

Overcoming stereotypes, discovering hidden capitals

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Abstract

This article presents a model of teacher research supported by academic partners to develop a better understanding of the barriers to education faced by young people growing up in poverty. It critiques politicians' demands for teachers to 'close the gap' for ignoring the cumulative intergenerational effects of deprivation. The authors explain how a simplistic 'craft' version of teaching has tended to reduce initial teacher education in England to training in the pragmatics of curriculum 'delivery' and policy implementation, leaving teachers theoretically and practically ill-prepared to deal with extremes of inequality. Finally, it presents a pilot research project designed to see beyond statistical labels and into the particularities of students' lives out of school, in order to reveal not only the realities of deprivation but also potential sources of cultural and social capital in their extended families and neighbourhoods.

Keywords Poverty, attainment gap, practitioner research, cultural capital, stereotypes

Introduction

One of the great ironies of the current political situation in England is that its conservative-led Coalition Government are simultaneously impoverishing large numbers of families through their Austerity measures and bemoaning the 'gap' in school achievement. They refuse to acknowledge that the poverty they create leads to underachievement, preferring to blame the students, their families and the teachers. This is best exemplified by Her Majesty's Chief Inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw (Ofsted, 2013), who stated that his concern is not with material poverty so much as with a poverty of expectations in the home and school given the effects on student underachievement, poor performance, and outcomes as a measure of success and failure. While there is ready acknowledgement of the link between disadvantage and educational achievement and economic disadvantage is named, the focus is on the student's background, low family income, and poor educational outcomes. The policy directions are for schools and colleges to counter academic failure through high expectations and relentless actions in order to improve test/exam results tied to national yardsticks, and teachers' work is then held in check by Ofsted inspections (see Beckett, 2014).

This shifts the focus of attention onto the educational *outcomes* of pupils with a free meal entitlement (England's crude proxy-measure of disadvantage), outcomes which are understandably lower on average than those of other pupils but for which teachers are supposedly to blame. No serious attention is paid by politicians to the economic and psychological impact of poverty on young people's school engagement and progress, let alone the wider features of their personal development and wellbeing. The hypocrisy brings to mind Roger McGough's little poem:

There are fascists
pretending to be humanitarians
like cannibals on a health kick
eating only vegetarians.

The situation is not very different in the USA, which is likewise subject to high-stakes testing and toxic forms of school accountability (Parks, 2013), and where 'gap-talk' is also a major policy discourse. Recently, Milner (2013) has argued that it makes more sense to focus on the lack of resources and opportunities rather than outputs. Drawing on Ladson-Billings (2006), Irvine (2010) and Darling-Hammond (2010), he insists on us identifying 'opportunity gaps':

By opportunity gaps, I mean stark differences in students' exposure and experiences – their economic resources, the qualifications of their teachers, the rigor of the curricula they study, their teachers' expectations, and their parents' involvement in their education. (Milner 2013).

Crucially, Ladson-Billings points to the cumulative effects of disadvantage and speaks of an 'education debt'. Citing President Lyndon B Johnson (1965):

You cannot take a man who has been in chains for 300 years, remove the chains, take him to the starting line and tell him to run the race, and think that you are being fair. (Miller, 2005, cited Ladson-Billings 2006)

This 'education debt' includes a complex of extra-school factors (poverty, racism, poor housing), school factors (inadequate budgets, underqualified teachers) and various relational and cultural issues such as parental education, teachers' low expectations, and political and social exclusion.

Such factors vary between countries, but it is worth recalling a few historic facts which suggest a similar accumulation of missing opportunity in England:

- 1) Until the 1970s – and in some areas still – children were divided into different schools at age 11, with the vast majority assigned to inferior and underfunded 'secondary modern' schools.

- 2) It was only in 1988 that a common school-leaving exam was established, the GCSE, and almost immediately politicians and journalists started to refer to the lower grades as ‘fails’.
- 3) Many areas are still suffering from the deindustrialisation during Thatcher’s government in the 1980s, leaving a legacy of chronic unemployment, low pay, insecurity and hopelessness.

Much has been written about Thatcherism, England’s vernacular form of global neoliberalism (Appadurai, 1996; Ball, 2007; Ozga and Lingard, 2007), which has relentlessly increased inequalities of income and assets, whilst peeling away the welfare benefits and services on which its victims depend. This is the foundation on which the current UK Coalition version of ‘Austerity’ politics is built, and we must be critically aware of political ideologies which regard the cultural factors as the main cause of poverty and its reproduction - expressed crudely when Chancellor George Osborne, a multi-millionaire, claimed that unemployment and dependence on welfare benefits was a ‘lifestyle choice’ (Wintour, 2010). Whether in well-intended versions such as Oscar Lewis’ *culture of poverty* or such arrogant and derogatory versions as Charles Murray’s *underclass*, an overemphasis on culturally based reproduction of poverty has been widespread and profoundly damaging (see Smyth and Wrigley 2013:47-51 for critique). Educational research has yet to catch up with the impact on children and young people of abusive political soundbites such as ‘benefit scroungers’ and ‘strivers not skivers’. Likewise teachers, while very often acting as the bulwark against vernacular neoliberal politics and policies, must be alert to adopting particular views about ‘the nature of the children we teach’, which is a comment frequently echoed in somewhat defensive discussions about urban school results that do not meet national floor targets¹.

Finally, unlike the USA, schools in poorer areas in England do not tend to receive lower budgets than more affluent suburbs; indeed disadvantaged students attract additional funding (though elite private schools spend far more than either). Nevertheless, it is clear that teachers in many urban schools are simply overwhelmed by their students’ emotional and educational needs, including the social turbulence which results from concentrated neighbourhood stress. A serious challenge to underachievement would require large numbers of supplementary staff of various specialisms (community educators, family counsellors, mentors etc.) to give teachers more time to focus on academic needs.

A gap in understanding

¹ This comment has been made numerous times in meetings with teachers engaged in CPD at our institution. These professional learning and development sessions, co-developed with teachers and school Heads to mentor and support school staff to broaden their experiences in practitioner research in both non-accredited and accredited programs called the ‘Leading Learning’ project and its allied MA ‘Achievement in City Schools’, are intended to simultaneously develop critical perspectives on schooling and education policies and practices (see Beckett, 2012, 2014)

To bring about change in this current situation, it is also necessary to consider the limitations on teacher agency brought about by simplistic constructions of teaching as a craft (Gove, 2010; DfE, 2010; Hoskins and Maguire, 2013), to the neglect of higher levels of professional knowledge.

Teaching is a craft and it is best learnt as an apprentice observing a master craftsman or women. Watching others, and being rigorously observed yourself as you develop, is the best route to acquiring mastery in the classroom. (Gove 2010)

Teaching has been described as a set of skills under the 1979-97 Conservative governments, and as a list of competences and standards under New Labour, 1997-2010 (Ball 2013). The ongoing attempts to reduce teacher education in England to the pragmatics of content delivery and policy implementation has made it increasingly difficult for teachers to respond to complex social and pedagogical challenges (see BERA-RSA 2014).

It is the argument of this paper that teachers need an opportunity to study in some depth the relationship between social disadvantage and educational achievement and the consequences of its neglect, especially where children are damaged not only by economic poverty, but socially and psychologically as well (Ridge 2002; 2006). Teachers, both pre-service and in-service, need to be briefed on 'the lessons of history' in the sociology of education (Mortimore and Whitty, 1997) and to be brought to an appreciation of the ways educational and social inequalities are inextricably intertwined (Anyon 1997; Connell 1993; Freire 1970; Thrupp 1999). They need to critically understand the role they are assigned in the current conjuncture notably as regards the psychological /cultural impact of economic poverty, and hopefully come to resist the flows of neoliberalism (see Ball, 2013).

Ball (2013) warned that teachers' creativity, passion and commitment are being displaced by contrived and fabricated measures and indicators, which brings a profound shift in our relationships, to ourselves, our practice, our students, and to the possibilities of being a teacher. In the same vein, Milner (2013) pointed out the crucial importance of teachers' mindsets. This is not another 'blame the teacher' move, but a recognition of the wide gaps between many teachers' and their students' lifeworlds.

At the heart of success in highly diverse and urban schools is teachers' ability to transform their mind-sets about their students and develop relationships with them to maximize student learning opportunities. (Milner, 2013)

It needs to be acknowledged that the majority of teachers working in challenging neighbourhoods, while under huge policy- and time-pressures to 'raise achievement' and 'close the gap', have no personal experience of the kind of pressures facing young people growing up in poverty. Most live

at a distance from the school, have secure employment contracts, enjoy relatively stress-free neighbourhoods and reasonably comfortable housing, and can afford books and cultural outings for their own children.

Our hypothesis, based on accumulated anecdotal evidence, is that many teachers in England are professionally ill-equipped to work with pupils disadvantaged by poverty in all its manifestations, given that they very often come without prior knowledge of the complexities. They can then unwittingly exacerbate the situation, for example by forming opinions about the students' families on the basis of a few dramatic outbursts from parents or indeed students. To give a hypothetical example, a sole parent Mrs Walsh, in receipt of welfare benefits, becomes angry and frustrated enough to march into school and complain. The teacher reads this within the dominant political discourse about welfare 'scroungers' and 'skivers', and soon starts to view the local community as good-for-nothing, outraged, unhinged or addicted. It can be extremely difficult to overcome such damaging stereotypes and generalisations.

Far more research, including practitioner research, is needed to explore the relational and perspectival disjunctions between professional assumptions and real families and neighbourhoods. Our experience is that teachers and students in more challenging schools frequently misunderstand each other, which can be played out in distorted views of one another's lifeworlds, sometimes resulting in open conflict, though there are also many positive examples of respectful and empathetic relationships.

In their book *Living on the Edge*, Smyth and Wrigley (2013) suggest, as a theoretical basis for research, various theorists with an interactive or relational approach, in particular Nancy Fraser, Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu. Fraser (eg 1997; 2000) has, over the years, developed an understanding that overcoming injustice involves recognition as well as redistribution. Goffman's methodology exemplifies 'symbolic interactionism' but in *Asylums* (1961) he combines this with a study of powerful institutions and their impact on identity. The transition into a 'total institution' such as a convent or a boarding school is certainly challenging, as Goffman shows, but arguably the daily movements of disadvantaged students between the environments of neighbourhood and school could be even more problematic, especially when there is a wide gulf between these different cultures. From the teacher's perspective, incidents are generally felt as breaches of discipline, but it could be more fruitful to explore them as 'interactive trouble' (Freebody et al 1995:297).

Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' (eg Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) provides an explanation of how social hierarchies are reproduced. By analogy with economic capital, i.e. having resources which you deploy to generate profit, Bourdieu argues that certain kinds of cultural assets can be deployed in the world to generate higher status and economic advantage. Crucially however, not

every cultural asset counts: only certain types are recognised by dominant institutions such as employers and schools. For example, being bilingual in French and English is generally positively validated whilst Punjabi and English might be regarded as a hindrance to academic progress. Similarly, the ability to ride a horse or play the cello may serve as cultural capital, bringing a pupil recognition as academically very able, whereas riding a motorbike or playing bass guitar might have the opposite effect. Indeed, there is a tendency for schools not even to know about such weakly validated skills and interests which lie beyond its normal frame of recognition. Cultural capital is, then, a relational term: it is not something you just *have* but a matter of *recognition* by powerful social institutions and individuals.

In addition, Bourdieu also uses the term ‘social capital’, again with an emphasis on recognition: social capital is the set of connections or capacity to connect with others which can ensure that your other assets can be successfully deployed. Crudely, this is well expressed in popular sayings such as ‘It’s not what you know, it’s who you know’ or ‘the old school tie’.

Bourdieu’s use of the term ‘field’ highlights the possibility that some cultural activities and achievements or social connections may be recognised in one context but not in others. For example, a person might be regarded as influential in her extended family or local community but not well respected in more formal environments such as school. Some community members, however, are able to act as mediators and advocates in encounters with schools.

If teachers develop stereotypes of a neighbourhood from antagonistic encounters, as suggested earlier, and fail to recognise important cultural activities and social connections, then potential capital is overlooked and goes to waste. Conversely, we see in the work of Luis Moll and colleagues (1992) the significant benefits of educators being able to work with community ‘funds of knowledge’. Thomson’s (2006) research in Australia and England provides further examples, referring to ‘virtual schoolbags’.

Statistical knowledge

The need for teachers to engage in ‘knowledge work’ is central to co-ordinating a professional reply to policy-makers who dictate the terms of teaching and teacher education (see Beckett, 2013). Very often these policy-makers require teachers to know something about their students’ ‘backgrounds’, at least tokenistically, but, within the managerialist system of accountability, this becomes reduced to a set of easily identified labels. Currently, school and national records in England use identifiers such as:

- Pupil Premium (indicating supplementary funding for students with free school meal entitlement (FSM) now or in the recent past, or in care)

- ethnicity (including white British)
- prior attainment score
- whether they joined the school at the normal time or later (perhaps after permanent exclusion from another school)
- having particular special educational needs (SEN)
- whether English is an Additional Language (EAL).

This is a particular form of a phenomenon which other analysts, following Nicholas Rose (1999) have described as ‘governance by numbers’ (see Ozga and Lingard, 2007), a characteristic of neoliberal administration systems. Despite the partial benefits of such labels, for example in recognising that some schools are likely to find it more difficult to achieve high general levels of attainment, the categories are crude when applied to whole schools, tend towards deficit labelling, and can be very misleading as a lens through which teachers seek to understand individual students’ lives and learning needs and then provide responsive schooling experiences.

At an institutional level, for example, two apparently similar schools may both have 25 percent of pupils with FSM entitlement. However, in one case another 25 percent will have graduate parents in professional occupations (a bipolar distribution) whereas in the other there may be almost none. This problem is not generally recognised in official evaluations of school effectiveness.

Furthermore, the FSM identifier is only a crude ‘proxy indicator’ of poverty / disadvantage. Nearly half of pupils below the poverty line do not have FSM entitlement. Large numbers of those who do may face economic hardship but without serious educational disadvantage, for example the children of well educated sole parents whose career development is temporarily interrupted by parental responsibilities. On the other hand, in some families the difficulties are compounded, for example by living in deindustrialised areas marked by lack of opportunity and a sense of hopelessness.

The categories are next to useless in providing teachers with an incisive and critical understanding of individual students, but unfortunately this ‘governance by numbers’ creates the illusion of reliable knowledge. It works as a lens which appears transparent but actually refracts and distorts. The labels are performative: they generate resonant negative stereotypes which are just as capable of lowering expectations as ‘raising achievement’.

It is in response to this situation that we have sought to operate as *academic partners* who can support practitioner research which moves beyond the statistics and towards a critical and empathetic understanding of students’ lifeworlds, learning needs and schooling experiences (see Beckett, 2014; Tan, 2013; Benjamin and Wrigley, 2013).

‘Chavs’

A further significant problem, though little recognized as yet either in policy or research, exists in the widespread discourse of denigration about people living in poverty. This phenomenon is by no means new, but has been deployed more vigorously since the banking crash to ‘divide and rule’ as part of the process of securing acceptance for welfare cuts. Thus, low paid workers who were themselves struggling to sustain family life with the aid of state subsidies to an impossibly low ‘minimum wage’ (child tax credits, housing benefit) are invited to join in the cry for a general reduction in benefits through government propaganda which accuses benefit claimants of idleness and self-chosen unemployment.

This draws on a discursive division between deserving and underserving poor which goes back at least into the 19th Century, but is now merged with a new set of derogatory ‘underclass’ images. Owen Jones, in his book *Chavs: the demonization of the working class* (2011), traces this back to Margaret Thatcher’s government in the 1980s when the victims of neoliberal economic policy, which included the destruction of heavy industry, privatisation and welfare cuts, had to serve as scapegoats for their own suffering. A stereotype was gradually assembled linking together particular ways of dressing, a lack of self respect and ambition, heavy drinking and smoking as well as heroine addiction, and coarse and abusive language. As if the acronym ‘chav’, which stands for ‘council housing and violent’, was not damaging enough, the ongoing multimedia production of the ‘chav’ stereotype includes a genre of television programmes about families who supposedly exemplify an ‘underclass’ lifestyle (eg the series title *Shameless*); newspaper articles about chronically unemployed parents with 10 or 20 or 30 children; and even fancy-dress parties in elite universities where rich students dress up as ‘chavs’. Jones comments on Prince William’s leisure activities at the Royal Military Academy during his training as a British Army officer:

At a chav-themed fancy dress party to mark the end of the first term at Sandhurst, he dressed in a loose-fitting top and ‘bling jewellery’, along with the must-have ‘angled baseball cap’. But when the other cadets demanded he ‘put on a chavvy accent and stop speaking like a Royal,’ he couldn’t do it... Welcome to twenty-first-century Britain, where royals dress up as their working-class subjects for a laugh. (Jones 2011:120)

For those teachers who already hold deficit views of the communities they serve, the ‘chav’ stereotype undoubtedly resonates, yet, to the best of our knowledge, there is no research, including practitioner research, which specifically explores this issue in the English context; nor is there any research to show the impact of political slogans such as ‘benefit scroungers’ on the children, their self-esteem and their aspirations. There are, however, moves in this direction as our teachers partners have undertaken some forensic analyses of local schools’ data in relation to national data,

derived from the Government's 'interactive' national database called 'Reporting and Analysis for Improvement through School Self-Evaluation' (RAISEonline), and then sought to move beyond this to develop 'other data' which provides a more rounded understanding and shows how this all sits within the complexities of poverty and deprivation (see Nuttall and Doherty, 2014; Wilson, 2014; Gallagher and Beckett, 2014).

Finding hidden capitals

This sort of teacher inquiry helps teachers avoid having a negative stereotype of the local area, especially when their direct knowledge of it is limited. In one particular pilot study, working with several teachers in the north of England, we encouraged research-active teachers to ask students a set of positively framed but open questions to elicit potential cultural and social assets which their schools might be able to build on.

This pilot formed part of an extended engagement involving academic partners and teacher partners in a number of inner-city schools in an area with high levels of poverty and deprivation, often marked by migration and mobility. These urban schools are struggling not only with all the barriers to students' wellbeing and learning which poverty entails, but also with a draconian accountability regime which entails the threat of closure and privatisation to schools unable to secure a good inspection judgement or to meet arbitrary (and ever rising) performance targets. The teacher inquiry projects ran in various clusters of schools, and as an addendum to this, on request, an allied Masters degree was developed and named the MA *Achievement in City Schools*. This has worked to extend the participants' engagement with a range of literature from urban sociology and geography, curriculum studies and pedagogy, inclusion and equality, policy and school change. We felt this to be important in a national context where young teachers had been systematically denied access to critical and theoretical resources, notably the professional knowledge bases including sociology of education, and where initial teacher training was steered heavily towards the pragmatics of classroom practice.

As academic partners, we were repeatedly made conscious of the ways in which governance by numbers, and the pupil categories of the accountability system, led to a reductionist understanding of student lives, learning needs and schooling experiences. The questions were designed as a simple way to move beyond statistical summaries and help teachers gain a little more insight into the complexity of young lives beyond the labels.

In this report, we draw upon two major sources (extracts used here with their kind permission):

- the research task submitted by two experienced teachers /school leaders for module 1 of their Masters degree;

- the transcript of an interview carried out by a senior teacher of another school.

The first sample was entirely boys; the second was mixed (one boy, two girls who were sisters). There was a range of family experiences, broken and restored relationships and so on. Though all were classified on the official data as 'pupil premium' and many as having some form of special educational needs, the real colour and individuality of students' lived experiences only emerged through the individual interviews.

In both cases, semi-structured group interviews were conducted, and although the exact questions varied a little, the following list formed the basis:

- 1) How long have you lived in this area? (How long have your family lived here?)
- 2) What are the good things about living here? What would you change if you could?
- 3) Who is the most interesting person you know? Why do you find them interesting? What do you do together?
- 4) Who do you know who's got an interesting job?
- 5) Is there anybody older than you that you talk to a lot?
- 6) Who encourages and helps you most with school (college) work? Who do you talk to if you need advice about school work or a problem?
- 7) Do you know somebody who reads a lot? What kind of things do they read?
- 8) Does anybody you know watch factual programmes on TV, like nature or wildlife programmes, or travel, or politics?
- 9) Do you know anybody who makes or grows things?
- 10) Do you know anybody who sings or plays music? Do you?
- 11) Do you know anybody who goes walking or any outdoor activities like climbing or canoeing?
Do you ever visit the countryside?

12) Have you travelled to any interesting places? Who do you know who has? (England or other parts of the world)

13) What interests you most? What are you interested in for the future?

The cultural profile of ‘disadvantage’

The first thing to notice about these results was their diversity. Even behind what appeared, according to the official categories, to be a high level of deprivation the team unearthed surprising features which belied any blanket generalisation of barrenness or dysfunctionality. These positive features combined in unpredictable ways with severe limitations brought about either directly by economic poverty or indirectly as cultural constraints.

My mum helps me with school work, especially Spanish cos she speaks it fluently... I know lots of people who play an instrument, I used to play the Bass Guitar.

My uncle has an interesting job, he works on a boat and travels all around the world. I think it has something to do with oil... I want to go to university like my sister and study Engineering.

Grandad Ian walks a lot. I go with him all the time, just rings up and we're off. Once we went to Scotland and we were walking an' he asked me what I'd do if a bear came and I said run.

My mum used to grow vegetables, she's going to grow tomatoes... I play piano for church and the drums, I play for choice, it's good.

Most of these experiences are unknown to these young people's teachers. Consequently, although they have considerable curricular potential in themselves, they do not become 'cultural capital'.

In the mixed-gender interview, in response to questions about travel, the girls informed us that their grandfather had been living in the Philippines and was captured by the Japanese early in World War II and taken to a prisoner of war camp. It is, perhaps, significant that the teacher's response focused on the grandparents' personal resilience but without any suggestion that this knowledge might have curricular potential.

The boy's family had been to Disneyland before he was born, but he told us of his own more limited experiences.

When I was little I went to Asda with my mum and my dad and my sister quite a lot but I've never been past it. Once when I was getting something for my mate's birthday I thought,

why not go past Asda, so I went past Asda and it was just the same. It was sort of interesting before I got there.

The farthest I've been away was like, we've got school, then the area around school, then you've got town. I think the furthest I've been away from my home or school was like the other side of town. That's probably the farthest I've been away and it's not that interesting.

There is clear recognition here of the limitations of his life. There is also irony in the fact that his city is surrounded by beautiful countryside and historic remains (Roman, medieval, industrial), an area which attracts numerous international visitors. This should raise questions about the opportunities and experiences which the boy's nine years at school have *not* opened up, and whether a greater emphasis on extending children's experiences might possibly be a more successful way to improve achievement than obsessive preparation for national tests.

In other respects, however, this young man was able to suggest strong and supportive personal relationships and mention particular cultural experiences which made his life interesting and enjoyable:

One of my friends in year 10 does parcour, like free running. But he also likes to play his games and stuff, like I do. I do it a lot. He also is like open to everything... He likes everything. If he doesn't like stuff he'll tell people that he doesn't like it. Internet speak, like a load of people got together on the internet and started making websites and it got real popular. They've got their own way of saying things and what stuff means, like their own language. He knows that. He does everything really. He's really interesting.

We learn of his dad's creative interests:

My dad plays the six-stringed guitar and he plays bass as well. He's really very good at it. I actually recorded him playing it. He free-styles as in like, he just plays what he thinks. He was thinking about forming a band but he couldn't find anyone else who played instruments. There was this song called Sanitarium by Metalica. In Metalica there's like the lead singer who will also do the rhythm guitar, you've got your guitars, you've got your bass and then your drummer but my dad managed to actually play the intro of that song using one guitar even though Metalica did it with two.

The girls, during the same interview, complained that their dad had a restrictive attitude, calling on them to stick to their school work. However, there was an extended family with wider horizons. Their uncle was a drama teacher and assistant headteacher, and had won awards for acting. They identified their grandmother as the most interesting person in their lives, a major influence whom they praised for her youthful attitudes:

- Girl 1: She's not like any other nan, she's just like, she's...she knows what we like and she's not like one of them that walks around going: I need a cup of tea.
- Girl 2: She does say that.
- Girl 1: She does say that but she's not the type to be sat down, she's the type to be playing outside with me and my cousins.
- Teacher: So a young nan? A young granny?
- Girl 1: A young nan who wears 5 inch heels up town.
- Girl 2: She's supportive as well. She teaches you like to go for your dreams but be careful as well.
- Girl 1: Be realistic.
- Girl 2: So instead of like, your parents saying: oh no, you're going to be able to do that. She's like: maybe we can do that, but she works around it.
- Girl 1: And she gives us freedom, which is more than my dad does.
- Girl 2: Freedom and independence.

Sometimes it is also clear that the students themselves are only vaguely aware of connections which, if pursued, clearly have potential as cultural and social capital. The following extracts from the other set of interviews suggests that half-remembered or perhaps half-understood details require positive engagement and recognition on the part of the school in order to elucidate their significance. This too raises questions about learning in an education system where curriculum is heavily standardised: why are we not assisting students to engage with the knowledge and experience available in their extended family? Engaging students in reflection on their experience now seems to have little space in the secondary curriculum, though for many years it was seen as central to the subject English.

My mum's friend does something with the police that is unusual.

My cousin is a lawyer, I never see him though.

I've got a cousin, you might know him, he came here. He's at Manchester University but I'm not sure what he's doing.

Similarly, some remarkable travel experiences were mentioned as well as communication skills in various languages, but these experiences too could be enhanced by drawing on them as resources for reflection and learning, rather than left behind in the student's other world.

I've been back home once [to Kurdistan]... we drove for 4, 5 days. Went for 6 weeks. There's fast cars out there, don't care... crash. Wouldn't change anything about here. Good rules here.

I've been to Pakistan three times and I've been to Dubai and Saudi Arabia. I've been to Castle Hill. Is that the Countryside? Yes, it's green we go and have a picnic.

In other cases however the significant out-of-school experiences were rare events and had been provided by the school:

I've been to the Sculpture Park. I got loads of pictures on my phone. We went with Art... made those poles n' leaves like for 'Joseph' set. I made some leaves for the set. I might be an engineer when I leave school... be a mechanic.

Some interesting evidence emerged from the interviews about the horizons of these young people's experience, and, reflecting on the data, we recognised the care which was needed in interpreting the data, in order neither to exaggerate nor misrecognise the limitations or potential growth points.

Some students clearly needed a clarification when we asked whether they had been to 'the countryside'. One said he went to the countryside, and when the interviewer asked how, he said 'I jog there'. He was actually referring to the hill behind his father's house, an area with grass. Others didn't like the idea of 'walking, mud and grass'.

It is significant that about half these young people were unable to think of anybody with an interesting job. However, questions about interesting work also revealed some different conceptions than teachers, from their own perspective, might easily fail to recognise as aspirational:

My grandad's done loads and done really well. He got an apprenticeship and was an electrician an' now he's the highest paid except for the manager.

Carl's my uncle, he's a builder and strips down sheds and makes all sorts.

My uncle sells cars in London.

In some cases, the student explained a link between a relative's manual occupation and a favoured school subjects which had helped engage and motivate and open up possibilities for the future.

My uncle's a painter and decorator. I've helped him out and I enjoyed it. I'm doing Art this year and I really like painting pictures. I'd like to do it in the Sixth Form then go to college, university. I'd like to study famous artists, draw and paint, paints and technology. I like Maths too, that's a good subject... for measuring walls when you're painting... helps with walls... decorating.

As well as physical / creative activities like this, many students mentioned music as a source of enjoyment and participation. In some cases music making out of school connected up with in-school music making, but in other cases took forms which could easily remain unknown to teachers. For example, one boy spoke of a Kurdish keyboard teacher, and another boy of African origin spoke of playing drums and piano for the choir at church ‘upstairs, in that building opposite Wilkinson’s’.

Few students read much for enjoyment or information, though around half had close or extended family members who were keen readers.

Reflection and recommendations

The diversity of assets and constraints are difficult to summarise, beyond insisting on the importance of teachers gaining a much richer critical understanding of individual students’ lives. This is not easy to achieve in a system where secondary schools are structured around strong boundaries between subjects and the prescribed ways of knowing that come with a rigid national curriculum. An interesting contrast can be drawn with schools in Norway, generally much smaller and where typically a year cohort of 60-100 pupils is taught exclusively by a team of 5 or 6 teachers, who also provide pastoral care / guidance and link with families. Unfortunately there is little interest in such alternative structures in England, even though closer relationships could be particularly important in areas where many students have experienced turbulent family relationships. One of these schools, however, has introduced two structural features which are designed to enhance and stabilise relationships: vertical tutor groups, and mixed-age electives (ages 13-16) whereby pupils from Years 9, 10 and 11 were taught alongside each other to achieve a GCSE at the end of each year.

Secondly, while many of these students surprised us with the range of their out-of-school activities enjoyed with significant adults, other lives appeared extremely limited. Some found it really difficult to identify someone they found interesting. When pushed further, the Asian boys confirmed that their fathers and uncles mostly worked as taxi drivers or bus drivers. These same boys found it difficult to identify an interesting job and appeared to have little idea what they would do next. One boy thought he would ‘probably make a living out of cage fighting.’ Similar limitations were also apparent in the case of some white British boys. In other cases, students mentioned an eclectic mix of jobs they would find interesting: ‘a photographer, mechanic, a chef’. Others mentioned university but without much idea what people do there: one suggested ‘something to do with cooking’.

All of this raises important questions about the relationship between schools and the world of work. The Labour government of 1997-2000 encouraged students achieving less well at academic subjects to begin a vocational diploma at age 14. Given the limited knowledge many of these students have, this could actually increase social reproduction rather than open horizons. It would be much more educational, perhaps, to provide a range of opportunities to sample various kinds of work, including those beyond the range of students' immediate families and neighbourhoods. Similarly, if more students from 'non-traditional backgrounds' are to aspire to university, or even to attend and complete a qualification in a Further Education college, we need to place much more emphasis on building the links and experience early.

This relates to Jessica Bok's (2010) discussion of aspirations, and her concept of an aspirational *map*. She argues that, rather than assuming that young people growing up in poverty 'lack aspirations', policy makers and educators should discuss ways in which knowledge of potential pathways can be mediated and made available to them and their families. Otherwise 'it's like making them do a play without a script'. Aspirations depend on having genuine opportunities, but also on access to knowledge which the children of professional parents acquire as 'social capital' through relatives, neighbours and family friends.

It is part of the 'gap closing' mentality that schools are encouraged to accelerate progress in basic skills of literacy and numeracy, and sometimes to an unrealistic extent, neglect real foundations in the process. These skills are clearly fundamental, and building them could also be done more successfully through engagement with family interests, but they are only part of the picture. Curricular breadth and balance, as well as the development of 'soft skills' (social confidence when speaking with adults of different backgrounds, initiative, problem-solving strategies etc.), demand a greater emphasis on extending the students' cultural experience. A strategy for both (i) extending the restricted experiences of many - though not all - young people growing up in poverty, and (ii) building bridges from everyday experience to high-status academic knowledge, and incorporating pupils' 'funds of knowledge' (Moll 1992) into curricular learning. This would do much to enhance cultural capital, and to capitalise on available vernacular culture.

For some of these students, despite occasional holidays, it was apparent that their lives were strongly circumscribed by the local area; in some cases, this was extended by occasional visits to extended family in Pakistan. Many of the pupils seemed happy to accept this and had no desire to move away. It is easy to view this as a limitation, and see them as victims of a lack of cultural and social capital. Educators always seek to expand people's horizons, and highlight opportunities. However we must also recognize that rootedness in a local area can offer security and friendship, especially to young people who have experienced hardship and uncertainty. Can widening horizons

be achieved in ways which are compatible with such rootedness and familiarity of place? Can schools find ways of developing knowledge and intellect, developing global as well as local citizenship, enabling young people to gain enjoyment and satisfaction from participation in a range of cultural activities (cultural both in a sense of the creative arts and in the anthropological sense) while respecting students' lifeworlds. Working along these lines might not only enrich lives, but also prove more effective in 'raising achievement' and 'closing the gap' and opening up wider career opportunities than the current instrumentalism of obsessive numbers-driven accountability regime.

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