# PERSEVERING FOR A CRUEL AND CYNICAL FICTION? THE EXPERIENCES OF THE 'LOW ACHIEVERS' IN PRIMARY SCHOOLING

Eleanore Hargreaves, Laura Quick & Denise Buchanan

Published online: 22 Nov 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ☇

Article views: 141

View related articles ☇

View Crossmark data ☇

# PERSEVERING FOR A CRUEL AND CYNICAL FICTION? THE EXPERIENCES OF THE 'LOW ACHIEVERS' IN PRIMARY SCHOOLING

*by* Eleanore Hargreaves, Laura Quick and Denise Buchanan,
*Department of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment, UCL Institute of Education, London*

ABSTRACT: *This paper is significant in its exploration of the experiences of children designated as 'lower-attaining' in British primary schooling. It is underpinned by Nancy Fraser's conceptualisation of a global shift from government via nation-state welfare structures to governance through supra-national financialised neoliberalism. Within this context, we take the innovative path of investigating how 'lower-attaining' children explain perseverance with hard work at school within neoliberalism's 'cruel and cynical fiction' of social mobility. Our extended interviews with 23 'lower-attaining' children over two years provide findings which indicate – with a startling vividness – that these particular children experienced loneliness at school and blamed themselves for being inadequate and inferior. Fear appeared to be an essential component of their schooling system and sometimes elicited from them anger as well as humiliation. In particular, these children feared being assessed and sorted according to attainment. We propose that these factors often led the 'lower-attaining' children to experience schooling as at least uncomfortable. And yet they came to accept as fact the fiction that they were inadequate; and to perceive that perseverance in conforming to schooling's rules was their only chance of not slipping out of the race altogether.*

*Keywords:* perseverance, inequality, attainment grouping, Nancy Fraser, fear, humiliation

## 1. The Shift from Nation State Welfare to Global Financialised Neoliberalism

This paper investigates how 'lower-attaining' children themselves explain perseverance with hard work at school. This investigation is contextualised within 'postwestphalian' society, where hard work and effort are promoted as key routes to success; and yet success eludes many who indeed work hard and put effort into their school studies. Nancy Fraser (2019); Fraser (2008) refers to the past 30 years as the postwestphalian era which brings to a close the supremacy of the nation state embodied in the Treaty of Westphalia 1648. She suggests that

the nation state focus of the Treaty has been superseded by 'spiraling networks of global governance' (2008, p. 4–5). Another leading theorist, Tomlinson (2017, p. 2005) has, similarly, represented this era as 'post-welfare'. These theorists emphasise that previously, the nation state promised security through wealth and freedom for all its citizens because of state support on account of their citizens' national citizenship. This wealth and freedom was to be largely achieved through schooling which would lead to mass upward social mobility in the form of increased qualifications and higher status jobs for all. The new, postwestphalian promise, however, had a different emphasis: while it also offers upward social mobility through successful schooling, this upward social mobility is now only offered *to those who live by its values* and prove their worth by attaining highly against a narrow range of economically-related criteria. In this new era, only a few children from less advantaged backgrounds will be worthy of the top prizes, which are otherwise held by candidates from more privileged families (Reay, 2020). 'Worth' is therein validated through supra-nationally-managed accountability systems dominated, for example, by IMF, World Bank, World Trade Organisation, Google and Microsoft (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2018). This *post*westphalian promise, involves the supranationally-managed processes of 'sorting the capable-and-competitive wheat from the incapable-and-non-competitive chaff' (Fraser, 2008, p. 128) and thereby constructs different life courses for each. By deploying power in response to people proving themselves through results – rather than deploying state micromanagement of methods – supranational bodies perpetuate the fiction of enhancing equality while actually sustaining inequality (Reay, 2020).

The research reported in this article explores the idea that children engaging in primary education in England are encouraged to persevere with hard work under the assumption that, if they persevere with hard work at school, they will be perceived as, or transformed into, the 'capable-and-competitive' rather than the 'incapable-and-non-competitive' (Fraser, 2008, p. 128). However, Fraser points out the 'plain repression' for those deemed 'incapable-and-non-competitive-chaff', who exist within the 'marginal sector of excluded low achievers' (2018, p. 169), which thereby constitutes them as 'inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction' (2018, p. 24). And yet, dominant socio-political discourses continue to emphasise the power of schooling to allow all children to compete equitably with their more wealthy and more socially privileged peers (Reay, 2020). Meritocracy is the label given to the idea that hard work and talent are the drivers of success, rather than heritage, social networks or wealth. It can lead to the assumption that those who do badly simply have not tried hard enough. As Owens and St. de Croix (2020) phrase it, meritocracy is a 'cruel and cynical fiction' in which social justice is compromised:

> Far from enabling a more just society, the prevailing meritocratic education discourse obscures the effects of structural disadvantages, reproducing social inequalities and perpetuating a cruel and cynical fiction (p.19).

This paper explores how children categorised as within the marginal sector of 'low achievers' in the neoliberal competition manifest in schooling – labelled as 'lower-attaining' children by the schooling system – explain their perseverance in schooling, in the face of this fiction; and the experiences and feelings they associate with this perseverance. By 'lower-attaining', we mean that they were designated at age 7–8, through systemic tests of mathematics and/or English, as having attained fewer marks than their peers. When referring to these children's perseverance, we mean their compliant hard work in schooling, even if they experience current conditions as harsh and the benefits of their hard work as obscure. That is, they continue to do as the system requires, without obvious evidence that it is providing the fulfilment they hope for.

## 2. Perpetuating the Cruel Fiction of Social Mobility

Brown and James (2020, p. 7) have shown how this contradiction lies at the heart of policy promises of social mobility. They claim that the standard policy formula of: *widening educational access → leads to increasing social mobility → leads to poverty reduction* ' ... does not stand up to close scrutiny and may have unintended consequences that serve to undermine the stated purpose of educational reform'. As Owens and de St Croix (2020) suggest, this fiction occurs through the re-emphasised value given to individual freedom *and responsibility*. 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, 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 and Picket, 2018). In other words, despite compliant perseverance, the majority of these children will be structurally obstructed 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 conceiving of alternative life goals or conditions.

According to Brown and James (2020, p. 1), many aspects of the postwestphalian schooling system actually confound the possibility of social mobility, rather than enhance it. In particular, its tendency in some countries to segregate children *according to attainment*, from an early age, stands to block social mobility (Brown and James, 2020). They claim that the end result ensures that 'individuals have an equal chance to be unequal, regardless of how large the prizes offered to the winners' (p.2). Other authors take a less clearcut

approach, for example, suggesting that there is much confusion about terms such as 'ability' and 'social mobility' (Mazzoli Smith, 2021) and that schooling can have some benign effects (Gorard, 2010).

Large-scale longitudinal studies among others (e.g. Mowat, 2020; 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 thereby potentially in moving upward socially. In England, the majority of young people remain in the same income bracket as their parents across the life-span (as shown by Mowat, 2020). 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 a cruel fiction: a student's level of deprivation (IMD rank) is a strong 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).

Despite such statistics, in the 2018–9 Social Mobility Commission report for Britain, the government claimed:

> 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).

Specifically, through such policy, students are encouraged to persevere during difficult academic experiences because they believe that their academic studies will lead to the successful futures the system has taught them to envision for themselves (Browman *et al*., 2017). However, as Stephen Ball (2017) suggests, these policies use social mobility more as a 'slogan' than a 'concept', focusing attention on the so-called 'problem' of schools rather than the problem of the economy (Ball, 2021, p. 194). In our current paper, we focus on the 'problem' of children who are unlikely to attain this social mobility.

The children's perseverance, and the lack of evidence that it guarantees good job destinations, has been identified in lower and middle income countries for many decades as the Diploma Disease (Dore, 1976), whereby qualification escalation has led to successful graduates failing to gain any work on leaving their education. Now, following the Covid19 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 rather than exclusively 'upward' movement. Therefore, those who have made substantial investments of time, effort and money to gain a college or university education stand to be disappointed.

In our exploration, described in this paper, we seek illumination on how inequality may play out through the school-lives of 'lower-attaining' children by drawing directly on their own depictions of daily life at primary-school.

## 3. Perseverance and Growth Mindset as Part of the Individualision within Neoliberalism

These children's continuing perseverance in schooling may pertain to the post-westphalian 'culture of the self and its actualization' through the individual's hard work, which 'intersect[s] with neo-liberal critiques of the welfare state in the new valorization of the self-actualized subject' (Dean, 2010, pp. 181–182). While the postwestphalian release from state intervention can appear to unburden the individual of historic baggage – and in this sense could motivate historically vulnerable children to work hard – our research sought to explore whether children felt burdened instead with excessive responsibility or potential blame for their attainment.

To support those who are struggling to progress on their own, without the political backing of the local or national community, 'positive psychology' strategies have been transformed into 'positive educational' interventions whereby happiness and/or wellbeing are conceptualised as important goals in schooling. This movement (e.g. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) was founded on the basis that ultimately human beings seek happiness (or well-being) and operate best when attaining happiness (or wellbeing) (Kristjánsson, 2012, 2021). This century, 'positive education' has been applied in schools to motivate children to be resilient and feel positive both about schooling and about their futures (Savvides and Bond, 2021; White, 2016). *Growth Mindset* was psychologist Carol Dweck's (2017) contribution to positive education's influence on schools. A Growth Mindset encourages children to focus on what they can do if they try hard, rather than what they believed they could *not* do because they were of a fixed 'ability'. Whilst Dweck's challenges to a 'fixed ability' mindset were potentially transformational, research evidence has not yet shown that emphasis on the Growth Mindset has had clear benefits in practice in schools. Critics suggest that this may be because of schools emphasising children's perseverance, rather than the child's and the school's openness to trying a range of approaches to help learning to happen. Dweck (2017) herself reiterates that the individual's effort is only one part of Growth Mindset, which also includes teachers' and the system's openness to experimentation with diverse ways to approaching learning in order maximally to suit all learners.

When combined with neo-liberal discourses of the 'new valorization of the self-actualized subject' (Dean, 2010, p. 181–182), positive psychology may therefore suggest a *false* sense of empowerment that in fact misleads the child, who is actually practising compliance rather than embracing a potentially

fulfilling challenge (Ecclestone and Lewis, 2014). Meanwhile, as the child perseveres individually, even fearing to ask for support (see Fisher, 2011), this could isolate them from those with whom they could otherwise develop empathy as well as creative, critical dialogue (Sealy et al., 2021). In the case of children such as the 'lower-attaining' participants on which this article focuses, we explore whether, and if so how, the emphasis on individual perseverance may encourage them to believe they only have themselves to blame for failure; and whether they describe ways in which responsibility is thereby taken away from the school, the schooling system and global political forces (Spohrer and Bailey, 2020): thereby disseminating the 'cruel fiction' mentioned by Owens and St de Croix (2020).

## Methodology

Questions driving the research described in this article included:

*How do 'lower-attaining' children explain perseverance in schooling?*
*Which experiences and feelings do they associate with perseverance?*

These questions emerged from our attempts to answer wider research questions about the experiences of primary-school pupils designated as 'lower-attainers', in terms of personal/social flourishing and learning, across five years of their school-life histories; and which factors influenced their experiences. Early on in our data analysis the children's perseverance emerged as a dominant aspect in their descriptions of schooling, despite the children's parallel references to doing badly in schoolwork assignments even after such hard work.. We were therefore curious as to their motivations for perseverance given their own accompanying perceptions of lack of attainment.

Our methodological approach was couched within critical theory (Horkheimer, 1982). We aimed to critique, through our research, current policies foregrounding attainment in tests of mathematics and English above other potential emphases in schooling. Through our findings, we aimed to describe in colourful detail some of the consequences of these policies, for 'lower-attaining' children. We drew on interpretivism (Schwarz-Shea, 2020) in our attempts to understand and describe how individual children reacted socially and affectively to their schooling situation and their expectations for the future within this.

Our research involved construction of school life-histories. Life-history research has been used over many decades and in a range of countries, to capture the 'concrete joys and suffering' (Plummer, 1983, p. 4) of marginalised individuals – sometimes within education (Goodson and Sykes, 2016; Lanford et al., 2019; Plummer, 2001). While life-history research has a long-established, albeit 'outsider', research tradition (Lanford et al., 2019), authors stress that there is no fixed way to do life-history research and that every life-history will be different. Because the life-history must be adapted to the participant, rather

than the reverse, we felt convinced to embark on adapting the life-history approach for school-children as participants. We wished to gain their immediate responses to the social institution of schooling as it was experienced by them across a transformational period of their (school) lives.

The 23 children attended English primary-schools and had been designated as 'lower-attaining': that is, they were measured by end-of-year tests of mathematics/English at age 7–8 years and scored less well in their class than the rest of their peers (apart from some children who may have had Education and Health Care Plans (EHCP)). We aimed to explore how their status as 'lower-attaining' in mathematics and/or English influenced their feelings and thoughts in reaction to schooling, in particular regarding perseverance, across five years from age 7–12 years. This paper covers the first two years from age 7–9 years.

*Sample*

We gained access to two British inner-city schools, which we named Brandon Grove and Jayden School; one suburban academy, Sandown; and one rural school, Sunnyfields. All the schools served mixed social areas. Three of the four schools had pupil intakes comprising above average numbers of children eligible for free school meals (FSM national average = 23%), while two of our four schools had numbers of children eligible for FSM closer to twice the national average (42.3% and 40.9% respectively). All four schools had been assessed as good or outstanding by Department of Education inspections at the start of the project and had at least two classes in each year group. We asked each school to invite six pupils to participate, whom they had identified as their lowest-attainers at the end of Year 3 (aged 7–8). We excluded children with a state-funded designation as having a learning disability (EHCP) although one participant subsequently acquired an EHCP. However, some of the sample children were considered to have special educational needs. Nine children had Pupil Premium status indicating social disadvantage. Over half were from the ethnic minority groups of England. One child in our sample moved away immediately, leaving 23 of our original 24 children. By the end of the second year, when this paper was written, our 23 children were attending no less than seven different schools (three further children having moved schools locally). In our first meetings with each child, they chose a 'secret' name, which became their permanent pseudonym.

This paper draws on data collected up to the end of the sixth visit of the project, the third visit of its second year, addressing data from Term 1 of the project [TERM1] to Term 6 [TERM6], just before the first Covid19 Lockdown in England in March 2020.

*Instruments*

We used the following data collection instruments:

(1) Audio-recorded activity-interviews of 40–90 minutes each (including a range of activities, games, role-plays, drawing, and photography) with each child every term

(2) Observations of each child in class, every term where possible.

As with most other life-histories, our research methods included semi-structured and unstructured interviewing, in which we aimed to listen deeply to each participant on multiple occasions. However, young children may not find questions/answers the most conducive means for expressing their feelings and experiences (Clark and Moss, 2005; Coyne *et al*., 2021; Watson *et al*., 2020). We therefore substituted straight questions and answers with a range of activities, games, role-plays, drawing, and photography. For example, one visit we were exploring each child's response to testing in schooling. One effective activity to explore this theme involved using a dolls house in which each child constructed a classroom, using toy school furniture and small plastic animals as pupils. They set the classroom up ready for a test day, choosing which animal represented the teacher and particular children, and how each child was feeling. This play activity allowed children to dissociate themselves from their own actual struggle of being tested and to express views and feelings through the disguise of the animals. We were interested in how they played out the scene behind the protection of disguise, while we recognised that their response represented them in a general sense rather than informing us directly about how they would react in the particular test situation. In each interview, we collected data on our chosen topic using two or more activities.

Over the six terms, we built up close bonds with the children which further encouraged them to speak with us freely. We also aimed – in contrast to many other studies of children's experiences – not to discuss the children with teachers or parents so that our data were based exclusively on the children's own ways of making sense of their schooling.

*Analysis*

We analysed data inductively, letting themes emerge from the data (Jeong and Othman, 2016). Initially, as a team of three researchers, we developed codes inductively for transcripts from eight pupils each; then discussed and refined codes collaboratively. After the first term, we fed all data into NVivo11/12 and applied existing codes to the new data-set. As we coded, we constructed new codes inductively, which we negotiated collaboratively. At the end of six terms, we were able to print out reports for all children for 36 codes from 107 interviews.

*Ethics*

We followed British Sociological Association guidance (2017) on ethical procedures and had clearance from our university Ethics Committee. We gained pupils', parents' and teachers' verbal and written consent and emphasised that the process was voluntary and participants could leave any time. We explained in writing and verbally what the project would entail. We found ways of explaining why children had been chosen, without suggesting that children lacked talent. We maintained with the greatest rigour the confidentiality and anonymity of the interview data.

## 4. FINDINGS

*The Children Perceived Perseverance as a Means to an Adequate Future*

All 23 of our participant children appeared to believe that perseverance, in the form of compliant hard work, had to be practised in order to remain within the fold of the 'capable and competitive'. Children told us that any child who was not performing well simply needed to work harder. For example, Bob prescribed more hard work for a classmate who was not doing well, despite evidence that this approach had so far failed: 'Let her stay in for her whole lunchtime … Work!' [VISIT3] Another child, Jeff, when asked whether everyone could be successful at school, commented, 'If they try their hardest they can' [VISIT4]. They therefore seemed willing to persevere despite their many highly uncomfortable situations in schooling now, because of a fear of what might happen in the future if they ceased to persevere.

However, when asked about their future employment aspirations, like Hoskins and Barker's secondary-school participants (2017), they did not mainly display desire for social *mobility* – that is, becoming higher status employees than their parents – but rather aimed for jobs that would allow them to live well enough, in a similar way to their own parents. For example, two of the girls wanted careers in food preparation while three boys mentioned becoming drivers. Four children aimed to become artists while four others wanted to work with animals. Their attitude did not seem to reflect a desire for social mobility, as Chrystal's comment suggested:

> What I want to do is just have a job and *not* be successful … I just want to carry on with my life and have a good time … And not be successful. [Chrystal, TERM1]

While it is likely that their aspirations would be heavily influenced by their parents, what is notable is that moving up socially beyond their parents did not seem to feature in their imaginations. And yet, these children continued to persevere in a schooling competition, the unspoken assumption of which was that such children would hope to prove their worth as potentially mobile citizens. Their worth from the perspective of the system was closely tied to

proving this potential. Some of the children expressed explicit awareness of such a conception of 'worth' as related to hard work. For example, Alvin [TERM6] suggested that school was not supposed to be fun but 'to learn; and *make your life better*. It's not just play'. A message that learning basic skills was fundamental to one's worth was also expressed by his teacher whom we overheard saying to the class:

> It's an issue if you still don't know your times table in Year 4. It's more useful than learning to kick a ball! You should be learning your tables at breaktimes.

### The Challenges of Perseverance Described by the Children

However, persevering on this route did not always appear to be easy, perhaps because the route did not respond to the personal aspirations of the children themselves. Perseverance tended to be maintained *despite* the content of lessons rather than *because* they were inherently engaging. As Noddings (2005) described, there appeared to be a tension between the participants' expressed needs and the needs inferred by the schooling system. For example, Max and Jake explained how difficult they found it to focus on some lessons that seemed irrelevant or boring [TERM5]:

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

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

There were 21 out of our sample of 23 children who therefore complained of finding school boring rather than socially, emotionally or cognitively engaging. Perseverance entailed carrying out tasks that did not always hold personal meaning for them. For example, when asked during TERM6 how often they could make their own decisions in their classroom, the majority of children replied 'never' [n = 16/23]. The children also suggested that they could not say something critical to or about the teacher because compliance, rather than proactivity, was a core value of schooling. As Saffa explained: 'I wouldn't say "I don't want to do that" because it's kind of disobeying … I have to do it' [TERM6]. These findings hint at the lack of opportunities for individual meaning-making during lessons among such 'lower-attaining' children in English classrooms, despite the neo-liberal demand for self-actualization.

*The Children Described Loneliness and Blaming Themselves for Being Inadequate*

The children's sense of being alone in their struggles with attainment, as well as the need to keep competing with others, seemed to lead some children to feelings of loneliness and isolation. For example, Chrystal [TERM2] echoed others by suggesting that when a child (like herself) did badly in mathematics or writing, she felt dissociated from the others:

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

Several children described feeling a loss when friends had to move physically to their different 'attainment sets' or 'intervention groups'. Summer explained: 'I need my friends. I need them to stay in the same class as me' [TERM2]. Bob [TERM3] told us explicitly that friends were the only part of school he enjoyed, and therefore he suffered when he was separated from them in his ['lower-attainment'] mathematics group. In two of our schools, lack of collaboration in the classroom meant that at the end of Year 3 [7–8 year-olds], our sample children did not know the names of some of the children in their own class, with obvious negative implications for developing the empathic and collaborative culture that might have better supported their learning and engagement (Hart, 1998). Learning as a social and creative *process*, that was constructive and enjoyable in its own right, did not seem to be emphasised, despite a parallel, contradictory rhetoric which encouraged the Growth Mindset (Dweck, 2017).

The assessment orientation of the system – as opposed to the Growth Mindset – may have been reflected in Alvin's [TERM4] description of aiming to *impress* his teacher and the head teacher, rather than to learn from and with them (cf Reay, 2020). Mohamed [TERM5] informed us that his parents would be 'happier if I be smart- the smartest in the class'. Anna showed awareness of the rigid assessment priorities and said that she therefore kept her real 'identity' out of school. She had a passion for reading and drawing. However, she perceived that even reading was seen as less valuable than writing; and artwork was lower-status still. At school she would therefore have to play the schooling 'game':

> [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. [Anna, VISIT3]

As Fraser (2000) described them, these fields of learning – e.g. reading for pleasure, art – seemed to have become 'comparatively unworthy of respect' (p.113), pushed out by the focus on future competence in the neo-liberal marketplace. In other words, the curriculum offer seemed to have been reified to exclude areas in which participant children excelled or showed passion,

potentially reducing their scope for creative learning and its accompanying engagement (Noddings, 2005). Our participants' perceptions that even art and reading were under-valued, as well less established priorities such as computer games or the study of reptiles, brought home some of the obstacles to learning faced by these particular children who struggled with mathematics and/or English.

Instead of or as well as relying on the innate satisfaction of engaging in learning tasks (in keeping with a deeper conceptualisation of Growth Mindset and a focus on process), a range of rewards was given in our sample schools as individual extrinsic motivators for children persevering with tasks and reaching their goals. Rewards included such symbols as: badges, golden tickets, certificates and digital 'dojo' points. Through these means, results were emphasised, leaving responsibility for the process to the individual child's perseverance (see also Reay, 2020).

A counter-motivation was the individual sanction for lack of perseverance. All the children feared being kept alone in class over break or lunch, to make up incompleted work-tasks (which was more likely for 'lower-attainers'). It appeared that sometimes the children had come to see such work-related punishments as an inevitable, common-sense part of schooling, unaware of the fact that playtime in schooling has been constantly decreased in recent years in parallel with the emphasis on attainment results (Baines and Blatchford, 2019). For example, we asked Summer [TERM5] whether she thought isolation for make-up work at break was fair. She replied, not noticing the incoherence of her argument:

> It doesn't really sound fair when you think of it, but it actually is, because otherwise I'll have to stay in for my *next* lunch break.

The disincentive to challenge the limited curriculum emphases was exemplified by Saffa [TERM1], who was an aspiring artist who had claimed that what she loved best about school was 'pointilism' in artwork [TERM2]. But she told us she would conceptualise art as 'quite meaningless' if she did it more often. When asked whether she would like always to do art first thing in the morning at school rather than mathematics, initially she said if art was first she would 'jump around in playtime' for joy. But then she checked herself, despite her own passion for art:

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

This quotation may illustrate how – not surprisingly in this climate – alternatives could not even be imagined. Values outside the accepted norm

could become excluded. Such findings suggested that children believed that it was up to the individual to fit in and participate in the everyday schooling system whereby the strange could become normal; and if they did not, they only had themselves to blame for negative consequences. Our data provided evidence that the children blamed themselves, and also other children, for not achieving tasks, rather than, for example, blaming the self-reliance discourses of the system. Landon 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. [TERM5]

In general, we perceived that the children believed it was through their own perseverance that they could compete adequately. Our data suggested that they continued to believe in the power of perseverance, even as they progressed from Year 3 (aged 7–8) to Year 5 (aged 9–10).

### Children Described Fear as a Common Component in Their Experiences of Schooling

Like previous research since the early 1990s in England (e.g. Reay and Wiliam, 1999), our data revealed children's sense of fear during their schooling, especially around testing. We considered whether this fear was compounded by the wider context of ambiguity that the postwestphalian system encouraged, especially for those whose lives had not been advantaged in traditional ways. During our research activities, the children tended to associate their frequent tests with fear of failure. Fear can promote an 'individual retreat to privacy' (Lemke *et al.*, 2011, p. 113) or repress children's voices under a 'veil of compliance' (Fisher, 2011).

The children's fear of tests seemed to be accompanied by the idea that the fear had to be tolerated as tests *per se* made them grow 'smarter', or perhaps compete more adequately. For example, Saffa [TERM4] explained:

> Without tests the school wouldn't be school … If you didn't have tests you wouldn't remember how to count … Some people might not know how to add and subtract.

While this perception can be challenged, the perception of Ben, Eleanor, Jake and Zack (across three different schools) was entirely fictional: they perceived tests as a passport to the next class up – despite the universal age-related criterion for moving up to the next class. They all feared that if they did badly in a test, they would be separated from peers. This perhaps illustrates their fear of being excluded or left behind; and also their sense of fearful uncertainty about how the system functioned.

Fear also seemed to pervade their experience of doing the tests themselves. Max [TERM4] illustrated his sense of anxiety as he advised, in the face of the

test, how to appear heroically unfluttered and contain nerves, as if admitting fear was itself a sign of failure (see Jackson, 2010):

> Don't freak out, just stay calm and stay focussed … then be as brave as you can to do- to do the test … Breathe in slowly and out.

Three other children specifically mentioned their fear of attaining a zero score in tests [Eleanor, Britney and Saffa]. During a role-play, Britney [TERM4] was also able to express:

> It's kind of hard and like you kind of feel nervous because you might get all the answers wrong. And … you don't want to do it anymore!

This fear of failure perhaps encouraged the children to persevere within the predictable schooling practices that they were familiar with. Emphasis in neo-liberal discourses on becoming economically successful adults (through high attainment in tests of core subjects) sometimes seemed to have infiltrated the children's fears. Saffa warned of her fear that if a child did not listen in class:

> You'll just be a McDonald's cooker, just flip patties. You will be unsuccessful. [Saffa, TERM1]

Anna and Chrystal both told us that they feared that if they did not persevere and work hard, they would end up in adulthood without a job at all; and therefore without a place to live. And Jake explained that if you failed to learn in school, 'your life is *ruined*' [TERM6]. Such fears – interwoven with discourses of social mobility – would perhaps reinforce the need for plodding compliantly through schooling towards at least a partial success (see also Reay and Wiliam, 1999).

### The Children Described Responding with Anger

An aspect of schooling that sometimes provoked anger among our participant children was being constrained in relation to holding their own body, rarely being free regarding physical posturing (see also Devine, 2003). This appeared to be in contradiction to the neoliberal emphasis on self-determination and self-reliance but perhaps illustrates that self-determination and self-reliance had become private pursuits within the wider, global demands for compliance. We extrapolated that Neymar was angry at such compliance, when he explained: 'You have to sit on the carpet or on the chair. I want to stand up and play something. Or like- run!' [Neymar, TERM3]. Jerry reported a recent occasion, when he had asked in exasperation and probably anger during a lesson, 'Can I go and explore? Because this is tooooo boring!' [Jerry, TERM1] Summer told us:

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. Sometime they say 'no'.

She went on to explain how her anger made her shout and punch:

I start shouting … Because like I do like to shout, but like I shouldn't because I'm going to break my ears and lose my voice … I have this bean-bag at mine [ie at home], like when I punch it all the beads come out [TERM4].

Rosie [TERM4], a child who was particularly quiet and obedient at this time in the research, role-played a scenario in which an imaginary child, who had not finished writing his test, became angry when the teacher interrupted him:

Rosie as the child: 'Hey, I was carrying on doing my work … I wanted to finish it, because I'm *not* staying in my lunch tomorrow … '

Rosie as the teacher: 'Well now you are, because you've had enough time to finish already … Because *that's the rules*'.

'That's the rules' was a phrase which threatened to shut down alternative ways of imagining schooling, constraining creative possibilities into sets of regulations, which clearly angered this 'imaginary' child. On such occasions, perhaps the children perceived that it was these unchallengeable 'rules' that controlled and punished them and coerced them to accept constraints they might otherwise have found unacceptable (see Raby, 2012).

On a more positive note, the fairly rigid schooling regime also seemed to provide a security to some children, signifying at least a local predictability which gave them an immediate sense of safety which was important within a system that at times seemed opaque. This predictability was perhaps a motivation for keeping within the constraints of the system, aspiring to a future that was equally predictable. These examples of the children's passive acceptance of the constraints of the classroom suggest that they may have traded proactivity for security, in their desire to gain assurance about their future potential failure.

### The 'Lower-attaining' Children Talked of Their Humiliation

Our participant 'lower-attaining' children talked of worrying about being humiliated by teachers and by peers. Their desire to avoid humiliation seemed to encourage them to persevere. Some of the children in our sample developed specific strategies to defend themselves against humiliation. Saffa [TERM1], for example, told us how she tried to avoid humiliation by persevering quietly and *not* raising her hand in class. She explained: 'Some people can say, 'Oh you got

that wrong! It was so easy!" Jake [TERM3] hinted at the fear of being deliberately targeted by peers if someone appeared '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'.

Eleanor [TERM5] was explicit about the pain and potential humiliation she felt when comparing herself to others:

> 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.

Jeff, Bella and Anna in a 'lower-attainers" group for mathematics all three stood out as the only Year 4 children who still had to work among the younger children in a Year 3 class. Saffa named the walk from the Year 4 to the low-attainers' Year 3 group, 'The walk of shame' [TERM3]. Such processes were likely to encourage the children to persevere in proving their worth as capable-and-competitive global citizens – at least for the time being.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Our findings do suggest that at times at least, these children persevered in working hard for fear of becoming the 'incapable and non-competitive chaff", which would constitute them as 'inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible', to repeat Fraser's words (2018, p. 24). The children in our study persevered with steady hard work, despite lacking the evidence in their schooling experiences, that as 'lower-attainers', they stood an equal chance as others to be seen as valuable in the schooling competition (Mowat, 2020; Parsons *et al.*, 2016; Richardson *et al.*, 2020). They persevered despite a high likelihood – whether they were aware of this or not – that they were fighting only for a chance to remain unequal. Our findings suggest that they persevered at times because they had become experts in compliance to a schooling system based on values that they could not fully permeate. These were values that may have hindered them from imagining alternatives or indeed engaging in learning in general. They seemed to persevere within the predictable restraining practices of the current system, without question, as the price they imagined they had to pay for future safety; and as a means for feeling a sense of control within a system whose functioning may have seemed opaque. We perceive that positive education's messages about the children's need for a Growth Mindset at times permeated these children's experiences, but yet was accompanied by too little emphasis on the support and flexibility the children needed to channel their hard work in appropriate or beneficial directions.

These 'lower-attaining' children also seemed to persevere because, within a climate where measurement and accountability were prioritised, they came to

accept and even validate frequent and threatening tests which assessed their capability and competitiveness; and potentially marginalised them as the 'sector of excluded low achievers' (Fraser, 2018, p. 169). While sadly many children in primary schools experience loneliness, fear, boredom, anger and humiliation, the postwestphalian emphasis on measurement of outcomes (rather than support for processes) underpins the practice of specifically sorting and grouping primary children by their measured 'attainment' (also often confused with 'ability': see Francis *et al.* (2020)). This sorting process potentially singles out 'lower-attaining' children as it explicitly separates the 'wheat' from the 'chaff' and misrecognises the 'chaff' as inferior (Reay, 2020). Our project dealt exclusively with children designated as 'lower-attainers' whose negative experiences clearly seemed to be affected by the policy focus on sorting by attainment (Hart, 1998; Reay and Wiliam, 1999).

Our data are significant in their capacity to illustrate the potentially impaired quality of life in schooling experienced by 'lower-attainers'. In particular, these children described loneliness at school and tended to blame themselves for being inadequate and not working hard enough. Fear played a role in their schooling experiences and sometimes elicited anger in them as well as humiliation. We propose that it was some of these factors that sometimes led the 'lower-attaining' children to experience a relatively – unequally – poor quality of life in the schooling system. This finding compounds other recent studies, such as the Children's Society's recent report (https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/good-childhood), that depict continually decreasing well-being among British school-children, made worse by the pandemic in 2020–2021.

The children in our sample seemed to suggest that they practised perseverance, even when it seemed destructive or senseless, perhaps because it gave the children a sense of control over their own outcomes and allowed them at least to continue to compete in the competition (which sometimes they seemed to be losing already). Messages which encouraged de-contextualised perseverance and the individual's Growth Mindset seemed to provide the children with a graspable alternative to opportunities for creative engagement. Unfortunately, our data portrayed some limitations in the schooling system in its success in providing opportunities for creative engagement among these children during their mathematics and English lessons. These limitations seemed to have negative consequences for the breadth and depth of children's learning and perhaps made it more difficult for the children to imagine alternative versions of schooling and of living. This in turn potentially made them more likely to be compliant as they accepted their norm. The schooling system's focus on individual mastery of basic skills – rather than creative engagement in a range of curriculum areas – also deprived the children of opportunities for immersing themselves in areas of learning that may have engaged and inspired them more, such as sport, art, drama, astronomy or nature studies, for example.

*Concluding Comments*

Over the next three years of the project, we may see some changes in these children's perseverance. As they approach puberty, it will be important to explore whether they become more aware of the 'cruel and cynical fiction' within which we suggest they are placed; or more impassioned about becoming compliant neoliberal subjects (Atkinson *et al*., 2012). If the former, we are likely to observe more active resistance or rebellion as they exercise more agentic decision-making in adolescence; or alternatively, increased resignation whereby they opt-out or disengage further. It was significant that our data showed that upward social mobility was neither a goal for our sample nor a likely outcome from their schooling, suggesting that the schooling system was potentially making poor use of the children's perseverance in hard work at school. Rather than convincing children that they need to persevere for questionable, fictional future aims, our schooling systems would do well to attend more to the quality of the life of children, both within school and in their wider contexts, while they are still children. Support for the diversity and depth of children's interests and ways of learning is required so that their perseverance leads these children to win the fulfilment of immediate inquiry, engagement or enjoyment; and a healthy, participatory schooling context for all. On both counts, our findings suggest that currently the system requires improvement: making real the possibility that children's perseverance is indeed substantiated by 'a cruel and cynical fiction'.

## 7. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## 9. REFERENCES

Atkinson, W., Roberts, S. and Savage, M. Eds., (2012). *Class Inequality in Austerity Britain: Power, Difference and Suffering*. London: Springer

Baines, E. and Blatchford, P. (2019). *School Break and Lunch Times and Young People's Social Lives: A Follow-up National Study*. Available online at: www.breaktime.org.uk (accessed July 26 2021.

Ball, S. (2017) Labouring to relate: Neoliberalism, embodied policy, and network dynamics, *Peabody Journal of Education*, 92 (1), 29–41.

Ball, S. (2021) *The Education Debate* (London, Policy Press).

British Sociological Association. (2017). *Statement of Ethical Practice*. UK,: British Sociological Association

Browman, A. S., Destin, M., Carswell, K. L. and Svoboda, R. C. (2017) Perceptions of socioeconomic mobility influence academic persistence among low socioeconomic status students, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 72, 45–52. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2017.03.006.

Brown, P. and James, D. (2020) Educational expansion, poverty reduction and social mobility: reframing the debate. *International Journal of Educational Research* 100, 101537. doi:10.1016/j.ijer.2020.101537.

Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2005). *Spaces to Play: More Listening to Young Children Using the Mosaic Approach*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Coyne, I., Mallon, D. and Chubb, E. (2021). Research with young children: Exploring the methodological advantages and challenges of using hand puppets and draw and tell. *Children & Society*, 35(5), 813–830. doi:10.1111/chso.12452.

Dean, J. (2010). *Blog Theory*. UK: Polity Press

Devine, D. (2003). *Children, Power and Schooling*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham

Dore, R. (1976). *The Diploma Disease: Education, Qualifications and Development*. London: George Allen and Unwin

Dweck, C. (2017). *Mindset - Updated Edition: Changing the Way You Think to Fulfil Your Potential*. UK: Hachette

Ecclestone, K. and Lewis, L. (2014). Interventions for resilience in educational settings: challenging policy discourses of risk and vulnerability. *Journal of Education Policy*, 29(2), 195–216. doi:10.1080/02680939.2013.806678.

Fisher, H. (2011). Inside the primary classroom: examples of dissatisfaction behind a veil of compliance". *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 59(2), 121–141. doi:10.1080/00071005.2011.567969.

Francis, B., Taylor, B. and Tereshchenko, A. (2020). *Reassessing 'Ability' Grouping: Improving Practice for Equity and Attainment*. London: Routledge

Fraser, N. (2000). Rethinking recognition. *New Left Review*, 3, 107

Fraser, N. (2008). *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*, Vol. 31. Columbia: Columbia University Press

Fraser, N. (2019). *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born*. London,: Verso

Fraser, N. (2018). Recognition without ethics? In C. McKinnon and D. CatiglioniEds *The Culture of Toleration in Diverse Societies* Manchester, England Manchester University Presshttps://www.manchesteropenhive.com/view/9781526137708/9781526137708.00011.xml

Goodson, I. and Sikes, P. (2016) Techniques for doing life history. In I. Goodson, A. Antikainen, P. Sikes and M. Andrews (Eds) *The Routledge International Handbook on Narrative and Life History* (London, Routledge), 82–98.

Gorard, S. (2010). Education *can* compensate for society – a bit. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 58(1), 47–65. doi:10.1080/00071000903516411.

Hart, S. (1998). A sorry tail: ability, pedagogy and educational reform. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 46(2), 153–168. doi:10.1111/1467-8527.00076.

Horkheimer, M. (1982). *Critical Theory*. New York: Continuum

Hoskins, K. and Barker, B. (2017). Aspirations and young people's constructions of their futures: investigating social mobility and social reproduction. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 65(1), 45–67. doi:10.1080/00071005.2016.1182616.

Jackson, C. (2010). Fear in education. *Educational Review*, 62(1), 39–52. doi:10.1080/00131910903469544.

Jeong, H. and Othman, J. (2016). Using interpretative phenomenological analysis from a realist perspective. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(3), 558–570

Kristjánsson, K. (2012). Positive psychology and positive education: Old wine in new bottles? *Educational Psychologist*, 47(2), 86–105. doi:10.1080/00461520.2011.610678.

Kristjánsson, K. (2021). Recent attacks on character education in a UK context: a case of mistaken identities? *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 42(3), 363–377. doi:10.1080/13617672.2020.1848151.

Lanford, M., Tierney, W. and Lincoln, Y. (2019). The art of life history: novel approaches, future directions. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25(5), 459–463. doi:10.1177/1077800418817834.

Lemke, T., Thorup, L. and Hvidbak, T. (2011). Fear. *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 12(2), 113–114. doi:10.1080/1600910X.2011.579453.

Mazzoli Smith, L. (2021). The ability trap: reductionist theorising about academic ability and the ramifications for education policy and school-based practice. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 51(1), 85–103. doi:10.1080/0305764X.2020.1782351.

Mowat, J. G. (2020). Interrogating the relationship between poverty, attainment and mental health and wellbeing: the importance of social networks and support–a Scottish case study. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 50(3), 345–370. doi:10.1080/0305764X.2019.1702624.

Noddings, N. (2005). Identifying and responding to needs in education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 35(2), 147–159. doi:10.1080/03057640500146757.

Owens, J. and de St Croix, T. (2020). Engines of social mobility? Navigating meritocratic education discourse in an unequal society. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 68(4), 403–424. doi:10.1080/00071005.2019.1708863.

Parsons, S., Green, F., Sullivan, A. and Wiggins, D. (2016). *Higher Education and Occupational Returns: Do Returns Vary according to Students' Social Origins?* London,: UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies

Plummer, K. (1983). *Documents of Life*. London: George, Allen and Unwin

Plummer, K. (2001). *Documents of Life 2: An Invitation to a Critical Humanism*. London: Sage

Raby, R. (2012). *School Rules*. Toronto,: University of Toronto Press

Reay, D. and Wiliam, D. (1999). 'I'll be a nothing': structure, agency and the construction of identity through assessment. *British Educational Research Journal*, 25(3), 343–354. doi:10.1080/0141192990250305.

Reay, D. (2020). The perils and penalties of meritocracy. *The Political Quarterly*, 91(2), 405–412. doi:10.1111/1467-923X.12829.

Richardson, J. T., Mittelmeier, J. and Rienties, B. (2020). The role of gender, social class and ethnicity in participation and academic attainment in UK higher education: an update. *Oxford Review of Education*, 46(3), 346–362. doi:10.1080/03054985.2019.1702012.

Savvides, H., and Bond, C. (2021) How does growth mindset inform interventions in primary schools? A systematic literature review, *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 37 (2), 1–16.

Schwartz-Shea, P. (2020) Scholarly reflexivity, methodological practice, and Bevir and Blakely's anti-naturalism, *Critical Review*, 31 (3–4), 1–19.

Sealy, J., Abrams, E. and Cockburn, T. (2021). Students' experience of isolation room punishment in UK mainstream education. 'I can't put into words what you felt like, almost a dog in a cage'. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1–15. doi:10.1080/13603116.2021.1889052.

Seligman, M. E. P. and Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: an introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5–14. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5.

Social Mobility Commission. (2019) *State of the Nation Report*. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications (accessed 29 September 2021).

Spohrer, K. and Bailey, P. L. (2020). Character and resilience in English education policy: social mobility, self-governance and biopolitics. *Critical Studies in Education*, 61(5), 561–576. doi:10.1080/17508487.2018.1537297.

Tomlinson, S. (2017). *A Sociology of Special and Inclusive Education: Exploring the Manufacture of Inability*. Oxford,: Taylor & Francis

Watson, D., Staples, E., and Riches, K. (2020) 'We need to understand what's going on because it's our life': using sandboxing to understand children and young people's everyday conversations about care, *Children & Society*, 35 (5), 663–679.

White, M. A. (2016). Why won't it stick? Positive psychology and positive education. *Psychology of Well-being*, 6(1), 1–16. doi:10.1186/s13612-016-0039-1.

Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2018). *The Inner Level: How More Equal Societies Reduce Stress, Restore Sanity and Improve Everyone's Well-being*. London: Penguin

YEUK (2020). Available at https://www.youthemployment.org.uk/dev/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-YEUK-Census-Report_FINAL.pdf (accessed 29 September 2021).

*Correspondence*
ELEANORE HARGREAVES DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM,
PEDAGOGY AND ASSESSMENT,
UCL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION, ROOM 775, 20 BEDFORD WAY, LONDON
E.HARGREAVES@UCL.AC.UK