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Citation:

Tan, J and Burton, S and Gunn, A and Beckett, L (2017) Diminishing the difference': being honest about the challenges in Leeds. In: AARE 2017, Canberra, Australia.

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Document Version:

Conference or Workshop Item (Accepted Version)

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Paper 1: ‘Diminishing the difference’: being honest about the challenges in Leeds

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Abstract:

This paper takes direction from the education strategy for Leeds, a deindustrialised city in the north of England, contained in its *Best City for Learning Strategy 2016-2020*. Of interest is the political endorsement in its update, the *Annual Standards report 2015 – 2016*, for a city-wide commitment to children and young people. They are said to be at the heart of economic growth, which should ensure they contribute to and benefit from ‘a confident and prosperous city’. The stated task is to bring together outstanding leadership and robust partnerships with a shared restorative culture, also said to focus all these strengths and capacity on raising standards and closing the gaps that exist. It then homes in on the overview of learning, tied to the realization about honesty in regards ‘the challenges that we face’.

This foregrounds a need for deep ethnographic study close-coupled with the use of local aggregated achievement data, and this paper explores our tentative early steps to develop a nuanced multi-perspectival approach to the challenges (see Mills and Morton, 2013). We needed to examine the significance of our localised collaborative work between local government officers and academic partners to interrogate understandings of poverty and its effects on students’ learning, given note of the context: recent estimates of 187,724 children and young people under the age of 20 in the city; 17.3% eligible for free school meals, the proxy indicator of child poverty; and 20.7% or 28,000 who live in poverty according to government measures, compared to the 18.6% expected nationally. This is married to acknowledgement that child poverty is often associated with poor outcomes in health, educational attainment and employment prospects; marbled city poverty areas but also inner-city concentrations.

We also needed to revisit the city’s new vision of reform in its ‘diminishing the difference’ plan and critically reconsider its pedigree from ‘making the difference’ (Connell et al, 1982; Thrupp, 1999; Thomson, 2002; Hayes et al, 2006) but also the evidence and arguments about the measurement of learning (see NUT, 2016) as it relates to the city of Leeds. This paper hopes then to raise critical questions and debate about how an ethnography of poverty and achievement is developed and, perhaps most importantly, how academic research(ers) sit in relationship to those other voices that we seek to make heard.

Introduction:

This paper sets out to examine some of the key features of a complex landscape of educational underachievement. Working from local authority data, it sketches out in some detail the ways in which underachievement is manifest within this urban area, providing a layered analysis of the city’s experiences of poverty and its effects. In doing so, it hopes to paint a picture of the city and its environs that gives rationale for further, deeper work at the level of schools and classrooms in order to examine possible levers for change. This paper is not one of answers. As a starting point in a longer relationship

with the local education authority and a cluster of schools in the area, it serves to identify some of the key challenges that our collective work faces and poses many questions about the nature of knowledge about poverty and its impact upon schools' work. Similarly, it asks questions about the gaps in our collective intelligence and the ways often aggregated data seems to paper over cracks in our knowledge (see Johnson, 2002; Johnson & La Salle, 2010), makes difficult the identification of complexities at the level of the school and thus mask a range of possible cues for strategic activity. This then, is a story of the significance of context in making sense of a city's experience of poverty and its impact on teaching and learning.

Perhaps, most important is to recognise that this city is not on its own. Its story is not peculiar. In fact, much of the rationale for this collective work has arisen from our frustrated conversations with others across the UK and worldwide where there is a sad comparability of these experiences. Poverty and its impact upon schools' work and the achievement of their children and young people are well documented through policy, academic research and locally-held knowledge at international levels. In our work with academic and school partners worldwide, our intention is to build a nuanced, ethnographic understanding of these issues as experienced by school professionals and their communities, whilst showing the global reach of our concerns. In this paper, then, from our northern, UK city context, we begin to take the first steps of our journey.

Mythologies & Concerns: Re-opening Pandora's Box:

In academic terms, bringing our research energies to bear on issues of poverty, communities and underachievement seems a tired, well-trodden ground. In the UK, they are, unfortunately familiar themes and even a cursory glance towards the sociological study of education brings the relationship between social disadvantage, achievement, home and school into sharp focus (Hargreaves, 1967; Evetts, 1973; Lawton, 1975; Reay, 2006). To revisit such issues again requires us to come face to face with some awkward realities and to address what we see as four mythologies. In the following section, we shine a spotlight onto these with the intention of contributing to a debate about how might one re-enter the field (in academic, activist and practitioner terms).

The first of these 'mythologies', takes its cue from Whitty's (1985) work, where he maps the often difficult relationship between research, school knowledge and education interventions to address inequality. The complex nature of the challenges at local, national and global levels means that any reconsideration has to admit that *'the roots of social and educational inequality cannot be addressed solely in terms of everyday professional practice... they need to be understood in terms of the broader social relations of our particular capitalist society'* (Whitty, 1985, p179). Arguably then, any

ethnographic study needs to examine how professional practice is situated in relation to those wider factors and perceptions that impact upon communities, families and their students. Work that foregrounds the importance of contextualised understandings (e.g. Lupton, 2003, 2004; Tan, 2013; Harridge et al, 2014) emphasises that these are socially, economically, culturally and historically configured. Making sense of these dynamics of social relations (see Connell et al, 1982) and how they work to support or frustrate practices of redress requires us as academic researchers to step into this relationship, lay bare our own positionality and to re-examine the ways we engage.

The first mythology is that professional action (whether this be practitioner or academic) acts from a position of knowledge (ie. that it *understands* the issues and acts accordingly). In other words, we have to challenge a mythology that knowledge and research becomes utilised. The second follows from this, resonating with the work of Hayes et al (2005) and Haberman (1991) in the sense that *'making a difference'* involves schools and their practitioners in attempts to interrupt dominant discourses on inequality that position learners and communities in deficit terms. Here we question the direction of flow in what might be called knowledge generation. Taken together with Whitty (1985) and with Mills & Morton (2013), we suggest that an ethnography of schools and poverty as we intend must also recognise how such work involves all those involved in *'oppositional politics'* (Whitty, 1985, p179). Moreover, it implies that if practitioners seek to *'occupy the space [that state education] offers with the most politically progressive forms of practice that are feasible within the present conjuncture'* (ibid p180), then we must also put our own principles and professional identities under scrutiny (alongside those of school practitioners). The challenge implied in such work might then extend to us questioning how we act as a conduit for the experiences and voices of communities to be heard. What of what might be termed an academic discourse needs to be interrupted to communicate, *affectively* these understandings within their subjective contexts?

The third mythology we entitle *'It's all about the money:'* successive government policies in the UK, and around the world have concreted an almost unchallenged (in policymaking circles at least) poverty logic that dictates: if the absence of money is causing an issue in schooling, then the application of money into schooling should ameliorate the concern. Recent UK Education Secretary Michael Gove publicly told a House of Commons Education Select Committee chaired by Graham Allen that *"rich thick kids do better than poor clever children, and when they arrive at school, the situation as they go through gets worse,"* and postulated that *"[s]chools should really be engines of social mobility that overcome the disadvantages of birth"* (Education Select Committee, 2010). This is addressed in the UK through the payment of pupil premium funding to schools educating children who live below the *'poverty line,'* with schools obliged to publish how they invest the funding into the school lives of their

children. Despite this, it has been clear over time, that the attainment gap which pupil premium seeks to close remains “*large and persistent*,” (EEF, 2014) although it is clear that some schools are beginning to use the funding to support and track their pupils in a far more successful and meaningful manner (Ofsted, 2014). From this acknowledgement, it is evident that a simple application of funding is not sufficient, and that a more nuanced examination of the schools working with poverty is required. We argue, as do Perry & Francis (2010) that policy conceptualisations of, and responses to income-based educational inequalities have been, to-date, inadequate. They seek out simplistic interventions, mostly reliant on *understandings* that are deficit and foreground individualised accountability. One must not lose sight of the – often under-represented by media and in society – subtle distinction between poverty and social class: we know that in the UK it is actually class that is (and consistently has been) the sturdiest prophet of educational success amongst the young (Perry & Francis, 2010). It is clear that the arguably limited political (and also academic) examinations and explanations of poverty to date have been inadequate in providing sustained systemic improvements in the lives of children growing up in poverty. Therefore, the challenge as we see it in re-entering the debate is to consider the ‘voice of the community’ in similar ways that Moll et al (1992) consider learners’ funds of knowledge as largely absent from the narrative thus far.

This challenge leads us neatly to our fourth concern (rather than myth), namely Denzin & Lincoln’s “*fourth movement*,” (2005: 18) the *crisis of representation*. Ethnographic research is an important and powerful tool when undertaking research in communities, and has been used in a plethora of important studies since Malinowski published his ethnographies of the Trobriand Islands in 1916. However, as reflexive researchers (Hammersley, 1983), we must be acutely conscious of the way in which the voice and experience of the subjects of research are presented and represented by our research approaches. Pring (2004) reminds us that anti-positivist research into a socially constructed arena such as this can never be truly removed from the influence of the researcher, revealing a tension between the procedure of academic research and the representation of the voice of the ‘researched,’ where research “*serves as a metaphor for colonial knowledge, for power, and for truth*” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: 1). This then begs a fundamental question in this work:

how does academic research appropriate the voice of the community?

In order to intellectually inform change, whilst being conscious of the crisis of representation, we must endeavour to successfully locate the experiences of teachers, children, schools and their communities in the spaces which they occupy. This requires us in the first instance to more critically conceptualise the underlying ‘patterns of being’ at work in the Leeds area. Thus, with the context of our ontology

set, and a number of mythic entities exposed, the next section introduces the nature of disadvantage in our locale, the city of Leeds in the North of England.

The City, Poverty and Achievement 'Gaps':

There are increasing numbers of children who live in poverty, both nationally and in Leeds. Children who grow up in poverty face a range of disadvantages throughout childhood and their entire life course. Experiencing childhood poverty has severe short and long term consequences across all indicators for success, with statistically significant relationships evidenced in gaps for educational attainment, physical and mental health, longevity, wellbeing, housing, economic and employment.

The factors that lead to child poverty are long disputed, encompassed by arguments that flicker between the political spheres, with battlegrounds drawn around all aspects of society. The conflicting arguments that surround the political left and right paradigms have shaped the experiences, and number, of children in poverty across the UK. The political right generally adopt absolute measures, with a focus on individual accountability, whilst the political left tend towards relative theories of deprivation and structural explanations for poverty. The number of children living in poverty increased drastically between 1979 and 1997, which could be correlated to the policies of successive Conservative governments. From the late 1900's, a significant fall in the numbers of children in poverty was attributed to the previous Labour administration's focus on reducing poverty within a generation.

Despite differing standpoints on the causes, and interventions regarding childhood poverty, there is cross-party agreement about its consequences. Subsequently, the Child Poverty Act (2010) came into being. This Act committed the UK Government to 'eradicating' child poverty by 2020. Over the last seven years, the political landscape has been dominated by Conservative-led coalition and Conservative governments, Led by David Cameron and, now, Theresa May.

Despite the policy rhetoric surrounding child poverty, since 2011 the number of children living in poverty has increased. Latest figures show 2.7 million children nationally experienced relative poverty before housing costs during 2015/16 (20% of children in the UK). This is 200,000 more children in relative poverty than the previous year. Looking at relative poverty figures after housing costs (AHC) are deducted from income, there were 4 million children in relative poverty during 2015/16 (30% of children in the UK). Latest figures show 2.3 million children nationally experienced absolute poverty during 2015/16 before housing costs (BHC) (17% of children in the UK). Looking at absolute poverty

figures after housing costs (AHC) are deducted from income, there were 3.7 million children in absolute poverty AHC during 2015/1 (27% of children in the UK)

There are now an estimated four million children living in relative poverty across the UK, with rises of 200,000 children between 2015 and 2016 alone. There is a projected further increase of 50% by 2020. These figures are believed to underrepresent the true scale of children and young people who experience poverty in the UK. One of the many difficulties in regard to creating an informed discussion on childhood poverty is the complexities with the measurement, definitions and concepts around poverty. The reported level of children who experience poverty changes dependent on which definition is used, and there are multiple concepts, definitions and measures, which further highlights the vast complexity of gaining a veracious picture of poverty.

The educational attainment and achievement of children and young people who experience poverty is a universal challenge. It is recognised that this is not a new issue and research and analysis has been undertaken. Consistent conclusions are that disadvantage impacts on a child's learning and the longevity of the disadvantage makes a difference. Disadvantaged pupils are not a single group; characteristics such as Special Education Need and Disability (SEND), ethnicity and EAL (English as an Additional Language) interact with disadvantage with varying impacts on progress rates, gaps with non-disadvantaged pupils and the long term impact of disadvantage.

In the UK education system, two main indicators are used to assess the level of child poverty; Free School Meals (FSM) and Free School Meal 6 (FSM6). Children in state-funded schools are entitled to receive free school meals if a parent or carer are in receipt for specific benefits (including income support, jobseekers allowance, child tax credit, working tax credit and Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999). FSM6 is used to assess children who have been in receipt of Free School Meals at any time in the preceding 6 years. This measure is then used to provide schools with additional funding, called pupil premium, which must be used to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils of all abilities to reach their potential. Pupil premium funding is currently set at £1,320 for a primary school child and £935 in a secondary school. In addition to the Free School Meals or pupil premium label, children and young can also be defined as disadvantaged or persistently disadvantaged. Pupils are described as disadvantaged if they have either been eligible for free school meals in the last six years or if they are aged 5-15 years of age and have been continuously looked after by the local authority for one day or more in the period 1st April 2014-31st March 2015, or recorded as adopted from care, or who have left care under a special guardianship or residence order. Pupils who are persistently disadvantaged are pupils who are eligible for FSM for 80% of their time in school.

These definitions, however, do not capture the true situation of every child who is in poverty, and there are many more children and young people who experience poverty every day who do not fall into these categories. In addition to this, not all those who are eligible for FSM register for free school meals. Constant changes to policy, benefits and funding further confuse the situation. Previously schools received funding per FSM eaten but following changes in funding method, schools now get all of the budget for FSMs delegated to them as part of the general school funding formula. This means that there is no financial incentive to increase take-up of FSMs. Pupil premium also does not provide an incentive. A school gets pupil premium funding based on a child having an 'award' for FSMs. The premium is paid irrespective of whether a child eats the meal or not. There is concern nationally that, because pupils in reception and key stage 1 are now all eligible for a Universal Infant Free School Meal (UIFSM), parents will have less incentive to apply for a FSM, resulting in the school not receiving pupil premium funding for this. In this sense, using pupil premium funding, like free school meals before it, is a problematic and inaccurate indicator of poverty (see Hobbs & Vignoles, 2007). At the same time research by Lupton & Thompson (2015, p19) have raised questions as to whether 'flagship policies' such as pupil premium 'can be expected to have any meaningful impact as part of a suite of education and social policies likely to work in the opposite direction'.

The relationship between Free School Meals eligibility and attainment is reflected in national studies, such as the recent the Education Policy Institute – Closing the Gap; Trends in Educational Attainment and Disadvantage (August 2017). The report focuses on how well the education systems is serving economically disadvantaged pupils. It recognises successive governments have viewed children's education as a key component of social mobility and of securing good outcomes in later life. Key conclusions arising from their analysis from the period 2007 to 2016 were that disadvantaged pupils (those eligible for free school meals in last 6 years) finish primary school 9 months, and secondary school 19.2 months behind their peers. Disadvantaged pupils fall behind by around two months each year over the course of secondary school. While this has narrowed over the course of the study period it will take around 50 years to fully close the gap at the current rate of closure. This proportion increases with persistent disadvantage (those pupils who were eligible for FSM for 80% or more of their time in school) who had a gap of 24.3 months.

At all measured ages (5, 11, 16), pupils who have been on free school meals have lower attainment than children who have not been eligible. If a child has been eligible for free school meals on just one occasion, their attainment is still lower than their non-eligible peers. Moreover, attainment decreases as the length of time spent on free school meals increases- children are better off academically the less time they spend as free school meal eligible. Studies show that, at the level of the school, the

impact of such redistributive funding is highly variable (Lupton & Thomson, 2015), supporting our rationale for the necessity for local, school, neighbourhood and local authority understandings of what is taking place. Considering then, the significance of contextual factors (Lupton, 2003, 2004; Tan, 2013), it is important to further consider the picture in the site of our research.

At our city level, Leeds has higher levels of child poverty than national for all measures. 20% of the Leeds population in 2015/16 was living in absolute poverty, which equates to 155,000 people in Leeds. When looking at the local child poverty proxy measure (which estimates the proportion of children living in families in receipt of out-of-work benefits), in Leeds, 18.1% of children under the age of 16 (26,400 children) were estimated to live in poverty, compared to 14.7% (1.5million children) in England. The 26,400 children in poverty represented 15,240 households across Leeds.

When looking at the children in low-income families, (using the local measure of the proportion of children living in families in receipt of out-of-work benefits or in receipt of tax credits where their reported income is less than 60% of UK median income) in Leeds, 22.7% of all dependent children under the age of 20 (37,200 children) lived in poverty in 2014, compared to 19.9% (2.3m children) in England. For those under the age of 16 in Leeds, 23.1% (32,805 children) were in poverty in 2014, compared to 20.1% (2m children) in England. Annual analysis reveals child poverty increased between 2013 and 2014 both nationally and locally. Looking at children under 20 in Leeds, the figure grew by over 4,000 and nationally over 200,000 more children were affected by poverty. On a national level, during 2014/15, 67% of all dependent children under 20 in relative poverty (AHC) were from a household where at least one person was in work. If this is applied to the Leeds figure above, it can be estimated that almost 25,000 children in Leeds were affected by in-work poverty in 2014.

Focusing down on the relationship between poverty (as indicated by FSM) and education, in Leeds, there were 18,655 pupils of statutory school age eligible for Free School Meals in the January Census 2017. Almost 12,000 of these were primary age pupils (17.7% of the primary cohort) and 6365 for secondary pupils (16.5%). Furthermore, a higher rate of eligibility is found within special establishments (39.4% eligibility). Whilst similar in trend to national averages, the proportion of those children and young people who are FSM eligible in Leeds has been decreasing since 2013, such decline may be attributed to changing eligibility criteria rather than any reducing need explains the decline. Irrespective of this, by any criteria, Leeds has a higher proportion of children and young people who are eligible for FSM compared to the national picture.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) release a national measure of deprivation by Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) called the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). This index ranks LSOAs in order of

deprivation; with common measures being the 20%, 10% or 3% most deprived nationally. Leeds is ranked 25 out of 152 local authorities in terms of the proportion of LSOAs ranked in the most deprived 10% nationally, with 105 neighbourhoods (22% of all Leeds neighbourhoods). 22% of the neighbourhoods in Leeds were in those 10% most deprived LSOA's nationally; that equated to 31% of Leeds statutory school aged pupils or 33,640 children and young people. The most recent indices of multiple deprivation identified that there are sixteen neighbourhoods in Leeds that are categorised as being in the most deprived 1% of neighbourhoods nationally. The nine poorest clusters in Leeds have the most dense population of pupils, the highest rates of free school meals, the highest rates of new arrivals, and the highest proportions of black, Asian and minority ethnic pupils, English as an additional language and special educational needs and disabilities pupils.. In Leeds, approximately 40% of children in the poorest communities are classed as disadvantaged (in receipt of pupil premium).

In areas where eligibility for pupil premium is low, but poverty is high, that there is often a high degree of in year movement in classes, high levels of English as an additional language and increased numbers of children with a special or specific educational need or disability. Whilst schools of all sizes exist across the city, on average schools serving communities with higher levels of deprivation are larger. Schools with a quarter or more of their pupils from areas considered in the 10% most deprived have on average around 337 pupils while those with no or very few pupils from these areas have on average 247 pupils. 5.26. One fifth of primary schools within Leeds have between 66% and 99% of their pupils living in the most deprived areas nationally and yet two fifths of primary schools have less than 5% of their pupils living in the most deprived areas. The most disadvantaged schools have the highest proportion of children with Special Educational Needs (20%), a figure that decreases on comparison with the affluence of the area. For the most affluent areas, the figure is 8%.

In terms of ethnicity, the least deprived areas are generally white British. There is a strong correlation between living in a deprived area and having black, Asian or minority ethnic heritage. There is a correlation between having English as an additional language and deprivation. This provides some notion of the huge disparity that schools in Leeds experience in pupil population and child demographics and reflects the fact that some of the poorer communities find it very difficult to claim free school meals and as a result, are not classified as disadvantaged. This also demonstrates that the poorest communities in Leeds face the greatest challenges.

In Leeds, the very slow narrowing of the gap between pupils that are disadvantaged and their peers seen nationally is not observed. Instead this gap is growing. Leeds is named as a local authority where disadvantaged pupils are doing worse now than they were back in 2012, and it is an area that has

some of the largest gaps in the country. The growth and size of the gap in the primary phase is a particular concern. When looking at the size of the gap between disadvantaged children in Leeds and their peers, Leeds is the worst place in the UK to grow up as a disadvantaged child.

Leeds and Yorkshire has good progress results for non-disadvantaged pupils, with outcomes for the non-disadvantaged cohort in Leeds broadly in line with the national non-disadvantaged cohort, and when looking at progress they are identical in both 2016 and 2017. It is, however, more mixed for disadvantaged pupils, with outcomes for Leeds children who have been registered on Free School Meals for any one time in the last 6 years considerably lower, which further increases the gap in comparison to other cities (whose attainment for non-disadvantaged pupils may be lower, and therefore their gap will be smaller) and national statistics.

The gap in educational attainment only widens as children progress through the school system. At 22 months, children whose parents are the highest social classes are already 14 percentage points higher up the educational development distribution than children whose parents are in the lowest social classes. In Leeds, at 5 years old, disadvantaged children are 5.7 months behind their more affluent peers. At 11 years old, this gap is 13.3 months, and at 16 years old, disadvantaged children are 22.3 months behind their peers.

Whilst the gap at 16 years is larger than national gaps (19.2 months) it is smaller than the average gap for Leeds' comparator cities (Bristol, Liverpool, Newcastle and Sheffield) where the average gap is 22.6 months. There is a close inverse correlation between the area a child lives in terms of how deprived (IMD decile) and the proportion reaching the expected standard in reading, writing and maths. In 2016 30.5% of pupils sitting KS2 (11 year olds) in Leeds reside within the 10% most deprived areas nationally. The proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in these areas is just over 35% compared to 48% for the city overall. 29.1% of pupils in 2016 who sat KS4 (16 year olds) in Leeds live in the 10% most deprived areas nationally. The proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in English and maths in these areas is just over 40% (compared to 58% average in Leeds).

This is the picture at the level of the City, in comparison with national averages. But it is not the whole picture. In the following section, we now turn to consider deeper layers of inequality *within* the city.

The Matroyshka: Patterns of Deepened, Localised Inequalities within the City:

As we have seen so far, at a City-wide level, the challenges facing professionals in this area are profound. It is clear from the data that the inequalities here represent longstanding, historical

disadvantage at a considerable scale. As a whole, in comparison with other areas of the UK, this northern city presents us with a picture where the relationship between children's welfare and education step side by side, and where a city's strategic responses are cognisant of the ways learning outcomes are strongly mediated by poverty. In our journey so far, it is important to note that as children in poverty lose ground in achievement in their primary years, their chances of 'catch up' at later stages diminish and the gap increases with time. Furthermore, the intersectionality of other social factors acting up schools' populations and their communities (e.g. race and disability), create a complexity of needs and social patterning of underachievement that the city's professionals attempt to address. As just one example of this, over half of those pupils receiving support for Special Educational Needs (SEN) live in twenty percent most deprived areas of the city.

Whilst this is a significantly complex picture, our examination of data, even at this aggregate layer, suggests that the magnitude of poverty effects on learning are further polarised *within* specific suburbs of the city. Likened to a traditional Russian Matryoshka doll, each level of scrutiny reveals how the effects of poverty are nested, so that as we lift away one layer, further deepened and intensive experiences become apparent. As an illustration of this nested experience, we now turn to one particular suburb of the city.

Looking across the city, one particular suburb stands out when we centre our concerns on the incidence of poverty. Situated within the north-western districts of the city, Bramley is characterised by high proportions of local authority housing (numbering around a third of the housing stock of the locality), these being predominantly older brick, terraced back-to-back houses. A number of high-rise apartment buildings punctuate the skyline and, in general, the population density here is one of the highest in the city. An area once inhabited by those working in textile industries, the decline of these industries over the last 40 years, have seen the economic fortunes and employment patterns of the area take a downward shift. Population density here sees around 14,000 children and young people living here in the Inner West – almost nine percent of the city's under-18 population. It is unsurprising then that the area's schools tend to have larger numbers on roll, and their class sizes generally bigger. There twenty primary and three secondary schools that serve this area, along with seven children's centres. Further demographic analysis shows that the Bramley, Inner West area (BIW) also has high concentrations of children and young people that are in care, a group considered as one of those most vulnerable. Over 11% of the city's looked after children and young people are located within the Inner West area. Using policy proxy measurements for child poverty (largely their eligibility for Free School Meals, FSM), this area also can be claimed as one of the city's most deprived. With the city's average level of FSM eligibility at 16.6% (primary) and 15.1 (secondary), the Inner West area sees rates of

approximately 8-10% higher for both primary and secondary schools in the area (25.6% and 23.2% respectively).

In terms of educational outcomes, an analysis of the data collated by the local authority shows some of the poorest levels of attainment across primary and secondary phases at a city level. Peeling back the layers to the level of the Inner West, we see attainment at the end of primary school around 10% lower than the city's average (48.0%), with 38.7% achieving the expected standards in reading, writing and mathematics. At secondary school level, the difference in attainment in English and Mathematics is even greater still, with 46.6% achieving expected grades from schools the Inner West area, compared with 59.8% as a city-wide average. Although the Inner West area exhibits attendance rates comparable with the city as a whole (approximately 95%), the data shows high numbers of persistent absences in both primary and secondary phases.

Whilst the city's data allows us to assemble an overall assessment of the demographic make-up of the differing regions of the city and to document its areas of concern regarding educational outcomes, what is less clear at this stage are any correlations at the level of the school. Certainly, as we have argued, the city represents an interesting site for further study, standing as an example of how poverty and educational achievement coincide. What is even more apparent is that, working at an area level within the city can also reveal deepened pockets of underachievement. Yet as we lift away further layers, gaps in our collective knowledge become more apparent. It leads us to begin asking some fundamental questions about what is known about the experiences of these schools, working with these communities. In our collective experience of working with schools, what seems also essential is recognition that each school represents somewhat unique contexts, professional practices and strategic approaches to supporting the achievement of those children and young people under their care. In the closing section of the paper, we thus move our attention to a set of questions that have arisen from our initial consultation of data and conversations with school leaders, teachers and local authority policy analysts.

Towards an Ethnography of Poverty and Achievement:

Ethnography is not a new research approach in schools (Hammersley, 1983), however it seems that in order to develop a meaningful, human narrative on the impact that poverty has on the classroom, we are obliged to use an approach such as ethnography in order to make real the data already introduced in this paper. Ethnography allows us the privilege of deep-diving into the synergies of the classroom, utilising the knowledge and established habitus of the urban teacher as both our chaperon and investigator. Our proposal to use the voices of teachers, school staff and children mitigates against

what Thomson called 'researching down' (2002) in *Schooling the rustbelt kids* (a text that we have used as a source of inspiration for our activities), where dominant power relations around poverty and disadvantage are reviewed, replayed and reproduced by visiting academics.

In order to achieve this, our initial energies are spent in the identification and training of current primary school teachers within our identified cluster of Schools in the Bramley suburb. The teachers who thrive in this context are already expert in notions of achievement in attainment, in the selection of appropriate pedagogies, and in working with children from a variety of backgrounds; for this reason the research team were unequivocal in the intention that these people should undertake the research, rather than the original ethnographer's approach of parachuting into an environment to 'live with the locals.' Additionally, this approach enables us to give something back to the community enduring the research (Mills & Morton, 2013); making a significant impact in the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of the teaching staff involved, and enabling the opportunity to reflect, theorise and publicise the work and development that they undertake on a daily basis in the Bramley cluster of schools.

Our research therefore aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do teachers conceptualise the impact that poverty has on the children in their charge, and what impact does that have on the classroom environment and on their classroom practices?
2. To what extent do we have to re-align the dominant discourses of aspiration amongst children living in poverty?
3. Are the current measures of achievement and attainment meaningful in the context of childhood poverty?
4. What lessons can be learnt and disseminated from the real-life experiences of and theorisations made by the teachers and children of the Bramley cluster, in maximising the early-life opportunities of children living in poverty; and
5. Ultimately, how does the research undertaken in Leeds resonate with that undertaken concurrently in Oxford, Geelong and Adelaide. What general principles can we glean from these complimentary ethnographies in order to influence the policy terrain?

Our conviction is that only an ethnographic approach can provide the rich data and contextualised understanding that this crucial investigation requires. In the UK, even our national School's Inspectorate, Ofsted, contend that they cannot make judgements on a School using data alone, only in-situ observers (in their case, inspectors) can give a thorough and meaningful scrutiny of a business

so complex as schooling. Our research takes that logic a stage further, by utilising the explicit knowledge of the teachers, school staff and children themselves in order to make meaning from our ethnographic undertaking. In such ways, we intend that in moving towards an ethnography of poverty and achievement, we begin to add to a rich understanding of the challenges that educators face and, most importantly, start to identify possible pedagogical levers for change. Undertaking such work galvanises our collective, principled expressions and understandings of social justice as applied to school communities. Alongside this we hope that we, as academic partners, school leaders, practitioners and communities can collaborate to develop more intelligent, responsive forms of accountability (Lingard, 2009; Park, 2013; Harridge et al, 2014) through local, national and international research and policy advocacy.

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