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Eleanore Hargreaves, Laura Quick & Denise Buchanan

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Shifting the focus: seven recommendations from children highlighting conditions that enhance intentional engagement in curriculum-work and participatory wellbeing

Eleanore Hargreaves , Laura Quick  and Denise Buchanan

Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment Department, UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

ABSTRACT

From a social justice perspective, schools' curriculum must shift to promote participatory wellbeing. However, what do primary school children themselves recommend about how participatory wellbeing be promoted, especially those who are 'lower-attainers'? This article portrays ideas from 23 children whose school-life-histories we constructed through 12 termly individual, lengthy interviews and observations, over four years. Through these, we developed seven key recommendations for schools and teachers. The children's recommendations accorded with Ryan and Deci's theory that – to evidence wellbeing – children's needs for a Sense of Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness must be fulfilled. The children recommended emphasising healthy relationships among children; nurturing a strong sense of belonging and participation; boosting respect among teachers for children; and facilitating collaboration among friends and peers. They proposed making lessons more engaging; minimising testing and 'attainment grouping'; providing opportunities for de-stressing; and encouraging children's critical reflection on classroom learning and teaching. We conclude that future curriculum development needs to take children's experiences into account and therefore to focus more strongly on their Sense of Autonomy and Relatedness.

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Introduction: shifting the focus

Nancy Fraser (2022) has re-emphasised the need for sustaining 'human beings and social bonds' as the counter-balance to exclusive focus on the economically-oriented performance culture: claiming that this performance culture permeates the institutionalised patterns of capitalism in many systems, including systems of schooling such as the English system. Fraser wrote of a necessary shift from production to social reproduction, whereby 'social reproduction' embraces human wellbeing in the sense of people being 'embodied natural beings' and 'social beings':

One essential epistemic shift is that from production to social reproduction – the forms of provisioning, caregiving, and interaction that produce and sustain human beings and social bonds ... Called "care", this activity forms capitalism's human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings (9).

Bridget Phillipson, appointed Secretary of State for Education in England in 2024, described a similar fundamental shift required to reform England's school curriculum, from a key focus on

CONTACT Eleanore Hargreaves  e.hargreaves@ucl.ac.uk

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attainment in tests; to a primary focus on children's wellbeing – from production of children's high test results to their accompanying social wellbeing:

I want all children to achieve and thrive ... But the scale of the challenge ahead of us demands something deeper – it demands a profound reform in what we value in our schools. So that up there alongside attainment is the wellbeing of our children. Because exam results are only achieved when children's wellbeing is prized too (<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/bridget-phillipsons-speech-to-the-confederation-of-school-trusts>; our emphasis).

To embody this shift towards emphasis on wellbeing, the Secretary of State for Education has promised that the revised National Curriculum will be aspirational and motivating, necessitating engagement by all children. The new curriculum, she promises, will encourage the participation of all children and their families, regardless of background, with greater attention to flexibility. Following advice from academics nationwide, she has conceded that 'More evidence is needed around approaches to improving wellbeing of children in schools [and] the factors underpinning the most effective approaches' (Cary and Webb 2025, 1). This article seeks to provide such evidence from the perspective of school children themselves.

Up until now, little research has focused on how children have experienced the curriculum and how/whether they believe it is 'sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings' (Fraser 2022, 9); and which schooling affordances they perceive have promoted their wellbeing and engagement with curriculum. Even less research has tracked evidence of children's claims about the conditions in which children's wellbeing is nurtured or damaged, and why some children become excited – and others reluctant – to learn what is offered in the National Curriculum.

While Fraser comes from a context of political science, useful links can be made between Fraser's emphasis on participation, and wellbeing as described by social psychologists such as Ryan and Deci (2019). Ryan and Deci 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 (Ibid., 215).

Similar links are made by the United Nations Development Programme (2014), who suggested that participation might imply citizens having equal opportunities to join 'actively in community life and be creative in an environment of dignity and freedom'. Such active and creative participation has been acclaimed as 'crucial for health, wellbeing and longevity' by Marmot (2004, 2). Shotter (2003) has helpfully emphasised the 'contributing' aspect of both wellbeing and participation, whereby having a sense of belonging demands proactivity:

A sense of belonging is not built merely on the existence of a collectively shared culture, but requires also the right to participate in the development of the 'living tradition' or the reflexive arguments of that society (cited in May 2011, 368; our emphasis).

These authors suggested that when individuals participated with parity, wellbeing was evidenced. Lynch and Baker (2005) focused on the parity angle of participation and named its purpose to be equality of condition, implying equality of the condition of wellbeing. They suggest this 'involves the equal enabling and empowerment of individuals' (2005, 132). A phrase we use in this article to reinforce links between the two different concepts is participatory wellbeing.

This article explores the words of 23 children whose school-life-histories we developed over four years of their exposure to the 2014 primary curriculum in England between 2018 and 2023. These were children who were not attaining well systemically, in relation to the 'core' curricula for mathematics and English. By exploring these children's actual expressions about how and whether they were motivated to engage fully with curriculum-work, and what enhanced or diminished their wellbeing in relation to participation, we are now able to suggest with confidence some important factors to feed into the development of the new National Curriculum and teachers' practice. In relation to teachers' possible classroom changes, we have distilled from the

children's extensive narratives seven fundamentally important practices which, the children maintained, would facilitate children's participatory wellbeing and fuller intentional engagement with curriculum-work.

Theoretical frameworks

Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice as parity of participation

We start with Nancy Fraser's overarching political theory of social justice as parity of participation, with the assumption that catering for all children's wellbeing and intentional engagement demands equal participation by everyone. Fraser suggests that parity of participation means parity of involvement by all individuals, regardless of their (dis)ability, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or social background. Fraser has been critiqued for not emphasising compassion and care within her theory of social justice (Lynch 2012; Mills et al. 2016), but her 2022 reference to 'care', which 'forms capitalism's human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings' suggests that her entire framework can be seen as couched within the framework of supporting wellbeing and away from focus on financialised capitalism (9).

Fraser's theory incorporates three essential and inter-related aspects of parity of participation, all of which support human beings as social beings in need of care: equitable distribution of wealth; equitable recognition of worth; and equitable representation of voice. By applying Fraser's concept of social justice to the domain of schooling, it becomes clear that in practice, schooling may systematically undermine social justice as parity of participation rather than uphold it (Cazden 2012; Cribb and Gewirtz 2003; Keddle 2016; Lipman 2008; Mills et al. 2016; Power and Frandji 2010; Reay 2025); especially in relation to recognition and representation of children.

Firstly, parity of participation can be seen as the equal distribution of material resources. This was the traditional conceptualisation of justice (e.g. Rawls 1971), on which Fraser elaborated (2008, 2022). In terms of schooling (although this was not Fraser's focus), wealth maldistribution might entail a minority of children having exclusive access to the most inspiring teachers, the most lavishly equipped schools or the most expert private tutors – which Fraser refers to as pillaging 'the vast majority to enrich the top 1 per cent' (2019, 20).

Secondly, parity of participation includes parity in recognition of status. Fraser wrote that 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. (Fraser 2008, 24; our emphasis)

A sense of misrecognition during schooling can persist into adulthood, continuing to have an unjustly negative impact on adults' wellbeing (Clark et al. 2018).

Fraser's third pillar in parity of participation constitutes political voice and representation, by which she means all sectors of a community participating in deciding how wealth is distributed and how recognition is defined. Representation during schooling can be fulfilled by all children contributing to making decisions about what and how they learn, through decision-making bodies or through an ethos of open critique followed by action on pupil feedback (Lundy 2007).

Ryan and Deci's Self Determination Theory

The aspect of our second theoretical framework, Self Determination Theory, that is appealing to our study is its assumption of the key role of agency (essential to self-determination) for wellbeing and therefore for participation in school-work leading ultimately to good attainment. Ryan and Deci (2019) claim that for people to evidence wellbeing which potentially boosts attainment, they must perceive to have their needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness fulfilled. Only then can they evidence wellbeing and engage fully in intentional learning – potentially leading to increased attainment.

Feeling a strong Sense of Competence (which embraces self-confidence) is associated with enhanced wellbeing (for example, Carver, Scheier, and Segerstrom 2010; McGregor, McAdams, and Little 2006), likely to support engagement in learning. When a child believes they have mastered any challenging task effectively, then they may experience a Sense of Competence. That is, if a child perceives that they are competent, this is what supports their engagement and wellbeing more widely; not a finite measure of attainment. In schooling, however, competence has become narrowly associated with attainment in tests of mathematics and English while it could be more broadly defined as also including: academic success in other fields such as history, environmental studies, religious studies; the effective accomplishment of non-academic tasks such as creative arts, sports or computer studies; or accomplishment of a social task. Unfortunately, a child talented at music or who makes friends easily, but who attains lower scores in mathematics/English at school, may have their overall Sense of Competence undermined (Francis, Taylor, and Tereshchenko 2019) and may therefore feel misrecognised (Fraser 2008) because scores in core subjects are more highly valued in today's schooling system than music or friendliness. This may be part of the required shift in focus referred to earlier in the article.

Secondly, Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that Sense of Competence would not be nurtured unless the child also experienced a Sense of Relatedness to others:

A sense of belongingness and connectedness to the persons, group, or culture disseminating a purpose, or what in Self Determination Theory we call a sense of relatedness. [This means] feeling respected and cared for (Ryan and Deci 2000, 64).

Thirdly, Ryan and Deci suggested that in order to choose engagement, leading to wider wellbeing, the child must also experience a Sense of Autonomy. Autonomy is action taken that reflects a child's Sense of Agency. Agency is not a ready-made capacity that individuals either have or not but something that they achieve under certain ecological conditions (Biesta and Tedder 2007, 137). A Sense of Agency is achieved when people act autonomously, making manifest their volition and intentionality; exercising choices; drawing on their own knowledge and beliefs to override random or irrational acts; and experiencing freedom and impact. We use the phrase intentional engagement to embrace the idea of children achieving agency during curriculum-work, when the children choose to engage in it. This is one important aspect of wellbeing and wellbeing is unlikely without it. In turn, full participation is unlikely without wellbeing and also promotes it. These interrelationships rest on Ryan and Deci's (2000) critical distinction between behaviours that are volitional and those accompanied by the experience of pressure and control, not representative of one's self (2000, 65). We questioned the extent to which children experienced their actions in school as intentional, i.e. being 'volitional and accompanied by the experience of freedom and autonomy' (Ibid.). Being intentional suggests that a child chooses to better understand and interact with their world and people within it and believe that they can do so. This contrasts with having to carry out actions necessary for a pre-ordained performance goal.

Research design

In order to explore 'lower-attainers' experiences in primary schooling, we recruited four primary schools in SE England, three of which were in disadvantaged communities (and all highly rated by Ofsted). We invited their Year 3 (ages 7–8) teachers to nominate six children, each of whom had been designated in Year 3 as not meeting age-level expectations in mathematics and/or English; but did not have an Education Health and Care Plan (indicating medicalised impairment). Their ethnic heritages were diverse. Ethical approval confirmed our use of safeguarding, pseudonymisation and repeated consent. From 2018 to 2022, we interviewed 23 of these children individually every term (one dropped out) using games, role play, scenario discussions and informal chat; and filmed them and observed them briefly in class (apart from one term in which Covid19 prevented us). All interviews were transcribed and analysed inductively using Thematic Coding whereby we

continued to identify emergent themes over the four years, with the assistance of NVivo. A holistic, chronological school-life-history for each child was then composed. For full details of our research methodology, design, analysis and ethics, please use this link: [Children's Life-Histories in Primary Schools: Imagining Schooling as a Positive Experience](#).

Implications emerging from our research evidence in children's life-histories

Seven recommendations from children for schools and teachers

Our research considered, from children's perspectives, how or whether current curriculum arrangements provided the 'care' to sustain the participatory wellbeing of children and their social bonds as well as to facilitate curriculum-related academic attainment and economic success more widely. Seven key suggestions in relation to actions accessible to schools and/or individual teachers are included below.

One: prioritise boosting children's relatedness and wider participation

When enjoying a Sense of Relatedness, the children described feeling respected, having good status, being valued, experiencing closeness, warmth, acceptance, trust and/or care with their friends. For example, finding that friends 'are always nice to me' [Michael, 3]¹; and they are 'always making me feel like I'm a grown up' [Amin, 3]. Jake told us, 'They really care about me and whenever I'm like hurt they would just help me out' [6].

There were seven children in our sample of 23 who told us explicitly that the only part of school they valued was their friends. Harriet said: 'The only thing I like about school is that I get to meet my friends' [4]. Sam explained that what he wanted to gain from schooling overall was 'to make friends' because 'making friends is a key part of being happy' [6]. Rory [5] told us he believed that good relationships were more important than high-attainment in tests. Alongside this valuing of friends, Children's Life-histories in Primary Schools (CLIPS) children expressed their keen desire to be participants in, and contributors to, their class or school community. They told us that having a Sense of Relatedness with other people was a vitally important ingredient of the wellbeing needed for their genuine engagement in curriculum-work. An activity we did with them demonstrated that their life-values were primarily focused on relationships: on becoming good, loyal family members and friends; and supporting 'the common good' (Sandel 2020). Very few said they aspired to wealth, fame or social mobility. Comments like these suggest that the heart of the necessary 'profound reform in what we value in our schools' (PhilLipson 2024, *ibid.*) includes a shift towards an enhanced focus on children's Sense of Relatedness to each other.

Two: encourage each child to be respectful to others, particularly towards those children who differ from others

Most teachers aim to generate respect among their students. However, we were disappointed to find that 20 of our CLIPS children described experiencing other children as fearsome or intrusive, potentially undermining their Sense of Relatedness and threatening their participatory wellbeing. Jack summed this up neatly, saying:

A lot of people are sad in this school ... Because like either they get told off by other children or other children be rude to them [5].

The term 'bullying' was used by eight children during one set of interviews. For example, Gabriella complained, when she was still new to her school:

What I really hate is people bullying me and people just think they can just be rude to me whenever they want [1].

Having described these fractured relationships, the CLIPS children then described instances of feeling lonely or isolated at school – lacking that relatedness and sense of participation. For example, Clara told us how she felt when she arrived at school:

[I felt] not that great because - Look at them! They all have friends and not me [1].

In such cases, the experience of feeling isolated may have limited these children's opportunities for participatory wellbeing helpful for intentional curriculum-work. However, it is worth schools and teachers noting that some children may need to learn how to nurture healthy relatedness. Adults in school could explicitly support children's relationship development – as well as their cognitive attainment – in order to promote children's future wellbeing and full participation in the community.

Three: encourage all teachers to be respectful, particularly towards those children who differ from others

All teachers also hope to be respectful to every child they teach. However, our research highlighted some examples where children felt hurt or upset by something a teacher did or said, even when their teacher had meant well. The teacher sometimes did not register the upset they had provoked. For example, Fin told us about one teacher:

She didn't think my work was very good ... So she ripped it up and threw it in the bin ... It doesn't really help my confidence [13].

On the other hand, Fin's attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder diagnosis – which meant he found it more difficult to concentrate in a formal classroom – also led to embarrassment:

When you're just daydreaming, like the teacher might just ask you [a question], and then you're just like 'Oh!' and then everybody stares at you and it's really humiliating.

A few teachers actually read out everyone's test scores in public to the whole class, despite children telling us they much preferred teachers avoiding making attainment scores public. Rather, we suggest, it would be more beneficial for teachers instantly to punish derogatory performance-oriented comments or behaviour from other children. Additionally, teachers themselves could stop using the words 'low' or 'high' in relation to performance – instead focussing on children's relatedness and agency.

Four: make lessons more engaging through participatory pedagogies

To gauge children's overall Sense of Agency reflected in their autonomous action within class, we asked sample children how often they could make their own decisions in their primary classroom. The majority replied 'never' [n = 16/23]. Educators have been arguing for centuries (Cremin and Chappell 2021; Dewey 1938; Kolb 1984) that children's learning is most effectively facilitated through pedagogies that draw on children's agency, sparking their imaginations or provoking creative action. Unfortunately, the CLIPS children found many school tasks to be irrelevant or too tricky to draw them in, making them appear boring. This then led to children's disengagement and their perception that their true interests had little value at school; and so in turn, they perceived that school had little to offer their own future aspirations.

Lack of agency-boosting pedagogies among the CLIPS children may explain the intense boredom described by 21 of our 23 participants. For example, during a one-hour interview, Rory used the word 'boring' 19 times to describe his recent maths lesson. Jack told us what happened when he tried to express his boredom:

I actually said, "Can I go and explore because this is too boring!" and [as a punishment] I was made to stay in for lunch and break-time [1].

The 23 CLIPS children seemed to experience being misrecognised because of their interest in curriculum areas and pursuits other than mathematics and English; including interests they explored

passionately at home. Harriet, for example, had a passion for drawing which was not promoted at school. Harriet therefore decided not to reveal her true 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].

In other words, Harriet intentionally withdrew from engagement in curriculum-work because it failed to acknowledge her own needs and preferences, even within National Curriculum subjects.

Rory described feeling misrecognised when being taken out of French lessons for extra help in mathematics. This had been his school's response to his lower-attainment in mathematics. It resulted in Rory not experiencing success in mastering French tasks effectively; it did not accord with his own valued goals for schooling; and he did not find mathematics tasks relevant or satisfying. In these ways, his low Sense of Competence and low Sense of Agency seemed to be sustained. This made him angry – rather than better at mathematics or French:

Sometimes extra help doesn't help because you're missing out on something else ... I found it annoying [missing 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].

In another case, Jack had started frequently missing days of school. We asked Jack how school would be different if they focussed first thing every morning on sport, art and computers instead of mathematics and English. 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].

He was suggesting that if school involved tasks like sport that he enjoyed and/or mastered effectively, aligning with his personally meaningful goals and interests, then he would feel recognised; and his participatory wellbeing might be boosted.

We invited Gabriella to describe the best things about primary school. She mentioned 'the activities that we do like in the afternoon': subjects like art and topic that she found personally relevant and satisfying. She demonstrated a serious dedication to becoming competent in art, describing how, if she won the lottery, she would use the money – not for luxury goods or trips, rather – to develop art:

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

Similarly, Zeph, Fin and Jon were all passionate and knowledgeable about animals. Zeph, for example, was nick-named the 'animal dictionary' [11] due to his extensive expertise about reptiles. Jon told us that if he could replace mathematics and English-lessons in the morning, he would 'learn about animals' instead. These three children had a great track record of success in relation to learning about animals outside school, to which they contributed actively. In this regard, their Sense of Competence was strong. Unfortunately, Fin noted that the school as an institution 'wouldn't know how good I know about animals' [3] because nature study was not included in their school's curriculum.

The CLIPS children requested more physically and emotionally provocative pedagogies where they responded creatively, emotionally or collaboratively to curriculum inputs. On this basis, we propose that teachers' pedagogic strategies could include using Jigsaw Method where each child teaches as an expert in one area; collaborative problem-solving or reciprocal teaching, which allow for agency and a display of individual competence; group or online discussions, collaborative experiments, charity projects, outdoor explorations or creative arts events, all of which support peer relationships and are likely to promote intentional engagement. Using such participatory pedagogies, teachers can avoid passing down the coercion they may be experiencing in the system and avoid hurrying or threatening children in relation to school-work.

The children's lack of choice in their curriculum focus and pedagogies mirrored findings by the Primary Review (Alexander 2012, 2011; Wyse, McCreery, and Torrance 2008) that post-1989 policy emphasis on test scores greatly reduced teachers' own Sense of Agency and creativity in pedagogies they adopted, so that teaching became more static, rigid, individually-focused and taught from the front. This occurred despite clear evidence that sitting still, listening and remembering can only be applied to a narrow range of performance objectives and not to all children – perhaps especially not to 'lower-attaining' children.

Five: practise collaborative friendship grouping and minimise 'attainment grouping'

Encourage collaboration. The CLIPS children emphasised the importance of teachers respecting friendship groups because they felt they became more engaged with school-work when they sat with friends. However, in our observations, we noted that teachers tended to keep friends apart so that they would not distract each other. Indeed, collaboration with any peers was frowned upon in most classrooms. As Amin explained: 'I don't want people stealing my ideas' [6]. This was at the expense of (potentially richer) collaborative learning through peer interactions, in particular, friendship interactions; thereby obstructing children from linking their Sense of Relatedness with their Sense of Competence. Such individually-framed practices countered children's experiences of participatory wellbeing, where friends or peers could extend and inspire each other's ideas through their relatedness.

Peer collaboration would have also helped the CLIPS children during instances when they could not get the help they needed from teachers in class. Jon represented others too when he demonstrated his anger about teachers' neglect, as he saw it, and would have welcomed a more collaborative class culture:

Sometimes, if you like call their [the teachers'] names like about- like a thousand times, they will just, won't - they can't hear you like. I wasn't getting literally – literally not enough help, like basically no help whatsoever [11].

Another obstructive feature highlighted by nearly all 23 children was being kept in alone at break-time or lunch-time (or both, like Jack, above) for not completing tasks. Clara expressed a rational argument to what appeared to her to be an irrational ruling:

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]

Edith explained how this punitive practice made her 'Very upset because I have to miss all my friends playing outside'.

This practice seemed to suggest that those who worked slowly – through no fault of their own – or indeed perhaps because some children were particularly careful – were less worthy of enjoying a full play-time and they therefore missed out on the wellbeing that it encouraged. The particular 'lower-attaining' children in CLIPS may have especially needed these times to boost their status through activities other than doing core subjects, for example, while playing games or making friends.

De-emphasise testing. The pervasive emphasis on testing perhaps encouraged lack of collaborative learning. Testing already disrupted our sample children's wellbeing in other ways. For example, Jake said that his brain 'crumbles up' and 'just goes blank' under test pressure, literally disabling him:

I'll do it when it's on a piece of like paper in my book and then I would just answer it, but in a test it's just weird ... It's like my brain – weird. It's just like- it like crumbles up and once I'm trying to figure out a question it just goes blank.

Similarly, Salah said that when he was expecting a test he might simply absent himself rather than face the test, choosing not to risk threats to his Sense of Competence and Agency:

I might not come [to school] ... [or] I might hide in the toilets ... I'm scared that if I get it [the test] wrong, then I'll get in big trouble. Today I got seven out of 30 in my mathematics test and I started crying [1].

The regime of testing led in turn to another destructive practice: grouping by attainment. Being divided up according to prior attainment risked leading 'lower-attaining' children to feel excluded simply by sitting physically in a different space from others – a space determined by prior attainment – and with no choice about this on the part of the child. This division was even worse when a child's special friends went out to their (higher) attainment groups, as with Ellie. She cried:

'Don't leave me! ... no! you guys can't leave me!' ... I need my friends. I need them to stay in the same class as me. They're the friends I usually play with [1].

Resultant feelings of exclusion and misrecognition seemed directly linked to children's perceived low competence. For example, when Edith described the feelings of someone who did not do well at school, she used the words 'lonely and sad' [3], making an explicit link between a (perceived) weak Sense of Competence and a weak Sense of Relatedness. Gabriella also suggested that when a child (like herself) did badly in mathematics or writing, other children alienated and misrecognised her:

No-one cares. And they feel lonely ... Because they have no friends to stand up for them.

On the other hand, when no grouping was used, feelings of exclusion and misrecognition could still emerge. For example, when Ellie did work within the whole class rather than in her lower-attainment set, she was sometimes given easier – but different – work than the others. This singled her out:

I feel embarrassed when I get different work ... I get a sheet like full of other stuff ... But like, everybody else just does it in their book.

In other words, even without formal categories of attainment grouping, Ellie still felt like the odd one out based on her prior attainment.

This categorisation according to prior attainment also seemed to lead some children to feel burdened with responsibility for their own failures within a situation where they simultaneously felt they had no power to represent their views or initiate change. They often blamed themselves for not achieving what they were supposed to achieve, rather than, for example, blaming the performative schooling context or the overly-narrow curriculum. If friendship seating in class were encouraged, and collaboration among friends developed in a systematic way, it might be more effective for both children and teachers (Hargreaves 2017). Like learning anything else, children need to learn – through reflection, with teachers' support – how to collaborate and support each other to best effect. Other children that one likes can be a very motivating resource, but only if systemic efforts are made to make it work for everyone.

The research literature describing the potential damage caused by attainment-grouping abounds (e.g. Dunne et al. 2011; Francis, Taylor, and Tereshchenko 2019; Keddie 2016; McGillicuddy and Devine 2020; Reay 2006). And yet policy has urged teachers to group by attainment because of the ubiquity of testing (e.g. DfE 1993). If special groupings are needed, evidence from our research and others' (Francis, Taylor, and Tereshchenko 2019), indicates that they are less damaging if they are temporary, i.e. only for a particular task rather than a whole subject such as mathematics. Specific support should be provided by an experienced teacher who perceives that, on this occasion, these particular children need more support for a particular task.

Six: provide children with opportunities for de-stressing during class time

Some of the CLIPS children described dramatic levels of stress and anxiety, sometimes finding the classroom well-nigh intolerable, especially in relation to mathematics. The high profile of mathematics in curriculum policy was in tension with the commonly found aversion specifically to mathematics. It was not surprising then, that some children expressed a desire for quiet places where they could choose to seek sanctuary; and for spaces without overwhelming display boards. While

distressing experiences persisted, participatory wellbeing and attainment would both be compromised. Ellie, for example, needed respite from sitting in class simply looking at the mathematics display-board:

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 just like 'No!', I'm so stressed [3].

Mark told us about his anger at lacking a Sense of Competence in curriculum-work, but he felt he could not represent his feelings at school. This gave him the challenging task of constantly hiding his negative feelings. The energy he put into this hiding task might otherwise have been directed towards engaging in curriculum-work. The situation was distressing for him, evidencing limited wellbeing:

I seem to get very angry every day ... [Later, at home,] I mostly just play Fortnite. I mostly just take my anger out on people online. I'm just sort of killing people. Because ... [at school], I'm just trying to keep it in.

Reflecting back on a teacher he used to have, he reported needing relief:

She was saying like, 'You have to do this and that!' I kind of got confused and didn't know what I was doing. There was too much stuff in my head at once and I couldn't work things out [Starts crying] [10].

Gemma described 'anxiety' or 'panic' attacks at age nine, which left her practically disabled. She had not told her parents or teachers about this for a whole year. She explained that, when faced by a tricky mathematics task:

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 [10].

Michael imagined a student who attained high marks, unlike himself, as feeling 'powerful' [2]. On the other hand: 'Being on the bottom is like you're feeling like sad and like no-one's playing with you and like you're being angry' [6]. Michael experienced significant stress in completing curriculum-work, which was exacerbated by his teacher's angry response. On one occasion, the little work he had done so far was destroyed, leading to further feelings of misrecognition, which further obstructed his will to engage:

[Teacher] gets so angry and he will say 'Did you get distracted?' If I said 'yes, yes sorry' ... he will make me in big trouble ... He- (distressed pause) he ripped out the paper and then I had to start again.

Edith relatedly described being 'very worried for the test', in case she achieved 'zero' [4]: that is, not even one mark to indicate her competence. She expressed the relief she would feel if she were magically guaranteed future high grades in mathematics examinations:

I want to be good at- good at mathematics so I don't struggle with it ... [If guaranteed good grades], I wouldn't have to worry about revising for exams too much because I would know I'm going to get good grades [13].

Jack described most graphically how his 'head gets hot' [4]:

You sometimes blow your fuse ... because when there's an easy question people just keep on confusing me ... when people are talking so loud I can't think so then I get it wrong [2].

He took the situation into his own hands and constructed his own stress-relief: he provoked the teacher to send him out of class, then saying 'Thank God! because I'm out of the classroom' so that his 'brain can relax' [12]. His pleasure at being sent out tallied with his frequent physical absences from school which presumably afforded him other opportunities to avoid school stress.

These comments from the CLIPS children indicated that some children were finding school-work distressing because of a sense of being overwhelmed, pressure to finish a task, fear of teacher disapproval, disturbance in the classroom or the perceived difficulty of mathematics. These children might need a different pace of lesson, or a less pressured setting. Teachers can devise sensitive means for dealing with this, perhaps suggesting surreptitious signals children can use if they feel

such distress. For example, they might be allowed to take a break outdoors or in a quiet place at times when the teacher is unavailable to work them through the difficulty step by step.

Seven: encourage critical reflection on classroom learning and teaching

Last but by no means least, the CLIPS children mentioned the seventh significant aspect whereby teachers and schools could recognise the children's agency and relatedness, as well as competence: through systematising children's critiquing of schooling provision. The children in our study greatly appreciated being asked to comment on how and what arrangements were employed in school. However, they suggested that they were rarely invited to critique teaching or learning at school. Indeed, they felt uneasy about saying anything critical about teacher directives. Santosh 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]. Rory exclaimed disbelievingly:

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]

We have few examples of children voicing this need and indeed, we noted how surprised or puzzled they were to be asked to provide critique. For some, strict obedience and conformity were their props to survival. However, we suggest critique could be promoted through teachers constantly seeking feedback from children about how, when and where children are most engaged while carrying out curriculum-work; and which alternatives they propose. To boost their Sense of Agency and provide improved opportunities to represent their views and feelings, the children also need encouragement to ask critical questions, throughout their lessons, about opaque aspects of curriculum itself and its relevance to their own learning and wellbeing – now and for the future.

Summary: children's recommendations for schools and teachers

In summary, the children suggested that they were most likely to choose to engage in school curriculum-work when curricula and pedagogies allowed them, to some degree, to follow their own desires to explore new meanings and new ways of behaving imaginatively and creatively, perceiving themselves as having the power to initiate change, practise reflection and consider genuinely alternative actions as ways to achieve curriculum aims. The seven key and related areas that their critiques proposed for schools' and teachers' action included:

One: Focus on boosting children's relatedness and wider participation.

Two: Encourage each child to be respectful to others, particularly towards children who differ from others.

Three: Encourage all teachers to be respectful, particularly towards children who differ from others.

Four: Make lessons more engaging through participatory pedagogies.

Five: Practise collaborative friendship grouping and minimise 'attainment grouping'

Six: Provide children with opportunities for de-stressing during class time.

Seven: Encourage children's critical reflection on classroom learning and teaching.

We must acknowledge that for schools and teachers to be able to make these changes, some key policy shifts beyond revising the curriculum content would be very helpful. An improved system would need to be adequately funded by government to provide a truly broad and balanced curriculum: including a core place for arts, sports, environment and humanities; and an emphasis on investigating how these can be taught most engagingly. These actions are not directly in the hands of children and teachers, although they can be promoted by political action in the public sphere. However, recent feedback in their Interim Report on the future curriculum review, suggests that shifting policy towards truly enhancing children's wellbeing is likely to be challenging for teachers and schools, as the March 2025 Interim Report describes:

Continuing to drive high and rising standards in all subjects, which includes mastery of foundational concepts in English and maths (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-interim-report>).

This emphasis does not seem promising in light of the children's narratives, which suggested that a true shift away from production towards social reproduction would see an end to the attainment tests implicit in this quotation, as measures of 'high and rising standards'. We propose that the Education Secretary could, instead of tests, implement more equitable and humane ways to keep schools accountable than through national testing. Reducing or eliminating the focus on tests would also help contain all schooling to within school hours, not pressuring parents into paying for outside-school private tutoring; nor pressuring teachers to keep children away from their playtimes. At the wider level, a progressive shift would be towards introducing more democratic processes for selecting – and acting on – curriculum content and inspectorate structures, including a diversity of children's and teachers' contributions.

Our findings suggest more widely that global curricula should be designed in policy and delivered in classrooms in consultation with children about their experiences in schooling. Curricula must, according to those who are supposed to engage intentionally with them, support not only a Sense of Competence but also a Sense of Agency and Relatedness as and through learning.

Final comments

This article constructs practical messages from the CLIPS children's narratives, to improve children's experiences of curriculum at this exciting opportunity for change in the future. The 'one essential epistemic shift' mentioned by Nancy Fraser (2022) at the start of this article is reflected in the CLIPS children's words. These mirror her call for a shift away from profit-related production and towards social reproduction, towards 'the forms of provisioning, caregiving, and interaction that produce and sustain human beings and social bonds' (2022, 9). The children's emphasis on relationships, a sense of belonging and need for participation, respect for one another, working collaboratively with friends – these all suggest that such developments are of prime importance to children and indeed, the key to children's curriculum engagement and wellbeing. Without waiting for policy shifts, teachers can continue to enact these suggestions as many already are: constantly balancing between driving 'high and rising standards in all subjects' on the one hand; with attending to every child's Sense of Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness, on the other. Teachers can continue to respond to requests for pedagogies that facilitate curriculum in ways that appeal to different children's interests and ways of learning; and that evoke agentic action and critical thought. Our evidence from children, above, provides new reasons for focusing at least as much on these aspects of children's participatory wellbeing, as on their test results. It may be encouraging, despite being counter-intuitive, to note that, having a strong Sense of Relatedness among friends seemed to boost children's Sense of Agency and their Sense of Competence rather than detract from these. While break-times and classroom discussion with friends may seem obstructive to higher attainment, our evidence in this article suggests the opposite. Enjoying a strong Sense of Relatedness encouraged children to feel recognised as they participated with others in valuing and valued ways, suggesting this as the key to the 'profound reform in what we value in our schools' (Phillipson, *ibid.*).

Note

1. Throughout the paper, a number in square brackets following a quotation means that the quotation comes from an interview during that term of the 13 term project. For example, [8] following a quotation means that the quotation came from TERM 8 of the project, i.e. just over half way through the project when the children were starting in Year 5 of their primary schools.

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ORCID

Eleanore Hargreaves  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5630-6995>

Laura Quick  <http://orcid.org/0009-0004-3774-4588>

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