

Negotiating Teachers' Work in Disadvantaged Schools

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Introduction

Since 1997, there has been a strong political rhetoric in England around the importance of reducing educational inequalities. Successive governments have sought to address the issue in different ways. The New Labour governments from 1997-2010 approached the problem largely through central government interventions. The initial focus was on raising standards in all schools by central prescription of curriculum, modes of performance pedagogies, the national literacy and numeracy strategies, along with targeted interventions in the poorest schools and areas, such as the 'Excellence in Cities' programme. After the mid 2000s, there was increasing focus on targeting individuals who were falling behind, through reading recovery and similar programmes, and then targeting schools not reaching increased floor targets through the National Challenge initiatives with assigned School Improvement partners. Throughout the period, investment in early years programmes and efforts to reduce child poverty accompanied and were intended to underpin school-based educational initiatives. The net result was significant redistribution of funding towards the poorest schools, but only modest gains in the relative educational attainment of the poorest children (Lupton, Heath and Salter 1999). The relationship between poverty and education, and the large gaps in attainment between poor and rich schools and neighbourhoods remained very strong period (National Equality Panel 2010).

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government formed after the election in May 2010 has also positioned the reduction of educational inequalities as central to its policy agenda, arguing that education gaps between rich and poor are a 'tragedy', more pronounced in England than in other countries, and getting worse, and also that the school system widens gaps between rich and poor (DfE 2010 p6/7). Its approach, however, is almost diametrically opposite to that of its predecessor, emphasising local rather than centrally-driven intervention, although there remains some lines of continuity in regards floor targets and school improvement plans. In the DfE (2010) Schools White Paper, entitled 'The Importance of Teaching', proposals were announced for: a smaller national curriculum; the ending of targeted programmes and grants to schools and instead a new funding system with a premium for disadvantaged pupils; no national targets but more encouragement for collaboration between schools; the establishment of 'Teaching Schools' and the expansion of schemes for the exchange of good practice; the reform of teacher training to make it more classroom based; removing expectations of standard approaches to lesson planning and pupils assessment, as well as the wholesale diversification of the school system with the enablement of 'free-schools' run by parents, charities or other groups and with

freedom to depart from the national curriculum and to prioritise students from low income families in their admissions criteria.

Many on the left have concerns about the fragmentation of the state school system and its potential implications for further social division, as well as the simultaneous removal of targeted grants and other wider programmes of support for low income families and child development. However, some aspects of the new government's agenda have been welcomed by teacher unions and progressive educators (e.g. Barker 2010) as hailing a new era of teacher professionalism, in which the needs of the most disadvantaged children (as well as others) can be tackled in innovative ways by knowledgeable and creative teachers unconstrained by excessive bureaucracy, offering real prospects for transformative change rather than a slow creep towards slight reductions in attainment gaps.

In this paper, we seek to explore the possibilities and constraints of the new government's approach within the most disadvantaged schools where people on both sides of the political spectrum would agree, change is most necessary. We examine work recently undertaken by teachers in one school serving disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the city of Leeds, who engaged in their own critical examination of educational disadvantage and the contribution of curriculum and pedagogic practice, and devised different interventions in response. In other words, they acted exactly as the new government would hope, as creative professionals, to address the educational challenges in their local communities. The work was undertaken as part of a nascent school-university partnership, known as the 'Leading Learning' project in which university academic partners (including two of the authors), worked to support the teachers in developing their action-focussed enquiries and practical changes. As we write, the teachers' work is not complete, nor have educational outcomes for their students been evaluated. The paper does not aim to evaluate the project but to offer some critical insights into the process and outcomes. Is it realistic, as the Coalition government believes, for teachers in disadvantaged schools to design and deliver curriculum change that can achieve transformational change in the toughest schools? What can teachers really achieve acting in this way, and what support do they – and their academic partners - need to do it?

Addressing Educational Inequalities: School Knowledge, Teacher Action and Sociology

Our approach to these questions is structured by the arguments made in one of the Sociology of Education's seminal texts: Geoff Whitty's (1985) book *Sociology and School Knowledge*, which appears to us to be particularly apt to revisit in the current policy context.

Written shortly after the upheaval in the Sociology of Education during the decade prior to its publication, but before the advent of the neoliberal education policy era in Britain, Whitty's book offers a strategic guide to the debates in this foundation discipline. It presents a critique both of the 'political arithmetic tradition' in which access to education was seen as the key issue in reducing educational inequalities (and the content of schooling was largely unproblematised) and some of the perspectives that emerged from the 'new sociology of education', in which pedagogical practice and curriculum content were implicated as central in the reproduction of educational

divisions and structures of social and economic power. Although emphasising the importance of ‘school knowledge’ and teacher action, Whitty argued against ‘naïve possibilitarianism’ - cautioning that far more was necessary to address educational inequalities than teachers’ realisations about the implications of their existing practice. Collective political action was needed as well as detailed studies of ideological and political practice in and around the school curriculum (p38). He also cautioned against a separation between academic sociology and educational practice, and emphasised the importance of an organic relationship between academic sociology of education and the groups for whom such work might have political value, including teachers in disadvantaged schools engaged in critical reflection on their practice.

The ‘Leading Learning’ Project was established in Leeds with exactly this organic relationship in mind. Drawing on the learning from the New South Wales Priority Action Schools Program (PASP) (Groundwater- Smith and Kemmis 2004), teachers’ working in learning communities (Lieberman and Miller, 2001, 2008) and inquiry communities (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2001, 2009), the project aimed to establish ‘an inquiry community’ in which teachers, alongside academic partners, would examine their context and practice to “generate local knowledge, envision and theorise their practice, and interpret and interrogate the theory and research of others” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2001 p 50) leading ultimately to changes in practice. It sought to offer an alternative kind of continuing professional development (CPD) to training or traditional academic courses, with the site of practice being seen as the key location of knowledge production, and the key knowledge-generating activity being the joint analyses of data collected through teacher research. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle pointed out, “fundamental to this notion is the idea that the work of inquiry communities is both social and political – that is, it involves making problematic the current arrangements of schooling; the ways knowledge is constructed, evaluated, and used; and teachers’ individual and collective roles in bringing about change” (2001:p50).

The project was initiated in 2006 as the ‘Patterns of Learning Project’, initially working in one primary school in inner Leeds, but at the end of the first year it was extended into its family of schools¹, including two secondary schools, also in disadvantaged areas, which culminated in a teacher research conference. Six months later, the Teacher Research Coordinator in one of these secondary schools requested the support of academic partners to continue, and it is the work of this team of teacher researchers that we report here, given their concerns with white British pupils’ under-achievement aligns with our sociological interests in the contributory factors, including the policies and practices promoted by successive governments committed to neo-liberalism. The first year of the project, focussed on school floor targets and a cohort of white British pupils’ schooling experiences (Lupton, 2004, 2006; Sveinsson, 2009), was nearing completion when there was a change of government, but the work continued into the 2010-2011 school year and evolved into a lesson study (Groundwater-Smith, 2007). It should be noted the impact of the current government’s educational reform agenda was beginning to be felt towards the latter stages of the first year’s work on which we are reporting. Earlier this year, given

¹ Leeds organises its schools into ‘families’ of geographically proximate primary and secondary schools.

similar work had also continued in other pilot study schools, the 'Leading Learning' project was adopted by Leeds City Council as part of its official School Improvement Plan 2011-2015, termed The Leeds Challenge, enabling/encouraging the participation of all schools serving disadvantaged pupils as part of the CPD of their teaching staff.

The logistics of the 'Leading Learning' project in this pilot study

In the first year, there were four teachers including the Teacher Research Coordinator who participated in negotiated CPD sessions approximately once a month. These sessions consisted of twilight sessions that enabled teachers, with the support of academic partners, to develop a research perspective on their role and on the school's work with a view to cultivate evidence informed policy and practice (Pollard and Oancea, 2010) and teacher-led reforms for school improvement (Lieberman, 1992). Despite the Coalition's rhetoric of freedom for the profession (Whitehead, 2011), the continuous presence of a tight regulatory framework meant it took time to develop a collaborative working relationship and shared critical understandings. This effort to provide teachers with analytic and practical tools (Whitty, 1985) needs underlining. It began with teachers' anecdotal reporting of disadvantaged pupils' underachievement and academic partners' critical interpretations alert to the complexities and a contextual analysis. This was supported with nominated readings with a view to developing a vocabulary of sociological ideas, concepts and theories about teaching in disadvantaged schools (Lupton, 2004, 2006; Connell, 1994, 2003; Anyon, 1997, 2005), critical conceptualisations of curriculum (Apple, 2008), productive pedagogies (Hayes, Mills, Christie and Lingard, 2005; Lingard, 2005; 2007; Lingard and Mills, 2007) and school improvement (Angus, 1993; Thrupp, 1999, 2005). It also took time to mentor teachers about conducting practitioner research (Mentor, Elliott, Hulme, Lewin and Lowden, 2011; Campbell and Groundwater-Smith, 2010) and generating school data (Johnson, 2002; Johnson and La Salle, 2010), and engage critical discussions of academic partners' preliminary investigations into the school and its 'school mix' (Thrupp, 1999, 2005). Central to these meetings was the task of raising questions of purpose and value: for example, more explicitly naming commitments to equity and social justice and what this might mean for teaching practice.

This work was taking place in a very different context to the one in which Whitty wrote. As Gazeley and Dunne (2007) point out, changes in teacher training since the 1980s have introduced a stronger focus on technical competence and removed subjects such as the Sociology of Education from the curriculum. Many currently-practising teachers will have had very little exposure, if any, to sociological theorising or texts about the roles of curriculum and pedagogic practice as well as forms of school improvement in perpetuating social and economic inequalities. The Coalition's plans to shift more teacher training into schools represent another move in this direction. Moreover, many currently practising teachers have served all or most of their professional careers in what is often referred to as the neo-liberal period in English education, following the 1988 Education Reform Act. The context of practice framed by an emphasis on improving academic performance in order to enhance national economic competitiveness, centralisation of curriculum, strong systems of accountability, national testing and league tables, and school markets is very well established.

Ball (2003), Connell (2009) and others have pointed to the effect of this context on teachers' identity and purpose, noting in particular a redefining of what it means to be a 'good teacher' in terms of what is externally measured: students' success in certain examinations; and completion of planning, monitoring and lesson delivery according to central guidelines and expectations. However, the close-coupling of social welfare and educational agendas during the previous New Labour period of office can also be argued to have put schools at the centre of policy implementation and set in motion a sense of broadening professional responsibilities, perhaps a re-professionalisation (Moss & Petrie, 2002; Anning, 2005; Whitty, 2005). Engaging practitioners in schools in critical discussions about practice alongside a deeper conceptualisation of inequality, might in turn lead to broader considerations of their professional identities as educators and their relationship with curriculum, classroom pedagogy and pupil assessment.

At the same time, the vocabulary of school effectiveness and school improvement has become divorced from the social and political contexts in which different schools and teachers operate, as if challenges in schools can be addressed in merely technical terms (Angus, 1993, 2009; Thrupp, 1999, 2005; Slee and Weiner with Tomlinson, 1998). Political rhetoric has encouraged teachers to play down emphasis on disadvantaged local contexts, for fear of being seen as making excuses for failure (Anyon, 2005). In this light, and given the Coalition's new emphasis on the 'importance of teaching', which many commentators have welcomed as a liberation of teachers from some of these straitjackets, a key question we were concerned to explore through the 'Leading Learning' project is the extent to which teachers are willing and equipped to engage with the 'New Sociology of Education's' critical stance on curriculum and pedagogic practice together with more critical approaches to school improvement, the identity work involved for them in so doing, and how academic sociologists can best support such engagement.

We were also concerned to re-visit Whitty's claims about 'naïve possibilitarianism' given these changes in professional context and a radically different political landscape. Given the performative pressures on disadvantaged schools and the prominence of centrally promoted 'good practice' in recent years, could we expect that new ideas from teachers would be encouraged or adopted by leaders in schools faced with the external pressures of closure? This was particularly apt in the pilot study school reported here because it had been targeted by the previous Brown Labour Government as a 'failing' school, given floor targets below national average, and it faced a forced structural solution in the form of closure at the end of the 2010-2011 school year to reopen as an Academy. Furthermore, while Whitty in the 1980s advocated political action through the Labour party, with its constitutional commitment (Clause IV) to the equitable distribution of the fruits of industry and commitments to fundamental redistribution in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people, the current political context in England is one in which there is no major political party committed to these goals.

Indeed we are hard pressed to identify a party whose agenda in the classroom might align with Whitty's concerns to provide teachers with analytic and practical tools for tackling school failure (p.12) and encouragement for academic partners to develop theoretically informed empirical research (p.38). Perhaps more importantly, as neo-liberal politics has become established, the broader discursive climate has changed in

multiple ways relevant to teachers' deliberations on the social and economic contexts of their work. For example, Gazeley and Dunne (2007) and Maguire (2001) have observed the absence of class consciousness among young teachers, while Lupton and Tunstall (2008) have argued that there has been a discursive repositioning of the neighbourhoods in which disadvantaged schools are situated, from a narrative of structural economic explanations to one of concentrations of individual problems. Approaching the 'Leading Learning' project, it seemed to us both that the climate for teachers to challenge "hegemonic ideological practice" in education and "it's economic and material conditions of existence" (Whitty 1985: p38) is particularly harsh and also that the opportunities to connect classroom change to broader political action are significantly diminished. In 1985, Whitty wrote that practice itself offered certain degrees of resistance, both to policy-related change and that attributed to knowledge emanating from academic research. As he stated:

'professional culture at the chalk-face retains a certain capacity to be resistant to change initiated elsewhere... This poses a problem not only for governmental and industrial attempts to give schools a more utilitarian bias, it also poses problems for those who wish to see schools as a context within which critical insights into the nature of the wider society can be developed' (Whitty, 1985, p148).

Such contexts present a challenging environment in which to begin to revisit school practice and knowledge with sociological and political lenses, with the potential for a dismissal of academics' initiating professional development activities. These concerns lead us to ask what possibilities remain for teacher action and are there possibilities for real change that are not naïve? Furthermore, how can university-based academics contribute on equal terms?

The Teacher Inquiries

In developing a critical teacher research perspective on white British pupils who comprise approximately 30 percent of the school population, with half registered for free school meals (FSM), the school's marker of poverty, the team had to be mindful of promoting a successful multi-ethnic school contributing to an equal and just British society (Runnymede Trust, 2009) while avoiding a retrogressive politics of whiteness (Apple, 2005). The first year of the teacher research work was devoted to knowledge-building about teachers & teaching 'from the inside out' (Lieberman, 1992) and developing the teacher researchers' capacity for strategic thinking (Connell, 1994) about working with disadvantaged pupils from families who are economically and culturally dispossessed in both the local neighbourhood and in the city of Leeds. An early task was to settle on the aims of the project. The primary aim was to develop a critical understanding of attainment data of pupils from low income backgrounds, which showed that white British FSM GCSE performance is low in comparison to non-FSM cohorts. In England in 2008 the gap between FSM and non FSM (5+ A*-C) was 32% (37% to 69% respectively, the biggest of any ethnic group) and in this school it was well below the national average. The secondary aim was to investigate the schooling experiences of a select cohort of white British pupils. Given they were almost the largest single cohort in the secondary school their achievement was a key determinant in the school trying to achieve the then Brown Labour Government's National Challenge target of 30% A*-C including English and Maths.

The select key readings helped identify the complexities of low attainment for pupils living in poverty and encourage a contextual analysis of educational and social disadvantage (Lupton, 2004, 2006; Connell, 1994, 2003), but the team had to find the common ground or third space between teachers' practical knowledge and academic knowledge so it could build what Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001, 2009) called knowledge-of-practice:

... it is assumed that the knowledge teachers need to teach well is generated when teachers treat their own classrooms and schools as sites for intentional investigation at the same time as they treat the knowledge and theory produced by others as generative material for interrogation and interpretation (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2001, p.48).

To get a purchase on the need for criticality, teacher researchers developed a profile of white British pupils in the form of sample vignettes or case stories of some of the most challenging learners across subjects and year groups and whose attendance and exam results were of great concern. This lent itself to an articulation of the teacher researchers' commitment to social justice in regards the politics of redistribution and the politics of recognition (Fraser, 1997), which required the team to work on both simultaneously so they got a sense of the twin sets of dynamics – on the one hand social class and the economy, for example, and on the other, curricula and teaching that is responsive to this oppressed group's culture, identity and history, for example (Apple, 2005). This also alerted teacher researchers to what was actually required to improve the white British pupils' schooling experience by directly facing up to their realities through document analyses of selected school data, a focus group interview of a sample of pupils, and informal discussions with parents. This was supplemented by an interrogation of archival materials from the school, including the latest Ofsted inspection report, teaching programs, and pupil work samples. As well, the team digitally recorded and transcribed their CPD sessions while teacher researchers recorded their personal reflections and set out to answer two overriding questions: why do minority ethnic pupils perform above the national average? Why do those pupils on free school meals gain far fewer qualifications?

The focus group interview of pupils became the centre-piece of the teachers' research, with four brackets of questions designed to elicit information on white British pupils' family and social background; their experiences of schooling; the specifics of teaching and learning; and their ideas about ways forward, including advice to teachers. The interview was conducted by the four teacher researchers, who took turns asking a bracket of questions. While the team recognised their interview skills could be improved and the brackets of questions honed, which signified their experiences of a technicist approach to teacher training devoid of any consideration of research-informed practice (Whitehead, 2011), it gathered some valuable information. The digital recording was transcribed at Leeds Met, and in what follows the teacher researchers provided an edited summary of data that came to light in the fieldwork with the sample of white British pupils:

'Nothing out there for me, can't do education any way and so what's the point'

'As I look around my neighbourhood I see poverty, people hanging about without a job, dilapidated buildings, parents and strangers who are struggling, and have issues with the State and each other'.

'This is my environment, an environment in which I'm brought up by people who have not succeeded in life by society's standards, so how will I achieve as a chip off the old block'.

'I can't see where my place in society is, maybe there isn't one'

'School doesn't cater for the life I'm going to lead in the future. My family survive and have not reaped the benefits of schooling so why do I need qualifications for opportunities that are not out there for me'.

'No one in our family has gone on to make anything of themselves and that's just the way it is. Why waste five years of my life learning about French or RE which I don't need when I can be doing my own thing now, that makes me feel happy, that gives respite from the shitty existence I have and will continue to have for the rest of my life?'

The teacher researchers embarked on a critical analysis, drawing on their budding sociological understandings, and mined the data for details about the impact of poverty and deprivation. They could see some connections to the research reported by Lupton (2006), who stated that a poor home life (abuse, neglected, no attention) is often played out at school creating pastoral and teaching issues. How pupils feel about their community (particularly if the school happens to be in their community) coloured their feelings about educational opportunity. Pupils in poorer areas generally have access to the worse performing schools so there is often a quality problem (but of course, not always). As pupils look around their neighbourhood there may be little to motivate or inspire them, with poor access to white collar jobs, their area does not role model itself to the better jobs on offer.

Successive CPD sessions were geared to rearing teacher researchers' critical understandings, conjoining teachers' practical knowledge with a more sophisticated Sociology of Education that shifts its focus from the characteristics of the disadvantaged to the institutional and social characteristics of the school and its cultural processes (Connell, 1994). This effort to develop a CPD program with political effectiveness (Whitty, 1985) also needs underlining. The task was to articulate the deeper roots of the problems, which required the remaining academic partner to consistently reinforce a sociological vocabulary to identify white British pupils' additional learning needs and experiences of material poverty; the emotional climate and disturbed behaviour in the classroom; and the demands on teachers to deal with reluctant participation and unpredictable incidents (Lupton, 2006). The team slowly came to learn about 'a profoundly close' relationship between poverty and attainment, notably some of the reasons why the school was likely to underachieve (Gibson and Asthana, 1998, cited by Lupton, 2006).

At the same time, the team of teacher researchers were anxious to see some instant actions to redress the situation. Anyon's (2005) advice on collective political action was apt, which echoed Whitty's (1985) counter to naïve possibilitarianism. Providing economic opportunity and realistic hope in their urban neighbourhood will be necessary to create the conditions that allow for and support a successful urban school, but these nurturing conditions will have to be supplemented by reforms that prevent racial tracking, low-level curriculum, and poor teaching, for example. This witnessed the academic partner lobbying local politicians and the local authority simultaneous to pursuing the common ground by aligning the team's findings with the views of other academics (for example Reay and Wiliam 1999, Reay 2006) on the experiences of working class children in education. The teacher researchers came to acknowledge the concerns these academics register about curriculum to engage disaffected pupils in terms of both relevant knowledge but also creditable knowledge that is valued in tests and the like. For some of the most challenging pupils in this school, the curriculum may well be remote from the experiences these poor white British pupils have outside of school. One teacher researcher believed that some of the curriculum is not seen as relevant by many of these pupils, or even by their families whose support for the school is crucial. He posited that if the school is to engage with the pupils and families successfully, then it is not simply a matter of looking at how the pupils access the curriculum, but how the curriculum can be tailored to meet the needs and interest of these pupil cohorts.

At the time, embarking on curriculum reform to try and reduce educational inequalities and address school failure was a significant undertaking, given the then Brown Labour Government's National Curriculum and its emphasis on testing, GCSE results, and the need to improve performance, all taken as given (Whitty, 1985). It was the same in regards the new Coalition's stated intentions for educational reform in the DfE (2010) Schools White Paper in regards higher standards of achievement and attainment, raising floor targets, improved performance, and better results for England in international competitions, again assumed to be a 'good' in itself and in the interests of the individual and national economy (Whitty, 1985: 9). To drive their plans for school improvement, cast as their version of sociological theory that is organic in practice (Whitty, 1985), the teacher researchers put together a draft Interim Report (Hagon and Beckett, 2010) that documented the experience of doing their research and initial inquiries albeit as a group. It showed what these teachers actually achieved, from gaining experience and confidence, which boosted their sense of professional autonomy, to their draft set of preliminary recommendations, which highlighted new ideas with a call to action from these teachers. This was underpinned by their concern to do further necessary teacher research work on curriculum and quality teaching or productive pedagogies (Hayes et al, 2005).

Negotiating Change

It took more than a year to arrive at this point and the dual constraints on this work building knowledge-of-practice was lack of system support and time pressure, which is an on-going issue for the team of teacher researchers and the academic partner, given demanding workloads in both institutions (see Beckett, forthcoming). The project was sustained by the teacher research team's commitment and determination to improve the schooling experiences and life chances of pupils in poverty and by the academic partner's goodwill in regards a preparedness to work without funding to

support teachers in disadvantaged schools and build the credibility of the 'Leading Learning' CPD program. Noteworthy change did happen in the form of teachers' learning and knowledge building in concert with their capacity for teacher research, their professional conversations and sense of self-determination, and their ability to make significant academic judgements in regards critical and meaningful curricular and pedagogical practices more suitable to white British pupils. This was all progressively shared among the team member's respective faculties of Science, Physical Education, Modern Foreign Languages, and Religious Education and with the school's Teaching and Learning committee, which suggests school leaders and staff were open to and interested in the teacher research activity. However, before the project could proceed into the second year, there were political issues to negotiate, which must not be underestimated in the task of supporting teachers to act on their nascent critical sociological understandings.

The Teacher Research Coordinator was keen to finalise the Interim Report (Hagon and Beckett, 2010) but some of the findings and recommendations had to be refined and edited to improve the chances of acceptability, given political sensitivities about the school's status as a 'failing school' and its scrutiny in the process of becoming an Academy. This took two rounds of editing, and it was finally submitted to the school Head, who was amenable to the findings generated by the teacher research and open to the recommendations, given they dovetailed with what it is that the school needs in regards redesign and regeneration of teachers' work. For example,

That a group of teacher researchers focus on the knowledge needs of white British pupils and a review of curriculum to reflect on provision that is both creditable (in terms of mandatory requirements for test results) and relevant (that is, inclusive, community-based and experiential), and that broadens horizons.

This was approved. The teacher research team then expanded to include another six teacher researchers, though one of the original team dropped out given work pressures. This meant the project work was being scaled up across the school, subject departments and areas of responsibility, given new team members came from Personal and Social Education (PSE), ICT, the school Library, pupil support, etc. The potential for change was increased, but a decision was made to focus attention on a cohort of white British pupils in a young minority ethnic woman's Year 9 PSE class, which was the subject of much concern because the pupils were not only under-achieving but they were disengaged and disruptive. Note should be made that this was a non-assessed area of the curriculum, so it does not count towards GCSE results, which raises questions about the possibilities for real change given the teacher research activity was then contained in an isolated area of the school curriculum. Not to be daunted, the teacher research focus was soon articulated as a lesson study (Groundwater-Smith, 2007), alert to critical interrogations of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's (QCA) curriculum prescriptions with a view to constructing a locally-informed teaching program to re-engage disaffected white British pupils. The academic partner encouraged the team's efforts to support the PSE teacher and her mentor, do some classroom observations, and splice and share the analyses of what was at issue in regards teaching and learning. The teacher and mentor recorded their lesson plans and reflections in a portfolio and each pair of teacher researchers respectively focussed attention on an area-based curriculum (RSA, 2010), forms of pedagogies (Hayes et al, 2005; Arnot and Reay, 2006), poverty effects (Lupton, 2004,

2006) and the social class gap (Perry and Francis, 2010), and pupil engagement (Australian Curriculum Studies Association [ACSA], 1996). This work is documented in a second draft Interim Report (Hagon and Beckett, forthcoming), which also included recommendations and plans for a third year of teacher research work that evolved into a longitudinal study of the schooling experiences across the curriculum of a select group of white British pupils, beginning with the 2010-2011 Year 7 cohort going into Year 8 in 2011-2012.

This paper, and the project on which it reports, represents a series of starting-points for debate and development. Fundamentally, it began by asking whether teachers could stand at the centre of transformational change in challenging school environments and what supportive role might academics engaged in teacher education occupy. What we have mapped out is some initial work within one of these school contexts, building on some traditions from Australian school-university partnerships. Working with academic partners, a group of teachers tried to develop sociological ideas, concepts and theories organic to a school concerned about its cohort of white British pupils who experience poverty and deprivation. They set about an investigation of their own situation with the intention of generating evidence to inform progressive policy and practices.

Revisiting Whitty's (1985) call to focus attention on the sociology of school knowledge, the paper illuminates something of the change of emphasis that is required in England if the sociology of curriculum is to make a useful contribution to the development of a coherent educational and political programme by left-leaning alliances of teachers and teacher educators. On the basis of the work reported here, we argue that such collaborative ventures between school practitioners and university academics can tease open spaces for dialogue and discussion that can invigorate teacher-led inquiries into their practice and communities (Lieberman and Miller, 2008), and that, moreover, that revisiting school concerns, equipped with sociological and political lenses can be productive for all involved. Most importantly, the work suggests that operating close-to-practice (rather than simply at the peripheries of initial teacher education) can indicate a more purposeful and relevant point of action for such critical theorisation. In doing so, we intended that in our role as academic partners the perceived boundaries between knowledge and practice would be in some ways broken down.

However, this is difficult business on many levels. Perhaps most significant is the different relationship that it builds between schools, in-service practitioners and university academics. Returning to Whitty's comments about how practice might be able to resist change initiated elsewhere, including critical ideas emanating from the academic research domain, perhaps here we have illustrated that in operating close to practice with collective purpose, it becomes more difficult to separate out these critical insights – knowledge and critique here are generated and debated *within* practice. If this is so and has the potential to refresh CPD and make schools sites of knowledge generation in partnership with universities, it suggests a different relationship between these organisations and it implies *different* critical skills to be located within teacher education. Such a partnership implies a reconsidered professionalism on both sides of the relationship, and the occupation of a

collaborative ‘space’ that values ‘resistance’ and ‘project identities’ (Castell, 1997) as a means of interrogating the existing policy conjuncture and envisioning the future differently. In this way, It exposes the necessary relationship of knowledge and practice and the role of practitioners in educational change (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009), problematising the idea portrayed in Coalition government circles that teaching is a craft, with skills to be learned from those already in the business of teaching (Morris, 2011).

Yet the questions of whether teachers *can* make some difference (Hayes et al, 2005; Connell, 2009) and whether their reconceptualisations of the ‘issues’ is more than momentary, remain unanswered at this time. This is something that future project work will hopefully shed further light on. The case study draws attention to the conditions of the daily practice of teachers in many inner urban English schools where schools are in crisis given community poverty and deprivation, charges of ‘failing’ schools, public funding cuts, shrinking infrastructural support for school improvement, and a national system in a perpetual state of reform marked by privatization and marketization. The teachers involved in the work reported here were simultaneously developing their critical understandings and attempting to shift their practice while struggling to meet expectations for improved performance in a disadvantaged school under relentless external pressure and closure threats. The same applies to school leaders. The difficulties faced by the teachers in implementing their plans for change should leave no illusions about the pressurised and constrained environments about which decisions on curriculum and pedagogic practice are made.

What we hope is that, true to writers such as Zeichner & Tabachnick (1981) and Villegas (2007), this work has provided opportunities for practitioners in schools and universities alike to deeply interrogate pre-supposed and take-for-granted beliefs through critical reflection and interrupt simplistic readings of inequality and the interplay of pedagogy, curriculum, professional disposition and educational (dis)engagement. This, in itself, we believe to be a valuable starting-point, as Villegas (1997) states:

‘Unexamined beliefs, especially those that are contradicted by new ideas about teaching introduced in teacher education courses, tend to remain latent throughout a candidate’s formal preparation, only to resurface once they are placed in a classroom to teach’ (Villegas, 2007, pp373-374)

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work in the schools that need them most. Selected pre-service teachers at QUT are invited to take part in the trial course, based on their academic performance over the first two years of their four-year Bachelor of Education degree, and on a demonstrated. These are that quality teachers for disadvantaged schools must have a particular 'passion' for teaching in disadvantaged schools; that knowledge of low-SES contexts is crucial to success; and that, though there might be a set of personal qualities or characteristics (such as resilience) that are desirable for such teachers to possess, high academic achievement is equally important in identifying high-quality teachers for the schools that need them most. Additionally, 58 per cent of teachers in disadvantaged schools said they were uncertain about their school's ability to find suitable teachers, compared to 35 per cent of teachers in state secondary schools with the lowest number of disadvantaged pupils and just 11 per cent in the independent sector. Unfortunately, as a result of this, 29 per cent of teachers in the most disadvantaged schools expect to appoint teachers who aren't well matched to the vacancies they have, with a further 25 per cent said they anticipated serious recruitment difficulties or were certain they will end up having to Report calls for schools in disadvantaged areas to be given money to help teachers rent or buy a home. About us My products Tes for schools Work for Tes. Teachers should work in disadvantaged schools before qualifying as headteachers, commission urges. Report calls for schools in disadvantaged areas to be given money to help teachers rent or buy a home. Martin George. 13th July 2017 06:01. Share this. Teachers should not be able to qualify as a headteacher unless they have taught in a school in a disadvantaged area, a cross-party report has urged. The Commission on Inequality in Education, chaired by former Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, found that pupils in poorer areas are falling behind