That's Another Story:

Urban Diversity, Poverty and School Accountability Reconsidered

Authors:

Sarah Harridge, School practitioner, Maple Community Primary School (Maple CPS)

Sarah Stokoe, School practitioner, Maple Community Primary School (Maple CPS)

Jon E.C. Tan, Leeds Metropolitan University

Abstract:

This article, co-authored by two research-active teachers with the support of their academic partner, reports on the resistance of an urban primary school in a northern city of England to the label 'disadvantaged school' and various judgements that refuse to take into account its holistic work with students and families from different and diverse minority ethnic backgrounds. The article will argue that there are flaws in the ways the school's story is officially told where it does not acknowledge what is being done to address students' experiences of immigration, poverty and deprivation, and the cultural barriers they often negotiate in coming to school. As a driver for change, practitioner research foregrounds the authenticity of school and classroom contexts and puts them under scrutiny as a means of informing strategic decisions. Utilising a case study design, this paper pulls together a range of data evidence to construct its narrative and tell the school's story, working in collaboration with its university academic partner. In doing so, it contributes to our understanding of practitioner research within challenging urban school settings, under pressure from centralised conceptualisations of achievement gaps and school

performance. It puts many of these ideas under scrutiny and asks fundamental questions about curriculum, pedagogy and accountability.

Introduction:

In this paper, we would like raise our concerns about the authenticity of centralised, standardised measures of school accountability that tend to deny school context as a major factor in educational achievement. Drawing on our professional conversations in the development of our school's consideration of the support of a group of Pakistani students, we hope to illustrate the development of our collective thinking about accountability for culturally rich urban schools.

In the current educational policy climate, there is something of a political unease with the issue of inequalities in educational outcomes. On the one hand, there is a sense that inequalities centred around socio-economic status and poverty, differences in the educational performance of boys and girls, and the variations in attainment across different ethnic groups are all things that our education policies should seek to eradicate. For secretaries of State, heads of governmental inspectorates, and for those holding prime ministerial office, the message is so often a clear one. As Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, stated in his speech to Brighton College in May 2012:

> '*We live in a profoundly unequal society. More than almost any developed nation ours is a country in which your parentage dictates your progress. Those who are born poor are more likely to stay poor and those who inherit privilege are more likely to pass on privilege in England than in any comparable county. For those of us who believe in social justice this stratification and segregation are morally indefensible'* (Gove, Brighton College, 2012)

Whilst as educators, we should have no problem with such sentiment, the political conceptualisations of the root causes of inequalities, the general direction of policy flow in identifying solutions, and the all-pervasive preoccupation with accountability raise our concerns. As documented by Tan (2013), the tendency of politics and policy to seek out simplistic causal explanations have resulted in individuals and their communities being considered deficit in ways that hinder their pathways through education towards economic well-being; and schools that exhibit attainment gaps between social groups of students are similarly deficit, perhaps in terms of leadership, pedagogy or strategic vision. As summarised by Perry and Francis (2010), there is great emphasis on raising aspirations and changing the behaviour of individuals, families and communities in the belief that it is their low aspirations and patterns of behaviour alone that result in their poor engagement and subsequent 'failure'.

Similarly, schools are perceived either as change-agents or barriers to success. So for governments then, schools and their staff that are judged to be 'good' or 'outstanding' are in the business of raising aspirations and plugging the deficits for those in their school communities that lag behind. In contrast, those labelled as 'requiring improvement' are schools and educators that 'fail' their students and their communities by way of poor leadership and pedagogy. As we can imagine, this puts school professionals under immense pressure.

In this paper, as a partnership of school and university-based educators, we want to examine the complexities of work in an urban school environment. We provide some small window into school strategy and classroom practice to show a school attempting to make **a difference**, though not necessarily **the difference**, echoing Hayes et al (2005). In doing so, we showcase how a school both comes to reject the simplistic deficit explanations of underachievement that course through the veins of politics and policy, and utilises collaborative practitioner research enquiry as a means of building a more authentic story of its support for its students and community. So, now, we better introduce the school and its context.

Context:

The school, let's call it Maple CPS, sits just outside the centre of the city, nestled amongst local authority housing, some local community shops and industrial units. Slightly further a field, one of the main roads into the city cuts close to the school's boundary, as does a large industrial estate with a range of businesses – some new, some established, but many now closed. The environment is not devoid of greenery; it's not the urban jungle of the film noir or stereotype. Yet the landscape is characterised in concrete, punctuated by brick, steel and asphalt and the school is watched over by towering apartment blocks. Urban living, grounded in the past.

Whilst there are indications of this historical continuity, the story of this school is also one of considerable change. When we first started working together as school practitioners and academic partner, the school head teacher (or principal) talked of the school field, unusable because of spent syringes from drug-users; she talked of broken windows in the school and older children visiting the school after hours, so to speak, perhaps with the excuse of football.

For those in the audience that thrive on data and categorisation, the official picture of the school's families and children that we can draw down from an analysis of governmental statistics (such as ACORN and RAISEONLINE data – UK databases that include demographic detail) 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% of students live with '*moderate means*' and 69% of 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 (Index of Multiple Deprivation), the average for this city's schools being 24.4%. (City Autumn package 2012). Even using these official bureaucratic terms, such as '*hard pressed*', we think this gives an insight into the school's socio-economic context. Other terms, popular phrases come to mind

when we interpret what this data signifies: high levels of deprivation, generational unemployment, social welfare dependency (for those unemployed and on significantly depressed incomes), experiences of crime. Some might offer up the label of '*disadvantaged school',* but we would not and as the story of the school unfolds, we hope that you'll be able to see why we reject such negative shorthand.

The communities that surround Maple CPS are also incredibly multi-cultural. 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 average being 23.7%. 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 (Special Educational Needs) register, again higher than the city's average (17.4%).

Due to the transient nature of families in the school's area, mobility currently stands at 26% (City Autumn Package 2012). It is an area of the city where the various aspects of globalisation can be seen. We celebrate the fact that we have 47 languages, 7 different religions and a mix of multicultural lifestyles and traditions. Globalisation is in some ways enriching, but has complexities.

It causes significant challenges for our school, often because some children are not with us for very long before they are moved away as other services (such as housing and welfare provision) step up to meet their needs. So we as professionals attempt to form connections, ways to enable the children to access learning. We mobilise language learning support where available (and with 47 different languages it is often not). We try to make necessary adjustment to our classrooms and pedagogy, as we would with any child with special educational needs.

Yet, in a moment and through no choice of their own, these children and their families (where present) are moved on. Such families have become a part of our school's community, albeit sometimes for only very short periods of time. So as a group of practitioners, along with our university partner, we sometime catch a glimpse of other cultures as they pass through, and they add to our diversity and our sense of our community richness. However transient, they all make an impression on us, and for those able to stay longer, they make lasting contributions to our classrooms and our sense of place.

So that's our school. Interesting isn't it? As you can imagine, our day-to-day experiences of supporting learning within such a context are rich and varied. A story with a plot too complex to be told in one go, with one voice; and with characters too numerous to do them complete justice. Thus, the 'back story', as they call it in film-making, is ever-changing. Yet one thing remains constant, our professionalism. What follows then can only be part of the story and to this end it is helpful to explore the relevant starting-points, our foci and theoretical underpinnings for the aspects of the story that we'll tell here.

Real concerns and research foci:

Context is our starting-point. Right from the very beginning of the partnership between the School and the University, our intentions were to address real concerns about children's learning and the patterns of inequalities that we encountered in our work as educators. There were many concerns, real concerns prompted by classroom experiences and others motivated by our consultation of aggregated statistical returns that was becoming increasingly centralised and generated external to the school (e.g. data generated via government inspectorate and Department of Education). Often the way in which the School's concerns were manifested was

in its response to such external data (measuring the School's performance, as indicated by student outcomes data, against national and sectoral averages). Such responses were largely voiced in strategic terms within the School's action plan. But, let's be honest here, the language of strategic action plans is chosen with the external audience of governmental inspections (Ofsted) very much in mind. The words and phrases used, echo the inspectorate's own. In such arenas, we might then talk of raising achievement; closing the attainment gap; ensuring quality outcomes. It is an all too familiar language of accountability that is often devoid of contextual specifics. Here then lies the centre of our concerns (amongst many others). Thinking about our school context, centralised data and accountability, they are that:

(1) School context is complex, socially, economically, culturally, pedagogically. Any centrally configured data emanating from government, whilst available in volume, is significantly limited by aggregation;
(2) Data which does not account for specific school context misses important detail that could misdirect the efforts and energies of practitioners attempting to make a difference;
(3) Centrally produced data is, at best, highly descriptive and is significantly devoid of professional 'clues' that might help explain patterns of underachievement and subsequently direct classroom/ school level action;
(4) Centralised accountability based upon such limited, de-contextualised 'evidence' is fundamentally flawed.

The part of the story of our professional partnership (as two school professionals and an academic, university co-researcher) that we will tell here is thus one of recognising that the external data record is incomplete, too aggregated. A story that examines how contextually rich practitioner research provides an alternative seam of evidence that can be mined for deeper explanatory understandings and subsequently appropriate pedagogical action. We have said that the story of the school and our collective journey is too complex to tell in one go, so along

the way we'll foreground some examples focusing on the support of children with English as an additional language (EAL) by way of illustration.

Examining these real concerns through discussion and academic reading helped us find an analytical, informed voice. Ultimately, it helped us to recognise and support our *stance*. Cochrane-Smith and Lytle's (2001) phrase '*inquiry as stance',* struck a chord with us very early on in the development of our thinking, as it helped us recognise the value of both practitioner knowledge and knowledge generated outside of the immediate practice setting. Most importantly, it allowed us to see the limits of both 'insider' and 'outsider' knowledge when considered in isolation, but the potential advantages when brought together to focus research inquiries and to inform professional action. Some of this work was used as discussion starting-points in the professional development sessions that we attended where school practitioners and university academic partners shared experiences and ideas. In many ways, such sessions were a physical representation of these ideas – bringing together different forms of knowledge to move things on. Two statements from Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (2001) stand out:

> *'Inquiry as stance permits closer understanding of knowledge-practice relationships as well as how inquiry produces knowledge, how inquiry relates to practice, and what teachers learn from inquiry within communities' (p48).*

And:

> *'The idea behind knowledge-of-practice is not that practitioners' research provides all the knowledge necessary to improve practice, or that the knowledge generated by university-based researchers is of no use to teachers….Rather, implicit in the idea of knowledge-of-practice is the assumption that through inquiry, teachers [ ]*

make problematic their own knowledge and practice as well as the knowledge and practice of others and thus stand in a different relationship to knowledge' (p49).

Such readings were also helpful in thinking about the outside 'evidence' that was placed in the public domain by central government (e.g. UK's school league tables; Ofsted reports of schools accessed by parents), and other statistical data that was used to compare the detail of school performance (both for an individual school, comparing its performance with itself over time; and comparing itself with national and regional averages). Perhaps this 'knowledge' also needed to be put under the microscope and treated as problematic, as Cochrane-Smith and Lytle (2001) were suggesting?

Another milestone in the journey for our theorisation of our relationship with knowledge was Ruth Johnson's (2002) work that looked at ways in which practitioner research and the generation of data/ knowledge of practice could help us address achievement gaps. Once again, the clear message was that data could be utilised in much more positive ways than was the school's current experience. Putting it simply, the school's relationship with data tended to be rather negative, reactive and one of those necessary evils generated from without. Perhaps most negative was the sense that data could used to hold the school and its practitioners to account in ways that seemed not to give an accurate picture of what was taking place in terms of professional practice and commitment. Discussions between us (as school practitioners, school head teacher and academic partner) also identified some challenging questions and statements in Johnson (2002). The opening pages seemed to hold nothing back:

'How do you get people in the school community to move from constantly blaming the parents, the kids, and the neighbourhood for the low achievement to reflecting

on their practices and the institutional policies and practices as a major source of the problem? (Johnson, 2002, p72)

And:

'The central purpose for all of the data activities is to improve learning opportunities and outcomes for students. Without deeper discussions that look at institutional conditions that are barriers to learning, superficial changes or avoidance will continue. Looking at disaggregated data will bring discomfort for many, and identifying inequities by race and class causes a complex array of emotions from anger to denial. Perceptions from past experiences are hard to penetrate.' (Johnson, 2002, p72)

As a school, the journey of recognition had already begun, having started working with the academic partner (Tan) for three years prior to the University's introduction of a city-wide professional learning and development programme, known as the 'Leading Learning Programme'. Yet the questions from Johnston turned the spotlight onto professional practice, classroom activities and our own beliefs and reflexes as educators. Wider still, the light shone into darker recesses of national education policy, the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. We found Bob Lingard's discussion of Bernstein's ideas of the three message systems of education very helpful here. Clearly, these were uneasy, unsettling questions we asked, some focusing on our dispositions and explanatory reflexes. They prompted crucial conversations.

So OK, where did we go from here? It was essential that we all developed a common language with which to talk about educational inequalities, poverty and the urban context that we felt were ever-present in our school's story. Remember, context is our starting-point. How could we

account for socio-economic, cultural and historical factors in telling the 'back' story of the school and its significant work to address inequalities?

As we've said, our school's demographic profile was one of overlapping complexities. In our professional learning journey, poverty, ethnicity, gender and global displacement of communities were constant companions – they required our consideration in every step we took. Starting to understand these complexities and how they impacted upon our children's learning and engagement was by no means straightforward. Thinking back to Johnson's (2000) point, it seemed that central government wanted us to continuing thinking that the root causes of the achievement gaps were about individuals, families and communities, rather than moving away from such a culture of blaming. As identified in Perry and Francis' (2010) review, there seemed an eagerness to explain underachievement and educational failure in this way. It was about a lack of aspirations; inter-generationally reproduced low aspirations; it was about disengagement with education (on the part of students and parents). Consequently, national policies and thus practices within schools tended to be interventions to raise aspirations, to 'rescue' a talented few from the inchoate masses. And those that failed, well really they'd failed themselves. The Government and media of the day seemed over-zealous in its language of 'scroungers', 'shirkers', the 'work-shy', those that didn't want to make the effort, and would rather make a career of being on social welfare. But had they really failed themselves? This was a question that constantly exercised our thinking.

Another very real way in which the culture of blame made itself known was in the blaming of schools like ours, and educators like us in our '*failure*' to provide a good education and high aspirations for our students. This position was summarised in the writing of the academic partner working in our partnership:

'..Conservative neoliberal politics continues to play out the following messages:

- *Where disaggregated data shows gaps in the performance of students from different family and social backgrounds, these can be closed by 'good' and 'outstanding' schools and by teachers who are trained in 'outstanding' institutions;*
- *Tthe demographics of the communities that a school serves cannot be given as reason for the variations in school performance (as measured by student outcomes): this can be improved by the school, notably by the quality of its teachers and quality teaching;*
- *Any variation in student outcomes, particularly the persistent underachievement of disadvantaged students, is attributable to teachers who subscribe to progressive forms of curriculum and teaching practice, the result of Liberal-leaning education policies that have 'failed' working-class pupils over time.'* (Tan, 2013, p21)

From our partnership position, we rejected such simplistic analysis of our efforts and the ways in which the real progression of our students was not reflected in simple, aggregated outcomes measures. It seemed that politicians wanted to deny that context was in any way a factor to be considered when assessing school performance. Yet our readings of Lupton (2004) and Thrupp (1999), chimed well with our experiences that context needed to be a very real consideration in our professional practices and was significant in the ways our school outcomes data presented itself. We also found Wrigley et al (2012), Wrigley (2000) and Haberman (1991) useful in starting to turn the spotlight on educational practices and policies but with a real sense of context being properly accounted for.

Thus, our conversations began to uncover gaps in the ways our school's story was being told. The data as currently available and used to hold us to account was also part of the '*wallpaper'* that Johnson (2002) talked about: it papered over a reality of inequalities and school practices and thus made the story of our school incomplete and an inaccurate portrayal of our efforts. It

was time to rethink the evidence on which we based our practice. In doing so, perhaps we could move to a more considered position in terms of how we were labelled and judged. Perhaps we could start some of the steps towards '*detoxifying school accountability'* as Parks (2013) put it.

Building an evidence strategy:

Against the backdrop of the busyness of the school's work, we began to devise ways of providing a more complete data record. In some ways, as conversations between us deepened and evolved, it was clear that we were not starting from scratch. Our necessary concerns as professional educators meant that, beyond the formal outcomes-oriented data that we were required to monitor, we generated a whole lot more 'evidence' of our practice. For example, we had much more student level data to enable us to track progress. In the process of aggregation and reporting, much of this detail was lost. Yet, as the academic partner noted, our school was a living and breathing data animal – its external appearance did not necessarily show everything that was going on inside, every moment of every day. So how did we start to uncover our evidence?

Firstly, our reconsideration of evidence was informed through conversations around academic readings, some of them purposely methodological (and for the uninitiated, by this we mean ways of approaching the understanding and collation of evidence). Writers such as Menter et al (2011), Punch (2009) and Somekh and Lewin (2007) were all helpful in such thinking. Having dialogue within the partnership that included teacher and academic researcher voices was essential in making sense of this literature and helping us to see how it might be applied within our school classrooms. Other academic literature reported on research and gave us models and examples that we could emulate and adapt for our purposes. 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. Overall, opportunities to have conversations about such research ideas helped us to capture our principled, professional voice through systematic reflection.

For those familiar with practitioner research, we ended up with was a case study approach that brought 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 school, 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 following sections we will explore some of the milestones in our thinking and to tell of the some aspects of the school's learning journey. It is a journey that is not over, but to date it is one of considerable success. The school's most recent government inspection talks of a good school with outstanding areas; a safe learning environment, free of bullying; attainment that has improved considerably, although still below average. It is a school in which students make exceptional progress in their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Maple CPS is a school where attendance is now excellent, with a rich, stimulating curriculum. This is an encouraging picture. Yet our concerns about how the school's 'official' story is told through decontextualized outcomes-based measures remain. Here's why.

Out of data! Does external summary data tells us anything useful?

Perhaps one of the most significant challenges in schools such as ours is the pace of change: not in terms of educational policies we have to be mindful of (that's another story!), more so in terms of the way our school population changes. As we mentioned earlier, we have a high level of mobility (26% at the present). Quite obviously then, any summary data produced externally is always out of date before we see it (let alone have opportunities to deeply interrogate it). It provides us with a snapshot of how the school *was* up to a given point. Such data might be useful in schools where students are drawn from quite established and static communities (ie. the population changes very little, or at least gradually with time). The patterns of inequality, for instance, might remain similar over time so that future school interventions might still be largely relevant. In our school, because of its high levels of mobility, any summary data such as those used by government inspections might not accurately represent the school's current patterns of achievement or underachievement. As we started to do detailed secondary examinations of the data, such problems became apparent.

Similarly, the summary data that we had in the form of official statistics also tended to have further gaps in what it was able to tell us in the ways in which it cross-tabulated its measures. For example, with regard to information on the educational performance of children with EAL, the picture it painted was one where only ethnicity and gender were considered. Yet for us to provide bespoke support, we needed to be able to know how particular special needs, factors associated with poverty and those that were about particular familial circumstances (e.g. refugee children that were unaccompanied minors). In the current year, the consultation of national trends (available at city and national comparative levels) suggested that one underachieving group was Pakistani boys. In one of our research reports, we drew attention to this:

Currently there are 13 Pakistani boys in school. Of the 13 students 6 have a special educational need, 4 are entitled to free school meals and 12 of them have English as an additional language. This shows that there are different factors that come together to inform student performance and any number of them could apply to any student. The picture of attainment, achievement and student performance becomes a lot more complex and variable than national data portrays.

It becomes clear from analysing the data that in 2013 and 2014 the Pakistani boys are on track to meet or exceed national expectations (Level 4 in Reading, Writing and Mathematics in the Key Stage 2 SAT's) and so the conclusion can be drawn that the poor performance of Pakistani boys in 2012 is not set to become a trend. In subsequent years it is possible that some of the Pakistani boys may not achieve the government's targets, however, these are students that have a special educational need, free school meal entitlement, EAL, or a combination of 2 or more of these factors. I believe that all our students can be considered vulnerable and that those groups labelled as underperforming are complex, varied and subject to change on a yearly if not monthly basis. (Personal report commentary, Harridge, 2013).

The fact that these 'vulnerabilities' might be shifting quite regularly over time makes it difficult for any external measure of accountability to be much more than a simple summary with very limited relevance on which to base school pedagogical and strategic activities. With the national policy focus being very much reliant on outcomes, attainment-based measures, there is a great potential for misdirection and inaccurate readings of any school's story of performance and development. We found James Park's (2013) perspective helpful in voicing our concerns here:

> *'… proxy indicators are inadequate to determine the quality of the inputs provided by leaders, teachers and other staff, … they lead to perverse outcomes for students. They also provide a poor guide to 'why' particular things are happening. A report by BERA observes that attainment data do not reveal 'what it is about the lives and educational experiences of particular groups of children and young people that leads them to underachieve at school', nor indicate 'what can be done to shape the underlying dynamics in ways which might help them''* (Park, 2013, p69)

So in summary, the time we were able to spend engaging in secondary analysis of extant data suggested that the picture that was held up as a means of comparing our school's performance against other schools, nationally and regionally, was at best incomplete and at worse inaccurate and valueless. To construct a more accurate, timely picture, and to tell our story more effectively and truthfully, then our own explorations in the classroom would have to attempt to do more of the work to shape our strategic activities.

A culturally rich school: Whose knowledge, whose aspirations?

Schools and university departments involved in teacher education are all too familiar with the use of observations and observational criteria, established benchmarks of so-called 'best practice'. We as school and university practitioners know the rhythm of such approaches to scrutinising classroom practices. They happen at a quick tempo, with little notice. Government inspections can label you as outstanding, good or in need of improvement. It has an impact on your morale, your sense of professional worth, your institution's public face and, of course on your ability to attract students. Our reading of Stephen Ball's (2013) work helped us set these within a political context of accountability and to see the continuities across governments and political parties.

At the same time, our discussions and reflections on authors such as Wrigley (2000), Haberman (1991) and Moll et al (1992), allowed us to ask more fundamental questions about the very nature of our classroom practices and whether current, familiar forms of scrutiny really helped us capture the realities of the school's story. What good work were we doing? Where were the 'holes'? Could we recognise Haberman's '*pedagogies of poverty'* in our work, given the social context of the school? Very early on in our professional relationship we were also drawn to the productive pedagogies work, reported in Hayes et al (2005). Thus we started to use elements of Haberman (1991) and the productive pedagogies schema for classroom observation as an alternative means of evaluating the work that was happening within classrooms in the school.

The social context of the school, particularly its significant levels of cultural diversity, EAL and underlying poverty had led us to consider the National Curriculum and the ways in which we connected children into it. Of interest to us were those elements of the productive pedagogies schema that talked about cultural knowledges being valued; that considered how the themes examined through curriculum were made relevant, had connectedness to the world; and how such work supported higher-order thinking and the development of deep knowledge and understanding. As extracts from our reports and reflections illustrate, such ideas lodged in the ways we were able to talk about our school's journey:

> *'Lingard et al. discuss how 'productive performance', 'productive pedagogies' and 'productive assessment' are based on the premise that all students can learn and that learning is connected to the world beyond the classroom. It is the world beyond the classroom that has led Little London School to alter its curriculum to immerse students in their learning and make it relevant to them. Lingard also suggests that learning any skills or knowledge is best done in context. Quicke (1999) also makes the point that connectedness to the world beyond the classroom corresponds to the*

goal of making schooling relevant to the individual and the social needs of students and their communities.

At the core of what we are trying to achieve is the question' Are all the students I teach, regardless of background, engaging in intellectually challenging and relevant curriculum in a supportive environment?' (Personal report/ reflection, Stokoe 2013)

Prompted by his work with the school, similar expression found its way into the academic writing of the school's academic partner and co-author, Jon Tan. In the conclusion to his work with Tim Murphy (2012) he wrote:

'Significantly, each of the works represented here speaks of the need for authenticity – the ways in which we interconnect learning with real issues, ones that are meaningful to all those involved. Reflecting on the role of the educator, one could envision it as being an interpreter and facilitator of learning, working to provide a crossing-point between curriculum and the world beyond the classroom… Perhaps more challenging here is the recognition of how curricula at all levels and all national contexts, foregrounds and rewards the acquisition of certain knowledge. But whose knowledge and whose voice? (Tan, writing in conclusion to Murphy & Tan, 2012, p235-6)

Within the school, the re-working of classroom observations to incorporate some of the layers of analysis present in *productive pedagogies* and Haberman's (1991) *pedagogies of poverty*, helped identify places where the school's approaches were attempting to build connectedness and move beyond instructional, impoverished forms of teaching. As one of the co-researchers and authors of this paper wrote in her observational reports:

'All the lessons observed were Literacy. Three teachers were observed in Year 2, one teacher in Year 3, one teacher in Year 5 and one teacher in Year 6.Two of the lessons observed were the second in a series of literacy lessons set in the context of Traditional Tales. 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.' (Personal reflection/ report, Harridge, 2013).

Clearly then, a significant part of our story was one wrapped up in the realization that the disconnections we had experienced in classrooms was not necessarily about individuals with low aspirations, born to parents that had similarly poor experiences of school. The deficit explanations so popular with educational policy and politics can be rather convenient if, as a practitioner you want to abdicate some responsibility. Yet, our work together as practitioners and academic partners enabled us to examine deeply the approaches adopted by the school in rethinking and redesigning its collective interpretations of curriculum and to help document its efforts to embrace diversity and to build a connectedness with the world beyond its classrooms.

Here was the recognition that there were other knowledges to be valued, other cultural ways of representing and exploring the world. The school's context then was not something to attempt to rise above: it was, on the contrary, something vital to its educators' means of providing rich,

powerful learning. In this sense a school like ours is not disadvantaged until you view it through a deficit model lens. So you can see why we reject such a label, when the diversity and cultural, social and historical context brings a richness to the learning we can explore together.

Conclusion: Valuing Professionalism and Re-positioning Accountability:

Our learning together, the school's learning and the learning of the wider professional community cannot be at an end - it's ongoing. What we've told here is one small aspect of that story - a snapshot. A popular vernacular might call it one of those Kodak moments – something significant and memorable that represents our journey together.

In closing it is perhaps timely to offer some comment on those concerns with which we began. Firstly, there is a point to be made about practitioner research, collaborative research that hopes to build a knowledge-of-practice. Our concerns about the limitations of aggregate national and regional data meant that we had to engage in forms of research that were more appropriate to providing a richer, quality of picture. It is our belief that school work, teachers' work, the work of learners and educators together is complex. It can only be understood with fine-grained, contextually-sensitive forms of inquiry. Any attempts to stand at distance from the real context in which learning takes place can only ever be, at best, approximations of that reality. At worse, such attempts misunderstand, misrepresent, and offer simplistic explanations of ways in which inequities in educational experiences persist. When we serve culturally, socially and historically diverse communities, how can we discover the '*kind of learning and knowledge acquisition that never show up on achievement measures, including high-stakes standardised tests'* (Milner, 2012, p6) without proper recognition and understanding of such contextual factors?

Secondly, since policy and politics have become increasingly seduced by the idea that standardised measures that offer opportunities for comparisons, (devoid of context) provide the means of holding schools and their professionals to account, we have to question the authenticity of the stories such data tell. As we have argued, getting close to a more complete, accurate representation of a school's activities to address inequalities requires much more context-sensitive evidence. This brings into question the rationale for accountability that is driven from a centralised inspectorate, working with data, separated from context. As Park (2013) and Lingard (2009) would say, perhaps now is the time for a more intelligent and multi-perspectival approach to school accountability. There is an important role here for practitioner research and professional learning in collaboration with academic partners.

Third, and finally, this part of our story must reflect on the very core of our work as educators in urban settings. The journey that the school has undertaken with its academic partner has been one in which the professional voice has been valued, perhaps rediscovered. It has recognised the diversity of our different funds of knowledge (Moll et al, 1992) that we as school and university-based educators bring to the table. Through dialogue, it has found spaces where knowledge can be examined and treated as problematic, where other understandings and explanations can be entertained with care and respect. And, of course, it was a story of learning that has always been anchored in real concerns, real, authentic professional worlds. For politicians to recognise the significance of context and for them to be open to forms of accountability that are not configured from the centre but are, instead negotiated with teachers and their communities, would be perhaps a small first instalment in the repayment of both the '*education debt'* (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and a professional debt.

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