Inspection judgements on urban schools: a case for the defence

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Abstract
This article is co-authored by two urban school Heads in the north of England with the support of an academic partner. The article begins with the phenomenon of official judgements of urban schools, made by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), a semi-privatised and supposedly independent arm of government. The discussion places in question its work in raising achievement, particularly in areas of deprivation. It points to deep flaws in the operation of policy-as-numbers and high-stakes accountability, contrasting the punitive style and consequences with collaborative principles of leadership and school change. The article looks at how summative judgements gloss over the complexities of students' lives and teachers' work, and ignore evidence of what is actually being done to meet policy expectations. Our conclusion is that more intelligent forms of school accountability are needed which do not constantly undermine the improvement processes of urban schools and damage reputations with labels such as 'requires improvement' 'special measures' or more colloquially 'failing school'. This 'intelligent accountability' might begin to support a more community-orientated moral purpose in leadership and pedagogy.

Introduction

England's school system shares many features of high-stakes accountability with other situations such as the USA and, increasingly, Australia, including blanket testing at fixed ages, well publicised comparisons between schools which are placed in competition against each other, and judgements about teachers based on crude measures of student progress (eg Ravitch 2010; Lipman 2004; Hursh 2008; McNeil 2000).On top of this, English schools are regularly judged by high-profile external inspections, under the control of an agency which is supposedly independent of government but whose autonomy has frequently been questioned (Shaw et al 2003; Elliott 2012).The combined impact of these processes has been to encourage parental choice of schools, leading to increasing segregation of populations on socioeconomic and sometimes ethnic grounds.

External inspection has been a feature of the English education system since the mid 1800s, but was radically transformed in 1992-3 by legislation which increased the frequency of inspections, introduced categories of close supervision such as Special Measures (but, in the media and popular reference, "failing schools") and sub-contracted the conduct of inspections to private companies. Later modifications reduced the pressure for many schools, through a 'light touch' approach for

those with higher test and examination data whilst unsettling other schools further, particularly those serving poorer neighbourhoods (see Elliott 2012 for further details).

This journal article explores the impact of these pressures through the voices of two experienced school Heads in terms of how sustainable school development is jeopardised. It questions the workings of 'policy by numbers' [Ozga and Lingard 2007; Rose 1999] both in terms of overreliance on quantitative data in the formation of judgements, and in terms of simplistic public categorisation of schools as 'outstanding', 'good', 'requires improvement' and 'inadequate'. The latter two categories are negative ones, requiring urgent remediation and involving close supervision and re-inspection. (The former positive category of 'satisfactory' was replaced in 2012 by the negative one 'requires improvement', with retrospective effect, thus adding to the pressures on schools in more challenging contexts.) In demonstrating the distortions to education which result, the headteachers point to the complexity of children's lives, the deep error of judging schools as if they were free-floating entities disconnected from families and neighbourhoods, and the injustice and misrecognition of teachers' work.

In view of the intense policy and time pressures, the two school Heads agreed to digitally record their contributions to the article, following some suggested guidelines in the form of a template with sub-headings that was pre-circulated. The intention was only ever to capture their voices to slot into the written record, and while the template was never constructed as an interview schedule, a joint decision has been taken to allow the academic partner to represent them as part of a three-way professional conversation. This may be a challenge to the regular way of writing and co-authoring, drawing on data, but we want to foreground the teachers' voice and not simply use transcripts in the course of academic writing for publication. At the outset it must be said there was agreement to focus on the judgements made of urban schools while 'the case for the defence' was one school Head's idea and endorsed by the other. The academic partner then provided the support and pulled it together.

The two school Heads work in separate administrative areas but both have a responsibility for more than one school. Melanie Williams, formerly Head of a 11-16 community school, is now Executive Head with combined responsibility for this urban high school and a nearby urban primary school; in addition, the 11-16 school is also growing its own primary department to become a 4-16 all-through school. In a looser configuration, Julian Gorton, an urban primary school Head, is Chair of a cluster of 14 schools of diverse characters and kinds (primary, secondary and special, including some church schools and privately managed 'academies') that are geographically defined in a wedge in the city. He also sits on a Joint Collaboration Committee which coordinates multi-agency support for behaviour, attendance, and emotional and physical wellbeing. The academic partner Terry

Wrigley, visiting professor at Leeds Metropolitan University, has published widely on school development in more challenging environments and works with many of the teacher partners making a contribution to this special issue of *Urban Review*, given their participation in the MA 'Achievement in City Schools'. Two of the three also have the benefit of having also been trained as Ofsted inspectors and having seen the process of inspection from the perspective of inspector.

These various cluster arrangements are being formed in the context of adverse system change, a late stage of the protracted politics of eroding local government, and reducing its capacity to support schools. School heads, in particular, are being required to support one another and seek help where they can still find any. Simultaneously, university departments of education are under threat, as their main source of income, initial teacher education, is being re-located into schools but only those that have secured an 'Outstanding' Ofsted grade.

> Local Authorities are no longer there. There is still a structure left but there's certainly not the depth and quality of practitioner in the Local Authority that we would have had and it's slithering away faster and faster. The support for schools, it has to come from each other, all kinds of arrangement, because it isn't out there in the Local Authority. They've been stripped down to such an extent. [MW]

Putting numbers in their place

Sending in a team of inspectors to visit a school, including observing teaching and learning and entering into dialogue with students and teachers, could conceivably provide a richer understanding of the school than simply looking at statistical data. It might, hypothetically, complement the hard quantitative judgements with the qualitative interpretative approach based on a human / humane professional understanding. One of the great ironies of the Ofsted framework is that the opposite occurs: the numbers largely predetermine the inspectors' judgement. Inspectors are, in fact, required to form hypotheses based on this data prior to their visit. The obvious danger is that they arrive predisposed to look for evidence which confirms this prejudgement

> The concern for all of us working in urban schools is that the data set is the first thing that Ofsted looks at. The statistical data, particularly on attainment, drives the inspection team's hypothesis about the quality of the school. Our experience is that Ofsted come forward with that hypothesis and then look for evidence to prove it or disprove it. The complexity of the inner city context makes it difficult to provide evidence that your school doesn't require improvement or is inadequate. Even just to keep your head above water, you've pretty much got to be outstanding in all respects, but would that be reflected in an Ofsted judgement? I

don't believe that teaching is worse in an urban environment than in any other school, but the schools with better data tend to be judged 'outstanding' while those within urban environments tend to be labelled 'requires improvement' or 'in special measures'. [JG]

This is certainly the easiest option since the inspectors' report will be less subject to challenge if it is consistent.

Because it relies on a system of sub-contracting through private companies, Ofsted has always had a system of internal quality checks, but this depends on consistency rather than truth. The pressure is on for the teaching grades to match those for attainment and progress, which are rooted in hard data from exams and tests. An inspector has to be bold to judge a mediocre teacher negatively when her class of privileged and well-motivated girls is heading for good exam grades, even if this is more through their own determination than the quality of teaching they receive. Conversely, the inspection team leader would lean on an inspector who gave a teacher an Outstanding grade in a school where exam results were below the national average. Similarly, it is hard for inspectors to judge leadership to be good in a school with below national average results, whatever the difficulties of social context and the benefits the school brings to its students and community, unless the school can provide hard evidence of improving exam results. [TW]

Further difficulties arise when inspectors are unused to such urban environments and who might overreact to an incident:

We got an outstanding for behaviour and care and guidance but one inspector happened to observe a particular student being calmed down by a member of the pastoral team after he'd had an outburst in defence of a friend, a girl. He came to us after being excluded from two previous schools and we managed to keep him and successfully manage him through to the end of year 11..The incident wasn't major and it was dealt with and calmed down instantly. The judgement from one of the Inspectors was that the care and guidance and behaviour couldn't be outstanding because quite clearly that young man couldn't self-manage. [MW]

Judgements are made of schools as if they were entities divorced from social environments. This is not to claim that no notice is taken of socioeconomic indicators, but rather that the crude indicators barely reflect the complexity of the real situation. Behind the proxy indicator of 40 percent of students entitled to a free school meal (FSM):

We have 27 countries and 30 languages, and many of our postcodes are from the lowest 10 percent in terms of deprivation. Around 40 per cent of our students have been entitled to free school meals and over 40 per cent come to us with reading ages below their actual age.

> These aren't excuses in any way but the finite levels of inspection judgements are very challenging... The judgements seem very straightforward and simplistic and I think that our frustration is we have children with very complex lives and the venn diagrams, as I would see it, the venn diagrams of their lives don't fit readily into the categories. [MW]

These 'categories' - FSM, SEN (Special Educational Needs), EAL (English as an Additional Language) provide a crude comparative measure of disadvantage within a school, but say nothing about the intensity of need nor the expertise and dedication which will be required of teachers even to reach average standards of attainment.

> Another school might have 50 percent free school meals, like mine, but I've got 45 different home languages. There are 20 different languages spoken by that class over there, and you're asking me why we haven't brought our children up to national average levels by age 7. Well actually 12 of those children have only just joined us in the last year. [JG]

The social context is also constantly changing:

> We've got 27 languages in school, as last year, but it's not the same 27 languages. The Primary School that we're going to be working with had 50 children join the School mid year and 50 leave in the last 12 months... You've got families coming into social housing and being moved out of it. [MW]

Whilst making some allowances on the basis of such 'categories', the Ofsted inspection system completely fails to see the complexity of teachers reaching out to each student's unique needs.

> Some of our children who struggle to achieve have very chaotic home lives. The challenge is to try and bring some order and develop some trust with those children. We are trying to develop some resilience and capacity to engage and learn when they might be hungry, they might be sleepy, they might be distressed, they might have missed learning, they might have witnessed all sorts of things, they might be growing up a whole lot sooner than we would like, they might be using inappropriate language or refusing to speak at all. [JG]

As another teacher partner to this special issue put it, the inspectors see the *absences* but not the *abscesses* – they fail to understand that mouth ulcers get in the way of learning and may even keep children off school; they look at school attendance figures but not at the lives behind them. Conversely, of course, some children within an official 'category' are incredibly well supported by their families but the labels can serve to lower expectations.

In a later part of this article, we will examine some of the impact of this on the school's work and its capacity to sustain improvement.

The urban school's work: students, families, society

Among the world's advanced economies, England remains one of the most unequal. This has substantially increased since the 1970s, in the period of neoliberalism (www.poverty.org.uk), and been further exacerbated following the banking crisis as a result of Austerity politics. Yet the country's political establishment is attempting to hold teachers responsible for these divisions by demanding that they 'close the gap' between the attainment of students with a free meal entitlement and the rest of the population.

The pressure on many urban schools comes, therefore, from two directions. On the one hand, they are faced daily with the consequences of welfare reductions, including families having to move house (and school) because they are deemed to have one bedroom more than they need, or children who can no longer be fed or clothed properly. On the other, they are expected to take children who, for various reasons, have below national average attainment and accelerate their progress to much faster than that of less disadvantaged children, even though the same barriers to learning remain.

> Mathematically, that just runs out, it can't happen, it can't be sustained indefinitel. [MW]

The absurdity of this demand is underlined by national statistics which show how students growing up in poverty tend to fall further behind at each succeeding stage: in other words, a general tendency for value to be lost, rather than added, when compared with the rest of the population(Sutton Trust 2008).

An extra difficulty is that students who arrive at secondary school with no prior attainment data, because of disrupted primary education or their teachers' professional decision that it would be too damaging to enter them for the tests, are by default set a demanding target at age 16. The secondary school is deemed to have failed if they do not achieve this, despite the challenges, so schools are often reluctant to take on these vulnerable children, potentially deepening their educational disadvantage.

To mention these facts is not a call for complacency, but rather a demand that the most challenged schools should receive dramatically improved support – far more than the 'pupil premium' with its many constraints allows. It is well established that neighbourhood disputes frequently spill over into classrooms and that teachers in these schools spend large amounts of time dealing with family troubles, yet no serious consideration is given to the need for counsellors or social workers or youth workers as essential indirect support for children's development and learning. In fact, the opposite occurs, and teachers and school Heads find themselves having to 'sustain that community moving forward and to provide something beyond the children; you're often providing for parents as well.' [MW]

Both school Heads use the term 'moral purpose' to describe ways of looking forward beyond the numbers game, and beyond the official judgements. The perspective is complex, stretching from a focus on the individuality of each student to the life of the family and then to some sense of an impact across generations. It is worthy of note how this is achieved in a spirit of generosity, without scapegoating parents for a child's inability to improve the school's statistics.

> The complexities are the family circumstances, and the emotional wellbeing of parents. What's their mental health like? That can have a massive impact on children. What's their economic status like? Are there stresses within the family around money, housing, resources, food? Has the child even got a bed to sleep in? [JG]

The term 'child-centred' has, in many places, been given a negative intonation, as if child-centredness was somehow a distraction from raising 'standards' and an invitation to be laissez-faire in one's expectations. Julian uses it in a very different sense:

> Well, child-centred to my mind just means that you understand the child, what their needs are, in all respects. It means that you invest in understanding children. You've got a class of 30, they are all different, they all tick differently, they're all motivated by different things, they've all got different barriers to learning, so your capacity to be child-centred means absorbing and understanding all those differences but then trying to meet them, as a group, as well as you can. [JG]

This does not involve a divorce from community and society.

> You start with what you've got for seven hours of the day and then you start thinking, what can we influence beyond that? Families and communities, different communities. [JG]

A determination to improve literacy and numeracy is central but not separate from all the other needs.

> The physical wellbeing of children is fundamental. Their lifestyles, how active they are... As a society we are building up massive problems for the future; obesity, sleep, social interaction, these are things that could come back and bite us while we are on the bonnet of the car focusing on literacy and numeracy skills. Literacy and numeracy are important but you can't afford to forget that it is also important for people to be fit and healthy enough to go to work and not grow up dysfunctional and disengaged.[JG]

'Making a difference' ultimately raises questions of intergenerational impact: 'If we can make a difference to that generation the hope is that it rolls onto another generation. Those children are

healthy emotionally and have positive relationships and when they have children and families, it's invested in those children'.

This sits well with the critique of 'gap talk' presented by two north American academics. Richard Milner (2011) argues that it is more fruitful to focus on a lack of opportunity rather than weaker outputs, if we wish to make changes, since this is the point at which we can have an impact. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) shares much of this concern, but in addition points to the cumulative effects of disadvantage. Citing President Lyndon B Johnson's 1965 address at Howard University:

> 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.

To underline her point, Ladson-Billings (2006) uses the metaphor of the National Debt, as the cumulative total of annual budget deficits, to coin the phrase 'education debt'. This term incorporates extra-school structural factors such as poverty, racism and poor housing; school-related structural factors such as inadequate budgets and underqualified teachers; together with the complexity of relational and cultural issues such as parents' limited education, teachers who have low expectations based on negative stereotypes, and a history of exclusion from political participation.

It would clearly be a mistake to attempt a simple transfer of these arguments to the English context, including a transfer from race to class as the main focus, yet the broad argument demands serious consideration. Even though English schools receive additional funds on the basis of student disadvantage, it remains clear that teachers in some urban schools are simply overwhelmed by the extent of social turbulence students bring with them every day, as well as the extent of learning difficulties. A serious challenge to underachievement would require the addition of a large number of staff of various specialisms, including community educators, family counsellors, youth workers and mentors.

Secondly, if we are to take seriously Ladson-Billings' notion of an intergenerational *education debt*, we have to look at the cumulative impact of family interaction with schools across the generations. We have to remember that it was only in 1988 that a common school-leaving exam was established, the General Certifcate of Secondary Education (GCSE), and almost immediately politicians and newspaper editors began to stigmatised grades D-G as fails. Until around 1970, and in some areas to this day, children were divided at age 11, with the majority assigned to an inferior and underfunded 'secondary modern' education; even in comprehensive secondary schools, as well as primary schools, the New Labour government (1997-2000) insisted that schools should regard segregation into different ability groups as the default arrangement.

Thirdly, we need to recognise the impact of family poverty, and of periods of unemployment interspersed with insecure work, on large numbers of families, with a concentration in many deindustrialised urban areas. The stigma attached to poverty and 'poor work' results in a common sense of shame or embarrassment which inevitably transfers to children. The repeated experience of disappointment as plans founder and ambitions fail to materialise easily results in a mindset of fatalism and indifference as children enter adolescence. (See Smyth and Wrigley 2013.) The widespread closure of heavy industry (coal, steel, shipbuilding) during Margaret Thatcher's premiership left entire areas devastated and communities adrift.

In the face of all this, haranguing teachers for failing to 'close the gap' is at best simplistic and at worst cynical and destructive.

The impact of top-down inspectorial judgements on schools

The two school Heads both point to the narrowing and limiting effect of England's draconian inspection regime whilst vehemently insisting on 'doing the best for every child'. This is not an evasion of the challenge to improve the achievement of disadvantaged students, but rather an argument that it cannot be done within the present policy environment.

> We want to give them the highest level of skills possible but there are lots of other attributes that contribute to children becoming successful and resilient adults. They do need those basic skills but they need other things as well. The danger is that you end up squeezing out some other areas of learning just to achieve testable outcomes. We see narrowing of the curriculum, and game playing by schools around assessments. You end up with very young children being put under enormous pressure. [JG]

The constant threat of negative Ofsted judgements actively undermines a school's improvement, making matters worse not better; indeed it is arguable that such is the intention, given the drive to convert the maximum number of schools into privately managed 'academies' within the life of this Parliament.

> We know that a School in 'special measures' is going to find it very difficult to recruit staff. One of the things that we find now with candidates coming through for interview, they have quite clearly selected where they're applying to by checking Ofsted reports. They are aware of the potential pressure of being in a school in really challenging circumstances. As a headteacher you may well find it difficult to recruit the high quality staff that you need and I think that is one of the issues about numbers and judgement. [MW]

Although teachers and school leaders do also make conscious decisions to work in urban schools, the constant pressure and risk of denigration is ultimately demoralising and counterproductive:

Our very experienced year 6 teacher is leaving this year. She's outstanding and always has been outstanding, but is exhausted by the unrelenting requirement to keep pushing and pushing. She has very high expectations of children and wants the very best for them but can see the need to develop so much more in children than just reaching level 4 by the end of year 6. [JG]

In the firing line
This brings to mind a distinction made some years ago by Fred Inglis:

'Accountability' is, after all, not the same thing as responsibility, still less duty. It is a pistol loaded with blame to be fired at the heads of those who cannot answer charges.

(1989:35-54)

The position of school Heads in urban schools has become parlous. Individuals who have chosen to work in areas of need find themselves under constant threat, and surrounded by schools which have received negative judgements.Very able teachers seek promotion up to the level of deputy Head of school but not the headship. This sense of permanent threat, including being dismissed from their job, is inimical to the drive for sustained improvement and the need to transform the culture of a school. It 'saps energy first and foremost so it can undermine your capacity to engage and take forward an organisation once you're labelled' [JG] as failing or requiring improvement.

Improvement is about culture and people. It involves developing over time and layering up and building community links. These things take time and there's no short-termism about them. So if that is your belief, actually it could be stripped away from you because one year the results weren't too good; a cohort of students came through that didn't do as well. [JG]

It is difficult for even the most successful and dedicated school Heads to ignore the pressures of damaging policy because living up to its requirements is the condition for remaining in post and bringing about significant and beneficial change. This continues to happen, despite the contradictions. For example, Melanie's school teaches elective subjects to mixed-age groups, and for a larger part of each week, with all students able to gain the GCSE qualification in that subject at the end of the year rather than wait until age 16. This has proved highly motivating and successful for the school. It is very difficult, however, to make such structural changes in the face of constantly shifting targets imposed from central government and its agencies.

Now the Government's drive is to remove Teaching Assistants. We would be horrified to lose ours because they are very skilled and work successfully with teachers. [MW]

Beyond this, the sense of negativity and threat and relentless demands for more is corrosive of the entire profession and process of education, and completely at odds with processes of school improvement.

> The overriding message that's coming over to the profession is that we're not good enough. I think there will always be issues that justify criticism, but education ministers shouldn't develop policy and make statements about the whole profession around such examples. This doesn't seem like a robust way of bringing about sustained development and improvement in any type of organisation... I don't know anybody who has successfully developed a school who uses that sort of language. That isn't how any emotionally intelligent person would set about trying to improve a school. [JG]

Finding a way out: the case for the defence

English schools have experienced 25 years of increasing centralised control, following the Education Reform Act of 1988 which gave future education ministers hundreds of new powers. The sense of arbitrary interference from one individual has become particularly acute under the present Government:

> I think we're at the vagaries of every Education Minister who steps up but we've never had anything quite as extreme as this. A very narrow view is coming through from the Government, so [Secretary of State for Education] Michael Gove and team, it's such a narrow view and a narrow background, that I think it's really reflecting their education, setting a standard for students to meet which has little resonance with what they will need for life. That's how it feels.[MW]

The only way out of this cul-de-sac – the result of 25 years of increasing centralised control – is by returning to a sense of professionalism and trust. The bureaucratic perspectives need to be replaced by:

> Respect for teachers' professionalism... respect for knowledge and experience we've built up with teachers. [MW]

As Mitchell and Sackney argued:

> Without trust, people divert their energy into self-protection and away from learning. When trust is lacking, people will not take the risks necessary to move the school forward. (2000)

The current model of high-stakes accountability, including a draconian and often erratic inspection regime, adds up to what Park (2013) describes as 'toxic accountability', to be replaced by the

'intelligent accountability' outlined by Lingard (2009), among many others. (See also Wrigley 2003: 45-59)

An important part of this is to replace a punitive model of external inspection with well supported school self-evaluation (see Macbeath 1999).

> We must be able to get to something better, whether it's peer-led inspections or peer-led review of some sort, there must be some better way than inspectors arriving in the car park or ringing the day before and saying, right I'm turning up or right I'm in the car park. There must be something which is less of dropping in, making a judgement in a few hours and going away again. [MW]

Teachers' knowledge is built on experience, with a close eye to detail, but is also about relationships:

> I still believe strongly that good teachers are emotionally intelligent, responsive relationship-builders. [JG]

It is on the basis of this kind of rich ethical knowledge, not simply numerical data, that a shared vision can be built:

> My approach, I suppose, is to have a very clear and shared understanding of our purpose as a school. We do want to be outstanding. We want every child to be achieving as well as they possibly can. This has to be shared and understood by everybody. To do this you've got to develop a culture of support, of challenge, of engagement. It's about developing a culture which enables children to develop as healthy, successful people. [JG]

The problems of urban schools cannot be solved by the schools alone; they need supportive partnerships, involving both the knowledge building which universities can help support and the assistance of local authorities which integrate different kinds of services locally:

> ...Schools need to work within local authorities which also provide housing, employment, health care and wellbeing, in order to address the complex needs which our children have. A school cannot address these on its own. We can work with the child and we can begin to work with families and we can hopefully begin to engage them, but there's no way that schools can do all the work in isolation.[JG]

The loss of possibility of this kind of integrated approach is perhaps one of the most counterproductive aspects of cutting schools loose, as 'academies', from democratically elected local government.

> I don't want to put forward the idea that local authorities were perfect. There were lots of aspects to their practice. Perhaps some had become a bit bloated? Had accountability slipped in places? Was the level of challenge not as strong as maybe it should be? But it was the wrong solution to rip it all apart and to ask a whole load of people who'd never been involved in education to come in and run schools. [JG]

The other silenced voice, at present, is that of professionals, often former teachers, working in Higher Education Institutions. The common perception might be they have the privilege of more time to read and greater opportunities to learn from a range of alternative practice, but they are in a precarious situation given current government moves to shift initial teacher education into schools. On the one hand, they must contend with the fall-out from funding reductions to Education Faculty, which often means under-staffing and increased workload, and on the other, the imminence of an Ofsted inspection to secure an 'outstanding' or 'good' grade to retain provision. This often gets in the way of more professional activities, and including attempts to develop responsive programmes for teachers in pre-service but also in-service. It is fortuitous that the other teachers and academic partners contributing to this special issue have experienced the power of dialogic learning in a particular form of partnership, the CPD 'twin-pack' comprised of the *Leading Learning* segment based on teacher inquiry strengthened by the allied MA *Achievement in City Schools*.

The word *relentless* is a favourite keyword among politicians who rely on negative data to demand of schools a 'relentless focus on Standards', a 'relentless drive to close the gap', and so on. A different kind of *relentless* emerges by listening to teachers' voices:

> Our moral purpose is based on realising that our children have one chance and it's with us and we must have the moral purpose to make sure that we do the very best for them. If you look at opportunity and life chances and moving students on, there is massively positive work being done. Teachers in classrooms every day are saying 'On my watch, I will not let that child slip through.' [MW]

The case for the defence of urban schools which face inordinate challenges must lie in listening attentively to those who work and learn in them. Without it, the struggle to improve learning and life opportunities for the most vulnerable students will remain elusive.

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