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# Supports for survival in school for ‘lower-attaining’ children: how an Autonomous Orientation to learning can help

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## ABSTRACT

Self-determination theory proposes that having an autonomous learning orientation will positively influence one’s learning and well-being. When we conducted a unique study among 23 ‘lower-attaining’ primary schoolchildren who struggled in the core subjects (literacy/numeracy), only four children aligned with this orientation. Significantly, our findings revealed that they: were all from the same school; all had the confidence to critique their schools; all participated in absorbing outside-school hobbies; and that for three of these children, they struggled in one core subject only. Recommendations are made as to how such protective factors can support the development of an autonomous learning orientation.

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## KEYWORDS

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## Introduction

The word autonomy originates from the ancient Greek word ‘αυτονομία’, meaning ‘living by one’s own laws’ (Swaine 2016, 217), and although the word is used ubiquitously in normal parlance there are various definitions of it. For instance within the context of education, Hargreaves (2017, 52) defined it as ‘Proactive engagement, self-direction and critical reflection’. Whereas within the field of health, Marmot (2009, 2) defined it as ‘How much control you have over your life – and the opportunities you have for full social engagement and participation are crucial for health, well-being and longevity’ and proposed that for people above the threshold of material well-being, autonomy was central as it aids well-being overall. Yet there is evidence that increasingly schools are limiting pupil’s autonomy by the imposition of strict testing and teaching regimes that diminish the opportunity for children to act in an autonomous way whilst at school (Devine and Irwin 2005). In our longitudinal project which focused on ‘lower-attaining’ children and was called ‘Children’s Life-histories In Primary/Secondary School’ (CLIPS), we also found evidence of this happening. The impetus for our research project was that previous work had identified that ‘lower-attaining’ children expressed many negative emotions in relation to their schoolwork, such as being seen by other pupils as being ‘dumb’ and feeling inferior (Marks 2016); as well as feeling frustrated, sad and upset (McGillicuddy and Devine 2020). Similarly, our findings revealed that most of our participants experienced difficulty in feeling positive about themselves-as-learners as they spoke of facing fears of failure, and frustration at their inability to achieve higher grades, despite putting much effort into their work (Buchanan, Hargreaves, and Quick 2020; Hargreaves, Quick, and Buchanan 2021). Rather, we identified that the children focused heavily on pleasing

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their teachers and conforming or spent their time avoiding punishments, sometimes by pretending, cheating or tricking the teachers instead of engaging with their schoolwork (ibid.). Nonetheless, there were four CLIPS children who did appear to navigate their way through school whilst retaining a *sense of autonomy*, as opposed to 19 other children who did not. This observation was reached after we had analysed the children's interviews (11 each) using thematic analysis, within the theoretical framework of 'Self-determination theory' (SDT) (Ryan and Deci 2019). Consequently, this led us to ask how it was that these four children managed to achieve this.

### **The research study**

The CLIPS study involved interviewing 23 'lower-attaining' children from when they were in Year 3 (aged 7/8) until the end of Year 7, their first year in secondary school (aged 11/12) i.e. over five school-years. However, children with an 'Education, Health and Care Plan' were not included in the study given that past work had already been carried out among such children (e.g. Webster and Blatchford 2013). Our study was funded by the Leverhulme Trust [no. 413]. Specifically, our team of three researchers, sought to explore how the struggles that our participants experienced in one or two core subjects (literacy and/or numeracy), influenced their sense of self and what the implications were for social justice in light of their experiences (Fraser 2019). Please note that we have used the term 'lower-attaining' throughout this article as opposed to 'lower-ability', reflecting our belief that the latter incorrectly suggests that 'ability' is 'innate ... measurable ... and fixed' (Bradbury 2021, 131).

### **The educational context**

The school context in which this study (in England) took place (2018–2023), was one in which subject performance indicators relating to the percentage of 10–11 year-old children reaching the expected level in Key Stage 2 Standard Assessments Tests (SATs), were used to rank the schools at both a national and local level (see GOV.UK 2022 for example). Consequently, schools were found to single the 'lower-attaining' children out and categorise them when they did not reach age-related expectations (ARE). These efforts involved putting the 'lower-attaining' children into intervention or 'ability groups', despite the evidence outlining how disadvantageous such groupings can be (Ball 2021; Bradbury, Braun, and Quick 2021; Francis, Taylor, and Tereshchenko 2020; Gillborn and Youdell 2000).

### **The theoretical framework: Self-determination theory (SDT)**

The theory of SDT which has been used in this article initially began as a theory relating to motivation, specifically in relation to personality development and well-being, by focussing on the differences between people whose motivation appeared to be either intrinsically or extrinsically driven, when participating in an activity such as learning (Ryan and Deci 2000). Specifically, Ryan and Deci (2000, 54) proposed that the key elements that contributed to a learner thriving within education settings, were that they had a *sense of competence*, (believing you can master a task), a *sense of autonomy* (believing you can choose how to act) and a *sense of relatedness* (feelings of belonging and connection to others). They postulated that facilitating this kind of self-determined behaviour enabled a learner to feel 'connected, effective and agentic' all of which served to enhance not only their learning, but also their creativity and well-being (Ryan and Deci 2000, 65). Ryan and Deci (2019, 127) defined autonomy as referring to a person who has an 'internal perceived locus of control' (Deci 1985, 111) and who behaves in a way that is 'volitional and reflectively self-endorsed' (Niemiec and Ryan 2009, 135). However, autonomy differs from independence as it does not necessarily include the desire to work or act independently of others. Equally, it differs from the term agency, as agency refers to 'the *capacity* to act independently and to make one's

own choices’ (Manyukhina and Wyse 2019, 223), although autonomy and agency are often used interchangeably. Although SDT has been criticised for lacking consistent evidence, for instance in relation to certain subjects such as sport and exercise, its usefulness has been verified in numerous contexts (see Ryan and Deci 2019, 137ff). These have included those both inside and outside educational settings, such as within healthcare and business organisations and contexts across the globe including collectivist societies (ibid.), confirming its worthiness in being used as a theoretical lens for our current analysis.

### ***Three learning orientations***

Deci (1985) purported that people had a tendency to fall into one of three general orientations – the Impersonal Orientation; the Controlled Orientation; the Autonomous Orientation. They argued that these tendencies reflected the degree of self-determination that motivates a person’s behaviour, contingent on how they have experienced and interpreted events in their lives. Ryan and Deci (2019) posited that people can be differentially motivated by different social conditions that in turn will influence which of the three orientations they align with, and although they may vary according to the social context, generally these are relatively enduring characteristics that a person will exhibit in any given environment. This article focuses on the Autonomous Orientation, but the two other orientations will be introduced first, in order to contextualise this orientation.

#### ***The impersonal orientation***

The impersonal orientation involves the tendency for a person to be motivated by a fear of failure, as they believe that they are unable to *control* or *anticipate* what will happen, which then leads to feeling a ‘pervasive sense of incompetence’ (Deci 1985, 112) and a lack of *sense of autonomy*. This in turn leads to the person experiencing strong anxiety when encountering new situations, accompanied by a tendency to make unhelpful social comparisons and by the belief that they themselves have little power to change their situations.

#### ***The control orientation***

This orientation refers to a person whose behaviour is in response to the controls that they perceive to be ‘either in the environment or inside themselves’ (Deci 1985, 112). Essentially, they are reliant on ‘controlling events such as deadlines, or surveillance to motivate themselves’ i.e. they are extrinsically motivated; this results in compliance to ‘real or imagined controls’ such as extrinsic factors of ‘threats, inducements, or expectations’ (ibid.). In turn, this leads them to feel that they *should* do certain things, although conversely, it may sometimes lead to defiance. Nonetheless, in either case their compliance or defiance develops from a sense of control, rather than out of choice.

#### ***The autonomous orientation***

In contrast to the above two orientations, the Autonomous Orientation refers to a person who has developed an ‘internal perceived locus of control’ (Deci 1985, 111) which prompts them to respond to ‘personal goals and interests rather than controls and constraints’ (ibid.) and so, to behave in a way that is ‘volitional and reflectively self-endorsed’ (Niemic and Ryan 2009, 135). In essence, this person’s *sense of autonomy* propels them towards being less controlled by extrinsic rewards, such as expectations from others and exam results, towards a desire to act according to their personal goals and interests. It is this Autonomous Orientation, that has been found to aid ‘learning, academic performance and well-being’ (Niemic and Ryan 2009, 133). Thus, it differs significantly from the Impersonal and Control Orientations, as whilst the former two orientations concern how a person responds to ‘controls and constraints’ from outside, the person with an Autonomous Orientation acts in line with their ‘personal goals and interests’ (Deci 1985, 112), which includes the ability to critique the system which they are part of. Devine and Irwin (2005, 322) suggest that such critique

involves working out whether to 'integrate, hierarchise or reflect upon the rules imposed from outside the self'.

### ***The challenges of remaining autonomously motivated in the present UK school climate***

Self Determination Theory identified that the Autonomous Orientation could be encouraged within the classroom, if a teacher employs 'autonomy supportive techniques, competence scaffolds and feedback approaches' such as providing choice and meaningful rationales for learning activities, as opposed to stifling a learner's freedom to be autonomous in a classroom by imposing apparently random external controls in the classroom (Niemic and Ryan 2009, 141). In relation to the CLIPS participants, we anticipated that in England where schools have become increasingly dominated by the 'neoliberal processes of accountability as a form of surveillance' (Bradbury 2021, 107), achieving such a *sense of autonomy* may be an ambitious goal to strive for in primary school, not least because the school curriculum was dominated by the very subjects in which the CLIPS children struggled, which they had no choice over. Correspondingly, we anticipated that it may be particularly difficult for the participants in our research to remain autonomous as learners, as they were often assigned to intervention groups, which have been found to be more controlling; stigmatising; involving fewer opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions; and being taught by less experienced and suitably qualified staff (Francis, Taylor, and Tereshchenko 2020; Marks 2016). To investigate this issue further, throughout all of our research interviews, we monitored how much of a *sense of autonomy* our participants perceived themselves to have within school. This culminated in specifically asking the children in their final interviews, to identify which of the three different orientations they aligned to (see 'Methods' for the specific choices they were given). Four out of 23 children chose Autonomous Orientation, hence the stimulus for this article in which we set out to answer the research question: 'In what ways did four CLIPS children who were designated as being 'lower-attaining', manage to navigate their school-life-history in an autonomous manner?'

### ***Research design***

The CLIPS study was based on the understanding that social reality is constructed as 'social actors negotiate meaning about their activity in the world. Social reality therefore consists of their attempts to interpret the world' (Scott and Morrison 2006, 131). In line with this understanding, a life-history approach was adopted in an attempt to capture the 'narratives recalling events' in the lives of the CLIPS children (ibid. 137).

### ***Recruitment***

Our study involved recruiting children from four primary schools which had been assessed as being 'Good' or 'Outstanding' in their last school inspection. However, once the children moved to their secondary schools, they were enrolled in 13 different schools. The original primary schools included one rural school in Southeast England: one suburban school near London and two inner London school. Apart from the rural school, all of the other schools had an above average number of children who were eligible for free school meals and among our participants, nine had 'pupil premium' status indicating economic disadvantage (indicated in this article as 'pp'). The cohort was made up of 11 girls and 12 boys, 14 of whom self-identified as belonging to ethnic minority groups. We recruited 24 children initially but one moved away soon after recruitment and so 23 children remained in the study throughout the whole five school years of the project (2018–2022). Recruiting the children involved the Year 3 teachers identifying those children who were considered by the system to be below age related expectations (ARE) in ongoing tests for literacy and /or numeracy. This article will focus however on the only

four children who choose an Autonomous Orientation to learning, and who coincidentally were all from the same school – Brandon Grove (BG).

### **Data collection**

Audio-recorded interviews over 13 school terms were carried out with participants lasting 40–90 min long. These were carried out with the children individually, although occasionally with two or three children. Prior to the face-to-face interviews in primary school, we also carried out 20-minute class observations which were then discussed with the child in the interview itself. However, during the period when schools were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, (referred to as ‘school closures’ throughout this article), our interviews were suspended, as carrying them out online would have contravened our promise of confidentiality. Despite this, in total we carried out 230 interviews from Year 3 to Year 7 during which each child chose their own pseudonym which will be used in this article. The children presented here were Santosh (PP): British Somali; Musa, British Turkish; Amin (pp), British Bangladeshi; and Rory, British White.

During the interviews, rather than asking the children to answer direct questions regarding their experiences of school learning, we devised interactive play-based games and tasks; these included a variety of games, photography, model making, drawing and role play. In the final interview [13] we presented our participants with a choice as to which of the three orientations (based on Ryan and Deci 2019) reflected best how they saw themselves as learners. However, we were mindful that it could be argued that we should not have accepted the orientation choices each child made unquestionably, in case they had not have fully understood what they were choosing. Nonetheless, as a team we decided to respect the children’s evaluations of themselves, given our interpretivist approach to this research project.

The four orientations were presented to the children in a child friendly manner:

1. Controlled Orientation (titles not visible to the children): *I like/ dislike doing what I am told. I respect/ dislike the teachers. I work hard to get rewards/ don’t care about rewards.* [Chosen by 7/ 23 children].
2. Impersonal Orientation: *I try to make sure I don’t do badly at school. I don’t want to have low grades and have people laugh at me. I take care to do my best and not get into trouble or get a detention.* [Chosen by 12/23 children].
3. Autonomy Orientation: *I’m interested in exploring different and unusual things. I am also interested in thinking about how things could be changed at school.* [Chosen by 4/23 children].

### **Ethical approval**

We adhered to the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association (2017) and our ethical approval was awarded by the university ethics committee [REC 1389]. This approval was based on our commitment to confidentiality and anonymity; non-traceability in line with GDPR.EU (2020) and informed consent including the right to withdraw. We sensitively avoided the use of the term ‘lower-attaining’ and instead explained that we were interested to hear the views of children who did not always find their literacy and numeracy classes easy. Consent was presented orally and in written form for both the children and their parents however, the consent of the children was revisited each year of the project to ensure they still wanted to participate as they matured.

### **Data analysis**

In line with Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis was carried out initially by pen and paper and then using Nvivo 11/12 software. Each researcher in our team of three researchers analysed their data inductively to develop their first sets of codes after which we collaborated in order to pare

down to approximately 36 codes and themes. These were revisited and modified after every interview, for example: 'children's positive experiences, strengths and interests'; 'children feel humiliated or inferior when compared to others'; 'diverted energies'; and 'relationships with peers and staff'.

## Findings

In this section, a short school-life-history for each child who chose the Autonomous Orientation, will be presented. Each will use quotations from the children which appeared to demonstrate their Autonomous Orientation, in relation to the three areas that SDT focuses on: relatedness, competence and autonomy (Ryan and Deci 2019). The numbers in brackets, indicate which term the interview took place in [1–13].

### Santosh

#### Sense of relatedness

Santosh spoke frequently of how much she enjoyed her school friendships and in particular, the school's termly 'Enrichment' sessions which involved joint all-age creative activities. Consequently, when she was asked if she believed school to be only about learning, she answered: 'No, it's probably about making friends ...' [11]. This sense of relatedness was also evidenced in relation to her teachers, when Santosh was explaining how a teacher had wrongly accused her on one occasion and when we asked her how she reacted to this, she said:

Because if I was punished unfairly, then I would complain about it. But I don't really complain because every single teacher is very nice here. [10]

Yet despite Santosh appreciating her teachers, she was often given a 'red slip' by them for her class behaviour, which she laughingly called the 'slips of shame' [2], implying that she understood these punishments were being used as a means of coercing the children into complying with the school rules.

#### Sense of competence

Santosh struggled in her numeracy lessons and declared on one occasion, 'Every single day wake up, do literacy, numeracy – so, so boring! – they didn't even try to make it fun'. [10]'. At the beginning of the project her numeracy level was *below* age-related expectations (ARE), and she explained that in Year 1 she had been in a numeracy intervention group which she didn't like, mainly because: 'you have to leave all the smart girls' [8]. Yet rather than appearing to feel defeated by her numeracy struggles, Santosh spoke of being frustrated by them as she said,

It's sad seeing you put an X on your paper, and you already worked that thing, and it's stuck in your paper forever and you can't change it. [6]

Santosh however believed that numeracy and literacy were important skills for her future life: '... so I can get bills and electrical stuff for my house when I grow older' [4]. By the time Santosh reached the end of her first year at secondary school her numeracy levels were deemed to be *above* ARE.

However, despite believing these to be important life skills to learn, when she responded to the following sentence starter: '*The worst thing about learning at home during lockdown was ...*', she said:

mm, well because I didn't really attend the Zoom classes, I felt like I'm slacking on my work ... but it didn't motivate me, not 1%, to do any work. Because I'd always have these breaks every 20 s, and I just go to YouTube, watch videos about how to do craft thingies. [9]

This admission suggested that Santosh's Autonomous Orientation led her to prioritise her creative interests rather than the work she was supposed to do, despite her wanting to be seen as: 'a smart girl' [3]. To reconcile the disparity between Santosh's desire to succeed at school with her



persistent numeracy struggles, she appeared to resolve this dissonance by ‘talking’ to herself, as she said in an earlier interview:

I think sometimes when I think I’m bad at numeracy I just think about other things to get my mind off of it, because I know it’s bad thinking that you’re lower as a person. But it’s not exactly true, because you’re making that up. So, I just make up a new story in my head and put my head down and try to work as hard as I can. [8]

### **Sense of autonomy**

When Santosh was asked how she would like people to describe her she answered: ‘I would like to be described as independent’ [10], and indeed she displayed a great thirst for learning outside of the core school subjects such as in art, computers and crafts. When asked what she believed to be the purpose of education, she answered:

You know that saying that ‘knowledge is power’? Knowledge can be like anything you want – because you have knowledge you can do literally anything, and anything in the future ... I think education is for your benefit and having a good time in life in your future. (11)

Possibly it was this view of learning that enabled Santosh to retain a sense of control in her schooling despite her persistent numeracy struggles, as she explained: ‘School isn’t us, so we can choose what we like and what we don’t like [12]’.

## **Musa**

### **Sense of relatedness**

Musa often mentioned how much he loved the social side of school. Following the school closures, he said: ‘it feels good (*to be back*) because I missed my friends’ [9] and in secondary school he quickly made friends, despite still missing his primary school friendships. He described his primary school teachers as: ‘All of my teachers are really kind ... Mr X is amazing’ [2]. In contrast, his relationships with his secondary school teachers were more capricious due to the frequent detentions he was given by them, as it appeared that the secondary school practices precluded establishing good relationships between staff and pupils.

### **Sense of competence**

Musa struggled in his Year 3 literacy classes, and so he was part of an intervention group for his literacy during Years 3 & 4. Although the work he did there could be repetitive and a bit too easy at times, he felt that he was less distracted in this group, which pleased him. By year 6 Musa’s literacy had improved to reach ARE, which he explained was partly because: ‘I’ve done a lot of reading in the holidays ... I was like reading instead of playing “Fortnite (*a computer game*)”’ [6]. However, despite his difficulties in literacy, Musa had a strong sense of *competence* due to his achievements in numeracy which he loved. This was illustrated when he told us about mathematics: ‘I wish I could do harder work’ [6]. Nonetheless Musa’s work suffered during the second and third terms of his secondary school when he had to miss several lessons due to being excluded from school on two occasions (see below). Subsequently his end of year results showed that although his literacy was now at ARE, his numeracy had fallen *below* ARE – the first time since we had met him in Year 3.

### **Sense of autonomy**

Throughout primary school, Musa displayed a thirst for learning generally and especially in numeracy and playing sport. Musa also exhibited a strong *sense of autonomy* as he described how he had determined to change his class behaviour in Year 3, as he said:

We (*he and his friend*) used to mess around in Year 2, but now we started Year 3 we don’t ... we started to be really good in our work and not make the teachers upset’. [3]



Yet Musa's *sense of autonomy* was severely challenged in secondary school when he was frequently given detentions for disobeying the school rules and on two occasions, he was externally excluded for 7 and 10 days respectively. Twice he said: 'I feel so angry' [12, 13], not least as he perceived the rules to be too strict such as being given a detention for unwittingly touching the sleeve of another pupil or laughing in class. Although occasionally Musa successfully managed to argue his case and the detention was cancelled, overall he expressed many negative feelings about these sanctions especially as they excluded him from participating in afterschool clubs or in his tutor group and having to miss many lessons. At this stage he said: 'I feel very sad about being excluded' [13]. He then spoke of deciding that he would now actively conform to the school rules as he did not want to be expelled, as he explained:

I probably need to listen to the teachers and that' and try to change 'my attitude and stuff ... and not hang around with the 'bad boys'. [13]

Part of his reasoning was because he wanted to maximise his chances of succeeding at school in order to get a job later in life that he enjoyed and that he felt was worthwhile. He explained: 'If I can't be a professional footballer, I'll probably be a maths teacher, because I like maths' [13].

### **Amin**

Amin choosing the Autonomous Orientation was a surprise to us, as we had previously perceived him to be more conforming within school, than the other three autonomously orientated children. Nevertheless, this may have been because he appeared to be a more introverted child when compared with them.

#### ***Sense of relatedness***

Although Amin said: 'I wasn't good at talking when I started primary' [12], he felt that he had become more sociable with his peers over the course of our project. He described himself in secondary school as being: 'Quite quiet ... but pretty friendly still' [13]. In both schools Amin spoke about being friendly with only a small group of boys. In terms of his primary school teachers, Amin spoke of them as being 'fair' [6] and in secondary school he described his teachers as being 'really good' [13], even after he was given seven lunchtime detentions in one go, for locking the door from inside his classroom when no teacher was present.

#### ***Sense of competence***

Amin enjoyed science, art and numeracy as he explained: 'Numeracy is really easy for me to do' [3], but he struggled in his literacy classes, and was assessed as working *below* the required level for his age when the project began. He described his literacy classes and being: '... really hard and really long.' [4]. Due to this, Amin was in a literacy intervention group and had one-to-one reading help. He explained that: 'this is for children who don't read very well' [6] but he exhibited no apparent embarrassment about him needing this help. Yet when asked what a person scoring low marks in a test might be thinking, he answered 'He's really sad. All the time he's just talking to his friends and in the end, they are avoiding him' [2], suggesting that low attainment could cause him feelings of sadness and shame. He further explained:

I get really stressed because I didn't really remember all the things that we did, to learn for the exams ... 'It's really hard'. [3]

Yet conversely, he said that he was not embarrassed about making mistakes in class as when asked how his teacher may react to such occurrences, he replied: 'They won't be cross ... because everybody makes mistakes' [4]. When reflecting over his primary school-years he said: 'I think from Year 3 to Year 6 I started losing interest in a lot of things (*at school*) [13] but we noticed that once he went to secondary school, he became more positive about his learning. He then spoke of loving the variety of

lessons at secondary school and said: ‘the best thing is the library with the manga books, and I really like numeracy’ [11], and by the end of Year 7, he was assessed as meeting ARE in both of his core subjects.

### *Sense of autonomy*

On a number of occasions, Amin spoke of how much he liked learning and how he spent a lot of his free time at home improving his art skills. Despite his struggles with literacy, he said: ‘I like Year 4 because I want to learn harder things’ [2] and ‘I’m looking forward to Year 5 because you learn about Space’ [4]. By his sixth interview he said: ‘So I just like reading a lot because I can learn ... I really want to read a book and not just keep reading what the teacher gives us’ [6].

When Amin was asked about the purpose of going to school, he said: ‘School helps a child to know how to make life choices [10], and he seemed to exhibit a growing *sense of autonomy* in the latter part of the project. Although Amin was upset when he was given seven detentions in one go, when asked how he coped with this he answered: ‘I liked sitting in the quiet and reading a book. It wasn’t that bad’ [13]. This reframing suggested that he had developed a strategy to enable him to turn a negative situation into a more positive one.

Finally, when Amin was asked to imagine his secondary school head teacher asking him for his ideas about how to improve the school, he was sure that he would welcome this opportunity. He then gave lots of suggestions which suggested his capacity and confidence to critique the school system that he was part of, which ranged from how to improve the physical layout of the school, to giving advice on how supply teachers could improve their pedagogy.

## *Rory*

### *Sense of relatedness*

Rory struggled socially in school when we first met him, which he felt was because his family background was different from that of the other pupils in his class and so when asked to reflect on this period years later, he said: ‘I was always anxious (*in that school*) ... I just didn’t ‘fit in’ ... I was an ‘outcast’ [10]. However, this changed when he moved to a different local primary school which some of his home friends attended. Here, Rory greatly valued his friendships, which led him to say that the best thing about returning to school (after the school closures) was: ‘That I could see my friends finally’ [8], and in secondary school he volunteered: ‘I’m better at socialising with people (*now*)’ [11]. Although Rory was lukewarm about his primary school teachers, he was very positive about many of his secondary school ones, which he said was because: ‘they know a lot more due to having degrees in different subjects’ [12].

### *Sense of competence*

Although Rory spoke of loving learning, he found formal school learning to be very challenging and when we first met him, he had been assessed as working *well below ARE* for both literacy and numeracy. This caused him much stress as he explained:

When you’re doing times tables, [*teachers say*] ‘pencils back in the trays’. Because you have to get a tick and it’s stressful, otherwise you have to stay in at breaktime to finish the work. [2]

When asked to imagine what an imaginary child who scored high marks in their tests might feel, he said: ‘He’s calm. He’s ecstatic ... because he doesn’t need to worry about anything [2]. Due to these struggles Rory was in intervention groups for both literacy and numeracy and although at first, he appreciated being in these groups due to the gentler pace, later on he resented being in them. His explanation for this change was:

Well, I mean it was fun at the beginning but slowly it got a bit annoying – I think I missed every single French lesson ... sometimes extra help doesn’t help, because you’re missing out on something else’. [2]

Once Rory moved to his new primary school which did not use intervention groups, most of this resentment subsided, although he still encountered certain frustrations as he recalled:

I really got frustrated with a difficult numeracy thing, because I could like answer B really easily on the worksheet, but C was quite hard. And when I said this to the teacher she said: 'Just do the other one, it's easier' and I said, 'but I want to challenge myself sometimes' and she said, 'You don't need to challenge yourself'. It was quite annoying. [5]

By the end of primary school Rory had reached ARE for both literacy and numeracy which continued during his first year of secondary school, as he said: 'I'm doing quite well in specific subjects though I need to improve in others [12].

### **Sense of autonomy**

When Rory was asked how a 'successful people' might appear, he answered: 'Clever, think what's right for yourself. Don't copy other people' [1]. This Autonomous Orientation was reflected in the range of Rory's hobbies as his hobbies included architecture, science, computing and history, playing the piano, learning Japanese, making short films and attending numerous after school clubs. Rory often complained that teachers did not give children enough choices in the classroom and on one occasion he said: 'There's no democracy in the classroom!' [6]. In a similar vein, when asked to respond to the statement: '*The school normally knows what's best for us even if we don't like it*', he said:

No, because they (*schools*) don't necessarily put the rules in there for benefitting us, it's for them, the teachers. [12]

On two occasions Rory was asked what he believed the purpose of learning at school. The first time he answered:

Well, the teachers always say, 'So you can get paid a lot when you grow older'. ... I could say different answers. One of the answers I could say is that so you could have friends, and so you could be educated. [6]

In a later interview he said: 'To educate children so that when they grow up, they will have all the education they need to get a job' [11]. Yet despite his linking education to his future employment prospects, he criticised the school for encouraging Year 7 pupils to become instrumentally orientated at such a young age, when they received a visit from an outside organisation. Rory explained:

They said that 'Employers want stars' – oh it's all about employment, employability ... I really disliked it ... This is just the wrong way of telling children, it's like they have this worksheet of what do you need to do this and how much it's going to pay – it just seems wrong. [11]

Nonetheless, Rory greatly appreciated being in secondary school as he felt that:

There's more like independence and creativity. So, in art, the teacher will show you how to do it, then you do it. He doesn't look and say 'Oh you should do it this way' – he doesn't give you help. [11]

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This article set out to ascertain the ways in which four 'lower-attaining' CLIPS children managed to navigate their school-life-history in an autonomous manner, by using the lens of SDT (Ryan and Deci 2019). This lens proved to be most helpful given its specific emphasis on ascertaining the children's sense of *competence*, *relatedness* and *autonomy* and how they managed to maintain an 'internal perceived locus of causality' (Ryan and Deci 2019, 118) and act in a volitional and self-determined manner, despite struggling in literacy or numeracy. Through the four life-histories presented here we identified four emergent patterns that contributed to these children maintaining an autonomous learning orientation. These were:

- *Being 'lower-attaining' in one subject only* We observed that all of the children, except for Rory, were *below ARE* in one subject only when the project began i.e. either literacy or numeracy, but not both. Consequently, we surmised that because their low attainment was confined to *one* core subject, this helped the children to sustain an overall *sense of competence* and *autonomy*. This observation was significant given that none of the other 19 children in the project chose an Autonomous Orientation. Rather they chose orientations that focused on responding to controls and striving for extrinsic rewards, which suggested that being considered as 'lower-attaining' in both core subjects was much more detrimental to them in numerous ways (see Hargreaves, Quick, and Buchanan 2021). The outlier was Rory who began the project as being assessed as working *well below ARE* in *both* core subjects. Considering this, we deduced that his overall sense of competence and autonomy were not undermined because of his multi-faceted hobbies, alongside the fact that he had achieved ARE in both subjects by the end of project.
- *Attending the same school* It was striking that all four children originated from the same primary school (BG). Analysing why this might be, we concluded that this may have been partly due to the different teaching arrangement that this school had. Here, the intervention groups were taught by the children's own class teachers, which was made possible as three teachers were appointed to span only two main classes, thus allowing one teacher to be available (in rotation) to lead the intervention groups. This contrasted with the other three schools in our study and also previous research (Francis, Taylor, and Tereshchenko 2020; Marks 2016), which identified how the staff leading such groups were normally not the class teachers and/or were less experienced teachers generally. Another aspect was that the group members changed each term, according to each child's progress; this fluidity contrasted with the other CLIPS schools and previous research (ibid.) and helped also to de-stigmatise being in such groups. We concluded also that the higher standard of teaching in these groups, accompanied by the high levels of *relatedness* in this school (between peers and between staff and pupils), would have contributed to minimising the detrimental effects of being 'lower-attaining'.
- *Being involved creatively in hobbies outside of school* All of these four children were involved in creative outside-school-hobbies e.g. Rory and his film making; Amin and his Manga art, which we suspected also strengthened their sense of competence. Yet soberly, we also noted that such competencies failed to filter into their academic attainment markers, presumably because creative pursuits were not deemed to be important within the school context.
- *Being able to critique the school system which they were part of* All of these children displayed an ability to critique the school system which they were part of e.g. when Santosh said that school is 'not being us' [12]; Rory voicing his abhorrence at the employability training they were introduced to in Year 7; Amin being confident in his ideas to reform his school and Musa reframing his response to the strict school rules in order to achieve his personal aspirations. This included them questioning and reframing the constraints and controls that were imposed on them, rather than being defeated by them, as they sought to 'integrate, hierarchise or reflect upon the rules imposed from outside the self' (Devine and Irwin 2005, 322).

The question now arises as to whether the autonomous learning orientation exhibited by these four children were influenced by other factors, not explored in our study. For instance, were such shared characteristics the result of factors external to their schooling, such as their personalities or their home environments? Unfortunately, the answers to such questions are beyond the scope of this article, but they would be interesting to explore in the future. In the meantime, our analysis has led us to make recommendations that may help other schools to facilitate other 'lower-attaining' children to develop an Autonomous Orientation within school. These recommendations are presented below under the areas of senses of *Competence*, *Relatedness* and *Autonomy*.

## Recommendations

In terms of promoting a **sense of competence** there needs to be a reconfiguration of both the national testing regime and school curriculum in England, in order to counteract the narrow emphasis on testing literacy and numeracy skills, which labels children as ‘succeeding’ or ‘failing’ from an early age, diminishing not only their sense of *competence* but also their *sense of autonomy*. However, such a recommendation would involve a systemic change politically, in order to move away from the ‘neo-liberal process of accountability as a form of surveillance’ (Bradbury 2021, 107) in schools, which pressurises schools and teachers to focus on test scores, as though they are ‘the be-all and end-all of education’ (Reay 2018, 62). Changing this focus would then enable teachers to teach more creative, practical and interactive lessons, providing increased opportunities for the ‘lower-attaining’ child to experience *competence* in lessons outside of literacy and numeracy, and so give them more opportunity to develop an autonomous learning orientation. This change in focus, could also be enhanced by providing funding for more after school clubs, particularly given the decrease in youth clubs (YMCA 2020).

In terms of promoting a **sense of relatedness**, were the above recommendations adhered to, we would surmise that as the timetable was altered, this would not only benefit the children but also the teachers. There is much evidence that teachers themselves feel pressurised by the performativity and surveillance culture which the national testing regime imposes on them (Ball 2021); such pressures have been identified as some of the factors influencing the increasing number of teachers who leave the profession within their first five years of practice (Perryman and Calvert 2020). Consequently, we would predict that if these pressures were lessened, then teachers and pupils would both benefit from experiencing higher levels of *relatedness*, resonating with research which has found that fostering a sense of belonging in school, helps the both pupils and staff to thrive (Riley 2019). Equally, such changes could lead to higher peer-to-peer levels of *relatedness*, commented on by Santosh about her school’s ‘Enrichment’ sessions (whole school creative collaboration activities).

In terms of promoting a **sense of autonomy**, this could be encouraged by implementing more autonomy supporting practises, such as: giving children more opportunities to choose what and how they learn; ensuring that if intervention groups are used, they are taught by experienced class teachers, with more fluidity in assigning children to these groups. This would also include stopping the practice of children having to miss break and lunch times in order to ‘catch-up’ with their schoolwork, in order to maximise the chance for *all* children to enjoy playing, relaxing and socialising. Alongside this, more creative collaborative activities involving the whole school could be organised, which would facilitate increased opportunities for creativity and engaging in among the different age group. In turn, this could further serve to increase a sense of belonging for both the staff and pupils which aids not only a *sense of autonomy* but well-being overall (Riley 2019).

In conclusion, the evidence presented here showed how four CLIPS children managed to maintain an autonomous learning orientation in their school life-history, despite struggling in certain core subjects. Yet, the fact remains that the 19 other CLIPS children were unable to achieve this. Consequently, we would propose that in order to maximise the chances for *all* pupils who are considered to be ‘lower-attaining’, not only survive in school but to flourish there, and become self-determined, autonomous learners, then the recommendations outlined above need to be prioritised. Only then will these learners have the chance to feel ‘connected, effective and agentic’, in ways that can enhance not only their learning, but also their creativity and well-being (Ryan and Deci 2000, 65).

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