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EDUCATION, WELFARE REFORM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING: A CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: There are established links between education and well-being, and between poverty and education. This article draws on interviews with parents of school-aged children impacted by a policy in the UK commonly referred to as the 'bedroom tax'. A critical psychology perspective to education is put forward, acknowledging the complex interrelationships between psychological well-being, sociopolitical factors and education.

Keywords: education, critical psychology, psychological well-being, welfare reform

1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the potential use of a critical psychology perspective within education. In doing this, we reflect on analysis from a piece of exploratory research which investigated the educational and psychological impacts of a recent change to United Kingdom (UK) housing welfare policy, namely the 'removal of the spare room subsidy' or the 'bedroom tax',¹ on children and their education in Greater Manchester (Bragg *et al.*, 2015). This project generated accounts from staff at 20 schools, housing associations and community organisations and explored (I) whether the 'bedroom tax' was perceived to have impacts on children and their education, and if so, (II) in what ways it was perceived to have an impact and how organisations were responding to this. We also recruited 11 parents drawn from affected areas to narrate their experiences of the 'bedroom tax'.² This article specifically draws on analysis from those interviews with parents. Our central proposition is that broader sociopolitical systems, educational experience and psychological well-being are interlinked and interconnected in a multiplicity of important ways. The structure of the article proceeds in three main steps: firstly we provide some background theory and literature to ground what follows, secondly we introduce the 'bedroom tax' research and analysis and thirdly we consider the ways in which this analysis illustrates the importance of a critical psychology perspective within education, and what the implications of this are.

2. A CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATION AND WELL-BEING

The association between children's psychological well-being and education is well documented in research, including findings indicating that childhood mental health issues predict poorer academic attainment and outcomes (e.g. early-onset mental health problems have been associated with leaving school earlier: Breslau *et al.*, 2008; Leach and Butterworth, 2012). Recent work has looked at 'developmental cascades', and cumulative or cascading effects of internalising and externalising mental health problems on academic performance (e.g. Moilanen *et al.*, 2010). In 2015, the UK Department of Health (DoH) published the *Future in Mind* report which explicitly brought mental health discourses into education, and proposed that mental health specialists should be integrated into schools (DoH, 2015). In addition to this link between education and well-being, research has established a relationship between poverty and education (Cooper and Stewart, 2013; Raffo, 2011): 'Put simply, the poorer is a child's family, the less well they are likely to do in the education system' (Raffo *et al.*, 2009, p. 342). We argue that a critical psychology lens may help us to conceptualise broader and more complex relationships impacting on children's educational experiences and outcomes than a consideration of these two relationships alone.

Historically, psychology focused on looking at the individual and their psychological well-being as isolated from their social and political environment. This approach, however, has been critiqued by 'critical psychology', as underestimating the impact of the social context on the individual, and ignoring the political nature of psychology (Parker, 2007; Prilleltensky and Fox, 1997). There is no single 'critical psychology' (Dafermos *et al.*, 2013; Teo, 2015); critical psychologists have argued that psychological discourse should consider not only wellness, but also fairness or justice, given the evidence demonstrating the significant interrelationships between wellness and fairness (Prilleltensky, 2013). Research focusing on the 'social determinants of health' has found that mental health problems are strongly associated with multiple social, economic and political factors: 'People are made vulnerable to mental ill-health by deep-rooted poverty, social inequality, and discrimination' (Allen *et al.*, 2014, p. 402). Poverty and income inequality are both strong predictors of poor mental health (Burns, 2015). In contrast to an approach which locates the cause of mental health problems within the individual, a critical approach encourages a contextualised understanding, and recognises that often the causes of mental ill health are related to social, not solely individual, factors. Such views have critiqued both the individualised nature of psychology and the misuse of psychology as a method of control (e.g. developmental psychology as a way of assessing and moulding children) (Burman, 2015). Some critical psychologists draw on an ecological model, which reminds us of person-environment interactions, and views the individual as embedded in micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A critical view also emphasises the importance of a

‘macro-social’ approach (Prilleltensky, 1999). This goes beyond a ‘micro-social’ approach which acknowledges the way in which oppressive structures in families, schools and communities can have detrimental impacts, and calls attention to economic, cultural and political forces. Our understanding of a ‘critical psychology’ approach is that it is both a critique of traditional psychology (and thus acknowledges the social and political systems rather than focusing solely on the individual) and is an application of psychology to critique social practices (of discrimination, disadvantage and oppression) (see Parker, 2015 for a recent overview of the critical psychology field).

We suggest such a perspective might be usefully applied to the field of education and educational research. This would involve taking this understanding of the relationship between well-being and sociopolitical factors to highlight interrelationships between education, psychological well-being and sociopolitical forces. We suggest that applying perspectives from critical psychology theory to education and educational research allows us to usefully shift our focus from the individual child to the political systems within which children are embedded. As Fine and Burns (2003) have suggested, we need an analysis of the intersections of economic, social and psychological positions of our subject of interest, rather than of solely the psychological. We elaborate on these issues in our discussion below, and outline some implications of this argument. Prior to this, however, we describe our research and present the analysis.

3. THE ‘BEDROOM TAX’ PROJECT

Internationally, economic, political and social change has accelerated over recent years, with many changes being made to welfare, housing, health and education systems, and a significant proportion of European countries implementing what are often termed ‘austerity measures’ in response to the global financial crisis in 2007/2008 (Karanikolos *et al.*, 2013). In a UK context, significant changes to the welfare state have been made since the previous Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government came into power. These are currently being extended under the Conservative Government which took power in 2015. Research suggests that low-income families with children lose the most from changes to benefits and taxes introduced between 2010 and 2014, and therefore that the reforms are making low-income families poorer (De Agostini *et al.*, 2014). Given the relationship between poverty and mental health problems (Allen *et al.*, 2014), it is certainly a possibility that by making poor families poorer, these policy changes are having negative impacts on psychological well-being. In line with our critical psychology perspective, children’s well-being may be adversely affected by poverty both as a result of the direct effects on the child, and indirect effects through impacts on the parent, and broader community and sociopolitical systems (Yoshikawa *et al.*, 2012).

The ‘bedroom tax’ policy means that housing benefits are reduced for working-age social housing tenants who are judged to be under-occupying

their homes (i.e. having ‘spare bedrooms’). Individuals are therefore required to pay more towards their rent costs; when there is 1 ‘spare’ bedroom they receive 14% less housing benefit, and 25% less for 2 or more ‘spare’ bedrooms. This policy is therefore a local example of the type of austerity measures which have been implemented internationally (Karanikolos *et al.*, 2013). The policy was introduced in England, Wales and Scotland in April 2013, but later ended in Scotland in February 2014. The policy has not yet been enacted by the Northern Ireland Assembly. Therefore at present, the policy applies only to social housing tenants deemed liable within England and Wales. The stated objectives of the policy were to (I) reduce the housing benefit bill, (II) make better use of the housing stock and (III) incentivise tenants to increase their income (via starting work or increasing hours), and thus depend less on welfare from the State. Since its introduction, it has been judged to be ‘failing’ on a number of levels (Gibb, 2015) and several options for reform have been suggested (Wilcox, 2014). Research has explored the initial impacts of the policy and has found that numbers of individuals and families moving are very low. Clarke *et al.* (2014) suggest the figure for movers is 4.5% affected tenants in the first 6 months of the policy, whilst Wilcox (2014) has the figure at 6%. Therefore, at this early stage, it appears that it has not resulted in better use of the housing stock. Additionally, individuals affected by the policy report having a decreased ability to buy basic domestic items and services such as food and utilities, experiencing increased mental health problems, and negative impacts on their family and community networks (Moffatt *et al.*, 2015). It is not only individual working-age adults, however, who are impacted by this policy, but also their children. Prior to our study, no research had investigated the impacts of the ‘bedroom tax’ on children and families, nor had it explored the impacts on education.

As noted above, this article is based on a wider project (Bragg *et al.*, 2015). Given the links discussed above between well-being and education, in this analysis, we sought to explore the effects of the ‘bedroom tax’ on children’s psychological well-being, and in doing so focused on addressing the following questions:

- (1) How, if at all, did parents perceive the ‘bedroom tax’ to impact on children’s psychological well-being?
- (2) What are the implications of this for education?

We conceptualise the ‘effects’ on psychological well-being to be changes (either positive or negative) to the well-being of children, which participants either indirectly or directly relate to the introduction of ‘bedroom tax’. Although looking specifically at the ‘bedroom tax’, we acknowledge that this policy emerged alongside many other welfare reforms and changes to public spending, all of which may have affected children and their education, and we are unable to separate out the direct impacts of the ‘bedroom tax’ from these other changes. These have included (but are not limited to): a cap to the overall amount of

benefits a household can receive (£500 a week for single parents and couples from October 2013), multiple changes restricting and reducing Working Tax Credits (April 2011 and 2012), abolition of the health in pregnancy grant (April 2011), a cap on Housing Benefit (April 2011) and localisation of council tax benefit with a 10% cut (April 2013) (Child Poverty Action Group, *n.d.*). Many of the parents interviewed had been impacted by numerous reforms, although the 'bedroom tax' is likely to be one of the most financially significant changes (Bragg *et al.*, 2015). We focus here on the 'bedroom tax' for two reasons: (I) it provides an example of one of the raft of changes which has impacted low income families and (II) it specifically relates to the family and the home in terms of their composition (e.g. by dictating who is 'entitled' to a separate room, based on sex, age and relationship status; Greenstein *et al.*, *Forthcoming*), and their place in the local community (e.g. by raising the idea of moving away from their home, community and school should a family no longer be able to afford their rent), and therefore, we may surmise that it has specific impacts given its specific nature. This potential interpretive problem of not being able to isolate the 'bedroom tax' as a specific causal factor in the changes to psychological well-being does, however, illustrate a significant point: that we are dealing with the combined impacts of a raft of measures which reduce family income. As we elaborate on below, the 'bedroom tax' is often perceived to be an additional burden, but also part of an accumulation with its own 'knock-on effects' or momentum. We have referred to this momentum as a 'cascading dynamic of disadvantage', a socially constituted issue, in which prior difficulties are intensified and become more complex (Bragg *et al.*, 2015).

Methodology

This research was a small-scale exploratory pilot project designed to explore the impacts of the 'bedroom tax' on children and their education. It was not designed to quantify the extent of the impacts found or to measure their effect on educational attainment or other outcomes. Therefore, a qualitative methodology was adopted.

Participants

Eleven parents based in Manchester, with at least one school-aged child (18 years or younger), were interviewed. This number was judged to be enough to gather sufficient in-depth data for the method of analysis chosen, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), whilst fitting with the wider timescales and nature of the project (Bragg *et al.*, 2015). Recruitment strategies included advertising in local community organisations and housing associations, as well as running stalls in supermarkets and community centres. The majority of recruitment was carried out in two contrasting neighbourhoods: a multi-ethnic area where social housing is mixed with other tenures and one where social housing predominates with

mostly white, British residents. Nevertheless, the final group of participants who offered to be involved did not all live in these two neighbourhoods and were based in a range of areas across Manchester. The sample included four fathers and seven mothers, each with between one and five children, aged 1–24 years.³ The particular organisation of households varied, and included single mothers and single fathers, some having full-time custody and some shared custody of children. Three participants were married or co-habiting and eight were divorced or separated. The majority self-identified as White British ($n = 8$), one as Asian, one Black/Mixed British and one Irish. Four reported that their children had either a learning disability or physical health problem (e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorder, epilepsy, severe asthma, learning difficulties and nocturnal enuresis). Three of the parents were in work and eight were out of work. Of those in work none were in a full-time permanent position (one was self-employed, one on a temporary contract and one part-time). Some limitations to our recruitment strategy should be acknowledged. Firstly, we interviewed parents rather than children. Future research clearly should consult with children to explore how they describe their experience of welfare reform. Secondly, as is the case with all qualitative research, participants were self-selecting (in the sense of volunteering to take part) and therefore may have had a specific perspective or agenda. It is interesting to note, however that, in the wider project, there was a great deal of consensus across both the parents interviewed and the professionals representing various community organisations and schools (Bragg *et al.*, 2015).

Data Collection and Analysis

Parents took part in semi-structured interviews in their homes, at the University at which the research team were based, or via telephone in summer and autumn 2014 (the larger project took place between January 2014 and September 2015). Prior to data collection, the project was reviewed and received University ethical approval. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour and were conducted by the fourth and fifth authors of this paper. Areas of focus within interviews included the current material and financial situation for the family; parents' perceptions of the impact of the policy on their daily routine and the psychological well-being and educational experience of their children; their understanding of and relation to their home and community; involvement with local services; and hopes for the future.

Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed and these were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This was chosen for its flexibility and rigour in working with qualitative data. The elements of the analysis presented here are those which relate to the specific research questions within this article (i.e. those which relate specifically to psychological well-being). Analysis involved the following steps:

- (1) Familiarisation with the data: reading each transcript multiple times and making brief notes on initial thoughts.

- (2) Coding each transcript individually for 'meaning units' (Rennie *et al.*, 1988). This was a descriptive process which involved sticking closely to the participants' words.
- (3) The codes from across the transcripts were then grouped into themes, utilising a process of constant comparison (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). This involved moving away from a close description of the participants' words towards a greater level of abstraction.
- (4) These themes were finally grouped into higher-order categories.

Several measures were adopted to optimise the trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis (Elliott *et al.*, 1999). The research team was made up of academics from the fields of education, psychology, learning disability studies and community work, thus providing multiple perspectives. Meetings were used as a space to discuss thoughts and feelings in relation to the project, which allowed researchers to bring preconceptions and positions on the research to awareness in order to promote reflexivity (Morrow, 2005). For further details of the research team's approach, see Bragg *et al.* (2015). All steps of the data analysis presented here were initially conducted by the lead author, and checks for consistency and coherence were conducted by the third author (Elliott *et al.*, 1999).

Analysis

Overall, two global themes emerged ((i) impacts/difficulties and (ii) coping strategies). In this article, we outline those which relate to the specific research questions posed above and therefore focus on the themes within the 'impacts/difficulties' category. In this category, three organising themes (which across them contained 32 subthemes) were identified. For reasons of space, we present an overview of the three organising themes: impacts on children, impacts on parents and families and impacts on the wider community and society. We end this section by focusing on general vs. specific impacts of the 'bedroom tax', which brings together analysis across these categories, explicitly focusing on the issue of specific impacts of the 'bedroom tax'.

Impacts on Children

Parents described children as being directly impacted by the 'bedroom tax':

He finds it very hard, and you know, at one point he was going to school with the fleece and a jacket, he was freezing and he was too scared to say to me 'Mum I need a coat' because he didn't want to put added pressure on me. (Anna⁴)

Here, Anna suggests her son is impacted physically in terms of the lack of a winter coat, and psychologically in the way in which he felt scared of burdening her with additional costs for a new coat. Parents talked about their children's worries about the 'bedroom tax', for example, about the potential need to move neighbourhoods

or schools. Prior research has suggested that anxiety about the future is associated with lower levels of well-being in adolescents (Matthews *et al.*, 2014).

It was notable within our analysis that cutting back on food and basics such as electricity and gas for heating and cooking was common practice, giving rise to difficult choices:

I mean a loaf of bread isn't going to keep me dry or keep me warm, or keep them warm, or keep them dry. So you've got to pick and that's the hard bit. (Joanne)

Interviewer: so what does this mean for you and your son?

Participant: being cold all of the time. (Anna)

Recent work has linked food insecurity and living in a cold and damp home to problems with psychological well-being (Carter *et al.*, 2011; Liddell and Guiney, 2015). Parents also described other financial changes such as cutting back on family day trips, extra-curricular activities such as musical lessons, or additional tuition outside of school. This is consistent with previous research illustrating the way in which people are cutting back on their expenses (Moffatt *et al.*, 2015), and illustrates specifically that some educational activities are being reduced. Involvement in extra-curricular activities has been found to correlate with higher levels of academic attainment (Gutman and McLoyd, 2000) and to have a positive impact on well-being (Hull *et al.*, 2008). In addition to this, parent's perceived there to be implications for their children's mood:

They aren't settling with the homework, because they are panicking they are not concentrating, it makes them short tempered. I know this because my ex-wife told me, they are not paying attention, they wander, they are snappy, they are quite tearful, they are lethargic half of the time 'cause they are not sleeping at night' cause they are panicking even if they don't have to panic; so it's affecting the kids, it affects the kids more. (Paul)

This example from Paul also highlights a theme that emerged across our material: the knock-on effect of the impact of the 'bedroom tax' on children's education through impacts on their well-being, as they are unable to concentrate to do their homework because of the stress they are feeling. Similarly, parents who had children of the same gender but different ages (e.g. 6 and 15) talked about problems arising from being 'entitled to' only one room to share, in particular, specific issues associated with getting homework done, especially in relation to revision and assessment deadlines. These problems were further compounded when one of the children had health problems which meant that sleep or routines were often disrupted.

Impacts on Parents and Families

Analysis also indicated the way in which impacts on the parent and the broader family unit are having an effect on children. Parents described how they

perceived their own mood to have been impacted, in terms of both increased anxiety produced by managing debts and communications from authorities:

... but the stress is there, you know ... like my friend says when she see the brown envelope she starts shaking because she doesn't know what they are going to tell her. (Melanie)

And a lowering of mood or increase in depression:

It's like just living to die, and that's so sad. (Elena)

Some of us are depressed because of this system; the system makes us depressed. (Melanie)

Four of the participants reported experiencing diagnosed mental health problems prior to the changes in welfare and a number also reported previous physical health problems. These were described as being exacerbated by the current financial stresses. Furthermore, parents described the way in which they could see their own mood having an indirect impact on their children, and the way in which children picked up on and experienced the stress in the household:

Oh yeah they are noticing don't get me wrong. They say 'don't cry, don't cry it's alright' but you can't say 'not really, mummy can't handle this one'. You know, but you can't say that to a five year old or a six year old, because they see you as superwoman don't they? (Joanne)

Another theme related to the sacrifices parents were making to protect their children from potential adverse effects of the welfare reform, similar to other research (Patrick, 2014). In one case, a parent reported significantly restricting her own food intake in order to ensure her children were eating regularly. Given the need to shield children from any negative impacts, we can imagine that it was difficult for participants to share with us the impacts they did see. One father, whose children came to stay with him at weekends in his one bedroom flat, described how he slept in the living room whilst they were there: every Friday he turned his bedroom into theirs, for example, by removing his things and putting their toys out and pictures up to make it look welcoming. The children were not 'entitled' to a bedroom in his flat as they did not live with him permanently. He reported that these sleeping arrangements had a negative impact on his health, sleep and mood, and were challenging for the children because of the shortage of space. Negative effects on parents appeared to indirectly impact children, for example, because of an increase in arguments and stress within the house:

Because it makes you snappy; anybody who is stressed they'll tell you straight away: if you are stressed you snap. And if you snap you feel guilty afterwards, and then you get stressed again and then it's a vicious cycle. (Paul)

I'm depriving my children of £20. So then it turns into an argument 'you don't do anything for us, you've just been tight ...' (Helen)

One worry expressed by parents related to a lack of space in the home for children. For example, being concerned that their grown-up children wouldn't be able to visit as much after leaving home, or being unsure where children would sleep when coming home in holidays from full-time higher education. One father who had shared custody was concerned about seeing one of his sons less often as there was nowhere for him to sleep. The family (and, within this, also the child) is therefore under increased pressure, both materially and psychologically. Finally, participants talked about the importance of their home as somewhere they had invested in for their family and felt 'safe'. As one said, 'it's my home and that's it, you know; I might rent the property [...] but it's still my home'. A number of participants reflected on preferring to stay in their house and manage the financial implications rather than leave home.

Impacts on the Wider Communities and Society

Broadening our view further, parents described an increase in 'us and them' thinking and segregation both within and across communities in their broader society:

What they have done now, what the government has done is making ... pensioners hating children, families with children hating pensioners (Melanie)

It's like on the television now... 'oh if you're on benefits you must be a scrounger, you must be this and that'. Years and years ago it used to be to persecute single parents, persecute black people, Asian people, but now it's people on benefits. (Bev)

Participants talked about their perception of society's attitudes towards them as recipients of benefits, and reflected on the stigma and the separation between groups of society. This was seen to occur within groups, as participants talked about how some people were 'deserving of' benefits (such as themselves) whilst also talking about those they knew who were not so deserving, or were taking more than entitled to from the state. It also appeared across groups, as seen in Bev's comments above.⁵ These reflections about the stigma of being on benefits in society, and also their judgements of who is deserving or undeserving of benefits echo findings in sociological research about 'poverty talk' (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013) and work on 'poverty porn' (Jensen, 2014). Children are situated within environments in which families on benefits feel as though they are targeted, victimised, or 'persecuted'. Interestingly, however, parents interviewed were not wholly against changes to the benefits system but rather saw the 'hostile' way in which changes were implemented as the main issue, and the thing which negatively impacted upon families and children (although this may

also be interpreted as indicating an internalising of stigma and mainstream policy perspectives):

I think we went through a generation where people are not appreciating what they are getting. Yes, they just wanted to be given. And it's true ... there is this aspect which I believe the government are saying the truth ... And yes, it's good the government are shaking people now to think, and especially the young generation to think. But at the same time, do not do it, you know, in a very hostile way because you are just ... what you are doing is you are harming the children, psychologically, you know. (Joanne)

General vs. Specific Impacts of the 'Bedroom Tax'

As aforementioned, there is a question about the extent to which we can isolate specific impacts of the 'bedroom tax' within this research. We found that participants found it difficult to do this, not only in the interviews with parents reported here, but also in those with community organisations and schools. In general, the 'bedroom tax' was experienced as one change in a complex picture of changing policy, with broad impacts such as decreased financial resources resulting in cutting back on food, heating, participation in society and educational activities outside of the school. However, some specific effects can be identified. Specifically, the main direct impact attributed to the 'bedroom tax' by parents was the loss (or threat of potential loss) of the bedroom for a child and the impacts which that may have. For example, parents were concerned about (or struggling with) a lack of space for children to do homework, function independently, socialise with friends, and form identities, in addition to managing increased arguments in the family and between siblings when space is reduced. We have drawn upon notions of 'psychological homelessness' to conceptualise some of these issues (Bragg *et al.*, 2015).

Discussion

This analysis has documented preliminary experiences of the effects of the 'bedroom tax' as described by parents, which illustrate that they view their children's psychological well-being to be impacted both via direct and indirect means. Analysis also indicates that the various reported effects of the policy on psychological well-being may have significant impacts on children's educational experiences. Children are nested in a series of social systems, all of which contribute to both their psychological well-being and their education. That is to say, their psychological well-being (and via the knock-on effects described above, their educational experience) is likely to be impacted not only directly by welfare reform, but also indirectly via effects on the parent, the family, the community and the wider society. From a critical psychology perspective, the 'bedroom tax', which along with other Governmental laws or reforms is located within the individual's exosystem, can be seen to impact children within their

microsystems (through its impacts on the family), their mesosystem (through its impacts on the home-and-community connection) and their macro-system (through its impact on the wider political landscape, discourse and society) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). While a traditional psychological perspective might emphasise the impact of the 'bedroom tax' at the level of individual children, a critical psychological perspective draws attention to the ways that social and political levels indirectly impact children and their education (Parker, 2015). Importantly, therefore, critical psychology's 'macro-social' view allows us to see not only the micro-social impact of the 'bedroom tax' on children within their families and their local schools and communities, but also the macro-social impact within the wider economic, political and cultural forces (Prilleltensky, 1999).

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This article considers the utility of approaching education and educational research through a critical psychology lens. As an illustration of this, we have reflected on analysis from research which explored the effects of the 'bedroom tax' on children's psychological well-being and education in one area of the UK. The 'bedroom tax' appears to be an example of a policy ostensibly only concerned with housing and space allocation, which is perceived by parents to have effects beyond this on familial, community and educational relationships. Our exploratory analyses suggest that children's psychological well-being may be impacted via direct and indirect processes, and it appears that these impacts may have potential implications for children's education. We have drawn on arguments from critical psychology to highlight the importance of an ecological, and 'macro-social', perspective of children's well-being. A critical psychology perspective (providing an understanding of the link between psychological well-being and sociopolitical forces), may help us to conceptualise more complex relationships beyond singular relationships between psychological well-being and education, or poverty and education. Specifically, we see the various inter-relations between psychological well-being, education and sociopolitical factors emerging.

There are several important implications of this argument. Firstly, if we return to the relationship between poverty and education, in addition to a potential direct link (Cooper and Stewart, 2013), a further *indirect* link between decreased income and education can be discerned from our analysis via the former's effect on psychological well-being. Therefore, we argue that it is important for research examining the impact of poverty or social policy on education to acknowledge the psychological within this process. Educational research in this area has typically focused on the 'meso' level of the school, and when psychological factors have been taken into account, this has typically drawn from traditional psychological approaches rather than a critical perspective (Raffo *et al.*, 2009). In line with our critical psychology viewpoint, however,

psychology's contribution here should acknowledge that the link between psychological well-being and decreased income (impacting on the relationship between education and poverty) relates to the well-being *of the child, the parent and the community* (rather than viewing children in isolation). Psychological contributions are important here, but we highlight the value of *critical psychological contributions*, which take into account the interconnections between the micro, meso, exo, and macro levels of analysis. Even when we examine the micro level, we need to view this as embedded, rather than distinct, as created by rather than separate from the broader levels. As intersectional and psychosocial perspectives highlight, the 'micro-social' cannot be divorced from the wider 'macro-social' perspective which encompasses economic, political and social factors beyond the individual and their immediate social environment.

Secondly, given the interrelationships we describe, education policies should take into account the social and political (Raffo, 2011). Anyon (2005) wrote of how educational policy is not just about education, and the need to recognise that broader policies such as housing, welfare and health, impact on the educational experience and attainment of children and young people. More recently, Lupton and Thomson (2015), in considering educational equity, have argued for the importance of seeing policy 'in the round'. Rather than viewing education in isolation, we should attempt to situate it in its wider systems, in order to gain a fuller perspective. Lupton (2014) has argued that 'The key point, of course [...] is that the problem of educational inequalities is caused by society, not by schools' (p. 922) and 'Teachers on their own cannot make all the difference, although they can certainly make a difference' (p. 923). Critical psychologists have long argued that individual psychologists treating psychological distress within the individual is at best misguided, given the role of social and political factors in influencing well-being (Prilleltensky, 2013). Similarly, it should be acknowledged that schools cannot address on their own the link between poverty and education, given the significant role of broader social policies.

The final implication of our argument relates to the way in which schools and education providers support the well-being of their students. School-based social and emotional learning interventions and counselling services, designed to improve psychological well-being, also have positive impacts on educational attainment (e.g. Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Rupani *et al.*, 2012). Such interventions are typically child-centred or whole-school-centred (for instance, see Hanley *et al.*, 2013 and Humphrey, 2013, respectively). There is no denying the importance of both individual and school level work to address psychological well-being in education. However as we have seen, there are strong relationships between psychological well-being, education, and political and social factors, and these approaches potentially neglect the wider social and political systems which have a profound influence on children and their well-being (viewing only the well-being–education link). The experiences reported in the present study highlight as a significant possibility that the impact of broader policies, such as welfare and housing, may undermine potential gains from school-based initiatives to improve

the psychological well-being of their pupils. This is not to say that we should not put money or effort into school-based mental health initiatives (e.g. Public Health England, 2015), but rather that we also need changes at a broader societal and political level in order to improve children's education and psychological well-being. Our contribution here, in line with critical psychological and educational commitments, is to extend the analysis of education and child well-being to contexts that lie outside the classroom, using models that view home, school, community and the wider society as connected environments in which children (should) learn. Similar to the above point regarding poverty and education, schools cannot on their own address the link between well-being and education, given the significant role of social and political factors.

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6. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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8. NOTES

- ¹ It should be noted that, although this policy has been referred to by multiple names, both for ease of reference and because this was the term most commonly used in public discourse and publications, we have chosen to refer to it as the 'bedroom tax' throughout (Gibb, 2015).
- ² The final sample for the project included 14 parents as noted in the project report (Bragg *et al.*, 2015). The project as a whole included longitudinal data collected over two time points, and the time two data is not represented in this analysis. The time one data included 12 parents; however, one individual was excluded from this analysis due to not being financially impacted by the 'bedroom tax'.
- ³ In order to be eligible to take part in the research, however, all parents had to have at least one school aged child of 18 years or under.
- ⁴ To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout this article.

- ⁵ We do not have the space to explore here material in the data relating specifically to race and potential racialised impacts of the 'bedroom tax', which might suggest that there may not be a shift from discrimination against one group to another group as Bev describes, but rather a complex presentation of a variety of discriminations.

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