

Society's readiness: How relational approaches to well-being could support young children's educational achievement in high-poverty contexts

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Abstract

This paper explores how relational approaches to well-being could support young children's educational achievement in high-poverty contexts. It draws on findings from a qualitative study involving mothers and early years educators living and/or working in a city characterised as one of the most disadvantaged in England. The findings suggest that children's well-being, rather than being merely an individual characteristic or aspiration, is interdependent with their social and material environments, as are the institutions that support them. The paper concludes by calling for a recalibration of early childhood policies away from assessing individual children's 'school readiness' to encouraging society's readiness to support everyone's well-being, and consequently that of young children too.

KEYWORDS

disadvantage, early childhood education policy, low-income areas, school readiness, well-being

INTRODUCTION

In England, as in many other parts of the world, most children living in poverty,¹ and particularly those in low-income areas, do not achieve the same educational outcomes or have the same life

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chances as their more advantaged peers (Simpson et al., 2017). Consequently, early education policy has been directed towards the ostensibly equitable objective of narrowing these ‘attainment gaps’ on the understanding that this will potentiate children's social and economic mobility (Social Mobility Commission, 2017) and thence, the well-being of each individual child. Yet in spite of these endeavours, the ‘attainment gap’ between children on free school meals (hereafter FSM) and non-FSM, for those leaving school at 16 years, remains stubbornly persistent in most UK regions, the exception being London (Macdougall & Lupton, 2018).

One of the principal responses in the past few decades to this longstanding issue has been to increase investment in Early Childhood Education & Care (hereafter ECEC; Belfield et al., 2018). This is predicated on an increasingly robust evidence base (Feinstein, 2003; Mathers et al., 2014) suggesting individual children's educational outcomes (as they are currently conceived) are influenced before they start their statutory education which, in England, is at 5 years old.

Given what appears to be a strong link between ECEC and the future well-being of individual children, in terms of their social and economic mobility, ECEC policy has focused on educational outcomes in an attempt to enhance future social inclusion and prosperity for all children, regardless of their socioeconomic status. This policy narrative could be said to be in contrast to Bernstein's contention that education cannot compensate for society (Bernstein, 1970). These educational outcomes relate to notions of ensuring young children's ‘school readiness’ (Department for Education, 2017:5), that is, that they each have a particular skillset to assist their smooth transition into school. This skillset is measured when each child is four or five years old, in the term before they start their statutory education. Children who reach ‘expected levels of development’ (Department for Education, 2017:14) in the three ‘prime areas’ (communication and language; physical development and personal, social and emotional development) and two ‘specific areas’ (literacy and mathematics) in the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (hereafter EYFS) are considered to have reached a ‘good level of development’ (hereafter GLD; Standards & Testing Agency, 2019:59). While the government has suspended the measurement, collection and publication of EYFS Profiles (hereafter EYFSP) owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, baseline testing and the teaching of Early Learning Goals are still being piloted and encouraged for those children in ECEC settings, with an understanding that children ‘catch-up’ as quickly as possible (Children's Commissioner, 2020). However, as this study suggests, the Covid-19 catastrophe may afford an opportunity to re-conceptualise ECEC rather than re-instate previous curriculum and assessment arrangements.

Distributive approaches to well-being: Child as bounded individual

It seems unreasonable, at first sight, to appear not to fall in with ubiquitous narratives calling for children, especially from low-income areas, to be able to achieve the same educational outcomes as their more advantaged peers. Such narratives are prevalent in policy, regulatory and popular media contexts (cf. British Broadcasting Company, 2018; Government Equalities Office, 2012; Ofsted, 2016). Indeed, the drive for all children to attain a ‘good level of development’ (and outcries that economically disadvantaged children might be falling behind) could be said to speak to a distributive approach to fairness and social justice, that is, the procedural distribution of equivalent educational ‘goods’ to every individual child. These ‘goods’ are represented by the EYFSPs which ostensibly provide ‘**equality of opportunity** and anti-discriminatory practice’ (original emphasis; Department for Education, 2017:5) for each child to attain an individual passport to future well-being.

This policy ambition, however, has been robustly critiqued by many academics on the grounds that it serves ‘to subjugate both teachers and children, and further marginalises already marginalised

groups of children if they fail to reach the GLD' (Kay, 2018:iii). Other academics criticise the approach to measuring children's learning, arguing that young children are misrecognised as individual bounded entities who pass naturally and inevitably through linear 'ages and stages' of development (Burman, 2017; Fleeer, 2015). Consequently, it is further argued, that the EYFS curriculum goals and assessment methods are narrowly conceived to fit this social construction of young children, and begin to shape children's perceptions of themselves and others in ways that can create failure by damaging self/other perceptions (Ang, 2010; Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016). Critics contend that these assessment methods, against which children are compared in the name of equality, begin to shape pedagogies in ways that mean that play, for example, becomes appropriated in the service of policy narratives that are influenced by and, in turn, contribute to this misrecognition of young children.

Relational approaches to well-being: Child as a mutuality of being

It is a concern that (child) well-being is under-socialised (Fattore & Watson, 2017) as well as under-theorised (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2014) that has prompted a recent turn to what is considered to be the primacy of network and relatedness to (well) being (Henderson & Denny, 2015; White, 2015). White, for example, proposes that relational approaches privilege the 'social or collective, going beyond the individual' (2015:2) and that well-being comes from 'between' (ibid). This approach conceptualises the human subject as a 'mutuality of being' (Sahlins, 2013:19) rather than the single, bounded individuals privileged in early childhood policy arenas. In this sense, proponents of relational approaches propose that well-being cannot be achieved merely by the distribution of resources or (educational) goods to individuals, as these goods are only instrumental to what is intrinsically important. Indeed, it is argued that well-being is not the property of individuals but instead, is 'emergent through the interplay of personal, societal, and environmental processes' (White, 2015:5).

Key concepts from distributive and relational approaches to well-being

In sum, the central concerns of distributive approaches to child well-being, from which ECEC policy-makers in England continue to draw, focus on the role and distribution of resources (havings) to support each child's beings, doings and becomings. As such, each child is viewed as a single bounded individual, a 'unit of moral concern' (Robeyns, 2003:44) and a worthy recipient of a set of primary goods (Rawls, 1971). In contrast, relational approaches to well-being focus on it as an embedded process between people, and privileges the concept of belonging. These approaches are well documented in academic literatures (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2018), but are usually applied only to adults. Distributive approaches to well-being are predominantly influenced by economic considerations (cf. Rawls, 1971; Sen, 1999); relational approaches to well-being are predominantly influenced by sociological concerns (cf. White, 2015).

The proposition in this paper is that relational approaches to well-being might allow a window into understanding the longstanding and embedded socially unjust treatment of people, including young children, living in low-income areas. This proposition was developed during a small-scale qualitative investigation into young children's well-being in low-income areas: what supports and/or hinders it. The empirical data suggest that defining and approaching 'well-being' as a relational concept may lead to improving educational outcomes and life chances of children in, or at risk of, poverty an ambition that has thus far eluded policy-makers and practitioners of ECEC in England.

METHODOLOGY

This study, conducted in one of England's most economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods, explored the views of mothers, early years educators (EYEs) and young children about their (children's) well-being. The study involved 18 children aged 2–4 years, and the findings from this cohort have been reported elsewhere (Street, 2020). In this paper, I focus on the findings derived from the mothers and EYEs.

Participants

Working with Children's Centres' Assistants and Outreach Workers, seven EYEs were recruited and consented to the study. As detailed in Table 1 below, all were White British women with a range of qualifications, working in different roles (from managers to practitioners) in different ECEC settings (from private, voluntary and independent provision to a state maintained school and an academy). In addition, seven mothers (as detailed in Table 2 below) were recruited and consented to the study.

Ethics

Recruitment of parents and carers whose two-year-old children were/had been eligible for 15 hr per week of funded childcare was prioritised, as this is one particular indicator of poverty. Parents with 'complex needs' were not recruited, as per the 'medium risk' ethical contract approved by the University of Manchester. The terms 'parents and carers' and 'mothers' are often conflated in childcare contexts. My sampling strategy involved the inclusion of a range of parents and carers. However, only mothers were recruited. Accordingly, this cohort is referred to throughout the paper as 'mothers'.

Written information was provided to all (potential) participants, a couple of weeks given for their deliberation, and their written consent sought. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' privacy and anonymity. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and manually transcribed. Digital data were stored securely with password protected accessibility.

Data generation

Data generation occurred over three consecutive stages:

TABLE 1 Early years educators

	Ethnicity	Further details
Paula	White British	EYE in private nursery
Liz		
Sharon		Childminder
Jessica		EYE in primary school
Katie		
Sian		
Kerry		EYE in community provision

TABLE 2 Mothers

	Ethnicity	Number of children (under the age of five)	Children eligible for two year funding?
Imani	Black African	3 (1)	Yes
Lisa	White British	2 (1)	Yes
Adenike	Black African	2 (2)	No
Rachel	White British	2 (2)	Yes
Michelle	White British	5 (1)	Yes
Stacy	White British	3 (2)	Yes
Ewa	White European	1 (1)	Yes

- (i) Introductory focus group, which supported the introduction of participants to the study, an exploration of what they understood by the term ‘well-being’ and their views on what supports and/or hinders young children's well-being in the study area.
- (ii) Individual semi-structured interviews—all participants were invited to bring a friend to the interview, if they wanted, but none of them took up this opportunity. The questions asked of them were shaped by the concepts derived from distributive approaches to well-being, that is, their young children's individual beings, doings, becomings and havings
- What helps and/or hinders their child/ren's current well-being?
 - What do the children like doing, and if this supports their well-being?
 - What do children need to have to support their future well-being?
- (iii) Final focus group—Six participants attended the final meeting: Imani, Adenike, Lisa and Stacey (mothers); Sharon and Kerry (EYEs, and also mothers).

This focus group had two components. First, the initial findings were discussed thereby providing opportunities for some measure of member validation, supporting the study's trustworthiness. Second, participants were invited to begin to consider some of the conundrums arriving from the initial analysis of the data.

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, the data were deductively analysed using the concepts (beings, doings, becomings and havings) derived from distributive approaches to well-being. This preliminary analysis began to surface other issues that these concepts did not appear to accommodate. I reflected on these with participants interviewed in the later stages of fieldwork. A summary of this analysis was presented to the participants who attended the focus group at the end of the study, for member checking purposes and to generate further reflections.

In the second phase of analysis, the data were re-analysed but this time matching them against the additional concept of belonging derived from literatures pertaining to relational approaches to well-being, in turn prompted by the empirical data. Crucially, these concepts were not treated as simply categorical. Their different dimensions and/or interpretations were recognised against the differential ways in which children are conceptualised, and are reflected in the findings section, below.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in three parts. In the first two, the findings are considered with and against conceptualisations of children as bounded individuals (as per distributive approaches to well-being), and then as mutualities of being (favoured by proponents of relational approaches). This section ends with a discussion of the resources/goods (havings) needed to support the well-being and educational achievement of children in low-income areas.

Children as bounded individuals?

The findings indicate that the process of supporting children to achieve ‘the best possible outcomes’ (Department for Education, 2017:10) began with the practice of separating children from their parents to facilitate the former’s transition into education settings. This practice was often described in ways that suggested it could be harsh.

Jessica advised,

... sometimes it is so hard peeling children off their parents when they are upset but I often say to parents it’s the best thing because of...it’s like a sticking plaster isn’t it, you’ve just got to rip it off.

Katie, another practitioner, described a child who was similarly struggling to make the transition into the setting:

It’s like a mist that’s over her all the time. She’s forever fretting. It’s like ‘mum, mum’ and if she’s not with her mum, if we manage to prise her off her mum or off her nanna in a morning, she’s got to be so close to one of us otherwise she is having a complete emotional melt down....we are finding it so difficult to snap her out of this and this is really affecting everything because she has sort of lost her independence.

Words and phrases indicating some children had to be ‘prise[d]’ or ‘rip[ped] ...off’ their parents may suggest that children’s early atomisation could have been distressing to some of them (and to some of their parents) and might affect (both) their current well-beings. The importance given to becoming an independent individual solely responsible for one’s own well-being was also surfaced by Sharon (an EYE and local mother) when she mentioned that children had to learn to ‘fend for themselves’ and ‘if you don’t, you’ve had it!’ The disposition to be a resilient individual appeared here to be privileged before social and collective values. Indeed, Sian, another of the EYEs, spoke of their role as ‘breaking that chain that you don’t have to do what your mummy’s doing’.

And to break that chain, support from ECEC settings appeared to be principally directed towards the children. Katie explained that a video of her reading a bedtime story had had over ‘100 hits’ in the few days since she had uploaded it onto YouTube. The idea was that this would support parents who could not, or did not want to, read to their children; an EYE could do it virtually for them instead. Supporting children to reach a ‘GLD’ appeared to be of paramount importance. The bedtime story could be regarded as intervening at a key time of connection and intimacy between children and their adults—whether they read a story or not.

That said, assisting children to separate and become independent was described as helpful by some of the mothers, especially those with little support. ECEC provision was said to facilitate this process.

According to most of the mothers, separation supported their children's socialisation and language development in particular, through the formation of friendships and wider relationships. However, other mothers described, or were described as, struggling with this process of separation. So rather than children being 'ready for school', it was sometimes more difficult for parents to be ready for their children to start school. Some practitioners with their own children recognised this difficulty. Sharon explained that, 'separation anxiety... is worse for the parent than it is for the child'. However, another of the EYEs, Katie, suggested a 'lonely' mother was 'constantly fabricating' her children's illnesses to avoid sending them to school. This mother may have been finding the process of separation painful, signalling the inter-relatedness of their (well) beings. Her children were about to start their school careers but it was unclear whether she had as much to look forward to.

Once children had been 'successfully' separated from their parents, practitioners believed they could support each child to develop the particular skills deemed necessary for their 'becoming' adult. They articulated that supporting children to learn the skills privileged by the EYFS meant that children had to be independently disposed and self-reliant, able to adapt quickly to their learning/work environments otherwise they were 'needy' or could not 'lead their learning' (Katie). So too, children who were not meeting the developmental milestones, seen to be requisite for a successful transition to their statutory education, were, according to Kerry and Jessica, considered to be 'lacking' or 'failing'. However, Paula talked about some children being 'set up to fail' if they were not 'academic'.

The study's findings also suggest that labelling some children, as 'lacking' against pre-defined and privileged outcomes appeared to militate against their well-being. Rachel, one of the mothers, described not returning to the health professional who had applied measurement standards to her son, and judged him to be 'delayed'. By implication, children's 'success' or 'failure' against normative standards appeared to be internalised by some of the mothers as a judgement of their parenting abilities and they railed against these judgements. Furthermore, that some children's 'success' necessitated others' 'failures' began to illustrate how the dependence on normative standards to make judgements about children underscored the dialectics of their inter-relatedness. For example, the pressure and worry that some of the women experienced regarding their children's schooling as a means to their 'becoming' was highlighted by a number of the mothers. Rachel amplified the complex consequences of privileging exam/assessment success. She seemed to relish the standards used to measure children's educational success when applied to her clever daughter but did not return to the health clinic when she was told by a health professional that her son had 'delayed' development:

Rachel: She's really clever like...she's in top set for everything...

Researcher: How old is she?

Rachel: She's 4... When she started nursery I got told she is like really highly advanced and they have different groups. So starting from nursery, so they have like Owls, you've got Foxes, they've got Squirrels and they've got Hedgehogs and she is in the Owls...and then, what she's in now, in reception there's Diamonds, Emeralds, Sapphires and Rubies and she's in Diamonds cos Diamonds are like the highest gem of them all. And they have like maths groups and phonics groups and she's in the top set for maths and phonics.

Individual 'becomings'?

It appeared that the success of the children and the practitioners within the ECEC setting was inter-related. Paula, one of the practitioners, mentioned she and her staff team felt pressured to get children

'ready for school' otherwise, they had not done their job properly. The fear of an unfavourable Ofsted judgment was underscored during fieldwork when one of the participants, the manager of a private nursery, was unable to attend a meeting owing to an Ofsted inspection, which resulted in a judgment of 'Requires Improvement' for the ECEC setting and her consequent dismissal as its manager.

What this also begins to illustrate, is that the privileging of individual children's acquisition of skills in pre-determined ways belied the inter-relational connection between the well-being of children and that of their EYEs. This connection underscored the inadequacies of conceptualising children's well-being as solely about becoming self-reliant single entities in pursuit of self-actualisation. Their well-being within their education settings was partly inter-related, it is suggested, to the recognition and support of their early years educators as skilled and competent professionals. EYFS measures were not only constitutive of children's progress but also that of the practitioners'. Early educators' professional trajectories depended on their ability to demonstrate their settings were able to meet the 'GLD' standards, thereby enabling a good (or better) Ofsted judgment. Reflecting on her first Ofsted inspection several years prior to our interview, Sharon mentioned that during it, 'there weren't all this big talk of teaching'. She had misgivings about her second most recent inspection even though it resulted in an 'Outstanding' judgment of her because, 'I know I'm going to have to up my game. I hope I'm not doing it by then'. The impact of this pressure to 'up it' on practitioners' well-being was also highlighted by Paula who talked about their poor remuneration. She described there being not much incentive for practitioners to undertake further training because 'the pay is not there at the end of it'. She reported their lack of recognition as having an effect on children's ability to thrive.

Children as mutualities of being?

According to the EYEs, children who were not thriving were isolated because they were 'socially lonely' (Katie). Lisa, one of the single mothers with one child, described her son's learning (and well-being) as developing rapidly once he started at his early education setting because he had made many friends and was no longer lonely.

EYEs also conceptualised children's well-beings as interdependent with those of their parents'. It was often not the vulnerability of some of the young children to which they referred, but to that of their parents. Some four-year-old children were described as having to help their parents. Several practitioners spoke of children who were not present at school (even though they were physically) because of the anxiety they might be experiencing about their parents. The EYEs, in these instances, were therefore not able to gain purchase on these children's beings to support their becomings (albeit in particular ways).

A common concern raised by practitioners was children's witnessing domestic violence. Sian, for example, explained that, consequently, some children felt responsible for their equally, if not more vulnerable, parents:

We always say, you know, like we are a family together and we'll help. Some of them will come in and say "My Mum's been sad at the weekend. Can you talk to her?"

This potential relational empathy, however, often appeared to be frustrated among some of this cohort because of the pressures placed upon them to get children to reach a 'GLD'. Several practitioners explained that some parents were not ready for their children to go to school (again reversing the understanding of children as needing to be 'school ready') because they were lonely:

A lot of them are single mums so it's literally been child and mother and they're not always well supported mums by their own families. We've got a family at the moment who's got their own child in nursery and a child in reception and the mother... doesn't have any family and the mum doesn't like bringing the children to school cos she gets lonely so their attendance is shocking. She's constantly fabricating illnesses in these children so they don't have to come to school... They are the families that really need the support ... so I think...[it's] supporting the parents first, I would say. (Katie)

The pressure to focus on each individual child's Early Learning Goals appeared to cause some frustration among many of the EYEs if parents were not, or appeared not to be, on board with the EYFS agenda. Katie mentioned that,

We've got about 15% that haven't joined [online tracking system] in EYFS... we found that those are the parents who are the hard-to-reach parents, the parents who will say, 'We haven't got internet access' but we know full well they're on Facebook and they're choosing not to be engaged.

As such, many parents were considered to be solely responsible for their children's 'lack of support' (Jessica), evoking well-rehearsed deficit views of parents in low-income areas. This was typical of a view among some of the early educators and appeared to draw from a 'moral underclass discourse' characterising poverty as a choice (Brown, 2015:1) and/or working-class jobs and lives as morally inferior. It also spoke to the misrecognition of the importance of mothers' reproductive labour.

The findings suggest that the huge efforts directed at individualising children misrecognised them. Children's individual ecologies were differentially enfolded within those of their m/others and their wider environments. Practitioners were, on the whole, cognisant of the impact of parents' personal vulnerabilities on those of their children prompting Katie to comment that parents needed to be supported first. However, ECEC policy (currently not joined up to other social policies—Lupton & Thomson, 2015) foregrounded the abstraction of children from their wider social and material contexts. I suggest this facilitated an understanding among some practitioners that some parents (and particularly mothers) were sometimes wilfully obstructing EYEs from educating their children. The comment from Katie about knowing 'full well' that parents had access to the internet, may have been an example of this.

Each of the mothers, and by consequence their children, faced a complex multiplicity of barriers, the intersections of which shaped in different ways their potential well-beings and becomings, and their agential capacities. Findings from the mothers' data suggest they all, either implicitly or explicitly, conceptualised their young children's well-being as being indivisible from their own and that of their neighbourhoods. Each of them, without exception, recounted the multiple barriers to their own well-being and linked these to that of their children. Adenike, who had moved to England from Nigeria for 'the height of education' she believed was available for herself and her young daughters, recounted that she had 'various things as barriers for myself not for the kids...so it [well-being] has to balance to the mother itself not the child'. Many of these barriers were prefigured by their own parents' struggles. Imani's father, for example, suffered from the same debilitating disease as she did, and some of those who (had) suffered depression described their own parents as having likewise experienced it. Lister (2004:125) describes depression as a 'collapse of agency' and most of the mothers suggested this influenced their children's agencies too, especially if they had no other support. Conceptualising children as individuals abstracted from their social and material contexts, as privileged by ECEC policy, might therefore be seen as potentially undermining children's well-being as it misrecognises its relational nature.

Findings from the mothers also indicated that because of their wider social and material constraints, the children who were more likely to be considered as ‘lacking’ were those whose families were experiencing, or at risk of, poverty and were therefore lacking the material goods necessary for their educational foundations and social inclusion.

The role of havings in relational approaches to well-being

The study's findings suggest that ECEC policy (and following this practice) undermined some children's well-beings in ways that meant they might be less able to achieve the educational outcomes and life chances their parents valued. In what follows, I describe how focusing only on the distribution of educational goods to children, conceptualised solely as bounded individuals and not as mutualities of being, may contribute to this.

The mother's personal struggles, including their low incomes, were compounded by multiple problems arising from difficulties in securing employment, poor public transport, inadequate housing, lack of affordable leisure opportunities, reduced policing and poor health. Most of the mothers discussed the importance to their children of having a range of experiences and activities to support them to work out what they might have reason to value. These were compromised by their personal incomes but also by the dis-investment in their neighbourhood (e.g. the local shop, parks and youth centre), which historically had few assets anyway. Playing outside in this neighbourhood (described as important by all participants to children's well-being) was widely reported by the mothers as being “dangerous” in this area. Witnessing and experiencing the effects of being outside could be seen as increasing children's opportunities to become involved in crime and anti-social behaviour or be the victims of it (especially—but not exclusively—in the case of Imani's family who had been victims of repeated racial abuse). The mothers suggested that, consequently, their children's geographies were being reduced, particularly (for those who had grown up locally) in comparison to their own when they were younger. Adenike described Tesco as one of the few local places she could take her children to play. These reduced opportunities could be interpreted as influencing children's desire to play on their ipads or watch television, as they had few other choices that their parents were happy with. While participants reported these activities as having some educational import, these mothers also complained of the constant petitioning for new toys these activities initiated.

Many mothers discussed the neighbourhood as creating a ‘mind-set’ that influenced their children's potential becomings in ways that worried them. Kerry, who had enough financial resources to do so, had moved off her social housing estate as she felt she could see the ways in which her children were being affected by these compounding conditions. However, not all mothers wanted, even if they were able, to move off the estate, as they had deep and long-standing connections, allegiances and networks of support in the area.

This study's findings suggest that the mothers and EYEs conceptualised child well-being, at least in part, in keeping with ECEC policy and distributive approaches to well-being. Given the constrained material contexts of many of the people resident in the study area, these mothers may have been motivated to value their children's ECEC. These women were delighted with the provision of ECEC, especially those whose two-year-old children accessed the funded offer. They were fully aware of the importance of early education as preparation for their children's statutory education, and as potential means to their (children's) future well-being. Adenike was prepared to move half way round the world and away from the support of her extended family in Nigeria as a trade-off for ‘the height of education’ she so highly valued for herself and her daughters.

All the mothers spoke unreservedly about the importance of resources as means by which their children could achieve well-being. However, and crucially, these went far beyond, but did not preclude,

human capital. Of necessity too were other individual-oriented resources, that is, personal and/or family incomes (financial capital) and neighbourhood-oriented resources, for example, schools, libraries and services—such as policing and public transport (built capital), safe parks and green space (natural capital). Mothers stated unequivocally that their low incomes combined with the reduction in (quality of) services militated against their (children's) current well-beings. Lack of resources, in turn, compounded and contributed to the area being 'dangerous' and creating a certain 'mind-set'. This finding is consistent with others reporting the vital importance of a range of material resources as means to well-being (Brown, 2015:22; Cooper & Stewart, 2017) and emphasises the continuing relevance of Bernstein's old adage that education cannot compensate for society (1970).

Suggesting that children might be 'school ready' if they reached 'GLD', thereby hinting at children's supposed future opportunities to be upwardly socially mobile, masked the potential consequences of asset stripping in the study area. Sian's understanding that children's well-being was about, 'breaking that chain that you don't have to do what your mummy's doing' diverged from mothers' descriptions of their lives. Many, but by no means all, of the EYEs appeared to discount the impact of structural, spatial and temporal influences on children's learning and well-being (specifically historical poverty) because they were compelled by ECEC policy to conceptualise children as single indivisible entities, needing to start their statutory education with the same educational goods represented by the EYFS profile.

WHAT 'RELATIONAL APPROACHES' TO WELL-BEING CAN OFFER POLICY-MAKERS CONCERNED WITH CHILDREN'S EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT IN HIGH-POVERTY CONTEXTS IN ENGLAND

Findings from this study suggest that young children's educational outcomes and life chances may be better served by an adoption of relational approaches to well-being. It is proposed that such an espousal would have a number of implications for ECEC policy and practice in particular, and wider socioeconomic policies more generally, which may then better leverage support for everyone's well-being, and following this, that of young children too.

Re-conceptualising children

This study suggests that re-conceptualising children as mutualities of being rather than bounded individuals may have a positive impact on their well-beings, and not just those in low-income areas. Policy narratives posit young children as capable of being and becoming agential and independent. However, this is undermined by measurement practices, which in the name of social justice, recreate young children as individual tabula rasa dependent on the acquisition of 'equal' educational goods. Early childhood pedagogies and curricula are thus narrowly conceived as they are compromised by measurement requirements that support the atomisation of children.

Recalibration of ECEC policy

It is also suggested that recognising, and thus supporting, EYEs to develop child-centred curricula and pedagogies would likely be enriching to the well-being of EYEs, children and their wider families.

Co-producing pedagogies and curricula that acknowledge the social and material circumstances of families, communities and neighbourhoods may be one way of doing this. Findings from this study reflect those of the study conducted by Simpson et al. (2017) who report how EYEs in England and the USA tended to 'downplay poverty status and to interact with children in a similar way to other children' (2017:182). I suggest this may be because of a belief that viewing children as 'every child' requiring the same educational skillsets, supports social justice. These authors discuss how this normalisation may result in the voices of children in poverty, for example, being 'organised out' (2017:184). To address this issue, at least in part, they call for a 'pedagogy of listening' that would respect the macro-level influences on the lives of children and their families who live in poverty. This 'pedagogy of listening' might include a variety of approaches. Brown (2015:173) for example, suggests assessing the needs and monitoring the progress of individual and groups of children who are more likely, because of their social and material contexts, to be disadvantaged by the education system. However, this study's findings suggest that such assessments would need to incorporate the needs of children's families reflecting the inter-relatedness of their well-beings.

Re-calibrating ECEC practice to foreground assessments *for* learning of unique children might also contribute to safeguarding children from some anxious parents' unrealistic expectations. Achievement of learning outcomes might then extend across educational phases rather than be confined to arbitrary stages, based solely on children's chronological age. By extension, this would also involve workforce training to enable EYEs to consider and change the ways in which current practices (e.g. grouping practices and expectation for parents to purchase expensive equipment) may contribute to children's social exclusion. Recognising the important role that skilled EYEs have, and could further develop, around supporting young children's well-being would therefore necessitate EYEs of children under the age of three being afforded the status of teachers with comparable access to CPD as colleagues in other stages of education.

Following Brown (2015:170) and Burman (2019:11) it is suggested that ECEC pedagogies might also focus on respecting and supporting relationships and social learning: *how* learning occurs rather than *what* is learnt, that is, processes rather than the products of learning, that is, to focus on the 'characteristics of effective learning'.

While recalibrating ECEC policy in the ways suggested thus far may help support all children's (well) beings and doings, it will not be enough to support the becomings of those children who live in poverty (especially those in low-income areas). As the study's findings suggest, these children (and their families) have their capabilities differentiated in ways that may contribute to their social exclusion.

Recognising m/others and spatial/neighbourhood influences

This study's findings are also consistent with others' (see e.g. Minh et al., 2017) suggesting there are other socioeconomic policies influencing the educational outcomes and well-being of families living in low-income areas and especially those in poverty. However, ECEC policy is currently directed at 'improving' ECEC and home learning environments alone (see e.g. Department for Education, 2018). It is suggested here that the importance of 'enabling environments' (Department for Education, 2017:6) to children's educational outcomes and life chances might usefully be extended to include their neighbourhoods.

Drawing from Fraser (1999) I suggest children in low-income areas, and particularly those living in poverty, are 'bi-valently oppressed groups' in that they 'suffer both maldistribution and misrecognition' (Fraser, 1999:75). Furthermore, and crucially, that children's bi-valent oppression is exacerbated

by their enmeshment within that of their m/others who are similarly and differently 'bi-valently oppressed'. Consequently, supporting children's well-being requires the adoption of policies allowing not only for their recognition but also that of their m/others and environments.

This study's findings are, at least in part, consistent with a conceptualisation of well-being as a dance and 'not the property of individual dancers' (White, 2015:11). The relational 'dance', in this area, could be said to connect all its individual residents in ways that allow a window into understanding embedded and longstanding socially unjust treatment. In this sense, well-being is not only under-socialised but also de-historicised. Recognition (of children generally, and of children and their m/others in low-income areas in particular) is essential to their well-beings but so too is its intersection with distribution of (non) material resources.

I suggest these distributive concerns involve three inter-related components. First, that children's well-being, including their educational achievement, is predicated not just on their access to quality ECEC provision but also on the totality of their (and their families' and neighbourhoods') experiences. In other words, that not only schools be ready for young children but also that society is ready for young children by providing adequate resources and opportunities to their families and neighbourhoods. Just as children are nested in their social and material environments, so too are the institutions that support them. Seeing ECEC settings' role as divisible from that of other services and institutions, is obstructive to well-being, as the mothers who participated in this study indicated. The study, therefore, emphasises the importance of joining up policy areas at national and regional levels, and consequently institutions, for the local provision of quality, affordable and accessible public services and goods including food, transport, housing, health, policing, green space, leisure and cultural services. For example, this study's findings suggest that investing in the upkeep of local parks might encourage more families with young children to use them. This in turn, might then support children's educational achievement by providing them with opportunities to play with their friends outside of school. More families with children able to play safely outside might then lead to a growing sense of community safety, and perhaps even a reduction in mental health issues resulting from isolation. In other words, the objectives of one policy would reinforce the objectives of others. This, however, clearly necessitates significantly more investment in low-income areas, as others have suggested (Lupton & Hempel-Jorgensen, 2012:602).

Second, supporting adults in low-income areas (some of whom may also be parents) to lead lives 'they value and have reason to value' (Sen, 1999:291) would involve their inclusion and participation not only in the provision of a range of learning and employment opportunities but also in their ownership. These could be achieved, at least in part, with significantly more investment in adult education (or more inclusion in their children's formal education), free at the point of access including vocational education (the latter with enhanced value and status). This would include the profession of EYEs, which might then start to attract more men, a current problem. Such initiatives may provide a useful basis upon which to build, if desired alongside parenting responsibilities, a job enough in itself.

While the financial (or commodified) economy is necessary to provide this investment, so too is the acknowledgement of the third element of this dimension, that is, the (uncommodifiable) 'gift' economy. Many commentators (e.g. Alderson, 2016:126; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018:30) including Oscar Wilde (1892) have pointed out the dangers or misguidedness of reducing 'everything' to a price or commodity. The kindnesses, connections, love, joy, solidarity, trust and forgiveness that were spoken of and displayed by many of the participants during the course of conducting the fieldwork—albeit often overshadowed by the cruelties and hidden injuries which surfaced in the interviews with mothers in particular—spoke to the importance of a parallel 'gift' economy: shared, uncommodifiable happenings in between and within the dance of relationship. These were mainly within the private

spheres of family life (as often, were the cruelties), but children's education, in spite of its many drawbacks, could also be seen in this study as providing these opportunities.

CONCLUSION

This study makes a theoretical and empirical contribution to knowledge. It suggests that relational approaches to well-being provide fertile ground for policy-makers interested in young children's educational achievement in high-poverty contexts. Relational approaches highlight that children's well-being and, following this, their educational achievement, is one thread in the broader fabric of well-being. The strength of the fabric is dependent on all threads being intact. Consequently, it emphasises an integrative approach to well-being—instead of children's 'school readiness', a focus on 'society's readiness' may support everyone's well-being, including that of young children too.

That said, this study involved only a small number of mothers and only one low-income area. Further research involving other parents/carers and low-income areas would test the theoretical propositions in this study. Given the complexity of well-being, it is suggested that measures need to be multi-dimensional to account for much broader factors influencing the well-being of the wider population, especially those in low-income areas. Consistent with the views of those calling for multi-dimensional measures of ill/well-being (e.g. Stewart & Roberts, 2019:533), a quantitative or mixed methods study could begin to operationalise the conceptual and theoretical work of this study. This is all the more urgent given the unequal impact of the Covid-19 pandemic already being experienced by children and families living in low-income areas (Lawson et al., 2020).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in [https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/theses/what-is-child-wellbeing-and-how-can-parents-and-early-years-educators-support-it-in-lowincome-areas-in-england\(26781e7e-4183-4069-a087-8243fb321dfb\).html](https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/theses/what-is-child-wellbeing-and-how-can-parents-and-early-years-educators-support-it-in-lowincome-areas-in-england(26781e7e-4183-4069-a087-8243fb321dfb).html).

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ Poverty is a complex multi-dimensional concept but for the purpose of this paper, its definition is based on Households Below Average Income data, which is used to assess children's eligibility for the two-year childcare offer and Free School Meals.

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