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Children's Life- Histories in Primary Schools

Imagining Schooling as
a Positive Experience

Eleanore Hargreaves
Denise Buchanan · Laura Quick

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Eleanore Hargreaves • Denise Buchanan
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Dedication to the children

*This book is dedicated to all children who sometimes find mathematics
and English in primary-school tricky.*

*And with special love and thanks to the 23 children whose life-histories
are contained in this book.*

FOREWORD

Children's Life-Histories in Primary Schools exposes the many fictions around schooling in the twenty-first century. We see children struggling to come to terms with their positioning as low-attainers, whilst working extremely hard to achieve a sense of themselves as 'a good-enough' learner. *Children's Life-Histories in Primary Schools* also tackles head-on the many myths around agency. We see young people being highly agentic, working extremely hard to develop a sense of themselves as competent learners. At the same time, we are faced with the harsh realisation that many of them are acting to little avail. Rather, as the book fearlessly claims in the face of long-standing orthodoxies, schools are primarily reproductive rather than transformative. But this is no simplistic binary analysis. Agency is conceptualised not as opposed to, but constitutive of structure. While there is a recognition that all young people exercise a degree of agency, there is also an appreciation that agency is very unequally distributed. As a result, for those at the bottom of the steep educational hierarchy, agency and effort rarely translate into the realisation of dreams, regardless of how many entreaties these young people receive to reach for the stars. As the book makes clear, in asserting agency for the individual at the cost of recognising embedded structures of power, what we are left with are deficit models of one sector of young people, as they fail to realise unattainable goals.

As the book fearlessly claims, schools can be very harsh environments for those who lack the resources to succeed and be included in the select group of educational 'winners'. This book, then, is about education's 'losers', a group, whose plight is given far too little attention. It reveals the

myriad ways in which the powerful competitive culture that saturates English schooling enters powerfully into how pupils construct and negotiate their identities. There is a potent affective current surging through contemporary classrooms. It is tangible in the accounts of pupils like Ellie who talks about feeling she is failing in everything to do with Maths and has ‘dreaded mathematics her whole life’. The dread is also there in the ever-present threat of punishment for poor work, which she describes as ‘scary, and nerve-wracking’. No wonder such a child would ‘like to stay home and throw away school’.

Despite the attempts at subversion and resistance of children like Ellie, more often we see fear, anxiety, humiliation and desperate attempts to adapt to the strictures of the system, providing little scope for children deemed to be low-attainers to thrive, flourish and demonstrate their strengths. There has been far too little recognition of the micro-aggressions and every-day cruelties of contemporary English schooling. Yet, our hyper-competitive, metric-driven educational system generates a category of stigmatised low-attainers, who are viewed as acceptable collateral damage in the drive to push up educational standards.

It is this group, and their compelling narratives, that *Children’s Life-histories In Primary Schools* focuses on, revealing the educational injuries inflicted on those who are not included among the ‘winners’. We are shown the consequences of a high-stakes system for children who are judged unsuccessful on the narrow criteria of achievement in Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. Time and time again, we see the children’s skills and talents in a plethora of different subject areas. Throughout their accounts, there are myriad mentions of aptitude in computing, love of art and music, proficiency in PE, and the pleasures and gains that come through socialising and playing with friends. But, at the same time, our increasingly narrowly focused, academically orientated curriculum prevents these children from demonstrating and developing their abilities in a wide range of areas the English educational system no longer values.

In the 2020s, the 3Rs take up a growing proportion of young children’s curriculum time when other subjects, vital for children’s sense of wellbeing and enjoyment in education, have been severely cut back. They now have less art, and less music, with even Ofsted (2021) bemoaning the reduction of music teaching in primary schools. Children are also receiving so little physical education that research found that 90% of primary

school children are no longer meeting the 30-minute moderate-to-vigorous physical education threshold (Daly-Smith et al 2021). Moreover, some children, in particular children in lower-attainment groups, are missing breaks and lunchtimes either as a punishment or in order to catch up with their school work (Baines and Blatchford 2019). Yet, for some of the children in this research, breaks are the only enjoyable aspect of their schooling.

There is increasing concern about the low levels of wellbeing among English school children (The Children's Society 2022). Concerningly low levels of wellbeing are evident throughout *Children's Life-histories In Primary Schools*. Gabriella, a Black British girl, comments poignantly:

[Low-attainers feel] sad ..., no-one cares. And they feel lonely... Because they have no friends to stand up for them.

Another child they interviewed described 'the walk of shame' as she moved from her Year 4 classroom to the 'low-attainers' Year 3 group, while another defines herself as 'brainless'. We also learn about Edith, a Black British, pupil premium student who had been taught to believe that the way to learn was to listen obediently. Edith lives in fear of achieving poor marks. Achieving poor marks or just not getting the answers right was a matter of painful concern because, as Edith reports, 'it makes me feel bad'. She describes being very worried about the frequent maths tests in case she gets zero. These are particularly striking examples, but in many of the quotes from the children, we see powerful feelings of futility, dejection, humiliation and shame. Most adults in England have little idea of the extent to which English education has become more about punishment than validation for increasing numbers of children and young people (Reay 2022).

The authors raise important and timely questions about what happens when students are not successful. But, just as importantly, it demonstrates the ways in which class, race and SEND are at the heart of educational practices. The children whose stories *Children's Life-histories In Primary Schools* tells are from ethnically diverse backgrounds, with many qualifying for pupil premium, and having a range of educational needs. This is a brave book that takes no hostages. It dives deep under the surface of the aspirational culture of English schooling to uncover the costs for those

who lose out in ‘the winner takes all culture’ schooling has increasingly become. In doing so, it raises vital questions about the purpose of the English educational system, and the values that underpin it that we should all be asking ourselves.

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Diane Reay

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LIST OF SELF-PORTRAITS

Self-portraits of children:

1. Abe
2. Harriet
3. Fin
4. Zeph
5. Gabriella
6. Michael
7. Mark
8. Jack
9. Laurie
10. Louise
11. Sam
12. Salah
13. Gemma
14. Clara
15. Jon
16. Edith
17. Eden
18. Samiya
19. Ellie
20. Musa
21. Rory
22. Santosh
23. Amin

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ABOUT THE BOOK

This book grapples with issues of social injustice among children attending British primary-schools. It isolates one out of the many injustices afflicting these children: the injustice of being stigmatised because of their lower than ‘age-level expectations’ in narrow tests of mathematics and English. Through repeated, lengthy and active interviews with 23 such children across primary schools in London and South East England, the authors drew up the life-histories of these children, in detail, across five years. The team found that the children who had lower-than-expected attainment in *both* mathematics *and* English tended to find that their Sense of Competence was damaged because they felt that they were treated as less worthy than their higher-attaining peers. The situation was made worse by ‘attainment’ *grouping* according to these narrow definitions of competence and also by policy emphasis on performance rather than learning. As predicted by Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2019), their perceived lack of competence also led them to feel trapped, as unable to achieve autonomy in school and it hampered their relationships—which in turn reduced their Sense of Competence in a continuing downward spiral. Overall, we concluded that their wellbeing was threatened by constant reminders of their perceived relative lack of attainment, setting some of them up for reduced flourishing in adult life. In these senses, we perceived their current everyday school lives, as well as their potential future lives, to be unjustly and negatively affected. Our findings support a strong case for promoting better parity of participation, facilitating greater wellbeing, among primary school children (Nancy Fraser, 2022).

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Eleanore Hargreaves is Professor of Learning and Pedagogy at the UCL Faculty of Education and Society (IoE), London University. Eleanore worked as a primary school teacher from 1983 till 1988. She was then employed by the National Foundation for Educational Research until 1997, researching and developing the earliest Key Stage 1 Standard Assessment Tasks. Having completed her MA Ed and her PhD, she then joined the Institute of Education as lecturer, teaching MA modules about formative assessment and learning. She also undertook consultancies and research projects abroad, focusing especially on Egypt. Eleanore's UK research began with a small project exploring the impact of teachers' feedback on different children, which led to a particular interest in how schools group by attainment and differentiate children as such. This ultimately led to the five-year longitudinal life-history study described in this book. Eleanore intends to spend the forthcoming few years embedding in practice the important messages that have emerged from this research.

Denise Buchanan works as Lecturer in Education at the Institute of Education, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, London. After training in psychology and general nursing, Denise worked as a Further Education teacher for many years, teaching psychology and health-related topics. She also taught cookery to students who had mental health problems, and so her PhD research was carried out among these particular students, in order to identify the ways in which formal adult learning could benefit their wellbeing. Her academic interests include social and health

inequalities, particularly in relation to mental health; the links between wellbeing and learning; how marginalised learners of any age experience formal learning; and the methodological and ethical issues that may arise when carrying out qualitative research.

Laura Quick is an honorary research fellow at UCL and Visiting Lecturer in Education at Roehampton University. After studying Social Anthropology and then qualifying as a primary school teacher, she worked in primary and special education settings for several years and ran a support programme for parents of children with social, emotional and mental health difficulties. Her PhD, which focused on four of the children discussed in this book, won the Geoff Whitty Doctoral Thesis Prize and the SAGE Student Research Methods Prize. Her academic interests involve the relationship between pupils' experiences of classrooms, classroom practices and the role of schools in the reproduction of inequalities.



CHAPTER 1

Life-history Methodology Used in the Children's Life-histories In Primary Schools (CLIPS) Study

INTRODUCTION

This book presents 23 life-histories of English primary-school children and our commentary on them. We used life-history methodology, from an interpretivist perspective, to provide the most holistic and vivid depictions of the children's experiences at school.

THE TRADITIONS AND BENEFITS OF LIFE-HISTORY RESEARCH

Thomson (2007) suggests that the aim of life-history is:

To provide a compelling account of the individual, of how and why events unfolded as they did and of the transformation of the individual over time. (p. 574)

In particular, we had the added aim of revealing aspects of children's school-lives that were socially unjust. This is in keeping with the life-history tradition and Plummer's (1983) suggestion that it evidences 'the concrete joys and suffering' of one individual in a vivid way that other data collection methods cannot. The life-history explores how the individual is responding to a specific temporal and social context. We recognise that both the child and the life-history researcher have their own ambiguities,

eccentricities, contradictions, humour and personality which influence the construction and contents of the life-histories.

Knowledge through life-history research, in contrast to traditional research, is constructed by the researcher working together with the researched person, in our case a child, as an active participant who provides unique insights and has agency over their life-history. Plummer (1983, p. 6) highlights the life-historian's 'compassion' towards her participants. The life-history is ultimately written by the compassionate researcher (in our case the three authors of this book), but the participant (or child) shapes its completion via their close relationship with the researchers. Life-histories do not aim to generalise from an individual's experiences but rather to make these experiences relatable to other individuals. Readers of life-histories may then reflect on the issues that emerge.

THE PRACTICES OF LIFE-HISTORY RESEARCH

Plummer (1983) suggests that life-history researchers need to listen deeply, extensively and openly, using prompts sparingly. They normally revisit the participant on several occasions over months or years (in our case, across four years). During the visits, they capture the participants' words and actions, recognising that both life-historian and the participant (child) will filter their understandings differently at different times. Even when the life-history does not cover a participant's whole life, as a history, it provides a chronological framework for the sequencing of a section of the participant's life, as well as individual snap-shots of particular points in time. The choice of time-period under study may relate to a particular aspect of the participant's life at that time or a specific era of policy history (in our case, current schooling policies that prioritise testing in mathematics and English).

In schooling, most life-histories are carried out with adults who reflect back on specific aspects of schooling such as being a teacher (e.g. Goodson, 1991). A few such retrospective life-histories have also been constructed of adolescents and/or students in Higher Education (e.g. Thomson et al., 2018). Some life-historians also use other artefacts to embellish the life-history account, such as school-records, pictures, observations, memory books, photographs or diaries. They may even interview other people who know the participant. The life-histories presented in this book, however, are based wholly on the responses of the children, on a regular ongoing basis.

ADAPTING THE LIFE-HISTORY APPROACH FOR THE CLIPS STUDY

The CLIPS project emerged out of our worrying perception that specific children were being marginalised in the current schooling system because of their lower-attainment in tests of either mathematics or English, or both. This concern had its early origins in the introduction of national assessments following the 1988 Education Reform Act in England and Wales. From this date onwards, children in England and Wales were categorised within schooling according to their test results. This was different from during the 1970s and 1980s when other strengths and interests such as in sport or music might have been given more weight. As a result, after 1988, most primary-classrooms divided children physically into groups according to their mathematics/English attainment (Marks, 2013), which had not happened since the 1950s/1960s. This led to the threat that those on 'lower' tables or in 'lower' sets had subordinate status to other children, purely on the basis of some tests.

Quantitative data studies across the past 30 years have repeatedly indicated that those children in the lowest groups, when grouped according to attainment, began to experience an additional lack of confidence and attain even lower grades than comparable children in other groups, because of their designation as lower-attainers (Francis et al., 2019). These negative effects persist and can increase as children advance through schooling, potentially obstructing educational opportunities and thus generating life-long social injustice (Boaler, 2005).

Our research team watched the 7-Up series (Apted, 1964) with great interest, in which children from different social backgrounds were followed through TV film, being interviewed every seven years of their life from age seven. Inspired by this, our team aimed to explore a different set of children's progression across the last four years of their primary-schooling and into their secondary-schooling. We aimed to provide vivid life-histories of 23 children as they progressed and developed across this transformative era of their school-lives. We sought their immediate responses to the social institution of schooling from within their designation as lower-attainers in Year 3, and revisit this across four years in order to explore their 'concrete joys and suffering' in schooling, with the ultimate purpose of tackling social injustice.

For this purpose, we recruited four primary schools in SE England, three of which were themselves 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 the Year 3 class as not meeting age-level expectations in mathematics and/or English, but did not have an Education Health and Care Plan (which would have indicated medical diagnosis). From 2018 to 2022, we interviewed each of these 23 children every term (one had dropped out), filmed them and observed them briefly in class (apart from one term in which Covid 19 prevented us from doing so).

LIFE-HISTORY RESEARCH WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Although life-history research has a long-established tradition, there is no fixed way to do life-history research: every life-history will be different. Lanford (2019) called for ‘an extension of life history strategies and a recommitment to the documentation of [individuals’] lives and struggles’ (p.461). Life-history research tends to be more flexible than traditional approaches because each life-history must be adapted to the participant, rather than fitting a prescribed model. In many ways, in the CLIPS project, we followed the guidance of Plummer (1983), Goodson and Sikes (2001) and Thomson (2007) in relation to common practices of carrying out life-history research. For example, we portrayed our participants as agentic individuals, had compassion for participants and supported them with a caring, respectful relationship. We also contextualised our life-histories within the globally dominant educational policy of focus on test-results in core subjects. Like most life-histories, our research methods included repeated interviewing, and we also used observation and film.

In keeping with the earliest life-histories, our purpose was to highlight gaps in the exposure of social injustices within the schooling system. Although most life-histories are retrospective and may include an individual’s memories of childhood, very few have employed the life-history approach to the concurrent lives of children, or within primary-schooling. Given the long-standing and critical interest in ‘Life in School’ (Hammersley & Woods, 2020), the relatively recent demand for ‘pupil voice’ (Fielding, 2004; Flutter & Ruddock, 2004), and the emphasis on childhood as worthy of attention in its own right (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003), our life-histories sought to fill a gap and enhance our insights into school-children’s emerging experiences and voices.

ADAPTING LIFE-HISTORY RESEARCH TO THE CLIPS STUDY

Our research used life-history study in some less usual ways:

1. The inclusion of primary-school children as participants;
2. The concurrent aspect of the life-history;
3. The child-only perspective, without information from others; and
4. The emphasis on active, child-centred activities as data collection tools.

The Inclusion of Primary-School Children as Participants

Our participants were seven or eight-year-old school-children when we began the CLIPS project. This seemed to be younger than other life-history participants as we could find no other life-histories with such young children in school (although see Pollard and Filer's 'pupil careers', 1999). Our own experiences of interviewing with young children, however, had suggested that these young children could be insightful and forthcoming (see Gipps et al., 2016). Indeed, we were convinced that without their contributions, attempts at improving the learning and social justice of primary-aged children's schooling was lacking.

The Concurrent Aspect of the Life-History

Most longitudinal life-history studies consist of retrospective reflections on a person's life (but see Thomson et al., 2018 for concurrent studies with older children). Our life-histories, however, could be called concurrent or synchronous life-histories (although also containing elements of retrospection) in that the CLIPS children's life-histories were literally unfolding under our eyes as we engaged with every child each term. This was living history! The synchronous aspect of our study provided a particular immediacy to our findings and attention to chronological change that a purely retrospective account may not have provided so effectively. However, it also meant that we, as life-historians, played a more dominant role in making interpretations and representing continuity in the life-histories.

The Child-Only Perspective, Without Information from Others

Some life-histories include information from other people in the participants' lives such as teachers' and parents' comments on a child. After much negotiation, our team decided to construct our life-histories purely from the perspective of the child. We believed this needed to be done, given the ubiquitous absence of the child's view in research literature. However, we did make one exception: we asked each child's teacher for Key Stage 1 attainment results (i.e. at age six/seven, teacher-assessed), Year 3 test results (i.e. at age 7/8) and Key Stage 2 attainment results (i.e. at age 10/11, teacher-assessed, due to COVID 19). We also asked the teachers whether any child was on the Special Educational Needs Register (indicating them as having a particular learning difficulty such as dyslexia), which a few children were. Other than these pieces of systemic information, we tried to interpret the children's experiences based only on what we learnt during observation and interviews with the children themselves.

THE EMPHASIS ON ACTIVE, CHILD-CENTRED ACTIVITIES AND DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

Most interviews depend on questions and answers. However, young children may not find these to be the most accessible means for expressing themselves. Indeed, using verbal responses at all was potentially disadvantageous to some of the CLIPS children. However, to avoid all verbal data was beyond our capacity and much of our data remained speech-based. However, we sometimes did manage to avoid simple question-and-answering which we substituted with activities, games, role-play, drawing or photography. Given that our participants sometimes did not want to sit still for a whole interview, we took playdough to our interview sessions. From the second visit onwards, we encouraged children to play with the playdough throughout the interview if they wanted; and many of them did so throughout all subsequent interviews. We also provided a snack where permissible to make the interviews feel more sociable and special. We also tried to provide choices, emphasising the individual's agency and keeping the participants actively involved. We carried these data collection activities out as shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 CLIPS visits schedules and interview contents chart

<i>CLIPS_{year}</i>	<i>Visits</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>School_{year}</i>
YEAR 1 AGE 7-8	VISIT01 (PAIRS OR THREES)	General getting to know you conversations and questions, including about future aspirations	Year 3 summer term <i>2018</i>
	VISIT02	Drawing faces on outlines of low and high-attaining children; and how their teachers might have responded. Quote sort (agree/disagree/not sure) of cards showing comments about 'being smart' picked up in interview transcripts from previous interviews.	Year 4 winter term <i>2018</i>
	VISIT03	Making models of self, using art materials selected by the child. Exploring how others describe self, using cut-out figures of parents, teachers, siblings and friends. Providing concentric circles and placing self and others to indicate closeness to certain people. Taking photos around school to indicate where particular emotions are experienced e.g. boredom, excitement, happiness. Describing best and worst aspects of school. Telling an alien about tests.	Year 4 spring term <i>2019</i>
CLIPS YEAR 2 AGE 8-9	VISIT04	Using a doll's house to model a test-taking classroom.	Year 4 summer term <i>2019</i>
	VISIT05 (PAIRS)	Quote sort of comments on cards regarding what teachers think about teaching them. Video shown of a child being treated unfairly in school and children asked to comment as it progressed. Picture of 'Maria'—high-attaining but poorly behaved child, triggering participants' comments. Feedback on the children's CLIPS involvement.	Year 5 winter term <i>2019</i>
	VISIT06	Agency and choice—quotations about having choices. Children selected boxes labelled never/sometimes/often/always/never where they placed put a figure of themselves. Sentence starters on cards: e.g. 'I learn best when...' Quote sort about fixed ability statements.	Year 5 spring term <i>2020</i>
	VISIT07 Cancelled	Retrospective school history (nursery to year 3), jumping from year to year. N/A	Year 5 summer term <i>2020</i> Covid-19

(continued)

Table 1.1 (continued)

<i>CLIPS year</i>	<i>Visits</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>School year</i>
CLIPS YEAR 3 AGE 9-10	VISIT08 Covid-19 (not 6 BG)	Covid-19 Questions: drawings of each child at home in lockdown and returning to school. Asked about feelings. Sentence starters e.g. 'On returning to school, I felt...' Rating scale using colourful wooden counting frame regarding teachers' view of their schoolwork for them and other pupils (e.g. how many out of 10?) Quick fire questions regarding positive psychology in school. Drawing of themselves in 10 years' time. Lids sorting activity to see how they 'divide up' children. N/A	Year 6 winter term 2020 [No interviews in one school but activities done in VISIT09]
	<i>Moved to next term</i>		Year 6 spring term 2021
CLIPS YEAR 4 AGE 10-11	VISIT09	Cloze story [filling in the word-gaps] regarding feelings about transition to secondary school and also loneliness. Blob trees to illustrate their feelings about returning to school after lockdown. Self-portrait using felt-tips for final publication.	Year 6 summer term 2021
	VISIT10	Retrospective school life-history for school years 4-7 and imagining beyond. Role play between Year 6 teacher (played by the child) and Year 7 teacher (played by the researcher, in dressing-up clothes), pondering how well the child would respond to secondary-school. Sorting lids for how to sort children. Toy animal activity, acting out imaginings of new Year 7 class. Questions on the purposes of education.	Year 6 summer term 2021

Secondary school	VISIT11	Sentence completers: best and worst things about secondary-school. Talking about favourite and least favourite aspects of new secondary-schools. Rating scale of feelings in secondary-school, using coloured wooden counting blocks: miserable = 1, very happy = 10. Quote sort e.g. ‘I wish I was back at primary-school’ Role play—what do you do when you are upset or happy at school? PowerPoint—preparing for secondary-school—to be sent to primary schools for future pupils. PowerPoint—advising a future child whether to be a research participant. Timeline of important life events from age 0–12 years old. Exploring loneliness via reactions to a story. Difficult situation—fill in the gaps (verbal cloze). Feeling uncomfortable in school (verbal cloze). Rating scale regarding having a voice, representing self, e.g., ‘If I am unhappy I know who to talk to and they will change it’. Questions regarding how getting on at secondary school. Putting into order of priority their aspirations (e.g. getting rich; getting high test scores; looking after family). Job aspirations conversation. Sense of status?—would they be surprised if head teacher asks for their recommendations? Selecting own motivational orientations: autonomy/control/impersonal.	Year 7 winter term 2021
	VISIT12		Year 7 spring term 2022
CLIPS YEAR 5 AGE 11–12	VISIT13		Year 7 summer term 2022

ETHICAL ISSUES

Being Explicit About Selection of Sample

As life-historians, we had particular ethical issues to address. In the CLIPS study, our first issue was selecting a sample of 'lower-attaining' children without by default identifying our participants as subordinate. In our case, we asked the class teachers to select children who did not have Education, Health and Care Plans (indicating medical diagnosis) but attained below national expectations on standardised tests in the so-called core subjects of mathematics and English in Year 3 of schooling (aged seven/eight). However, initially we told the children themselves that they had been selected because we were interested in talking to children who found some aspects of schooling difficult. Only as the project proceeded did we explain the specifics of their selection. This concern has remained key throughout the project and relates to parents' sensitivities as well as children's.

Meaningful Consent

Another issue was our request for consent from seven-year-old children in a study that would end when they were five years older. We debated the issue of how competent the children were to know in advance that they would be happy about their participation in later years. This was particularly related to our plans to film the children. We tried to address this issue by regularly checking that the children understood what the project was about and that they were still happy to be filmed and have their narratives recorded. Every term we reconfirmed their commitment. However, we did find that they tended to forget all about the project between interviews and we often had to remind them about our purposes and plans.

Watching Children Suffer

We found it difficult when our participants described painful experiences that we had no power to help with. We had promised the children complete anonymity (except in the rare event of a safeguarding issue), which meant that we had to refrain from intervening. On the other hand, the children's active engagement with the interviews (indicated by the fact that we only lost one child out of 24 across 4 years) suggested that at least they were finding some fulfilment in the interviews and their relationships with the research team.

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CHAPTER 2

Imagining Schooling as a Positive Experience

INTRODUCTION: A POSITIVE SCHOOLING EXPERIENCE

It's stressful when I put my hand up and get it wrong. It's a bit like I got rejected. And then other people put their hand up and they get it right ... Everyone else is smarter than me. I don't know mathematics and I don't know how to spell ... Shouting at us doesn't make it better. It just makes it worse. Because then we start to hate them and we start to not come to the school. [Harriet, TERM3]

When Harriet told us this, aged eight, she was not having a positive schooling experience: evidence of her wellbeing was limited; she was perceiving herself as less competent than her peers; but she felt she had no means for changing this. She found the way mathematics and English were taught unhelpful. She excelled in other ways in her life, but, from her perspective, these strengths and interests were not recognised or valued sufficiently in the current schooling system.

Evidence collated by Clark et al. (2018) found that schools can play a major positive role in supporting the wellbeing of a child and that, actually, the best predictor of adult wellbeing is not qualifications but one's 'emotional health in childhood' (p.21). This is a distinctly significant statement to make, in relation to Harriet's life-history and the other life-histories we present in this book. Evidence of wellbeing portrayed in the children's life-histories is likely to predict each child's future wellbeing better than the

grades they achieve at GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education, national tests taken at age 16) while it is the opposite message that we hear being broadcast to the children—and to their teachers.

We have called this book *Imagining schooling as a positive experience*. We imagine that schooling as a positive experience, firstly, would evidence wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2019); and secondly, would support social justice as parity of participation (Fraser, 2008). Like other books in the series, this book provides a critique of the current grammar of schooling and—drawing directly on empirical data from children—also imagines new grammars. *Imagining* is an action that demands use of our own agency as we consider reflectively an *alternative normal*. We also embrace and elaborate on the imaginings of 23 children—including Harriet—who had been designated by the system as lower-attainers in mathematics, English or both, when they were seven-years-old. We explored whether and how this designation seemed to influence their experiences of schooling. We explored whether and how they felt they were participating with parity in intentional engaged school-learning. And we explored, if so, whether and how this furthered their best interests within a positive culture.

Using the life-history research approach in our Children's Life-histories in Primary-Schools project (CLIPS), we engaged in interview activities every term for 13 terms in which we investigated each child's Sense of Competence, Sense of Agency and Sense of Relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2019) in schooling (see Chap. 4). We then compared these to their images of schooling as a positive experience. We interrogated their life-histories to guide us educators to better imagine an *alternative normal*—schooling as a positive experience; and then to place this into the wider context of social justice. We conceptualised agency and autonomous action as the heart of children's learning; also of their wellbeing; and of social justice. We recognised each child's life-history as an expression of 'an agentic subject who can bring her rich capacities for life—as a desiring, creating, relational person—into her working life and organizational participation' (Casey, 2006 cited in Etelapelto et al., 2013). (We were also constantly aware that teachers often face the same injustices as children because of the neo-liberal performativity of the wider systems—but that is another book.)

To support our processes of analysis, we drew on and linked three theoretical frameworks, two with their origins in the United States and one in Britain. The US frameworks were both developed outside education—one in the academic discipline of social psychology and one in political science—but we have adapted them to elucidate the school-life-histories of these 23 children. The first is Nancy Fraser's framework of social justice as

parity of participation (2008). The second is Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's Self-Determination Theory (2019) in which a Sense of Competence, Agency and Relatedness are all considered essential for wellbeing. The third theory, Chris Watkins' (2010) Theory of Learning versus Performance Orientations, also from social psychology, loosely links the two other theories together by providing a contextual shell for Ryan and Deci's theory, positioning it within the performative governance described by Fraser as heavily colouring the global political picture.

In terms of social justice, a socially just schooling system is one that serves socio-economically *advantaged and disadvantaged children equally*, allowing all children to experience fulfilment in and respect for their curriculum-related tasks; *and also facilitating procedures whereby the system itself can be critiqued by the children who use it*. The children in our study unanimously experienced a non-participatory model of school governance, in which rules were made for them rather than by them or with them. Instances of the children providing critique or challenging classroom rules or pedagogic customs were rare; and tended to meet with sanction rather than positive response. But we believed that children who found either or both of the two core subjects tricky—mathematics/English—perhaps suffered more than others through their lack of participation in decision-making. Because our sample children tended to feel alienated by the tunnel-vision focus on mathematics and English, it was even more important for them to feel part of other decisions relating to schooling such as its organisation: choice in subjects; seating; and teaching approaches. Indeed, these children were sometimes barred from participation in the affordances which allowed their Sense of Agency (self-direction) to be nurtured; where they could make choices and decisions to direct their learning. There appeared to be very limited 'fair and open processes of deliberation, in which all can participate as peers' (Fraser, 2008, p.29), suggesting that lack of representation of their voices provided further evidence of social injustice. This book provides one vehicle through which their voices can be portrayed.

EXPERIENCES OF STATUS-SUBORDINATION AND NON-PARTICIPATION AMONG THE CLIPS CHILDREN: NANCY FRASER

Although operating outside the context of education, Nancy Fraser described today's global socio-political arena, as manifesting a 'reduction of equality to meritocracy' (2018, p.14). By this, she implied that people

proving their worth by their merits had become more important than ensuring an egalitarian society. One particular benefit we perceived from adopting theoretical frameworks from outside education was that sometimes schooling can be seen as beyond the realm of social justice and human rights. However, this negative idea of meritocracy is core to the schooling system today and source of most aspects of injustice within that system. A schooling-system that promotes meritocracy accords with a world-view implying that some ‘deserving’ individuals from under-represented groups can attain employment positions on a par with their talented peers if they merit this through hard work and/or inherent talent (Fraser, 2019, p.16). Fraser wrote that such meritocratic policies may legitimise the ‘exclusionary vision of a just status order’ that leaves many misrecognised—such as some of the children in the CLIPS study.

Our CLIPS children sometimes felt that they were accorded lower status than their peers because of their designation at age seven of having a lower performance of attainment in mathematics/English. Status-subordination, or misrecognition, is identified as one aspect mitigating against social justice within Nancy Fraser’s (2008) framework. The CLIPS children sometimes talked of feeling inferior; feeling excluded; of feeling other; or invisible (as Fraser predicted, 2008, p.24). These negative experiences negatively affected many other opportunities to achieve agency for engaged learning and participating. They described feeling humiliated and trapped when they were compared to other children whose performances in these narrow subjects (mathematics/English) were perceived as better. Sometimes they were teased or bullied because of this, undermining their participation in learning further. They felt especially humiliated when the teacher publicly displayed their supposed lack of competence or reprimanded them for it; and sometimes it meant they had to sit separately from their peers. They even felt that the teachers *preferred* the higher-performing children and gave them favours, discriminating against others as full members of the class. A particular issue that they raised on many occasions was the anger and alienation they felt when they had to stay in during break-time or lunch-time to finish work that peers had finished during class-time.

Some of the most disturbing stories told by our CLIPS sample indicated intense anxiety or stress around actually doing mathematics/English in class. They experienced finding work disabling, obstructing participation further. They expressed boredom, fear, anger and sometimes extreme confusion, which denied them the opportunity to achieve mastery in their

work; and denied them the chance to take control of the situation. They suffered especially when presented with tests of their performance, which could alienate them further as they found them difficult and nerve-wracking to participate in. Several children described not getting the help they needed in the classroom. The outcome was that they sometimes dreaded coming to school and, instead of participating in learning, kept their eyes constantly on the clock to track home-time; and sought only to get by.

WELLBEING AND THE SENSE OF AGENCY: RYAN AND DECI

In the CLIPS project, we drew on Richard Ryan and Edward Deci's (2019) definition of wellbeing, which includes 'positive experience and wellness':

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

Fundamental for evidencing wellbeing, Ryan and Deci theorised that every child must possess a strong Sense of Competence, a strong Sense of Agency (Autonomy) and a strong Sense of Relatedness. The core of these was the Sense of Agency—facilitating self-determination—but all three were essential.

We also subscribed to White's (2011) related definition of wellbeing, this time specifically in schooling:

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

White's perspective puts importance on 'making learning enjoyable and not something to be endured for the sake of goods beyond it'. White also imagines 'hard work' to be only as valuable as its effectiveness in facilitating wellbeing. Like Ryan and Deci, he emphasises that nurturing beneficial 'dispositions', Orientations, attitudes, approaches to work and life, are necessary for wellbeing among school-children; *as well as* understanding of specific knowledge such as within the disciplines of mathematics and literacy.

In this book, we examine the motivational Orientations (or dispositions) that our 23 sample children develop when operating within the current schooling system which emphasises performance in specific knowledge *over* motivational Orientations towards learning (Watkins, 2010). We note how, when disabling Orientations are supported by systemic performative messages, these obstruct children's 'whole-hearted and successful engagement' and their 'propensity to take interest'. The CLIPS children tended to develop disabling Orientations which threatened to:

- a) erode their overall Sense of Competence further;
- b) undermine their Sense of Agency in taking control of their learning;
- c) obstruct their Sense of Relatedness to others.

This tendency led them to focus on conformity and avoidance of punishments rather than whole-hearted and successful engagement in learning and schoolwork. In turn, these Orientations limited their overall wellbeing, which ultimately limited their parity of participation.

FOCUS ON PERFORMANCE RATHER THAN LEARNING IN A PERFORMATIVE SYSTEM: CHRIS WATKINS

Chris Watkins (2010) contextualises such (diluted) schooling experiences as belonging to a global move towards neo-liberal performativity in education systems rather than the nurturing of children's intentional learning. By this, he means that performances in tests and other assessments are systemically presented as the purpose for schooling, rather than an *alternative* purpose which bodes better for wellbeing and social justice. His alternative purpose aligns with White's perspective, that a beneficial schooling system would instead prioritise: *children engaging now in worthwhile pursuits through which they direct their own construction of knowledge, with others, to satisfy their interests and meet personal goals they value*. At the heart of this conception of valuable learning lies again the Sense of Agency or what Watkins calls *self-direction*. This in turn aligns indirectly with Fraser's recognition and representation aspects of social justice in which everyone has an equal and valued role in *proactively participating*. It also aligns with the central role accorded to self-determination and Sense of Agency by Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory.

It was the Education Reform Act of 1988 that first systematised *competition in performance* as the purpose of schooling. Later in the 1990s, this was narrowed to focus on performances in the so-called *core* subjects of mathematics and English. The subsequent introduction of tests (nick-named ‘SATs’), of some (measurable) aspects of just these two subjects, led to disproportionate amounts of curriculum time being devoted to *test-preparation for performance in these tests*. This started occurring to the *exclusion* of an Orientation towards learning (i.e. engaging *now* in worthwhile pursuits, through construction of knowledge with others, to satisfy interests and meet personal goals).

Another outcome of the focus on performance in tests was that children became systemically categorised—and potentially stigmatised—according to their individual performance in preparation for these narrow tests. Government inspectors in the 1990s required categorisation of primary-school pupils as *high*, *middle* or *low*-attainers in performances of mathematics/English, potentially linking children’s worth directly to their performance, regardless of what intentional learning they might have engaged in. Key Stage 2 classrooms (aged 7–11 years) became divided into attainment groups (often misnamed ‘ability groups’), for mathematics/English-lessons particularly, and these extended into other lessons too. While the directive for physical grouping by attainment has not been reinforced among this age group recently by government (in part, due to the recent critical research of Francis et al., 2019), the practice of sorting by attainment still seems to be perceived by many teachers as efficient and indeed as the only possible way to manage all pupils’ performance at prescribed standards. However, as Marks (2013) noted, even in a classroom where children are not *physically* grouped by attainment, children may become discriminated against according to their performances, within the *teacher’s head*, who in turn may treat children in destructively differential ways.

These performative features of schooling threatened the positive schooling experiences of children who were already finding lessons in these core subjects uncomfortable. It was not surprising that these children sometimes started to focus on *avoidance*, or *approval*, rather than whole-hearted and successful engagement in school-work. The combination of the difficulty of work, intense boredom, status-subordination and lack of opportunity to change the situation made some children’s school-lives in urgent need of improvement.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In this chapter, we have explained our key concerns and our academic points of reference. In Chap. 3, we explore Nancy Fraser's conceptualisation of social justice as parity of participation, grappling with its application to children in primary-school. In particular, we note her three-pronged framework for social justice as including not only

- a) distribution of resources but also
- b) status recognition and
- c) representation.

In the following Chap. 4, we investigate definitions of wellbeing and their components, drawing on the framework of Ryan and Deci's (2019) Self-Determination Theory, and also the work of White (2011) and the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). We try to sketch out what the components of wellbeing might look like in practice in a positive schooling context, assuming that a Sense of

- a) Competence,
- b) Agency (Autonomy) and
- c) Relatedness

are all essential for wellbeing as suggested in Self-Determination Theory. In Chap. 5 we contextualise our theoretical framework of Self-Determination Theory within the work of Chris Watkins and his differentiation between Learning and Performance Orientations. We also unpick Ryan and Deci's Causality Orientations Theory within Watkins' distinction. We used this as a special way of categorising our sample children, according to how much they focussed on Performance and how much on Learning (agentically or intentionally) in their school-life-histories; and what the consequences were. In particular, we adapt Ryan and Deci's terms to identify:

- a) those children who have a weak Sense of Agency as having an *Impersonal Performance Orientation*;
- b) those with a Sense of Restricted Agency as having a *Controlled Performance Orientation* and

- c) children with a strong Sense of Agency as having an *Autonomous Learning Orientation*.

Chapter 6 summarises these three Orientations and then presents our actual life-histories, categorising these according to which Orientation each child identified with.

Section 6.A presents the life-histories of those who agreed with this statement: *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.* This *Impersonal Performance Orientation* was selected by 12/23 children.

Section 6.B presents the life-histories of those seven children who identified with the following: *I like/dislike doing what I am told. I respect/dislike the teachers. I work hard to get rewards/don't care about rewards* (*Controlled Performance Orientation*).

Section 6.C displays the life-histories of those four children with the strongest Sense of Agency (*Autonomy Learning Orientation*) who signed up to: *I'm interested in exploring different and unusual things. I am also interested in thinking about how things could be changed at school.*

Chapter 7 presents the words of some of the children specifically about their experiences of status-subordination in relation to their Sense of Competence. Chapter 8 then explores their relationship to mathematics and English—the core curriculum subjects—in relation to their Sense of Agency. Agency is explored as a concept too. Chapter 9 takes a closer look at their Sense of Relatedness in schooling and how this inter-relates with their Sense of Competence, Autonomy and overall wellbeing. Chapter 10 concludes the book with some imaginings and implications in relation to children's positive experience of schooling and social justice. In particular, we tentatively propose recommendations for more *socially just* educational policy and practice: that can make all children's life-histories more positive and more highly supportive of wellbeing and social justice.

[IMPORTANT NOTE: Throughout the book, 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 TERM8 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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Social Justice as Parity of Participation: Fraser's Theory

SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

In this book, we imagine what might constitute *positive experience* for our cohort of 23 children. By drawing on their own portrayals of their schooling experiences from age 7 to age 12, we are enabled to start imagining how schooling would look if all children had positive experiences there. We bear in mind the socio-political conditions within which the children's schooling is positioned, to make a politically aware analysis of their portrayals. Fraser (2022) herself decries the global and systemic emphasis on economic reproduction over and above social reproduction (i.e. prioritising economic wellbeing over human wellbeing). According to Brown and James (2020), this prioritisation also lies at the heart of policy promotion of 'social mobility' in England. The standard education policy formula for the strategy of social mobility includes:

- widening educational access
=> leads to
- the opportunity for all to engage in self-responsibilised hard work
=> leads to
- increasing social mobility
=> leads to
- poverty reduction.

However, Brown and James (2020) suggest of this strategy that it

does not stand up to close scrutiny and may have unintended consequences that serve to undermine the stated purpose of educational reform. (p.7)

According to Brown and James (2020, p. 1), many aspects of recent neo-liberal policy actually confound the possibility of social mobility, rather than enhance it. For example, the recent practice of segregating children according to attainment, from an early age, threatens to *block* social mobility (Brown & James, 2020). They claim that the end result of the above normal formula ensures that ‘individuals have an *equal chance to be unequal*, regardless of how large the prizes offered to the winners’ (p.2). Giroux and Penna’s (1979) equation is pertinent here, between marketised, competitive schooling systems and the unavoidable subordination of some: ‘The hidden message is one that supports [many people’s] *alienation*’ (p.32; our emphasis). That is, where there is competition, there are winners but also *losers*—who feel demoralised, humiliated and as failures (Sandel, 2020). As Owens and de St Croix (2020) suggest, if individuals are told they fail because they do not persevere sufficiently in hard work at school, social inequalities come to be perceived as a fair result of the natural variations in ‘talent’ and ‘effort’ between individuals, who come to *deserve* their failures. The fiction pertains to the fact that, within the neoliberal competition of the ‘postwestphalian era’ (i.e. from the 1990s, as the welfare state was run down), only a ‘talented’ minority of children from those outside traditionally privileged groups can gain social mobility to the promised privilege via the most desirable school/university places (Reay, 2020; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018) while the rest are trapped as failures. Despite their compliant perseverance and hard work—that we see the CLIPS children engage in—structures obstruct the majority of these children from ever achieving this goal of social mobility. At the same time, the global dominance of the values underpinning neoliberalism may also obstruct them from *even imagining* alternative life goals or conditions. In addition, funding has been cut from schools generally.

In his book *The Tyranny of Meritocracy* (2020), Sandel imagines a more just society where meritocracy is reduced:

A society more successful than ours at providing upward mobility would need to find ways to enable those who do not rise, to flourish *in place*, and to see themselves as *members of a common project*. Our failure to do so makes

life hard for those who lack meritocratic credentials and makes them doubt that they belong. (p.224; our emphasis)

Indeed, large-scale longitudinal studies among others (e.g. Mowat, 2018; Parsons et al., 2016; Richardson et al., 2020) tend to indicate that wealth, class, ethnicity (and gender) operate to advantage some groups and disadvantage others in gaining the ever-diminishing employment available and these variables thereby potentially obstruct 'upward' mobility. In England, the majority of young people remain in the same income bracket as their parents across the life-span (as shown by Mowat, 2018). Richardson et al. (2020) have shown that students from disadvantaged backgrounds (in terms of parent occupation) are less likely to apply to Russell Group universities (prestigious research-intensive institutions) than socially advantaged students, even when they hold similar qualifications. This reinforces the idea of what Owens and de St Croix (2020, p.19) call the 'cruel and cynical fiction' of social mobility. Actually, they show, a student's level of deprivation (IMD rank) is the predictor of the class of final university degree; and in terms of attaining the highest status jobs, these go most often to middle-class white men who have attended an elite university (as indicated by Parsons et al., 2016). This suggests that schooling has made little difference to mobility.

Despite such statistics, in the 2018–2019 Social Mobility Commission report for Britain, the government continued to claim:

Schools are an essential vehicle for improving social mobility. Disadvantaged pupils start schooling behind their peers in terms of attainment, but good schooling can increase their chances of getting a well-paid job in the future. (2019)

This is a very different approach to the alternative prediction by Clark et al. (2018), whose research evidenced that *wellbeing* in childhood was the best predictor of wellbeing in adulthood (which may or may not implicate a 'well-paid job'). Unaware of Clark et al.'s research, many children will potentially persevere during distressing academic experiences in schooling, where their wellbeing might be compromised, only to discover that their academic studies *do not lead* to the successful futures the system has taught them to expect (Browman et al., 2017). Fraser (2008) claimed that, in these ways, our global market-driven governmentality separates and tracks individuals for the sake of efficiency and risk prevention,

‘sorting the capable-and-competitive wheat from the incapable-and-non-competitive chaff’ (p. 128) and thereby constructing different life courses for each—some of which support wellbeing while others make it very unlikely. Now, following the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment figures among young people have increased globally and have almost doubled in Britain compared to the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008 (YEUK, 2020). Within this context of job scarcity, social mobility is even more likely to depend on social fluidity (and ‘cultural capital’) rather than exclusively ‘upward’ education. Therefore, those less-privileged children who have made substantial investments of time, effort and money to gain a college or university education may stand to be still disappointed. While income and wealth inequalities cannot be eliminated by schools, their influences on schooling practices can be interrogated and exposed, which is what we hope our life-histories will facilitate. And our life-histories depict especially, *‘the great injustice of the smart and dumb’*. As Sandel quotes from Thomas Nagel:

When racial and sexual injustice have been reduced, we shall *still* be left with the great injustice of the smart and dumb, who are so differently rewarded for comparable effort. (Sandel, 2020, p.145–6; our emphasis)

PARITY OF PARTICIPATION

This book draws on Nancy Fraser’s (2008) conceptualisation of social justice as parity of participation, incorporating three inter-connected aspects:

- Parity in distribution of resources,
- Parity in recognition of worth and
- Parity in representation of voice.

Although parity of participation might be expected to lie at the heart of schooling, by applying Fraser’s concept of social justice to schooling, it becomes clear that in practice, schooling may systematically undermine social justice as parity of participation (Cazden, 2012; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003; Keddie, 2016; Lipman, 2008; Mills et al., 2016; Power & Frandji, 2010). On this basis, we have harnessed Fraser’s conceptualisation to consider children’s experiences at school, focussing particularly on the *recognition of worth* aspect—that is *status-subordination*, *misrecognition* or *lack of parity of status*—because of its special relevance to children designated

by the system as lacking competence in some way. At the same time, the book itself supports parity of representation, as it actually represents the children's own thoughts, feelings and actions. It provides one vehicle for them to portray their perspectives to a wider audience and thereby have the potential to enlighten the adults who are in a good position to improve other children's experiences. For parity of participation, children need to be able to represent their needs and preferences and have these acted upon. We focus in this book particularly on what Fraser calls the 'institutionalized patterns of cultural value' embodied within neo-liberal performativity and how these may indirectly obstruct children from having their needs met. Human rights underpin all three aspects of Fraser's conceptualisation of social justice. This is not surprising, given that the UNCRC (1989) emphasises that human rights are in place to *protect the best interests of the child who needs protection and care for development of his or her wellbeing*.

We found that children designated as lower-attaining at age seven tended to have less access to the higher status enjoyed by other children, indicating a lack of parity in recognition. Because the schooling system suggested the value of mathematics and English above all else, and because the CLIPS children found one or both of these core subjects troublesome, their strengths and interests in other areas did not seem to make up for perceived difficulties in one or both of the core subjects. Although the children seem to have been repeatedly told that it was in their best interests to focus on mathematics (and to a lesser extent, English), in terms of social justice, this emphasis was a misconception which tended to de-emphasise the children's wellbeing as a whole person. This was reflected in our particular investigations into their Sense of Competence, Sense of Agency (Autonomy) and Sense of Relatedness, all of which needed to be strong in order for positive experiences to flourish (Ryan & Deci, 2019) and wellbeing to be promoted. And yet these were unlikely to be strong when such a narrow curriculum focus was systemically valued.

PARITY OF PARTICIPATION AS AN AIM FOR SCHOOLING

As explained above, the analysis framework for our research was Nancy Fraser's (2008) conceptualisation of social justice as parity of participation. Participation is a noun of action, stemming from the Latin *participare*, which denotes an individual *sharing in, partaking of and contributing* to something:

Summary 3.1: Participation

An individual actively

- sharing in,
- partaking of and
- contributing to

a task, system, community, etc.

We have harnessed this conceptualisation to consider children's experiences at school: how wholeheartedly they share in, partake of and contribute to their own intentional learning. Nancy Fraser uses the words parity of participation to refer to an adult sharing in, partaking of and contributing to society by having access to the resources to take an active and equal part in social interaction with others in society; equal social status among others; and equal access to political decision-making.

Summary 3.2: Parity of participation

An adult sharing in, partaking of and contributing to society by having

- access to *the resources* to take an active and equal part in social interaction with others in society,
- *equal social status* among others and
- equal access to *political decision-making*.

Associating wellbeing with participation is not a new approach. Other authors draw out some crucial aspects of participation relating to wellbeing. For example, according to the United Nations Development Programme (2014), 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, p. 2). Shotter (1993) emphasises the 'contributing' aspect of participation, arguing:

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, p.368)

These authors suggest that being part of the development of a living tradition is central to participating, with individuals equally actively and dynamically contributing. Lynch and Baker focus on the parity angle as well as the recognition angle of participation, which they refer to as the goal of *equality of condition*. They suggest this:

Involves the equal enabling and empowerment of individuals ... It is also about appreciating or *accepting* differences rather than merely tolerating them. (2005, p. 132; our emphasis)

Fraser suggests that full participation means parity of involvement of all individuals, regardless of their (dis)ability, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or social background.

THE THREE PILLARS OF PARTICIPATION

Firstly, parity of participation can be seen as the *equal distribution of material resources*. This is the traditional conceptualisation of justice (e.g. Rawls, 1999), on which Fraser then elaborated (2008, 2022). Traditionally, this has meant distributing the wealth in society so that all sectors of society live at an equally high standard, have access to the same facilities and similar opportunities for gaining wealth and social esteem. This would contrast to the current politico-economic situation which Fraser describes as pillaging ‘the vast majority to enrich the top 1 per cent’ (2019, p. 20). In terms of schooling, wealth *maldistribution* might entail certain children having exclusive access to the best teachers, the most inspiring classes, the most lavishly equipped schools, the most expert private tutors.

Secondly, parity of participation includes the concept of parity in *recognition of status*. Recognition can be influenced by what Fraser calls ‘institutionalized patterns of cultural value’, denoting social structures which constitute certain members of a group as less significant and therefore as *misrecognised*. 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, p. 24)

She went on to suggest:

Misrecognition is wrong because it constitutes a form of institutionalized subordination—and thus, a serious violation of justice. Justice requires that institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem . . . It precludes institutionalized norms that *systematically depreciate some categories of people* and the qualities associated with them. (Fraser, 2008, p. 26; our emphasis)

This book provides many representations of CLIPS children's experiences of status-subordination, whereby they feel 'inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction' (Fraser, 2008, p.24). We represent the words of the children, expressing feelings of fear, anger and humiliation, reducing their opportunities for wellbeing. A sense of low-status during schooling can linger throughout adulthood, continuing to have a negative impact on wellbeing (Clark et al., 2018; Southgate, 2003).

Fraser's *third* pillar in parity of participation constitutes *political voice and representation*, by which she means all sectors of society participating in deciding how wealth is distributed and how status is defined. In adult society, this might refer to citizens' rights to express their political views freely and to gain access to fair electoral voting systems. 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 and action following pupil feedback (Lundy, 2007). The absence of voice, constituting representational injustice, may be apparent in the ways in which students, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, can be summarily suspended from school, given detentions and other forms of punishment without options to challenge those decisions or question who makes the rules.

Fraser's tri-partite framework has had its critics. One criticism that is particularly relevant to our research is that its attention to equality of *care* is missing. Lynch (2012) previously emphasised, more explicitly than Fraser, the importance of caring as a human capability meeting a basic human need, although Fraser's 2022 book does rectify this perceived gap:

While Fraser's work is a highly sophisticated theoretical framework for mapping the problem of equality and social justice, it does not recognise the

affective domain of life as a discrete site of social practice ... The issue of inequality in access to the love, care and solidarity needed to support people at such times is a highly significant matter for egalitarians. Affective equality is focused therefore on two major issues, securing equality in the distribution of the nurturing provided through love, care and solidarity relationships and securing equality in the doing of emotional and other work involved in creating love, care and solidarity relations. Affective inequality occurs directly when people are deprived of the love, care and solidarity (LCS) they need to survive and develop as human beings ... It also occurs ... when love, care and solidarity work is trivialised by omission from public discourse.

Mills et al. (2016) draw on Lynch's work to conclude that, in terms of schooling, the affective sphere must be included in its own category when we imagine a socially just schooling system, as this is concerned with the *quality* of relationships available to students. They conclude:

'Care' needs to be taken in the provision of flexible education to ensure that students do not receive a watered down curriculum that fails to engage them intellectually and that damages their sense of self-respect.

Our own perspective accords with these authors. However, in reading Fraser, especially her 2022 book, we find emphasis on these qualities as an outcome her tri-partite emphasis. Care tends to be a result of the tripartite structure being in place. We demonstrate this particularly in our writing about relatedness (see Chap. 9).

RECOGNITION AND MISRECOGNITION

Recognition implies people being respected as of equal social status across all groups and individuals, regardless of how they identify themselves or the groups with which they identify. In the schooling context, status-subordination can manifest as some children constructing themselves as less competent, more separate, different or not as visible as others, with the result that their participation in social interaction is limited and opportunities for enhancing social esteem curtailed. Misrecognition will influence children's capacity to benefit from current schooling as well as threaten their future wellbeing. Lewis (2009, p.259) explains how educational forms of *recognition* aim to redress *cultural*, *symbolic* and *status* injustices and how by providing recognition through the schooling

system, schooling can avoid the emotional and psychological harms caused, for example, by

non-recognition, the rendering of invisibility as a result of dominant cultural forms; misrecognition, being seen as lacking value and as inferior; and disrespect, being maligned or disparaged in everyday interactions or representations.

This *misrecognition* has special relevance to children designated as lower-attaining in a system where performance of attainment (especially in mathematics/English) has particular (excessive) cultural value. Practices reflecting this imbalance of cultural value include—most obviously—school-children’s separation from others according to their prior attainment in these subjects.

Keddie (2016, p. 115) described how targets within a performative neo-liberal schooling system are embodied within ‘classroom ability setting (streaming) and standardised tests’. She concludes: ‘these are the fields of judgement that for these students seem to encapsulate and represent their worth and value’. Keddie believed that being designated in any sense as a lower-attainer signified the child’s diminished worth and *misrecognition* as a good citizen within the current system—and sometimes actually threatened children’s sense of ‘survival’ (2016, p. 113). McGillicuddy and Devine (2020, p. 1) found that when researching among 100 primary-school-children, those in lower-attainment groups frequently used words such as ‘shame’, ‘upset’ and ‘inferiority’ which contrasted with the positive words expressed by the children in higher groups, such as ‘pride’, ‘happiness’ and ‘confidence’. In our CLIPS study, words the children actually used for their discomforts included feeling:

- rejected,
- annoyed,
- sad,
- bullied,
- angry,
- embarrassed,
- lonely,
- isolated,
- frustrated,
- bored,

- nervous,
- stressed,
- really mad,
- upset,
- tired and sleepy.

However, Fraser's concept of misrecognition should not be confused with Bourdieu's equally important but different conception of misrecognition (James, 2015). Bourdieu's conceptualisation of misrecognition related to the fact that disadvantage across the whole schooling system is not recognised or brought to people's awareness. On the other hand, Fraser's theory, a 'radical-democratic interpretation of the principle of equal moral worth' (James, 2015, p.98), refers to the *individual's feelings, thoughts and perceptions of themselves as less worthy than others*, as well as others' perceptions of these individuals as inferior. From Fraser's perspective, the school-child is misrecognised when their strengths and interests 'are either excluded, minimally assessed, or accorded a lower status within a given subject when fully assessed' (Lynch & Baker, 2005, p.139). In other words, when mathematics and English are given a monopoly of prestige, other strengths and interests can appear subordinated. These ideas are summarised in Summary 3.3.

Summary 3.3: Children who experience misrecognition in primary education

- They construct themselves, and are constructed by others, as less worthy, less connected, more different and less visible than others;
- how they identify themselves is not respected by all;
- the groups with which they identify are not respected by all;
- they experience unfair distribution of resources;
- they experience inadequate representational opportunities
=> *which suggests*
- they have diminished opportunity for achieving social esteem;
- they encounter systems, or common practices, that fail to confer respect equally to all categories of people and the qualities associated with them;
- their life and cultures are absent in school curricula
=> *which suggests*
- their participation in social interaction is obstructed;
- their common humanity is denied;

- they are inequitably disempowered
=> *which suggests*

recognitive social justice is denied.

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CHAPTER 4

Wellbeing

DEFINING WELLBEING

In this chapter, we explore how ‘positive experience’ may be interpreted, with particular emphasis on imagining how school-children’s wellbeing might be further promoted within the schooling system. We draw on Ryan and Deci’s phrase ‘positive experience and wellness’ (2019, p.215) to represent relevant aspects of school wellbeing. Wellbeing has become a much overused word this century, making its interpretation diverse. Our own interpretation of wellbeing, in relation to school-children, chimes with White’s (2011) definition as follows:

Autonomous, whole-hearted and successful engagement in worthwhile activities and relationships ... engaging *now* in worthwhile pursuits. (p.131; see Chap. 2)

White explains that both ‘dispositions’—that is, Orientations, attitudes, approaches—and the understanding of specific knowledge are necessary for wellbeing among school-children:

Education for wellbeing is built around acquiring personal qualities (dispositions) on the one hand and understanding on the other... *Dispositions are more important* ... school subjects [such as mathematics, English] are not

ends in themselves, but vehicles – and not the only ones – to attain further purposes. (White, 2011, pp.131–5)

In the same vein, twentieth-century philosopher, John Macmurray, placed relatedness at the heart of schooling for wellbeing. Fielding (2012) explained:

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

Stern (2012) elaborated further:

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

WELLBEING AND THE GLOBAL POLICY CONTEXT: UNCRC

An examination of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989—ratified in law by Britain) highlights particular practices that are likely to lead to children’s wellbeing. The UNCRC specifically emphasises that it is the child’s right—including when they are at school—to have their best interests promoted and to receive ‘protection and care as is necessary for his or her wellbeing’ and for the (positive) ‘development of the child’. Wellbeing implies here, therefore, that educators have the legal duty—on a day-by-day basis—to *promote every child’s best interests and development, within a culture of protection and care, while the child attends school*. One feature that is noticeable in the UNCRC (in contrast to its *absence* in the current National Curriculum in England) is the emphasis on leisure time, recreational time, the creative arts and personal development. For example, one way proposed for promoting wellbeing is by providing ‘appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity’, thus emphasising that the schooling system (along with other structures) needs to balance work with play on one hand; and natural/mathematical sciences with creative arts, on the

other. In addition, children have the legal right to be protected during schooling ‘from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation’ (which would include not being shouted at: Dube et al., 2023).

Schooling also needs to help develop each child’s ‘personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential’, including encouraging their participation in cultural life and the arts. While some rights may be supported more by parents than by schools, every child’s strengths and interests, as well as knowledge acquisition, will be heavily influenced by institutionalised values they encounter at school too.

The child has a right to autonomy of thought, conscience, religion and expressing themselves, whether at home or at school. This applies to children with learning difficulties or other disabilities as much as any other children ‘in a manner conducive to the child’s achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development, including his or her cultural and spiritual development’.

Summary 4.1: Some practices that promote wellbeing according to UNCRC (1989)

- Being protected and cared for
- Being developed in mental and physical strengths and interests
- Being given appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activities
- Being allowed freedom of thought, conscience, religion and expressing themselves.

These rights also form the backbone of Safeguarding Policies in the UK (Baginsky, 2008), which stipulate that schools protect their students from harm and have robust processes in place to do so.

WELLBEING AND THE NATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

White critiques John Wesley (1749) in whose school they did ‘not allow any time for play on any day’ (cited in White, 2011, p.25). Unfortunately, this quotation from 1749 has resonances with the school practices that the Education Secretary in England was praising in a news brief in 2020, entitled, ‘We’re going on a discipline drive in schools’. It endorsed practices in schools such as where reading and writing exercises are conducted in

silence in class, and pupils are given punishment ‘for things like forgetting their pens or slouching in class’. Contrary to most suggested supports for wellbeing, the Education Secretary proposed: ‘As part of our ambitious plans to level up across the country, I want this kind of culture to be the norm’ (<https://www.goversusuk/government/news/education-secretary-were-going-on-a-discipline-drive-in-schools>). Forgetting pens and slouching in class are likely to indicate the *result* of children *not* experiencing the success of whole-hearted engagement at school—that the schooling system has failed them in this respect. Schools do have the potential to significantly influence—for better or worse—a child’s present and future wellbeing by attending directly to children’s mental, physical and social health, as well as their academic attainment. On the negative side, when ‘discipline’ replaces care, schooling may lower a pupil’s Sense of Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness and lead to stigma which will compromise their wellbeing still more. At worst, schools have been accused of being the means by which the inequalities that are inherent in society generally are reproduced in subtle, unacknowledged ways (Bourdieu, 1998).

Arguably, negative effects on wellbeing have escalated since schools in England have increasingly been subjected to a performative culture of surveillance and accountability through demands for public presentation of attainment data, focusing on evidence of performance rather than learning. In a climate where high attainment in performances of mathematics and English is given most prestige, it is not surprising that children who do not perform ‘as expected’ in mathematics/English, evidence less wellbeing during schooling compared to others. As there is an increased likelihood that some lower-attaining children may also experience disadvantaged home circumstances such as poverty, unemployment, debt and overcrowding (Marmot, 2004), these children are even more likely to experience poor mental health and have their wellbeing compromised. White (2011) pointed out the role that school curriculum could unfortunately play in *disrupting* children’s wellbeing:

[Schools] may be steering them towards curriculum subjects they come to hate, having chosen them not out of love but for future gain. (p.83)

However, in apparent contradiction, the 1999 education policy document in England expressed the fundamental purposes of the English National Curriculum specifically as promoting wellbeing, as follows:

As a route to the spiritual, moral, social, cultural, physical and mental development, and thus *the wellbeing, of the individual*. (cited in White, 2011, p.11; our emphasis)

Again in 2007, revised curriculum aims were officially named as supporting young people to become ‘confident individuals who are able to lead safe, healthy and *fulfilling* lives’ (Ibid., our emphasis) The Department for Education released several further guidance documents more recently on schools’ role in promoting children’s welfare. A 2014 DFE document focused on promoting resilience and (good) mental health, as part of helping children succeed at school (presumably ‘succeeding’ in terms of ‘expected’ academic outcomes). A 2018 DFE document used the words ‘mental health’ and ‘wellbeing’ to propose a whole school approach to tailoring actions to specific needs, implying that a range of social or emotional needs can be accommodated:

Schools have an important role to play in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children by developing whole school approaches tailored to their particular needs, as well as considering the needs of individual pupils.

Later still, in 2022, they emphasised that children’s ‘welfare’ is everyone’s responsibility:

Everyone who comes into contact with children and their families has a role to play. In order to fulfil this responsibility effectively, all practitioners should make sure their approach is child centred. This means that they should consider, at all times, what is in the *best interests of the child*. (DFE, p.45; our emphasis)

Curriculum statements and policy guidance documents therefore explicitly promise a policy goal in England of children’s overall wellbeing. And yet, some research findings—including our own—suggest that their success is partial at best. Even back in 1994, when accountability measures were less intense, Pollard et al. (1994) warned that the curriculum as a ‘planned intervention’ was proving inadequate to ‘*harness the interest of the children in support of the learning process*’ (p.146; our emphasis). Children therefore focused more on producing an outcome that would gain sufficient approval, rather than engaging in a motivating experience of learning. According to Wyse et al. (2008), their motivation to learn was negatively affected by the experience of boredom, tasks’ ambiguity, the

children's perceived lack of competence and the perceived difficulty of work. To erode wellbeing further, schools have cut back on recreational and creative activities which provided opportunities for social fun and exploration (Neumann et al., 2020). Baines and Blatchford (2019) have exemplified that school break-times and playtimes have been gradually reducing in length, too.

Not surprisingly then, we have evidence of reduced wellbeing among school-aged children over the past decades. According to a World Health Organisation report on the 'Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children' (HBSC, 2016), English school-children today express less favourable impressions of schooling than most of their European counterparts. Only 48% of English 11-year-olds say that they 'like school a lot' (against 74% of Albanian children) and 30% say that they feel 'pressured by school work' (against 9% in Sweden and 10% in the Netherlands). Furthermore, recent international assessment scores show that although the United Kingdom's attainment scores for 15-year-olds have gone up, only 53% of UK pupils reported being *satisfied with their lives at home and at school*, compared to an international average of 67% of pupils. While 'liking school' and being 'satisfied' are not the same as 'wellbeing', they would contribute to its prevalence.

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY AND WELLBEING

Wellbeing frameworks derive from a range of disciplines, for example philosophy (e.g. White, 2011), sociology (e.g. Lynch & Baker, 2005), social psychology (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2019) or economics (e.g. Fraser, 2022). In keeping with a conceptualisation of social justice as parity of participation (Fraser, 2008; see Chap. 3), we use the social psychological theory of self-determination as a vehicle for unpicking some key, personal aspects of children's wellbeing in their everyday school lives within the context of wellbeing and social justice more broadly. We accord authority to Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory because it has been studied and reinforced in schooling across many cultures, as well as in other social sites more widely. Ryan and Deci (2019) claim the wide applicability of their theory:

Self Determination Theory has embraced not only the ideal of coordinating its tenets and findings within a single theory, but also of integrating that theory within the larger framework of the life sciences, an aim fitting with its

organismic philosophical grounding Self Determination Theory has ... become a more general theory of human motivation, personality development, and wellness. (p.113)

What is particularly appealing about Self-Determination Theory to our study is its assumption of the key role of agency (essential to self-determination) for wellbeing. Ryan and Deci also claim that only when a child perceives their needs for all three—competence, autonomy and relatedness—to be met, will this lead to wellbeing. Their definition of wellbeing includes healthy self-functioning, integrity and a general positive self-concept (2019, p.117). They claim it 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., p.215)

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

Summary 4.2: Ways of imagining wellbeing or flourishing in schooling

- ‘Autonomous, whole-hearted and successful engagement in worthwhile activities and relationships ... engaging *now* in worthwhile pursuits’
- An integrated Sense of Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness
- Healthy self-functioning, integrity and a general positive self-concept
- ‘the spontaneous propensity of people to take interest in their inner and outer worlds in an attempt to engage, interact, master, and understand’.

Feelings that might accompany wellbeing include excitement, enjoyment, calmness and contentedness. Such feelings can foster creativity, imagination and flexible styles of thinking which then lead to further engagement and enjoyment (Helwig, 2006). For example, evidence of wellbeing might be related to a child improving their time management, suffering fewer distractions during learning, increasing in cognitive performance, increasing in prosocial behaviour and benefiting from improved physical health—all of which again promote further engagement (Alivernini et al., 2019, p.100).

Summary 4.3: Benefits related to wellbeing

- Good feelings: such as excitement, enjoyment, calmness and contentedness
- Useful learning supports such as: creativity, imagination, suffering fewer distractions, increasing cognitive performance and flexible styles of thinking
- Overall health: physical, emotional and social.

Helwig (2006) emphasised the undermining of wellbeing associated with perceiving oneself to be controlled or coerced by others. Wellbeing is especially undermined by the control of adults over children's bodies, appearance, friends, food and recreation—all of which are applicable in the schooling context. It is with this background research that we approached our study of 23 children's day-to-day and long-term Sense of Competence, Agency and Relatedness; which align with their wellbeing within schooling; and the parity of their participation therein.

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Motivational Orientations: Watkins' Theory with Ryan and Deci's Theories

INTRODUCTION: HOW CHILDREN ARE MOTIVATED TO ENGAGE

In the CLIPS project, we explored how the children were motivated at school, and how their motivation influenced their engagement with learning in school, across their life-histories. Watkins' categorisation, which distinguishes between a Learning Orientation and a Performance Orientation, provides an outer shell for Ryan and Deci's Causality Orientations Theory; and we draw on this nested model of the two theories.

These frameworks suggest that children would react to the schooling system in particular, distinct ways, depending which Orientation they were steered to develop towards school-work. Some children would respond to school-work primarily by feeling dominated by anxiety about failure in their performances; and punishments for failure. Others would focus on control structures such as school rules and control figures such as teachers who directed them to carry out their performances. These responses were likely to interfere with wholehearted engagement in school-learning because they aligned with the school-child's sense that they had *little or no power* to achieve a task or initiate a change.

Other children would react in an agentic way—whereby they were likely to reflect on their environment and make a conscious choice about how to respond to school-work most beneficially. These children were

those striving explicitly towards learning and growth. They enjoyed motivation driven by their Sense of Agency in achieving their own learning goals, as well as a Sense of Competence to achieve them. The outcome was likely to be whole-hearted engagement in *intentional learning*.

LEARNING VERSUS PERFORMANCE ORIENTATION

Watkins (2010) provides an all-encompassing shell to accommodate Ryan and Deci's three Orientations, a shell which places schooling firmly within the political rather than psychological realm by emphasising that it is the schooling system that triggers children's Orientations: one is not born with an Orientation but develops it via influences from one's environments, for example, the schooling environment. Watkins' theoretical shell provides two broad Orientations which apply specifically to schooling situations: Learning Orientation and Performance Orientation; which are loosely based on Deci's distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (1975):

1. Being intrinsically motivated (or having a Learning Orientation), means a learner gets satisfaction and personal pleasure from the activity itself without receiving an external reward for completing it. This satisfaction derives from an internal process of self-rewarding during which a Sense of Competence and a strong Sense of Agency emerge.
2. Extrinsic motivation (or having a Performance Orientation) in contrast, derives from the anticipation of receiving extrinsic rewards outside and beyond the self, for instance money, prizes, feedback. One's Sense of both one's own Competence and one's own Agency are thereby eroded.

The point that Watkins is keen to emphasise is that schooling can promote or limit children's Sense of Competence and Sense of Agency by systemically emphasising external factors rather than internally relevant ones. In the current era which stresses neo-liberal performativity—i.e. outcomes over processes, and prior attainment over current engagement—individual schools will need to work hard to nurture a Learning Orientation over a Performance one. To use Ball's (2003) words, by performativity we generally mean: 'A technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)' (p.216).

In our life-histories, for example, the Performance Orientation (reflecting weak or Restricted Sense of Agency) is exemplified by Clara, who explained:

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

In other words, Clara has no inherent interest in her task and no conception of how it might be relevant to herself. For Eden, teachers were intolerably controlling:

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

Eden's emphasis here is on the strict policing aspect of the teacher's role. In the CLIPS project, we noticed that many of the children feared teachers who shouted; so they adapted their behaviour in ways they hoped would avoid being shouted at, *even if this meant curtailing their own growth*. That is, instead of investing their energies in engagement with learning focused on mastering understanding, some children sought rewards and praise for doing what the teacher instructed and worked hard to avoid punishment—but without feeling free to engage intentionally. Instead, children spent their energies on devising ingenious ways to avoid punishments. Eden admitted that he pretended to work:

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

Abe explained how he managed to talk in class, which is what he wanted to do:

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

In these cases, it is being seen to be doing the right thing that counts (i.e. performing), rather than 'autonomous, whole-hearted and successful engagement in worthwhile activities and relationships ... engaging *now* in worthwhile pursuits' (i.e. intentional learning) (White, 2011, p.131). Some of the punishments the children spent time avoiding were immediate, such

as being shouted at, getting a detention. Others were longer term disasters which they believed were looming over their futures: such as not finding a satisfactory job in adulthood and therefore having to live in poverty. As Michael told us, if you don't do well in school, 'Your life will be ruined!' These more amorphous fears—often disseminated via a 'cruel and cynical fiction' (Owens & de St Croix, 2020, p.19)—may have led to children feeling even more powerless to have impact either on their attainment or on their wider situation. All they could do, then, was to do as they were told and avoid punishment. Perhaps a little Sense of Agency could be achieved in designing creative ways to trick the teacher (Etelapelto et al., 2013).

TENSIONS BETWEEN LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE

It is crucial to clarify what we mean by 'learning', to help distinguish it from performance. To do this we turn to Watkins et al. (2007, p.19) who have brought together the definitions of many others when they suggest that effective *learning* is:

- An activity of construction (demanding Competence)
- Handled with, or in the context, of others (demanding Relatedness)
- Driven by the learner (demanding Agency)
- Monitored and reviewed *by the learner* for the effectiveness of their approaches and strategies in relation to their goals and context (demanding Competence and Agency).

Therefore, a *Learning Orientation* entails the child emphasising learning goals, which are driving intentional engagement or a whole-hearted willingness to act. They have a *concern to 'improve' performance* by going through processes of engaged learning. This contrasts with the *Performance Orientation*, whereby the child is emphasising the end point—their performance, a focus which can undermine agency leading to helplessness, compliance and avoidance. The child's *concern is primarily to 'prove' performance*.

Summary 5.1: Learning Versus Performance *Learning* is:

- an activity of construction (demanding Competence)
- handled with, or in the context of, others (demanding Relatedness)
- driven by the learner (demanding Agency)

- monitored and reviewed *by the learner* for the effectiveness of their approaches and strategies in relation to their goals and context (demanding Competence and Agency).

Motivational Orientations can be:

- a) *Learning Orientation*: the child emphasising learning goals, which are driving intentional engagement or a whole-hearted willingness to act
=> *A concern to 'improve' performance*

Contrasts with

- b) *Performance Orientation*: the child emphasising performance, within the context of neo-liberal performativity, which can undermine agency leading to helplessness, compliance and avoidance
=> *A concern to 'prove' performance.*

Carol Dweck (2017) is known as author of Growth Mindset. This is closely aligned to Watkins' Learning Orientation. She despairs of schools emphasising performance over learning: 'What are the events or situations that take us to a place of *judgement* rather than to a place of *development*?!' (Our emphasis). She goes on to ask:

Great contributions to society are born of curiosity and deep understanding. If students no longer recognize and value deep learning, where will the great contributions of the future come from? (p. 220).

Dweck and colleagues considered striving towards 'deep learning' to be important because, they believed:

Enjoyment of challenge and willingness to sustain engagement with difficult tasks . . . maximise attainments in the long run ... Of course, individuals need to be able to gauge when tasks should be avoided or abandoned. (Dweck & Leggett, 1988, p. 257)

One issue that has arisen out of the focus on a Learning Orientation (or Growth Mindset) is that it contradicts the very essence of performative systemic schooling goals. These promote *measured performance and*

attainment hierarchies, within which there is little scope to nourish growth and learning. When invited to embrace a Learning Orientation, children are likely to default to adopting the Performance Orientation instead, if ‘institutionalized patterns of cultural value’ support measured performance and attainment hierarchies. This latter set of cultural values can dominate, encouraging children as it does to gain favourable judgements about their competence by *proving* it to others and emphasising extrinsic motivations over which *the child has no control*.

Summary 5.2: Impact of institutionalised patterns of cultural value on children’s Orientations

1. *Valuing intentional learning*, focusing on growing and learning
 => *Leads to*
 Strong Sense of Agency, intentional engagement towards owned goals, whole-hearted willingness to act
 - *Leads to* Learning Orientation = belief in personalised goals, fluid strengths and interests
 - *Leads to* individuals seeking to *improve* their competence through learning—prior attainment is not relevant.

2. *Valuing measured performance*, focusing on judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions
 => *Leads to*
 Weak Sense of Agency, ‘helpless’ pattern of learning ‘characterized by an avoidance of challenge and a deterioration of performance in the face of obstacles’
 - *Leads to* Performance Orientation = belief in fixed goals, fixed norms
 - *Leads to* Individuals seeking to *prove* their competence—prior attainment is highlighted.

If personal strengths and interests were valued by the system, learners would be *less likely to worry about their prior attainment* as they tackle a task. On the other hand, when prescribed performance goals are promoted, because *these specifically highlight attainment and prior performance*, they can lead lower-attaining children to feel helpless (low-agency, low-competence) rather than in control of their mastery (high-agency, high-competence). This leads to wasted learning opportunities:

The great majority of children in the evaluation-oriented condition [i.e. Performance Orientation] sacrificed altogether the opportunity for new learning that involved a display of errors or confusion. (Dweck & Leggett, 1988, p. 259)

That is, when lower-attaining primary-school children are presented with the kind of school-work tasks distinctive of a neo-liberal performativity culture (i.e. involving measurements, comparisons, rewards, sanctions; see Ball, 2003), they are more likely than their higher-attaining peers to adopt a *helpless or non-agentic approach*. This may entail clinging to rules, norms and rewards; or feeling fear and focusing mainly on avoiding failure and punishments. This is because the performative system reinforces the idea of children positioned on a descending scale of measured performances; and also comes to represent their descending value to the school. This way of perceiving the system is one of our key motivations for writing this book.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF LEARNING ORIENTATION

A Learning Orientation is reflected when a child perseveres in engaging with a challenging task, rather than giving up too soon. But persevering does not only mean sitting, working hard, exerting effort to solve a task at their desk for a long time, even when they are stuck or confused. It means creatively *exploring all possible ways of approaching and mastering it*. Possible ways of approaching and mastering an academic task might involve, for example, receiving help from a range of different people, having access to different resources, sitting in a new place, sitting with a different partner, taking a break, concentrating more intensely, or deciding to stop working on a particular task for the time being.

Summary 5.3: Possible ways of approaching and mastering a task

- Receiving help from a range of different people
- Having access to different resources
- Sitting in a new place
- Sitting with a different partner
- Taking a break
- Concentrating more intensely
- Simply keeping trying or
- Deciding to stop working on a particular task

The child with a Learning Orientation perseveres by focussing on what they can do if they harness all possible resources: rather than what they believe they cannot do because they are stuck. However, this is where a ‘cruel and cynical fiction’ is at play because the child may end up exacerbating their sense of failure, as they work hard and make effort: but it does not lead to success! It does not lead to success because their hard work is executed within neo-liberal discourses of individualised performance disguised as learning; hard work done by the individual—but in isolation; in an environment of conformity; without the child’s freedom to explore a range of supports; and without the freedom to make mistakes.

CLIPS CHILDREN’S MOTIVATIONAL ORIENTATIONS

Nearly all the children whose life-histories are portrayed in this book had been designated as ‘below age-expectations’ in both mathematics *and* English at age seven. Where this designation had led the child to feel subordinated (especially due to being designated as ‘lower’ in *both* subjects), their overall Sense of Competence was most negatively affected (e.g. see Gemma’s and Jack’s life-histories as examples, Chap. 6). Where the child perceived their competence to be high in one valued area, such as either in English or in mathematics, their overall Sense of Competence seemed to be sustained. However, our sample illustrates that, when the child perceived their competence to be low in *both* the core subjects, it was much harder for them to sustain a strong Sense of Competence overall.

Ryan and Deci’s Self-Determination Theory suggests that satisfaction of a person’s need for autonomy/agency entails them participating in intentional engagement in learning and enjoying a ‘positive experience’ (2019, p.219); ultimately boosting their wellbeing. (Note that we are sometimes using the words agency and autonomy interchangeably, despite

their theoretical differences). Their participation is affected by *how* and *where* they attribute their successful actions to be caused—through their own agency or from others' control. School-children may well have a different Orientation in a different situation such as at home or in other outside school situations. For example, a child who feels lacking in autonomy at school and adopts a Performance Orientation may show a strong Sense of Autonomy (Agency) in relation to their mother's dog-walking business (see Ellie's life-history, Chap. 6.B).

Autonomous Learning Orientation/strong Sense of Agency Those who primarily sustain a Learning Orientation (Ryan and Deci's Autonomous Orientation) perceive that they can achieve the agency to succeed; and also initiate change to their own school-work. The Autonomous Learning Orientation was demonstrated, for example, when Rory explicitly explained to us during interview that to be successful as a person, one should 'Think what's right for yourself. Don't copy other people' [3]. In a schooling system which evidences high levels of wellbeing and where parity of participation dominates, we might expect to find that all children hold the Autonomous Learning Orientation. This would mean having their Sense of Agency systemically promoted and supported (Chirkov, 2009; Jang et al., 2012). Across a range of cultures:

Autonomy support from teachers and parents has been associated with . . . high academic outcomes, better psychological wellbeing, few problem behaviours, high self-esteem, less dropping out, and strong persistence in educational settings. (p. 257)

From an institutional point of view, we add that teachers and parents cannot provide this support adequately without themselves also enjoying systemic support for learning over performance.

Controlled Performance Orientation/Sense of Restricted Agency Children with a Controlled Performance Orientation perceive that the reason they have little control over their own trajectories in the schooling system is because they are controlled by other people in authority or directly by the external structures of the schooling system. In other words, they believe their actions to be externally controlled rather than occurring out of self-directed intention (via agency) on a day-to-day basis. Having a Controlled Performance Orientation is particularly associated

with seeking to be praised for achieving these externally-set goals and working hard to achieve them. For example, the Controlled Performance Orientation may be reflected in Abe's description of aiming to impress his head-teacher rather than focussing on the learning itself. Children in the CLIPS project with the Controlled Performance Orientation were the most likely to put emphasis on attaining recognitions or rewards as extrinsic motivators. Rewards included such symbols as: badges, golden tickets, certificates and digital 'dojo' points. On the other hand, some children—such as Eden—expressed their belief about being controlled by *resisting* authority and external controls. However, this does not seem to be a display of an Autonomous Learning Orientation because the belief remained that goals were achieved or thwarted because of external controls rather than to through one's own decisions and/or actions.

Impersonal Performance Orientation implying weak Sense of Agency The Impersonal Performance Orientation is perhaps the hardest of the three Orientations to grasp and the least helpful for a school-child to adopt. It is significant that this was the Orientation that the largest group of our sample identified with, inside the structures of schooling (12 out of 23 children). Children with this Orientation perceived little causal connection between what happened to them at school and their own decisions and actions: with this Orientation, events seem to happen randomly because of opaque structures at play in the schooling system. Having this Orientation is associated with trying to avoid tricky learning situations, rather than grappling with them. For example, an Impersonal Performance Orientation was reflected in Mark's decision to finish his work quickly, regardless of how well it was done, fearing he would be kept in otherwise at playtime. In such a situation, his fear of being kept in at break-time was limiting his capacity for engagement in learning. This can be seen as the pursuit of an 'avoidance goal' ((Ryan & Deci, 2019, p.157) and was associated with low expectation of success in achieving goals because of the perception that one has little power either to succeed in this situation; or to initiate change in the situation.

GENERAL PATTERNS OF ORIENTATION AMONG THE CLIPS CHILDREN

Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory also theorises that a Sense of Agency is *essential but not sufficient* for wellbeing. Children also need to experience a Sense of Competence. However, the children in our study were specifically selected because they had been designated as having low-attainment in mathematics and/or English, leading to some assuming that they also had low-competence—thereby immediately putting their wellbeing under threat, according to Self-Determination Theory. We found that indeed, three of those four children who indicated having an Autonomous Learning Orientation (4/23) had only been designated 'lower-attaining' in *one* of the core subjects at age 7/8—while most of the children (17/23) were designated 'lower-attaining' in *both* core subjects. The fourth Autonomous Learning Orientation child had soon been categorised as reaching age-related expectations in both subjects. The experiences depicted by these four Autonomous children were indisputably more positive than for most of the other children.

The third aspect of school-life that contributes to wellbeing is a Sense of Relatedness. Sometimes, the construction of someone as having low-competence itself could obstruct a strong Sense of Relatedness. In this sense, the children designated as lower-attaining, or as having lower-competence, had a double threat to their Sense of Agency and ultimately their wellbeing. Very few children felt capable of taking actions that made their situation better in relation to mathematics/English, other than withdrawing physically or emotionally from it. However, some CLIPS children sustained very positive relationships with their peers and when this happened, this could support their Sense of Competence, despite their lack of positivity about mathematics/English tests.

Generally, however, the weak Sense of Autonomy (Agency) described by 19/23 CLIPS children led to most children's investment in Performance Orientations, suggesting that as part of the schooling system, they rarely participated in 'autonomous, whole-hearted and successful engagement in worthwhile activities and relationships', engaging *now at school* in pursuits they experienced as worthwhile (White, 2011, p.131). The result was that they tried their best to do as they were told, sometimes with great distress

or anxiety, hoping to gain approval or at least avoid punishments. Much energy must have been put into their attempts to scrape by—when it sometimes seemed impossible and intractable. Their cries for help and for clarification were sometimes silenced by school rules and controls. As Dweck wrote in 2017: ‘Somewhere along the line, [the child’s] intelligence became disconnected from [their] schooling’ (p.59).

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The Life-Histories

INTRODUCTION: THE THREE ORIENTATIONS

The life-histories of children designated at age seven as ‘below-age-expectations’ in mathematics/English are important because these children face obstacles that other children do not. Most crucially, as Watkins (2010) and Ryan and Deci (2019) pointed out (see Chap. 5), when these children are expected to meet the kind of goals distinctive of a neo-liberal performativity culture, *they are more likely than their peers* to adopt a helpless and non-engaged approach, because such goals draw attention to performances and competition, highlighting instances of poor prior attainment. Highlighting failure rather than promise is likely to lead *these children in particular* to cling to rules, norms and rewards; or feeling fear and focusing mainly on avoiding failure and punishments.

Features associated with the three Orientations described in Chap. 5 can be summarised as follows:

Performance Orientation: (A) Impersonal Performance Orientation/Weak Sense of Agency

In schooling, the Impersonal Performance Orientation/weak Sense of Agency is associated with procrastination, denial of internal conflicts and the putting off of decisions and actions (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Some

children in this category pursue ‘avoidance goals’ (Ryan et al., 2001, p. 157), avoiding challenge because of their low expectation of success due to feeling little power to change the situation. Of the five children in our study who seemed to reject schooling by the end, two chose this Orientation. In a general sense (not only at school), an Impersonal Orientation/weak Sense of Agency features social anxiety, public self-consciousness, self-derogation, a sense of powerlessness and alienation and lower self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

***Performance Orientation: (B) Controlled Performance
Orientation/Sense of Restricted Agency***

This Orientation is associated with commitment to prescribed goals, and with conscientiousness. It can drive the child to attain the system’s goals, but this might be at the cost of their own Sense of Agency. Children with the Controlled Performance Orientation were most likely to put emphasis on attaining recognitions or rewards as extrinsic motivators. Children with this Orientation tended to cheat more, as an easy way to attain approval for doing the right thing, without needing to engage in learning (Deci & Ryan, 2012). On the other hand, some children expressed their belief about being controlled by *resisting* authority and external controls and thwarting reward systems. Of the five children in our study who seemed to reject schooling by the end, three chose this Orientation.

***Learning Orientation: (C) Autonomous Learning Orientation/
Strong Sense of Agency***

This Orientation supports persistence, flexible thinking, social involvement and benign relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Those with this Orientation tend to have confidence in their academic attainment and good overall levels of engagement and participation. According to Deci and Ryan (2012), children with this Orientation experience lower levels of boredom; they focus on interest and challenge at work and are more likely to be autonomy-supportive of others.

Summary 6.1: Watkins' Theory Adapted and Blended with Ryan and Deci's Theory

Performance Orientation

1. Impersonal Performance Orientation—weak Sense of Agency
2. Controlled Performance Orientation—Sense of Restricted Agency

Learning Orientation

1. Autonomous Learning Orientation—strong Sense of Agency.

It was significant perhaps, that in our study, three of the four children who chose the Autonomous Learning Orientation (all from one school) had been designated as attaining below age-expectation in *either mathematics or English but not both*. We had wondered why these strong autonomy children all came from the same school, but this seems to be part of the explanation. If so, it indicates that their Sense of Competence was probably higher than for children who were designated as below-age-expectations in *both subjects*. Those who chose the Controlled Performance Orientation had *all* been designated as below-age-expectations in *both* core subjects. The implication is a strong correlation between a Sense of Competence and a Sense of Agency; and this is especially important when we take into account that Sense of Agency is key to wellbeing.

SELECTING AN ORIENTATION

In order to identify which Orientation a child subscribed to, we summarised the three Orientations using language suitable for children. We asked them to identify which of the following three was most like them. The children in all cases chose the Orientation that we as researchers would also have identified for them. They had to choose among:

Performance-oriented:

- A. *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.* (Impersonal Performance Orientation/weak Sense of Agency—selected by 12/23 children)
- B. *I like/dislike doing what I am told. I respect/dislike the teachers. I work hard to get rewards/don't care about rewards.* (Controlled Performance Orientation/Sense of Restricted Agency—selected by 7/23 children)

Learning-oriented:

- C. *I'm interested in exploring different and unusual things. I am also interested in thinking about how things could be changed at school.*
(Autonomy Orientation/strong Sense of Agency—selected by 4/23 children)

[**IMPORTANT NOTE:** For ethical reasons, we have chosen new pseudonyms for the children, in this book. This means that they do not tally with names used in some published journal articles.]

LIFE-HISTORIES OF CHILDREN WITH A PERFORMANCE
ORIENTATION AT SCHOOL

A. Impersonal Performance Orientation/Weak Sense of Agency

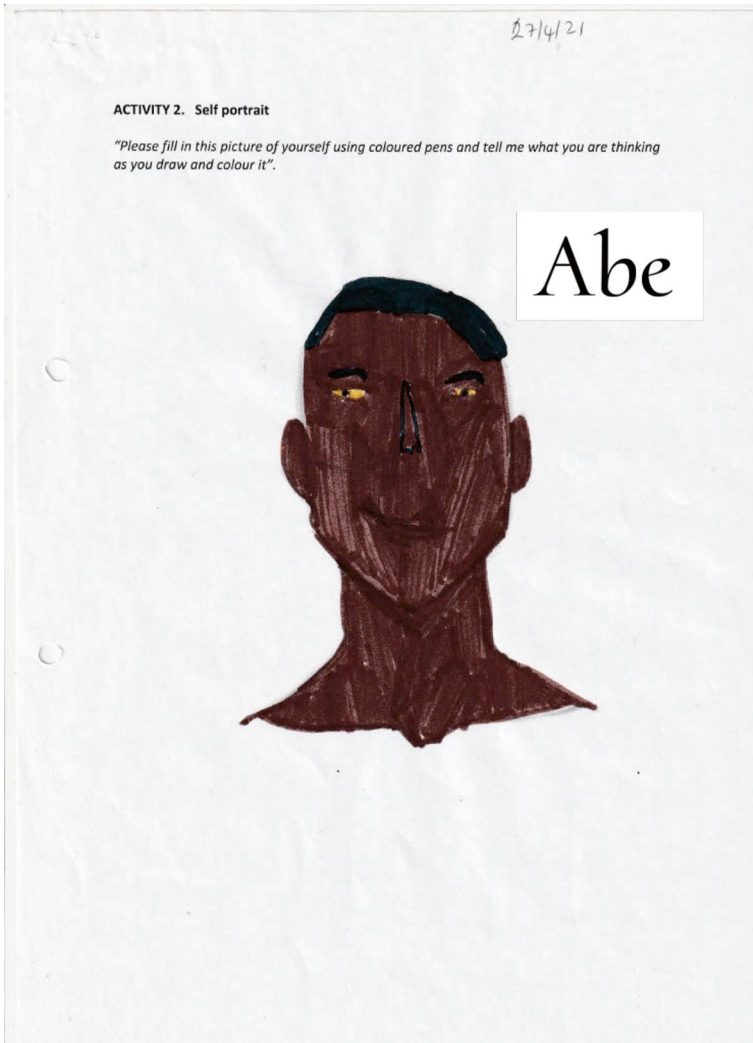
Child

1. Abe
2. Harriet
3. Fin
4. Zeph
5. Gabriella
6. Michael
7. Mark
8. Jack
9. Laurie
10. Louise
11. Sam
12. Salah

Impersonal Performance Orientation/Weak Sense of Agency—Selected by 12/23 Children

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.

ABE'S LIFE-HISTORY



Self-portrait 1: Abe

Abe was a British boy with dual heritage (Black African and Spanish), who came to the UK when he was seven years old and joined Jayden primary-school. Abe enjoyed helping others, at home or at school. Abe loved many aspects of primary-school, and after the COVID-19 school closures, he said: ‘I always miss school ... School’s my second home’ [8]. Abe said that he was ‘friends with everyone’ [13]. Abe spoke of his classroom being a place where he felt safe. He explained:

They [his peers] take care of me. When I’m upset, they come to me, and I love it because they’re so nice to me [3].

Abe was especially interested in music, particularly drumming and singing: ‘Music is basically my life—I love music’ [6]. He also enjoyed working on computers; and art; and in secondary-school his favourite subjects included history; and Physical Education, such as badminton and hockey.

However, he experienced challenges. In our first interview, Abe said:

I hate in English writing, because sometimes they distract me, and I get very nervous, and I break the pencil. [1]

English was an additional language for Abe, and as our project began, his English level was assessed as being *well* below age-related expectations. By the end of primary-school, this had progressed to being only *below* expected levels in English. In mathematics, Abe’s level was described as below the expected level when he began the project. In TERM 3, he described his frustration with mathematics:

Sometimes I get confused [in mathematics], and I don’t like it a lot. So, I don’t like feel that I’m very good at mathematics. It’s very annoying. [3]

As a result of these discomforts, Abe was put into intervention groups for both core subjects. He explained his objections to missing out on fun, and his favourite—music—when he went to support groups:

I want to stay in my class. Like I want to still do things in my class and have fun. Also, I think sometimes that [the intervention] group misses music and I’m like not comfortable with that. [6]

Abe spoke of feeling upset when he was compared unfavourably to someone else. One teacher had said to him during mathematics, ‘Look how

Jamila can do more than you and she's from another country'. For Abe, this was 'not okay':

I'm from another country too, and I can mainly do it, but I find things hard.

Abe spoke of the pain he felt in a mathematics tests:

I tried and tried so badly. But I tried so hard because I was nervous and I was like shaking. [5]

Abe had revealed in his earlier interviews that he felt fearful in the class-room when not achieving good grades. He did his utmost to avoid this failure, as he saw it, by trying to 'work hard' [4]. He confessed:

Sometimes when I haven't finished my work, my teacher says, 'Abe! I'm very disappointed at you because you haven't finished your work' and sometimes I feel upset. [2]

Later on in secondary-school, he said:

I went down from 56 to 38 this time [in English]... I was upset ... [My mum] has a parents evening today. I'm actually really, really scared... [The teacher might tell her] that I failed my test, that I'm not doing good work. [12]

Abe seemed to have internalised the institutional patterns of cultural value when he claimed that, if he did badly, it was his job to avoid it. He had no inclination to critique the curriculum or the teachers, even when he found it painful:

Teachers are here to learn with children, not to play with them only. When they shout it's only for us to learn ... I learn when they shout at me, because I don't do it again. [2]

When Abe was later asked what he had felt when the end of primary-school SATS tests were cancelled, he said: 'Happy. Because – I don't like tests, I really don't' [10].

When Abe was asked in his last year of primary-school how he felt during his mathematics classes, he was still negative: 'Bored and tired' [9] and unfortunately, his secondary-school mathematics experiences were also, as he put it: 'Bad' [12]. Abe displayed a Performance Orientation, rather

than a Learning Orientation when spoke of wanting to do well at his school-work *to gain approval*:

I want to get higher marks ... and be very clever at mathematics and English so I can impress my teacher and my mum and everyone in my family. [2]

He also believed he should maintain a positive and hopeful attitude to his work, even when he had worked really hard to no avail. He seemed to be attempting to minimise his emotional pain, by repeating positive psychology affirmations and pushing away his difficult feelings. Abe explained his attempts to put on a brave face:

We did it like five times and then people keep forgetting, and the teacher was like screaming. I was like: ... That's okay if they scream at me. But when he screams, they make tears come out. [5]

As typical of a Performance Orientation, a lot of Abe's emotional energy appeared to be spent trying to please his teachers. When asked what a '*child who scored low marks*' would be thinking, he explained: 'He's like thinking what he has to do to impress the teacher and everything' [2]. Nonetheless, concentration was a challenge in itself, for which he also blamed himself, even though he could see that the environment was not supporting his preferred ways of learning:

A lot of times I go to the board and the teacher says to me like, 'Do this Abe to see if you're concentrating'—and every time that I go to the board and I don't know it's because I'm not concentrating. [4]

Abe seemed to be influenced by schooling messages about the importance of concentrating and working hard in class ultimately to get a 'good' job: 'It's about getting a good job, trying to get good grades. If you don't work hard, you get bad grades' [6], trapping him into an impossible situation whereby he felt set up to fail in the long-term. In secondary-school, he was still finding concentration difficult. He told us:

My head of year... she's told me that I need to focus more, and that like [if] I want to pass and do good and everything, then I have to focus. [13]

On the positive side, by the end of Abe's first year at secondary-school, although his mathematics level remained below expected levels, his English scores had improved to the so-called expected level for his age.

HARRIET'S LIFE-HISTORY

ACTIVITY 2. Self portrait

"Please fill in this picture of yourself using coloured pens and tell me what you are thinking as you draw and colour it".



Harriet is Happy!

Self-portrait 2: Harriet

Harriet was a White British girl, born in January 2010, who attended Sunnyfields primary-school. She described herself as a quiet, modest person who was not ‘posh’ [10] and did not want to be particularly rich or ‘smart’. She told us that—more than school-work or test scores—she valued friendships and particularly enjoyed it when she made new and more friends in secondary-school compared to primary. At the end of TERM13 [age 12], she told us:

I don’t like the lessons but I like seeing my friends at school ... they’re probably the only reason I decide to go to school. [13]

She also portrayed the importance of sitting next to people in class that she felt comfortable with. Humour was particularly important in her school-life. She suggested: ‘I just care about making people laugh’ [9] and she praised teachers she found ‘funny’. However, throughout her life-history, she expressed negative feelings about school other than her Sense of Relatedness: ‘I’m not that much of a person who likes school’ [8]. She claimed that lessons were boring, saying: ‘I usually nearly fall asleep in class’ [9]. She dreaded returning to school after Lockdown because of the long, boring lessons. She expressed the insight that if lessons were too boring, it was very difficult to learn or even want to learn; so she tended to just try and get by without getting into trouble. This was indicative of her Performance Orientation in whereby she mainly wished to avoid trouble.

Throughout her school-life-history she described a love of and talent in art: ‘I really, really like art ... Because I’m a very good artist’ [TERM1, age 8]. In TERM4 [age 9], she explained how relatively unimportant other subjects were to her:

If I was the headmistress then I would just say that [children] could do one piece of art [each morning] and then go home and miss out all the other subjects in the school day.

Increasingly, she mentioned liking Physical Education, and decreasingly, English. In primary-school she had become intentionally engaged in writing stories: ‘We write stories sometimes, and that’s what I really like ... It feels like when you read them you’re in a different world’; and she toyed then with the idea of being a journalist in adulthood. But she stopped enjoying English-lessons at secondary-school where writing stories rarely happened. In the earlier years of her life-history, she described enjoying reading books too, such as *Ratburger* and *Fantastic Mr Fox*, plus comic

strips from the local library such as *Spiderman*. Later she stopped reading books at home for enjoyment, perhaps because reading for enjoyment was not emphasised at secondary school. And she had never liked mathematics.

In TERM3 [age 9], Harriet confided that she felt less ‘smart’ than others and she blamed herself for forgetting things:

Other people put their hand up and they get it right ... [I feel] sad and embarrassed ... Because if they’re in the same year group, like in the same mathematics group as me, then they probably know more than I do ... Because I don’t know mathematics and I don’t know how to spell words properly... even though I already know them, because I keep forgetting. [3]

Then she sometimes felt angry when she had to stay in at breaktime to catch up on her work: ‘Because you could just do it in the afternoon, not take someone’s break away’ [3].

Harriet had recognised feeling inferior by her teacher’s negative reaction to her writing at primary-school: ‘When I write something in literacy, like when it’s all laid out perfectly they normally go ‘One [*pause*] summer [*pause*]’ ... [while] they read other people’s like this [speaking fluently]- ‘One sunny day in Africa’. And then mine!—they just do it awkwardly and weird ... [to show that I] need to lay it out more correctly’ [1]. She was acutely aware that, for her, school life was sometimes more difficult than for other children but she claimed she had a weak Sense of Agency and a weak Sense of Competence, and believed that she could not control that: ‘I writ as much as all the other people did, but I still got a 3 plus... [so I feel] mad – I don’t really like my English teacher... some of the stuff on the paper, I didn’t really understand what she wrote’ [12].

Regarding mathematics, she commented in TERM4 [age 9]: ‘Well I don’t really like the mathematics work that they give us now, because I’m in [with] *the people who struggle* with mathematics, and it’s still quite hard’ [4]. In one interview [8], she sadly described herself as both ‘brainless’ and ‘confused’. When we asked her how confident she felt at the start of TERM11, first TERM in secondary-school, she expressed fears of failure: ‘We were doing mathematics tests this week, and I wasn’t confident with them ... [I was afraid] that everyone else in the class would be done before me and I would be the only one left’ [11]. She described her lack of Sense of Competence and lack of Sense of Agency: ‘I don’t know what the teacher is talking about ... In mathematics I just sit there day-dreaming’ [9]. She explained the need for teachers to talk less fast so that she would become less ‘stressed’ [11]. She perceptively suggested that doing more art at school would get her mind ‘off of all the stress in the work’ [6].

Despite accompanying negative feelings, she appreciated being in special groups for mathematics in which the participants—like herself—‘don’t understand much’. This was because she feared that mathematics in the main group would be too hard. However, she described the tactics she took to avoid trouble rather than engage wholeheartedly: ‘I pretend to concentrate in class so I don’t get told off, because normally I get told off’ [1].

Harriet’s fearfulness was apparent in various spheres, which undermined her Sense of Agency. She told us: ‘I don’t want to talk in front of the whole entire class... If I get asked to do something I’ll just sit there quiet and wait until the teacher asks for another person’ [6]. And she told us: ‘I go into the classroom and do what the teacher wants me to do’ [6]. In secondary-school, she followed the many new rules; and she was shocked when she still got penalised for forgetting a couple of things. Indeed, her definition of ‘successful’ was to ‘Get everything right and you’re not being told off’ [3]. This was a reflection of her Impersonal Performance Orientation where she did not feel she could change her situation as it seemed to be randomly controlled by systemic features.

Harriet was aware of the future importance of GCSE exams and claimed: ‘I’m just scared to do them because—What if I don’t get it right?’ [11]. However, she did not seem to feel overly pressured by the need to perform highly in current or future exams. She seemed to be more concerned with avoiding immediate humiliations and punishments at school and with sustaining her precious friendships. Indeed, she seemed in some ways to conflate good behaviour with being ‘smart’ whereby she identified a peer who had considerable learning difficulties as 10/10 in smartness because ‘he tries his best in his work’ [8]. This perhaps reinforced her sense of confusion. She did not show an overly self-responsibilised orientation, being often more anxious to navigate successfully present threats such as punishments or lost friendships. Her energy was therefore evidently engaged mainly *not* in formal learning so much as in avoidance; which was in keeping with her self-identified Impersonal Performance Orientation.

Harriet’s life-history journey did not undulate greatly. She started off as a ‘mathematics hater’ [1] and finished off similarly, as she had no reasons for expecting things to change (‘I’ll probably hate it even more [at secondary-school]’ [9]). She was in groups that provided special support for mathematics through most of her school-life-history, but she tended to be glad of this as it was less taxing, and perhaps most importantly for Harriet, in Year 7 [aged 11–12], she was in a class with some good friends which made it less boring for her. Her passion for art was sustained throughout, as her valuing of humour and friendships continued to blossom and flourish.

FIN'S SCHOOL LIFE-HISTORY

Fin

ACTIVITY 2. Self portrait

"Please fill in this picture of yourself using coloured pens and tell me what you are thinking as you draw and colour it".



Self-portrait 3: Fin

Fin was a White British boy attending Sunnyfields school, born in Winter 2009. He described himself as a ‘normal’ person, neither better nor worse than others [11], someone who enjoyed sleeping in late, eating chocolate, running in the woods, playing with his dog and watching nature programmes on TV [7]. Fin was a child with a wide range of interests in which he eagerly engaged and for which he displayed great curiosity and reflection. For example, he was highly informed about and intrigued particularly by the natural world, as well as archaeology, the World Wars, Science, even Brexit [6–9]. Despite his in-depth knowledge about animals, he regretted that he had not ‘had a topic about animals’ at school [6].

Fin emphasised his happy-go-lucky approach to life which was focused firmly on his friendships, including with his much beloved dog whom he acquired during Lockdown 2020. His request was for longer playtimes as he was someone who was ‘good at playing’ [8, 10]. Friendships with peers played an essential supporting role in his life-history, which were mentioned every interview; and were the first aspect he mentioned when describing his excitement about his transfer to secondary-school. He had a long-standing friend [2, 3, 6, etc.] whom he had met at pre-school, then been separated from in Year 3 [aged 7–8], and then reunited with in Year 5 [aged 9–10]. Sharing diagnoses of ADHD and dyslexia, Fin found great comfort and fulfilment through this friendship which appeared more important to him than anything else at school. When we asked Fin to highlight the most important moments in his whole school life [12] he singled out meeting this friend and getting his dog as the most important moments, along with meeting a particularly great teacher in Year 6 [aged 10–11]. Although he did not enjoy other aspects of schooling such as writing lessons, he was delighted when Lockdown was over because it meant he could see his friends again at school.

Fin struggled with his writing throughout his school life-history. At one stage during Years 4 and 5, he referred to himself as ‘dumb’ as he did not know enough about the ‘right’ topics; and later he called himself ‘not very interesting’ [13]. Reflecting his Performance Orientation, he longed for his friends to say that he was really smart and believed that this would make him more popular [13]. He 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’. At this stage in his school life-history, he felt that the teachers did not pay him enough attention or even notice that he was there: ‘Because most of them just sort of walk straight

past... because they know they can't read my handwriting... they don't talk to me much'. As a result, he described his classroom seat being at the edge of the classroom where he could neither see very well nor be seen.

Fin was not an angry or volatile person. However, his calm demeanour sometimes concealed some less calm responses. When asked whether Fin believed teachers thought he was 'dumb', he told us, 'They just want to be paid'. It was not until Year 6 [aged 10–11] when he had a very special teacher, that he experienced being really helped to improve rather than being judged negatively. This seemed to transform his experience of schooling in a lasting, positive way.

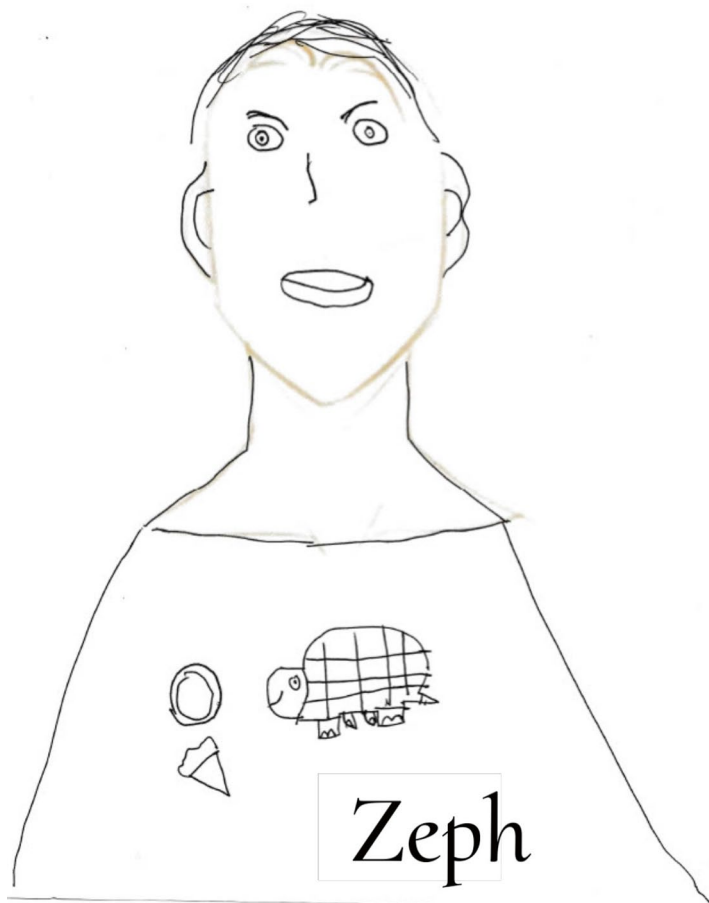
Fin clearly believed that school was the way to future success [1]. He was afraid that not getting a 'good education' would mean he would not get a job he would enjoy. He therefore avoided trouble and persevered in order to get the 'right education' [6]. However, he displayed a lot of fear and anxiety throughout his life-history, perhaps because of this threat he saw to a happy future work-life. He told us he was scared of being told off, even though this very rarely happened. When he did get told off, he said it was because 'I'm not doing enough work ... Because I don't get it'. He was afraid of giving the wrong answer and would 'freeze' if a teacher asked him a question. Even if a question or reprimand was addressed to a peer, he would 'panic'. Managing these negative emotions cost him emotional effort that might otherwise have been directed towards his keen interests in learning about the world more widely.

Fin was one of a handful of children (four) in our study who seemed to be thriving at the end of the project, having overcome significant obstacles along the way. He rated his general satisfaction with school as 8 or 9/10 in Year 7 [aged 11–12]. From the start, he had tended to consider himself better at mathematics than at English and by the end of Year 6 [aged 10–11] he felt very competent in mathematics, perhaps partly thanks to having a private tutor at home. By the start of secondary-school, he rated his overall competence as 7/10 [11] and was hoping he might be in the top set for mathematics (although in the event this was not the case for either mathematics or English). He continued to value his friendships highly and to look forward to a future in which he could engage more deeply in understanding the natural world.

ZEPH'S LIFE-HISTORY

ACTIVITY 2. Self portrait

Please fill in this picture of yourself using coloured pens and tell me what you are thinking as you draw and colour it".



Self-portrait 4: Zeph

Zeph was a White, dual-heritage British, summer-born boy who attended Sunnyfields primary-school. He was generally positive about his school experiences, taking a matter-of-fact and very accepting approach to schooling and attainment and claiming, ‘I’m happy all the time’ [8] and ‘I think school is okay honestly! I don’t think we should change anything’ [12]. His passion was animals, especially frogs and tortoises, about which he was so knowledgeable that he could claim: ‘People call me the “animal dictionary”’ [11] and ‘I’m known as the person that knows a lot about animals’ [13]. At the start of the project, he assessed himself as follows: ‘I’m intelligent about animals but not on every other thing’ [3]. He loved to talk; and engaged with curiosity in conversations about many varied topics. Particularly, he loved to talk about his frogs and tortoises and when asked about the most important events in his life, he mentioned getting his first two frogs; and the birth of a tortoise. He brought frogs into many of his school subjects, for example, depicting frogs wearing different historical costumes. Over his 11 interviews, the words ‘frog’ or ‘frogs’ were mentioned 183 times. He very much wished that schools would provide lessons about animals which, he said, very rarely happened.

Although he told us that ‘I’m not interested in people, I’m interested in animals’ [1], Zeph valued his friends highly, gaining more friends in Year 4 [aged 8–9] than in Year 3 [aged 7–8] and more again in Year 7 [aged 11–12]. He kept a small circle of good friends close to himself. He missed his friends very much in Lockdown and told us: ‘When I knew I was returning to school this term, I felt extremely happy, like the world has like—like just ended but just like came back’ [8].

Although he put a positive spin on most things, Zeph did not usually feel comfortable during mathematics lessons which he described as being not ‘really fun at all’ [12]. Despite feeling much more confident in mathematics after gaining help from a relative during Lockdown, he continued to have negative experiences of mathematics lessons. For example, he used the word ‘painful’: ‘You don’t even know what you’re doing and you don’t, like it doesn’t go in your brain ... Like the stuff we did first, like—we did place value first, but um then it got harder and harder and harder, and then it went all into fractions and decimals! That was really painful’ [13]. Zeph was surprised to hear that he had been categorised in Year 3 [aged 7–8] as ‘below age expectations’ in mathematics, exclaiming: ‘They never said “Oh! Do you want some extra help?” Because I remember they used to shout at me’ [13]. He also relayed how his friend Terry and others laughed at him sometimes if he did not know the right answer: ‘[Terry] kept like saying like impossible mathematics, like “Do you know what pi

means?” I was like “No” and he was like “You’re so dumb” ... I don’t even know what pi means yet because he’s in a higher mathematics group’ [9]. He described mathematics tests as horrible. He looked back longingly at his pre-school experiences where school was fun because there were no mathematics tests:

Because like it’s so hard, like you um—I don’t understand it that much, and the teacher can’t explain what it is ... You have to do it yourself ... And you just have to think everything, it’s like so hard. I don’t understand it all. [6]

Zeph did appreciate that teachers tried to make lessons fun, but he realised: ‘In mathematics you can’t really do that because if you made it more fun it would still be boring’ [3]. He found some aspects of English tiresome too but developed strong reading skills that allowed him to enjoy reading Harry Potter and other novels, at least at school and sometimes at home too.

Zeph seemed to fit the description of ‘Performance Orientation’ classically, and indeed the Impersonal Performance Orientation/weak Sense of Agency specifically. By Year 7 [aged 11–12], he explained that he was not really bothered about getting engaged in intentional learning, but just wanted to get by: ‘I mean I’m not really interested in learning that much ... Don’t think I really want to try that much. I want to just get—get decent grades’ [13]. As a reflection of his Impersonal Performance Orientation/weak Sense of Agency—the Sense that he had little control over his situation—he seemed to put a lot of hard work into avoiding being in trouble and in fact defined a successful person *as* someone who did not get told off. He defined the whole point of learning at school as ‘so you do your exams correctly’ [6] and for ‘house points’ rather than for intentional engaged learning. His focus on getting things right rather than creative learning was reflected in a desire he expressed:

I wish like I was a prince or like the United Kingdom so every time I go to school like the manager would come with me behind and tell me all the answers. [5]

When asked whether a fictional character should introduce tests to children on Mars, he advised against it: ‘Because you might get in trouble if you do it wrong’ [4]. Perhaps if animal or nature studies had been on the curriculum, he would have put his energies into these to good effect.

Zeph did feel under some pressure to do well enough in mathematics, as he mentioned several times that he believed mathematics was the most important subject for future success. However, he was not able to explain

why this was true. This tendency was noticeable for Zeph, suggesting a conformist attitude overall without questioning institutionalised patterns of cultural value. For example, when put into ‘lowest’ sets for mathematics, he could say: ‘But it doesn’t mean I’m bad or anything ... It just means I’m a lower level and it’s fine’ [11]. One might hypothesise that it cost him additional energy to convince himself that these claims were true, energy that could otherwise have been diverted towards learning.

Zeph certainly adhered to the belief that anyone could be successful if they worked hard, listened to the teacher and concentrated well in class, despite the fact that these strategies had not always proved effective for him: he himself was someone who listened and concentrated well in class but did not necessarily ‘succeed’ in mathematics. However, he was rewarded for being obedient, reinforcing the idea that obedience was more important than learning, for example saying: ‘I did get a house point for sitting silently’ [6]. In secondary-school, detentions seemed to be given out easily, something that Zeph avoided at all costs. Indeed, he related on three separate occasions the episode during which a primary-school teacher had unfairly given him a detention for something he had not done; which clearly left a scar on his memory. [It was sadly noticeable that other children at the same primary-school also had horrified stories to tell about this same teacher.]

However, on a positive note, in Year 6 [aged 10–11], at the end of primary-school, Zeph was feeling positive about his mathematics attainment, claiming:

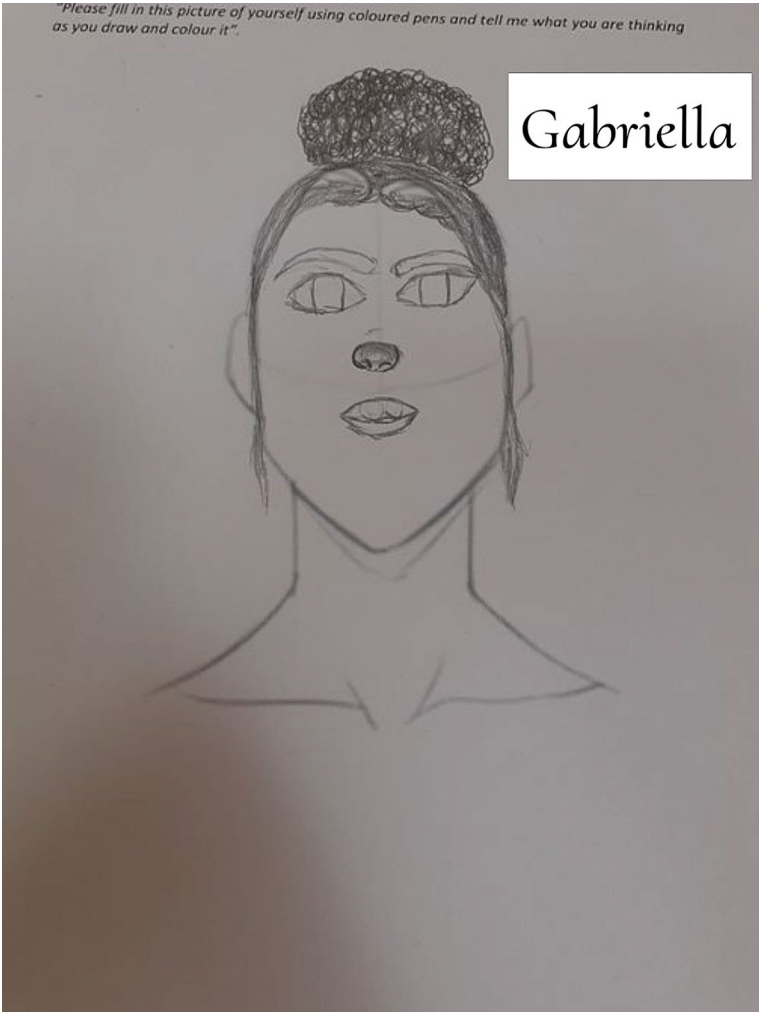
I used to be like really low in the class but now I’m top ... I didn’t like mathematics when I was younger, but now with mathematics it’s so fun. Probably like the second best thing I do at school. [8]

Indeed, he assessed his mathematics attainment as overall 2/10 before Lockdown and 10/10 after Lockdown, thanks to having had help from a relative during Lockdown. However, once in secondary-school, the dislike of mathematics he started out with in Year 3 [aged 7–8] seemed to set back in again in Year 7 [aged 11–12], when he told us:

No one really likes mathematics ... Someone says ‘Mathematics’ and then someone else is like ‘I love mathematics’ and there’s this person ‘Are you on alcohol?’ [11]

However, his extreme love of and curiosity about the nature gave him a whole world of confidence of his own, one which schools in future will perhaps embrace more appreciatively.

GABRIELLA’S LIFE-HISTORY



Self-portrait 5: Gabriella

Gabriella was a Black British girl, born in April 2010 and attending Sandown Academy. She described herself as funny, creative, playful and very nice. Most noticeably, she expressed a strong love between herself and her family members [3]. She was interested in people giving each other ‘positive energy’ [13] and had a wealth of interests and talents, many of which persisted throughout her life-history. She was quite passionate about art, music, dance, science, swimming and in particular—from age 8 onwards—reading and writing. She read fiction at home for fun, including the books of Raoul Dahl and Dick King-Smith. She told us that reading could be calming:

Sometimes I do reading when like I’m mad or upset. Like there’s somebody maybe at school I’ve had an argument [with]—I just read. And then somehow it just makes me—it makes me very like happy [8].

Alternatively, she said, ‘I just write how I feel in a diary’. This was because she also loved writing, both in and out of school—her daily diary or other stories. Her mother had a baby during the project and, in addition to her passions for art, reading and writing, she enjoyed feeling grown up by caring for the baby [8, 9]. However, she was clear at the start and end of the project that she was not looking for fame but hoped to get by (in keeping with her Performance Orientation). In contradiction to much rhetoric on Social Mobility, she said:

What I want to do is just have a job and not be successful. ... I just want to ... keep going to get paid. Because I just want to carry on with my life and have a good time [1].

Gabriella had an exceptional capacity for reflecting back on her past life. For example, once in secondary-school, she could report back that she ‘used to always talk and make funny jokes’ in class at primary-school, but she recognised that now she was more sensible and more focused on her school-work. She explained:

Before I just hated learning like, I just disliked it so much. If my mum forced me to do my homework I’m like ‘I don’t want to do homework’. [9]

Nonetheless, she described how in secondary-school, when she showed her ‘resting’ face in the classroom, her teacher mistook this sometimes for showing ‘attitude’ and she sometimes was reprimanded. She also gradually indicated awareness of racial issues and sometimes perceived being treated less positively than her white peers. She was particularly positive when her

teacher was ‘the same colour as me’ [8, 12]. She had some fluctuation in her peer friendships due to changing schools at the end of Year 2 (before the project began). Year 3 [aged 7–8] seemed a little lonely as she felt shy and did not know many people yet [2]. However, on return to her original school in Year 5 [aged 9–10] and then at secondary-school, she surprised herself by finding that she was very popular, sometimes too popular for comfort. She explained that she was fundamentally not a very sociable person, but she had successfully learnt how to socialise and make friends [11–13].

Like many of the CLIPS children, Gabriella perceived a close link between bad behaviour and bad learning [6]. This meant she might worry about being reprimanded for both. A phrase she often used was ‘Stand up for me!’, which she required from parents, friends and teachers. Gabriella’s phrase ‘standing up for myself’ perhaps indicated the energy she felt she needed to exert—beyond, *and sometimes instead of*, engagement in school-learning—in order to survive at school. She described the angry teachers whom she feared who might ‘rip out the piece of work’ they did not like, making her poor performance very obvious. Gabriella admitted to having to pretend to understand sometimes, to avoid embarrassment [2]. Therefore, she tended to rate herself as ‘not one of the smart people in my class’ [2].

Gabriella’s designation by the schooling system as ‘below age expectations’ in mathematics and English were made very obvious to Gabriella and everyone else. This may have reinforced her Impersonal Performance Orientation/weak Sense of Agency driven by fear and avoidance. In mathematics lessons, she described feeling stressed and worried [3]. She explained: ‘Because when I put my hand up in mathematics that I know what the answer is, it’s really stressful because I got it wrong ... I feel a bit embarrassed’ [2]. At the end of Year 7 [aged 11–12], Gabriella predicted that she would be in one of the lowest attainment sets in Year 8. However, she saw some hope in this: ‘If you’re in a really bad set then that means you would get more—like you learn more, and you get educated more, so you will find—you start to find stuff easy’ [13].

However, mainly, being depicted as ‘below expectations’ led Gabriella to fear tests in mathematics and English greatly, to feel very stressed about them and to hate them [4]. While she sometimes described intentional engagement in learning (especially at home), her motivation at school often seemed to be to avoid punishment: ‘I did do my work because if I don’t do my work then I will get in trouble’ [6]. She talked a lot about avoiding detentions in secondary-school; and emphasised high marks in tests as a most important aspect of her schooling [13]. These characteristics reflected a Performance Orientation rather than a Learning Orientation.

For example, she described how teachers kept directing children to listen hard in class, 'so you can pass your GCSEs and go to college then university'. She noted to us astutely, 'I think they want to scare us into listening' [11]. Despite hating mathematics lessons, she told us her belief, perhaps with anxiety:

Mathematics is really good and it helps you. ... you will be able to get into a workplace properly ... If I don't know [mathematics], I won't get a job and I'll be homeless and I'll have to live with my mum or daddy [6].

However, when she tried to explain how mathematics would help her into employment, she referred to practical tasks such as reading bills.

Gabriella claimed to believe: 'You can do anything if you put your mind to it'. In fact, she complained that she kept hearing this claim from teachers: 'They just want us to believe in it and do like your work and just put your mind to it. But yeah I do that all the time, I don't have to be told ... [I grasp that] all I have to do is just listen and understand' [8]. This was in keeping with a time when she was kept in over break for not completing her work in primary-school, where she blamed herself: 'I felt sad and I thought like I should concentrate more'. Indeed, she perceived that hard work was how one moved from the lower attainment set to the upper set. When this did not happen, it still did not shake her belief that hard work was the key.

However, as researchers, we could also perceive Gabriella's tendencies towards a Learning [Autonomous] Orientation too as she sometimes indicated a Strong Sense of Agency. As explained above, Gabriella became competent in reflecting back critically on her own behaviours. She also showed genuine excitement about learning certain subjects, especially at home but occasionally at school too. For example, in Year 6 [aged 10–11] she claimed: 'It's quite exciting to learn, I think learning is very, very fun'.

At the end of the CLIPS project, Gabriella was still hoping to attend university, perhaps after attending an FE college, following GCSEs in which she strove towards success. Her struggles with mathematics continued throughout. However, her relationship with English had originally been very positive, despite being designated as 'below age expectations'. Unfortunately, in Year 7 [aged 11–12] she faced a very strict English teacher (whom she said was 'rude') whereby she became less keen on English, at least temporarily. However, she faced her future with 'positive energy', which she did bravely, cheerfully, knowing that things might not be easy but, as much as possible, she would continue 'standing up for herself' and looking ahead to her adult life when she would be independent.

MICHAEL’S LIFE-HISTORY

ACTIVITY 2. Self portrait

"Please fill in this picture of yourself using coloured pens and tell me what you are thinking as you draw and colour it".



Michael

Self-portrait 6: Michael

Michael was a Black British boy who described himself as follows: 'Happy ... a really positive person' [3] and 'very kind ... Sometimes bossy but very kind' [8]. Michael was popular and his friendships important to him, proud that 'everyone's my friend, literally' [2] and that friends were 'always nice to me' [2]. He believed his popularity was partly the result of his efforts to be happy, as, he said:

If you're just feeling sad and down and all that ... no one's your friend and ... if you're happy like you can be, like you have friends then all the time [6] ... 'I'm the class clown ... like, I'm really good at jokes ... and the people just laugh. [4]

He also felt he benefitted academically from these positive relationships, telling us: 'Sometimes I get bad at mathematics, but then if I sit next to [my friend] I get better and better because she's helping me' [3] and: 'If I have a hard question like 60 times 14 for example, I'm like 'Oh no, I forgot' and then someone might like help me ... until I get the hang of it' [6].

In contrast to his sense of his social leadership, Michael described his academic position as follows: 'I'm like in the middle, and being in the middle is okay, and being in the middle's like fun' [5]. He explained this by contrasting himself with those both 'below' him and 'above' him. He did not sit on the 'support table', with people who 'are not learning that much' [2] and reassured himself that others got lower marks. Nor was he one of the 'top' people, described as follows: 'They're like mathematics genius[es], like they're like the mathematics gods, and like the mathematics angels' [5]. In fact it was better, he persuaded himself, to be 'middling' than 'top', as 'top' people could be 'spoiled' and 'selfish' [6].

However, despite his claim that he was 'in the middle', Michael was often unconfident about his academic competence, reflecting fear and confusion. He explained: 'Sometimes I get a bit confused about the work' [3] and 'I do make mistakes, so many mistakes' [5]. He felt this showed him in a poor light in classroom practices, telling us, for example: 'Whoever has that good writing they get a handwriting pen ... None of [us]—Jamila and Sam, neither me too—we don't have a handwriting pen' [8]. He was also anxious about getting told off for poor work, explaining bitterly: 'When you do like too much mistakes [the teacher] rips out your page, scrunch it up, and put it in the recycling bin and [you] start a new one' [5].

Indeed, Michael's fear of falling to the bottom of the class was evident throughout his school-life-history. When asked what he would feel if he were at the bottom he explained:

I would be sad, disappointed. I don't know, all those words that are bad. I would be like disappointed. But lucky I'm in the middle. [5]

Low-marks pupils, he felt, were stigmatised: 'Friends, they might bully him ... They will say that he's a dumb person ... [they] will say "Oh you're bad at mathematics, oh you're bad at English" ... "Oh you're not smart, you don't even know what's 1 plus 1"' [2]. These comments illustrated his constant fear of falling into the 'low-marks' category because of his weak Sense of Agency and Competence, which led him to believe that he could not do anything to help the situation. Michael believed that academic failure could blight the future, telling us that if you don't learn in school: 'Your life is ruined, and [if] like you don't learn, like nothing's going to happen ... like you can't go to the job anymore ... then what are they going to do for their life?' [1], and he often commented, sounding anxious, that 'the future awaits' [13]. Michael's fear of falling to the bottom of the class and the impacts this might have on his future took a significant amount of his energy away from more fruitful learning engagement and concerned him greatly, especially as he felt powerless—lacking both Agency and Competence—to change the situation.

Michael's academic confidence, never strong, took a serious hit over Lockdown. He said he had little engagement with online learning over the lockdowns and worried about returning to the classroom, explaining: 'I felt like I would be down because I haven't learnt any school things' [8]. However, he was relieved to find school 'just normal' [9] on return, and in fact his academic confidence seemed to grow during Year 6 [aged 10–11] and into secondary-school. He described this change as his brain coming back to him: 'I feel like a success because like—I don't feel the same as primary-school—primary-school I like felt like I've been a failure ... but for some reason out of nowhere I just get all my intelligence back ... when I started secondary-school my brain just came back' [12].

Socially, however, Michael found the shift to secondary more difficult. He seemed to miss his high social status at primary-school, saying of leaving his primary-school friends: 'I didn't cry, but like I just miss them' [11]. At times this lack of relatedness seemed to blight his increased competence at secondary-school as it had perhaps become his key prop to compensate for his perceived low Competence. He exclaimed: 'I just don't like secondary... I just wanted every one of my friends to come here' [11]. By the end of Year 7 [aged 11–12], he was finding an additional, different discomfort—long hours of controlled concentration: 'Now in secondary-school when you start to develop it's just like—like you have to sit on a desk, do some work for like—like longer time than primary and like you just sit all day' [13].

MARK'S LIFE-HISTORY

ACTIVITY 2. Self portrait

"Please fill in this picture of yourself using coloured pens and tell me what you are thinking as you draw and colour it".



Mark

Self-portrait 7: Mark

Mark was a White British boy, born in March 2010, attending Sunnyfields school. He described himself as kind, brave, small, happy, always hungry, good at drawing, good at outdoor ball games and very skilled at computer gaming ('I was born by being good at computer games' [6]). Always striving to be kind and positive, he described his primary-school in a positive light, explaining: 'It is a good school and you can learn a lot of things' [10]. He was much more critical of secondary-school.

His 'wonderful friends' [8] were especially important to Mark who punctuated his school-life-history according to special friends he had made along the journey. Indeed, he told us that the best thing about his new secondary-school was having more friends whereby, by the end of TERM13, he could call himself: 'Already kind of popular in school' [13]. He had earlier described the hardest aspect of primary-schooling as: 'When someone like says I can't play' [3], indicating once again the important role of his Sense of Relatedness for thriving at school.

In terms of academic school subjects, Mark proclaimed a continuous enjoyment of mathematics even when it was hard. He was particularly motivated by a Year 6 [aged 10–11] teacher telling him he was a 'mathematician'. He told us that he had a good imagination and enjoyed the stories aspect of learning English, although reading and writing continued to be frustratingly difficult for him throughout.

Mark made great efforts not to let himself become upset or angry, even when he felt frustrated, fearful or humiliated. When discussing his relatively low-attainment in reading and writing, he advised:

Like for me I'm really not that good at PE, but I am good at mathematics ...
Some people are good at something, some people are absolutely horrible at something ... just be yourself. [11]

He claimed that he did not really get annoyed by other people at school, although, like others in the CLIPS project, he objected when they were noisy. However, what might be evident here is the tendency of those with an Impersonal Performance Orientation/weak Sense of Agency, to down-play conflicts and difficult situations. A great pressure for Mark, leading to even greater diverted effort on his part, was his apparent belief that it

was not acceptable to show discontent at school, and particularly not acceptable to express anger publicly. We were struck by his not infrequent mentioning of ‘keeping down’ his negative feelings and ‘getting used to’ them: ‘I actually just keep it down, like super-down inside me’ [9]. When we asked him if frustrating aspects of school made him feel angry afterwards, he replied as follows: ‘Yeah definitely ... Uh, I mostly just play Fortnite [later on, at home]. Uh I mostly just take my anger out on people online ... then I’m just sort of killing people’ [12]. He had been told that he had ‘anger issues’ [11] and to relieve these at school, he had been taught to take deep breaths, but even this he did not do ‘out loud’ [11]. He told us: ‘I normally just scream into my arm and just forget about it’ [9], pushing his bad feelings down. This pushing down must have cost him a lot of effort which might have been channelled more fruitfully. Additionally, provisions could have been made for him to reduce triggers for his anger.

So we ascertained that Mark did have confusing, distressing times—mainly due to his low Sense of Competence—over which he seemed to feel that all he could do was keep doing what he was told, drawing classically on the Impersonal Performance Orientation. For example, during writing lessons, he explained:

Normally I don’t know what to write or how to explain it or something ...
So whenever my teacher says like you need to write a whole paragraph,
then—and I’m a slow writer—so it’s kind of stressful for me. [9]

In mathematics with a particular teacher in Year 3 [aged 8–9], he narrated: ‘Like although 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]. During class discussions on the classroom carpet, he reflected his low Sense of Competence by explaining that the teacher rarely asked him questions: ‘Because I don’t know the answers... I really don’t know’ [5]. When doing tests, he described how: ‘The children might be frustrated ... A little bit. Actually a lot ... because they might be stuck and they don’t understand’ [4]. By the end of primary-school, Mark was ‘frightened’ [10] about getting bullied at secondary-school and worried that he would get too much ‘super-hard’ homework (‘I’m not a fan of homework’ [5]) with too much writing. What Mark said he would have liked again

indicates his low Sense of Agency over his situation. He wanted more help in class, easier work, and a teacher who would, for example, do the following: 'Like shorten the sentence ... like shorten it up so we understand ... like understand what she's saying' [6].

Mark again displayed his low Sense of Competence by telling us calmly: 'For me I'm bad at mostly everything' [11]. He had reconciled himself to the idea that he did not mind being 'the lowest, highest ... all I want to do is just learn' [13]. He seemed much more pressured by the need to avoid punishments and humiliation. We never noted a 'whole-hearted engagement' in school learning; only when it came to online video-games at home. Rather, Mark seemed to conflate the concept of conformity, hard work, performance and learning. In his mind, it seemed that obedience led to approval and perhaps conformity in the classroom was also hard work itself—for Mark. This led him to put great efforts into being obedient, law-abiding and polite, making him a favourite with many teachers but potentially siphoning off valuable energies from whole-hearted engagement in learning.

From earliest interviews, Mark displayed a preference for mathematics over reading and writing, declaring of himself: 'I'm kind of a mathematics person' [11]. He explained that mathematics was the most interesting school subject: 'It's much easier ... Because you just need to do numbers instead of just writing a lot of sentences' [6]. In Year 6 [aged 10–11], he perceived: 'I'm pretty like good [at mathematics]. I'm in the middle' [9]. Reading and writing were a different matter. Although Mark made steady progress in these, across his school-life-history, he was never fully comfortable with them, potentially making all other subjects except mathematics more frustrating. However, by Year 6 [aged 10–11], he was reading certain books at school and at home. Writing had started off by hurting his hand and he struggled to keep his letters on the line. He reflected, even in secondary-school, however: 'Other people write really fast still' [11] and he admitted that he still hated writing 'a little bit' [12]. His new friendships in secondary-school, who accompanied him in the same (lowest) sets, seemed to compensate for some frustrations and Mark seemed assured in our final interview with him that so long as he was with his friends, he would be happy.

JACK'S LIFE-HISTORY

ACTIVITY 2. Self portrait

"Please fill in this picture of yourself using coloured pens and tell me what you are thinking as you draw and colour it".



Jack

Self-portrait 8: Jack

Jack was a White British, summer-born boy who attended Sandown Academy. Jack described himself as ‘funny sometimes’ [1] a bit ‘cheeky’ and ‘lazy’ [10] and not very ‘mature’ [11]. He told us several times over the years that sports and leisure times were most important to him: for example, he would have liked a bigger playground, shorter lesson-times and longer break-times at school, in which to enjoy playing sports with his friends—mainly other boys. He told us: ‘I don’t like people when they’re silly in PE, because obviously it’s my favourite lesson’ [11]. He did not play for a school football team, however, as he found any such pressure stressful.

Jack told us that he delighted in making other people happy and that if he won a million pounds, he would give half of it away to charity. He also expressed an egalitarian attitude, possibly as a way to reconcile himself to his low Sense of Competence: ‘Because I don’t like being better than people, I just like to be like in the middle, like the same’ [11]. Jack explained how lacking in a Sense of Agency he felt, in relation to his performance:

Some days I’m like smart and some days I’m not ... [Some days] my brain has flash-banged ... It like crumbles up and once I’m trying to figure out a question it just goes blank. [11]

He also displayed his poor Sense of Agency by explaining that he was at a disadvantage compared to his peers, but that he could not do anything about this: ‘It’s harder for me because normally other people like practise 24/seven with their mums and dads... [but] I’m not a practice person’ [8]. He also believed that, based on his experience, tests were ‘not really my thing’ [1]. Tests caused him a lot of stress and indeed this was made worse by being humiliated by low scores: ‘[I] got laughed at, like “Ha ha, he’s an idiot”’ [13]. However, what seemed to matter more than being laughed at was whether he was with his friends in the classroom. His Sense of Relatedness was threatened however, when he was separated from friends in his special group for literacy at primary-school. And he recognised with indignation that at secondary-school, the teachers do not ‘even know who my friends are!’ [12].

At primary-school, it seemed to erode Jack's Sense of Competence and confidence that he never managed to get his name in the Achievement Book despite admitting: 'I'm trying like extra hard now' [8]. He also seemed misrecognised when he worked really hard but his work was not perceived as good enough: 'Handwriting—they [the teachers] think it's messy—and after you just do all that work they just rip it up for nothing' [8]. Jack therefore described himself at school as 'happy and sad' [3] but often bored by lessons. He explained how painful he found boredom, which led him to feel: 'I don't want to ever go back to that school again' [5]. He told us of one brave and agentic instance in the classroom:

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 breaktime [1].

He explained that one cause for his boredom was weak Sense of Agency—his confusion and lack of control—added to his low Sense of Competence: 'I don't understand and no one helps me' [2]. He also reflected insightfully on another cause, one not always noted by policy-makers: 'Whenever I'm *not* happy, it's hard for me to like work ... I just stop doing my work' [6]. As someone with an Impersonal Performance Orientation, he told us he would *get through* lessons by sleeping; or distracting himself by writing on his hand; or fiddling with things under his desk. A third reason he voiced for boredom, seemed to be curriculum content he could not relate to, that did not align with his personal strengths or interests: 'They just give me loads of stuff I don't like ... like comprehension sheets' [12]. He found this stressful: 'My head gets hot' [4] 'and you sometimes blow your fuse' [2].

His lack of 'whole-hearted engagement' was therefore completely unsurprising. Jack described himself as:

Not one of the smart people in my class ... 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].

At times he actually welcomed being punished by being sent out of class, saying 'Thank God! because I'm out of the classroom' [12] so that now his 'brain can relax' [4]. This indicates a high level of stress or distress in class. His pleasure at being sent out of class tallied with his Impersonal Performance Orientation/weak Sense of Agency, as did his frequent

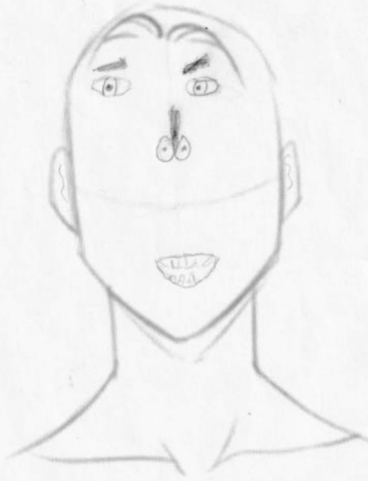
physical absences from school. He did not seem to take pleasure in addressing difficult challenges in terms of school-work perhaps because so many tasks were too challenging for him. When asked how he would feel if he knew he would be in top sets for all subjects in two years' time, he replied: 'Not really delightful ... because that means it's much harder questions' [13]. Indeed, at times Jack was happy to be a little devious in order to avoid trouble. In one lesson, he was praised for finishing reading his book while in fact, he told us: 'There was not enough time. I couldn't finish it properly. So I just skipped three pages' [1].

Like most of the children, Jack seemed to believe that good grades at primary-school led to good grades in secondary which led to a good future job. Although it did not work for him, he had been assured that the route to good grades was supposed to be through concentration and perseverance: 'If you persevere you will be better and you will probably be the top person in the class... Yes! Because if you don't focus, you're going to be like low grades ... it means like you've just gave up' [6]. Sometimes it seemed that Jack had given up, when school-life seemed especially out of his control. He noted at the end of the project: 'I'm not really that smart ... I can be good at any lesson—but I wouldn't try' [13]. Partly, his boredom and dislike of the learning content and environment zapped his motivation: 'I don't work hard on mathematics... Because I don't really like it' [4] (although by the end of the project he was less negative about mathematics). Regarding writing, he commented: 'I'm not really good at writing [but...] in like Year 5 [aged 9–10] it was boring writing and that lot' [8]. In TERM1, Jack's test attainment in mathematics and English was categorised as below age expectations, which is why he was selected for the CLIPS project. By the end of TERM13, he was *well* below age expectations in the same subjects. In summary, Jack tended not to find school-work to be relevant, manageable or interesting for him—apart from Physical Education—which made intentional engagement extra challenging for him leading him to avoiding it whenever possible.

LAURIE'S LIFE-HISTORY

ACTIVITY 2. Self portrait

"Please fill in this picture of yourself using coloured pens and tell me what you are thinking as you draw and colour it".



Laurie

Self-portrait 9: Laurie

Laurie was a dual-heritage (Black-White) British, autumn-born, boy who attended Jayden Primary-school. He described himself as funny, polite, sometimes loud and not particularly hard-working. He told us at the start of the project: 'I'm the best goalie in my class' [1]. He achieved this football skill through practice: 'Every single day—I was doing this since I was little—every single day when I came from school I used to get my ball and practise goalkeeper' [3]. Like many others in the CLIPS sample, he selected food tech, computing and design/technology as preferred subjects at secondary-school.

Laurie tended to be positive about his whole school-life-history, for example, telling us: '[My teacher is] teaching me good stuff!' [6]; and 'The lessons are really good' [13]. He could scarcely express any desired improvements in relation to his schooling and had looked forward with excitement to secondary-school, explaining positively: 'It's a new beginning!' [12] It seemed that Laurie recognised his Sense of Relatedness as a key trigger for enjoying school. He described how, even though they might distract him a bit, he learnt better when sitting near friends: 'It would just be a better environment' [12]. Although he was a bit worried about making new friends at secondary-school, he soon had a good group of friends around him. He himself hoped to grow up into a 'kind' and 'friendly' person [10] as well as caring for his family.

'Mathematics isn't really my strong point' [4] Laurie told us, although this realisation seemed to come gradually as primary-school proceeded. However, he never expressed a low Sense of his own Competence, even when he did badly in class. For example, he explained after receiving his test-score: 'I got six out of 20 ... I wasn't that angry—but I knew that I could do better' [5]. He frequently mentioned being 'mad' at himself for making a mistake or not knowing something [2]. Yet he seemed to avoid indicating that others were more competent than he was; for example, he described a peer as follows: 'Callum—always thinks he's good at everything ... He even said it to my face ... So like he's a bit too confident'. Like many of the CLIPS children, he preferred to think of himself as in the middle: 'Because I feel like I'm smart, but like (*pause*) I could still get smarter' [11]. He believed the myth that anyone could succeed if they

practised hard: 'Because we're all going to learn the same thing at some point' [6]. Yet Laurie recognised that teachers gave the approval he craved to the child who 'listens and can get the most answers right' [5], indicating that this child was not always himself.

Laurie demonstrated a Performance Orientation (Impersonal/weak Sense of Agency) as he tended to work his way through school avoiding trouble, avoiding low marks but without investing great energies into 'work' such as mathematics, English, RE, languages. He was quite driven by recognition that GCSE exams (which would happen four years after the end of this project) were high profile: 'Because like if you get like high marks you'll go to like a good college' [13]. Laurie believed the myth that good grades meant getting a good job in adulthood. And he blamed individuals themselves if they did not do well, rather than blaming the system: 'They don't practise, they don't work hard enough' [8]. His remedy for the low-attaining child was direct: 'He has to go to detention. And he needs more discipline' [1]. Yet for himself, he seemed to believe that he could work just hard enough to get by in mathematics and writing-based subjects to allow him to enjoy the real attractions of school: friends, football, parties, making food. Looking back over his primary-school life-history, he maintained that school was mainly 'happy' but a little bit 'boring' [9]. The best thing about primary-school was his: 'friends'; and the worst thing was 'Tests and the work' [9]. He seemed to avoid negative aspects of school and avoid even talking about these—although a few times he was explicit that it was mathematics lessons that were particularly 'boring' [9].

It is intriguing to note that Laurie's Sense of Competence in the guise of personal confidence, and reduction of shyness, seemed to increase across his school-life-history. For example, in secondary-school he claimed: 'Obviously like—I feel more confident now than I was in primary' [11]. His attainment relative to age had not decreased since age seven (according to systemic measures) and indeed, his English attainment grades had improved. He is a classic example of someone whose positivity about life and whose sociable nature carried him through the potentially difficult aspects of school-life albeit not through 'whole-hearted engagement'.

LOUISE'S LIFE-HISTORY

Give each child a prompt sheet and ask them to draw/colour/paint a picture of themselves. These will form the basis of the profile we write about each child.

Louise



Please fill in this picture of yourself using coloured pens, crayons or paints and bring it with you next time? Or give them an SAE?

Self-portrait 10: Louise

Louise was an Asian heritage British girl, born in June 2010. Throughout her life-history, her main interest was art as she explained: ‘I like painting and I sometimes paint with pointillism’ [1]. Louise thrived on her friendships at school and as the project began, she said that her best moments in school were: ‘Playing with friends ... and going on the slides’ [1]. Indeed, in reflecting back over her earliest years in school, all of her memories revolved around playing [4]. During the first four years of the project, Louise found her English-lessons easier than mathematics and was consistently assessed as reaching age-expected levels for English. However, her actual enjoyment in English dipped during secondary-school due to the 100-minute lessons as she said: ‘The [English] work is kind of hard ... and the lessons are so long’ [13]. The trajectory of Louise’s mathematics competence was mixed as it improved in Year 4 [aged 8–9] and then dipped in Year 6 [aged 10–11]. However, the surprise for Louise was that in secondary-school she found mathematics to be: ‘quite easy sometimes’ [11] and indeed, her attainment at the end of the project was *above* age-level expectations for mathematics.

When we first met Louise, she was in the mathematics intervention group due to being assessed as being *below* the expected level for mathematics. She explained that the reason for pupils being in the intervention groups was: ‘Because they like don’t understand the question sometimes ... The teacher helps you if you’re stuck’. During the Lockdown, she had found the online learning difficult as she could not depend on the teacher’s help: ‘It was kind of hard because you don’t kind of understand what the teacher means ... and they can’t answer your questions’ [9]. Louise was very clear that the things that helped her most to learn were: ‘Getting help from my partner... When the classroom is quiet. And when the teacher comes to me’ [6], suggesting that her Sense of Agency might not have been strong—as indicated by her Impersonal Performance Orientation.

However, Louise believed that practice led to success. When discussing an imaginary child who got high marks in their test, she reasoned that the child would say: ‘I practised a lot ... and I’m very happy’ [2]. Conversely, she said that the child with low marks would be thinking ‘I didn’t revise a

lot, or like practise a lot at home' [2]. Working at home was another big part of what Louise believed could lead to success. These beliefs both emphasised the responsibility of the learner and their family, rather than the schooling system.

Louise's Performance Orientation and her low Sense of Agency were fuelled by her fear of humiliation: When we observed Louise in class, she explained why she had not put her hand up: 'I was afraid the children would laugh at me [if I made a mistake]' [3]. Louise's fears, about not wanting to be laughed at or getting into trouble, meant that the move to secondary-school was something Louise said she felt 'scared and nervous' about [9] and, although part of this was worrying about being able to make new friends, Louise was also fearful: 'Because there's older people in secondary ... the work might be too hard ... and I won't know the teachers' [9]. After two terms there, she reflected back with more confidence and an evidently stronger Sense of Competence: 'I thought I would be like the lowest in the class and not like the highest, like other people ... but I'm in the middle' [13]. Another strong fear that Louise had once she reached secondary-school was of being given a detention, as she said: 'Because you have like big punishments if you do like something bad, or if you do like the littlest thing, you still get a punishment for it' [12]. Possibly it was these specific fears that contributed to Louise concluding at the end of our study that she missed her primary-school.

Louise's anxiety also centred around her performance in school tests. When asked if school would have been different had she always attained highly in tests, she reflected: 'I think I would have enjoyed school more than I used to ... I would have been less anxious' [13]. Nonetheless, despite these fears Louise at times displayed a Learning Orientation. When asked if she would prefer to be home-schooled, she explained: 'No, I won't see my friends and I'm not learning something new ... and I want to learn more Spanish' [10].

SAM'S LIFE-HISTORY

ACTIVITY 2. Self portrait

"Please fill in this picture of yourself using coloured pens and tell me what you are thinking as you draw and colour it".



Sam

Self-portrait 11: Sam

Sam, an August-born dual heritage White British and Black Caribbean boy, moved to Jayden Primary-school in Year 3 [aged 7] having been unhappy at his previous school. Sam loved football, playing it regularly both in and out of school, and described himself as: ‘A sporty person, so I try to be as active as possible ... I basically try to spend as much time as I can when I’m outside trying to play football so I can get better’ [4]. He said: ‘I was the best goalie in my old school’ [1]. His success in football had helped to boost his Sense of Competence; and his sense that he had made this happen—his Agency.

Sam’s Impersonal Performance Orientation was promoted by his belief in needing to work hard at school and never receive sanction ‘cards’ for poor behaviour: ‘I’m a card free zone’ [1]. And yet his efforts did not seem to serve his Sense of Competence or indeed his overall perception of having a positive experience at school. Partly because Sam often found the classroom too ‘loud’ [9], his favourite spot was a secluded corner in the library hidden between two tall folding boards where he could read a favourite book, telling us: ‘It’s like a magical place’ (3). It was no surprise, then, that Sam preferred learning at home during Lockdown, and he drew a picture of himself contentedly working at his quiet kitchen table every morning with his computer and mum to help. Sam was delighted when KS2 SATs were cancelled due to Lockdown, making what he described as: ‘a very smug and happy face’ [9]. He perceived that the cancellation of SATs would benefit his performance in his two least favourite topics: ‘I would be so stressed and think about it so much, I would underperform... [we’re] recapping stuff in mathematics lessons [now] ... so I’m understanding a bit more ... mathematics and SPaG’ (9).

Sam could feel very anxious about performing less well than others in class. He described lucidly how he felt he had neither Competence nor Agency and how frightening this was:

Sometimes I have ideas and then they just pop out of my brain and then I’m like (*imitates panting*) and I’m just breathing in and out deeply, in through my nose and out ... like um [*pause*] “I have a good one. Oh what was it again? Oh yeah it was that”. So it was basically I mainly forget it, forget what it is. [3]

Part of what made him anxious was not knowing what work he would be given and whether he would be able to do it. He felt he had no Agency over what happened to him at school, nor could he even predict it:

I was wondering what we were going to do, and I was wondering if it would be hard or easy for the English lesson... The mathematics sometimes is just really hard ... Like sometimes it's so hard like, and like—'stop! it's so difficult'—sometimes I'm like that... it might be easy for other people, but it might be just like "Oh, it's so hard" for me ... I'm just so angry and sad at the same time. [2]

He worried about how his teachers viewed him, suspecting that his Year 3 [aged 7–8] teacher might think: 'That I sometimes just go in a dream world' [1]. He mentioned a few times how little control he felt over his concentration in the classroom as it currently operated. He was also scared that his Year 3 and Year 5 teacher would say: 'Sam needs extra help with his spelling' [2]. His fear was that this teacher would get very angry—even though he could not help himself: 'He just gets annoyed that I can't spell really easy words' [5]. Not surprisingly, Sam found this distressing and it added to the pressure he was already experiencing. He blamed himself rather than the way schooling was organised and told us it 'makes me feel disappointed in myself' [5].

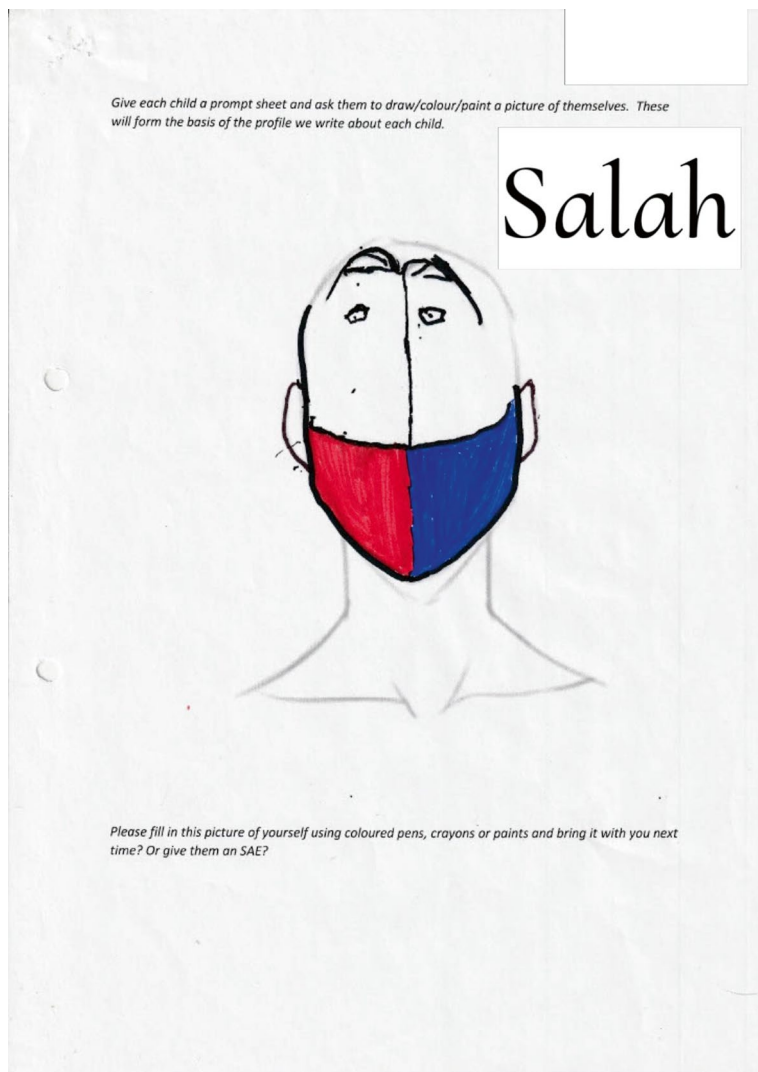
Tests were what Sam feared most throughout his life-history: '[Year 1 was] good. There was one thing I hated though—spelling tests ... [We also] had spelling tests in Year 2 and if you didn't get more than five—or something—right, you missed your break' [4]. Even worse, he described his humiliation when his Year 3/5 teacher read test scores out aloud, drawing attention explicitly to comparison of attainment between peers. Sam wanted his teacher to: 'Not shout out other people's scores because it makes me feel really sad, embarrassed ... Like he shouts it out in the whole- to the whole class' [5].

Sam certainly put a great amount of effort into schooling, but not into intentional engagement in learning: rather, his efforts seemed fuelled to a large degree by fear of being compared negatively to others. This comparison highlighted to him his poor Sense of Agency as, despite his hard work, success was out of his reach. He explained the lack of coherence he felt emotionally: 'My life is a jigsaw and then I keep, I basically, I miss out bits. It's like a story and then it's missing a page' [5]. He seemed to consider himself as lacking some vital piece of himself that was necessary to activate Competence at school. At the same time, he continued to blame himself.

On the positive side, although Sam felt 'nervous' [10] about going to secondary-school, he preferred it because it offered him the opportunity to explore fresh areas of interest, such as acting, making music and sport. By the end of Year 7 [age 11–12], he was no longer designated by his school as below age-expectations in mathematics or English, in contrast to

when the project started. His rationale was that: 'I just think secondary-school is a lot better ... [we have] proper PE teachers, proper teachers... I just feel like I can understand it more' [11].

SALAH'S LIFE-HISTORY



Self-portrait 12: Salah

Salah was a British boy with dual heritage (Hispanic-Asian) born in March 2010. In addition to attending Brandon Grove school, being a particularly active person, he also attended sports practices several times a week outside school. Salah explained in Year 3 [aged 8–9] how the static nature of the classroom did not suit his preferences: ‘I don’t like being in the class ... Because you have to sit on the carpet or on the chair, I want to stand up and play something, or like run’ [3].

Salah described himself as: ‘Kind, sporty, gentle, fun, shy’ [1] and prioritised ‘being a good, loyal friend and making other people happy’ [13]. Salah could be sociable and appreciated his strong Sense of Relatedness. He played outdoor and online games with friends and maintained the same strong friendships throughout his life-history. Salah told us in his new secondary-school:

Whenever I’m happy [in school], that’s when I’m with my friends ... and I just have a good conversation with them. [11]

Salah enjoyed a strong Sense of Relatedness with most of his teachers too. He said: ‘The best thing about returning to school after the first Lockdown was, seeing my teachers and my friends’ [9]. When asked what helped his learning most, he said of his teacher: ‘Mr. Morris made me laugh. He just made school better’ [10]. Salah also attended after-school Qur’an classes but he did not seem to enjoy these so much.

When we first met Salah, he was most vocal about his discomfort in mathematics lessons. His biggest worry about moving into Year 4 [aged 8–9] was as follows: ‘Mathematics, because in Year 4 you get harder and harder mathematics’ [3]. At this stage, Salah was in a mathematics intervention group which, he explained: ‘Makes me concentrate’ [1]. This group included fun games and Salah’s class teacher taught this group on a rotational basis. The group was rejigged regularly according to need, which might explain how he exhibited no embarrassment about being in this group. Later, however, Salah paid for outside school help, presumably lacking a Sense of Competence in the schooling environment [3]. Yet, despite this, in Year 5 [aged 9–10] he said that his life was ‘getting worse’ [5] due to the pressure of mathematics tests. He explained the weak Sense of Competence and low Sense of Agency—as well as isolation compared to other children—he experienced in mathematics classes:

Half the time I just don't know what the teacher's saying. I'm just like confused because I don't listen very much in mathematics, and I think I'm the only one who doesn't know anything. [9]

At the end of primary-school, Salah's formal attainment in mathematics/English was assessed as working well below the expected level for mathematics, which indicated a decline since Year 3, and he now said: 'I hate mathematics' [9]. When asked how his teacher would rate him in terms of this school-work, he estimated that although pre-Lockdown he would have been rated as 7/10 by his teacher, by the end of primary-school, it would have dropped to 5/10 [10].

Salah displayed a classic Impersonal Performance Orientation/weak Sense of Agency in that he tried to avoid difficulty because grappling with the problem seemed too hard. When a test was threatened, he wanted to avoid it completely: 'I might not come [*to school*] ... I might hide in the toilets' [1]. He continued: 'I'm scared that if I get it [*the test*] wrong, then I'll get in big trouble. Today I got 7 out of 30 in my mathematics test and I started crying' [1]. In secondary-school he explicitly voiced his fear of status subordination based on low attainment:

I'm not the best at school but I try my hardest at school. And I don't want to have low grades as well and I don't want people to laugh at me. [13]

Salah also told us that he had 'anger issues' [4] at home and in school and although he had supportive mentors, his anger issues in secondary-school led to him being given detentions. Not only did these detentions upset him but they also appeared to be interfering with his whole-hearted engagement in learning. For example, in our last interview of the project, he told us that he had just finished being excluded completely from his class by being kept in the school's 'isolation' room for eight consecutive school days—because he had had a fight with someone who was insulting his older brother. This meant that he had to do his school-work alone, on a computer, presumably damaging his Sense of Relatedness as well as Agency and seemingly obstructing his attainment. So, although in his first term at secondary-school he felt that his mathematics was going all right, this had changed by the end of the school year because he had been out of class so much: 'I feel like [learning mathematics] was quite hard because I wasn't like learning from the teacher' [13]. By the end of his first year at

secondary-school, his mathematics level was reported to be below the age-related expected level.

Salah's Sense of having little Agency over his attainment was indicated when he put disbelieving words into the mouth of an imaginary child who gained low marks on a test: 'Why am I getting all of these bad marks?'. His imagined solution was that someone should coerce him to engage: 'The teacher could make me do more work. That will help me to get a better result' [2]. He believed the myth that he needed good results to get a good job, but like the other children, could not explain the link apart from via writing an application form and adding up sums:

Like for a job application, you have to type it up and you need good grammar ... And if you work as a cashier you're going to need to do your mathematics if you don't have a calculator or anything. [10]

Like many of the CLIPS children, Salah said he was unable to concentrate sufficiently in class due to the other pupils distracting him. But even at home during Lockdown, he did not engage intentionally in much school-work:

Because during Lockdown, I just didn't want to do my work, as I just got lazy. I forgot a lot of my times tables.

Although Salah often felt that he had little Agency over what happened to his attainment, in other areas he expressed more Competence. When asked if he would feel able to give advice to his head teacher on how to improve their school, he replied: 'I would be quite excited because I think I can give her good ideas to like help her with the school' [13]. Similarly, when asked whether it was rude to disagree with a teacher he was not afraid to say: 'No, because if a teacher's saying something that you think you don't agree with, you can say "Miss, I disagree because -" ... it's not rude, you're just giving your opinion to the teacher' [11].

B. LIFE-HISTORIES OF CHILDREN WITH A PERFORMANCE
ORIENTATION AT SCHOOL

Controlled Orientation/Sense of Restricted Agency

*Controlled Performance Orientation/Sense of Restricted Agency—
Selected by 7/23 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.

Child

13. Gemma
14. Clara
15. Jon
16. Edith
17. Eden
18. Samiya
19. Ellie

GEMMA'S LIFE-HISTORY

ACTIVITY 2. Self portrait

"Please fill in this picture of yourself using coloured pens and tell me what you are thinking as you draw and colour it".



Gemma

Self-portrait 13: Gemma

Gemma was a White British summer-born girl who attended Sunnyfields school. Gemma described herself as funny, loveable, chatty and imaginative. Throughout her primary-school years she enjoyed a wealth of hobbies and strengths, as well as a great care for other people. She was a well-behaved pupil in primary-school who made a huge effort to be positive. Her friendships were fairly fluid but she craved a strong Sense of Relatedness; she was anxious to be popular and told us that ‘my friends support me’ [4] and that this helped her learning. However, she was aware of being a Gemini star-sign, which she said meant that she could go a bit ‘crazy’ and lose her temper sometimes.

Reviewing her primary-school life-history from secondary-school, Gemma told us that in Year 4 [aged 8–9] her Sense of Competence had been knocked: ‘I was obviously in Year 4 and I was in the Year 3 mathematics class with a load of Year 3s’. She found mathematics tricky throughout her school life-history and was given extra support for mathematics by the school, always singling her out as a bit different, a bit less Competent. She described getting bullied at times. As well as having a weak Sense of Competence with mathematics, she also wished that her handwriting was better as sometimes people laughed at her handwriting too, eroding her Sense of Competence further. It was made obvious that she struggled with her school-work ‘a bit more’ [5] than others. For example, she described the classroom practice whereby her friends got their ‘pen licence’ while Gemma’s handwriting was not considered ready [4]. This division of pupils according to attainment affected her Sense of Relatedness with teachers too, as she perceived that teachers preferred the children who tended to get things right because they demanded less effort than people like her who less often got things right [5]. In addition, the system further highlighted her lack of Competence by stipulating that she only take out ‘kid books’ from the library (for ‘infants’) because she was not as competent in reading as others—even though, as she admitted, she had no Agency over this:

I would love to read better, like be able to just read any words like other people in my class. But I guess I can’t, so I’ve got to accept that.

On top of feeling singled out sometimes because she was perceived to lack Competence in mathematics/English, she told us that sometimes she did not get enough help [6]. Still at the end of Year 6 [aged 10–11], she was explicitly asking for ‘more help in general’ [10] in these two particular areas, suggesting that she had given up hope that she herself could overcome her difficulties.

In the first few years of the project, Gemma made a huge effort not to criticise school nor to express discontent about school-life. At one point, she told us that she liked all subjects and was never bored. She denied feeling stressed about getting things wrong and told us: ‘I like hard work, because I like challenging things’ [3]. In other words, she seemed to try to turn potentially negative experiences into good opportunities, demonstrating her desire to conform to school norms, reflecting her Controlled Performance Orientation. However, in the middle of Year 7 [aged 11–12] she indicated a different response to schooling than she had shown in primary, which still focused on controls but which shifted her response to resisting them: ‘I hate mathematics so much... We had a test today and I didn’t even start it. ... I didn’t want to do it. ... I don’t care’. She went on to predict: ‘I know I’m going to be in the bottom set, because I don’t do any work in mathematics. ... Because I don’t care about tests’.

Gemma described a weak Sense of Competence throughout her life-history. In Year 4 [aged 8–9], Gemma was in a group among younger, Year 3 [aged 7–8] students, and yet she described it as ‘very hard still’. When asked about her attainment in mathematics in Year 6 [aged 10–11] she claimed: ‘bad’. Gemma told us that it was in Year 5 [aged 9–10] that she started to have frequent ‘panic’ attacks in class when she felt completely trapped, completely devoid of Agency, as she could not work out her mathematics. She explained:

Sometimes like bad voices come in my head and my head starts spinning. ...
Sometimes when I can’t do my work. [10]

These attacks continued into Year 6 [aged 10–11] at which point she told her parents. Perhaps these precipitated her gradually changing orientation to schooling as her Sense of Agency became weaker and her Sense of Competence was rock bottom. It was as she neared secondary-school, that she began to demonstrate a particular resistance to controls. She expressed anger towards her teachers. At the end of Year 6 [aged 10–11], in a role-play, she indicated herself running away from school, explaining: ‘I do not like school’. In a different role-play in Year 6 [aged 10–11], she showed herself to be angry with the teacher for wanting to keep her in for further mathematics practice at break; and angry with those of her peers who did not complain [10]. By the start of Year 7 [aged 11–12], she could say, ‘I hate most of my lessons, they’re very boring’.

Gemma herself told us that she had changed a lot since the project began in Year 3 [aged 7–8]. It seems that Gemma’s focus on being controlled (i.e. her Controlled Performance Orientation/Sense of Restricted Agency) swung across her school life-history from being dominant in controlling her behaviour and reinforcing her conformity; to driving her to become outright rebellious. In Year 7 [aged 11–12], during one interview she explained that she was ‘on report’, which meant that every teacher had to sign that she had behaved well enough in class on that particular day. She told us about storming out of lessons without permission (‘I wasn’t going to be in the lesson if the teacher gives me [punishments] for no reason!’); and of attempting to control her mathematics teacher, exclaiming to him in class ‘I’m not a dog!’ when he asked her to ‘Sit!’ [12]. She made the very interesting comment, that secondary-school teachers just wanted her to be a ‘goody two-shoes’—which had very much been her preferred model for her own behaviour in primary-school: where she would sit quietly and work hard consistently, demanding perhaps a lot of effort to overcome her painful feelings or experiences. The above comments suggest that Gemma exerted great emotional energy in resisting: firstly, negative feelings and secondly, teachers whom she perceived to be controlling.

CLARA'S LIFE-HISTORY

ACTIVITY 2. Self portrait

"Please fill in this picture of yourself using coloured pens and tell me what you are thinking as you draw and colour it".



Clara

Self-portrait 14: Clara

Clara was a dual heritage White British and Black African girl who attended Jayden Primary-school. She said she enjoyed school because 'I get to see all my friends. I like to learn and have fun' [4]. Clara described herself as 'a happy, always excitable and happy person' [3] and felt it was important to help others be the same. She explained: 'I would like to make other people happy because if I don't make them happy then I will just be upset and down' [13]. Staying happy and positive was important to Clara, albeit very demanding of her energies. She had a repertoire of techniques for conquering negative emotions. She described one as follows:

I meditate when I'm angry and mad ... I cross my feet, I have to. First I pray, and then when I've finished praying, I meditate just quiet for like two minutes. [4]

She applied these techniques to many aspects of her life, explaining:

You can believe in yourself no matter what. Say like I was in a race and then so like I was the slowest ... I would tell myself: 'Believe in myself, believe in myself. Come on! I can do it. At least I can go in the race and have some fun. [8]

Clara described herself as a hard-working and successful student. She was always keen to tell us how well-behaved and high-attaining she was; how she was not one of the 'bad people' [3] who 'muck around' [2]. Rather, she was 'always getting high marks' and finished her work 'really quick' [2], because: 'I do all my work perfect and like I feel a success' [11]. At the end of primary-school, she described her Year 6 [aged 10–11] teacher's opinion of her as follows:

She's a very mature child. She gets good grades. She's very good at mathematics. I think she can pass on everything. Maybe she's going to do very good on secondary-school and she's going to pass on all her tests no matter what. [10]

Although such responses suggest that she was keen to present herself as well-behaved and successful, when asked less directly about attainment,

Clara sometimes revealed a weak Sense of Competence and a low Sense of Agency. We wondered whether she was presenting herself as Competent to disguise what was actually a weak Sense of her own Competence and Agency. Caught off guard when we placed an agree/disagree card down on the table with the words 'it's stressful when I put my hand up and I get it wrong' she blurted out 'Yes!', before quickly qualifying it with 'Oh wait, oh, no no, no I don't get it wrong' [2]. Also, during a play-based activity when the toy animal she had chosen to represent herself was told they had a test in their least favourite subject, they stormed out of the room, shouting: 'No! ... I don't want to do it! ... I'm going out, bye! ... It's not fair because everyone gets what they want and not me!' [4]. When asked in Year 7 [aged 11–12] about the Year 8 attainment-set placements coming up, she showed an awareness of the panic a low-set placement could produce. She explained of someone who lacked a strong Sense of their own Competence: 'Maybe you was like panicking like, [thinking] ... 'If I was in a bad set I'm going to get bad grades, I'm going to be bad in school, I'm going to be bad, I'm going to be bad'. Contrasting this person with another who did have a strong Sense of Competence, she explained: '[If] you found out your grades and you're in the top sets you can just be all calm and let it all out, instead of bunching it all up in yourself and then getting angry' [13].

Clara explained her Controlled Performance Orientation as follows:

Because I'm very like helpful, so if I got told to do something I would do it straight away ... I really, I respect the teachers. Like if you go around the school to my teachers and say who's the most respectful, they'll—maybe they'll say my name. [13]

She also seemed proud that she worked for extrinsic rewards rather than personally fulfilling learning goals, explaining: 'I really do, because we get like rewards, like there's a couple of credit notes—I've had ten so far and I had an ice-cream'. She told us you received these rewards for 'trying your best, going above and beyond, being exemplary, prepared, truthful, perfect' [13]. Clara never directly criticised school and struggled to suggest how it could be improved [10]. She even defended being given a detention for forgetting her homework, explaining: 'It's fair because if

you get a detention you will change like your ways and like how you behave' [11]. She was equally committed to the traffic light behaviour chart in her primary-school classroom, telling me it felt 'embarrassing' when she got moved down it and saying: 'When this happens ... I need to make a change and put it up' [3]. Because Clara viewed school success as up to the pupil, the result of hard work, she felt teachers were justified at being angry at poor marks and the schooling system was not to blame. She described the teacher as feeling towards a 'low marks' child: 'Really really really mad ... I'm so mad at this child because he, she, is supposed to be doing harder!' Indeed, Clara took this responsibility to achieve school success very seriously, in keeping with her Controlled Performance Orientation. She explained, with implicit reference to Dweck's Growth Mindset: 'You can just practise. Say like in your free time you can just practise mathematics, say like you do like fractions and like algebra or like your times tables and stuff like that' [12]. We have interpreted Clara's descriptions of herself as a successful pupil as driven by this sense of responsibility; and the accompanying personal shame that was signalled by any school failure. The effort Clara put into presenting herself as successful, appearing to consider it shameful to be otherwise, seemed to take a huge amount of her energy away from a more whole-hearted engagement in her learning.

Secondary-school was initially difficult for Clara. She explained this as follows: 'It's nerve-wracking, because ... [in] primary you don't really need to worry about anything really. And then in secondary you have to worry about loads of things, like your GCSEs, your tests, you have to worry about how you're behaving, if you have the correct uniform, if you have the correct equipment and stuff like that' [13]. However, as Year 7 [aged 11–12] wore on, Clara said she had settled in, particularly enjoying the increased range of subjects, in which she was able to feel increasingly successful.

JON'S LIFE-HISTORY

ACTIVITY 2. Self portrait

"Please fill in this picture of yourself using coloured pens and tell me what you are thinking as you draw and colour it".

Jon



Self-portrait 15: Jon

Jon was a White British, summer-born boy who attended Sandown Academy. At primary-school, Jon told us: ‘I know quite a bit about animals’ [5]. He had a passion for animals, especially lizards and dinosaurs, about which he built up a sophisticated and far-reaching knowledge. During one meeting with him, he devised an animal quiz that the adults found challenging. This interest in animals was the reason that he was most interested in science of all the school subjects. He explained: ‘Because science is how you can know about space and dinosaurs, creatures’ [6].

However, actually, he objected to the fact of having ‘just constantly lessons’ [12] of any type, frequently requesting longer playtimes and also more time at home. It seems that he felt restricted by the constant demand to sit in class and concentrate, which he found particularly difficult. During Lockdown, he had enjoyed staying at home, playing on his computer and Xbox for several hours a day and refining his online skills. Jon described himself as a funny, kind, hyperactive boy: ‘I like mess about and I have a lot of energy’ [3]. He was diagnosed with ADHD at the start of the project but was relieved when medicine helped him behave in a more controlled way, as he saw it, not inhibiting his Sense of Agency but restricting his involuntary actions ‘like where I do like noises’ [2].

He tended to have just one or two friends at a time in primary-school, but they were his main motivation for coming to school. When we asked him if he liked coming to school, he said: ‘I do like coming to school to see my friends and play with them’ [2]. When Lockdown was over, even though he had preferred being at home, he was happy to see his friends. When anticipating starting secondary-school, he was very much looking forward to making new friends—even though he felt nervous too. There was a transformation in Jon when he went to secondary-school. While he had not previously appeared overly distressed at primary-school, he described being much happier at secondary-school where he was in a small class in an autism unit. He rated his happiness and confidence here at 10/10 and described all his teachers and peers as nice.

Bearing in mind that Jon did not remember past events very clearly, in hindsight from secondary-school, he told us explicitly and many times that at his primary-school he was not having his learning needs met: ‘I wasn’t getting literally—literally not enough help, like basically no help whatsoever’ [13]. He went on to say that his struggles with literacy made lessons really hard at primary-school. He explained of teachers: ‘Because sometimes if you like call their names like about—like a thousand times ... they can’t hear you’ [2].

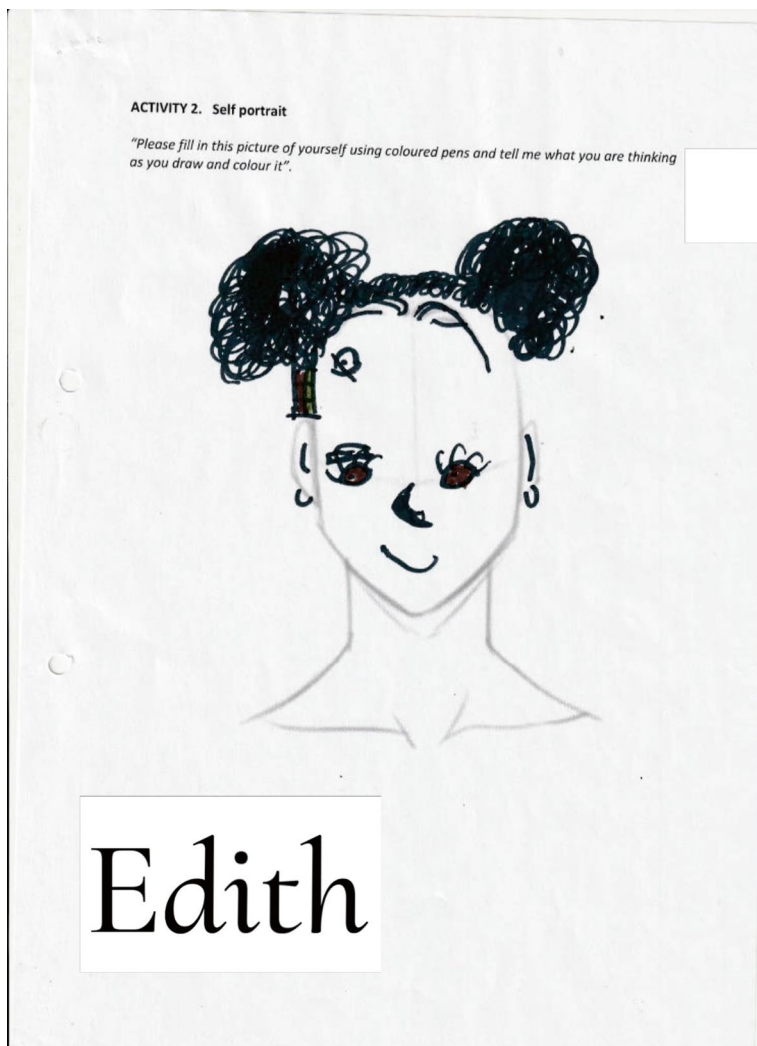
Even though he found lessons ‘quite boring sometimes’ [1], Jon was eager to conform, once his ADHD was well enough under control. In secondary-school, he told us his aim was never to get any detentions throughout secondary-school. By the time he reached secondary-school, he was also prioritising as important, high GCSE attainment and high test scores generally. On the other hand, in primary-school, he had found it particularly hard to concentrate. Yet he also resisted being given extra support by a teaching assistant. In one interview he explained that he felt like saying to the teaching assistant: “You get out of here, I hate you ... I’m thinking like “Shoo off” ... Don’t want any help and I don’t really understand’ [1]. He also depicted an imaginary teacher shouting ‘Stop! You stupid!’ [2] to an imaginary child who could not do their work, despite Jon never having been treated like this himself. In fact, he depicted this teacher as so angry that she had steam emanating from her ears. These examples reflect his concern with controls, which he seemed to see as the cause for obstructed progress in school-work.

Jon certainly invested a lot of energy into trying to get down to hard work, even though this was not easy for him. He told us that he hated to be disturbed when he was working, making classroom learning potentially uncondusive to learning for him. Yet, he was convinced that hard work was what he should be doing. He told us that he thought his teacher did not want children to ask her questions, but rather wanted them to ‘do work’ [6]. He told us that he believed that listening hard and working hard in class were important: ‘Because then you will learn and be smart’ [6]. It is perhaps ironic that these strategies in classroom life had not always won Jon the successful results he claimed. The pressure he seemed to feel to knuckle down to ‘work’ was accompanied by fear for Jon that, if he did not do well, he would not get a job easily in adulthood. He therefore experienced ongoing pressure in these several ways, which might well have interfered with his Sense of Agency.

In light of the pressures he felt and to avoid any implication of deficiency in his attainment (in a climate dominated by mathematics and English tests), Jon made the best of his mathematics skills, perhaps to compensate for his discomfort with reading and writing lessons. Aged eight, in his Year 3 [aged 7–8], he told us he did struggle with mathematics. But in the following year, he exclaimed: ‘I’m really good at mathematics!’ [5]; and by the end of the project he was assessing himself as ‘very smart’ in mathematics [13]. Perhaps his discomfort when learning to read made life particularly hard for him in the early years of the project. During Year 4 [aged 8–9], he could still not read very much but told us: ‘I still want to read’ [4]. By the end of the project, at secondary-school, he told

us that he still found both reading and writing troublesome, but his increased Sense of Relatedness and support from teachers in his new school, put him in a positive position for the future in terms of wellbeing.

EDITH'S LIFE-HISTORY



Self-portrait 16: Edith

Edith was an autumn-born, dual-heritage Black British girl, born in 2009, who attended Jayden primary-school. She described herself as follows: 'Thoughtful, polite, generous. ... Friendly, kind, playful, joyful ... A hard-working student' [10]. Getting rich was not her ambition for the future, except to give money to charity. A Sense of Relatedness became increasingly important to Edith. After an incident in the playground when she was 12, she told us: 'I felt proud of myself because I stood up for my friend and I stood up for myself by telling the truth' [12]. She described how at primary-school: 'I used to just sit alone, I didn't really want to play with anybody' [11]. But then: 'When I started secondary-school I didn't have that much friends, but then plenty of people at times started coming to me and being my friend; that's how I made friends' [12].

In primary-school, Edith liked reading: 'My two favourite books is Diary of the Wimpy Kid and Dork Diaries' [3]; although by secondary-school she had stopped reading for pleasure. However, she continued to like studying English all through her life-history. On the other hand, she told us: 'Mathematics is hard for me' [1] and 'I'm kind of a mathematics hater' [2]. Overall, however, she was not keen on doing any school-work. She confessed: 'I never feel relaxed at school, I always like to feel like [I want] to play outside. Because playing is my favourite' [2]. She was also honest to admit that the worst thing about primary-school was, in her view: 'That we had to do a lot of work sometimes' [9] and at the end of first year in secondary, she said: 'I don't want to do that much hard work' [13]. These comments suggested that her wellbeing was not being fully promoted at school.

Edith did not pretend to perceive her academic competence as high. She told us: 'I would say I'm kind of smart but not really' [11]. She added, two terms later: 'I'm not really the smartest person out of my class' [13]. In her last interview, she indicated an eroded Sense of Competence: 'Like sometimes they give the smart kids a different [task]—when they give us more easier. That shows us that um—that shows us that the teachers think we can't do harder work' [13]. Indeed, Edith lived in fear of achieving poor marks on her work or just not getting the answers right. This was a matter of painful concern to her, especially as she felt she had little agency over it: 'It makes me feel bad' [11]. She described the low-attaining child as follows: 'Lonely and sad and very disappointed ... She feels really sad because all her other friends have high marks and she's the only one who has low marks' [2]. When asked what she would most like to learn in school, she told us: 'I want to be good at mathematics so I don't struggle with it' [6]. As she explained: 'Because I'm really bad at mathematics tests,

sometimes I get a low score' [5]. On reaching secondary-school she continued to struggle with mathematics: 'Mathematics is the only one I struggle with, so that's why I always hope I don't get mathematics' [11]. She commented reflectively: 'People try their hardest, but sometimes they fail' [5]. This last comment indicated a rather hopeless outlook for her, in relation to her Sense of Competence and her Sense of Agency, in mathematics specifically.

Both in primary-school and then at secondary-school, Edith attended an intervention group for mathematics (plus one also for English at secondary): 'It's just a way of boosting our energy in—so like if we're struggling in English, you can boost it by going to Literacy. ... It's just to help more with English' [13]. She explained to us why she was taken out of class in primary-school, acknowledging her weakened Sense of Competence: 'Because when I was in [the main] class, yeah, so mathematics was a little bit too hard for me' [3]. For example:

I don't understand when she says 2000 and 1000. I said that I don't know the answer for 2000; and then 200. I said that—that doesn't even make sense ... I don't understand, but my friends understand and get the answers right [2].

Although she had been taught to believe that the way to learn was to listen obediently, indicating her reduced Sense of Agency, she confessed: 'I listen, but when it comes [to it], I don't really understand it' [8]. Her punishment was: 'If you've not finished your work you have to stay inside' [6]. So she often missed what she loved most, playing outside at lunch-time and breaktime, threatening her Sense of Relatedness too.

Edith selected the Controlled Performance Orientation/Sense of Restricted Agency as applying to her and many of her statements reflected this Orientation, for example:

If the teachers tell me something that she didn't tell the rest of the class, I would still do it, but I would still be a bit confused. And I respect the teacher because—like I work hard to get my rewards ... And my mum teach me that I shouldn't be rude to anyone—that's why I respect the teachers ... but it's also a good thing because you make your parents happy with good grades [11].

She once told us with a sigh: 'Listening and working, working hard at school is good, because if you don't work hard you might not get a star achiever [reward] ... and then your teacher might say—and your teacher might be angry of you for not listening' [6]. In this quotation, there is no reference to other purposes for learning, other than performance. Success,

for Edith, occurred as follows: ‘When you do something and then you get it right’ [4]. Edith was motivated by rewards for having done things right. At secondary-school, she was inspired by a raffle: ‘If the head teacher picks us [good children] out of the pot we can win iPods, money, iPhones’ [11].

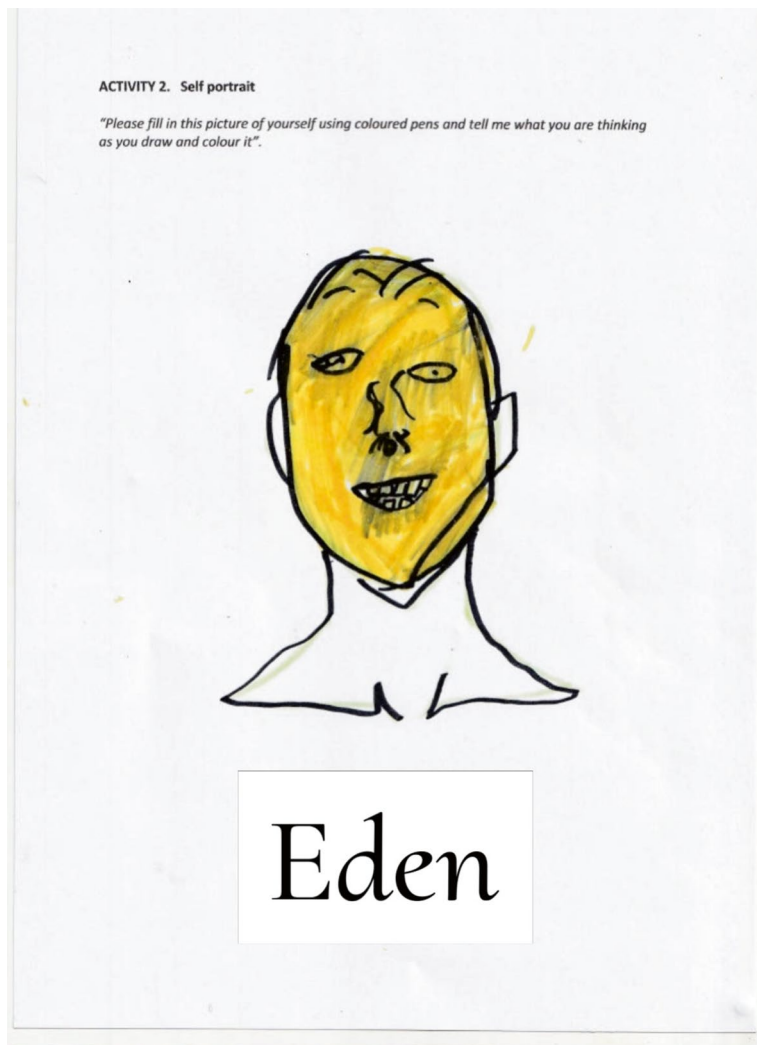
It is fascinating that, although clearly distracted by the imperative to be well-behaved and rewarded—rather than, for example, curious or creative—Edith also showed an enhanced Sense of Agency as she matured. We were very interested, given her otherwise Controlled Performance Orientation/Sense of Restricted Agency, when she told us near the end of the project: ‘This school—sometimes they tell you stuff—the school might tell you something that you don’t like, but they’re not our parents and they shouldn’t really force us to do things that we don’t like’ [12]. This seems to contradict some of her earlier statements, and makes us wonder whether this critical streak will transform her Sense of Agency in the future. More than this, Edith commented on her increased Senses of Competence, Autonomy *and* Relatedness over her life-history. By the end of primary-school she felt: ‘I’m really good at English and other stuff, stuff—I wasn’t very good at mathematics but now I am ... because my mathematics has—my mathematics has improved, I understand um stuff now’ [8]. Later she explained: ‘I’ve become more mature and not silly anymore... [I’ve become] the person that talks to more people ... starting to be more active’ [10]. Near the end of the project, she could even declare:

I feel a success because I’ve come a long way from getting to know not that much stuff, to be doing brilliant at things! [11]

Whilst she was always somewhat confident overall, she perhaps lacked a Sense of Competence earlier in school which perhaps made her lack of attainment in mathematics more concerning for her. However, by age nine, she was explaining how her Sense of Competence regarding Relatedness was improving: ‘I changed nice now because I used to be scared of people—teachers who shout—but now when teachers shout I’m not scared anymore’ [4]. However, her Sense of Competence in relation to mathematics/English was less positive: by the time she ended her first year at secondary-school, Edith said she believed that no-one else was struggling as much as she was [11]. The difficulty of her work and the pressure of exams continued to concern her: ‘In secondary-school there was plenty of exams—GCSEs, A Levels and stuff—but none of that was in

primary. So work at primary was easier than here' [13]. And yet, formalised school records showed considerable improvement in her end of year assessments at the end of the first year of secondary-school—including in mathematics.

EDEN'S LIFE-HISTORY



Self-portrait 17: Eden

Eden was an Asian heritage British boy. He was born in late July and attended Sunnyfields primary-school. Family and friends were very important to Eden. Looking after his family was a high priority for him and he spoke very affectionately about his younger sister. He also delighted in telling us about his strong Sense of Relatedness during his first year at secondary-school: 'I made loads of good friends' [12] whom he described as 'nice and they're kind' [11], despite having suggested previously that he had sometimes been 'unconfident at like making friends and stuff' [11]. He was certainly confident in 'being me!' [11] and was proud of his 'personality' [11] although he told us he sometimes felt different from his peers. One very positive difference was his Muslim identity which led to his learning Arabic outside school, which was uncommon in his rural community. He was delighted when his class studied Islam in primary-school. However, he explained: 'I don't really like speaking Arabic in school ... It's quite embarrassing' [3]. He was an excellent sportsman, including football and kick-boxing; and also loved food. Primarily, he told us 'I love myself the most!' [3].

He described himself as 'very intelligent ..., smart, funny' but that 'he gets distracted'; which he attributed to having being diagnosed with ADHD [10]. He told us that he thinks 'Everything is a joke' [10] and that: 'I've always been silly ... I'm always going to be silly because that's just the way I am' [10]. At the end of primary-school he looked back and commented: 'Every year I was happy' [10]. However, later he thought he might also have been bored quite a lot and that often he did not like school. When asked at the end of the project how he would have experienced primary-school, if mornings had contained sport and art instead of mathematics and English, he replied: 'It would just be fun ... I would have actually liked school' [13].

By the end of the project, Eden told us that he now understood that the way he learned things was different from how many other people did learning. This was not because he was not competent, but because he responded to lessons differently to others. Earlier in his life-history he had appeared both less different and also less explicit about any differences. He told us he had begun to notice: 'I'm just like really slow, and I tend to ask people [questions] a lot and the others don't' [11]. This led, he said, to feeling 'stressed and frustrated' [11]. Yet Eden acknowledged that he was not to blame for responding in his particular way to his schooling. He seemed clear: 'I make noises and I talk a lot ... I can't control it' [9]. ADHD medicine helped somewhat, and yet as he grew older he felt he had actually become a bit more destructive. He demonstrated his frustration in one interview by repeatedly stabbing the piece of playdough he was manipulating [9].

His specific ways of learning did not always lend themselves to teachers' favour or comprehension which challenged his Sense of Competence. He reflected back: 'I like being praised. [But not getting praised enough at school ...] made me feel like I wasn't good at anything and like I wouldn't do well in life' [13]. Eden specifically mentioned not being able to remember things very well: 'You forget. Some teachers don't like [this]—they say like 'I'm not going to tell you twice' [12]. He expressed a desire for 'much more assistance' during classes because 'the work is hard' [11]. He described in his primary-school class:

I just stand with a pencil like this. I don't really write anything, I just stand like and wait until the teacher comes and says 'Hello'. I'm like—I'm just standing like waiting for her'. [5]

Earlier he had explained how he did play-acting when he felt powerless: 'This morning when we were in mathematics ... I was pretending to be concentrating, but I wasn't actually doing anything'; as he seemed to feel lost without the support of a teacher. He explained: 'When I look at the board it just looks really hard, and ... I just look somewhere else' [1]. However, when his particular requests for help failed to be met sufficiently for him, it made him worried as he felt pressured about his future. He had been informed that high-attainment 'would help me if I get a job' [13] although he could not explain how this connection functioned. He thought the way to success was by concentrating—yet, for him, concentrating was the most difficult part of schooling. He therefore had a double challenge to his Sense of Competence—firstly to his competence in the subject domain; and secondly to his competence in keeping to the formalities of classroom traditions: 'I sometimes get bored. Like I said, I day-dream and like, and then I don't know what I'm doing anymore ... and then I just, I just like, I go in my head 'I hate mathematics' and like I get bored, I just draw pictures on my whiteboard' [3]. With his Sense of Competence so heavily taxed, his Sense of Agency will have suffered too, further reducing the chance of Eden evidencing wellbeing.

Eden saw control as residing mainly in teachers and being mainly a negative aspect of schooling. 'They're annoying and I don't get my way... And they tell me what to do, and they're not in control of me—I am' [10]. Without teachers: 'We can do like anything, we can jump, we can do anything we want, and we don't have to follow the teacher's rules' [5]. Indeed, his focus on control, manifested in teachers, was reflected across his whole school-life-history and may have related directly to the fact that he was sometimes what he called 'silly'. 'Silly' was probably a word he had

picked up at school, that covered many behaviours including those related to ADHD. While Eden recognised his behaviour as particular, his comments sometimes suggested that teachers thought he was just being 'naughty'. It sounded as though the teachers sometimes found it difficult to know how to cope with his unique behaviour when standard sanctions did not have the desired effect. He described one teacher: 'She said, "Rude boy, you're a very rude boy"—and what I was worried about [was] people just laughing saying "He's an idiot"' [5]. Despite being reprimanded a lot by teachers, he still wanted to sustain a Sense of Relatedness to his peers and cared how they judged him. The negative words of teachers made him afraid that peers would see him the same way.

Eden himself suggested that if children like him did not follow school rules: 'Give them extra support!' [12] rather than punishments. Eden resented his punishments. He noted his first few detentions at secondary-school as significant negative moments in his whole life-history which made him feel angry, primarily with teachers. He reflected that the most destructive aspect of primary-school had been: 'The teachers were always like breathing over my neck' [13]. And, he bemoaned: 'We have like really strict teachers that I really want them to leave' [5]. Of course, the question may be which came first, the alternative ways of behaving or the schooling sanctions, but certainly neither seemed to serve Eden's whole-hearted engagement in learning or his wellbeing. However, on entering secondary-school initially, Eden seemed delighted to encounter a male teacher for the first time, whom he described as follows: 'He's nice, and he's kind. And he appreciates me in his class... Because he's always smiling at me' [11]. This seemed to boost his Sense of Relatedness, which had sometimes been lacking with teachers.

As seems evident from the details above, Eden seemed to spend a lot of his energy on resisting and fighting control, energy which—as he himself saw—could have been better spent on being helped to understand things better. His own belief, promoted by the system, did not support his engagement either: that the whole point of learning at school is 'to be clever... Like when the teacher says something you'll know it straight away' [6]. Such 'cleverness' may not be an appropriate aim for anyone who has more diverse goals in their lives.

Eden's Sense of Competence in his school-work such as mathematics and English undulated across his school-life-history but overall he tended to suggest that he had found English, and even more so, mathematics, difficult throughout. He explained in TERM3 how demotivating the process might be: 'I struggle sometimes with my work. It's always a big deal because I have to like go back and do my work [again]. My teachers force me to do my homework' [3]. He sometimes blamed himself for not

having worked hard enough. However, at the start of each school year he tended to perceive that he was making better progress; then by the end of the year he did not seem so positive. However, his pride in his own particular ‘intelligent, funny’ personality and ‘being me’ stands to support him as he proceeds through the rest of schooling [11].

SAMIYA’S LIFE-HISTORY



Self-portrait 18: Samiya

Samiya was a dual-heritage Asian-White British girl, born in March 2010, who attended Sandown Academy primary-school. She had a very positive Orientation on life and school, emphasising in particular the importance of friendship, behaving well and working hard. Samiya described herself as funny, kind, helpful, grateful and sociable; initially she was shy but gradually overcame this. Although she was very well behaved in formal school terms, she did not hide the fact that she would prefer to lie in bed on school mornings than attend school; and that she celebrated days when she did not have to attend school (such as during Lockdown). Samiya was always careful not to be too critical of anyone, including herself. When she did not attain high marks in her worst subject, mathematics, she said that she was still proud of herself if she had done her best, a fact that seemed clear to us too. Overall, across her life-history, she claimed she was a happy person who had fun at school and rarely felt angry or upset: 'I'm always happy most like—basically every single day' [11].

Samiya was careful not to categorise herself as having low Competence, claiming that she did not know which set she was in when her class was divided for English according to prior attainment. But she did not enjoy the days when she was in this lowest group for English, finding it unengaging. She expressed preference for arts subjects and humour:

We do [this group] on Thursdays and Fridays, but that isn't as fun as the other days, because I feel like Tuesday is one of the best days ... because we get to do art and music with other teachers. And sometimes our music teacher—he's quite funny. [4]

Samiya knew that she was not one of the best at mathematics or English grammar, but persisted in being hopeful that through hard work she would improve. She was aware that, at times, she had been taken out of her primary-school lessons for extra mathematics coaching when she did not understand a topic. This continued into secondary-school, a fact she partially attributed to missing work during Lockdown. However, unlike previously, in secondary-school she was aware that, in her withdrawal group, she was being disadvantaged by missing new topics being taught in the main class therefore undermining her Sense of Competence. She reflected: 'So in the test that we're doing in a few days I'm not really going to know much of the stuff because I missed out on it' [13]. But she saw no way to change these systems.

She did not expect to be in top sets for everything in secondary-school but she did hope to be in one or two top sets. She reflected that life would have been easier for her at primary-school if she had been better at

mathematics especially. She told us how hard remembering was for some children: ‘When I was in primary-school like I didn’t really understand much my times tables much, and like obviously for mathematics that’s basically the main thing ... because there’s like quite a few things, like it’s hard just to remember all of them for some kids’ [13]. In Year 6 [aged 10–11], she felt under pressure because of the impending harder work at secondary-school; and was therefore delighted when SATs were cancelled. She particularly disliked all tests, found them overwhelming and stressful; and feared that she might not do well: ‘Sometimes [a test is] not fun because sometimes it’s just stressing, because there’s loads of pages and stuff’ [9].

We observed that Samiya was particularly engaged with issues of control but saw it mainly in a positive light. For example, she told us on arriving at secondary-school that she liked knowing which lessons would be when, unlike in primary-school when lessons were more random. She seemed to feel safe within the control of teachers. She told us: ‘The teachers are around nearly everywhere at the school so if anything was to happen we’d be safe because loads of teachers are everywhere’ [6]. She felt that she did more learning from the teacher at the front of class than from discussion with peers.

She found the regime in secondary-school more controlling than in primary-school, sometimes too controlling: ‘The teachers, sometimes they’re strict and like—say if you’re getting told off, I don’t mind if they’re being strict because they’re telling you off, but sometimes they’re strict like if you put your hand up, they say “Put it down!”’, so you can’t ask any questions’ [11]. She told us about many rules imposed in secondary-school, including about whether, and if so for how long, a child was permitted to visit the toilets. However, she seemed to accept the rationale for these rules and believe what she had been told about how useful and necessary they were. She believed that without them: ‘People would probably just spend half of their lesson maybe in the toilet, or some people would just always playfight, but then it could cause real fights and stuff if they don’t get consequences for it’ [11]. However, she did not consider that one reason for children wanting to leave the classroom may have been the fact that their needs were not being served there.

Samiya seemed to accept the school rules and assume that she would obey them, but she drew a distinction between teachers controlling her physical actions, which was acceptable; and others controlling her mental activity, which was her own sphere. She believed that teachers liked the

well-behaved, quiet children best. However, if she was not caught, she was occasionally happy to trick teachers, for example, by laughing under her desk while she pretended to have dropped her pen in class. In keeping with her Controlled Performance Orientation, Samiya valued rewards highly too, and on one occasion we observed Samiya and her partner pretending to have read a whole book, just to get the teacher's 'Well done' [2]. She was always eager to avoid punishment, but she did strive to learn about new topics and to attain high marks.

Samiya believed what she was told, that school was important 'so then you can get a job' [11]. She felt the pressure to perform in order to have a promise of reasonable employment—even though she did not always see the link between what she learnt at school and future job options. Anyway, she clearly believed that the way to success was through her own hard work and conforming to the system's demands; and it certainly did not depend on innate 'ability': 'It's not that you can be born smart or dumb, it's only how much you practise' [8]. She had experienced how hard work could help her to learn and she stated explicitly that people should adopt the 'growth mindset', that is:

Just keep on trying and then they will get it right even though they do mistakes—it's more better to do mistakes because then it makes you learn what you've done wrong quicker. [4]

Therefore, she believed in individual responsabilisation that if children did not listen to the teacher, their lack of learning was 'mostly their fault' [5], rather than the fault of how the system operated.

Samiya had never suggested she was one of the least 'smart' in her class and throughout her life-history she enacted the following view: 'Even if I'm not like fully like smart with it, whatever work I (like kind of) get, I'm kind of confident with it' [13]. Throughout her life-history, she wished she were able to find mathematics easier, but even in our final interview, she explained that she still felt she had little mastery of it: 'I just don't really understand much of it' [13]. As for English, while Samiya had always found most aspects of English easier than mathematics, when we left her at the end of Year 7 [aged 11–12], she felt as follows: 'Like I don't mind the subject [English], but I wouldn't like choose it as something like when we actually get to choose our subjects' [13]. Overall, considering her whole life-history, Samiya was one of the children we perceived to be thriving as she prepared to enter Year 8: her genuinely positive approach

to life, her enjoyment of friends at school and pets at home, her calm acceptance of difficulties and challenges, her determination to keep improving and be proud of her hard work at school, all led to her flourishing appearance at the end of Year 7 [aged 11–12], even if her engagement with schoolwork was not always whole-hearted.

ELLIE'S LIFE-HISTORY



Ellie

Self-portrait 19: Ellie

Ellie was a White British girl who attended Sandown Academy. She had a strong Sense of Agency in terms of presenting an established sense of self, which she described as: ‘Family, they’re like really important because they look after you, so you look after them’ [13]. She loved her home life and made frequent remarks like:

I can’t wait to just get out of school, have hot chocolate, play down the road with my friend, come back and then my dad’s there. That’s what I want [4].

Ellie’s employment plan was to work with dogs like her mother did [1, 8, 9, 13]. From a young age she put considerable effort into friendships at school, too, trying to sort out problems and ensure a Sense of Relatedness was sustained.

Ellie had a low Sense of Competence in relation to school-work, and felt others saw her like that too. Identifying from a young age as ‘not smart’ [2], Ellie felt her teacher would place her at the bottom of the class [9] and told us that when she was picked to answer a question ‘I usually feel like dumb’ [9]. Mathematics was a particular source of anxiety and fear, leading to her making great efforts to avoid it where possible, dismissing opportunities for grappling with it. She explained:

Because in mathematics I feel like failing everything, and I just, I don’t want to do mathematics ... When the teacher explains it, it’s like ‘this is so hard’ [8] ... I’ve dreaded mathematics my whole life ... I think I’m just going to hate mathematics forever. [9]

She was wracked with anxiety when her desk faced the mathematics display board, explaining:

Like the signs on like the board, and like I just feel so stressed ... 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’ [3].

This suggested that even the idea of mathematics was quite overwhelming for her and made her feel powerless. She also experienced the threat of punishment for poor work as ‘scary, nerve-wracking’ [9]. She hated the detentions and the humiliation, and separation, that punishments could entail. Her chances of whole-hearted engagement with school-work were slim, particularly as she explained that she had already nearly given up on it. Even in primary-school she struggled to grasp its relevance to her sense of self:

I don't really care about how smart I am ... I don't really care about mathematics, like school-work, so, yeah, so I wouldn't really care what my score is ... If I don't get good marks then it doesn't really make a difference to my life. [9]

Her aim in lessons was to get by rather than to understand and she had a matter-of-fact approach to cheating: 'I cheated because like it has the answers on the back, so if Miss is looking somewhere [else] then I could turn it round and look at the answer ... just be an easier way to get the mathematics done' [3]. In other words, school-work tended to feel like an imposition rather than an opportunity. She said of her homework, for example: 'I had this sheet in my bag, but I was too busy over the weekend ... whenever I get like told to do my homework I hardly do it—I only do it sometimes if I'm in the mood' [13]. But she did not seem to worry about this.

Ellie described whole-hearted engagement in learning as irrelevant to what was important in life, which was relationships with family and friends. She noted that her goals in schooling may be different from other people's: 'The whole point for me is that I get to see my friends, but like for other people it's probably just like learning' [6]. She also told us: 'I wouldn't mind like little [i.e. low] marks because it doesn't matter about your work, it just matters about people just like doing good' [5]. Indeed, she suggested that an (imaginary) girl who always got top marks was likely to be 'a little bit rude' to friends in the playground [5]. This suggested that she actually savoured the alternative flavour of her own life-history.

Far from enjoying doing what she was told, however, Ellie appeared to resent school's constant control over her, feeling that it eroded her Sense of Agency. She complained: 'I hate school because, like, when I want a drink I can't go off and just get a drink, I've got to ask the teacher, sometimes they say no ... [Also, we] can't go to the toilet ... I'm like 'Oh my God, I can't hold it!' [2]. Above all, her Sense of Agency was blunted when she found lessons painfully, almost agonisingly, boring and yet she was required to remain in them: 'We have six hours of school, it's just so boring ... I'm like 'Oh my God! I'm so bored, what is there to do?'. I'm like 'Oh I can't do anything really because I'm at school and there's nothing to do!' [1]. She told us she dealt with her boredom by constantly watching the clock [1, 2, 4, 8, 9] and daydreaming, though she feared actually falling asleep [1, 9].

Ellie explained in a straight-forward way that schooling was not appropriate in its current form: 'I think I don't suit school' [9] and 'I don't really think school's a good influence' [8]. She actually resented school wasting so much of her time, telling us that 'you know how there's five days at school, right, and then there's two days off—you should have five days at school ... and five days off, I think that would be fair' [8]. She also

complained indignantly: '[School is] like half my day!' [9]. She repeatedly—and longingly—brought up the idea of home schooling [1, 3, 4, 5, 8]. In other words, she spent, it seemed, a huge amount of energy on disliking and fearing school, far more than she seemed to spend on engaging in learning.

Although Ellie did not change her view of herself as lacking in school-work competence, her Sense of Competence strengthened in social ways and she became less anxious about being seen to do the right thing as she progressed through primary-school. By Year 6 [aged 10–11], she told us, with a new confidence: 'I snuck my phone into class when we were just leaving, and the teacher didn't see me, so that was good' [9]. Rather than wishing to be invisible, she started to enjoy standing out a little, with eye makeup, a dyed fringe [9] and blue nail polish [8]; perhaps as compensation for her poor Sense of Competence in the subjects that mattered to the schooling system.

The move to secondary-school, however, seemed to dampen her new-found boldness and cause a resurgence of anxiety and a low Sense of Competence. She told us: 'I don't know why, I felt more anxious to come to this school ... because the lessons changed a lot ... I've got so many detentions ... I hate mathematics, and if you don't get like a good like score on the mathematics thing then you have to redo it' [13]. Schooling practices promoted her to compare herself to others and she became afraid of being at the very bottom of the class. So strong was the competitive environment that she told us of her relief when someone else got lower marks than her: 'I was expecting him to get higher but he didn't, so I was like "okay good, someone below you"' [13]. At the start of secondary-school she had actually achieved agency enough to dare speaking to her teacher about this anxiety and been given a day off school [13]. But by the end of Year 7 [aged 11–12], she said she was feeling more settled, helped by building strong new friendships.

C. LIFE-HISTORIES OF CHILDREN WITH A LEARNING ORIENTATION AT SCHOOL

Autonomous Learning Orientation/Strong Sense of Agency

Autonomous Learning Orientation/Strong Sense of Agency—Selected by 4/23 Children

I'm interested in exploring different and unusual things. I am also interested in thinking about how things could be changed at school.

Child

- 20. Musa
- 21. Rory
- 22. Santosh
- 23. Amin

MUSA'S LIFE-HISTORY



Self-portrait 20: Musa

Musa was an Asian heritage British boy, born in December 2009. Outside school, he played football for two clubs as well as enjoying other sports; and attending Quran classes at the mosque. Musa spoke mainly of positive school experiences. He reflected back on his primary-school, saying:

It wasn't strict. Like other schools were like strict and not as happy. This school was like a fun school. [12]

Musa believed it was his own responsibility to work hard at school; and practise at home, especially mathematics. His father helped him with his times tables at home too. Consequently, he suggested that children attained low marks in their tests, when they were 'not concentrating and not working at home' [2]. However, he suggested that his teachers might describe *him* as someone needing 'to concentrate a bit more on the English ... and who sometimes messes around' [10].

However, despite this, he claimed during primary-school that he loved learning mathematics in particular and said that he felt 'excited by tests' [4], rather than daunted by them. In TERM10 said: 'I was looking forward to doing my SATS and like get good scores' [10] and he was disappointed about their cancellation due to Lockdown. In Musa's first term in secondary-school, he also spoke of loving the varied timetable and said he was pleasantly surprised to find that he found the work quite easy. When asked what to advise a new pupil about transitioning to their secondary-school, he said: 'Expect good things' [12]. This attitude, plus his Autonomous Learning Orientation, might have been partly attributable to the fact that he had not been designated in Year 3 as 'lower-attaining' in mathematics, but only in English.

He also enjoyed a strong Sense of Relatedness and following the Covid-19 school closures he said: 'It feels good [to be back] because I missed my friends' [9]. He spoke of liking many of his teachers and quickly made friends at secondary-school, despite still missing those from primary-school.

Nonetheless, Musa also spoke of having negative school experiences in primary-school. Musa found his English classes tricky and was therefore part of an intervention group for English during Year 3 & 4 [ages 7–9] which, although the work could be repetitive and a bit too easy at times, overall, he felt: 'The group's fun' [3]. He referred to this group as being for 'people that need help' [3] but he displayed no signs of embarrassment about this. Possibly this was because these groups were taught by Musa's class teachers, not teaching assistants, and whose participants were changed

each term according to need which helped to normalise the groups. Another reason may have been because Musa had a strong Sense of Competence in both mathematics and sport. By Year 6, Musa's English had improved to the level 'expected' for his age, which he attributed to his own genuine engagement: 'I've done a lot of reading in the holidays ... I was like reading instead of playing "Fortnite"' [6].

None the less, he told us after Lockdown: 'I used to hate school, but because I missed it [during Lockdown], I like it now' [10], confirming how his feelings about school could fluctuate. Unfortunately, in secondary-school, he was subjected to many detentions particularly in his second and third terms, which led him to be excluded completely from school on two occasions, threatening his school wellbeing in every way, given that the schooling system is supposed to cater appropriately for all children. These exclusions were the result of an accumulation of 'failing' to turn up to previous detentions and although Musa admitted that at times he had been playing around in class, several times he felt the detentions were unfair and was able to express how he felt very angry about how the detentions were given to him. On occasions he successfully managed to argue his case against the multiple detentions he was given, and some detentions were cancelled. However, prior to our final visit when he was given what he perceived to be another unwarranted detention, his display of frustration and anger was so great that he was given an even longer, additional external exclusion.

In our final visit at the end of his first year at secondary-school, Musa reflected about how detentions and exclusions also caused him to miss lots of his classes; to be moved to tutor groups away from his friends; and prevented from joining any of the afterschool clubs. His Sense of Autonomy (Agency) was therefore threatened in secondary-school due to his not adhering to the school rules. But he responded by making a critical reflection on events and choosing himself, to change his behaviour accordingly. He spoke of now deciding to concentrate on conforming to the numerous school rules despite not agreeing with them; and resolved to himself that he would 'probably need to listen to the teachers and that' and try to change his 'attitude and stuff' [13]. To this end he intended to avoid hanging around with the 'bad boys' [12;13]. Subsequently at the end of his first year at secondary-school, his formal attainment results showed that although his English was now at the 'expected' level for his age, his mathematics had now fallen below that level—the first time since we had met him in Year 3 [aged 7–8].

RORY'S LIFE-HISTORY

Give each child a prompt sheet and ask them to draw/colour/paint a picture of themselves. These will form the basis of the profile we write about each child.



Rory

Please fill in this picture of yourself using coloured pens, crayons or paints and bring it with you next time? Or give them an SAE?

Self-portrait 21: Rory

Rory was a White British boy, who attended Brandon Grove primary-school. He was born in February 2010 and lived with his younger sister and parents. Rory's main interests were computers and film making and during the Lockdown he made two humorous films which were later exhibited in a London museum. He was also interested in architecture; for example, he described his new secondary-school as being in a 'Huguenot building' [11].

Prior to attending Brandon Grove, Rory had attended two other primary-schools where he seemed unsettled. He did not seem comfortable at Brandon Grove either, as he felt like an 'outcast' [10], partly because he was ethnically different from all of his classmates. However, he moved to a new local primary-school at age nine, again locally, of which he said: 'It's great ... and my mum can communicate with the adults here' [3].

Despite Rory's obvious thirst for learning outside school, he found formal school learning challenging: in his second interview he used the word 'boring' 19 times and the word 'annoying' 40 times. When he began in Year 1 at his previous school, he had found formal mathematics and English classes tricky. Rory described his transition from this previous school:

It was a really nice building, it had roman pillars on the sides ... In the kindergarten it was drawing and eating and playing, but then [in Year 1], we had to go all the way to doing timesing, dividing and plussing, and so on ... and I did not know how to do that. [2]

Consequently, despite having a strong Sense of Agency in general, his specific transition to Brandon Grove had been stressful due to his low Sense of Competence in relation to mathematics and English:

I'm stressed in school sometimes. Sometimes I get worried ... And sometimes I hear 'finished, finished, finished, finished' everywhere—so it sort of annoys me ... because you have to um get a tick, because otherwise you do extra work and have to stay in at breaktime to finish the work. [2]

In contrast to this anxiety, Rory imagined a child who scored high marks in their tests would feel: 'Like he's calm. He's ecstatic ... because he doesn't need to worry about anything' [2].

At this stage, aged 7–9 years, Rory was assessed as working well below the expected level for his age and accordingly was assigned to intervention groups for both mathematics and English. His reaction to being in these groups was mixed:

I like being in this group, because once I went into the big class and you would have to find out the time [in that lesson] and I couldn't work out what the time was. I found it too hard ... Sometimes it's too easy here, and sometimes it's too hard there. [1]

However, later on, Rory resented being in these groups. This was not because he was embarrassed about being in them. It was partly because being in these groups meant that he missed other classes that he was very motivated to engage with:

I think in Brandon Grove I missed every single French lesson. So, when the times I was in French I had no idea whatsoever what was going on ... I had to look at someone else's work ... because like sometimes extra help doesn't help because you're missing out on something else.

Later on, it was also because the work was too easy and therefore unengaging. In a mathematics intervention group, he described:

The teacher kept on giving me easier and easier work. I found it annoying and then I was—I wasn't participating ... And it sort of delays me on things that I need to do in Year 4. [2]

When Rory moved to his new primary-school where everyone was taught in the main class, this resentment was replaced by a different discomfort, which also restricted his whole-hearted engagement in learning. This was triggered by a strategy that allowed each child to choose the difficulty of their mathematics questions from A (easiest), B (medium-hard) to C (hardest). Rory said:

I am really getting frustrated with the difficult mathematics thing because I could like answer B really easily on the worksheet, but C is quite hard. And when I said this to the teacher she said: 'Just do the other one [B], 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]

Rory identified with the Autonomous Learning Orientation/strong Sense of Agency, which aligned with what he had said in his first interview when asked how 'successful people' might appear. He answered: 'Clever. Think what's right for yourself. Don't copy other people' [1]. Rory's strong Sense of Agency was obstructed by schooling not giving children many choices and on one occasion he exclaimed: 'There's no democracy in the classroom!' [6]. In secondary-school when asked whether he thought his

school knew what was best for their pupils, he answered ‘no’ and gave a reflective, critical response:

They [schools] don’t necessarily put the rules in there for us benefitting: it’s for them, the teachers. [12]

Rory perceived that he was better able to achieve agency in secondary, which he appreciated:

There’s more like independence and creativity ... it’s like an evolution of primary-school in some aspects ... So in art, he’ll [the teacher] give you an example—he’ll show you how to do it, then you do it. He doesn’t look and say ‘Oh you should do it this way’—he doesn’t give you help. [11]

There was a shift in Rory’s attitude to school generally following Lockdown whereby he particularly recognised the significance of relatedness in motivating his engaged learning at school. Before the pandemic there had been mention that if Rory so wished, he could be home-schooled for secondary-school. However, when asked about this possibility after the school closures, he explained:

I didn’t have a big imagination in Lockdown, because I mean (*pause*) I was really bored for half of the time. I was really just grumpy in general because I couldn’t see anyone. [8]

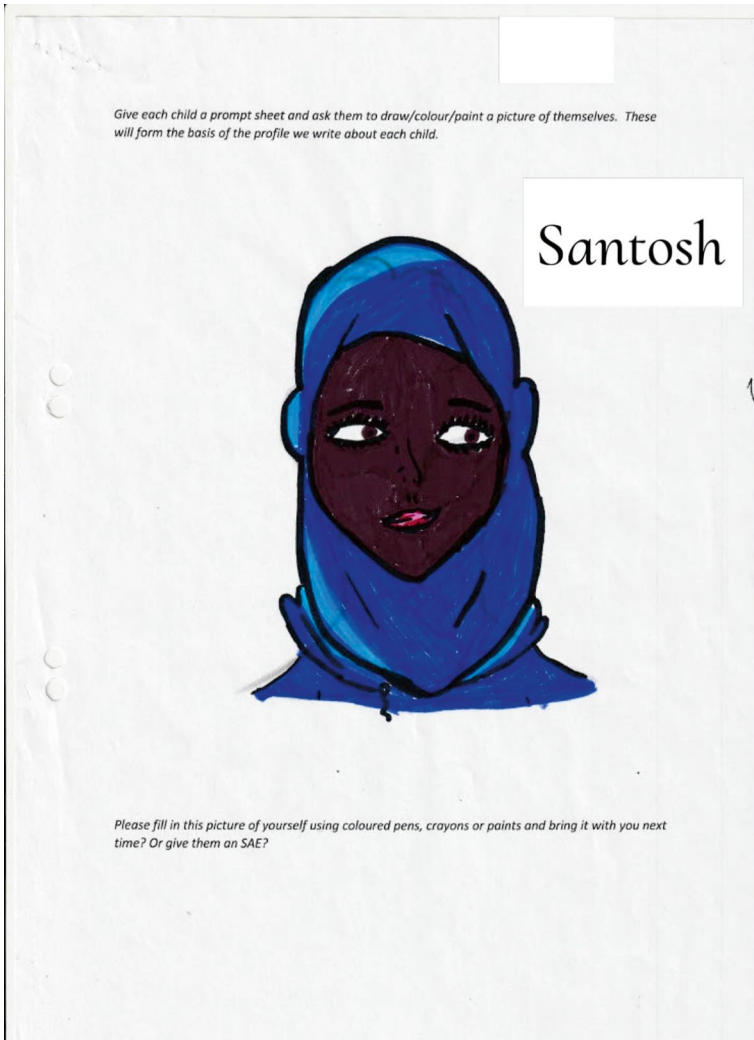
In primary-school, he perceived a Sense of Relatedness as an important purpose for schooling generally:

Well, the teachers always say [its purpose is], ‘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. One of the answers you could say, so you could be educated [6].

However, when asked at secondary-school about the purpose of schooling, relatedness was not included when he said: ‘To educate them [pupils] so that when they grow up they will have all the education they need to get a job’ [11]. Later on, when ranking priorities in life, he was the only child in our sample who put ‘Getting the highest test scores’ as his first priority. He explained: ‘[This] is quite important for a good career’ [13]. This was certainly a shift in Rory’s outlook which may have been triggered by the fact that success in tests was a more realistic possibility for him now. By the end of primary-school, and into secondary-school, he was assessed in formal school attainment terms as being at his age-related level; while

he had been designated at the start of the project as working well below the level for his age in mathematics/English. Once he was in secondary-school, he reflected: 'I'm doing quite well in specific subjects. I need to improve in others' [12].

SANTOSH'S LIFE-HISTORY



Self-portrait 22: Santosh

Santosh was born in May 2010. She was an African-heritage British girl. She attended Brandon Grove primary-school and was the youngest member of her family. Her Muslim faith was important to her. One word to sum up Santosh is *humour*—she loved other people making her laugh and vice versa. Even when discussing discomforts, she would still manage to joke about them. Santosh thought her primary-school teacher would describe her as follows: ‘She’s very funny, she smiles a lot and is very happy’ [3]. She in turn described her primary-school teachers as ‘very nice’ [9]. Santosh’s strong Sense of Relatedness to her family and her school-friends was an enduring theme in her interviews. When asked the purpose of schooling, she responded: ‘It’s probably about making friends’ [11]. Santosh had to join her new secondary-school six weeks into the term, due to her first choice of school excluding her by forbidding her to wear a hijab and therefore denying her access. Santosh said that the best thing about starting her (different) new school was as follows: ‘Being with my friends. Many of my friends are here and it’s really nice’ [11].

Although Santosh enjoyed many aspects of school in terms of engagement and socialising, she did declare on one occasion near the end of primary-school: ‘Every single day: wake up, do literacy, mathematics—so boring, so, so boring!—they didn’t even try to make it fun’ [10]. At the beginning of the project, her formal school English attainment was at age-level expectations, but mathematics attainment was below expected levels. In Year 4 [aged 8–9], she was in a mathematics intervention group which she perceived in competitive, performative terms:

I wasn’t that smart. But I started revising and got smarter ... But I wouldn’t be happy [to go back into the group] because you get to leave all the smart girls and you have to start from the bottom again and work your way all the way back to the top. [8]

Santosh made jokes about her weaker Sense of Competence in mathematics, but when asked what she would feel if her mathematics scores were disclosed publicly, she admitted, ‘I’d feel quite scared because I’d be quite embarrassed if somebody told me I got a 1 out of 40. I think it should be private’ [10]. Santosh spoke of being frustrated by her perceived lack of competence as she said, ‘It’s sad seeing you put an X on your paper, and you already worked that thing, and it’s stuck on your paper forever and you can’t change it’ [6]. However, because she did not view her competence in English to be inferior, she at least had this Sense of Competence to fall back on.

Santosh valued her Sense of Agency, saying: ‘I would like to be described as independent’ [10] and this desire was reflected when she chose the Autonomous Learning Orientation/Strong Sense of Agency as describing her: *‘I’m interested in exploring different and unusual things’* [13]. However, Santosh still wanted others to see her as smart, suggesting that her Autonomous Learning Orientation was not overwhelming: ‘I want to be described as “She’s a smart girl, I’m going to copy off her because she is so smart”’ [10]. Santosh was also influenced by the (mis)conception that succeeding at school would determine her future: ‘What happens when I get to my GCSEs? ... If you didn’t listen in class and you never listened ever in your lifetime then you won’t do anything and you’ll just be a McDonalds cooker, just flip patties; you will be unsuccessful’ [2]. In similar vein, Santosh held the belief that success at school was dependent on practising as she attributed her school-friend being ‘very clever’ to that fact that ‘she practises a lot’ [3]. Yet she personally did not like having to do extra school-work. During the Lockdown, she admitted: ‘I’m slacking on my work. I should do it more ... [but working online] didn’t motivate me [to do any work], not 1%’ [11].

On the other hand, she recognised the damage she might do to her sense of self by having a weak Sense of Competence in mathematics. She chose to ‘make up a new story’ about herself and combine that with hard work:

I think sometimes when I think I’m bad at mathematics 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 ... 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]

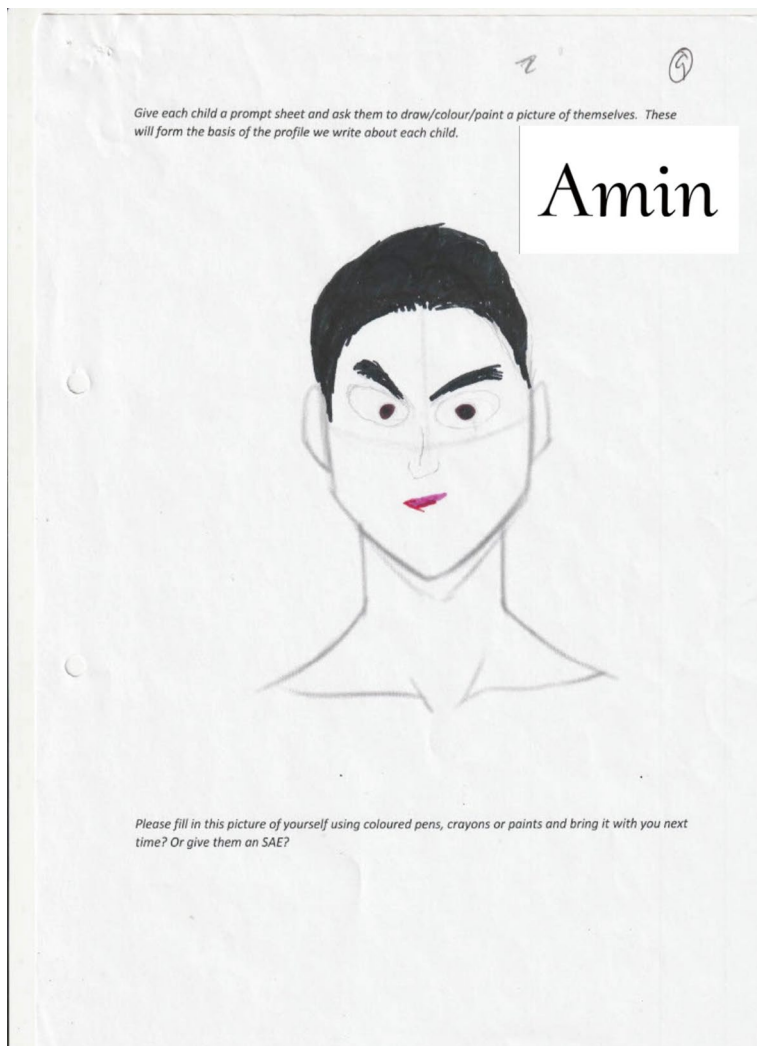
She explicitly linked *acquiring knowledge* with power and agency, rather than attaining high scores (although she might alternatively have been influenced by the growth mindset misconception that anyone can achieve anything if they try hard):

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 like in your future. [11]

Santosh did appear to retain a Sense of Agency in school as she seemed able to release herself from the sense that schooling oppressed her: ‘School isn’t us, so we can choose what we like and what we don’t like’ [12]. Indeed, her Sense of Agency and substantial Sense of Competence, no

doubt played a part in Santosh being assessed as *above* age-related -expectations in formal mathematics attainment measures by the end of the Project; and telling us during our last visit that ‘it isn’t tricky anymore’ [13].

AMIN’S LIFE-HISTORY



Self-portrait 23: Amin

Amin was an Asian-heritage British boy who attended Brandon Grove school and lived with his parents and three brothers. He often spoke about attending classes at the mosque at weekends; and also his love of Art, especially drawing Manga. Amin spoke enthusiastically about his primary-school years and referred to school being ‘fun’ [1, 2], especially school activities whereby ‘You get to learn and also have fun!’ [6] However, there were times when his enthusiasm dipped as he spoke of being bored, especially during literacy classes. He suggested that school could be stressful too. He even claimed: ‘Any classroom stresses me out. Why? Because it’s learning. I do like learning, but it still stresses me out’ [3]. When asked to describe himself at age ten, he said he was ‘still eager ... but more bored nowadays’ [10]. This dip was particularly noticeable after Lockdown, when he said he felt ‘sad’ to return to school, despite having missed his friends [9].

Amin’s Sense of Relatedness was strong and he spoke of having long-standing friends at his primary-school; and quickly started establishing good friendships at secondary-school. Asked how his last primary-school teacher might describe him, he referred to his excitable, sociable traits as well as his hard work. He said she would say, ‘He’s too excited for his own good ... and sometimes he’s shouting out and talking too much in class. But I’d say he works hard’ [10].

Amin claimed early on in the project: ‘Mathematics is really easy for me to do’ [3] and this enthusiasm continued into secondary-school. His overall Sense of Competence was thereby presumably boosted and this may have related to his stronger Sense of Agency (see below). However, he spoke negatively about his Sense of Competence in literacy classes in the early days of the project and said: ‘English is really hard and it’s really long’ [4]. He spoke of feeling disappointed when he got a low mark in his spelling test as he said: ‘It’s really hard ... Once I had like six [out of ten]. I was sad’ [1]. He also struggled with reading books at this stage explaining that they felt a bit overwhelming: ‘I like hearing them ... but I don’t really read my book ... and sometimes the blurb is so long I couldn’t be bothered to read it’ [3]. He was aware that he was considered lacking in Competence with his English tests. He explained, aged eight: ‘I get really stressed because I didn’t really remember all the things that we did to learn the exams ... It’s really hard. I’m below [age-related levels]’ [3]. This was why Amin was in an intervention group for literacy. He said he liked this group and missed it when he was moved into the main literacy class. He also

enjoyed having his daily (remedial) one-to-one reading session with a teaching assistant: 'I really like it a lot ... it's a lot more fun than being in literacy [main class]' [6]. He further explained that these sessions were for the children who 'don't read very well' [6]. There was no apparent embarrassment or shame attached to these interventions. However, his lack of Sense of Competence in English seemed to make English-lessons more boring for him: 'Boring, especially because I was bad at it ... That's why I got a low grade [in a reading test] ... I used to get normal grades, and then now I've gotten worsen ones' [9].

Amin believed that it was his lower score that prevented him from being able to attend the same Muslim boarding school that his brother attended. His disappointment about this may have knocked his Sense of Competence in English further. He reflected sadly: 'I think like from Year 3 [aged 7–8] to Year 6 [aged 10–11], I started losing interest in a lot of things [at school] [13]. However, by the end of primary-school, his teachers estimated that, in formal school attainment measures, he was now working at the 'expected' level for his age in both mathematics and English, so this may have increased his Sense of Competence and his positive experience at school overall. Later, when asked to advise a new pupil what to expect when joining his secondary-school, he was encouraging: 'You should expect good learning ... Fun activities in class' [12].

Amin believed that it was a pupil's responsibility to concentrate in class and 'listen well' [2] but, unlike the other children, he also claimed it as important that teachers support children who are finding school-work hard: '[Children] shouldn't blame themselves because [teachers] should also help the children listen more better' [5]. Amin's apparent lack of fear about his teachers' reactions to him making mistakes permeated all of his interviews, removing the fear that other children described in a unique way. For example, he exclaimed, 'Everybody makes mistakes, like me!' [4].

Amin's Learning Orientation was illustrated on a number of occasions during his life-history, when Amin spoke enthusiastically of how much he liked learning. For instance, he said when aged eight: 'I like Year 4 because I want to learn harder things' [2]; and when asked what he was looking forward to in the future, he said; 'I'm looking forward to Year 5 [aged 9–10] because you learn about Space' [4]. Amin also said that school was like a second home to him, because 'I get to learn' [2]. His desire to learn increasingly included wanting to improve in his English beyond just for school attainment. He admitted to wanting to engage beyond what the teacher told him: '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]. Amin's strong Sense of Competence and his Sense of Agency were illustrated when he said he would feel confident enough to advise his head teacher on how to improve his school. He was able to reflect critically on schooling and specify a number of areas that he believed needed reforming. These ranged from improving the physical state of the school buildings, to re-organising the end-of-term activities, to giving advice on how supply teachers could improve their pedagogy.

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Sense of Competence and CLIPS children's Experiences of the Policy Focus on Mathematics and English

SENSE OF COMPETENCE

The child's Sense of Competence lies at the heart of our research interest; and how this inter-relates with the child's wellbeing and indeed, parity of participation. When a child believes they have mastered any challenging task effectively, then they may experience a Sense of Competence. It is important to note that this need not be in a normative sense; in other words, if a child *perceives* that they are competent, this is what supports their wellbeing; *not a finite measure of a specific attainment*. A body of research points clearly to the fact that feeling competent and confident with respect to valued goals is associated with enhanced wellbeing (for example, Carver et al., 2010; McGregor et al., 1998). However, when tasks are imposed, they may be either too easy or (in the CLIPS case, usually) too difficult, whereby wellbeing is undermined (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), which leads to even lower expectations of success.

The concept of competence is closely related to self-efficacy—perceiving that one has the competence to act, leading to exerting oneself to influence one's life intentionally (Bandura, 1989). A Sense of Competence, including the perception of self-efficacy, is most likely to occur after a child's whole-hearted engagement in an area of study that they enjoy *in which they encounter mastery*. Repeated experiences of not being able to master a task are likely to quickly lower the Sense of Competence because

competence is only experienced when children feel that they have made ‘an effect on the environment’ and therefore mastered ‘valued outcomes within it’ (Yu et al., 2018, p. 1864). In this sense, it is also closely aligned to Sense of Agency. ‘Competency’ is the execution of the capacity to achieve that task in action.

Summary 7.1: Supports for a child achieving a Sense of Competence

- A valued task is mastered effectively
- Goals are personally appropriate in amount of challenge
- Tasks are personally satisfying
- A difference is perceived to be made.

In primary schooling, *competence* has become narrowly associated with attainment in tests of mathematics and English. However, competence can be more broadly defined as also including academic success in other academic fields such as history, environmental studies, religious studies; or the effective accomplishment of a non-academic task such as creative art-work, textiles or computer studies; or—equally valuable for building up a Sense of Competence—a social task. For example, 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 unjustly undermined (Francis et al., 2019) or *misrecognised* (Fraser, 2008). In these latter cases, Sense of Competence refers more generally to a child’s overall perception of their self-confidence: which can feed *into* academic competence; and also be fed into *by* academic competence in schooling.

Summary 7.2: A more complete definition of Competence

Includes

- Success in academic tasks in humanities, sciences or mathematics/English etc;
- Success in non-academic tasks such as in creative arts, sport and technology; and
- Success in social tasks which support the Sense of Relatedness.

Our research described in this book is concerned with each child’s *full* Sense of Competence—in contrast to recent policy bias in the English schooling system where competence almost exclusively relates to a child’s attainment scores in mathematics and English (White, 2011). Our

concern is how well the child's Sense of Competence can withstand the narrow, unnegotiable dominance of these performance scores and schooling's embedded messages about competence. We explore implications of the *lack of systemic importance* given to children's wider academic competence, their non-academic competence, as well as to their social competence.

In particular, we investigate Ryan and Deci's (2019) claim that a Sense of Agency and Relatedness are *also* required (as illustrated in Chaps. 8 and 9). This would mean that even if support for all kinds of competence were available (which often they are not), unless a child's Sense of Competence was accompanied by supports for agency and relatedness, this may zap motivation to engage. It might ultimately steer the child's energies away from opportunities for engagement in school learning, towards alternative interests as means of enhancing wellbeing and salvaging a positive sense of self. Alternative interests may be non-school or anti-school in their Orientation.

In our narrative below, we consider the ways in which a Sense of Competence was eroded for some CLIPS children in that they failed to master effectively the tasks provided by the school; did not always share the goals valued by schooling; did not find all tasks relevant or satisfying; and did not feel they made any difference, however hard they tried.

Summary 7.3: A Sense of Competence is reduced
when a child

- fails to master many tasks effectively,
- does not share the goals valued by schooling,
- does not find many tasks relevant or satisfying,
- does not seem to make any difference, however hard they try.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE FOCUS ON NARROW AREAS OF COMPETENCE

As illustrated in our life-histories (Chap. 6), primary-school timetables in England have become heavily weighted towards mathematics and English. This has left reduced space for non-assessed subjects such as history, geography, music, drama, art, sport or nature-study, subjects some CLIPS children were particularly passionate about. Not only has the curriculum been narrowed in this way: our sample indicated that teaching approaches had also become narrowed. Recent policy has led to the increased teaching-to-the-test testified by the CLIPS sample, and—as a by-product—to more

emphasis being put on attainment per se and attainment grouping as a by-product. This performative culture has led to frequent testing during primary-schooling which our sample referred to, often with trepidation. This exerts pressure on children generally, since ‘ability as measured on test scores’ has become ‘the be-all and end-all of education’ (Reay, 2017, p. 62). In order to contextualise this tunnel-vision because of its impact on the CLIPS children, we briefly outline how particular performance-oriented cultural values came into place.

Within a few years of being introduced initially in 1988, the National Curriculum and Assessment came to place the burden of nationally audited testing on children at the end of a newly constructed ‘Key Stage 2’: that is, 10- and 11-year-old primary-school children. However, originally, the National Curriculum content was developed to *allow all children to enjoy the full range of school-subjects* (although division by aims or competencies, rather than subjects, was never considered: White, 2011). However, when national tests came to assess only the core subjects of mathematics and English, this led to these subjects being given most emphasis and value. Content that was assessed dictated what was taught, as well as how it was taught and further, how *often* it was taught. This limited participation in a well-rounded curriculum, as the CLIPS children testify below. (Fortunately (as they construed it!) for the CLIPS sample, the year in which they reached this stage was 2020 when COVID-19 necessitated cancelling national tests (‘SATs’).)

The Primary Assessment Curriculum and Experience project (PACE) found that even by the early 1990s, 20 years before the CLIPS children were toddlers, approximately half of curriculum time was devoted to the core curriculum in mathematics and English (Wyse et al., 2008). Boyle and Bragg’s (2006) longitudinal survey over a decade later also indicated the gradual decline in time dedicated to subjects other than mathematics and English, most significantly in the last years of primary-school, where cuts included: geography reduced by 21.6%; history 21.6%; and art 21.2% (p. 379). A revised version of the curriculum, implemented in 2014, further subordinated history, geography and the creative/fine arts including music.

This occurrence could be perceived as reflecting scarce value being attributed systemically to the overall wellbeing or the human rights of the children. There is clear evidence that the creative and fine arts, including music, make a unique contribution to children’s creativity, imagination and overall wellbeing (e.g. World Health Organisation, 2019) and constitute a social justice requirement (UNCRC, 1989). The reduction in access to the arts including music is particularly worrying, given that leisure-time has

been further reduced in schools (Baines & Blatchford, 2019) and cuts in physical exercise, have led to 90% of primary-school children failing to achieve the in-school 30-minute moderate-to-vigorous physical activity threshold today (Daly-Smith et al., 2021). In addition, nature and environmental study has been greatly under-emphasised. Unfortunately for their Sense of Competence, arts, sports and nature study were three areas that our CLIPS sample particularly valued and excelled in.

Focusing on a core of mathematics and English was aimed at combatting what right-wing policy-makers conceived of as the trend of students opting out of 'harder' more 'academic' subjects such as mathematics, in favour of cultural, artistic, recreational or vocational activities, which they perceived as easier and less important (Berliner, 2011). This is the crux of the challenge to our current institutionalised patterns of cultural value: prioritising mathematics/English over other subjects is culturally biased against many children's main strengths and interests. According to Neumann et al. (2021, p. 706), the 2014 curriculum's underlying assumptions displayed a substantial emphasis on teaching a 'narrow, centrally dictated and conservatively defined canon of core knowledge'. By 2012, Alexander was able to write scathingly about the narrowing of curriculum to the 'three Rs' (Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic) as follows:

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

Alexander (2012) noted that its emphasis on 'essential knowledge' was informed by the work of essentialist Hirsch, ignoring important contextual and cultural factors, ethnic diversity and the findings of educational research; all of which absences made it harder for different groups in society to participate fully in it—including some of the children in the CLIPS sample. Evidence suggests that lower-attaining children, in particular, began to perceive that their non-core interests had 'little status and recognition' educationally (Reay, 2017, p. 65). Devine (2003) noted that 'some forms of learning and intelligence', which these children had once enjoyed or excelled in, were now considered less important (p. 44) or—in Fraser's words—'comparatively unworthy of respect' within the school curriculum (2000, p. 113).

INFLUENCES OF CURRICULUM NARROWING

In what may seem like an irony, illustrated by the CLIPS life-histories (see Chap. 6), the imposition of this narrow curriculum appears to have made it *less likely* that skills relevant to flourishing adult life would be learned at school. This is despite that fact that a socially just education clearly has to provide young people with the skills and knowledge to engage with ‘emerging societal contexts’ (Bardsley, 2007). Such skills will necessitate engaged learning about technology, developing critical citizenship skills, relationship competence and understandings of contemporary social issues such as climate change and sustainability. Since these were mainly omitted from the curriculum, it is now becoming clear that schooling in Britain will not provide significant advantage to Britain’s entire population either in the present or the future.

To add to the narrowness resulting from the reduced offer of subjects, children who found mathematics or English tricky also started to be withdrawn from other classes that they preferred, such as art, PE, ITE, for withdrawal for one-to-one or intervention ‘catch up’ provision and test preparation in mathematics/English—subjects that they might have disliked. In addition, children were not consulted about arrangements, providing no representation of their interests, goals or preferences, despite the rhetoric of policy on pupil voice in schools (Comber & Hayes, 2022). A tension has therefore emerged between school-children’s expressed needs and the needs inferred systemically (Noddings, 2005), as reiterated by the CLIPS sample on many occasions.

This threat to present and future wellbeing increased for children who found mathematics/English tricky because, by definition, these children found it difficult to participate fully in the learning of mathematics and English: because it was on the basis of attainment specifically in these two subjects that had designated them as lower-attainers. Prior to the 1988 Education Reform Act in England, ‘low-attaining’ was used in a non-specific way to describe children who found it difficult to participate generally within current schooling arrangements (see, for example, Low Attaining Pupils Programme (LAPP)). By the mid-1990s, however, the government inspectorate in England (Office for Standards in Education) mandated that primary class teachers differentiate between ‘high’, ‘middle’ and ‘lower-attainers’ against the new National Curriculum Assessment criteria (Hart et al., 2004). Hence our use of the label ‘lower-attaining’ in the CLIPS study, despite our preference for de-emphasising test attainment in the primary-school more generally. This labelling by

attainment-differentiation has persisted till the present day (see Francis et al., 2019), depreciating those children who have strengths and interests beyond formal mathematics and English schoolwork. Children designated as lower-attaining stood to be most negatively affected by the reduced status of alternative subjects, because these were *by definition those that lower-attainers were likely to prefer*, and because these children were most negatively affected by narrowed pedagogies, which were often unsuited to those who found formal school mathematics and/or English tricky.

In 2013, a group of academics had a letter published in the British newspaper *The Independent*, in which they expressed how the new curriculum was likely to make children's engaged learning of the curriculum more difficult. It highlighted how the curriculum failed to promote critical understanding and creativity, was too difficult to allow mastery and was not relevant to many primary-aged children. This would lead, they predicted, to 'failure and demoralisation':

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

This curriculum negatively reinforced differences and promoted deficit understandings of under-performance, as our CLIPS sample describe. It potentially eroded lower-attainers' Sense of Competence because it linked—for the first time—Sense of Competence and performance (Wyse et al., 2008). Teachers were right to become concerned that 'forcing' such students to take the narrowly defined core subjects would increase disengagement and disaffection (Neumann et al., 2021). White wrote, in 2011:

The more time pupils spend at school doing things they don't have their heart in, the more counter-productive this is from a wellbeing point of view. (p. 138)

Indeed, the Primary Review (Alexander, 2012) and contributing studies during the 1990s (Galton et al., 1999; Pollard et al., 1994; Torrance &

Pryor, 1998) found that the whole culture of teaching and learning now disadvantaged the many children who preferred active, participatory learning approaches (White, 2011). Teachers said that they needed to cut down pupils' participation during lessons in order to cover the core curriculum content; which action also appeared to restrict thinking skills; put time pressure on teachers and pupils alike; and greatly reduce opportunities for children to achieve a Sense of Agency. Wyse et al. (2008) portrayed a more pressurised classroom environment which was 'more intense than hitherto and highly teacher controlled, with little scope for pedagogic flexibility and little pupil autonomy' (p. 9). That is, students had little, if any, role in shaping the direction of their learning, especially as teachers began to adopt a whole-class teaching style which emphasised transmission-teaching to the group rather than individual interests and goals.

THE 'CORE' SUBJECTS: MATHEMATICS AND ENGLISH

Our CLIPS life-histories indicate how hard some children found it to achieve any kind of mastery in mathematics; and how resistant they therefore became to it. Since 2014, there has been an increased swing in primary-schooling towards basic calculation skills and mental arithmetic rather than using and applying mathematics, making the subject seem even less relevant to children's normal lives. This negativity around mathematics need not have been the case, according to Boaler (2015). She re-affirms that whether children find mathematics hard or not actually depends on how mathematics is taught—not on inherent talent. Boaler described how children who did not do well in mathematics tests were those who had been taught to memorise methods instead of interacting with numbers flexibly. She described a sort of disempowering trap: that memorising methods made mathematics considerably harder for these children; and yet high performance on tests, given limited time, demanded memorisation.

Some student beliefs about mathematics could also be dominated by their perception that mathematics was not only innately difficult but also rule-based (Larkin & Jorgenson, 2016) which led to students expressing hatred, anger, frustration, confusion, sadness and boredom in relation to mathematics. Larkin and Jorgenson (2016) cited a young student's comments to illustrate this claim: 'And it's just a big blob of confusion and it makes me frustrated that I can't understand it ... It makes no sense at all. It's really confusing' (p. 914). In these senses, the National Curriculum's

increased focus on mathematics might inadvertently have had the counter-productive effect of *increasing children's mathematics anxiety* rather than improving competence, for particular groups of children.

In relation to the other core, English (or literacy), important socio-cultural factors which encouraged children to participate in lessons tended to be accorded less value in the new curriculum. As Haberman noted:

How students feel about themselves, how they are positioned as literacy learners, their individual interests and aspirations to read particular kinds of texts, their membership of particular social networks and their visions of the kind of readers or writers they want to become ... will influence their learning in school. (Haberman, 1991, p. 291 cited in Ellis & Rowe, 2020)

This trend away from recognising children's subjective differences, was exacerbated by commonly-imported literacy interventions emphasising reading as based only on technical, cognitive aspects: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary development and comprehension (National Reading Panel (US) et al., 2000 cited in Ellis & Rowe, 2020, p. 420). In one of our CLIPS primary-schools, a scheme imported from the United States was being used which the children described as particularly boring. As suggested by Haberman (above), reading has emotional, social and intellectual aspects not accounted for by such imports, whose absence of focus on individual interests might further alienate some students from participating in reading activities. In addition, there is no clear evidence for the efficacy of the current approach to teaching reading (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). In relation to writing, too, Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation tests were nationally mandated; but have also had no clear benefits for narrative writing (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022) and were found to be particularly boring by some children in CLIPS. They seemed to distance writing skills further from children's own experiences of life (Braun & Maguire, 2020). 'Speaking' as a skill in English-lessons was not assessed because of ministers' fear of it becoming 'idle chat' in the classroom, because the latter failed to understand (or chose to ignore) the important role of speaking within writing (Alexander, 2012). Children's author, Rosen, has criticised policy-makers' belief that writing subjective, personally oriented, narrative texts, was a form of class oppression, suggesting that the most important factor in children being motivated to write was having opportunities for *choices* in the content, format and publication of their writing (Rosen, 2013). Others go further to argue that National Assessment in English represents a form of linguisticism 'which serves to entrench linguistic social injustices' (Cushing, 2020, p. 35).

CLIPS CHILDREN'S SENSE OF COMPETENCE

[**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Throughout the book, a digit in square brackets following a quotation means that the quotation comes from an interview during that TERM in the project. For example, [8] following a quotation means that the quotation came from TERM8 of the project i.e. just over halfway through the project when the children were starting in Year 5 of their primary-schools.]

UNMOTIVATED BY MATHEMATICS AND ENGLISH BUT
INTENTIONALLY ENGAGED IN OTHER DISCIPLINES

The 23 CLIPS children's experience of being misrecognised related to their interest in curriculum areas other than mathematics and English; including interests they engaged in passionately at home. Harriet, for example, had a passion for reading novels and drawing, but she felt that these were not valued by the schooling system. Even though reading is part of the core curriculum, she perceived that *reading for pleasure* was not valued in the way that reading comprehension texts was; or writing was; and that artwork had even lower status. In addition, her lack of knowledge in mathematics led to the all-pervasive demotivating experience of not mastering mathematics tasks effectively. Harriet described—perhaps as a consequence—not choosing 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 absented herself from engagement in school-learning because of what was taught and how it was taught.

Rory described missing out on learning French—which he was eager to learn—because he was being taken out of French lessons for tuition in mathematics. This was 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 valued goals for schooling; and he did not find mathematics tasks relevant or satisfying. In these ways, his low Sense of Competence was sustained. This made him angry:

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

Jack started actually absenting himself physically from school on a regular basis. We asked Jack to comment on how school would be different if school focussed on sport, art and computers instead of mathematics and English during the mornings. 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]

If school involved valued tasks like sport that he mastered effectively, aligning with his personally meaningful goals and interests, making his experience relevant and satisfying, then he would not need to miss whole days of school: then he would feel his presence was meaningful. Then he would feel a stronger overall Sense of Competence.

We invited Gabriella to describe the best things about primary-school and she mentioned 'the activities that we do like in the afternoon and PE': that is, subjects like art and topic, that she found personally relevant and satisfying, which perhaps she could master successfully if she tried hard; that boosted her Sense of Competence. She went on to describe how, if she won the lottery, she would use the money to develop her desire for greater engagement in art:

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

In relation to areas of interest not offered at school, Zeph, Fin and Jon were all passionate and extremely knowledgeable about animals. Jon told us that if he could replace mathematics and English-lessons in the morning, he would 'learn about animals' instead. When it came to knowing about animals, these three children had a great track record of success: learning about animals accorded with their personally meaningful goals for life; and tasks relating to animals were relevant and satisfying and they could make a meaningful contribution by participating. In this area, their Sense of Competence was strong. Despite this, Fin noted that the school as an institution 'wouldn't know how good I know about animals' [3] because little focus was given to nature study. Nature study was not included in their school's curriculum, despite these children's interest; and despite Zeph, for example, being nick-named the 'animal dictionary' [11]. Zeph came to assess his overall competence somewhat negatively as 'intelligent about animals but not on every other thing' [3].

These institutionalised patterns of cultural *devaluing*—which infused topics and practices the CLIPS children encountered every day—became embedded in the children’s minds. This influence was exemplified by Santosh who was another aspiring artist who claimed that what she loved best about school was ‘pointilism’ in artwork [2] (i.e. using dots to create a picture). When we asked her whether she would like to do art first thing every morning at school rather than mathematics, initially she said she would ‘jump around’ for joy if that were the case. But then she checked herself, despite her own passion for art and her own aversion to mathematics, remembering what was systemically considered important:

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

THE DOMINANCE AND DIFFICULTY OF MATHEMATICS IN THE CURRICULUM

Michael felt that academic failure, particularly in mathematics, could blight the future, telling us: ‘Your life is ruined, and [if] like you don’t learn ... like you can’t go to the job anymore ... then what are they going to do for their life?’ [1]; and he often sounded anxious that ‘the future awaits’ [13]. In congruence with now ex-Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (as of 2024), the sample children were constantly told that mathematics was the most important subject for their future careers. While of course mathematics is a potentially useful and powerful domain of knowledge, it is good to remember that Clark et al. (2018) claimed that wellbeing in primary-school—not qualifications in mathematics—was the best predictor of wellbeing in adulthood. If children’s wellbeing is compromised because of the way mathematics is taught or presented, then this bodes badly for their future wellbeing.

However, the children absorbed the messages about the importance of mathematics, although few of them could explain the link between mathematics now and their future wellbeing. They could only think of times when basic arithmetic might be useful, if a calculator was not available. Santosh [4] perceived mathematics as helpful to ‘get bills and electrical stuff for my house when I grow up’. Gabriella [9] had a similar perception that mathematics was for sorting bills:

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

Unfortunately, Zeph saw no chance that mathematics could be enjoyable, however useful it might be:

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

These examples illustrate the discordance between the CLIPS children's conceptualisations of their goals and aspirations and those of policy-makers for the schooling system. These latter were evidently opaque: their ultimate concern with global economic competitiveness was of course not obvious to the children. As we discovered in our activity of sorting cards showing life-goals, the children's life-values were almost exclusively focused on relationships: on becoming good, loyal family members and friends; and on supporting 'the common good' (Sandel, 2020): and very few of them said they aspired to wealth, fame or social mobility. The most common order of priority for the children was similar to this, starting with the most important life-goal:

1. Looking after my family
2. Being a good, loyal friend
3. Being kind
4. Making other people happy
5. Being healthy and fit
6. Being popular
7. Getting the highest test scores
8. Being famous
9. Getting rich
10. Being attractive/beautiful/handsome.

Unfortunately, the children's experiences of finding many tasks to be irrelevant or too tricky—and often too boring—led to their disengagement and their sense that what they wanted or what they did had little impact on the schooling agenda; and indeed, the schooling agenda had little impact on their real future aspirations.

While these testimonies may be unsurprising, particularly given the diet of mathematics provided in schools, our data do underline the intensity of these children's dislike for the way mathematics was presented and their particular disadvantage in finding mathematics tiresome, given its domination of the curriculum. If, for example, one's status was judged according to capacity for engagement in reading fiction books for enjoyment, in studies of animals, or pointillism in art, these children's school status would have been transformed. It was their *misfortune* that mathematics was promoted as being most valuable.

THE DOMINANCE AND DIFFICULTY OF ENGLISH IN THE CURRICULUM

For other children, English-lessons were the biggest burden but more often because they were too boring rather than too tricky. This was because, although the children tended to love stories, the bulk of the English-lessons they described appeared to be highly structured but mundane—which the children did not find sufficiently satisfying. In particular, they appeared to endure too little experience of mastering tasks effectively and a lot of passive listening. Sam and Michael [5], for example, explained how they experienced English-lessons as boring but, at the same time, there was no time to daydream in the pressured class they inhabited. Losing concentration, even when a lesson was boring to them, was not acceptable to teachers who had to get them through a prescribed curriculum:

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

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

Jack explained how writing his own real opinion was engaging for him because it was satisfying and relevant:

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

Jack seemed to be requesting that his own ideas, judgements and preferences were taken into account during writing lessons.

Zeph did not find English any more satisfying or relevant than mathematics but he had no choice but to conform, even though his interests and preferences were not accorded value. He ended up feeling coerced rather than acting intentionally:

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

Similarly, Gabriella enjoyed writing stories at home. She loved reading story books. However, these aspects of English were not emphasised in her English-lessons at school:

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

She appeared worried about grammar, another focus in lessons that did not align with many children's aspirations for schooling or life more widely:

I ask, what's like the adjective and everything? And what's a noun? What's an adverb?—like what do they do? [8]

Others found the actual process of handwriting difficult and frequently failed to master writing tasks at all. When these uncomfortable experiences of literacy dominated their impressions of school-life, it was likely to have negative consequences for participation within and beyond the English curriculum and the associated opportunities for wellbeing.

WELLBEING AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: INADEQUATE EMPHASIS

Several children told us that when they did not finish their schoolwork within the classroom, they were held in during break-time or lunch-time to complete their work, further indicating the system's little investment in social activities and relationship development, or wellbeing more generally. Samiya explained how the system worked for mathematics:

You have to stay in for your lunch or break. Because if you're doing mathematics before break you have to stay in for your break, but if you do it after break you have to stay in for your lunch. And if you do it after lunch you have to stay in the next day.

Rory depicted the stress this caused him, perhaps increasing his Sense of Incompetence compared to others who could perform more quickly:

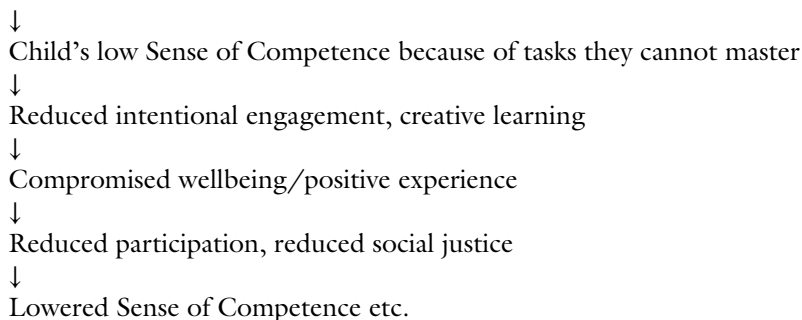
I'm stressed in school sometimes. Sometimes I get worried ... And sometimes I hear 'finished, finished, finished, finished' everywhere—so it sort of annoys me ... because you have to get a tick, because otherwise you do extra work and have to stay in at break-time to finish the work. [2]

This system seemed to suggest that those who worked slowly—though no fault of their own or indeed perhaps because they wanted to take time for reflection—were less worthy of enjoying a full playtime and enjoying the wellbeing it encouraged. While a weak Sense of Competence is linked to lack of wellbeing, in this system, the punishment for insufficient performance was further reduction in opportunities for wellbeing. Louise agreed that this was not a fair system: 'Because the rest [of the class] get break-time, and the other people have to miss some of it' [2]. When we asked Mark how he felt about being kept in at lunch-time, he replied, 'Hungry'. It seems that schools felt justified in keeping children in at break-time or lunch-time by the need to relieve teachers' pressure of having to be able to cover the core curriculum (Baines & Blatchford, 2019). However, this is clearly a destructive move in terms of children's wellbeing, especially in terms of social parity of participation. Given that most of the children in the sample selected break-time, lunch-time or home-time as their favourite aspects of primary-schooling, keeping children away from their leisure-time seemed to them particularly unfair. These children, especially, may have needed these times to boost their status through activities other than doing core subjects—such as doing sport or enjoying friendships.

It is sadly not surprising then that many of the children in our study expressed dislike for school, some an extreme dislike, apart from as a place to meet friends. In short, the children referred frequently to the fact that the institutionalised patterns of cultural value around mathematics/English did not include a valuing of their own goals, or preferences, thereby reducing their chances of mastering learning tasks effectively. In the end, this further eroded their Sense of Competence, as illustrated in Summary 7.4:

Summary 7.4: The relationship between Sense of Competence, wellbeing and social justice

Performative Schooling System, focus on testing in mathematics/English



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CHAPTER 8

Sense of Agency and Status-Subordination

AGENCY IN THE LIFE-HISTORY

Etelapelto et al. (2013) explain how:

The concept of agency has ... usually been loosely associated with active striving, taking initiatives, or having an influence on one's own life situation.

Autonomy can be defined as behaviour or actions that reflect the child's agency (although we have used the terms interchangeably at times). A child's agency is reflected in how they operate in relation to their Sense of Agency. Billett (2006) maintains that, with a strong Sense of Agency and subsequent autonomous action, children can actually select from social suggestions, to shape their own development and remake cultural practices in transformative ways:

Individual accounts of learning emphasize the individual's role as an actor who will decide what problems are worth solving and with what degree of energy. In this way the individual is emphasized as an actor in relation to the social world ... shaped by their individual life history and prior experiences. (Billett, 2006 cited in Etelapelto et al., 2013, p. 46)

Agency is therefore not a ready-made capacity that individuals either have or not but something that they achieve under certain ecological

conditions (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137). Agency is something individual efforts can achieve to varying extents, depending on:

- (a) the available resources,
- (b) contextual factors and
- (c) structural, systemic factors.

Out of an individual's action and their structural, systemic, contextual environment, agency can emerge that was not in existence previously. Biesta and Tedder (2007) suggest that life-histories (such as those used in the CLIPS project) are particularly suitable vehicles for empirical research into agency (2007, p. 14) because these can illustrate how an individual shapes their responsiveness to their particular (school-life) situation. They suggest:

[For] learning about one's agentic orientations ..., it is important that actors can distance themselves from their actions in order to explore and evaluate them. Hence the importance of narratives—life stories—in such learning processes. (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 146)

Bourdieu (1977) claimed that the agency depended also on a range of *relational* properties such as the child's social position and dispositions, which they import with them into schooling as 'habitus'. In other words, he maintained that how and whether a Sense of Agency is achieved in the schooling environment is closely linked to the child's specific *outside-school environments* (see also Priestley et al., 2015). According to Bourdieu, the child's background environments provide some specific patterns of cultural value of their own, which bypass language 'to act below the level of consciousness' and to endure despite the new environment of schooling and its systemic patterns of cultural value.

The implication here is that particular efforts will need to be made within the schooling system to facilitate the achievement of agency in a multitude of ways, among children from diverse walks of life and diverse orientations. Social contexts and structures interplay with different identities and children's reactions in different ways. This underlines the vast opportunity schooling has to promote the development of children's Sense of Agency, which in turn enhances both the Sense of Competence and Relatedness, which in turn contributes to wellbeing and social justice.

INTENTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

We use the phrase *intentional engagement* to embrace the idea of children achieving agency, as the children choose to engage agentially in learning. To achieve *intentional engagement*, we mean *children choosing to apply themselves to school learning by incorporating it into their personal goals*, whether long-term or immediate. It rests on Ryan and Deci's (2000) critical distinction between

1. behaviours that are volitional and accompanied by the experience of freedom and autonomy and
2. behaviours that are accompanied by the experience of pressure and control and are not representative of one's self (p. 65).

Giddens understands human action and consequent events as agentic only when the action is *intentional from the perspective of the actor*. Such actions are the opposite of mere responsive reactions, such as just doing what one is told (Giddens, 1984). Giddens specifies that an intentional act is one that 'the actor knows, or believes, will have a particular outcome, and in which knowledge is utilized by the actor *to achieve the outcome*' (cited in Etelapelto et al., 2013, p. 49). This aligns the achievement of Agency closely with the Sense of Competence since, where agents *lack the power* to engage intentionally, there is little Sense of Competence. We questioned the extent to which the CLIPS children experienced their actions in school as *intentional* i.e. being 'volitional and accompanied by the experience of freedom and autonomy'. Being intentional suggests that a child grapples with challenging concepts or ideas because they *choose* to better understand and interact with their world and people within it (Vygotsky, 1962) *and believe that one can do so*. This contrasts with having to carry out actions necessary for a pre-ordained performance goal. Intentional learning relates to a *desire* to be competent in understanding concepts, practices and ideas in more sophisticated ways, linking to those already tackled in prior learning; as well as the *drive* to be competent in constructing new meanings and the belief that one can do so.

Mills et al. (2016, p. 109) reinforced the idea that, at the immediate classroom level, children engage intentionally (achieving agency) when they have a Sense of Competence. They claimed that their Sense of Agency was also boosted when children felt trusted to achieve a task; when they understood their valued *contribution* to the Big Picture; and had an

opportunity to *question* their own and others' roles without fear. Agency was promoted when they understood the various links within a school subject and across school subjects; and the meaningful reasons for embarking on a particular task.

Summary 8.1: Supports for a strong Sense of Agency among school-children (Mills et al., 2016)

- Feeling trusted to achieve a task;
- Understanding one's contribution to the Big Picture;
- Opportunities to question, without fear;
- Understanding links within and across school subjects;
- Knowing why a task is meaningful and making it a personal goal.

In our analysis below, we questioned how or whether a Sense of Agency could thrive in the environment described by some CLIPS children, where intentionality was constrained, where:

- Children's competence was explicitly designated as subordinate.
- Children were not always trusted and were threatened with punishments for not complying.
- They did not understand their contribution to the Big Picture.
- They did not have opportunities to question their own and others' roles.
- They did not understand links within and between school subjects.
- They did not fully understand the reasons for embarking on particular tasks.

Intentional engagement also demands imagination and creativity, including divergence of thought and openness to experience. However, it is antithetical to excessive external control structures such as those alluded to by some of the CLIPS children.

Summary 8.2: Important components of intentional engagement

- Children choosing to apply themselves to school-learning
- Children grappling with challenging concepts or ideas in order to better understand and interact with their world and people within it, and believing they can achieve their aim

- Children having a desire to understand concepts, practices and ideas in more sophisticated ways and believing they can achieve this aim
- Children constructing new meanings and new ways of behaving
- Children using imagination and creativity
- Children demonstrating divergence of thought and openness to experience
- Children evaluating their own experiences of engagement.

Since Enlightenment days, in the Global North, there have been strong proponents of the idea that education should help people to develop their capacities for intentional, agentic action. C. Taylor, pioneer in conceptualising agency, contended that the critical component of distinctly human agency (reflected in autonomous action), lies in the human capacity to evaluate our actions (Taylor, 1985; our emphasis). This is a conception of agency that schooling systems would find hard to accommodate, whereby school-children were encouraged to evaluate the value and justice of the skills, attributes and knowledge they were told to learn at school—and take action to change them if they seemed invalid or unjust. Further development of reflexivity and critique among children would support their wellbeing, for example, through exercising their imagination of ‘new possibilities for thought and action’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, pp. 983–984). We hope that this book will support teachers and school-children to do exactly this, but our data from the CLIPS project suggests that this rarely happens at present.

Hays (1994) differentiated between structurally *reproductive* agency (whereby only peripheral impact is made) and structurally *transformative* agency (such as the transformations of revolutionaries). This latter is achieved through a predominantly future-focused imaginative process wherein some ‘actors attempt to reconfigure received schemas by generating alternative possible responses to the problematic situations they confront in their lives’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 984). It is with this Sense of Agency in mind, for example, that the current book ‘imagines’ schooling as a positive experience. Hays (1994) suggests that for agency to be possible, ‘alternative courses of action are available, and the agent therefore *could have acted otherwise*’ (p. 64; our emphasis). However, it is clear that the immediate contextual features of schooling usually restrict the child from exercising agency, as choice is highly constrained and few alternatives are offered. The environment of schooling will therefore often curtail children’s Sense of Agency.

Summary 8.3: A Sense of Agency is facilitated when people (including school-children)

- ✓ make evaluations of their actions;
- ✓ perceive themselves to have power to cause change;
- ✓ are not too constrained by particular structural situations;
- ✓ practise reflexivity;
- ✓ perceive themselves to have alternative courses of action; and
- ✓ have their intentions aligned with their actions.

Summary 8.4: A Sense of Agency is achieved when people

- ✓ make manifest their desires, volitions and intentionality;
- ✓ exercise choices;
- ✓ draw on their knowledge and beliefs to override random or irrational acts; and
- ✓ experience freedom.

CLIPS CHILDREN'S SENSE OF AGENCY AND STATUS SUBORDINATION IN RELATION TO COMPETENCE

[IMPORTANT NOTE: Throughout the book, a digit 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 TERM8 of the project i.e. just over half way through the project when the children were starting in Year 5 of their primary-schools.]

The narrative below draws on our 23 life-histories to provide illustrations of occasions on which certain children alluded to systems, practices or *institutionalized patterns of cultural value* (as Fraser describes them) in schooling, that they believed influenced their experiences of status-subordination, based on what was perceived to be their limited competence in mathematics/English. These experiences could lead them to *feel inferior; feel excluded; or feel 'other' or invisible* (again to paraphrase Fraser, 2008, p. 24). In our analysis of these occasions, we draw on our framework for human agency and intentionality as presented above to further investigate

what happened to the children's Sense of Agency—closely linked to their wellbeing—when they perceived their competence as subordinate.

We asked sample children how often they could make their own decisions in their primary classroom. The majority replied 'never' [$n = 16/23$]. The children also suggested that they could not say something critical about what the teacher told them to do. 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 disbelievably:

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]

Rory's comment reflects his realisation of his own curtailed agency, but in this case, as it applied to all children not just those designated lower-attaining. We learnt that some children felt controlled during lessons even in relation to holding each part of their body in a prescribed, rigid and static position, as if they were not competent to choose how to sit in class. Such physical restraints may have been particularly disabling for children in our sample who expressed a need for constant activity, especially in light of reduced sports curriculum time and reduced playtimes. For example, Salah exclaimed: 'You have to sit on the carpet or on the chair. I want to stand up and play something. Or like—run!' [3]. Jack reported a recent occasion, when he had actually taken the initiative to ask in exasperation during a lesson, 'Can I go and explore? Because this is too boring!' [1]. He was kept in for lunch-time on the two subsequent days as punishment. His autonomous behaviour and request to meet his own personal needs were met with further limitations to his freedoms. Rory used the word 'boring' 19 times and the word 'annoying' 40 times to describe his overall experiences of school, in a one-hour interview.

FEELINGS OF LIMITED COMPETENCE AND HOW THESE RELATED TO A WEAKER SENSE OF AGENCY

Our findings supported and illuminated previous research findings that some children did indeed perceive themselves as of inferior worth to others at school, owing to the systemic emphasis on performance in mathematics/English. At the same time, it is important to note that some children, such as Michael and Clara, did not *explicitly* acknowledge these feelings of stigmatisation. Perhaps this was mainly because they were

encouraged to constantly show that they were happy and coping. However, there were many in the sample who did explicitly articulate a sense of inferiority, usually based on a reduced Sense of Competence as a result of comparing their own attainment to that of others—in mathematics/English. For example, Edith showed a lowered Sense of Competence and little faith in her power to initiate change, indicating a weakened Sense of Agency, when she told us:

I'm the one who was always slow because I write slow. [2]

I'm not really the smartest person out of my class. [13]

She described a picture of a child who had received low marks in a test as 'sad', indicating her sense of powerlessness because she had no alternative courses of possible action. She also lacked a Sense of Relatedness to higher-attaining peers:

She feels really sad because all her other friends have high marks and she's the only one who has low marks. Lonely and sad and very disappointed. [2]

The isolation linked to lower-attainment suggests further disempowerment and lack of control of the situation. On the other hand, Edith perceived that a child who attained high marks for their performance would be recognised by being paraded to the head teacher who would praise her performance. She would feel perhaps an empowering Sense of Competence:

Super happy, really, really happy. Extremely excited about her scores [especially] when they show the head teacher. [2]

Edith went on to recommend that the low-scoring child take private tutoring, suggesting that she had no power initiate help for herself at present; that the support she received at school was inadequate to allow her to make normal progress. This was despite the fact that Edith herself and many of her peers were on Pupil Premium (indicating economic disadvantage), meaning she was trapped in an impossible position, lacking agency:

[The low-scoring child] should ask her parents to book a tutoring programme so she could get more better at mathematics and stuff like that. [Or] they might send them to a school which costs a lot of money so they can learn better maybe. [6]

She used the word ‘sad’ again to illustrate her awareness of her own inferior competence when test-scores were made public, a classic vehicle for drawing attention to failure:

I’m a little bit sad, because I’m not very good at mathematics tests and sometimes—um sometimes you need to write your score [in public]. I think for my last mathematics test I got 4. [4]

Again, she is describing feeling trapped in a place she can do nothing to change. Edith was explicit about the pain and humiliation she felt when comparing herself to others and her sense of powerlessness to change her predicament because she had failed:

My friends understand and get the answers right ... It doesn’t feel good for me, because I don’t understand ... people try their hardest, but sometimes they fail. [5]

Edith’s Sense of Competence is repeatedly eroded, every time she tries her hardest, but still fails. This led to her questioning whether she has any control over the situation. Edith relatedly described being ‘very worried for the test’, in case she achieved ‘zero’ [4]: that is, not even one mark to suggest competence! She again expressed her lack of power to initiate change, leaving her just to dream about being better at mathematics. She indicated 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]

Edith’s peer, Laurie, indicated that his Sense of Competence and Agency were affected by the *status* of the actual performance, rather than any specific engagement or learning. He had a greater sense of freedom when the test was a practice, indicating a particular hierarchy within the performative system:

I got 6 out of 20. But I would be crying if it was a real test, but it was a practice [so] I wasn’t that angry—but ... if it was a real test I’d be ashamed. [5]

Laurie uses the word ‘ashamed’, which itself implies lower-status, and the sense of being trapped in a position he could not tackle. Similarly, Sam seemed cornered and disempowered when he said:

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

Louise’s low Sense of Competence obstructed her from putting her hand up to answer questions in class, because she was anxious about being reprimanded for getting something wrong; and about losing external affirmation for her performance. This seemed more important to her than her freedom to find out whether she had grasped a concept well or not. This was because, when reprimanded, she felt:

Scared ... and sometimes I get dojo points off [i.e. reward-points off].

Despite her overall greater Sense of Agency than Louise, Santosh’s freedom was constrained by fear of disapproval from peers, too. She explained:

Some people can say, ‘Oh you got that wrong! It was so easy!’

She therefore also tried to avoid humiliation by not raising her hand in class, even if this would have helped her engagement and learning. Michael [3] similarly had a disabling fear of peer disapproval, especially being deliberately labelled as ‘dumb’:

They might bully him ... They will say that he’s a dumb person ... Probably they will say ‘Oh you’re bad at mathematics, oh you’re bad at English’ ... ‘Oh you’re not smart’.

Rory [3] described needing more time for agentic reflection, which led him to feel very nervous in his competitive infant classroom [aged 5–7], limiting his sense of freedom and capacity for thoughtful action; and potentially exacerbating his lower Sense of Competence within the performative environment. It is sobering to consider that these young children were so busy avoiding trouble that they had little time for reflection, let alone reflexivity. One can imagine his distress when Rory explained:

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

Mark, Gemma and Harriet in a lower-attainers' group for mathematics told us about a classic schooling process that led them to stand out as less competent than others: as the only Year 4 children who still had to work among the younger children in a Year 3 class. Santosh named the walk from Year 4 to the lower-attainers' Year 3 group, 'The walk of shame' [3]. This shame seemed to undermine their Sense of Agency in many ways: they saw themselves to lack both a Sense of Competence and a Sense of Relatedness; they perceived themselves to have no power to initiate a change to the situation; they were entirely constrained by the attainment grouping structure; they had no chance to follow alternative courses of possible action; and finally, they could not exercise their desires, volitions or intentionality or exercise choice—all because of how 'prior attainment' was perceived.

Some children perceived teachers to *prefer* 'good, smart' children. This was another performance-related strategy that singled them out as having inferior status—based on their prior attainment. Michael, for example, pointed out how the teacher favoured children who were competent readers, meaning that he had fewer opportunities—less freedom—than they had:

The smart people, they get a lot of chances because if they get—so we do reading ... Whoever's reading that much, they [the teacher] put their name up in the star, and then—(*pause*) but he never picks me. [2]

Later he described these smart people as super-stars 'like the mathematics gods' and 'like the mathematics angels' [5] while he was just normal. His peer, Sam, explained how this discrepancy deprived him too of some enjoyable social time that 'smart' children enjoyed, denying him some opportunity for exercising choice and experiencing some freedom:

I'm just carrying on and then I finish like ten minutes later than the other people—[they] are just messing round on the board because they've finished.

When asked what a teacher would say about an (imaginary) high-attaining girl called Maria, Ellie explained that only higher-attainers like Maria were allowed to get a drink when they wanted [2], were picked for special jobs [4] and given more rewards [4].

FEELING EXCLUDED ON THE BASIS OF ATTAINMENT AND HOW THIS RELATED TO AN INFERIOR SENSE OF AGENCY

Feeling excluded on the basis of attainment could simply be provoked by sitting physically in a different space from others—a space determined by prior attainment with no input according to the child's choice or judgment. Due to her perceived lack of competence, Ellie felt excluded—and she felt powerless to initiate a change to this—from the green and yellow groups for mathematics:

If you're on green then it means you're good with mathematics. If you're on yellow then it means you're kind of good with mathematics. But if you're on red it means ... you wouldn't like be *getting it* [3] ... When I feel left out, I feel mad!

On several occasions she expressed anguish when her friends went out to their (higher) literacy attainment groups, again, against her preference and with no recourse to changing this situation:

I'm like '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]

On the other hand, when she did work within the whole class, she was sometimes given easier work than the others on the basis of her perceived lack of competence, which led her to feel cornered by embarrassment:

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

Jack sometimes experienced teasing because he was in a lower-attainers' intervention group. This seemed to put him on the defensive, feeling attacked by higher-attaining peers' derogatory comments, potentially reducing his own Sense of both Competence and Agency:

Some people might tease you for it, [being] in the bottom group for everything. But if they just tease you, just tell them, ‘So what if I’m in the bottom group for everything, I’m still catching up to just learn stuff’.

Jack perceived himself as excluded and lacking normality in relation to his peers in another way too, over which he believed he had no agency:

It’s harder for me because *normally* other people like practise 24/seven with their mums and dads. [But] I’m not a practice person.

Fin described being deliberately excluded from teachers’ attention, denying him opportunities for spontaneous engagement, because of the difficulty he faced with handwriting. This eroded his Sense both of Competence and Relatedness:

It doesn’t really help my confidence because most [teachers] just sort of walk straight past [me] because they know they can’t read my handwriting. They don’t talk to me much.

On the other hand, Fin’s Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) diagnosis singled him out because he found it more difficult to concentrate in a formal classroom and he could suddenly be surprised when his attention was caught. This put him in a compromised position where ‘everybody stares at you’, which he found humiliating. Yet he perceived that he had no power to initiate change:

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.

The dominant focus on mathematics (in addition to writing) in schooling was itself a source of exclusion which triggered erosion of children’s Sense of Agency. The majority of children in our sample found themselves particularly adverse to mathematics, while simultaneously being told that mathematics was the most important subject for their future career success. Institutionalised patterns of cultural value suggested to them that to fail at mathematics was potentially dangerous leading them to feel trapped by their lack of competence in this subject—regardless of their competence in many others. Laurie relayed to us this ‘cruel and cynical fiction’:

Mathematics is a core subject ... it's a subject that you need like in your life, and not being good at it like—like there's lots of jobs that need mathematics.

A further and obvious source of exclusion which reduced a Sense of Agency was being kept in at break/lunch-time—against children's intentions—because they had not completed as much work as other children. This was prescribed, despite the fact that they had little choice over the speed with which they worked—and that working faster may not have been most engaging or rich in learning. Clara felt constrained by this and expressed frustration, displaying 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 her reaction to being kept in against her wishes to finish work. She noted how this would interfere with her Sense of Relatedness to peers; and curtail her freedoms:

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

In secondary-school, some of the sample children spent time in sealed off Isolation Units because of unfinished or forgotten homework, especially designed to exclude them from both their classrooms *and* their playtimes. Such treatment has been considered both against human rights and also illegal according to safeguarding policies. More research on the impact of this practice needs to be initiated.

FEELING INVISIBLE OR WHOLLY 'OTHER' BECAUSE OF LOWER-ATTAINMENT AND HOW THIS CURTAILED CHILDREN'S SENSE OF AGENCY

The 'Wholly Other' Experience of Disempowerment through Stress and Anxiety

Some children experienced disempoweringly high levels of stress and anxiety when faced by a page of mathematics/English tasks at which they knew they could not succeed, limiting their capacity for acting *at all*. They

were left feeling powerless because they could see no way forward, no way out. This extreme state was often exacerbated by the fact that mathematics (especially) seemed so ‘hard’, and yet was held to be of such high importance. Of all the testimonies we collected from the CLIPS children, perhaps the following are the most devastating and most in need of addressing. While these experiences persist, engagement and attainment is sure to be reduced; and wellbeing denied. Ellie, for example, explained:

When we’re learning about [mathematics] I’m like ‘This is so hard!’ ... [Even] when the teacher explains it—it’s like ‘This is so hard!’

The pressure to perform successfully—despite not feeling able to act at all—was intense for Ellie. This experience was usually accompanied by fear, stress, even panic and anger, which undermined Ellie’s Sense of Competence and Sense of Agency further. Ellie described her intense fear of the teacher choosing her to answer a mathematics question in class:

I’m like, ‘Not me, not me! I don’t know the answer’ ... I was sitting down in my chair and I was like—(*stunned pause*) I don’t have that much fingers!

For Ellie, simply sitting in class looking at the mathematics display-board brought on panic which seemed to lock her into fearful inaction:

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. But for him, the difficulty centred around the fact that it did not feel safe to express this anger within the constraints of school. This gave him the constant and challenging task of hiding his negative feelings at school. The energy he put into accomplishing this hiding task was clearly in tension with energy he might have put into engaging in other learning agentically. It was also a distressing experience for him, specifically as a person frequently evidencing limited wellbeing:

I seem to get very angry every day ... I mostly just play Fortnite [later, at home]. 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. I normally do deep breaths. Well—not out loud!

Mark's anger tallied with his weak Sense of Agency which stemmed from his weak Sense of Competence in writing, as well as the fact that writing actually hurting his hand and arm physically. But he reaffirmed that he needed to repress his anger and hurt; and was not free to express these:

Sometimes I just can't deal with it, there's too much information in my head. So I normally just scream into my arm.

Reflecting back on a teacher he used to have, he reported feeling out of control and yet having no recourse to help:

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]

These confessions illustrate how his weak Sense of Competence became exacerbated by his weak Sense of Agency where he did not feel free to express distress. He perhaps felt trapped because, not only did he perceive his responses to be wrong and feel powerless to change the situation, but he felt constrained to repress or hide these exact feelings.

Fin felt constrained by having a different impossible choice: if he was struggling to understand a concept, he needed time to think about it and engage with it; but time was not available and he had to move on to the next task:

I get confused with the other bit and then I don't really listen to what the teacher's saying because I'm still trying to figure out why that answer is like that. [3]

Here is yet another example of how hard the CLIPS children seemed to be working, and yet despite this, how their Sense of Competence was constantly eroded, leading to a damaged Sense of Agency. Several children also surprised us by depicting *other children* as constraints on their freedom to engage, a comment that might be expected more from the highest-attainers in a class. One example was when Abe described how painfully difficult he found it to succeed in English writing, both earlier and later in his life-history, leading to ongoing nervousness and physical shaking:

I hate English writing, because sometimes *they distract me*, and I get very nervous; and I break the pencil. [1]

I tried so hard because I was nervous, and I was like shaking. [5]

Jack seemed to experience a similar confusion triggered by classroom disturbance, which impeded his Sense of Competence and made him less capable of taking control of his situation:

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

Another trigger for disempowerment was the testing regime. Like many of the children, Jack explained how the fear surrounding tests made it more difficult to perform competently and take action to achieve success. He used a very evocative image of lacking agency, saying 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. I don't know, I'm not sure. 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.

His solution was to provoke the teacher to send him out of class, in other words choosing to be excluded and isolated as preferable to attempting what appeared to be the impossible task in front of him:

If you like constantly be on Miss's case, you'll get sent out, so your brain can relax. [4]

At least in this way, he had discovered how to make a change to an untenable situation, achieving some Sense of Agency where he was allowed a little freedom.

Gemma experienced what she described as 'anxiety' attacks or 'panic' attacks from age nine, which, like Jack's experiences, left her practically disabled. When faced by a mathematics task she felt incompetent to address, yet pressured to attempt:

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

These moments of panic continued throughout her final year in primary-school, at which time she finally informed her parents about them. Up to that point, she had been trying, unsuccessfully, to deal with them in alienation from others.

Michael also found mathematics stressful, seemingly impossible to master:

I hate mathematics because it's too hard because it has—so if I do 1000 times 1000—it's 2000. But if it was the hard-hard-hard-hard like 100 divided by 100 like—is that 200? I think I think, but it's hard-hard-hard!

And yet Michael's confusion could be reinforced by his teacher's anger whereby the little work he had so far successfully achieved was destroyed, provoking an even further reduced Sense of Agency in Michael, and leading to fear, distress and anger. He tried to concentrate but sometimes this was not within his mastery and he had no control over it in class:

[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 took out the paper, he um, he (*pause*) he ripped out the paper and then I had to start again.

In contrast, Michael imagined a student who had good marks, imagining him as feeling 'powerful' [2]. This contrasted to those who were positioned in the lower ranks, feeling disempowered cognitively, socially and emotionally: '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].

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]

None the less, all children—except Sam, Ellie and Zeph—simultaneously believed the institutionalised messages of cultural value—the ‘cruel and cynical fiction’—that tests are good for children. Perhaps their overarching belief that they had little power to initiate change to structures, and their emaciated opportunities for critical reflection in schooling, led them to accept the fiction that tests were good for learning just as they accepted other practices for fear of punishment if they did not. Sam, however, in a role-play scenario, showed some insight by warning against giving (imaginary, alien) children tests because: The alien children ‘might get super stressed-out and *faint*’.

Indeed, Sam is an example of a child who responded to his repeated failure to meet ‘age-related expectations’, exemplified by poor test marks, by concluding that there was something ‘wrong’ with him. He expressed this clearly:

My life is like a massive jigsaw with pieces missing. It’s like a story and then there’s a missing page.

These images of a jigsaw with pieces missing or a book with a missing page powerfully highlight how limited Sam felt in his emaciated capacity as an incomplete, incoherent whole. Unfortunately, his feelings about his poor performance dominated his whole school-life-history: his Sense of Agency appears to have been weakened by his constantly low scores in tandem with his ongoing hard work and concentration. This was disempowerment—when he worked as hard as he could but still could not attain the same scores as others, even as others who did not work as hard as he did.

Initiating Gaining Help

Many of the children eloquently described not being able to *initiate* receiving the help they needed in class. One can easily imagine the sense of powerlessness experienced by the CLIPS children as they sat and waited for help, constrained by school-rules not to move around or find help in other ways they preferred. They had no choices but to sit and wait with their hands up: again, actually wanting to engage with their work, but constrained by the systemic structures of the classroom from doing so. Jon was particularly angry with teachers:

Sometimes if you like call their 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]

For Sam, the wait for help felt like 'a million years'; and Fin sometimes actually felt invisible and never managed to talk with the teacher, which presumably evoked a strong sense of disempowerment:

I do put my hand up. But she doesn't see me because I'm at the end of the classroom.

THE OUTCOME: DISLIKE OF SCHOOLING

The narratives above illustrate how some of the children in the CLIPS project—due to their perceived low-attainment—felt lower-status or inferior; excluded; or 'wholly other' and invisible; and how these experiences related directly to a weakened Sense of Agency or even disablement. This sense of powerlessness was not due to lack of hard work or the desire to concentrate among these children. It occurred when the children were working as hard as they could but perceived that they *still* did not achieve the same as other children. We imagine that this led to even less motivation to engage the next time.

Some of the children came to dislike school intensely, apart from as a place to meet friends. For example, Ellie's life-history is rich in examples of her strong dislike for all aspects of school except home-time. Ellie explained how her school-life was dominated by longing to go home where, presumably, she felt she could exercise her own desires and choices and experience freedom, drawing on her own knowledge and beliefs to inform her actions:

I looked at the clock and then it was nearly home-time, it was like on the 11. And I was like 'So close'... I'm saying 'home-time' in my head all over again—I'm like 'home-time, home-time' ... The thing I like about school is like the end of the day—that's the only part I like ... I love going home ... I wish I never came to school today.

Ellie expressed this rejection of school particularly lucidly, but others shared it. Edith told us how important home and lunch-time were for her:

I [would like to] stay home and throw away school ... That makes me really sad when I get up to go to school ... I never feel relaxed at school [except] super happy about lunch-time. [3]

Five children out of 23 in the project appeared to find schooling so unpalatable that they made a conscious or sub-conscious decision to focus on non-school or anti-school interests by the end of the project. What distinguished these five children was their especially weak Sense of Agency (with three having a Controlled Performance Orientation; and two an Impersonal Performance Orientation). All five of these children told us in final interviews that they did not care about school-work anymore. They seemed to have given up on the possibility of participation in intentional engagement in school-learning. The lack of recognition they experienced, the low status they perceived themselves to hold, and their disempowerment in initiating changes for the better, seems to have curtailed their participation. Our interpretation of their portrayals is that the institutionalised patterns of cultural value they faced in schooling did not recognise their particular strengths, intentions or goals, constraining their experiences of freedom and preventing them from drawing on their own knowledges and beliefs in making decisions about action. This minimised their capacity to evaluate or critique schooling practices. They neither perceived themselves to be competent nor to have the power to make desirable things happen. Overall, the system was not serving their best interests; and undermining social justice.

Gemma is the most extreme example of someone who seemed to have given up on being able to master any institutionally valued aspects of schooling. In the first few years of the project, Gemma was very obedient and hard-working at school and always tried to be positive. She seemed constantly optimistic that if she kept trying hard, she would achieve success. However, at the end of her last year at primary-school, in a role-play, she showed herself to be getting angry with the teacher for keeping her in for further mathematics at break; and angry with peers who did not stand up for her. Despite all her hard work, success still seemed elusive. By the start of secondary-school, she could say:

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

During one interview, she told us about storming out of lessons without permission:

I wasn't going to be in the lesson if the teacher gives me [punishments] for no reason! [13]

And she tried to take control and put her teacher in his place, exclaiming to him in class 'I'm not a dog!' when he asked her to 'Sit!' [12]. She commented on the control that secondary-school teachers wanted to have over her, instructing her to be 'goody two-shoes'. And she expressed an utter desperation in relation to her lack of a Sense of Agency:

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

Summary 7.5: Institutionalised patterns of cultural value in schooling that seemed to disable the CLIPS children and led them to experience status-subordination

Systemic schooling policy that values performance/attainment over intentional learning/engagement:

Maths being promoted as most important despite obstructing some children from mastering it

The external pressure of testing

Testing being held up as beneficial for children

Limited time to cover prescribed mathematics/English curriculum

Outside-school support being expected and necessary to be normal in current system

=>lead to=>

General patterns that curtail agency:

Allowing children no alternative courses of possible action to redeem their sense of status

Not recognising children's choices, preferences and judgements

Permitting children to have minimal impact on their environment

=>lead to=>

School patterns that indicate valuing those with higher-attainment above others:

Physical separation according to prior attainment

School-based rewards and privileges for high- attainment

Public announcement of scores that highlight negative differences
 >=lead to=>
 Classroom practices that value competition:
 Making comparisons between children's attainments
 Individualised work in class, disallowing collaboration that might provide support
 Other children's comments which hierarchise children by attainment
 Publicly apparent differentiation according to prior attainment
 Children being presented with tasks that look too difficult
 Children being picked on to answer a question in class that appears too difficult
 Display boards that might intimidate some children
 Whole-class teaching that may not suit some children
 Teachers shouting and getting angry or impatient with children who find class difficult
 >=lead to=>.
 Lack of parity-of-participation = reduced social justice.

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Relatedness for Wellbeing

SENSE OF RELATEDNESS

Our life-histories happily demonstrated how an increased Sense of Relatedness could influence a child's trajectory in directions promising wellbeing. The life-histories indicated the importance of friendships, especially for children with a low Sense of Competence. However, this appeared to be an incidental outcome, rather than a systemically designed one. Eden and Mark, for example, found school-life barely tolerable in primary-school, but on discovering a greater range of friends in secondary-school, both managed to keep going albeit not always in a learning-engaged way; while Gemma felt that her agency was increasingly undermined as she mourned the loss of her primary-school friends. Feeling a Sense of Relatedness is what most people want passionately, whether they acknowledge this or not. However, relatedness may not come easily to some children, surrounded by dozens of other school-children. They may need to learn how to nurture this. This is where systemic strategies can help. Like Watkins (2010), Lynch and Baker (2005) have critiqued the neo-liberal performativity of the current schooling system which tends to relegate relatedness and affective aspects of childhood to second place:

Formal education has been premised on the assumption that the principal function of schooling is to develop intellect ... The neglect of the emotions

has been paralleled by the neglect of education of the personal intelligences involved in emotional work ... [Western thought] characterized the emotions as being in opposition to reason, and therefore subordinate and morally suspect. (p. 142)

As proposed also by Macmurray, policy-makers and educators in schools could consider instigating a ‘relational pedagogy’ (Cremin & Chappell, 2021), emphasising relationships as not only the means to effective learning and wellbeing but also *as the desired outcome* of these (Fielding, 2004; Stern, 2012). Adults could explicitly support children’s relationship development as well as their cognitive attainment, in order to promote children’s future wellbeing more fully. This would align with Ryan and Deci’s Self-Determination Theory which proposes that wellbeing *and* academic attainment will occur if children have a strong Sense of Competence *and* a strong Sense of Relatedness, including good friendships or relationships among peers. The child is less likely to attain cognitive competence at school if they lack the Sense of Relatedness. This claim seems to be systematically ignored.

The Sense of Relatedness that most people crave is characterised by experiences of:

- closeness,
- warmth,
- belonging,
- respect,
- acceptance,
- value,
- trust,
- participation,
- shared purpose,
- cooperation and/or
- care.

Ryan and Deci suggested that to generate the motivation required to engage intentionally, the child needed to feel not only competent and agentic, but also personally connected or related to their peers in the immediate community. They needed:

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

A good Sense of Relatedness allows the child to feel a positive social status in their community or group, being recognised as valuable within it. Relatedness therefore is one means for promoting recognition, an essential pillar of social justice. It is linked ‘inextricably to identity, the shaping of people’s subjectivities, or senses of self in relation to the social world’ (Ecclestone & Brunila, 2015, p. 492). It is important for the child’s development of their own unique identity—or their particular niche in relation to the immediate and wider social world—which will potentially help them develop a stronger Sense of Agency and Competence. It is important to stress here the *Sense of Relatedness*. There may be no finite definition of who belongs and who does not, but if school-children have the *sense* that they belong and are connected at school, this is likely to be what motivates them to engage with school. Pavlenko and Norton (2007) suggested that only when a child believes in (or imagines) the existence of positive future possibilities for their social group, will they choose to invest in learning and take control over it.

Bourdieu (1977) emphasised that part of feeling related is knowing how to gain acceptance into the social world in the first place. This knowledge may need to be nurtured explicitly for some children more than others. At best, primary-school children eventually form a learning community through close networks of egalitarian peer relationships where, in Cremin’s words ‘You find your people’ (HHPC conference, Nov 2023). When school-children have this sense of belongingness and connectedness, they feel the right to participate in the development of the future of their social group. Although each school-child’s development of a sense of belongingness and connectedness will be different, Ryan and Deci’s hypothesis is that some form of Sense of Relatedness is vital: not only to support academic attainment; but also to enhance motivation to engage in school-work; and promote good physical and mental health and wellbeing overall.

In terms of cognitive learning (of mathematics, English, humanities, science etc.), Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory proposes that even this is fundamentally socio-cultural and not just cognitive; and indeed that it feeds into the development of the human being who is learning, rather

than being an end in itself. In his theory, new knowledge is not acquired by being presented with information by a good teacher and storing it. Rather, a cognitive (e.g. scientific) idea is seeded by a teacher but will not become engaged with as integral to the thought, speech and action of the learner, until the individual has investigated it through interaction with others—potentially including peers—in the cultural environment. Then the learner may become competent and creative with their use of the new knowledge. That is, without some fundamental forms of social relationship and interaction, many areas of cognitive learning are obstructed. These theories suggest that relatedness is a key aspect—often a necessity—for any intentional learning.

Summary 9.1 Sense of relatedness
might include

- sense of belongingness and/or connectedness to group/others, having a sense of purpose and potential benefit with and for the group and
- feeling respected, having good status, being valued, experiences of closeness, warmth, belonging, respect, value, acceptance, trust, participation, cooperation, and/or care.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE SUPPORTING THE LINKS BETWEEN SENSE OF COMPETENCE, SENSE OF RELATEDNESS AND WELLBEING

There is limited research focused on children's perceptions of their relatedness to peers and/or staff in primary-schooling (but see Burke & Grosvenor, 2004; Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2004; Williamson et al., 2020). However, there is some consensus in recent research literature (e.g. Sellars & Imig, 2021; Tze et al., 2021; Wentzel, 2017) that time spent with peers and/or friends can provide personal help for children to achieve agency and wellbeing. Good peer relationships also seem to be associated positively with academic performance throughout school (Guo et al., 2018). In contrast, feeling socially excluded leads to distress and reduced chances of wellbeing with negative implications for cognitive competence. Mínguez (2020) provided evidence, from the Subjective Wellbeing literature, for *personal relationships being the strongest factor for*

predicting happiness. This aligns with Clark et al.'s (2018) claim that wellbeing in childhood predicts later wellbeing, assuming that good personal relationships are also key to happiness. This may be because good peer relationships can buffer some of the negative effects of stress or fear (as referred to by the CLIPS children). For example, Baines and MacIntyre's (2022) research illustrated that enjoyment of sitting with peers to eat a meal at school was positively related to greater liking of lessons in school and school liking generally, presumably enhancing engagement with learning too. Humour and fun functioned to build a sense of connectedness within the group and help foster acceptance and respect for diversity, especially among boys (Baines & MacIntyre, 2022). Seligman (2011) proposed that one of the main reasons why relationships promote wellbeing is because it is only in relationships that we can show kindness to others, a positive trigger for feeling good.

Sadly, there is also a substantial documentation of the deleterious effects on children's mental health and wellbeing that *lack* of relatedness implicates (Maunder & Monks, 2019; Ng-Knight et al., 2019). For example, Reay's (2006) study of primary-school pupil narratives about the social conditions of learning uncovered a negative social status hierarchy that undermined relatedness. Reay found 'aspects of both pupil peer group cultures and classroom dynamics that work against fairness, collegiality and a sense of community in classrooms' (p. 171). Peer relationships may be made less satisfactory by a systemic culture of neo-liberal performativity, within a power hierarchy strategised by attainment, social class, gender and ethnicity differences. Reay (2006) emphasised the importance of recognising 'the school's role in the development of such invidious pupil hierarchies' (p. 179). She described how these power dynamics inevitably silenced certain, marginalised groups of pupils and made bonding with other peers more problematic for them.

Webster and Blatchford (2013) also illustrated the subtle interplay between a low Sense of Competence and a poor Sense of Relatedness when they investigated experiences of pupils with Special Educational Needs/learning disabilities in primary-school. Many of these were withdrawn into lower-attainment intervention groups (as were some children in our CLIPS sample). These children described their limited access to other pupils compared with higher-attainment groups, which made relationship-forming more difficult. Dunne et al. (2011) also illustrated primary pupils' resistance to being taken away from higher-attaining peers for lower-attainment group work in mathematics or English (as also

indicated by the CLIPS children). Separation justified in terms of attainment may be one factor behind the research showing that 50% of children in the UK have reported feeling left out by other children in school classes at least once in the last month (Mínguez, 2020). To illustrate how this might occur, Ambreen (2020) reported how, in her study, the presence of children from lower-attainment groups in mixed-attainment groups: ‘was not appreciated by those children from both the average- and high-ability groups’ who stigmatized their lower-attaining peers as ‘low knowledgeable and unhelpful’. In such a competitive environment, children who attained consistently highly might come to prefer to work alone than engage in peer work (Ambreen, 2020), thereby reducing opportunities for all children to interact and form relationships during class. Indeed, any instructional methods that aim to foster competition or even ‘independence’ may obstruct the fostering of good relationships (Juvonen, 2018).

Some children with syndromes such as ADHD or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may find it difficult to relate to peers, even more so when placed in segregated groups. As Woodgate et al. (2020) suggest, despite society’s efforts to promote social inclusion, children with divergences (even lower-attainment, it seems) continue to report feeling lonely and excluded, having limited contact socially and encountering systemic barriers (e.g. bullying, discrimination). Other barriers to the creation of good peer relatedness may concern the fact that opportunities are declining for children to engage in enjoyable face-to-face interaction with peers in ‘open settings’ both in and outside the school (Baines & Blatchford, 2009). Children are spending less time socialising with peers and are less engaged in play outside the classroom within the current performative system. This is especially because, in nearly all schools, break-times and lunch-times are used as occasions to catch up on incomplete work, negatively affecting those who work more slowly. Other barriers may include the constantly close control of adults in school which may hinder the development of peer interactions (Leigers et al., 2017). CLIPS children themselves were aware that freedom during playtimes could redress the impact of stressful experiences. For example, Clara explained how the playground was a place where she could eliminate stress:

The [school’s] secret garden ... whenever I’m stressed, nature makes me feel happy... because like you can sit down and watch all the birds come and it will be so quiet here. [3]

Given that many so-called lower-attainers will spend most of their school-mornings working on subjects they find tricky and may well dislike (mathematics/English), it is especially important that this source of stress is counterbalanced for them, by the opportunity to enjoy relatedness to peers, free from the ‘continual compliance’ and ‘surveillance’ of their classrooms (Devine, 2003, p. 123).

CLIPS CHILDREN’S SENSE OF RELATEDNESS

[IMPORTANT NOTE: Throughout the book, a digit in square brackets following a quotation means that the quotation comes from an interview during that TERM of the project. For example, [8] following a quotation means that the quotation came from TERM8 of the project i.e. just over half way through the project when the children were starting in Year 5 of their primary-schools.]

We were amazed to discover that in two different sample schools, the children did not know the names of all the children in their own class by the end of Year 3 (ages 7–8)—partly as a result of segregation by attainment. Some affirmative remedies had been put in place to address lack of relatedness in some schools—for example, a friendship bench in the school playground [Mark, 3] and a break-time supervised activity-room for those who did not want to play outside [Gemma, 4]. However, more transformative remedies appeared necessary which addressed the wider causes of loneliness and isolation.

The children in the CLIPS study understood how important relatedness was for success and wellbeing at school. Gemma told us that what she liked most about herself was that: ‘I have a lot of friends, and my friends support me’ [4]. Fin explained in TERM3 that he was a shy person and therefore benefited particularly by being in ‘teams’ to learn. Jack explained how his friends made him feel calm and cared for:

I think it is important to be happy because if you’re not then it affects your learning ... Whenever I’m not happy it’s hard for me to like work—when-ever I’m not happy I just stop doing my work ... [but] whenever I’m sad about anything my friends do come over ... They really care about me and whenever I’m like hurt they would just help me out. [6]

Seven children in our sample of 23 told us explicitly that the *only* part of school they liked was friends. Harriet said: ‘The only thing I like about

school is that I get to meet my friends' [4]. Ellie explained that, for her, the whole point of school was to have fun and feel happy by being with friends: 'I want to see my friends because like it makes me happy' [6]. Sam similarly explained that what he really wanted to gain from schooling overall was 'to make friends' because 'making friends is a key part of being happy' [6]. Rory [5] told us that he believed that good relationships were more important than high-attainment. 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 'they are always nice to me' [Michael, 3]; and they were 'always making me feel like I'm a grown up' [Amin, 3].

Given that quality appears to be more important than quantity in terms of relationships, even one best friend could seemingly transform a child's engagement at school. This appeared to be particularly the case with Fin whose life-history dramatically transformed once he was reunited with his infant-school friend when he was nine. Others had particular and significant best friends too. Ellie explained that she and her best friend: 'Text every night' [4]. Musa [3] described his fun-filled, humour-rich friendship with Latham: 'Me and him say we're funny ... And he says weird stuff and makes me laugh'. Clara [1] recognised one of her strengths as caring for others and helping children who felt excluded: 'My best things about me is like—I help people when they're upset or like hurt. And if they don't have anyone to play with, I can play with them'. Despite a systemic lack of emphasis on collaboration that we noticed in the schools, the children seemed to want to help each other, perhaps anticipating the sense of connectedness and worth it gave to them and to their peers.

TROUBLED RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN SCHOOLING AND A SENSE OF ALIENATION

However, among our CLIPS sample of 23 children, we coded 20 children as expressing the concern that other children caused trouble for them. We have no way to know whether or how these troubles were related to their own Sense of Competence or the fact that they found mathematics/English particularly tricky. However, our findings illustrate that many of the sample children, who all found schooling hard in some ways, were experiencing other children as fearsome or intrusive, potentially undermining their Sense of Relatedness and threatening their engagement and wellbeing. Jack [5] summed this up neatly, saying:

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

The term ‘bullying’ was used by eight children during the episode of interviews in which we focussed on relationships. The children additionally described how other children were violent to them, kicking them, spitting, punching and hitting them. As Rory told us fearfully:

One of the bullies said ... ‘If you say that again I’m going to—I’m going to punch your head like a little egg’ [3].

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

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

I was about to get a red [sanction] card because one of my friends, Amelia, yeah, she was lying, yeah, and then she made me and somebody else in our class, yeah, get in trouble [6].

The CLIPS children described peers telling lies about them as well as being selfish, unfair or arrogant towards them. These apparent miscarriages of justice appeared to be sources of considerable pain to the children and presumably made it more likely that they lacked a secure Sense of Relatedness; all of which would interfere with the flourishing of future relationships, as well as cognitive learning; and overall wellbeing.

The CLIPS children described instances of feeling *lonely* at school during which they would have welcomed support from others. For example, Clara told us, ‘Whenever someone tells me “I’m not your friend” or when I’m alone—that’s when I’m stressed’ [3]. The following term, she said: ‘I’m lonely—maybe when, like, no one wants to play with me’. She also explained how she had felt when she first arrived in school:

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

Gemma described how in her nursery, ‘People didn’t like me ... So like the first two months I was basically walking around alone’. When Harriet was eight-years-old, we asked Harriet who her best friend was. She replied: ‘Not really anyone because I don’t play with anyone’ [4]; although she subsequently became friends with Mark. Earlier on, we had asked Mark to place a model of himself on the middle of concentric circles drawn on a table-top, and place figures representing friends, family and teachers at appropriate distances from himself depending on how close he felt to them. Unlike the other children, who all put family closest to them and teachers furthest away, Mark did not place anyone close to him. He placed one friend relatively close. In each of these cases, the experience of feeling lonely may have limited these children’s opportunities to feel a sense of belonging and have their status recognised.

THE DOUBLE-BIND OF LOW SENSE OF COMPETENCE WITH PERCEIVED ALIENATION FROM FRIENDS

While feelings of loneliness could be experienced by any child, there were some instances in which this loneliness was perceived as exclusion directly linked to their perceived low competence. This corroborates Ryan and Deci’s (2019) theory that children with a low Sense of Competence (which we assume occurred once they had been told they were lower-attainers) were particularly vulnerable to feeling inadequately related. For example, it was striking that 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 weak Sense of Relatedness and a weak Sense of Competence. Gabriella also suggested that when a child (like herself) did badly in mathematics or writing, she felt unsupported by others:

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

Physical isolation from higher-attaining friends could lead the children to feel more alienated as well as less competent. Several children described feeling a loss when the children had to move physically away from their friends, to their attainment sets or intervention groups. This exodus

highlighted both prior attainment; and lack of relatedness. For example, Ellie explained: ‘I need my friends. I need them to stay in the same class as me’ [2]. And yet her friends with perceived higher competence were moved into another room, exacerbating her perception of being alienated from her support system. As another example, Zeph also said he suffered when he was separated from his friends who went to a [higher] mathematics attainment group. Given that Zeph [3] told us explicitly that friends were the only part of school he enjoyed, this was a considerable source of distress for him: he was not only denied the opportunity to feel valued by his friends, but he also found no vehicle for voicing his own preferences and having these acted on.

Hard work done individually, in keeping with the performative system, was perhaps emphasised at the expense of (potentially richer) collaborative learning through peer interactions, thereby ignoring the crucial links, expressed by the children, between relatedness and competence. For example, Amin explained why he sometimes did not want to help peers: ‘I don’t want people stealing my ideas’ [6]. Such individualistic practices may have been counter to their sense of belongingness and connectedness where peers could extend and inspire each other’s ideas through their relatedness—regardless of prior attainment. Jack alluded to this emphasis on individualism: ‘If you have no friends ... you will work easier’ [6]. Zeph [3] told us: ‘I work hard a lot in mathematics and I listen quite a lot ... and do less talking ... Because most of the people on my table aren’t really my friends’. In addition, this valuing of independence and individualism led some children to feel burdened with responsibility for their own failures within a situation where they simultaneously felt they had no power to initiate change. In other words, they were expected to achieve competence without being allowed its supports in terms of Agency and Relatedness. They often blamed themselves for not achieving what they were supposed to achieve, adding to existing feelings of helplessness and ineffectuality—rather than, as we would see it, blaming the performative schooling context or the narrow curriculum within it. For example, Laurie blamed the children:

It’s the children’s fault they didn’t learn. And if the teacher said learn it at home and they didn’t learn, it’s their fault [4].

Independence should not be confused with autonomy or agency, specifically because a child’s Sense of Relatedness explicitly relies on their agency

to make it effectual. For example, Edith told us how she felt abandoned rather than autonomous when she had to work alone:

Sometimes ... it's hard for me and no one helps me. Sometimes I feel [my friend is] not always here to help me [2].

All the children admitted being kept in alone at break-time or lunch-time (or both) for not fully completing set tasks. This potentially exacerbated a child's low Sense of Competence (for feeling slow) by adding a lowered Sense of Relatedness too. Yet, the children seemed to view being kept in at break-time as a completely *normal* practice that must be tolerated, despite threatening their Sense of Relatedness and causing them distress. For example, Ellie told us that being kept in at break/lunch did not really sound fair. Then she added, 'But it actually is, because otherwise I'll have to stay in for my next lunch-break' [4]. The prioritisation of teachers completing the curriculum for mathematics and English seems to have justified deliberate alienation of these children during break or lunch-time.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON THE SENSE OF RELATEDNESS IN OUR DATA

This chapter has explored the CLIPS children's Sense of Relatedness as having a feeling of belonging, being connected and contributing to the social group at school. We have suggested that when feeling related, the children felt more respected, higher status, better valued; and they experienced closeness, warmth, trust and care. We have suggested that having a good Sense of Relatedness helped them develop a positive Sense of Competence, thereby supporting them in engaging in and mastering school-work.

Our data indicated that where the CLIPS children did not believe that they enjoyed equal social status in their classrooms—that is, enjoying a strong Sense of Relatedness—it may have led to them having their Sense of Agency curtailed too as they came to feel excluded as legitimate members of their community thereby being obstructed from parity of participation. Our data suggested that peer relationships were made less satisfactory by competitiveness among the peer group within a hierarchy stratified by attainment differences as well as social inequalities.

Our data, however, also illustrate how even one rich peer relationship had the potential to provide a source of companionship, support, care and

entertainment for the CLIPS children, including humour and fun, which could also function to build a sense of belongingness within the group. Most strikingly, having a strong Sense of Relatedness appeared to allow the CLIPS children *to satisfy their own needs for autonomy and competence* as well as relatedness; to feel *recognised* as they connected with others in valuing and valued ways. The social group or individual friend could then help in providing practical support, potentially leading to increased intentional engagement and ultimately, enhanced wellbeing and social participation.

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Imagining Schooling as a Positive Experience: Conclusions and Practical Recommendations

It was ambitious for our study to draw on three theories from different roots. Two were from outside education: Fraser's political science conceptualisation of social justice as parity of participation; and Ryan and Deci's social psychology-based theory that agency is fundamental to human well-being. By bringing in our third theory, Watkins' pedagogical theory of the distinction between learning and performance, to link the two previous theories together in an educational context, we have enriched our understandings of both wellbeing and social justice; and perceived synergies between the two. This allows us to draw well-targeted implications out of our data, which stand to support both academic and practical enhancements of children's experiences within schooling—in particular because children's own voices inform and direct these. These add insights into psychological understandings of children's motivational Orientations in schooling; but illustrate too how influences of a global performative schooling system influence individual children's everyday experiences. Our work has helped throw light on social injustice within the British schooling system, a system which Chris Watkins (2010) described as encouraging performance rather than learning. The data from these children in particular alerts us to the aspect of social justice that Nancy Fraser (2022) calls recognition of status; which is also important for wellbeing and social justice, both of which demand development of a strong Sense of Agency (Ryan and Deci, 2019).

IMAGINING SCHOOLING AS A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE: THROUGH THE CHAPTERS OF THIS BOOK

We started by defining participation as when an individual actively shares in, partakes of and/or contributes to a task, system or community. Using this definition, we imagine that school-children participating on a par with other children at school would entail everyone feeling that they are part of and contributing to their schooling community. In Fraser's terms, this implies that they have equal access to the resources to take an active and equal part in social interaction with others in schooling; that they feel that they have equal social status among others in schooling; and equal access to political decision-making in schooling. We imagine a schooling system where these demands are met as a socially just schooling system (Chap. 3).

Imagining schooling as a positive experience, we would see each child constructing themselves, and being constructed by others, as equally worthy in the schooling situation, regardless of their prior attainment. How they identify themselves will be respected; as will the groups they choose to identify with. When recognised in these positive ways, all children will be enjoying equal access to leisure time; and to other people's equally positive evaluations of their diverse strengths and interests. In this imaginary scenario, common practices in schooling support rather than ignore children's preferences; for example, support by physically placing children in classroom situations where they feel comfortable. And, crucial to representational justice, all children will have equal opportunities to represent their needs and preferences and these will be taken seriously and acted upon.

We have made a significant cross-discipline link in this book to boost our imagining, by highlighting how demands for wellbeing overlap with human rights underpinning social justice (Chap. 4). As indicated in the UNCRC (1989), this overlap might be manifest in children feeling protected and cared for within the schooling system, having their unique sense of self, strengths and interests developed, rather than undermined; and being given appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activities. This book has imagined that the outcome of having the positive experience of recognition will be children's wholehearted intentional engagement in academic tasks, non-academic pursuits, as well as in relationship-building. The positive conditions of schooling where they experience status recognition will spur them to interact with and understand the people and practices around them rather than feeling bored, trapped or distressed. In this situation, they are likely

to have good feelings such as excitement, enjoyment, calmness, and contentedness, which boost their creativity, imagination, concentration, cognitive performance, and flexible styles of thinking, and thus their overall wellbeing. This will be made more likely when schooling environments explicitly support them to have strong Learning Orientations, including a strong Sense of Competence, of Agency and of Relatedness.

For these aspects of wellbeing to be most readily evidenced, we imagine that the schooling environment focusses on children's growing and learning, their practice of freedom and volition, leading to children being eager to improve the range of their competences without regard to prior attainment (Chap. 5). For wellbeing to flourish, formal judgements and comparisons among different children will be minimised, as will rewards for meeting prescribed goals. Instead, an environment conducive to intentional engagement will develop: where school-children are encouraged to grapple with challenges that interest them and succeed in mastering them, receiving help from a range of people, having access to different resources and opportunities and being allowed to decide to stop working on a particular task when appropriate.

One important aspect of recognising the high status of every school-child would be the systematising of opportunities to support every child's Sense of Competence (Chap. 7): competence which may or may not relate to performance in mathematics and English tests. Whichever competence they have achieved (whether cognitive, creative or social), the child needs to feel that the task is personally appropriate and fulfilling; they can master it effectively; and a difference is made; after effort is exerted. And *this must account for the majority of their time in schooling* if it is to sustain their Sense of Competence.

From our findings, it is clear that children in a positively-experienced schooling system would need a strong Learning Orientation, which includes a strong Sense of Agency, in order to be recognised as competent, as theorised by Self-Determination Theory. For example, a Sense of Competence is unlikely to be nurtured when children do not feel they direct their own mastery of tasks (Chap. 8). We learnt from the children that their engagement and learning were compromised when they lacked a sense of control within schooling, sometimes instead, believing a 'cruel and cynical fiction' about their futures being 'ruined' if they did not conform. They needed more opportunities to ask questions about opaque aspects of schooling itself; as well as subject domains and their relevance to their learning and wellbeing. The CLIPS children showed us that they

were most likely to choose to engage in school-learning when this was fuelled by their own desire to grapple with particular ideas, to explore new meanings and new ways of behaving imaginatively and creatively, perceiving themselves as having the power to initiate change, practise reflexivity and consider genuinely alternative actions.

In particular, when children imagined having the freedom to focus on subjects such as arts, nature-study or sport instead of only mathematics and English, they seemed more enthusiastic about engaging; especially if testing were less dominant and time pressure less oppressive. They imagined feeling particularly well-recognised when they could choose to sit with their special friends; and when everyone won rewards for particular strengths, rather than just for performing well in mathematics/English tests. In the imaginary positive experience of schooling, their Learning Orientation, including a strong Sense of Competence and Agency, would be supported because they would be presented with tasks to do in ways that worked best for them and allowed them to master these; they would have access to collaborative ways of working and would not compete against their peers; and the teachers would not feel so pressured themselves that they resort to shouting at them; or become angry or impatient with children who are having difficulties.

We affirmed in our findings too, in keeping with Self-Determination Theory, that a Sense of Relatedness could support children's status-recognition and wellbeing at school (Chap. 9). Positive experiences of schooling, potentially including perceptions of higher-attainment, were more likely to emerge when children felt a sense of belongingness and/or connectedness to their group/others, feeling closeness, warmth, belonging, respect, acceptance, trust, participation, cooperation, and/or care; and having a sense of purpose and potential benefit with and for their group. A stronger Sense of Relatedness could compensate for deficiencies in Sense of Competence and could provide support for enhancing Sense of Agency; both of which spurred children on to adopt a Learning Orientation and engage intentionally in school-work. However, all of these would require systemic support from policy-makers and other educators.

KEY FINDINGS: OBSTACLES TO WELLBEING CAUSED BY GLOBAL NEO-LIBERAL PERFORMATIVITY

At the policy level, global neo-liberal performativity has fed into the narrow emphasis on attainment scores in mathematics and English within the British system. This narrow emphasis has influenced those with lower scores in mathematics/English, whereby they feel status-subordination and a reduced Sense of Competence. This narrow focus on specific performance in narrow curriculum areas, rather than learning and engagement in wider fields, has provoked limited conceptions of what is normal and what is acceptable, pushing many children into perceiving themselves as in the category of less than normal. The systemic performative culture promotes competition for high performances in a narrow set of tests. This has meant that some CLIPS children felt they were the 'losers' rather than achievers; and children's Sense of Relatedness was undermined. Attainment differences for these narrow performances potentially reinforced the existing power hierarchy (not investigated in our study) organised by social class, gender and ethnicity differences. Instructional methods that assumed that children would work individually, competitively, rather than collaboratively, have denied children the opportunities for learning with and from each other. Children have had few opportunities to engage in social or leisure activities with other children too, especially as break-times and lunch-times are used as 'catch-up' times for children who work more slowly than others. Within the classroom, the grouping of children according to prior attainment in a narrow range of performance tests has sometimes denied them access to their preferred seating partners and drawn attention to those with lower prior attainment. Such groupings have sometimes contributed to making children designated to lower groups feel subordinate. All these factors have reinforced a Performance Orientation over a Learning Orientation among the children.

Summary 10.1: Systemic factors that mitigated against children's wellbeing *Policy-wide*

- Narrow emphasis on attainment rather than learning.
- Narrow conceptions of 'normality' among children.
- Few systemic supports for relatedness.
- Systemic culture of competition for performance rather than learning.
- Power hierarchy strategised by attainment, social class, gender and ethnicity differences.

Instructional methods aimed to foster ‘independence’ or individualised responsibility.

Few opportunities for children to engage in enjoyable face-to-face interaction with peers in ‘open settings’.

Break-times and lunch-times being used as occasions to catch up on incomplete work, negatively affecting those who work more slowly.

Close control of adults in school.

Classroom based

Limited access of lower-attainers to other pupils, compared with higher-attainment groups.

Lower-attainers being taken away from higher-attaining peers.

Support for performance over learning.

Fear of being laughed at for lower-attainment.

KEY FINDINGS: EVIDENCE FOR IMPROVING CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCES

The influence of the systemic factors described above, according to the life-histories, was that children’s wellbeing was overall negatively affected; the CLIPS children often felt angry, frustrated and alienated. Some children found the formal aspects of mathematics and English particularly distressing and lacked any sense of successful learning or mastery in these subjects; and they all experienced frequent testing as a source of fear and anxiety. These negative feelings eroded the Learning Orientation, including the Sense of Agency, of many children, especially those who found it unsatisfactory to sit still for long hours and preferred more active, exploratory or collaborative approaches to learning. On the other hand, given that they were expected to concentrate on difficult tasks for long periods of time, many children wanted more peace and quiet in the classroom; as well as longer lunch-times and break-times in which they could relax and make each other happy. The constant and dominant erosion of children’s Sense of Agency was closely and negatively connected to Sense of Competence. This aligned with the finding that those who perceived their competence in performance as weak, took a more passive, conformist approach to schooling, trying to get by without being in trouble, as best they could. Whole-hearted engagement in learning would have demanded support for a Learning Orientation, including a much stronger Sense of Agency, including power and control by the children, whereby they could see—every day—that they could make a difference to how and what they

learnt. Then they could whole-heartedly learn about the many aspects of the world they found fascinating; and not worry only about performing.

A strong Sense of Relatedness was closely and positively connected to a strong Sense of Competence. However, relatedness was rarely given emphasis in the children's experiences of schooling as a system. Children were instead oppressed by the fiction that their happiness in future depended only on hard work in primary-school. It sometimes led to them blaming themselves when they were not engaged by the classroom, rather than demanding a better system and/or a better curriculum. They were not told that the best predictor of future wellbeing was their current wellbeing (Clark et al., 2018).

Summary 10.2: How Sense of Relatedness, Agency and Competence are linked to intentional learning, wellbeing and parity of participation



IMPLICATIONS OF THE LIFE-HISTORIES IN RELATION WELLBEING AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Nancy Fraser (2022) has recently re-emphasised the need for sustaining 'human beings and social bonds' as a counter-balance to the policy tunnel-vision on proving successful performance in economic prowess, the latter

which permeates the institutionalised patterns of capitalism in systems of schooling:

One essential epistemic shift is that from production to *social reproduction*—the forms of provisioning, caregiving, and interaction that produce and sustain human being 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. (p. 9; our emphasis)

This book has considered one form of national provisioning for social reproduction—schooling—and how or whether it provides the care to sustain human beings and social bonds *as well as* facilitating academic attainment and economic success more widely. Our findings have highlighted exactly this need, to swing the focus in schooling towards wellbeing, including nurturing relatedness and human agency in schooling. In re-imagining schooling as a positive experience for all children, our analysis suggests areas for improvement relate to each of the three aspects of parity of participation: distribution; recognition; and representation. In Fraser’s terms, some suggestions for improvement could be categorised as transformative—reforming the systemic neo-liberal performative structures that generate injustice; while others are affirmative—correcting inequitable outcomes without substantially disrupting the systemic structures underpinning them. Both are important in challenging injustice, although transformative actions are more likely to pertain to the national or international level of action; while the affirmative actions may be those more accessible to schools and to individual teachers and children, who are also strongly influenced by systemic structures. Some suggestions are also included below, relating Fraser’s three-pronged conception of social justice to Articles in the UNCRC (1989) as suggested by Jerome and Starkey (2021).

REDISTRIBUTION: TRANSFORMATIVE REMEDIES AT NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

First and foremost, at the national and international policy level, our findings suggest that a deliberate separation of schooling from the performative models of governmentalised neoliberalism would remove some of the fear felt by the sample children of their lives being ‘ruined’ if they do not meet (unnegotiated) policy expectations in terms of narrow attainment targets.

In particular, the concept of ‘meritocracy’—that some children deserve better lives because they perform better at school—must be shown to be the ‘cruel and cynical fiction’ that it actually is (Owens and St. de Croix, 2020, p. 19). Attainment tests as measures of educational performance, as this book has shown, are disturbingly blunt instruments which limit the wellbeing of many children, and dis-able vast riches of potential talent, creativity and intentional engagement/learning. There are more equitable and humane ways to keep schools accountable than through national testing, as has been persuasively argued ever since the 1988 Reform Act. One more humane way is the adaptation of the National Inspectorate to become a supportive knowledge exchange—or learning—arrangement rather than one that provides summative assessments on schools. Another means is that, where testing is used in schooling, tests take account of the different ways that children learn and express themselves (as highlighted for example in Articles 2, 28, 29, 30 of the UNCRC). By reducing a systemic requirement for testing, the lower status that accompanies a child’s lower grades in mathematics/English could be dispensed with; especially if any tests that continue to exist focus on a wide range of Orientations, skills, knowledge and understanding rather than only measurable aspects of mathematics and English at the primary-school stage. At the wider level, more democratic processes for selecting curriculum content can be introduced, including a diversity of children’s contributions.

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 (Articles 2, 28, 31 of the UNCRC). A schooling system that promotes children’s positive learning experience would be adequately funded to provide a truly broad and balanced curriculum including a central place for arts, sports, environment and humanities (Articles 13, 14, 29, 31 of the UNCRC); and a central place for investigating how these can be taught most engagingly. At the same time, policy-makers would do well to publish the research findings they draw on from a range of sources, including studies using qualitative data like our own, showing that their policies are based on this diverse range.

RECOGNITION: AFFIRMATIVE REMEDIES AT SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM LEVEL

As this book has illustrated, enhanced wellbeing takes many forms but having a Sense of Relatedness with other people is shown to be vitally important for children’s school-lives, whereby they feel a sense of

belonging, feel cared for, and they notice that they make a beneficial difference to others' lives. The children have suggested that this is not an added extra for schooling, but a fundamental need which underpins their whole experience. Learning Orientations are unlikely to develop without this foundation.

The children experienced recognition in diverse ways, such as, fundamentally, school staff and other children being careful not to cause physical or emotional pain (Articles 19, 28) and people encouraging each other to be respectful, particularly of those who appear different (Article 29). While teachers strive to do this already, priority and accompanying support must be systemically given and explicitly reinforced in policy messages.

Teachers can also challenge the performative language used in policy directives and ban such language from being used by teachers in their schools. They can punish children's derogatory performance-oriented comments or behaviour. They could stop using the words 'low' or 'high' in relation to performance—instead focussing on children's achievement of agency and intentional engagement in *learning*, which in turn will encourage further engagement. If intervention groups are needed, they can be fluid, tailored and temporary, led by the most highly skilled teachers. Friendship seating in class should be encouraged and reflectively developed to be effective for both children and teachers. It was noticeable that the children in our study also expressed a desire for quiet places to be provided for children to seek sanctuary when their brains were about to 'crumble'; and for spaces without overwhelming display boards. Another message that is clear in our findings is the dangers of substituting leisure times (break-time, lunch-time) as 'catch-up' spaces: systemic messages should, rather, emphasise the benefits to children of play and fun, especially where these can be systemically supported by staff too (with adequate funding), to build up relatedness and autonomy in non-formal areas.

In addition, as educators have been arguing for centuries, children's learning can be facilitated through pedagogies that are engaging for children, that are fulfilling and meaningful to them, not only in terms of prior and future performance. Teachers can avoid passing down the coercion they may be experiencing in the system, by not hurrying nor threatening children in relation to formal schoolwork, despite the pressure that teachers themselves are under to meet targets. Promoting whole-hearted engagement in learning, rather, might involve use of particular teaching and learning situations that draw beneficially on children's diverse strengths and contributions—taking account of the fact that sitting still,

concentrating, listening and remembering can only be applied to a narrow range of performance objectives. Instead, for example, intentional learning could be promoted through the Jigsaw Method, collaborative problem-solving, reciprocal teaching, group or online discussions, collaborative experiments, charity projects, outdoor explorations or creative/performance arts events. Children's competence in other skills and interests, that they have developed outside the classroom, need to be taken seriously at school. Systemic support should be provided by government to teachers and teaching assistants in using such participatory pedagogies; and indeed by providing additional members of staff in school.

REPRESENTATION: AFFIRMATIVE REMEDIES AT SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM LEVEL

Recognition of a child's worth hinges on valuing, encouraging and acting on their achievement of agency, including *the child constructing critiques of schooling provision*. The UNCRC (1989) is emphatic that there must be formal and informal mechanisms for learners to make a complaint or suggestions for improving the life of the school (Articles 12, 13); students (and staff) must be consulted about the quality of the teaching and learning in the school (Article 5, 12 and 18); and children must have the freedom to express their own political, religious or other opinions during their learning, whatever the outlook of the teacher (Articles 12, 13, 14 and 17). Relatedly, children must feel safe somewhere in school to express negative feelings without fear and have these acted upon, despite the inconveniences this might entail for staff. From a researcher perspective, we would promote continuous, rigorous research by children with their teachers about how, when and where children evidence wellbeing most fully while learning at school. This book has attempted to make a start on supporting children to represent their perspectives, critiques and feelings about schooling as a positive experience.

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