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Utilising practitioner research knowledge to address poverty and student achievement.

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Abstract:
Centred around a school's journey in supporting children's learning needs within an urban, inner-city context, this paper documents some of the key moments in a longstanding partnership between school practitioners and their university-based academic partner. Drawn from teacher partner reports and reflections on their practitioner research enquiries, the authors attempt to illuminate their specific concerns about how the predominantly outcomes-based data that is used to paint the public view of schools like theirs is misleading. Moreover, the paper suggests that the social, cultural and historical context of a school, whilst denied by governmental measures of performance, is absolutely vital to practitioners' careful considerations towards making a difference. Written together with their academic partner, their collaborative research work and engagement with critical readings of urban education and poverty are presented here as a story of discovery. It concludes that whilst the impact of poverty on education is undoubtedly significant, school practice, teacher education and governmental policy should be careful to separate such patterns of inequality from deficit explanations and labels of disadvantage.

Introduction:

In this paper we want to foreground some of our developing concerns about the authenticity of centralised, standardised measures of school accountability that largely ignore social and cultural factors in their summary judgements of school performance. Presented as a 'tour' around the school, the paper attempts to illuminate some of the complexities of professional work in an urban school setting, marked by poverty. It does this to show how school context, the social, cultural and economic environment of a school is of vital importance, not just in terms of 'evaluating' a school's work, but in developing professional school strategies that attempt to make a difference. Perhaps most importantly, this is a story of a school as a learning organisation, one that engages in research activities and critical scholarship and begins to build a considered counterpoint to popular models of understanding that tend to blame families and individuals, schools and practitioners for the social variance in student outcomes.

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[1] In the interests of confidentiality, the name of the school and those of individuals appearing in this text have been changed.

To make the clear the unbreakable connection between context, teaching and learning within this urban setting, we tell the story of our research and concerns in the form of a tour around the school and its community. The narrative and the 'evidence', we have woven tightly together in an attempt to give you a sense of being there, where context lives and breathes around you. You'll meet some of its staff, have a look around some of its classrooms, take a walk around the neighbourhood, perhaps even drop in on a school meeting or a corridor chat. Of course, whilst compiled from real events, reports, classroom observations and discussions, in the interests of confidentiality, anonymity and our sense of professional ethics, any names are fictitious and the characters of the story are composites of real people. So let's begin. Where are we now? Well, we're in your car, it's 7.30am and we're just about a quarter mile from the school, not far from the city centre. Not far now.

Through the school gates:

So the school – we'll call it Maple CPS – sits just outside the main city centre. It's surrounded by local authority housing, some local community shops and industrial units. Standing here at the school gates you can just hear the traffic building up along one of the main roads into the city. It runs close to one of the school's boundaries, passing through a large industrial trading estate with a range of businesses. Many are closed now, some barely keeping going. As you can see, those concrete high-rise apartment buildings pretty much dominate this landscape. There is history here, grounded in England's industrial past.

The school itself shows considerable change. We'll talk of its demographic make-up in a moment, but let's have a look around – Mr Hasan, the caretaker, will let us in. You can park your car here, the gates will be locked and it will be safe. As you can see, there have been some renovations and some building on the site. There's a children's centre here now that helps with children's transitions into school and also with particular learning needs. The school has also shown incredible improvements in grades over the last six years and is growing in size. Families want to send their children here. It has a good reputation for being a school that cares and that is very much involved with its local community. Whilst it serves one of the poorest and most diverse communities in the city, this is a vibrant, safe, respected and stimulating learning environment. It describes itself as a 'can do' school and its wall displays regularly showcase children's work and exciting activities and events that have taken place in support of their experiences and learning. The most recent government inspectorate's report (OfSTED) made mention of this in its introduction, saying that:

> *'[Maple CPS] has made good improvements since the last inspection and is now a good school. There are some significant strengths to its work. A parent summed up the views of many, "[Maple CPS] has made significant strides in the past two or three years". All pupils in this very positive school community are valued. Equality is promoted exceptionally well and discrimination is successfully*

tackled. Community cohesion is promoted extremely well and pupils celebrate the different languages, cultures and faiths found within the school. Productive partnerships with schools overseas further enrich pupils' understanding of the wider world. Care, guidance and support make an outstanding contribution to pupils' personal outcomes. Pupils achieve well because of good teaching and a well-planned curriculum.'

(extract from 'Maple CPS' Ofsted Report, 2010)

Ok, so now that the senior secretary has let us in and we've got our visitors' passes, it might be useful to say hello to the headteacher, Mrs Ashmore. She'll tell you how Maple CPS was not always a 'good' school in the eyes of the inspectorate. When we first chatted about many of the school's challenges, she talked about how the school field couldn't be used for some time because there was a danger to the children from the spent hypodermic syringes that drug-users left behind. On many occasions she was called to the school 'after hours' and on weekends to make it secure after older kids had broken windows, sometimes with the excuse of playing football. The staff will tell you that this is a challenging environment to work in, but they resist strongly the labels of disadvantage. Nevertheless, as the head teacher will tell you, the official picture of the school is one marked by significant poverty. Using secondary data analysis, our practitioner research partnership has shown that:

'.. the official picture of the school's families and children from an analysis of ACORN and RAISEonline data, is one marked by significant poverty. The students at the school can be classified as coming from three particular categories regarding their financial situation (ACORN data). Eleven percent of students are classified as living in 'urban prosperity'; 21% live with 'moderate means' and 69% of its students' families are classified as 'hard pressed'. The school also has 69.3% of its student population living in the top 10% most deprived areas (by the Index of Multiple Deprivation), the average for this city's schools being 24.4%.'

(Taken from practitioner research data reports, 2014)

Further socio-cultural factors also contribute significantly to the schools' demographic mix. Alongside issues of poverty and socio-economic class, the communities that are served by Maple CPS are incredibly diverse. Again, if you look at the secondary data analysis that we have conducted as part of our school-university partnership in practitioner CPD, you can see that:

> *'Currently, there are 47 different languages spoken in the school, with 73.4% of students having English as an Additional Language (EAL). This is in stark contrast to the 15.1% EAL average for schools in the city. Almost eighty-six percent (85.9%) of students are from Black, Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds – the city's average being 23.7%'..*
>
> <div align="right">(Taken from practitioner research data reports, 2014)</div>

Oh, we mentioned poverty didn't we? Yes, well although governmentally-adopted indicators such as the receipt of free school meals is less than perfect (see Hobbs & Vignoles, 2007; Lupton, 2003; Connelly et al, 2014), it is also interesting to see that the school sit well above the city's averages. The same is true of Special Educational Needs (SEN). Data we collected showed that:

> *'The school also has a high uptake of free school meals, currently 52.3%, well above the city's average of 19.8% and the national figure of 26.2% (RAISEonline data 2012). Of all our students, 24.1% of them are on the SEN register, again higher than the city's average (17.4%).*
>
> <div align="right">(Taken from practitioner research data reports, 2014)</div>

The staff will also tell you of the high levels of mobility with which they have to deal. Part of the real challenge of telling an accurate story of the school's outcomes is the fact that high percentages of families move in an out of the area. Such mobility is manifest in children joining and leaving the school. In recently available data (from the City Local Authority), over a quarter (26%) of the school population was subject to such movements. In this sense, the school's social, cultural and economic demographic is never stable, never static, always dynamically shifting. A city that never sleeps!

Ok, so that's the current picture of the school. We hope that's given you a sense of the contextual factors that are present here in our community school. We'll hear other details as we move round the school. But, for now, let's just quickly pop into the staff room, grab a cuppa, and we can briefly tell you about the work that we've done in partnership with the University and, most importantly, listen to some of the staff concerns that have been uncovered in this collaboration.

Leading Learning CPD, Real Concerns & an Evidence Strategy:
We want to tell you briefly about the partnership between the school and the university. It's been a fruitful collaboration, long in the making, so it's perhaps useful to say something in brief about the sorts of work it has done, some of its guiding principles. After that we'd like to

outline our research concerns. It's helpful to do it that way because the concerns have been honed by the conversations that we've had as teacher and academic partners (and now co-authors).

Our work together is one of many layers. At the school level, conversations with our academic partner (Tan) began as part of an individual school CPD project in 2007. Such work built the foundations of a longstanding, respectful and productive relationship focusing on developing teachers' and support staffs' social analysis. Further developments saw the school and a select number of staff contributing to a governmental agency-funded programme of CPD, in partnership with other local schools. Now, in this current phase and funded through the school itself, two teachers (Harridge & Stokoe) have been contributing to a wider CPD initiative ('*Leading* Learning') led by the two originators of this work at the University (Lori Beckett & Jon Tan), and have also been working towards accredited CPD as students of the MA 'Achievement in City Schools'.

Surrounding this formal CPD partnership, there are other connections that associate the three co-authors and other members of the staff team. For example Stokoe and two other teaching staff at the school were mentored by Jon Tan during their undergraduate teacher training; the school has also supported other students from education-centred degree programmes (both QTS and non-QTS) that have been under his tutelage. These layers of the relationship make for trusted, honest and professionally respectful conversations about real school and individual concerns. Now might be a good time to outline those that we want to chat further about during your visit.

So, we've undertaken a journey as a school partnership and there are many aspects of conversations that have been taken forward into the staff-room to good effect. Did we mention that the school is much improved over the time we've been working together? It has become one of the most improved schools in the city, and in the region. It is perhaps because of this that we still have major concerns about how the school is evaluated externally and how predominant focus on outcomes-based measures gives a misleading or at least severely limited picture of the school's quality. During the course of our practitioner enquiries, these are the things to which we constantly return:

1. Our school context is complex – socially, economically, culturally and pedagogically. Any centrally-configured data emanating from government that does not account for these complex variables, whilst available in volume, is significantly limited by its aggregation;
2. Centrally produced, aggregate data is, at best highly descriptive and 'late in the day'. It is severely devoid of 'professional clues' that might help understand patterns of underachievement and thus direct classroom/ school action;

3. Holding schools such as ours to account on the basis of such limited, decontextualised and flawed 'evidence' is fundamentally misleading, ethically questionable.

These are aspects of our concerns that have arisen from our enquiries in to classroom and school level practices. We didn't set out to challenge this governmental position, but our research has presented us with such an alternative 'story' of the school's quality that meant we couldn't ignore its implications when we considered the issue of accountability and how external judgements were being made of the school and its professionals. These are the conversations you might hear around the staff room: it's never far from our minds.. "*we're doing a good job, we've done amazing things with this child or that child – but it's stuff that just doesn't show up on official measures!*"

Having discussions together as staff and academic mentor started us thinking about how we could start to build an 'evidence strategy' in order to tell the story more authentically and to capture and understand our own attempts to pedagogically address issues of poverty and underachievement.

Having dialogue within the partnership that included teacher and academic researcher voices was essential in making sense of academic research literature (e.g. Menter et al, 2011; Punch, 2009; Somekh & Lewin, 2007) and helping us to see how it might be applied within our school classrooms. Other academic literature reported on research that could be methodologically adapted. Here, writers such as Hayes et al (2005) and the idea of productive pedagogies were extremely valuable. An example of this was the use of some of the elements of the productive pedagogies schema for classroom observations to focus our attention on how such things as the recognition and valuing of diversity, the connectedness of classroom work with the world outside, and the considerations of a supportive, safe learning environment were manifested in our professional work.

We've ended up with was a case study approach that brings together an eclectic range of data, some quantitative sources involving secondary analysis, others that required us to conduct differently-focused classrooms observations and to revisit student work and our detailed assessments. In all, we recognised that in order to provide a more complete picture of our, then practitioner research enabled us to identify and create opportunities where the evidence became more specific and context-sensitive. It was a specificity that we needed if we were going to use data to lever change in the context of urban poverty.

Anyway, we've spent rather a lot of time in the staff-room! Let's take a walk down the corridors and see if we can drop into some of the classrooms. Then perhaps you'll be able to see what we're doing here and we can chat further about the sorts of things that have been

informing our work, helping us gain a more accurate representation of the school, as well as identify places for action and change.

Down the Corridor – Classrooms, Diversity and Productive Pedagogies:
Perhaps most obvious when you tour around the school is its diversity. Let's just pop into this classroom for a moment and you'll see what I mean. As we mentioned, we have forty-seven languages represented here and there are complexities at the level of dialect, even when children come from broadly the same geographic area. This means that there's a considerable amount of work that has to take place in support of children's learning in addition to the pedagogical activities of the classroom. When we take into account the multi-layered effects of poverty, gender, ethnicity and SEN together, then these contextual 'neighbourhood' and individual factors, as Lupton (2004) documents, serve to make more complex and time-intensive the daily work we do to prepare children. Take for example the boy over there, working with Mr Richards (a behaviour support worker), we'll call him 'B' for confidentiality reasons:

> *'Child B has had erratic progress in learning since starting school, he struggles with concentration and self-esteem. He has been on the school special educational needs register for the last 3 years and has often had the label of ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) due to his short attention span and inability to stop moving and fidgeting. However this is not a recognized diagnosis given to him and it has been believed by many of his previous teachers that he is just a boy with a lot of unsettled issues in his home life. He has a father who left home around 6 years ago due to drug abuse but who is now back in child B's life and has made a positive change to his life and is conscious of supporting his child now. His mother suffers with depression and although it is very evident of her love for her children her behaviour is often erratic. There are mornings when child B arrives at school after an argument with his mother and will often need between 30 minutes to 1 hour to calm down, this obviously has in impact on his concentration and learning. Child B is below national average and especially struggles with his number work (this may be a mild case of number dyspraxia). In younger years he struggled with his motor skills meaning his writing was difficult to mediate. It has only been in the last 18 months that child B has begun to make some catch up progress in his writing. His reading decoding skills are good but he struggles with his comprehension, it has often been recognized that child B has not had some of the life experiences which equips children with the knowledge of how the world works.'*

> (extract from practitioner research vignettes of students)

What we worry about here is that the majority of policy responses tend to see children like 'B' as being damaged in some ways, and his family as dysfunctional. Following on from this, as summarised by academic researchers such as Perry & Francis (2010), policies seem to

adopt a sort of behavioural interventionist stance: the State has to intervene to modify the child's behaviour and the families approach to parenting. Once this is completed successfully then the child is able to take its place in the 'perfect' education system and will then succeed. It reminds us of Goffman's study of asylums and the 'treatment' of the self (Goffman, 2007). We're uncomfortable with this, as one of us wrote in one of our practitioner research reflections:

> *'When I personally think of Diversity and Differentiation in my classroom I immediately think of identity, and constantly ask myself 'am I labeling an identity to this child'. Maybe this comes from my personal primary school experience of being labeled the child that has learning difficulties, although I think back in my time in school it was more of a label of the 'thick' child who cannot spell, I think I actually remember my teachers saying this comment to my mother in my year 3 parents evening. Today I would probably have been tested for Dyslexia and would be taught supportive strategies to cope with this difficulty. But the experience of this name has obviously stayed with me for all this time and for me no matter what the name given is; it is a label which identifies us, which in turn shapes our concept of our own intelligence.'*
>
> (Extract from practitioner's personal reflection on meeting learners' needs)

Writers such as Milner (2013), Ball (2013) and Wrigley (2000) have helped us reconsider that ways in which we attempt to understand how social inequalities are played out within the school setting. Other work, such as Hayes et al (2005) and Haberman (1991), have given us alternative lenses through which we can interrogate what takes place in our classrooms and what changes could we introduce. Do we see those '*pedagogies of poverty'* that Haberman (1991) talks about? Do we promote connectedness with the world outside as highlighted in the productive pedagogies work of Hayes et al (2005) and in Moll et al's (1992) sense of there being different '*funds of knowledge'*, some perhaps not always acknowledged. See here in this literacy classroom what is happening:

> *'The teachers in Year 2 had chosen the Traditional Tale, from Hinduism, of Rama and Sita. This story had been carefully chosen and was part of a thematic approach as the class were also learning about Diwali. It was clear from observing the environment and discussion with the students that the teachers, not only in these two lessons, but across all the lessons observed used a thematic approach. In one of the lessons a Hindu student was given the role of 'expert'. This enabled him to use his knowledge in supporting others and because this particular student needed to develop his collaborative and social skills the lesson was also immensely beneficial to him and learning beyond that of just acquiring knowledge was able to take place.'*
>
> (extract from practitioner personal reflection/ report)

So the teacher is drawing on knowledge and familiar experiences outside of the classroom to which the children can relate. The learning becomes purposeful and contextually sensitive.

These are real experiences for these children and their literacy skills are thus developed in meaningful ways. Of course this means that the teachers and support staff could be viewed as being instrumental in interpreting the standardised curriculum content and making it relevant to their students. This is what we mean when we say 'connectedness'.

So as we mentioned we have 47 different languages. We have seven religious denominations in the school and a whole host of different lifestyles and traditions. Culture impacts significantly on the social context in which we work and with 26% mobility it is an ever-changing picture. That is one of the frustrations that we have with the official data record of the school: by the time we have it to analyse, by the time we've identified children 'at risk', the picture has changed. At the moment, we have an issue with a few Pakistani boys. But it wasn't an identifiable pattern last year and might not be next. Part of our school journey has been the realisation that practitioner research helps us be more focused, using and collecting other data that helps examine classroom issues more deeply (see Johnson, 2002; Johnson & La Salle, 2010).

The productive pedagogies research also talks about recognition of difference and how a productive school works carefully to be inclusive and to recognise alternative knowledge. It is worth mentioning how these elements of a professional ethos are carried forward in providing support for students, given the significant levels of diversity and mobility present here. Let's walk a little further down the corridor to see some of the challenges we face in linguistic terms when working towards inclusivity. We can chat with the school's specialist language support teacher, Mrs Kinnersley.

As we said when you arrived, the school's context is complex and it's our view that the social, economic and cultural dimensions of this complexity needs to be accounted for in any 'story' of the school's work. The work of Mrs Kinnersley and her team (well one other support staff member) is a good illustration of the significant energies and resources that underpin children's progression through the school and their engagement in classroom activities. Even though her support is directed at supporting children's linguistic skills, as students arriving with little or no English, she'll tell you that the realities of this work are often wrapped up in social welfare issues and experiences of trauma, bereavement and displacement. Mrs Kinnersley?

> *'… it's not unusual for these children to have what we call "baggage" for example if they come from a war torn country and for them to have emotional difficulties. Which we address at the beginning but obviously we can do more for them as they gain, English as a language. Because we have an in house counsellor, support groups, family liaison officers, and the learning mentor, they do different little groups of dealing with bereavement. Because we've had children that have lost siblings and actually witnessed it. And as soon as they've started to pick up English they will be able to express that. For*

example a little girl whose sister had been killed nearby her, she seen it all and it was her birthday that day because she was learning dates in school, she knew it would have been her birthday. And you could see she wanted to grieve but she didn't know how to express it. So we do nurture groups, which are groups of children that find it difficult to express themselves, so we will do it though play. So role play with them, so it isn't all verbal.'

(extract from interview with Language Support Tutor)

So you can see that staff here have to operate very much as counsellors, often dealing with issues that are deep-seated, either surfacing out of the blue or being constant aspects to consider in a child's daily experience of school and the world around them. These are complex factors that inhibit children's engagement, the pace of their building relations with others (staff and peers) and also the ways in which parents, where present, are able to make sense of the schools work and their new environment. For some families, they are moved on quickly as other housing and welfare services pitch in to support them. So they're not with the school for very long. Nevertheless, the work is intensive, creative and needs to be pedagogically diverse – your try everything don't you, Mrs Kinnersley?

'*Using visual aids, drama, sensory is a definite plus. So you try and expose them to as much learning strategies as you can. I use all of those, if I say outside or mention a garden I take them out and it's irrelevant of the weather. They need to experience that, it needs to be hands on. If they are seeing, feeling and listening if you cover all of these you can make sure some learning is happening. Like reception they have all the play areas, and are experiencing the home corner, the dressing up, the children are not only listening they are seeing and touching as well.*

If we get a child older than reception with no education, has no English for them to come and be expected to sit in a classroom, with a teacher stood in front, they can't learn. So we don't do that, we let them sit in to listen to the register so they can hear their name, but then we take them out and support them. It can hinder their learning but they need time to learn because otherwise they might get distressed or switch off. We will take them outside and back down to reception and play, touch, play with paints.

The children feel more comfortable with younger children they like to take them round and play with them. And they will try to talk to them and if they don't respond in English they will try in their own language and then if they don't speak their language they will find a child that does speak their language if they can.'

(extract from interview with Language Support Tutor)

It's challenging work, as no doubt you can understand now. We hope that's given you a brief insight into what's happening on a daily basis. Feel lucky that it's been a snapshot for now. It's a constant rhythm for us here. Ok, so let us walk you back to the car park. There's a few things we want to say to you before you go, so we can chat on the way.

Conclusion: School Context, Practitioner Research and Democratic Accountabilty:

So that's Maple CPS and our community. We hope that's given you an insight into the some of the complexities of our work as a school: a constant balancing act between providing high intellectual, problem-solving activities for the children; meeting their considerable social, emotional and welfare needs; maintaining open and respectful relations with families and the community; motivating children with rich pedagogical activities; building self-esteem. Of course alongside this juggling act is our commitment to our own learning as individuals and as an organisation. There are two things that we want to say in conclusion – for now that is!

Firstly, one of the significant challenges we have faced is our building the alternative story, not just of the school, but of children, families and the community we serve. It is perhaps the easier option to conceptualise them as damaged and dysfunctional, because it shifts pedagogy, school practice and education policy out of the spotlight of responsibility. In our policy attempts to standardise curriculum and pedagogy, to find out 'what works' and 'best practice', we perhaps lose sight of the broader social, cultural, economic and historical factors that systematically reproduce inequalities and constrain life-chances.

In the course of this paper, we hope we've started to show how these influences are played out in our school and how our learners have complex needs that require context-sensitive approaches (not standardised packages). Crucial then is the means through which we turn the spotlight onto our own pedagogies and the organisation and practice of education and ask difficult questions about our professional contribution to either the redress of inequalities or their reproduction. Engaging in practitioner research and critical literatures such as Thrupp (1999), Wrigley et al (2012) and Johnston (2002), are starting-points to seeing the alternatives to the dominant discourse of individualised blame.

Secondly, the deeper we delve into school experiences such as these, the more we unravel the simplistic, inaccurate and inadequate nature of current forms of school and teacher accountability. Perhaps most illuminating in our journey has been the realisation that our school's social and cultural context makes for an enriching resource in the education of our diverse and dynamic constituency. However challenging the work and effort required, such factors advantage us in being able to develop socially just pedagogies and schools like ours are only seen as 'disadvantaged' when we view them from within a largely deficit discourse. Poverty is a key factor in understanding our school's story, our daily work and our achievements. It cannot be ignored and it is essential to any meaningful framework of accountability. As Park (2013) argues, there is a long-overdue need for more democratic, multi-perspectival forms of accountability that are negotiated through all stakeholders. Our fear is that, for the same social and cultural reasons that some voices are heard above others and that, like Ladson-Billings (2006) highlights, the knowledge of certain groups is valued more highly, then the voices of those in urban schools facing the effects of poverty might

remain silenced. We hope that though our practitioner research and school-university partnership, we have been able to make some noises that resonate elsewhere in teacher education, CPD and policy development. Thank you for visiting, hope to see you again.

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