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The importance of teaching: pedagogical constraints and possibilities in working class schools

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Introduction

Our starting point for this paper is that a socially just education system must involve an equitable approach to pedagogical practice. Following Lingard and Mills (2007), we begin with the proposition that pedagogies can make some difference, thus treading a line between the view that state schools must inevitably reproduce social and economic inequalities and that of the ‘sociologically naïve’ (p234) school effectiveness literature which seemed to suggest that schools and teachers could achieve social transformation in the absence of more substantial societal redistribution of power and wealth and access to educational opportunity. We also suggest that attention to pedagogy is essential as part of a transformative educational policy mix. Whilst they may be *necessary* to a socially just system, interventions to create equal access to schooling, distribute funding equitably, equalise the quality of school buildings and technology, or supplement existing provision in order to compensate for poverty and social disadvantage will not be *sufficient* to ensure justice in either opportunity or outcome unless the process of school-based learning is equally inspiring, enlightening, liberating and knowledge-producing for students from disadvantaged backgrounds as it is for those who are more privileged. Tackling inequalities based on the inheritance of cultural capital requires that all children are given the tools of intellectual enquiry (Bourdieu 1990) as well as the ‘sense of wonder’ (Munns 2007) that engages them in active learning. Achieving social justice in education requires attention to content not simply to access (Gale 2011)

We focus the paper on England where, arguably, pedagogy has occupied a central position in policy since the late 1990s when concerns to address the persistent links between poverty, social class, and educational attainment became prominent in the education policies of all three major political parties. Considerable attention and money since then has been devoted to the question of teaching in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. In response to what was perceived as inadequate teaching in disadvantaged schools, the New Labour government (1997-2010) took a highly centralised approach, developing national strategies for the teaching of core subjects which included guidance on the specific content and timing of lesson activities. The Conservative/Liberal Coalition (2010 -), is doing the opposite, emphasising teacher autonomy and professionalism, abolishing central initiatives and grants to give headteachers much more budget flexibility, promoting the sharing of practice and establishing centres of excellence, as well as moving the principal responsibility for initial teacher training into schools. This government has explicitly emphasised the centrality of pedagogy, entitling its Schools White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2010). In neither case, however, has government given any attention to what socially just pedagogies might look like, nor to the organisational conditions in which they might thrive. Successive policies have seemed to rest on an assumption that there is something that can be identified as ‘good teaching’, which can be equally distributed in a sustained way between schools. When disadvantaged schools have sufficient ‘good teachers’, implementing what is known to be effective practice, learning outcomes for their students will be improved, thus helping to close the attainment gap between them and their more advantaged peers.

Other authors have pointed to the limitations of New Labour’s pedagogical imagination, and indeed to the implicit ‘paring down’ of pedagogy within the neoliberal education project, in which knowledge acquisition is inextricably linked to economic ends and expected to occur in linear progression governed by external assessment. The Coalition government’s continued

adherence to this approach, and indeed its toughening of attainment targets, increasing pressure on ‘failing schools’, return to a more academic curriculum and further encouragement of competition between schools, all suggest that the room for socially critical and imaginative teacher practice may be more limited than the rhetoric on ‘the importance of teaching’ suggests. There may be a desire to equalise the distribution of ‘good’ pedagogy, but there is no evidence of any understanding that the standardised pedagogies of the current system may work a lot less well for those with low economic, social and cultural capital than they do for more advantaged students. In other words, current policy gives no hint that socially just outcomes may require different kinds of pedagogies. The establishment by the current government of an Education Endowment Fund (EEF) to fund innovative proposals to ‘raise standards in underperforming schools’ potentially provides a space for such pedagogies to emerge, but does not specifically advocate or mandate them.

There is a growing academic literature on alternative pedagogies. Perhaps best known in the context of socio-economic disadvantage is the ‘productive pedagogies’ approach developed in Queensland, Australia (Hayes et al. 2006). In England, challenges to current practice have emerged in the form of ‘creative pedagogy’ (Jeffrey and Woods 2009) and ‘transformative pedagogy’ (Hart et al 2004). These approaches, although they differ from one another in a number of respects, are all characterised by a number of features designed to promote greater recognitive and distributive justice. They engender teachers and pupils with a high degree of agency and autonomy in teaching and learning. They make less use of prescriptive external resources and rely instead on teacher’s professional expertise and ability to develop their own creative and risk-taking approaches. For example, Munns (op cit. p 304) describes pedagogy as process, not as “teacher planned practices to be adopted by students”. They focus specifically on inclusiveness. A significant emphasis is placed on developing positive relationships between teachers and pupils based on trust and a strong sense of community. This includes connecting

learning with pupils' lives and contexts outside school and valuing the knowledge and experiences of all pupils. In the productive pedagogies approach this is in addition to promoting an intellectual culture in the classroom based on questioning and problematising the curriculum (Lingard et al 2003). Learning is also for the sake of learning rather than a more instrumental approach which, in a 'creative pedagogy', leads to innovation and change on a deep level (Jeffrey and Woods 2009). Perhaps most crucially, all of these pedagogic approaches are founded on the belief that all pupils are capable of transformation in terms of their learning and rejects the notion of fixed ability and hence ability grouping in schools. The goal is a deeper, more sustained and voluntary engagement with learning with higher quality and more inclusive communication and intellectual engagement, more risk-taking and higher levels of participation in learning outside the classrooms.

Our concern in this paper is not to evaluate these different approaches nor advocate a particular form of pedagogy. Rather we take up a different issue. If we take as read the possibility that there are pedagogical approaches that have recognitive justice at the heart of their design (i.e. that they are democratic and inclusive) and have the potential to contribute to more equal outcomes (greater distributive justice) through their capacity to engage students who are marginalised by traditional teaching, what conditions need to be put in place to enable these approaches to be developed and sustained in disadvantaged schools? If the current government is taking both social justice and pedagogy seriously, as it claims, what can it do to enable socially just pedagogy in the places that need it most? This paper aims to contribute to that process by offering an integrated understanding of the relationships between the socio-economic contexts of schools and the pedagogical processes within them. We anchor the work in a Bernsteinian analysis of pedagogical practices in four English primary schools, before drawing on a variety of literatures on school composition, markets, leadership, and teacher identities, to present an account of the way that these factors combine to produce consciously or

unconsciously different pedagogical approaches between working and middle class schools and also between working class schools in different circumstances. This leads us to some recommendations for policy approaches which would enable a more socially just system to emerge.

Methodology

The empirical data in this paper is drawn from our own work as part of a three-year (2004-2007) mixed methods project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)¹ and designed to investigate the effect of school composition on school processes and pupil attainment. The project as a whole incorporated quantitative analysis of composition and attainment in 300 schools, supplemented by interviews with head teachers and analysis of a bespoke survey of parents in 44 of these schools, and finally an ethnographic investigation in 12 of these, across the course of a school year. During this time, lessons throughout the curriculum in a single year group (Year 4, pupils aged 7-8) were observed, as were informal interactions in the playground, staff room, lunch hall and assemblies. Staff at all levels were interviewed, including the head teachers, deputy head teachers, curriculum co-ordinators, special needs co-ordinators, office staff and year four teachers. These interviews focused on school processes and management, school ethos, perceptions of school intake, curriculum delivery and the use of 'ability grouping'. Two groups of four pupils in each class in Year 4 were also interviewed about the following topics: pupils' perceptions of their teacher, their relationships with their teacher and each other and the characteristics they thought their teacher would like in a new pupil (the ideal pupil). The pupils were later interviewed in friendship pairs to gain more detailed data about their individual perceptions of their progress at school and their social and pedagogical relationships with peers.

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Three researchers each conducted ethnographic work in four schools. Here we report on the schools studied by one of the authors (insert name after anonymous refereeing). These four schools were all located in or around a large town in the South East of England. Two of the schools, which we refer to by the pseudonyms of Aspen and Cedar, were situated in the most disadvantaged housing estates in the town. Our survey of parental occupation identifies these schools as mainly working class (see Table 1). They also had around double the national average proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals (FSM). Fir was also located on a housing estate and had a majority working class population, although this was a more socially mixed area. FSM eligibility at Fir was slightly below the national average. Rowan was located close to a wealthy village, had a largely middle class population and very low FSM eligibility. Based on a national indicator of the proportion of families claiming out-of-work benefits or Working Tax Credits (a benefit for low-waged workers), Rowan ranked in most advantaged tenth of schools nationally at the time of the fieldwork. Fir was positioned in the middle of the national distribution and Cedar and Aspen in the sixth most advantaged decile group. In other words, none of these schools was among the most disadvantaged schools in England, which tend to be found in the major conurbations, but they provide clear contrasts in terms of social class composition.

[Table 1 about here]

Pedagogic Approaches in the Four Schools

We start by describing the pedagogical approaches in Year 4 in the two working-class schools – Aspen and Cedar. Both schools had two classes in Year 4 and organised these using a combination of ‘mixed ability’ and ‘ability group’ strategies. Cedar split the year group into two

ability ‘sets’ for all numeracy lessons (but not for other subjects), while Aspen separated higher and lower ability groups once per week for numeracy and ICT. Within classes, pupils were also seated by ability.

Both schools exhibited what Bernstein (2000) has described as a ‘performative’ mode of pedagogy. Classrooms were framed by a discourse of high-stakes testing, including posters on the walls showing what pupils were expected to achieve at different levels of the National Curriculum (NC), and learning was highly focused on pupils performing according to external criteria. For example, researchers spent a day with a Year 4 class in which all lessons were entirely focused on the completion by seven pupils (all the rest having already completed it) of a poetry writing task that was due to be submitted for external scrutiny by a local authority inspector. The teacher explained to the researcher that “I really need to get this finished – I can’t move on to the next thing until this is done” and relayed the importance and meaning of the task to the pupils with repeated statements of its necessity in terms of their progress through the prescribed curriculum. Meanwhile, other children were occupied (although clearly bored) with time-filling tasks such as colouring symmetrical patterns or playing computer games.

The focus on NC delivery meant that teachers at both schools tended to keep strong control of what was taught, with pupils being passive, given very little agency and expected to respond to the teacher in a prescribed way. For example, in a typical Aspen numeracy lesson, pupils were learning to identify patterns in numbers to help them with addition. The teacher introduced the use of graphs on the interactive whiteboard and then gave pupils a set of exercises, interspersed with teacher-led question and answer sessions, using the whiteboard. Pupils responded (mostly correctly) to teacher questions, which the teacher praised.

Both schools had a strong focus on discipline and extensive and visible systems of reward and punishment to regulate pupil behaviour. At Aspen these included a house point system, award certificates at assembly, a weekly head teacher award, extra playtime for the class and days out. There was also a step-wise system of sanctions with increasingly severe consequences depending on the nature and number of behavioural transgressions. In one Year 4 classroom there was an additional comprehensive range of rewards for 'good behaviour' and sanctions for unacceptable behaviour, which were used throughout most lessons, as well as a monitoring system where pupils who had transgressed the classroom discipline rules were named and the number of transgressions recorded on the whiteboard. This was supplemented by a large cardboard 'behaviour thermometer' where the class's behaviour was monitored on a daily basis. Discipline had a similarly high profile at Cedar, although with a stronger emphasis on sanctions than positive reinforcement.

Interviews with pupils showed the extent to which they absorbed performative messages in the construction of their identities as learners. To elicit pupils' understandings of what was valued in their school we used the device of asking pupils what characteristics the 'ideal pupil' (Pollard and Filer 1996) would have in their school. Learner identities are important to understand from a social justice perspective because they comprise pupils' self-perception as learners and their orientation to learning. Furthermore, learner identities have a profound impact on a pupils' future orientation to learning (Stobart 2008) and are linked, through the extent of control over learning a pupil feels, to present and future attainment (Nowicki and Strickland 1973, Wang et al 1999, Von Stumn et al 2009). If a pupil does not develop an independent, confident and active learner identity this may prevent him or her from learning effectively at school and taking up learning opportunities after compulsory school and 'can create and amplify exclusion' (Pollard and Filer, 2007, p. 3).

At Aspen the pupils we interviewed felt they had to approximate a perfectly disciplined and passive ideal pupil who always kept their head down and ‘did as they were told’. Secondary to this, focus was placed on being hard working, polite and helpful to the teacher.

Researcher: if a new boy or girl came into your class, how do you think your teacher would like them to be?

When she [the teacher] looks at him, he has like angel rings...like an angel thing around his head...gets sort of stuff out for the teacher instead of sort of like everyone just rushing to the door like that just pushing everyone out of the way. She’ll like one of them. (Daniel, Class 1)

I think he would be really happy with someone who was good and did what they were told and is quiet... (Daisy, Class 2)

Similarly, at Cedar, pupils’ perception of the ideal pupil was characterised by responding to the teacher in a prescribed way and earning rewards as a consequence:

Fiona:...And if you listen during the work you can even get one team star or team points.

The effect of the regulative discourse (Bernstein 2000) at Aspen and Cedar was that pupils felt an acute sense of blame for their individual and collective failures to conform to their teachers’ expectations, particularly in disciplinary terms. At Aspen, while teachers often blamed parents for unacceptable behaviour and the low value pupils placed on education, children felt that they were to blame for their own and others’ misbehaviour, due to perceptions of their teacher’s treatment of the class and themselves. Pupils felt largely responsible for their teachers’ perceived negative treatment of them, as illustrated by an Aspen pupil:

‘All our teachers are nice, it just depends on whether you’re good’ (Chloe, Class 1).

The sense of labelling and blaming (Laws and Davies 2000) in the classroom was exacerbated by features of regulative discourse such as ‘ability’ grouping. At both schools ‘misbehaviour’ was associated with the lower ‘ability’ groups and this caused a great degree of resentment from pupils in the higher groups who felt the teacher’s attention was largely taken up at these tables. At Aspen, the lower groups were taken out of the class for some lessons to minimise their disruptive effect, a measure welcomed by the higher groups who felt strongly affected by this disruption. At Cedar, ‘ability grouping’ caused social divisions as pupils at the higher tables did not associate in or out of class with those in lower groups and resented it when they were partnered with pupils from these groups to help them with their reading.

Pupils therefore had not only highly performative perceptions of themselves as learners but also felt that it was very difficult to meet classroom expectations of what it was to be a good learner. Most pupils, even those who were meeting attainment targets and who were rarely individually reprimanded for misbehaviour felt it was impossible to please the teacher due to constant ‘misbehaviour’ from other pupils.

If someone was shouting and then Jack comes up with the register and said “Ms Grey, here is the register, she’ll be saying like “Don’t show me it! I’m really furious now!” (Jasmine, Class 1)

This left pupils with a sense of shortfall and potentially added a damaging negative dimension to the learner identities which were already very passive, discipline orientated and dominated by a sense of blame.

By contrast, pedagogic practices in the average (Fir) and middle class (Rowan) schools conformed more to Bernstein’s idea of a ‘competence mode’, in which notions of success are

based on pupils' perceived personality characteristics rather than their performance against external measurement such as tests (Bernstein 2000).

The regulative discourse was weaker and less visible in the year four classrooms at both Fir and Cedar. 'Ability' grouping was used far more loosely than and was made almost invisible in one of the Fir classrooms. This teacher used less differentiation and made more activities accessible to all groups. In one classroom pupils were not seated in groups and both teachers were careful in not using terms such as 'bottom group' and to avoid 'ability' labelling. At Rowan there was some use of 'ability' grouping although pupils were seated according to friendships which tended to coincide with 'ability' grouping. The interviews suggested that pupils were acutely aware of perceived 'ability' as the competence-based pedagogy centralised the idea of 'innate intelligence' in constituting pupils.

Time was also more fluid at both Fir and Rowan and there was less of a concern with sequencing and pacing of learning (Bernstein 2000). Lessons more often went 'off on a tangent', following pupil and teacher interest and pupils could finish activities after break time or the following day rather than being sanctioned or told off for not finishing them on time. At Rowan in particular, very little time was spent on organisational issues, such as tidying up after lessons, moving between activities and moving in and out of the classroom and pupils being disciplined. For example, pupils simply walked into the class on their own, sat down or got on with their activities without teacher prompting, in contrast to Aspen, where pupils were told to line up before entering or leaving classes and were given extensive instructions and reprimands in this process. At Rowan lessons were generally held up less often by pupils not being able to keep up or being unable to complete tasks. This meant that more time could be spent on NC activities than at Cedar or Aspen, yet without the restrictions imposed on pedagogy by not being able to cover them in the mandated time frame.

Teachers at both schools were given high levels of autonomy in their teaching styles. At Rowan, large blocks of time (one or two weeks) were set aside to teach NC topics in a cross-curricular way using creative and hands-on techniques. This led to a wider curriculum rather than a tight focus on the core subjects. Nevertheless, pedagogy at Fir and Rowan largely took a similar form to that at Aspen and Cedar where the teacher directed learning, although pupils were generally less closely supervised at Fir and Rowan and were left to get on with activities without constant teacher monitoring. There was also more independent questioning and offering of ideas by students at both Fir and Rowan. For example, in writing a class story about an angel a female pupil offered, unprompted by the teacher (who had started the story), to begin the story in a different way, which the teacher allowed and took the lesson in a slightly different direction.

Discipline was considered a minor issue in both schools (particularly Rowan) and there were far fewer discipline-related disturbances in lessons, and hence pared down or non-existent discipline systems compared with Aspen and Cedar. When pupils did ‘misbehave’ and were reprimanded by teachers, pupils might be labelled as ‘naughty’ but were not blamed by the teacher or other pupils for their behaviour as at Aspen and Cedar. Rather, ‘misbehaviour’ tended to be seen as a product of circumstance. For example, at Fir the behaviour of a pupil who was regularly disciplined was explained as being due to her mother having left the family home, leading to the pupil seeking adult attention. There were also none of the class-wide consequences of disciplinary action as at Cedar and Aspen, where the whole class was often punished collectively. Disciplinary incidents at Fir and Rowan had little knock-on effect on other pupils in terms of their relationship with the teacher or other pupils.

Rowan and Fir pupils’ learner identities were therefore constituted in significantly different pedagogical contexts compared with those at Aspen and Cedar. Rowan pupils in

particular provide a sharp contrast in pupils' perceptions of the ideal pupil. At this school the ideal pupil was constituted in terms of what was seen as their innate characteristics. For boys, the ideal was 'intelligent' and 'funny' – and not always perfectly behaved.

... it would be like a combination of someone like maybe me because I'm good at maths, English and someone who's good at all subjects ... But like, we're good at work, but we sometimes get told off. (James)

The female ideal pupil had high order social skills (being polite and helping to create a positive and congenial classroom atmosphere). Secondary to this, she was seen as intelligent. For male pupils in particular, being active, for example in engaging with banter with the teacher was seen as highly positive and for girls this translated to 'not being shy'.

Chloe: [the teacher]'d like someone who's polite

Leah: yeah he'd like someone who's not shy...like me, cos I'm extremely shy.

Chloe: ...who takes care of other people

Ella [in a sarcastic voice]: ...who says 'please' and 'thank you', or 'no, thank you'.

Leah: and doesn't teach them rude things or bad manners.

Chloe: People who take care of other children

In general, pupils at Rowan felt more able to embody the characteristics which made up the ideal pupil. This was particularly so for the middle class boys, who more or less modelled the ideal pupil on themselves. However, there was some indication that this was more difficult particularly for the working class girls in the class who were labelled by boys and girls as 'not clever' and 'constantly arguing' and therefore not approximating the female ideal pupil. So while some more middle class pupils did not experience the shortfall between their perceptions of themselves and their teacher's expectations, this may not have been the case for all pupils. Yet, this does contrast significantly with pupils at Aspen and Cedar where almost no pupils (if any at all) felt able to meet their teacher's expectations.

Neither in these four schools nor in any of the others observed in this study did we observe ‘productive’, ‘creative’ or ‘transformative’ pedagogies. While the ‘competence pedagogies’ observed at Fir and Rowan bore some similarity to these alternative pedagogies in their emphasis on pupil and teacher agency, they lacked any conscious aim to break down classroom hierarchies based on ‘ability’ or social class by valuing diverse identities and connecting learning with the knowledge and contexts of pupils, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. We are not, thus, suggesting that ‘competence pedagogies’ represent a socially just alternative to the ‘performative pedagogies’ found in the working class schools we examined. What is of interest in the data is the way in which substantial differences in pedagogical practice are manifest in schools in different socio-economic contexts within an education system which has a strong emphasis on raising teaching standards, particularly in disadvantaged schools.

While much of the academic work on school contexts does not focus on pedagogy, similar patterns were observed by Thrupp (1999) in a comparison of advantaged and disadvantaged secondary schools in New Zealand. To maintain control and achieve curriculum progress, teachers in the disadvantaged schools engaged in less questioning and set more whole-class tasks, which were tightly prescribed, allowing little student agency and involving little individual student/teacher interaction. In Australia, Johnston and Hayes (2007:p376) have also noted that in schools facing challenging circumstances with high instability, both school leaders and teachers can ensure survival by reverting from new and more uncertain practices to a “default mode” of operation.

These studies, along with the data we present here, suggest that different modes of pedagogy in schools in different socio-economic contexts may not be solely attributable to

teacher ‘quality’, leadership, training or the exchange of good practice. It appears that the pressures on schools in disadvantaged settings tend to lead to the maintenance of pedagogical practices that are unlikely to have transformational effects on students, and indeed may contribute to negative learner identities. The capacities of these schools to develop and sustain productive or creative pedagogies may be more limited than those of more advantaged schools. Although there will obviously be exceptions, the result will tend to be an inequitable distribution of pedagogical practice, loaded in favour of those schools serving more advantaged students and thus serving to reproduce rather than overturn existing inequalities. If this is the case, then overcoming these contextual barriers to the development of new pedagogies will be as important a contribution to a more socially just system as the pedagogies themselves. In the second half of the paper, therefore, we attempt to bring together some of the principal explanations for constrained pedagogical practice in working class schools, which appear in a variety of different educational literatures, in order to generate an integrated understanding capable of supporting new policy directions.

Constraints on Pedagogical Practice in Working Class Schools

The most straightforward explanation for the more limited pedagogies observed in disadvantaged schools relates to the **mismatch between student demands and organisational capacity**, exemplified in most detail in the work of Thrupp (1999) and Lupton (2006) and in their joint work (Lupton and Thrupp 2007, 2011, Lupton, Thrupp and Brown 2010), but also in other studies (Metz 1990, Proudford and Baker 1995, Gewirtz 1998, Ofsted 2000, Maden 2001, Thomson 2002, Smyth & McInerney 2007, Mills and Gale 2009, Carrasco-Rozas 2010) and in the data we present above. The argument made by these authors is that schools are designed and resourced according to a set of assumptions about the school social relations and processes

informed by middle class norms. For instance, that the curriculum will engage students, that investment in education has long term economic value, that learners enjoy comfortable material circumstances at home enabling them to eat and sleep well and have access to educational activities and resources, that parents will be able to supplement the academic learning provided at school and so on. They are not designed to deal with the social and education consequences of material poverty, inadequate housing and poor neighbourhood conditions, labour market exclusion or exploitation, forced migration and other pressures. Lupton (2006) argues that in areas of concentrated poverty, these consequences manifest in schools in lower average prior attainment, a very wide range of learning needs, children who are hungry or poorly nourished, students and parents who are disengaged and/or underconfident and reluctant to participate, and a more complex mix of social and emotional needs of children whose families are under extreme stress. Together these create “the unpredictable school” (p661). Crucially she suggests that specific demands will vary from school to school, according to local demography, economies, housing and community resources. Thomson (2002) refers to such local variations as ‘thisness’ - a combination of neighbourhood narratives, resources and issues. Nevertheless, studies of the organisational processes and social relations of disadvantaged schools consistently relate some common implications for teachers. These include: the perceived need for extensive differentiation and to deal with some learners who are a very long way behind their peers; low and high level disruption due to emotional disturbance, peer conflict or disengagement from lesson content; time spent on providing equipment; the need to support students socially and emotionally as well as intellectually; students who are less practised at working independently; and the possibility of conflict. The demands on a classroom teacher are simply much greater than in middle class schools where ‘expected levels’ of attainment, and students who are adequately fed, clothed and equipped and for the most part engaged with learning can routinely be expected. This is not an argument which seeks to suggest that middle class children and

parents are normal and right and that the ‘problems’ of working class schools arise from the deficits of the parents and children therein. Rather it suggests that poverty, inequality and exclusion create concentrations of real material social and educational disadvantage in schools that have not been designed to address them.

Faced with these extra demands and internalising the problem as their own, teachers tend to fall back into modes of pedagogy with which they can, in various senses, succeed. These include (as witnessed at Aspen and Cedar, although these are by no means the most disadvantaged schools in the country) strong classification and framing so that students know what they are supposed to be learning and can be kept on task, whole class teacher-led activities in which the teacher can maintain surveillance and control, seating strategies, short and superficial activities which do not allow the possibility of going off task, and extensive behaviour management measures. These measures are sometimes consciously adopted as teachers realise what they need to do to make progress through the curriculum. For example, both heads and teachers talked about the need to consciously create situations in which these students could succeed:

“During the year, if the conditions are right and they’ve got the support of the teacher they will sit and do the work. But the thought of having to sit through a test – they’re throwing it across the room and ‘I’m not doing this’ and they don’t perform. They’re quite capable of doing it but you’ve got to have the situation right for them” (Head, Aspen)

You have to make explicit, a lot of the skills that other children will pick up [in a middle class home...because their parents talk to them and discuss things] ... You have to be continually bridging what you’re learning with simplifying the language, showing them visual aids and modelling and you almost have to give them examples of good language...in another school you could use more text[book] based learning. (Class 1 teacher, Aspen)

Sometimes, however, teachers ‘find themselves’ changing their practice, without consciously meaning to do so. Lupton’s study of secondary schools has many examples of this process of pedagogic drift, such as this science teacher who admits to working “with a lot of closed question stuff so they can just chuck the answers in ... which I never did before I came here, which is a shame isn’t it?” (2003: p208)

Notably these same issues are very well documented in Thrupp’s study of New Zealand schools which, at the time, were not operating under a system of national standard tests nor a national curriculum. However the evidence from our own study points to the additional pressure created in England by the expectation (and associated accountability framework) that all students should move through the NC at the expected rate. Puzzling over the lack of connection between her day-to- day practice and the Piagetian theory she had been exposed to in her training, one of Aspen’s Year 4 teachers noted how curriculum pressures, in the context of the school’s limited capacity to meet all the children’s learning needs with individual or small group attention, made things worse:

“ And I think what happens is that in a catchment area like this you get a bigger and bigger gap between your average and your lower ability until there’s this huge gulf and only the sort of relatively able children cope...that gap gets reinforced at school because ...the teachers feel pressured to fulfil all the demands of the National Curriculum and its full scope, rather than actually making sure they really consolidate and get the foundation laid securely” (Class 1 teacher, Aspen)

There is also a broader sense in which the strains on organisational capacity in disadvantaged schools work against pedagogic development. As Thrupp (1999) observed, myriad minute events in the day to day life of teachers in disadvantaged schools take time and energy from planning and organisational development. Energy goes into regular ‘firefighting’: dealing with behaviour, finding equipment, cajoling participation, liaising with parents. Hayes

(2006: p203-204) writes that “ In schools operating under adverse conditions, teachers and school leaders can spend a considerable amount of time responding to challenging circumstances and have little time left over to think and plan for improvement. They can appear to ‘do’ lots of things for seemingly little gain...[Adverse conditions] work against steady progressions towards improvement that are more likely in more stable environments; they also emphasise on-the-spot problem solving (reflection-in-action) rather than shared description and analysis of problems that produced planned responses (reflection-on-action)”.

A second set of explanations relates to **teachers’ attitudes and professional identities**, essentially following Bernstein’s argument (1970) that effective pedagogy demands that the “culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher”. While organisational capacity arguments tend to be constructed around the neutral concepts of ‘disadvantage’ (in Australia in particular), ‘poverty’ (in England) and socio-economic status (in New Zealand), in arguments relating to teacher consciousness, social class comes much more to the fore. From one perspective Reay (2006) presents evidence of what she calls the demonisation of working class children and their families throughout educational discourse in England. Teachers, she argues, approach teaching in working class schools from an unacknowledged position of middle class normality - a ‘normal’ child is an active engaged learner, well supported by parents. Teachers’ accounts of working class children start from their deficits from this perspective. A key aspect of Reay’s argument is that middle class knowledge only is recognised in schools, leading to working class children being assumed to know nothing nor be capable of learning very much – forming part of an “unknowing uncritical tasteless mass” (p295). Her interviews with working class children in socially mixed schools produce poignant accounts of being made to feel stupid and being excluded from participation as though they didn’t exist or were “less than human” (p298). For example (p297):

Kenny: .. some teachers act as if the child is stupid. Because they've got a posh accent. Like they talk without 'innits' and 'mans', like they talk proper English. And they say, 'That isn't the way you talk' – like putting you down. ..

Martin: Those teachers look down on you

Kenny: Yeah, like they think you're dumb ... we don't expect them to treat us like their own children. We're not. But we are still kids. I'd say to them, You've got kids. You treat them with love but you don't need to love us. All you need to do is treat us like humans.

Though the examples are less stark, some of the same processes are evident in our data on the construction of learner identities. In the working class schools, children had picked up that successful learning is about compliance and discipline. At Rowan (the middle class schools) they picked up that it was about their innate abilities – ironically, at Rowan, for the working class kids 'being good' or 'trying hard' was not good enough.

The implication of Reay's argument for the matter at hand is that pedagogy in working class schools will inevitably drift towards the performative if it rests on an assumption that the purpose of teaching is only to make as much progress as possible, through persistence, simplification, compensation, and control, with the impossible task of raising working class children towards the levels that can be expected from 'normal' children. The adoption of transformative pedagogies must rest on class-equal conceptions of knowledge, personhood and potential. Arguably, deficit perspectives of working class children have always been a feature of English education. Recently, however, a number of authors have pointed to the lack a developed and critical consciousness of social class that might provide a starting point from which teachers could challenge this position (Allard and Santoro 2006, Gazeley and Dunne 2007). Lupton and Thrupp (2011) highlight the sympathetic but individualised accounts that headteachers produce to account for the adverse social and economic circumstances encountered

by families in disadvantaged schools. Gazeley and Dunne have pointed specifically to the impact of the move to competence-based teacher training in the 1980s in England, and the stripping out of foundational disciplines such as history, philosophy and sociology from the teacher education curriculum. Arguably, however, the underlying problem is not a lack of sociology, but the complexity of post-modernity and the absence of any grand narrative to explain relationships between class and education in the early 21st century. As Thomson has observed, ‘teacher talk’ about working class children and parents may be seen as deficit, patronising or even an avoidance tactic, but might also be seen as “efforts to understand and articulate how it is that complex social, cultural, economic and political matters come together and are embodied in children’s lives and are mediated by teachers, situated pedagogies and the institutionally bound workings of specific schools” (Thomson 2002, p 17). Osborn et al (1997), in a comparison of the beliefs, goals and teaching methods adopted by primary school teachers in areas of disadvantage in England and France, have pointed to the importance of embedded political ideals in this ‘teacher talk’.

In a more recent development, Carrasco-Rozas (2010) draws on Bourdieu’s notion of ‘institutional habitus’ to elaborate the ways in which these efforts, played out in different settings, result in institutional norms, dispositions and habitual practices which differ both between middle and working class schools and between working class schools in different settings. School cultures, norms and practices, he argues, arise not entirely from the agency of school leaders but from the conjuncture of national system requirements, professional socialisation and local contexts. This account inserts a contextual dimension into Ball’s (2003) account of the struggles over professional purpose and identity that performative regimes create for teachers. Teachers in the schools studied by Carrasco-Rozas in Chile engaged in ongoing debate with themselves, colleagues and management to reconcile competing political and professional notions of ‘how to teach these children’ with the possibilities in the classroom. Our

own data, similarly, reveals tensions between what teachers want to do, believe is right, think will succeed, and what they actually perform. Teachers at Aspen claimed to use ‘hands on’ and ‘creative’ teaching methods, although the typical lesson among those we observed were teacher-led and highly performative.

A third set of arguments suggests that **school leadership** in disadvantaged schools allows a drift towards performative pedagogies – that it is less likely that headteachers in such schools can operate as leaders of learning, focusing on pedagogic processes, rather than as managers. These arguments are closely linked to the foregoing ones. To lead socially just pedagogies, headteachers (like teachers) need a deep understanding of the context in which teaching takes place - “a habitus formed in relation to the field of the school, which has a “feel for the game”” (Hayes et al 2004 p522). They also need time for reflection, planning, and leading staff development. In this sense, understanding what it takes to transform pedagogy in disadvantaged schools has not been helped by an academic school leadership and school improvement literature that has been largely decontextualized (Wrigley 2006, Hopkins and Reynolds 2001, Harris et al. 2006), providing generic views of good leadership that have failed to take account either of sociological perspectives on the evolution of organisational practices or contingency theories of organisation (for example Pugh and Hickson 1976) that point to the need for different kinds of leadership and organisational structure for institutions in different operating environments, for example those dealing with unstable, complex and challenging circumstances.

The importance of context is being increasingly recognised (for example Watkins 2010), and a number of books have pointed to the need for different leadership styles and characteristics in disadvantaged schools. For example, Maguire et al. (2006) emphasise the need for additional skills and knowledge in working effectively with external and community organisations, and dealing with emotionally complex situations, as well as the personal characteristics of resilience, humour and optimism. These authors emphasise the systemic constraints on getting the right

headteachers in place and keeping them there (burnout, lack of recognition) and on enabling them exercise to professional autonomy (inadequate funding, administrative burdens, constant central government initiatives). More directly, Hayes et al. (2004), and Johnston and Hayes (2007) have explored what kind of leadership can best support the development of productive pedagogies in challenging circumstances. A key point is that in disadvantaged schools that are constantly on the edge of chaos, organisational learning has to be more dynamic and less 'intervention-based' than in more stable environments and also, given that standard pedagogical approaches may not be successful in these settings, that educational leadership must be primarily pedagogical rather than concerned with management and compliance. 'Productive leaders' (Hayes et al. 2004) promoted dispersal of leadership, encouraged the development of positive relationships and took responsibility for the emotional labour required, and prioritised pedagogy on the school's agenda. They "supported a culture of leadership and collective responsibility focused on outcomes and pedagogy" (p536). They were also hands-on leaders who worked closely with teachers and students on the day-to-day minutiae, rather than executive-style leaders, with a management focus.

Crucially, also (and these were Australian schools) they did not feel "unduly bound by departmental policies and directives". This is often not the case in English schools. Since the early 1990s, disadvantaged schools in England have been subjected to a series of central government initiatives demanding that they achieve arbitrary attainment targets or face closure. Official 'school improvement' has been geared to the short-term achievement of these goals rather than to sustainable organisational change. None of the schools in our study were faced with closure threats, and must therefore be considered only as moderate examples, but both of the working class schools, Aspen and Cedar, were under significant pressure to improve their attainment levels, which were well below national averages and local targets. Measures included increased inspections visits and, in Cedar's case, a cycle of auditing and target setting and the

imposition of a 'systematic and structured' programme for improvement for the school to follow. These had direct implications for pedagogy in the short term (as we have seen), and wider ones. Strong external pressure and direction created a low-trust and high risk environment for the headteacher. A strategy of following standard pedagogies and teaching increasingly narrowly to the test, and placing increased emphasis on monitoring curriculum progress and behaviour could satisfy the local authority and relieve external pressure by increasing the school's 'success'. Going 'off-piste' to experiment with more socially just pedagogies potentially carried the risks of loss of local authority confidence, increased scrutiny and possibly even loss of the head teacher's job. Referring to 'transformative' pedagogies, Hart et al. explain that experimentation with pedagogy was only possible in their case study schools when attainment targets were being met, providing 'hard evidence' of the schools' pedagogical competence (Hart et al 2004). For example, in one of these (Peacock 2006), the head teacher was successfully able to re-engage disengaged pupils in learning and simultaneously move the school from special measures to 'outstanding' by OFSTED, using an alternative pedagogy rejecting fixed 'ability' labelling. However, this school did not have a disadvantaged or working class intake. Working class schools are typically likely to have much less room for manoeuvre, especially when they find themselves in competitive markets where loss of public reputation and pupil numbers can result in closure. This does not mean that nothing can be done. Almost all the headteachers in Maguire et al's (2006) study referred to the pressures of unrealistic targets and league tables, but some were determined to ignore these and pursue what they considered to be 'good practice'. They were "not afraid to make unpopular decisions if it will benefit the school in the long run...[and were] also prepared to take risks and offer child-appropriate learning contexts for social and emotional learning as well as intellectual growth" (p66). This literature therefore points both to questions of agency and structure. Headteachers need the right personal qualities, skills and knowledge, and these need to be contextualised. They must also be enabled to operate

in environments in which they can reflect and plan, take risks, prioritise pedagogy, focus on long-run organisational transformation and invest in relationships.

Possibilities

The evidence and arguments we have presented in this paper point to the conclusion that achieving widespread pedagogical change in the interests of social justice will ultimately require a major shift in the contemporary English concept and system of education. An equitable approach to pedagogy demands an education system concerned with the development of human capabilities and knowledges of the broadest kind, not one driven by the goal of global economic competitiveness. It requires a system architecture designed to promote learning for all, not one designed to regulate achievement of narrow educational goals and to produce a functioning market for educational providers. Without the removal of these performative pressures, relying on teacher agency to transform educational outcomes through pedagogy is, as Whitty (1985) described it “naïve possibilitarianism”. Since no major political party at the current time is even remotely prepared to move in this direction, there are major limits on the progress that can be made. However, this does not mean that nothing can be done to advance more socially just pedagogies within the current system. We want to close this paper, therefore, by suggesting some measures that could be taken now. Given what we know about the systemic constraints on pedagogy in disadvantaged schools, what could be done?

One step would be to take the opportunity of school-based teacher education and greater knowledge exchange between schools to build a broader and more critical understanding of the impacts of socio-economic disadvantage into the initial training and continuing professional development of teachers, thus empowering teachers to re-think their professional identities, dispositions and purposes. Teachers need the tools to be able to interrogate the ways in which

economic and social class relations in society, as well as material poverty per se, affect students' experiences of learning, as well as the ways in which performance and competence pedagogies, applied in specific socio-economic contexts, can serve to reinforce hierarchies and inhibit learning. As Lingard and Mills have argued (2007; p237), "Socially just pedagogies require well educated teachers who know the research literature, but mediate it through a careful reading of the demands and specificities of their students, classes, locale and place and space of nation and globe". This is challenging. Sympathetic understandings of students' material circumstances do not necessarily demand changes to pedagogy; understandings of power relations and their reproduction in the classroom do. However, potentially the rewards are significant. Johnston and Hayes (2007: p372) argue on the basis of their experience in Australia that "students are likely to be more successful at school if their teachers are actively engaged in learning how to teach within the local context of the school". A fundamental step that must be taken (and could be taken within the resources of the government's new Educational Endowment Fund) is robust evaluation of alternative pedagogic approaches in disadvantaged schools to substantiate this claim in England.

There is more than one method in which teacher understandings could be extended in this way, including exchange between schools as well as partnerships with universities to support ongoing learning and practice development. Such approaches could also be linked to different conceptualisations of organisational learning and leadership for different contexts. The development of federations of schools and the creation of schemes in which National and Local Leaders of Education will be expected to lead practice, provide an opportunity for extending and augmenting headteacher professional learning to focus more fully on the pedagogic aspects of leadership in disadvantaged schools. Moreover, as the existing arrangements for School Improvement Partners are abolished and schools are enabled to seek support from organisations beyond their local authority, there may be space to re-think, and provide, the support that

headteachers may need in this respect. Notably all the examples of alternative pedagogies we mentioned at the start of this paper have relied on support from colleagues and/or leaderships within their schools, and/or external partners (such as university academics). All of the authors of these papers acknowledged that continuing professional development support is essential to the success of these pedagogies even though some teachers did and can work in isolation. Tan (2009) has argued that such partnerships can enable both teachers and academics to work outside normal assumptions and practice, creating ‘project identities’ which allow them a means of interrogating the existing policy conjuncture and envisioning the future differently.

These recommendations suggest how capacity might be built for socially just pedagogies. Inevitably they come at a cost. Professional development and organisational change take extra time, over and above the ‘day-job’. Yet it is precisely in the most disadvantaged schools that staff have the least time and space for new work, and where pedagogy is constantly challenged by the material poverty and social and emotional difficulties that learners bring with them into the classroom. For this reason alone (and there are many others), the need to continue and extend the current redistributive trend in school funding towards the most disadvantaged schools remains acute. Achieving social justice in education remains firmly dependent on the distribution of state funding where it is needed, to enable smaller classes, more support staff in welfare roles, recruitment and retention of teachers and so on. The other essential step is to reduce the risks associated with change. Short of dismantling the regime of national attainment targets and closure threats, two much more modest measures could be envisaged. One would be for government to fund the trial and evaluation of alternative pedagogic approaches in disadvantaged schools that are already deemed successful, so that other heads can be more confident of implementing change. Another would be to demand a more explicit focus on whole-school, contextualised, pedagogical review as a central part of the improvement strategy for so-called failing schools. At present the emphasis is on transforming measurable outcomes in

the short term, rather than transforming pedagogical processes. Conceivably this might demand different kinds of leadership structures in disadvantaged schools to reflect the fact that headteachers in such schools, in particular, also need to perform more managerial and executive roles. New school structures, such as chains of schools run by particular sponsors, provide room for more than one tier of headship, and for the functional division of leadership roles which might allow a focus by site-based headteachers on leading learning. If these models work, they should not only be confined to privately-run schools.

These pragmatic suggestions fall well short of a full agenda for social justice in education but would go some way to creating the capacity for more socially just pedagogy. They are offered in the spirit that there are possibilities as well as threats in the current policy environment. The measures in the Coalition's White Paper, which push responsibility down to schools, may conceivably provide some room for empowered teachers and heads to demonstrate the importance of teaching in more radical and progressive ways than is currently envisaged, and to build a challenge to social injustices in education from the bottom up. Building on these opportunities in the ways we suggest would enable any government genuinely committed to social justice to move its agenda forward even within the strong constraints of England's highly performative system.

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Table 1: A profile of the four case study schools

School	Aspen	Cedar	Fir	Rowan
Location	Urban housing estate	Urban housing estate	Urban housing estate	Outside a wealthy village
School roll	221	280	208	112
Number of Year 4 classes	2	2	2	1
Dominant social class	Working class	Working class	Working class/mixed	Middle class /mixed
<i>% Middle class: professionals</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>% Middle Class: managers/administrators</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>26</i>	<i>46</i>
<i>% Working class</i>	<i>78</i>	<i>82</i>	<i>62</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>% Other/unclear</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>0</i>
Free school meal eligibility	28%	24%	11%	3.7%

Note: The social class data is based on the Goldthorpe-Hope social class classification scale where parental occupation is the main indicator of a child's social class. The main criteria for classification of occupations in this classification system is the degree of autonomy parents have in their work. Parental autonomy at work has been found by Kohn (Kohn, 1977) and others (Roberts, 2001) to be correlated with parental educational aspirations and pupil attainment.