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'This is *too* boring': a life-history approach to primary pupils' distress and lack of motivation for school-work

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ABSTRACT

While engagement in school learning is key to high attainment, very little research has explored what motivates engagement as seen from the child's perspective. This paper addresses what motivates engagement – and alternatively what might promote aversion from engagement – among primary-school children designated by the current system in England as 'lower-attaining'. We consider the relationship between their distress and educational policy that promotes grouping by attainment. We used Self Determination Theory (SDT) as our guiding theoretical framework to explore these children's distress as related to lack of motivation to engage in school-work. We employed the life-history approach with a group of 23 'lower-attaining' primary-school children. We report how two of these children, as case studies, described their engagement during schooling over five years from age 7 in primary-school to age 12 in secondary-school, during termly activity-interviews and classroom observations (for full details of the wider study, see https://profiles.ucl.ac.uk/48423-eleanore-hargreaves). We found that the children sometimes experienced distress, which took the form of anxiety, sorrow, anger and pain. These were triggered by, and in turn further promoted, a weak Sense of Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness. We consider in this article whether these negative experiences were related to policy emphasis on attainment in tests, because of how these defined competence narrowly in terms of test results in core subjects. The life-histories portray how distress may have hindered engagement, learning and well-being, ultimately infringing social justice.

A school-child's lack of motivation to engage in school-work might be a side effect of distress (Carr, 2020). Distress may be 'a direct result of the threat caused by educational specific negative operations of power such as exam stress or punitive behaviour management strategies' (Bodfield & Culshaw, 2024, p. 14).

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This article explores some primary-school children's distress, experienced as a threat to their motivated engagement in school-work. The article does this by drawing on life-history data from two case-studies of 'lower-attaining' children as they experienced schooling over five years from age 7 in primary-school to age 12 in secondary-school. Our research investigated how these lower-attaining children's distress might manifest itself (for example, as unwelcome emotions; Connolly et al., 2023); and how it might then proceed to hinder engagement, learning and wellbeing (Keddie, 2016).

We used Self Determination Theory (SDT) as our guiding theoretical framework in interpreting relevant data because of the essential links SDT makes among motivation, learning and wellbeing. SDT proposes that productive motivation, such that it might lead to engagement, is fuelled by a person having their needs fulfilled for their own Sense of (ie perception of) Competence, their Sense of Autonomy *and* their Sense of Relatedness. They propose that where these needs are all met, there is likely to be strong motivation for engagement, learning and wellbeing. Where these needs are not met, there is likely to be distress and dampened motivation. We accord authority to Ryan & Deci's SDT because it has been studied and reinforced in schooling across many cultures, as well as in other social sites. Ryan and Deci (2019) claim the wide applicability of their theory as a 'general theory of human motivation, personality development, and wellness' (p.113).

Ryan and Deci (2019) define wellbeing (or wellness) as:

> 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; our emphasis)

This accords with White's (2011) description of wellbeing specifically in relation to school-children, as:

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

In this article, we illuminate the roles played by lower-attaining children's Sense of Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness, that Ryan and Deci (2019) maintain to be vitally important both for motivation and wellbeing. Distress, or lack of wellbeing, can be one outcome of lack of fulfilment of these needs; it can then mitigate further against engagement, as energy is used up in dealing with distress rather than in engaging with learning (King et al., 2024). By distress, we refer to unwelcome emotions such as anxiety, sorrow, anger, and pain (Connolly et al., 2023), that emerge when one experiences particular challenges or difficulties.

A school-child experiencing distress may suffer shame or hopelessness; trouble with making decisions or processing information; or aggression (King et al., 2024). While a child may *get through* school without feeling motivated or fully engaged, in this article we explore distress as the antithesis to wellbeing and

investigate various ways in which it may provide a major obstruction to engagement and therefore to learning and wellbeing. Previous studies evidenced the direct link from lack of engagement to lack of achievement (e.g. Symonds et al., 2016) but the role of children's distress in this sequence is a particular and underexplored challenge, because children may hide their distress and it may thereby not be noticed by school personnel (Pate et al., 2017).

Significance of the research in relation to high levels of school absence

This research is especially significant within the current context of unprecedented numbers of children physically absenting themselves from school. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, school attendance figures have further plummeted in England (Macmillan & Anders, 2024). However, very little research has been carried out into root causes for absenteeism in English primary-schools making our research findings of critical significance. In tandem, we challenge the policy focus in relation to absence which seems to land:

> Squarely on the apparent pathologies of the students ... The overall foundations, mechanisms and modalities of the system itself seem to have missed out on any attention. (Heimans et al., 2024, p. 2)

Yet, it is notable that one report claimed that fewer than three out of four (70%) of parents were confident that their child's needs were being met at school (Center for Social Justice, 2024). Beyond this report, insufficient attention has been given to the possibility that contemporary educational policy itself contributes to lack of wellbeing and reduced engagement; indeed may actually exacerbate some children's distress at school (although see Bodfield & Culshaw, 2024; Francis & Mills, 2012; McGillicuddy & Devine, 2018, who also maintain that policy contributes to lack of wellbeing). However, no studies that we know of have allowed primary-school children themselves to provide insights across five years of schooling about demotivating aspects of schooling.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989 – to which Britain is a signatory) especially Articles 12, 28 and 29, emphasise the child's right to have their best interests promoted at school and to receive 'protection and care as is necessary for his or her wellbeing'. 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'. In these terms, it is morally unacceptable if children are demonstrating distress in government-funded schooling situations. Distress will play no part in supporting that child's best interests: indeed, it may be one of the emotions that leads children to want to be absent from school.

Potential side effects of the educational policy of categorisation by attainment

Research into grouping indicates that when lower-attainers are taught as a separate physical group from others, their future attainment tends to be hindered (Francis et al., 2020; Higgins et al., 2015). However, key mechanisms at work have not received the in depth investigation they warrant to pinpoint. Extant data, albeit limited, has indicated that in the prevailing competitive climate, perceiving oneself as lower-attaining might trigger a low Sense of Competence, potentially leading to distress which might then obstruct engagement (Marks, 2016). Keddie (2016) described how being designated as 'below age-level expectations' might threaten a child's very sense of 'survival' at school (p. 113). McGillicuddy and Devine (2020) illustrated how this designation produced feelings of 'shame', 'inferiority' and 'upset', being wielded as 'symbolic violence' on lower-attaining children, potentially leading to distress and undermining engagement and learning (2018). Similarly, Lynch and Baker (2005) explained that lower-attainers may be stigmatised as 'inferior, deviant, ugly or threatening. In so doing, they legitimate acts of disrespect, disdain and violence' (p. 142). Reay (2006, p. 178) revealed an 'invidious hierarchy' among peers within the classroom itself that undermined their Sense of Relatedness. According to Ryan and Deci (2019), it is not only the Sense of Competence that can be undermined when children are categorised as 'lower-attaining'. Their Sense of Autonomy and Sense of Relatedness can become entwined in this negative downward spiral. It seems self-evident, that this spiral might ultimately mean that, given a chance, children would choose to absent themselves from school.

Three inter-related triggers for children's lack of wellbeing according to self determination theory (SDT)

The literature cited above briefly summarises some literature on distress in schooling and its possible association with educational policy related to attainment categorising. The next section explores three needs which must be fulfilled to enhance motivation needed for engagement, according to Ryan and Deci's SDT. Altogether, these provide some ingredients towards the answer to our research question: *How do lower-attaining children describe and explain their distress and reduced motivation? How might these relate to educational policies of grouping by attainment?*

Weak sense of competence

A Sense of Competence results when a child believes they have mastered a systemically valued task effectively (Yu et al., 2018, p. 1864). Distress may result when the child believes they are falling short of expected competence

levels as assessed within their particular environment. In the current English schooling context, competence is predominantly associated and measured in relation to limited academic tasks such as mathematics tests. This implicates a child's specific and limited, academic self-concept that may not represent their overall capacities or characteristics. There appears to be a negative and significant correlation between poor academic self-concept and academic motivation to engage (Norouzi et al., 2024). Where only competence in testable aspects of mathematics and English is valued – as in contemporary educational policy in England – a child may perceive themselves to have low competence overall (Francis et al., 2020) and thereby feel distress; when in fact they are highly competent, but in areas less valued by policy.

Weak sense of autonomy (reflecting a child's agency)

Etelapelto et al. (2013, p. 46) explained how:

> The concept of agency . . . [is] associated with active striving, taking initiatives, or having an influence on one's own life situation.

Having a strong Sense of Autonomy means a school-child recognising that they can act in ways that reflect their agency; that their thoughts and actions are not entirely controlled by others; and that they have some control over which aspects of their school-life they influence. With a weaker Sense of Autonomy (reflecting a weaker experience of agency) therefore, a child might feel there is no point exerting energy and may feel the distress of being disempowered (Helwig, 2006). Agency is therefore something that they achieve under certain ecological conditions where autonomy is facilitated (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

Weak sense of relatedness

A Sense of Relatedness refers to experiencing qualitatively and quantitatively adequate social bonds, feeling cared for, valued, respected and belongingness within community. Sense of Relatedness to other children and/or to teachers plays the third essential role in supporting wellbeing – and thwarting distress – according to SDT. Macmurray placed the Sense of Relatedness above Competence and Agency as the key to school motivation, learning and 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 should educate the emotions, place *relationships and care at the heart of teaching and learning*. (p. 654, citing Macmurray, 1961; our emphasis)

A strong Sense of Relatedness allows a school-child to feel a positive social status within their community or group, being recognised as valuable within it,

regardless of their attainment. It is fundamental because 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). If school-children have the *sense* that they are valued at school, this is likely to motivate them to engage with school in academic as well as social ways (e.g. Baines & Blatchford, 2019). In contrast, feeling socially excluded can generate distress and reduce chances of engagement (Sellars & Imig, 2021; Tze et al., 2021).

For more discussion of the three needs of SDT, please see Hargreaves et al. (2021, 2023, 2024).

Methodology

In this article, we hear the voices of a particular group of primary-school children who tended to be school-averse, those who are recorded as performing 'below age-level expectations' in tests of mathematics and English in primary-schools in England. Exploring the question of their apparent school-aversion is significant both from the perspective of children's potential attainment in schools and in broader terms of wellbeing and social justice. In this article, we explore in great depth two such children.

Sample schools

In summer 2018, we gained access, via professional and personal contacts, to four primary-schools, two inner-city, one suburban and one rural, in and around London, UK. All four schools had been assessed as good/outstanding by national inspections in or prior to 2018.

Sample children

We invited teachers in each of the four schools to select six children who had been categorised, aged 7–8, as 'below age-level expectations' for attainment in mathematics and English. We did *not* include children who had Education and Health Care Plans, which in England indicate additional needs. We selected only six children in each of four schools, to be manageable for our small research team; but also to allow for drop-out. In the end, only one child dropped out leaving 23 for the full project for 12 of the 13 terms.

Of our 23 lower-attaining children nine had Pupil Premium status, including Jack below (but not Ellie); and the group represented a range of ethnic heritages (also not demonstrated by the two life-histories below). We did not formally collect any data about school culture, children's social-class, ethnic heritage, parental occupation or parental education, except from the children themselves. This was in order that information about these did not bias our analysis of the children's own words. This was a particular and unique strength of our

study. By autumn 2021, the lower-attaining children were attending 13 different secondary-schools.

We present the whole sample of children below according to their own declared sense of agency, whether weaker or stronger. In keeping with Ryan and Deci (2019) Causality Orientation Theory (COT) (see Hargreaves et al., 2023 for more detail), we asked the children to identify which of the following three statements best reflected their Sense of Agency. The children in all cases chose the orientation (or strength of Sense of Agency) that we as researchers would also have identified for them. Children receiving Pupil Premium funding were evenly distributed across the three groups. The children chose among:

(A) *I like/dislike doing what I am told. I respect/dislike the teachers. I work hard to get rewards/don't care about rewards.* **(Sense of Restricted Agency – selected by 7/23 children including Ellie)**

(B) *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.* **(Weak Sense of Agency – selected by 12/23 children including Jack)**

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

From the main sample of 23 life-histories, we have selected two below: Ellie – with a Restricted Sense of Agency; and Jack – with a weak Sense of Agency. (For full details of the wider study, please see https://profiles.ucl.ac.uk/48423-eleanore-hargreaves). These two children, both at the suburban primary-school initially, had no recorded special needs, but portrayed well the distress represented by children of their group, but presented a more vivid example than most of the children in that group; and were adept at expressing it. We present, below, their school life-histories using as many of their own words as possible as these voices are often missing in other educational research reports. The life-histories illuminate how their distress might have related to their grouping as having a low or restricted Sense of Agency. Quotations derive from interview transcripts; with terms 1 to 13 of the study shown in brackets after each quotation. These also give a sense of the chronology of each child's life-history.

Life-history approach

Our innovative life-history methodology has been fully documented in Hargreaves (2021). As a summary, we can say that school-life-histories aimed to capture the 'concrete joys and suffering' (Plummer, 1983, p. 4) of unheard individuals (Goodson et al., 2016), drawing on interpretivism

(Schwartz-Shea, 2020) to portray how individual lower-attaining children experienced schooling every term across ages 7–12 years. Plummer proposed that life-histories revealed the depth and complexity of human experience and social dynamics, allowing the researcher to consider multiple levels of the phenomenon under investigation: in our case, schoolchildren's distress and reduced motivation to engage. Life-histories were generated from data from each child's termly activity-interview conducted by two researchers together prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; and one researcher during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. They were then crafted into a coherent history by the research team, who carried out thematic analysis collaboratively on all the data, constantly cross-checking on their respective interpretations.

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

- 12 (or 11) audio-recorded and transcribed activity-interviews of 40–90 minutes with each child every term for 13 terms (missing one, or in rare cases two, under Covid-19); in a few cases using dyads/triads).
- Classroom observations of each child every term in primary-school, where possible.

During these activity-interviews, we used exceptionally creative data-collection activities including games, role-plays, drawing and photography to allow the children to express their thoughts and feelings faithfully. The two children whose life-histories are presented below had each experienced 11 activity-interviews [Total *n*= c.16 hours each], nine of which were individual and two in dyads. They had been observed in their primary classrooms eight times each. In the life-histories presented below, the term of interview [TERM1–13] is represented in square brackets alongside quotations.

This article is different from the others we have published (e.g. Hargreaves et al., 2024) in that our aim in it is to exemplify and illuminate in detail the actual words used by two distressed children, to describe their own school-life-histories. We give a summary of overall findings, but concentrate primarily on the vivid, individual detail.

Analysis

Each researcher (from a team of three) took responsibility for a sub-group of four to ten children continuously across the project. Ellie's and Jack's life-histories were initially compiled by two different authors. We analysed their interview data inductively using thematic analysis, letting themes emerge from the children's words and actions (Jeong & Othman, 2016). We fed data into NVivo11/12 and, across the years, constructed new subthemes inductively, which we negotiated collaboratively as a research team. We then clustered

codes under the themes highlighted in SDT, including Sense of Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness.

Ethical procedures

We gained ethics approval from our university Research Ethics Committee (REC 1079) and followed protocols for data collection during Covid-19, guided by British Sociological Association ethical code (2017). Full consent was regularly re-confirmed by both children and parents. We ascertained that children: did not feel coerced to talk to us or do our activities; seemed to find activities manageable and enjoyable; knew why we were doing the research and plans for dissemination. No child missed any interview across the five years apart from those constrained by Covid.

Findings

Many of the 23 lower-attainers in our study expressed dislike for school, some an extreme dislike. The dislike reflected levels of distress they reported. Among other factors, this distress may have led to five of our sample children simply giving up on formal school-learning by the end of the project and focusing on non-school or anti-school interests. We could detect no obviously common characteristics among these five children, except particularly low-attainment in mathematics *and* English; and either low or restricted perceived agency (two low and three restricted). These five children told us in final interviews that they did not care about attaining good grades anymore. Ellie and Jack were two of these five.

Despite this, across the whole sample, by the end of the project, 12 participants had ceased to be designated 'lower-attaining' in both core subjects, while 11 continued to be so designated in secondary-school. It was significant perhaps, that in our study, three of the four children who selected a strong Sense of Agency had been designated as attaining below age-expectation in *either* mathematics *or* English *but not both*. By the end of the project, three of these children were among those no longer designated 'lower-attainers'. This perhaps indicates that their Sense of Competence *and* their Sense of Agency was probably higher than for children who were designated as below in *both subjects*. For example, those who chose the Restricted Agency had *all* been designated as below 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.

Ellie's life-history reflecting a restricted sense of agency

Ellie was a white British girl who loved to be with her family: 'Family, they're like really important because they look after you, so you look after them.' [TERM13].

This manifested in her love of home-life which contrasted with her strong aversion to school-life. She made frequent remarks which reflected the sense of restriction she felt at school, and her desire to avoid it, such as: 'I can't wait to just get out of school, have hot chocolate, play down the road with my friend . . . That's what I want' [TERM4]. She described anxiously watching the clock for home-time throughout every school day. However, she put considerable effort into friendships at school, too, trying to sort out problems and ensure other people felt cared for and had a sense of belongingness.

Ellie's perception of her competence

Ellie had a low Sense of Competence in relation to core school-work; and she felt that others saw her negatively too. Identifying as 'not smart' [TERM2], Ellie felt her teacher would position her at the 'bottom' of the class [TERM9]. When she was picked to answer a question, she said, 'I usually feel like dumb' [TERM9]. Mathematics was a particular source of distress, leading her to make great efforts to avoid it, dismissing opportunities for engaging with it. She was even wracked with anxiety when her desk faced the mathematics display board, feeling uncomfortable in her own classroom: '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"' [TERM3]. She also felt restricted by the threat of punishment for her below-expectation work, a threat she perceived as 'scary' and 'nerve-wracking' [TERM9]. Punishments made her feel more distressed and led her to dislike school even more passionately. However, she had to repress her distress at school, not feeling free to express it:

> I do want to fight, but I can't fight [at school]. So at home . . . I have this bean-bag at mine, like when I punch it, all the beads come out. [TERM4]

Ellie's perception of mathematics' lack of relevance to herself as a person

Even in primary-school, Ellie questioned the relevance of school-work to her sense of self and this undermined her motivation to engage: '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' [TERM9]. Her agency was directed elsewhere. In other words, although she was distressed by punishments for 'deficient' work, she did not feel motivated by achieving good work as it had little link to the competences she valued.

Her aim in lessons was to *get by* without being admonished; and she had a matter-of-fact approach to cheating as a means to *get by* with least engagement: 'I cheated because like it has the answers on the back, so if Miss is looking somewhere . . . just be an easier way to get the mathematics done' [TERM3]. In

other words, school-work tended to feel like an imposition rather than an opportunity, not always distressing but rarely engaging. In relation to home-work, she at least felt she had more control over her choices. She said, for example: 'Whenever I get like told to do my homework, I hardly do it – I only do it sometimes if I'm in the mood' [TERM13]. In fact, she suggested that academic competence might actually restrict human goodness: she suggested that an (imaginary) girl who always got top marks was likely to be 'a little bit rude' to friends in the playground [TERM5].

Ellie's experiences of restricted agency

Since school-work had little motivational value for Ellie, she came to believe that schooling was not relevant to her in its current form. She declared: 'I think I don't suit school' [TERM9]. Indeed, she had felt that school restricted her in negative ways: 'I don't really think school's a good influence' [TERM8]. For example, Ellie expressed distress around school's physical control over her body: '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!' [TERM2]. At a psycho-social level, though no less distressing, she told us she had to sit through lessons which she found agonis-ingly boring and yet she was required to remain in them, having her autonomy restricted, preventing her from fulfilling her needs. Her engagement was under-standably minimal: '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!"' [TERM1]. This was particularly painful when she was kept in the classroom, away from her friends at breaktime to finish work; or when her friends went to groups for 'higher-attaining' peers.

Ellie dealt with her boredom by constantly watching the clock [TERM1, 2, 4, 8, 9] and daydreaming; and sometimes actually falling asleep. She resented school 'wasting' so much of her time and complained indignantly: '[School is] like half my day!' [TERM9]. She repeatedly – and longingly – brought up the idea of home schooling where she perceived her needs would be better met, despite not being among her friends [TERM1, 3, 4, 5, 8]. In other words, she spent a huge amount of energy dealing with her distress at school and conceiving of ways to avoid it.

The stricter rules about school-work that she encountered at secondary-school seemed to heighten her distress. She told us: 'I hate mathematics! And if you don't get like a good like score on the mathematics thing then you have to redo it' [TERM13]. Schooling practices continued to promote distressing com-parison to others and she told us 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"' [TERM13].

In Ellie we perceive a child with great potential to enjoy life and friends but whose motivation to engage in school-work is restricted by her distress at being a lower-attainer in mathematics particularly. This does not improve on transfer to secondary-school. She expresses intense and ongoing distress as she finds ways to survive the restrictions of school and avoid engagement. And yet her life intentions are to support and enjoy the wellbeing of her friends and family.

Jack's life-history reflecting a weak sense of autonomy

Jack was a white British, summer-born boy. Jack described himself as 'funny sometimes' [TERM1] a bit 'cheeky' and 'lazy' [TERM10] and not very 'mature' [TERM11]. Sports and play-times were when he felt most himself; and 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. His strong capacity for full engagement in sports was emphasised when he told us: 'I don't like people when they're silly in PE, because obviously it's my favourite lesson' [TERM11]. Jack demonstrated his desire to make a positive difference in the world by telling us that if he won a million pounds, he would give half of it to charity.

Jack's perception of his competence

Except in relation to sport, Jack appeared to have a weak overall Sense of Competence, describing himself as: 'Not one of the smart people in my class' [TERM1]. He found it hard to think straight in class: 'People just keep on confusing me . . . when people are talking so loud I can't think so then I get it wrong' [TERM2]. Jack sometimes suggested that he had more choice over his behaviours than others might think. For example, he justified not being 'one of the smart people' on the basis of his egalitarian attitude: 'Because I don't like being better than people, I just like to be like in the middle, like the same' [TERM11]. That is, not being smart was his deliberate choice: 'I can be good at any lesson – but I wouldn't try' [TERM13]. However, his weak Sense of Agency was apparent when he described how his own brain could let him down: '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' [TERM11]. Tests caused him particular distress and eroded his Sense of Agency, particularly as he told us he was being laughed at for his low scores: 'I got laughed at, like "Ha ha, he's an idiot"' [TERM13]. He referred to feeling distress when 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' [TERM8].

Jack's lack of sense of agency and his avoidance strategies

Jack's boredom in lessons seemed to make him experience sorrow which led him to feel: 'I don't want to ever go back to that school again' [TERM5]. He told us of one instance in the classroom when he actually said aloud, 'Can I go and explore? Because this is too boring!' He was made to stay in for lunch and breaktime as punishment for his audacity [TERM3].

Jack was aware of the link between distress and disengagement. He explained: 'Whenever I'm *not* happy, it's hard for me to like work . . . I just stop doing my work' [TERM6]. He also explained how powerless, lacking in autonomy, he felt in class: 'I don't understand and no one helps me' [TERM2]. He therefore became creative in findings ways to *get through* lessons: by sleeping; or by writing on his hand; or fiddling with things under his desk. He did not experience lessons other than PE as engaging: 'They just give me loads of stuff I don't like . . . Like comprehension sheets' [TERM12]. He found all this distressing: 'My head gets hot' [TERM4] 'and you sometimes blow your fuse' [TERM2]. He did not take pleasure in addressing difficult challenges in terms of schoolwork perhaps because so many tasks already felt inaccessibly difficult to him. At times Jack was also creative in avoiding rather than confronting difficulty. In one lesson we observed, 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' [TERM1].

His solution to this distress was not only mental disengagement but voluntary physical isolation too. He actually precipitated being punished by being sent out of class, saying 'Thank God! because I'm out of the classroom' [TERM12] so that now his brain could 'relax' [TERM4]. This tallied with frequent physical absences from school.

Jack epitomises the lower-attaining child who rallies against his distressing designation as such but also resigns himself to it, having lost hope of taking more control over his school-life. Considering himself to be generous, humorous and egalitarian, he does not achieve sufficient support for his Sense of Competence, Autonomy or Relatedness in a classroom where distress, including confusion, block engagement.

Discussion

Ryan and Deci (2019) defined wellbeing (or wellness) as people taking interest in their inner and outer worlds 'in an attempt to engage, interact, master, and understand' (p. 215). The life-histories above illustrate how rarely Ellie or Jack found interest in their lessons and how few opportunities they encountered in which they could voluntarily 'engage, interact, master, and understand'. In the classroom or indeed the school, they equally rarely described 'autonomous,

whole-hearted and successful engagement in worthwhile activities and rela-tionships . . . engaging *now* in worthwhile pursuits (White, 2011, p. 131).

We have interpreted these manifestations of lack of motivation to engage in school-work in light of a person's need for a Sense of their own Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness, with reference to how contemporary educational policy may fail to fulfil these needs (Carr, 2020). Our findings shed light on the current context of unprecedented numbers of children physically absenting themselves from school, as they provide vivid evidence that some children, including lower-attainers, demonstrate aversion to the schooling experience itself.

We have defined distress to include unwelcome emotions such as anxiety, sorrow, anger and pain. While some distress is to be expected in a busy social environment like school, the life-histories of Ellie and Jack radiated concerning levels of anxiety, sorrow, anger and pain among these lower-attaining children specifically; in particular in relation to their uncomfortable feelings in lessons of mathematics and English. Many of our life-histories, like Ellie and Jack's, evi-denced children using up valuable energy on trying to hide their negative feelings, making their plight even harder to remedy. Like many others too, the two life-history children demonstrated intense boredom because of their lack of autonomy, which appeared genuinely distressing and debilitating. As we described above, Ellie said, 'I'm like "Oh my God! I'm so bored! What is there to do?"'

In particular, like the majority of the sample children, Ellie and Jack described the pain of being cast as inferior to others who had better mastery over prescribed – systemically valued – tasks in mathematics and English. Manifesting the traits, as noted by McGillicuddy and Devine (2018), of being oppressed by symbolic violence, the children tended to identify themselves overall in relation to their perceived deficiency rather than, for example, in terms of their obvious good-natured generosity and care for others or additional talents (Francis et al., 2020). For example, Ellie told us she usually felt 'dumb'. Jack perceived that he was not like the other children because his brain some-times 'crumbled' and went 'blank'. These unwanted experiences of being sub-ordinated then led to anger (another manifestation of distress common among our sample), especially when the children's 'deficiency' was made public by teachers tearing up work; separating them from friends according to their attainment; or keeping them in the classroom at breaktime to finish off work.

Some triggers for distress potentially related to contemporary policy

Our data have illustrated ways in which 'foundations, mechanisms and mod-alities' of the school system (Heimans et al., 2024) make it more challenging for some children to fulfil their needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness. Since fulfilment of all three of these inter-related needs is necessary for a child to

develop an integrated sense of self and thereby wellbeing, our data suggest that the human right of having the Best Interests of the child at heart (UNCRC, 1989; Articles 12, 28, 29) is not always being observed in schools, especially where pressure to meet rigid targets is imposed on teachers.

We interpreted distressing experiences as responses to the culture of competition and comparison within which these particular children failed. As Lynch and Baker (2005) suggested, the children's distress might be an example of how the neo-liberal performativity of the current schooling system relegated affective aspects of childhood to second place, even as 'subordinate and morally suspect' (p. 142). These children described being teased or bullied by peers because of their perceived lack of attainment, exemplifying Reay's (2006, p. 179) 'invidious hierarchy'. The life-histories illustrated that a trigger for these lower-attaining children feeling distressed was feeling coerced into doing activities they neither liked nor valued, using methods they neither liked nor valued. Across our whole sample, we found it was the children who displayed the weakest or most Restricted Sense of Autonomy who made least progress in their formal marks and who were more likely to give up. As cited by Etelapelto et al. (2013), agency implies active striving, taking initiatives, or having an influence on one's own life situation. These actions were made difficult by the pre-determined nature of many classes, that did not suit these children. As Ellie herself reflected, this distress could lead to a lower-attaining child spending a 'wasted' life at school (see similar wording by McGregor, 2018, p. 88). Tests particularly provoked distress because the child had no choice but to engage in them, leading to panic or anxiety and fear of publicly displayed failure. And yet the shortcomings of the situation were systemically attributed to deficiency of the lower-attaining children rather than to the tests, the curriculum or pedagogy themselves which perhaps lacked appropriate inclusive access (Heimans et al., 2024).

Jack particularly, like many of our sample, demonstrated his unfulfilled need for 'belongingness and connectedness to the persons, group, or culture disseminating a purpose . . . feeling respected and cared for' (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 64). This need appeared to be systemically marginalised in terms of policy priorities, focused rather on attainment. Both Ellie and Jack, along with many other sample children, displayed a sense of not being appreciated for the skills and talents they *did* have, perhaps in relation to competence being defined in very narrow terms by contemporary policy. This led to the children learning to see themselves as having poor competence overall, despite their myriad other interests and strengths. They were not always able to remedy their battered Sense of Competence sufficiently during breaktimes by affirming their Sense of Relatedness through play, as breaktimes were often used for them to 'catch up' on work (Baines & Blatchford, 2019).

We have illustrated how lower-attaining children were sometimes experiencing distress at primary-school, which threatened wellbeing and compromised

social justice. While we cannot know whether higher-attaining children felt the same, it was clear that many lower-attainers, including Ellie and Jack, felt alienated, sometimes abandoned by teachers and peers, rather than included, supported and cared for, directly as a result of their lower-attainer designation. Rickard et al. (2023) have recently suggested that cultivating social and emotional wellbeing is increasingly recognised as a fundamental priority in contemporary educational policy, not only as the means to effective learning but also as the desired outcome of this (see also Fielding, 2012). However, our life-histories have indicated that, so long as competence continues to be narrowly defined by contemporary policy in terms of attainment in tests that these children find distressing, their engagement is unlikely, even if relatedness gains more emphasis. The life-histories pinpoint the veracity of Ryan & Deci's claim that wellbeing *and* academic attainment will only occur if children have a strong Sense of Competence *and* a strong Sense of Relatedness; as well as a strong Sense of Autonomy in their school environment. Ellie and Jack both enjoyed some fulfilment in their Sense of Relatedness, but their life-histories made it clear that their low Sense of Competence was closely entwined with their perception of their lack of agency to achieve effectively or spontaneously the tasks valued within the school community they belonged to.

Some concluding implications

This article set out to consider the following question and to exemplify our findings through the presentation of two rich life-histories:

How do lower-attaining children explain how their distress and reduced motivation to engage in school-work manifest themselves, with reference to contemporary educational policy which categorises children by attainment in tests of mathematics and English?

Emphasising the urgency of fulfilling the three needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness, the new understandings which emerged from this project may, as Heimans et al. (2024) suggested, lead policy-makers and educators to ask not just 'why is it that students refuse to go to school?' but also 'why is it that students do not refuse to go to school?' (p. 3). As Heimans et al. (2024) propose, 'It may be up to us as teacher education researchers to be the ones to find ways to support others and ourselves to "disobey" the very systems that we are in'. Our new understandings thereby feed into an over-arching social justice perspective that insists that policy and practice emphasises every child's right to have their best interests promoted through the system of schooling itself, enjoying 'protection and care as is necessary for his or her wellbeing' (UNCRC, 1989). This perspective eliminates a policy focus in relation to absence which blames 'the apparent pathologies of the students' rather than considering more compassionately 'overall foundations, mechanisms and modalities of the system itself' (Heimans et al., 2024, p. 2).

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