 lower-attainers' experience of being misrecognized included their interest in curriculum areas other than mathematics and English; often interests they pursued passionately at home. The children sometimes represented these skills as being—in Fraser's words—'comparatively unworthy of respect' within the school curriculum (2000, p. 113), which may have reduced some students' opportunities for proving their worth as an agentic human being.

In relation to non-core curriculum subjects, Anna, for example, had a passion for reading and drawing. Even though reading is part of the core curriculum, she perceived that reading for pleasure was less institutionally valuable than writing; and that artwork was even lower status. In addition, her lack of knowledge in mathematics led to the demotivating sense of subordination compared to others. Anna responded to these patterns of cultural value by not choosing to reveal her real self—or participate fully—at school:

> [The teachers] don't know how good I am at drawing ... because I don't really feel like I have to show my true drawings - or identity - to the school. [3]

Ryan described missing out on learning French—which he was eager to learn—because he was being taken for one-to-one tuition sessions for mathematics during French lesson-times. This was his

school's solution for his lower-attainment in mathematics (see also Webster & Blatchford, 2013). Ryan responded with anger:

> Sometimes extra help doesn't help because you're missing out on something else . . . I found it annoying [being withdrawn from French] and then I was- I wasn't participating . . . It sort of delays me on things that I need to do in Year 4. [2]

Jerry tended to miss many days of school. We asked Jerry to imagine how school would be different if they focussed on sport, art and computers instead of mathematics and English during the morning. He replied:

> I would be like kwww! [indicates speeding into school] Much better! . . . Much easier . . . [I'd] be coming in every day. Because like normally there's some days that I don't really want to get up [and attend school]. [13]

We invited Chrystal [10] to describe the best things about primary school and she mentioned 'the activities that we do like in the afternoon', which included art; but excluded mathematics/English. She went on to describe her passion for art and that, if she won the lottery, she would use the money to develop herself artistically:

> Just do art basically . . . just buy stuff from like art suppliers [10].

Ben told us that music lessons allowed him to exercise some autonomy, in contrast to core subjects:

> I quite like music, because you can't really go wrong with music because it's like your opinion and stuff. [10]

In relation to areas of interest not offered at school, Bob, Ben and Dragon were all passionate and distinctly knowledgeable about animals. However, Ben noted that the school as an institution 'wouldn't know how good I know about animals' [3] because little focus was given to nature study. Dragon told us that if he could replace mathematics and English lessons in the morning, he would 'learn about animals' instead. Nature study was not included in their school's curriculum, despite these children's interest, and despite Bob, for example, being 'known as the person that knows a lot about animals' [13] and nick-named the 'animal dictionary' [11]. Bob's response therefore was to assess himself somewhat negatively as 'intelligent about animals *but* not on every other thing' [3].

Yet they seemed reluctant to challenge the narrow curriculum. This was exemplified by Saffa who was also an aspiring artist who claimed that what she loved best about school was 'pointilism' in artwork [2] (i.e. using dots to create a picture). But when we asked her whether she would like to do art first thing every morning at school rather than mathematics, initially she said she would 'jump around' for joy. But then she checked herself, despite her own passion for art:

> Well, if it was every day I would quite get tired at school of art. It would get quite meaningless. Because you *have to* do plus and take away and division and stuff.

She suggests with these words that she had accepted without critique the myth that mathematics was the most important school subject. Similarly, Landon represented most of the sample children—like Saffa—in explaining:

> Maths is a core subject . . . it's a subject that you need like in your life, and not being good at it like- like there's lots of jobs that need mathematics. [6]

Experiences of the domination and difficulty of mathematics in the curriculum

Jake had also absorbed institutional patterns of cultural value which led him to fear that academic failure could blight his whole future, telling us:

> Your life is ruined! And [if] like you don't learn . . . like you can't go to the job anymore . . . then what are they going to do for their life?' [1]

The sample children were constantly told that mathematics was the most important subject for their future careers: despite the fact that few of them could articulate the link between mathematics now and their future careers. Saffa [4] perceived mathematics as helpful to 'get bills and electrical stuff for my house when I grow up'. Chrystal [9] had a similar perception that mathematics was instrumentally desirable for sorting bills:

> When I'm older and I start to like- I will start to have to pay the rent and the water bills and everything . . . then when you start to like work it will be easier for you because like you've learnt all this stuff in primary.

However, some of the children's experience of difficulty in mathematics could be devastatingly intense. For example, Jake said:

> I hate mathematics because it's too hard because it has- . . . if it was the hard-hard-hard-hard like 100 divided by 100 like – is that 200? I think I think, but it's hard-hard-hard! [5]

Jake's difficulty could be met by his teacher's anger, potentially silencing any critique. His teacher was presumably trying hard to support all his pupils to achieve national attainment targets in mathematics. However, Jake's distressed response is shocking:

> He gets so angry and he will say, 'Did you get distracted?' if I said 'Yes, yes sorry' . . . he will make me in big trouble . . . When you do like too much mistakes [the teacher] rips out your page, scrunch it up, and put it in the recycling bin and [you] start a new one. [5]

Summer in particular displayed mathematics anxiety throughout her school-life-history (Larkin & Jorgenson, 2016). She described her exceptionally intense fear of the teacher choosing her to answer a mathematics question in class; and her obvious lack of competence with basic mathematical processes:

> I'm like, 'Not me, not me! I don't know the answer' . . . I was sitting down in my chair and I was like- (stunned pause) I don't have that much fingers! [3]

Just glancing at the mathematics display-board made Summer panic, presumably devoting all her energies into fear rather than engagement in learning mathematics:

> Every time like I look at the mathematics board I'm just like, 'Oh, hopefully we're not doing that today . . . I'm just like 'No, I'm not going to look at it' . . . I'm so stressed. [3]

Bella described actual mathematics-related anxiety attacks from age nine. Her energies would also have been diverted to her anxieties:

> Sometimes like bad voices come in my head and my head starts spinning . . . Sometimes, when I can't do my work . . . when there's so much noise and so many people, your head just starts to spin and sometimes I get a bit of anxiety. [10]

Jerry seemed to experience a similar distress, leading him to function less well physically as well as emotionally:

> It's because when there's an easy question, when people are talking so loud I can't think so then I get it wrong . . . it gives you quite a headache and it does annoy me when people are talking when I'm trying to do my work. [6]

His response to this anger was to provoke the teacher to send him out of class, in other words choosing exclusion 'so your brain can relax' [4]. Bob similarly saw no chance that mathematics could be enjoyable, again suggesting hours of potentially wasted time as he grappled with intense boredom:

> [Teachers] encourage you to do stuff, like so they make it more fun so then you like it and you want to do it . . . But in mathematics you can't really do that because if you made it more fun it would still be boring . . . Yeah, it's quite hard, and yeah, boring as well. It's not really exciting, it's just doing loads of sums and stuff. [3]

Ryan used the word 'boring' 19 times and the word 'annoying' 40 times to describe his mathematics class, in a one-hour interview. These devastating testimonies underline the intensity of these

children's distress with mathematics classes which appeared paradoxically to reduce their chances of engaging fruitfully in mathematics; and their particular disadvantage in finding mathematics tiresome, given its domination of the curriculum. If, for example, one's status was judged according to a child's engagement in, for example, reading fiction books for enjoyment, studying animals, or pointillism in art, these children's school status could have been transformed and their engagement in other areas enhanced. It was their misfortune that institutional patterns of cultural value led them to believe that mathematics was most valuable.

Experiences of the dominance and difficulty of English in the curriculum

For other children, English lessons were the biggest burden. This was because much of the children's English-lesson experience appeared to be highly-structured and mundane in the way suggested by Braun and Maguire (2020). Max and Jake [5], for example, explained what happened to their potential for learning when lessons were 'boring', perhaps illustrating the futility of trying to force children to focus on others' literacy targets which are not socially or emotionally meaningful to them:

> Max: I pay attention then it's like I fall asleep for 10 seconds and then we're moving on to the next thing.

> Jake: Yeah, I remember something. And then like I stop. And then we go on with the work. And I forget it.

Jerry explained the link he perceived between enjoyment and engagement in learning:

> I'm not really good at writing. And sometimes- (pause) in Year 6 it's much funner because we like write about these nice things *what I actually like about things*, but in Year 5 it was boring writing and that lot. [8; added emphasis]

Bob was not excited by English, making his engaged learning with it unlikely:

> Like they give you like stuff to do, but like most of it's like boring writing. And then . . . I didn't want to do it anymore but I still had to do it. [9]

Chrystal enjoyed writing and reading stories at home which she said frequently chose to do, suggesting that she was inspired by these: unlike English lessons at school:

> I don't find that much lessons exciting . . . It was quite boring, because like . . . I don't like listening to words, I just like doing very nice books, like reading nice books in lessons. [3]

Others found the actual process of handwriting difficult. Jeff, for example, found that writing hurt his hand and arm physically and overloaded his brain cognitively. He responded by making a big effort not to feel upset, whilst presumably not being able to engage in further learning:

> Sometimes I just can't deal with it, there's too much information in my head. So I normally just scream into my arm and just forget about it. [7]

Ben described how his confidence was knocked by being excluded from teachers' attention because of his poor handwriting:

> Most of my teachers just sort of walk straight past [me] because they know they can't read my handwriting. They don't talk to me much. And then like it doesn't really help my confidence!. [13]

As the children noted, when these uncomfortable experiences of literacy dominated school-life, it was likely to have negative consequences for wellbeing and therefore to participation in English tasks, which is a poor start with the subject sometimes called the Gateway to the rest of the curriculum.

Curriculum emphasis on prescribed attainment goals rather than learning-engagement

We were particularly interested in how the curriculum seemed to influence the lower-attaining children's autonomy, reflecting their agency, because we conceptualized this as essential for

engagement in learning and subsequent wellbeing (Helwig, 2006). Ryan reflected on these aspects after his move to secondary-school:

> There's more like independence and creativity [at secondary-school] . . . It's like an evolution of primary-school in some aspects . . . So in art, [teacher will] give you an example – he'll show you how to do it, then you do it. He doesn't look and say, 'Oh you should do it this way'. [11]

In primary, and for most children, the experience of autonomy appeared restricted, endangering wellbeing. We asked sample children how often they could make their own decisions in their primary classroom. The majority replied 'never' [n = 16/23]. The children also suggested that they could not say something critical about what the teacher told them to do. Saffa exemplified this: 'I wouldn't say "I don't want to do that" because it's kind of disobeying . . . I have to do it' [6]. Some of the children felt controlled during lessons even in relation to holding each part of their body in a prescribed, rigid and static position (Devine, 2003). Like many in the sample, Neymar expressed a need for constant activity: 'You have to sit on the carpet or on the chair. I want to stand up and play something. Or like- run!' [3]. Jerry even reported a recent occasion, when he had asked in exasperation during a lesson, 'Can I go and explore? Because this is too boring!' [1]. He was kept in for lunchtime on two subsequent days as punishment. Wellbeing and engagement in learning are unlikely to flourish where institutionalized patterns of cultural value specifically dismiss such crucial aspects of wellbeing as being physically comfortable.

On a more positive note, some children's passive acceptance of the constraints of the classroom suggested that they may have traded autonomy and creativity for security, in their desire to gain assurance about their futures: instead of trying to participate in understanding a lesson, they put their creative energies into, either a) focusing rigidly, even obsessively, on doing what they were told and/or b) devising ingenious ways to avoid punishment by making it look like they were conforming. Jake made a concerning observation relating to the overpowering control he perceived to be exerted by teachers (who were presumably under pressure to produce results):

> I feel like the teachers are bullying children [6] . . . They want to shush you, they want to make like a detention, a timeout. [5]

Ryan angrily saw that teachers' rules did not support children's wellbeing:

> There is no democracy in the classroom. . . They don't necessarily put the rules in there for *us* benefitting: it's them! It's the teachers! [12]

For Joe, teachers as people represented intolerable levels of control which made him feel negative about the whole process of schooling:

> They're annoying and I don't get my way . . . And they tell me what to do! [10]. . .

> I like being praised. [But being reprimanded at school. . .] made me feel like I wasn't good at anything and like I wouldn't do well in life. [13]

Others spent their creative energies on avoiding punishments by pretending to conform rather than participating in learning. Joe explained how somewhat devious strategies might be employed to avoid punishments—but not to promote engaged learning:

> You pretend you're doing work, because when you do that, she [teacher] thinks, 'Oh you don't need detention! You're doing your work!'. [3]

Alvin explained how he managed to do what he actually wanted to do, talk in class, rather than engage fruitfully in learning:

> Sometimes I'm talking but pretend I'm concentrating and I'm not. [The teacher], he's looking at his computer and he's writing, so he doesn't know. [2]

Britney expressed the uncomfortable tension she felt between exercising her perceived autonomy and choosing conformity:

> It's like someone telling me to do something and I don't want to do it because it's boring – but I have to do it because if I don't do it I would get in trouble. [4]

However, in four out of our 23 cases, (Ryan, Mohammed, Zack and Saffa, all from the same primary-school), participation in learning-engagement was supported rather than hindered by the creative energies these children devoted to their learning situation. Rather than feeling controlled and trying to avoid things, they described sometimes being able to stand back and reflect on ways forward that did not compromise their perceived autonomy, status or overall wellbeing. Saffa, for example, explained:

> Well, you know that saying that 'knowledge is power'? Knowledge can be like anything you want – because you have knowledge you can do literally anything [11] ... School isn't us, so we can choose what we like and what we don't like. [12]

It seemed that Saffa had a holistic view of learning which enabled her not to withdraw her attentions from learning, despite finding mathematics hard, especially as she experienced her English classes as easier than mathematics.

Curriculum emphasis lacking in developing wellbeing

Several children told us that when they did not finish their schoolwork within the classroom, they were held in during break time or lunchtime to complete their work, indicating the system's sparse commitment to social activities and relationship development—often see as key to wellbeing. Rosie explained how the system worked:

> If you're doing mathematics before break you have to stay in for your break, but if you do it after break you have to stay in for your lunch. And if you do it after lunch you have to stay in the next day. [5]

Britney, unusually for her, expressed her frustration with the *institutionalized patterns* of cultural value that prioritized curriculum coverage over wellbeing:

> I don't know why they have to like say if you haven't finished you have to stay in for break. Why can't we just do it after lunch? [2]

Eleanor expressed her reaction to being kept in to finish work, a reaction unlikely to spark enthusiastic further engagement in learning:

> Very upset, angry or furious ... Very upset because I have to miss all my friends playing outside. [8]

These *institutionalized patterns* seemed to suggest that those who worked slowly on core subjects, through no fault of their own, were less worthy of enjoying a full playtime—thereby disadvantaging these children further. It seems that schools felt justified in keeping children in at break time or lunchtime by the need to make more time for covering the core curriculum (Baines & Blatchford, 2019). However, this is clearly a destructive move in terms of children's wellbeing; and overall parity-of-participation. Given that most of the children in the sample selected break time, lunchtime or hometime as their favourite aspects of primary-schooling, keeping children away from their leisure-time seemed to them particularly unfair: these children may have needed these times to boost their wellbeing and status through activities other than doing core subjects.

It is sadly not surprising then that many of the lower-attainers in our study expressed dislike for school, some an extreme dislike, apart from as a place to meet friends. The irony is that this relationship aspect of their school experience has never featured as a valued aspect of the National Curriculum and Assessment. Among the other factors discussed above, this may have led to five of our sample children simply giving up on formal school-learning by the end of the project and focusing on non-school or anti-school

interests. We could detect no obviously common characteristics among these five children, except particularly low-attainment in mathematics and/or English; low perceived autonomy; and tendencies to focus on controls and conformity. These five children told us in final interviews that they did not care about attaining good grades anymore. Bella was an extreme example of someone who gave up trying. Initially, Bella was very conformist and hard-working at school and worked relentlessly to appear positive despite finding mathematics particularly difficult throughout. However, near the end of primary-school, in a role-play, she expressed anger with a teacher who kept her in for extra mathematics at break; and anger with peers who did not complain about being kept in. During first term of secondary-school, she told us:

> I hate most of my lessons, they're very boring [11].

The next term, she described putting her new teacher 'in his place', exclaiming in class 'I'm not a dog!' when he asked her to 'Sit!' [12]. She complained that teachers wanted her to be a 'goody two-shoes' and divulged:

> I hate mathematics so much ... We had a test today and I didn't even start it ... I didn't want to do it ... I don't care! I know I'm going to be in the bottom set, because I don't do any work in mathematics ... Because I don't care about tests. [13]

Discussion and conclusions

Lack of wellbeing among lower-attaining children

Our data have illuminated *in situ* responses to the global policy emphasis on 'measuring and managing the "performance" of educational programmes' (Lingard & Lewis, 2016, p. 666). Through our life-histories, we have shown vividly how this global policy affects lower-attainers particularly because more engaging aspects of mathematics and English themselves have been squeezed out even of the core curriculum and the way it is taught; while other, potentially more inspiring subjects, have been devalued. Our research has evidenced the sheer distress and devastation that emerged when lower-attaining children spent at least half their school-life being forced to study the two subjects they were likely to prefer least. Our life-histories also made it abundantly evident that where hatred and anger prevailed among the lower-attainers—which was often the case—engagement and persistence in learning were threatened. Lower-attainers' motivation to engage in learning was particularly negatively affected by boredom and anxiety in relation to the perceived added difficulty of work in the 2014 curriculum; and continuing rigid forms of pedagogy. The lower-attaining children also talked heatedly about the fact that schools have cut back on recreational and creative activities which would have provided opportunities for much-craved social fun and inspiring exploration (Neumann et al., 2020). Children have focused instead on producing the minimum, or avoiding the teacher's punishments, rather than engaging intentionally in learning *per se*. Not surprisingly, then, we did not hear narratives from our lower-attaining sample about the excitement, enjoyment, calmness, and contentedness that accompanies wellbeing at school; nor their explorations with creativity, imagination and flexible styles of thinking which would then lead to further engagement and enjoyment (Helwig, 2006). Politicians' aspirations in England in 2010 to 'To develop a modern, world class curriculum that will inspire and challenge all learners and prepare them for the future' (Alexander, 2011, p. 275) seems to have failed most dramatically in terms of participation, according to the views of the lower-attainers in our English study. In at least one of our life-histories, 'intolerable' would have been a better adjective than 'inspiring' to describe their experiences of National Curriculum and Assessment—through no choice of their own—making their intention to engage in school-learning distinctly less likely.

Ways forward for social justice in schooling

Our life-histories challenge how such global policy can be described as being socially just; in the children's best interests; or as promoting wellbeing in any sense. These narratives from England can act as an example for educators in other countries, provoking an opportunity to

weigh up the social justice of institutionalized patterns of cultural value in their own situations. A socially just curriculum, unlike the offer described by the sample, would provide parity-of-participation in children's 'opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity' (Ibid.). In addition, it would reflect participatory values by encouraging the development of every child's 'personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential' (UNCRC, 1989). More opportunities would be provided, in school and in research, for these children to express their actual experiences, have their voices heard and have their requests acted on. Such expressions would validate the children as high-status individuals in a refreshing way, but would also benefit teachers and policy-makers who were ready to act on the evidence. In Cook-Sather's (2006) valuable words, this would encourage them to 'begin the life-long work of resisting the imposition of oppressive, disempowering, and commonly accepted educational practices' (p.345).

Current injustices in curriculum

Yet policy in England, as globally, still ignores this crisis, failing to make the link between children's fear and loathing at school with their declining intention to engage in learning. Until institutionalized patterns of cultural value shift towards a vision of children's current and future wellbeing in a holistic sense, lower-attaining children in particular are likely to continue to have their learning opportunities severely curtailed in the ways described above. It seems that Fraser's words describe accurately the current operation of the global policy that focuses on attainment in (limited aspects of) core subjects above other types of success. In our life-histories, this seemed to legitimate the 'exclusionary vision of a just status order' which systematically depreciated 'some categories of people and the qualities associated with them' (2019, p. 26). In Fraser's terms, the global schooling system is promoting injustice to each child in our sample and all others like them around the globe.

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