Addressing barriers to minority ethnic students' learning in a performative culture: possible or Aan u SuuraGelin? Niemożliwe?Nemoguće?نــاممکن?

Kathleen Gallagher and Lori Beckett

Abstract

This article, written by a research-active teacher of English with an academic partner, recounts the circumstances of forging a partnership way of working in an urban high school that is consistently targeted for closure in the north of England. This is connected to performance and achievement against Ofsted inspection criteria and school data benchmarked against national data. The article proceeds with a recollection of the teacher's battle for professional recognition when it comes to the intellectual and practical arguments for curriculum and classroom practices that are tailored to the learning needs of different minority ethnic students, who have to negotiate language barriers to schooling. This more professional view of what is to be done draws on evidence built up in the course of a teacher inquiry project, which needed the sanction of the School Improvement officer assigned by the Local Authority, who recommended a focus on achievement in the teacher's bottom set Year 7 English class. The experience points toward research-informed teaching, which stands in marked distinction to being compelled to 'teach to the test' in classes that are set. The article illustrates a union argument that teachers' professional responsibilities are linked to a struggle to reclaim the right to make professional decisions.

Introduction

The pressure is on teachers at Corrigan high school, the pseudonym given to this urban high school in the north of England, located in the inner city, which is an old de-industrialised city that now claims to be the major financial services centre outside London. Having been deemed a failing school because it did not meet national targets, the school came through a protracted campaign against school closure three years ago and was allowed to remain open. It was then compelled to go through a major re-structure, including 'managed staff reduction' (MSR), and now it is required to meet new national targets for students' performance or face the consequences. Most recently the new Executive school Head, with the backing of the Interim Governing Body (IEB) which has no staff or parent representation,

decided to convert from a state-sponsored Local Authority school to an Academy[1] . The proposed sponsor is the local Further Education College, given its broad curriculum, wide range of work-related courses, and publicized benefits to the school. Yet the College has no experience of teaching students under the age of 14 and limited experience of teaching students in the 14-16 age range.

Given these policy pressures, and as a result of the Key Stage 2 (KS2) SATs data from primary school, a small year 7 group of minority ethnic students were identified on entry as in need of attention to raise achievement. Due to the threatened closure of the high school, and the fall-out in terms of reduced enrolments, this was initially a very small class of only twelve students. Six of the British-born students had English as an additional language. The other six were of Pakistani or other minority ethnic heritage. The students were grouped in the bottom set for English, but they were not identified as new to English (NTE) students because they are deemed to have enough English to access the mainstream curriculum and so they are allocated a place in the mainstream classroom.

The School Improvement Officer, assigned by the Local Authority, agreed this particular class worthy of an action plan with the specific twin objective of increasing the students' rates of progress and raising achievement. This was co-determined with the first co-author, an English teacher, and approved by the new Executive Head. Throughout the 2013 calendar year, which coincided with terms 2 and 3 of one school year and term 1 of the next, the teacher worked with the second co-author, an academic partner, and together they began to develop a teacher inquiry project. This continued into the 2014 calendar year up to the Easter holidays, but the same class changed composition with a bigger mix of minority ethnic students. This extended time period allowed us to develop a research perspective on the Year 7-becoming-Year 8 class of minority ethnic students' learning needs and problematize the idea of a gap in achievement. This required intensive school-based work together, which is reported in this article.

Collaborative points of engagement

---

[1]Academies are schools who opted for the status but they are mostly urban schools who were forced to accept a change of status with a corporate sponsor outside of Local Authority control.

The major teacher union in England, the National Union of Teachers (NUT), has consistently opposed the narrow focus on teaching to the test but also the setting of unrealistic targets, all based on the principle that schools compete with each other in local and national league tables in a marketised system. These targets are not agreed with teachers, and now teachers' pay is linked to meeting these targets, which has profound repercussions for teachers' stress levels compounded by an undermining of their sense of professional responsibilities to students. The union argument sits well with Milner (2013), for example, who added to our critical thinking about targets and 'achievement gaps' and the way they lead people to look at students from a 'deficit' perspective. Although writing about schooling in North America, he also alerted us to the dangers of the standardisation of policies and practices, recognised to be at the heart of many reforms to decrease and eventually eliminate achievement gaps. This proved insightful given our joint work in this small urban high school serving a very deprived mobile minority ethnic student population. Corrigan High School is regularly ranked at the bottom of the local school league tables and teachers are criticised for not hitting nationally set targets. Clearly there is more to this complex story that first meets the eye, not least a critical analysis of these minority ethnic students' learning needs.

The co-authors found common ground with a focus on the standardized reform agenda, along with the issues highlighted by the NUT and the thoughts of critical scholars such as Milner (2013).In particular, we reflected on his advice that students' outcomes in standardised exams will vary based in part on teaching, and the learning opportunities that they experience as well as a host of outside school variables. It should be noted that English schools are expected to ensure that students make3 or 4 levels of progress per year, regardless of the naturally uneven rates of students' learning and the different barriers to be negotiated including language. Most of the white British and minority ethnic students who enter the school below the expected level 4 will make slower rates of progress since the factors which slowed down their previous learning are likely to continue. This pattern is, in fact, confirmed by national data tabulated for all schools.

There are other externally imposed targets. The school's English department follow the National Curriculum, recently revised or rather radically changed on the advice of the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, who is overseeing a new national agenda

with a much greater focus on English literature. In KS3 (age 11-14), this includes two of Shakespeare's plays, pre-1914 literature and a heavy focus on grammar. There is however some scope for teachers to develop curriculum and classroom practices to reflect the minority ethnic students' knowledge and cultural backgrounds and to this end the English teachers decided to focus on the African Caribbean author Malorie Blackman for example.

Specific directions are also derived from analyses of quantitative data and school inspection. Each year the 'Reporting and Analysis for Improvement through School Self-Evaluation' (RAISEonline) data report, developed jointly by the Department for Education and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and released into all schools in November, provides comparisons between school and national data over the previous three years (see Tan, 2013).

The teacher partner was directed to focus on closing the achievement gap from the beginning of Year 7, the year students enter the school so that it would have the biggest impact on examination results as they move into senior years. An initial task in mapping the scope of the teacher inquiry was to capture her professional concerns about the demand to raise the achievement of this sample group of minority ethnic students initially by three levels of progress. A major concern is that students whose first language is not English and students with Special Educational Needs are expected to make the same rates of progress as those who enter Year 7 with a good level 4 or above. In what follows, we share the process of building our joint inquiry project, which interweaves the directions provided to the school and passed down to teachers, together with the teacher partner's concerns about how the students are divided into sets according to ability – again based on government and Ofsted policy. A guiding light was shown by Drummond and Yarker(2013), who stated it is 'not know thyself but know thy National Curriculum level'. The teacher partner began with a deep-felt unease that the emphasis on 'fixed ability thinking' (Drummond and Yarker, 2013) hampered the development of responsive pedagogies and detracted from the minority ethnic students' learning opportunities.

The back-story to teacher inquiry

Corrigan high school is a small urban high school with only 330 students currently on roll. It is based just north of the central business district in a very deprived area. Most families live in accommodation rented from private landlords or the city council. Some of the issues

faced in this area are common to new immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, including overcrowded accommodation and high rates of unemployment. In this long-standing neoliberal education policy regime in England, characterised as a performative regime (see Ball, 2008; 2013), the school has a long history of poor levels of achievement as measured by national targets. Not surprisingly, the school is preoccupied with achievement, having been directed to 'close the gaps' in order to remain open.

In the most recent RAISEonline report for the 2012-2013 school year, the main criteria by which Corrigan High School is judged - the percentage of students who achieve 5 A*-C grades in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subjects including Maths and English - declined sharply from 30% in 2010-11 to 21% in 2011-12. It should be noted that this was the year after the school had had to fight against closure; during that time Corrigan High School not only lost some of its star students but also some of the best teaching and administrative staff, including teacher union representatives.

This situation is gradually turning around. Results for the 2012-13 school year were up to 26% of 5 A*-C grades. However the changing student profile should also be noted. During the same period, the number of students with English as an additional language (EAL) rose from 54% to 65%. Correspondingly, the number of students on Free School Meals (FSM) also rose from 39% to 58%. The number of Gypsy Romany traveller (GRT) students significantly increased and continues to do so. In any event, Ofsted judged the school as 'requiring improvement' in the last inspection report dated April, 2013. The report highlighted that the school needs to work on differentiation and the progress of certain groups of students, in particular those who are registered as 'Pupil Premium', which is a designation tied to extra funding support targeted at students who do not make as much progress in comparison to others and who are usually in receipt of FSMs.

This all speaks to our sense of professional disquiet with these challenging sets of circumstances, including the dominant orthodoxy of setting, yet despite our joint misgivings these have prevailed in Corrigan High School over a long period of time and indeed precipitated our coming together to work as a teacher and academic partner some six years ago. We had earlier worked on a teacher inquiry project utilising productive pedagogies (see Hayes et al, 2005) in an English classroom, as part of a cluster project in six schools, funded nationally by the then Teacher Development Agency's (TDA) 'CPD in schools in challenging

circumstances'. Over a twelve month period (2008-2009) we forged a strong and positive working relationship. The teacher felt a high level of trust in the academic partner, which is unusual in an education system characterised by a performative culture that criticises and blames teachers (see Ball, 2001, 2003).Our formal working relationship came to an end when the national project was bought to a close, but together we made a commitment to maintain some ongoing partnership work (see Beckett and Gallagher, 2014).

We have long shared a concern about the effects of poverty and deprivation on students' learning and teachers' work in Corrigan high school, which extends into classrooms where 'pedagogies of poverty' (Haberman, 1992) are in evidence, a consequence of policy- and time-pressures on teachers to 'teach to the test'. This is critical in this urban high school, where the five A*- C grade GCSE performance agenda inevitably forces a very narrow focus on the students who are around the C/D borderline. We agreed all those years ago that there was a wilful resistance on the part of politicians and policy-makers to acknowledge these effects (see Lupton, 2006) and insist on rigid performance measures, with punitive results. We also agreed that a more professional response, if not a counter strategy, was to employ different elements of productive pedagogies, including efforts to link to students' cultural background knowledge (Hayes et al, 2005).

We continued to develop a shared critical analysis of the links between poverty and deprivation and teachers' work to meet students' complex academic and social learning needs, but not just confined to test scores and examination results, and to shed light on factors infusing the complex nuanced realities of teaching in this urban high school. This required both the teacher's and academic partner's closer attention to the school in its local area setting and the students' lives and schooling experiences. This was especially poignant in this teacher partner's English classes, but this joint work was interrupted by the campaign against school closure. A passionate and strongly fought campaign by staff, parents, and governors culminated in a public meeting which attracted over 300 people (from a school that had only around 500 students). This was successful in keeping the school open, although an acute shortage of places for students across the city was probably the real reason the school was allowed to continue. However the damage was done and the subsequently the new Year 7 intake was less than a usual class full of twenty eight students. As noted above, numbers in the rest of the school were also affected as parents moved their

children to other schools. Due to the much reduced size of the school, given that it had lost a Year 11 of over 100 students, student numbers plummeted to around three hundred (see Beckett, 2012).

The campaign was successful insofar as the school remained open but it was forced to go through a major re-structure. The highly committed Acting school Head was removed, the school governing body was dissolved[2] and the Local Authority imposed an Interim Governing Body with no staff or parent representation, as noted above. The new Executive school Head was appointed. The path was then paved to turn the school into an Academy, albeit sponsored by the local Further Education College. This was a move that had long been resisted by the staff, parents and previous governors and the Acting school Head. The resistance to becoming an Academy was based on many concerns, the main one being removed from Local Authority control and into the control on an unknown sponsor who would have the power to impose arbitrary decisions[3].

Following the transition period, the new Executive school Head finally approved the teacher partner's request to re-join the CPD programme, now renamed the 'Leading Learning' segment of a CPD twin-pack[4] and the cohort nicknamed the Trailblazers' group. Given the previous experience with practitioner research, the teacher partner was granted admission at the beginning of the second year, the 2013 calendar year. In concert with the city-wide learning community of practitioner researchers, she began to shape her most recent teacher inquiry project and we resumed our formal work together as teacher and academic partner. This work sat well with the teacher's active involvement in the NUT, which alerted us both to the wider teaching profession's anxieties and anger with current dominant orthodoxy in England and the teacher union's preferences for worthier educational alternatives (see Drummond and Yarker, 2013).

---

[2]The Board of Governors was given two choices by the Local Authority, no doubt operating on instruction from the Secretary of State for Education, to either formally dissolve themselves (to avoid any negative publicity) or be removed from office. The rationale provided was an new Interim Executive Board would better handle the need to arrest the school's budget deficit (or more accurately reduced funding capacity given the notice of school closure and falling school enrolments). The Board opted to dissolve in the interests of the public profile of the school.

[3] At the time of writing this journal article, the public consultation has been held and the school has been through the formal processes of conversion into an Academy, divorced from Local Authority control and under the direction of a local sponsor. It became official on 1 April, 2014.

[4]This is described elsewhere in the special collection of articles.

Scoping the teacher inquiry

The new teacher inquiry project was directed in many ways by the School Improvement Officer's approval of an action plan, which highlighted milestones throughout the year at which certain success criteria could be measured. However as the teacher partner read more international research literature on students in low achieving schools in challenging circumstances, this focus for the teacher inquiry project became more problematic. Reading Wrigley (2013) endorsed initial thoughts about a re-direction: 'It may be that more schools could help disadvantaged young people to achieve more highly, but there are serious questions about how this can be done'. Additionally, he added that 'blaming teachers and schools for poverty-related underachievement is a relatively new move' under the regime of league tables and Ofsted inspections. This proved apposite, and in line with NUT policy thinking.

At the 2014 NUT annual conference in April a motion on Ofsted was proposed by the National Executive and passed by conference. It stated that Ofsted is not fit for purpose and is the root cause of stress and illness in many teachers. An amendment recognised that ' the current approach to school inspection is one symptom of a wider problem: the lack of a coherent vision for education, trust in teachers, ministerial policies which de-professionalise teachers and a raft of accountability frameworks which are disjointed, piecemeal and deeply harmful to teaching, education and social justice.' The union had recently sent a delegation from the National Executive to Finland where it noted that 'instead of inspecting schools, the Government invests in initial teacher education, values excellent professional development and models evidence-informed policy-making'. Consequently the NUT is campaigning for an independent review to examine how to secure a single system of institutional accountability which fosters ownership of evaluation and development by the profession and school communities.

Milner's (2013) work also proved particularly useful given his advice on the follies of a focus on achievement gaps without a critical reading of what these actually mean. His concern with culturally diverse students resonates, as we see merit in looking more closely at the official school data but also at 'other data' (Johnson, 2002; Johnson and La Salle, 2010) to tease out the reasons that underpin the progress and test results of minority ethnic students in this bottom set English class and other English classes in the same year level.

Milner's comparison with white students does not apply in our context, because in this school the cohorts of white British students who are working class are very few and in this bottom set English class there is a small cohort of white Polish and Gypsy Romany students with low levels of achievement. They are all mostly in receipt of FSM. However, this does not detract from our concerns about the different groups of minority ethnic students and the need for a compelling, nuanced and illustrative portrayal of the different achievement gaps, the teacher partners' productive pedagogies, and the different and diverse students' learning opportunities.

The most recent RAISEonline data for the 2012-2013 school year showed that this urban high school has an intake of students who score highly on the deprivation marker of FSM, while it was more recently reported that 75% of the students have English as an Additional Language (EAL) with over fifty languages and dialects spoken. The school population continuously changes and currently there are significantly higher numbers of Eastern European and Gypsy Romany Traveller students. Also the Year 7 data and matched data revealed that a significant proportion of the students achieved higher in Maths, where having EAL did not affect achievement to the same degree. This is reflected in the GCSE results where a higher percentage of students gain a C grade in Maths than in English. Nationally students are now expected to make 4 levels of progress in a year regardless of the level at which they start and despite the fact that many (not all) students on lower levels make slower rates of progress. This needs to be read in conjunction with a key message from Ofsted but delivered by Allen (2014)[5] that:

> *'The effects of high-quality teaching are especially significant for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds: over a school year, such pupils gain 1.5 years' worth of learning with very effective teachers, compared with 0.5 years with poorly performing teachers. For poor pupils the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher can result in a deficit of a whole year's learning.'*

This raises the twin question about the capacity of Corrigan High School to attract and appoint teachers, and the incentives provided, together with opportunities for professional learning and development about the complexities and challenges of working in urban

---

[5]The teacher partner attended a course to be provided with Allen's research paper from Ofsted's 'Access and achievement in education 2013 review'.

schools. The teacher partner's major concerns stand. The minority ethnic students in her bottom set English class cannot be expected to all make the same rates of progress, especially given professional knowledge that student progress is not linear and cannot be measured in this way (see Drummond and Yarker, 2013; Chitty, 2004). As it happened, the students' reading levels were very low, notably with reading levels below age 6 and up to age 9 for students in the 12-13 year old age bracket. The school embarked on interventions and introduced a reading programme with computerised quizzes for each book in the scheme and online testing of reading level. The teacher partner balked as the tests are seemingly not reliable indicators of reading age mainly due to the cultural bias of the test and flaws in the computerised tests, though no evaluative research is at hand. However she reported her students generally enjoy the reading lessons, motivated by a highly incentivised scheme which rewards the students who read avidly and take the quizzes regardless of the level of difficulty.

In our first school-based meeting[6] we began to question the approved action plan, and in the light of the NUT materials and our critical reviews of literature, we wanted to reframe it to take into account the complex learning needs of different minority ethnic students who came with varying levels of English and reading abilities, and who have lived experiences of social deprivation and poverty. The Ofsted inspection report (April 2013) recognised the students' wide range of minority ethnic backgrounds with the largest group being of Pakistani heritage. Ofsted noted that the proportion of students speaking English as an additional language is about four times larger than the national figure, with many at the early stages of learning English. Likewise it noted that the proportion eligible for 'Pupil Premium' is more than twice the national average, and the proportion of students entering the school other than at the usual time is well above the national average. These Ofsted observations are also indicative of the complexities of teaching and learning, and what needs to be done to meet these minority ethnic students' multiple and cumulative learning needs.

Investigating under-achievement

---

[6] The series of six school-based meetings, once every half term, are also part of the 'Leading Learning' CPD segment, described elsewhere.

With this in mind, we began to articulate some draft teacher research questions:

1. Why are (these) Year 7 minority ethnic students underachieving?
2. How do we conceptualise/measure rates of progress?
3. In what ways can teachers raise rates of progress?

The national expected level at the start of Year 7 is a secure level 4. The lowest level in the targeted group was a low level 2 and the majority of the students were on a level 3. Seven of the students had English as an additional language. Two of the students were persistent absentees. Two of the students were on the Special Education Needs (SEN) register. At the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year when the class proceeded into Year 8, only two students remained from the original Year 7 class that was the initial focus of the School Improvement Officer's approved action plan. The Year 8 class was radically different, more so since another three girls and one boy were admitted after the start of the school year, while yet another girl, a new enrolment, started just before the Easter holiday, and one girl left. The new class was composed of fifteen students with seven girls and eight boys.

The main point of interrogation in the teacher inquiry project was the absurdity of demands on the teacher partner, given this changing class of different and diverse minority ethnic students whose problems lead to low attainment at age 11 and who are expected to somehow catch up despite a continuation of the same problems. In order to develop a critical reading of the situation, the teacher partner provided copies of the class list and a class sheet of summary data. This respectively showed the students' family names and an indication of students' family background and social circumstances together with prior learning, progress, and targets for the year. The majority are from Eastern European countries and three speak Czech, two are Romanian, one is Polish and one is Slovakian. Two girls are from Eritrea and speak Tigrinya, one boy is from Zimbabwe and speaks French, and a new girl speaks Italian. Another boy is from Afghanistan and speaks Pashto. There are also two English speaking students. The girl has Irish heritage and the boy is white British. This class list and summary data raise many questions about different and diverse minority students' complex learning needs and gaps in achievement, which are read as progress and potential test grades in the dominant policy regime, and which are closely tied to their social lives and schooling experiences.

The productive pedagogies framework (Hayes et al, 2005) proved fruitful in an analysis of these minority ethnic students' academic and social learning needs, particularly 'working with and valuing difference' to accommodate the varied cultural knowledge and providing a 'supportive classroom environment' to secure student engagement. The teacher partner was cognisant that her productive pedagogies were designed to increase 'intellectual quality' connected to students' family and social backgrounds. Many of her students live in urban areas where traditionally new migrants have always lived. These areas are densely populated. The terraced houses with yards but no gardens accommodate big minority ethnic families, mostly economic migrants looking for a better life for themselves and their children, but some are refugees. They had fled violent and war torn countries such as Eritrea - as is the case in the rest of the school with students from Afghanistan, the Sudan, Somalia, and Libya. Some of the students have witnessed violence at home.

Homing in on classroom practices

However we also took Milner's (2013) point that achievement gap explanations can force us to focus on individual students and groups of students rather than structures, systems, contexts, policies and practices that can be inequitable, racist and sexist and lead to achievement gaps, which are no doubt real. As if to illustrate the point, the sample pen portraits of the new Year 8 class developed by the teacher partner allowed us to jointly embark on a critical reading of the complexities of these minority ethnic students' learning needs but in the spirit of backward mapping (Lingard et al, 2003) also chart some tentative pedagogical responses in terms of learning opportunities and learning experiences.

The first, a snapshot of a Slovakian boy who came to England four years ago and who speaks exclusively Slovakian at home, showed that he struggles with English and makes limited progress with his writing and reading but he is keen to learn. He receives free school meals and he is the 'alpha male' who bullies weaker boys, who in turn defer to him, and he interacts with the girls by flirting while sexism is an issue. It is school policy to take this seriously but the low level name-calling and sexual comments denigrating girls are hard to stop, especially when his comments are in another language and provoke multi-language back-chat bordering on teasing and verbal abuse.

The second, a snapshot of the girl with Irish heritage girl, showed that she identifies as a Goth, wears heavy black make-up, dyes her hair black and wears many piercings. Her level

of English, based on a standard comprehension test, was level 3a but she exhibits a love of English. She does not receive free school meals and she is designated SEN with dyslexia, having recently transferred from a neighbouring urban high school conditional on improving her behaviour. This girl remains non-conformist and attends erratically; rarely in school for a full week and when there she will miss large parts of lessons. This not only makes it difficult for her to become engaged in the work but it also has an unsettling impact on the rest of the class.

These two student vignettes are not isolated cases, but armed with some crucial insights we turned to classroom practices. In anticipation of planned lesson observations, using the productive pedagogies coding sheet (QSRLS, n.d), the teacher partner also provided copies of one scheme of work and a series of lesson plans derived from National Curriculum English Framework for Year 8.The school's English department had chosen *The Lady of Shallot* to meet the requirement to study a pre-1914 text and to explore the ballad format. The teacher partner planned to use ballads from different cultures, for example the African-Caribbean ballad of Paul Bogle; the Irish 'Skibbereen'; and the English ballad of the Gresford mining disaster. She also made flexible provision for the minority ethnic students to identify and explore ballads known to them, and to write their own in a sequence of imaginative lessons that made student learning fun and exciting, self motivating not just teacher-led.

The academic partner was invited to do classroom observations on the condition that these were intentionally different to the Ofsted inspections and performance management observations. The teacher partner made it known that, as the NUT representative in the school, she worked with the senior leaders to ensure that staff are not subjected to too many Ofsted-style observations. The union guidance is for a maximum of 3 observations a year. In a survey on the effects of Ofsted conducted by the NUT in October 2013, the key finding was that observations are 'a source of stress' which 'disrupted activities for students', 'created significant workload', and are perceived as 'intimidating pressure' and 'not supportive or motivational'. Yet again, guided by critical scholars like Hayes et al (2005) on productive pedagogies, the authors co-devised a classroom observation schedule with an agreed focus on the vocabulary to describe the teacher partner's intentions, illustrated by example:

1. 'connectedness' (background knowledge) eg. the story about Abdul;

2. 'supportive classroom environment' (academic engagement) eg. white British story of Hillsborough football fans' death;

3. 'working with and valuing difference' (group identities in learning communities) eg. country flags, key vocabulary/picture images.

The actual observations showed the teacher partner's consistent effort to match the required National Curriculum tasks to classroom practices in line with productive pedagogies; and thus articulate an explicit form of quality teaching, which is lacking in the Ofsted inspection criteria. The classroom activities were evidently planned and executed to meet the complex learning needs of these different minority ethnic students, and they appeared to be challenging and enjoyable. The sequence of lessons was fast paced, again in line with Ofsted and school management expectations to get through prescribed work given 6 weeks/12 lessons to do ballads. There was whole class engagement, individual and small group work; but there was also some disconnection from the lessons especially when some different students and small groups of students lost focus on ballads. The teacher partner was then obliged to follow school protocols and had to be direct these students to alternative activities such as remedial work-sheets or first language dictionary explorations in the hope they would demonstrate engagement in learning, which is a mandatory requirement. However, there was deliberate student disengagement, even among the students with work-sheets and notably the non-conformist girl who teased other girls, who were then openly insulting in their first language. This triggered similar mockery across the classroom, while a Polish boy who insisted on one-to-one support copied the behaviour of the Slovakian boy who obviously dictated what should be happening in the classroom.

Critical analyses

The teacher inquiry activities, including the two authors' field-note records, were telling. There were extraordinary constraints imposed on the joint investigation, which need to be addressed in any serious effort to mentor and support teachers' research activity. However, the evidence provided ample data for critical analysis and professional discussion about these minority ethnic students' multiple and cumulative learning needs. Firstly, the teacher partner registered that these particular co-devised classroom observations felt very constructive, in contrast with the enormous policy pressures placed on teachers; the show of respect by refraining from passing judgement was coupled with the offer of support and

insight into classroom practices. The sequence did not increase workload but became an expected part of everyday teaching, which provided an opportunity to critically interrogate the host of outside school variables as well as the teacher partner's scheme of work, lesson plans, student work samples, pedagogies and classroom practices.

Secondly, there is a need to further develop the 'insider perspective' on curriculum and classroom practices (see Dinkins, 2009). This reflects the teacher partner's multiple aims given the National Curriculum English requirements, ranging from doing vital vocabulary work with NTE students, the use of first language dictionaries, extending vocabulary and key words with EAL students, and improving their language understanding using visual images. There are many other practical considerations, given that some students do not readily embrace the prescribed work; some are not habitually used to dictionaries (with the exception of an Italian girl); Czech dictionaries at students' level of learning are not available and/or they are limited especially when the word 'ballad' is not listed. The teacher partner is also well placed to consider different minority ethnic students' learning futures; for example, the dominant Slovakian boy does not like desk work, which does not help preparation for the regular deployment of English department tests to measure progress in anticipation of eventual high-stakes GCSE examinations.

In conclusion, however, it is not the teachers' concerns with minority ethnic students' progress and test results that require attention so much as it is government policies and structures that define the English system of schooling. This urban high school, consistently targeted for closure, is obliged to adopt segregational practices such as setting according to perceived ability because it is under-resourced, which is probably intentional as a state-sponsored Local Authority school located in a poor immigrant area of the city. The school's performance, measured by Ofsted inspections and national benchmarks, cannot be continuously blamed on the teachers and the new Executive Head, but rather the multitude of social, systemic and school-based inequities. For example, as it stands it would benefit the minority ethnic students in this bottom set English class if there was a regular Teaching Assistant for all of their lessons. Over the year there have been four different Teaching Assistants at different times during the week, including one for just a single lesson, while occasionally there has been support in two of the four lessons from 2 different Teaching Assistants. This lack of continuity makes it hard for the teacher partner to know when the

support will turn up as they are often re-directed to other tasks such as examination invigilation.

More pointedly, it is one thing to recognise the evident constraints that prevent this teacher partner's on-going productive work: unrealistic policy pressures, externally imposed targets, inflexible curriculum demands, calculated lack of resources, orthodox setting by ability as a matter of necessity, crippling time loads, not to forget the low socio-economic status of the urban school context and the effects of poverty and deprivation, constantly changing community demographics and student census, to name a few. Taken together, these constraints deny the teacher partner an opportunity to make her own professional decisions. For instance, having brought together the research literature on 'ability' labelling and grouping and a history of Eugenics theories (Drummond and Yarker, 2013; Chitty, 2004) with the evidence generated by the teacher inquiry, she opts for mixed ability English classes. In her professional experience, this will ensure that more high-achieving students are present to enrich the supportive classroom environment, provide peer-support, and share learning while all the students will learn from each other. In this way, the more able first language speakers could help with English translation and students with more English-speaking experience could pair up with students in need of support but to their mutual benefit. This one measure might arrest some students' lack of progress because they lack English language and speaking experience to access this particular scheme of work on ballads and particular segments of the lessons.

While the teacher inquiry project has come to an end for the time being, it is not for the want of continuing the work of jointly building *knowledge-of-practice* (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009) and developing research-informed teaching[7]. In the interim, it is important to take the findings to date and share the initial insights into these minority ethnic students' family and social backgrounds and ways to provide engaging and intellectually-charged learning opportunities and learning experiences even in the face of the imposed political

---

[7] The Bristish Educational Research Association – Royal Society of Arts (BERA-RSA) conducted an Inquiry into Research and Teacher Education, which should prove significant in terms of policy advocacy in the run-up to the 2015 UK elections in May, if not before: http://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/BERA-RSA-Research-Teaching-Profession-FULL-REPORT-for-web.pdf

agenda on urban schools. The right to make professional decisions about what is required to meet different and diverse students' multiple and cumulative learning needs will come about, assisted by teachers and academic partners working together and collectively with our unions in England and elsewhere to engage in evidence-informed policy advocacy. As for the question posed in the title of this article, which can be asked in many languages: is this possible or impossible?

List of references:

Anyon, J. (1980) Social Class and School Knowledge. *Curriculum Inquiry*, Vol. 11, No. 1. (Spring, 1981), pp. 3-42.

Beckett, L. (2012) Engaging Democratic Educational Politics Against School Closure. Chapter 7 in Pink, W. T. (ed) *Schools for Marginalized Youth. An International Perspective*. New York: Hampton Press Inc.

Beckett, L. and Gallagher, K. (2014) Practitioner research to improve students' learning outcomes in the north of England: Possible or impossible? Paper for BERA Annual Conference, London, 23-25 September.

Chitty, C. (2004) Eugenic Theories and Concepts of Ability. Chapter 7 in Benn and Chitty (eds) *A Tribute to Caroline Benn. Education and Democracy*. London: Continuum.

Cochran-Smith, M. and Lytle, S. (2009). *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research in the next generation*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Dinkins, D. (2009) Teachers Talk About Race, Class and Achievement. Chapter 9 in Cochran-Smith, M. and Lytle, S. (eds) *Inquiry as Stance. Practitioner Research for the Next Generation.*New York: Teachers College Press.

Drummond, M.J. and Yarker, P. (2013) Editorial: The Enduring Problem of Fixed Ability: but is a new conversation beginning? *Forum*, vol.55, no.1, pp.3-7.

Hayes, D., Mills, M., Christie, P., and Lingard, B. (2005) *Teachers and Schooling Making a Difference.Productive Pedagogies, Assessment and Performance.*Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Johnson, R.S. (2002) *Using Data to Close the Achievement Gap. How to Measure Equity in Our Schools*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press Inc.

Johnson, R.S. and La Salle, R.A. (2010) *Data Strategies to Uncover and Eliminate Hidden Inequities.The Wallpaper Effect*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press Inc.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2006) From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35, 7, pp.3-12.

Milner, R.H. (2013) Rethinking Achievement Gap Talk in Urban Education, in *Urban Education*, 48, 1, pp.3-8.

Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., and Gonzalez, N. (1992) Funds of knowledge for teaching: using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, Vol. XXX1, No.2.

Tan, J. (2013) RAISEonline, half-truths and other fictions about attainment gaps. Chapter 2 in Beckett, L. (ed) *Teacher Education through Active Engagement: Raising the professional voice*. London and New York: Routledge Research in Education Policy and Politics series.