Alistair Ross   *Editor*

# Educational Research for Social Justice

## Evidence and Practice from the UK

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Volume 1

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Editor

# Educational Research for Social Justice

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## ⬡ Springer

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# Preface

My colleagues and contributors started work on this volume in the early summer of 2019. We completed the final editing of our copy in late March 2020, and the checking of proofs in December. The times had changed, and the messages in our chapters have acquired an unforeseen and dramatic resonance as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Firstly, expertise based on systematic and thorough research is critical in supporting the making of policy for the public good. Our messages are about the importance of this in education: but they apply with even greater import in other areas of policy, such as public health. There is a need to consider the dispassionate and considered arguments of researchers' expertise in policy-making circles: the experts may not always agree, but policy-makers have a duty to act in the public interest to understand and evaluate the evidence. Researchers have an obligation to investigate with the public interest in mind, and to report openly in clear language what they find. Equally, policy-makers always have a responsibility to take heed of the evidence.

Secondly, we need to agree on what constitutes public interest. We argue in these chapters that we cannot simply rely on the aggregation of individual desires, but have to consider the good of all people, across the globe, of each and every one of them. We argue here that research suggests that the neo-liberal order in the United Kingdom in many instances fails to provide education services for the public good. A similar message can be seen today – with dramatic clarity – with respect to public health services across the world. The early seventeenth-century English poet, John Donne, expressed this well.

> No man is an island,
> Entire of itself.
> Each is a piece of the continent,
> A part of the main.
> …
> Each man's death diminishes me,
> For I am involved in mankind.
> Therefore, send not to know
> For whom the bell tolls,
> It tolls for thee.

London, UK                                                                                  Alistair Ross
30 March 2020

# Acknowledgements

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# The Education System in England and Scotland

*Alistair Ross and Sarah Minty*

Many of the chapters in this book relate to the educational structures and systems found in the United Kingdom (UK), particularly those of England, and sometimes of Scotland. This section offers an outline description of these, and the ways which we will refer to it in this book. Table 0.1 gives figures for educational establishments and student numbers for each of the four countries in the UK.

Most education is provided by the state, but there is in England a system of private education that constitutes about 5.5% of pupils under 16, and 14% of 16–18-year-olds. While many private schools confusingly call themselves 'Public schools' or 'independent' schools, we will refer to them here as private.

The curriculum is established differently in each of the four countries, and is arranged by subjects. Where details of the curriculum are relevant to a particular chapter, details are given, but no overall synopsis is provided here.

In **England**, education is the responsibility of a Department of State, the title of which has changed six times over the past 40 years (see Table 0.2). (Universities have been largely the responsibility of the same Department up to June 2007[1], when they became part of the responsibility of a new Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, which was changed to become a Department of Business and Skills 2 years later. Within this a specific Minister of State focussed on the Universities brief. In May 2015, Universities were returned to the Department for Education, since when they have had a series of six appointments of Ministers of State for Universities (though only four individuals)) (Table 0.2).

State schools are commonly divided into primary schools, that run from 4 years old to 11, and secondary schools, from 11 to either 16 or 18. Secondary schools are generally comprehensive (mixed ability) in their intake, but in some areas (about 5% of the total) there are selective grammar schools with an entrance examination (known as 'the 11 plus'), and most private schools have some form of selection. Both primary and secondary schools are either Academies, Free Schools on under

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[1] Responsibility for some research funding was transferred to a separate Office of Science and Technology in April 1992, where it remained until subsumed into the new Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills in 2007

**Table 0.1**  Numbers of schools and students in different countries of the UK

|  |  | England | Scotland | Wales | Northern Ireland |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Primary schools | *Institutions* | 17,200 | 2,500 | 1,400 | 900 |
|  | *Students* | 2,330,000 | 194,000 | 135,000 | 90,000 |
| Secondary schools | *Institutions* | 3,400 | 360 | 210 | 200 |
|  | *Students* | 1,604,000 | 140,000 | 90,000 | 76,000 |
| Further education/sixth forms | *Institutions* | 350 | 20 | 15 | 5 |
| Special schools | *Institutions* | 1,040 | 140 | 40 | 40 |
|  | *Students* | 31,000 | 2,000 | 1,000 | 2,000 |
| Private schools | *Institutions* | 2,300 | 100 | 70 | 14 |
|  | *Students* | 284,000 | 29,000 | 5,000 | 3,000 |

Sources: Department for Education (2017) Education and Training Statistics for the United Kingdom. London: DES. Table 1.1; Scottish Council of Independent Schools (2018) http://www.scis.org.uk/facts-and-figures/

Local Authority control: Academy and Free schools have greater independence, and greater business, religious denominational or parental control than Local Authority schools. Current policy is to make Local Authority schools become Academies if they are judged to be failing. Students take national assessment tests in the years in which they are 7, 11 and 14. At 16 students normally take national General Certificate of Education courses in a range of subjects (usually at least five, including mathematics, English, double science and a humanities subject). Education is compulsory to 18, but schooling only until 16. Post 16 education can be at school, sixth form college of a further education college to age 18, when students undertake Advanced ('A') Level examinations in normally two to four subjects, or alternatives such as Business and Technology qualifications, International Baccalaureate, or Apprenticeship qualifications. All state-funded schools are regularly inspected by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), who publish reports on the quality of education of each school. Schools judged by Ofsted to be inadequate may be subject to special measures (such as replacing the governing body and senior staff, and becoming an Academy).

In **Scotland**, education has been devolved to the Scottish Government since 1997. State secondary schools are comprehensive in organisation, and have a range of names, such as High Schools, Academies, Secondary Schools, Grammar Schools, Junior High Schools and Colleges, but these do not signify any substantial difference in organisation, provision or status. There is a tradition of universal public education, with a significantly smaller proportion of private education than in England (although around a fifth of students in the City of Edinburgh attend independent schools). Inspections of educational standards are conducted by the Scottish Care Inspectorate (pre-school provision) and Education Scotland for schools.

Formal testing for primary pupils was introduced in 2017/2018, as part of a raft of changes related to the National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education in an attempt to tackle the attainment gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers. Scottish National Standardised

**Table 0.2** Administration of education (schools) in England, 1980–2020

| Department dates | Name of Department | abbrv | Secretary of State | appointed | Governing party / Prime Minister |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (1964) – 14 April 1992 | Department of Education and Science | DES | Mark Carlisle | 5 May 1979 | Conservative / *Margaret Thatcher* |
| | | | Keith Joseph | 14 Sept 1981 | |
| | | | Kenneth Baker | 21 May 1986 | |
| | | | John MacGregor | 24 July 1989 | |
| | | | Kenneth Clarke | 2 Nov 1990 | Conservative / *John Major* |
| 15 April 1992 – 19 July 1994 | Department For Education[a] | DFE | John Patten | 15 April 1992 | |
| 20 April 1994 – 7 June 2001 | Department for Education and Employment | DfEE | Gillian Shephard | 20 July 1994 | |
| | | | David Blunkett | 2 May 1997 | Labour / *Tony Blair* |
| 8 June 2001 – 27 June 2007 | Department for Education and Skills | DfES | Estelle Morris | 8 June 2001 | |
| | | | Charles Clarke | 24 Oct 2002 | |
| | | | Ruth Kelly | 11 Dec 2004 | |
| | | | Allan Johnson | 5 May 2006 | |
| 28 June 2007 – 11 May 2010 | Department for Children, Schools and Families | DCSF | Allan Johnson | 28 June 2007 | Labour / *Gordon Brown* |
| 12 May 2010 – (2020) | Department for Education[a] | DfE | Michael Gove | 12 May 2010 | Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition / *David Cameron* |
| | | | Nicky Morgan | 15 July 2014 | |
| | | | Justine Greening | 8 June 2015 | Conservative / *David Cameron* |
| | | | Justine Greening | 14 July 2016 | Conservative / *Theresa May* |
| | | | Damian Hinds | 8 Jan 2018 | |
| | | | Gavin Williamson | 24 July 2019 | Conservative / *Boris Johnson* |

Sources: to November 2017, Mortimore, Roger and Andrew Blick. (2018); thereafter, Wikipedia

[a]Note that the title of the Department of State responsible for education changes, but had the *same* title between 1992 and 1994 and from 2010. To distinguish them, we have used a capital F for the earlier Department, in both the full name and the abbreviation, and a lower case f for the later Department

Assessments are taken at age 5, 7, 11 and 15 (in P1, P3, P7 and S3). Traditionally, Scottish secondary education has been characterised as emphasising breadth across a range of subjects, unlike the rest of the UK, where there is a greater depth of education over a smaller range of subjects. However, the implementation of New National Qualifications in 2014 alongside the new Curriculum for Excellence have led to concerns of curriculum narrowing (Education and Skills Committee, 2019). The majority of students now sit six or seven National 4 and 5 qualifications (replacing the traditional eight Standard Grade qualifications) taken in S4 (age 16), before progressing to Highers at age 17 in S5. Most students go on to sit further Highers in S6 (age 18), while some also take Advanced Highers, considered to be equivalent to Scottish first-year degree programmes.

Across *the UK as a whole*, pupils are divided into age cohorts, and there are very few examples of pupils being held back or advances into a different year group. However, the year groups are described locally in different ways: through this book we will simply use the age of the pupil, in order to offer clarity for the international reader.

# Chapter 1
# What do educational science and the public good mean in the context of educational research for social justice?

**Alistair Ross** (ORCID)

**Abstract** This book has been written by a group of researchers who worked together variously over 2000–2015, who broadly share a commitment to educational research that leads to social justice. This introductory chapter sets out what we understand social justice to mean, and how this gives a particular connotation to the terms 'educational science' and 'the public good'. We share the same approach to the nature of educational policy research and its purposes, namely that it should be designed and conducted with the intention of illuminating or having an effect on public educational policy, and that this effect should be generally to counter the inequalities between the treatment and outcomes of different social groups within society, whether those groups were determined with respect to class, gender, ethnicity, disability, and other social categories. These values, we argue, are central and critical components of our professional and intellectual research and judgments. They contribute to what we conceive of as the public good: a society in which structural inequalities are minimised; where diverse identities are valued; outcomes (educational and other) for individuals and groups are broadly equal; all individuals are valued and have agency; and all members of society are engaged and empowered.

## Our purposes

This book has been written by a group of researchers who worked together variously between 2000 and 2015, who broadly share a commitment to educational research that leads to social justice. Our joint work was in a single research institution – the Institute for Policy Studies in Education (IPSE) – based in London Metropolitan University (UK), which collaborated with researchers across the UK and Europe, some of whom contribute here. Most of our work was funded by

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policy-oriented institutions, who commissioned research to meet particular briefs; some work was investigator-led, funded by research councils and foundations. We were established and developed as a research institute with a specific focus on contributing to social justice and equity in educational policy. We are thus a group of scholars who share the same approach to the nature of this kind of educational research and its purposes, namely that it should be designed and conducted with the intention of having an effect on public educational policy, and that this effect should be generally to counter the inequalities between the treatment and outcomes of different social groups within society, whether those groups were determined with respect to class, gender, ethnicity, disability, etc. This chapter sets out what we understand the terms social justice and equity to mean, and how this gives particular connotations to the terms 'evidence', 'educational science' and 'the public good'.

We begin by setting out our objectives in writing this volume. We intend to justify a particular perception of knowledge and understanding of educational enquiry and research, examining through practical examples its foundations, validity and limits, based on the values of social justice and equity which we acknowledge in our approaches to educational inquiry, to our analysis and findings. These values, we argue, are central and critical components of our professional and intellectual research and judgments. They contribute to what we conceive of as the public good: a society in which structural inequalities are minimised, in which diverse identities are valued, and the outcomes (educational and other) for groups are broadly equal. All individuals are valued and have agency, and all members of society are engaged and empowered.

Secondly, we set out our understanding of social justice and equity, particularly as they affect educational policies and practice in the settings and contexts in which we work. This is based on a critique of the ways in which educational 'efficiency' is seen to trump equity in policy-making. We challenge the promotion of educational institutions as participants in the competition of league tables, and of individual learners in a zero-sum game of meritocracy. We argue that these are based on instrumental views of education and a human capital model of education that essentialises, commodifies and values a particular form of education that is underpinned by neoliberal ideology.

Thirdly, we examine how such an understanding impacts on the meaning and nature of educational science. Educational practice is contingent and contextual, taking place through a myriad of social interchanges between learners and learners, and teachers and learners. Their circumstances and settings mean that they are not necessarily reproducible, and are thus not part of those branches of science that require results to be replicated. Our scientific approach to education recognises this, and seeks to examine and describe the constraints of particular kinds of data, and to use this to both qualify and illuminate our analysis. The social construction of social structures and processes means that terms and categories are imprecise and may be understood in a variety of ways: the quantification of social categories needs to be approached with caution (and is not infrequently used by the state as a means of control and surveillance); but they can nevertheless be used in educational research

in a heuristic manner. We also recognise and try to account for structural inequalities in our research approaches.

Fourthly, we consider how our understanding of social justice influences our construction of the public good. We question whether and to what extent state institutions – even in those countries that profess to be liberal democracies – can be seen as necessarily in a position to define the public good. The way in which such states have embraced international competitive league tables of 'educational performance' illustrates how the notion that education should be based around individual needs and aspirations has been overtaken by an assumption that league table success will lead to improved economic outcomes. Such expectations were evident to us when we undertook the researches we describe in this book, and our critical distancing from such assumptions was evident in our analyses, even where we were commissioned by those who held these positions. There are many very germane examples of this in current UK government policies in education, most notably in England.

The emphasis on equality of opportunity over equality of outcomes is, we believe, used to justify social inequalities by victimising weaker social groups and constructing them as the authors of their own misfortunes. Our research tries to identify structural inequalities and point to their significance in educational outcomes, and is based on the premise that, if there are inequalities between groups, there should be a presumption that there are institutional prejudices behind this, at school and policy levels, and in wider society (albeit possibly unwitting and unintended prejudices).

We then briefly describe our own institutional setting, focusing particularly on the processes by which we operated. How we developed our research practice, how we recruited, and how we operated: all of these may help the reader understand how and why we believe that using educational research in the ways we describe can contribute to specifically democratic, humanistic and values-based educational development for individuals, groups and societies. As an institute that explicitly focused on educational policy, and that was dependent on commissioned funding from policy-making bodies, our focus inevitably was primarily directed at educational institutions and structures, rather than the learning that takes place in informal contexts: however, we did sometimes research the inequalities that occur in such settings, for example, in Fretwell (Chapter 5, 2021), Ross (Chapter 12, 2021b) and some of the material in Hartsmar et al. (Chapter 13, 2021). We conclude this Chapter with an outline of the structure of the book and the individual contributions within it.

## Towards a social justice axiology of education research

The intention of this book is to challenge what we see as the dominant epistemological norms of educational policy research in the neoliberal context, and to offer some steps towards the re-definition of what might constitute 'the public good' that stress the values of social justice and equity rather than the mere summation of each

individual member of society's conception of 'good'. What are the characteristics of educational research that contribute to our understanding of social value? Some of our IPSE colleagues have previously considered 'what would a socially just educational system look like' (Francis and Mills 2012; also Reay 2012). Here we consider the same question as applied to educational research.

There has been a long and consistent literature that shows how education systems serve to reproduce and perpetuate social inequalities, from Stan Bowles and Herb Gintis (1976) outlining the correspondence between the practices of schooling and the labour requirements of capitalist production, through Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's (1990 [1970]) work *La Reproduction*, to the work of Stephen Ball (1994, 2003) and Diane Reay (2017) on social class and education. Inherent in all of these is not simply a *description* of inequality, but an insistence that policies be devised to *change* this. There has been an equally distinguished – though less voluminous – literature on social justice in education and educational research. The contributions in Morwenna Griffiths (2003) explored the tensions between striving for and implementing equality while also acknowledging individual and group differences. Carol Vincent (2003) explored similar issues, particularly with reference to diverse cultural identities. Melanie Walker and Elaine Unterhalter (2007) took a rather different approach, taking Amartya Sen's 'capability approach' to social justice, in which fairness and justice are determined less by the overall impact on society as a whole than the freedom of each person to make decisions they value and remove obstacles to those freedoms – the expansion of their capabilities ('the ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being; representing the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be': Sen 1993, p. 30). There have also been special issues of journals devoted to the topic, notably the *Journal of Education Policy* in 1998 (Gewirtz 1998) and in 2012 (Francis and Mills 2012).

Not all educational researchers feel this imperative: Becky Francis (2011) has criticised educational research as 'far too removed from policy and practice' (p. 4) in England and the UK, and that 'as educationalists, we should be concerned to increase our research 'impact'… beyond the narrow drivers of research assessment measurements' (pp. 4–5). But she also notes firstly the dissonance between researchers and policy makers embedded in neoliberal ideologies who drive 'instrumental understandings of the purpose of education as exclusively economic, and of education credentials as exclusive indicators of "quality"' (p. 7), and secondly the dominant ideology of many educational researchers apparently leading to a focus on deconstructing contemporary policies and their suppositions rather than proposing constructive alternatives. Francis attributes this lack of direct engagement with policy to four factors: (a) the relativism that encourages deconstruction rather than construction, discounting claims to 'truth'; (b) the research evaluation in UK Higher Education (and increasingly in other countries), which prioritises publication in relatively esoteric journals rather than communication with practitioners and policy audiences; (c) the expectation that policymakers will disregard research findings; and (d) a tendency to criticise, rather than to become associated with existing policies and practices. Elsewhere, Francis and Martin Mills challenge education researchers as possibly being 'in danger of becoming knowing observers of

psychological phenomena, comparing clever notes within our own exclusive circle, while practice and policies that exacerbate inequalities continue oblivious and unabated' (2012, p. 578).

Structural inequalities, both in educational provision and in educational outcomes, are an important part of the problem that needs to be addressed in educational research. Reay, however, makes the point that schools and education (and research) cannot compensate for social and economic injustices: 'social class [must be] recognised as a fundamental division in British education that requires urgent, far-reaching attention' (Reay 2012, p. 588), and she argues not just for broadening the idea of educational success beyond the academic, but that our focus should not be on 'perceived differences of ability and aptitude but rather [on] children's very unequal and unfair educational starting points' (Reay 2011, p. 2). She draws on Richard Tawney's seminal work, *Equality*, in which he describes the 'barbarous associations of differences of educational opportunity with distinctions of wealth and social position' (Tawney 1931, p. 210), that create perceptions of social inferiority to become 'the cannon-fodder of industry' (p. 203) that cannot be rectified until 'children of all classes of the community attend the same schools' (p. 204). The inequality between private and public education continues to persist nearly 90 years after Tawney wrote: private schools, with about 7% of the UK's pupils, consume 21.3% of total educational spending, and spending per private school pupil is 3.6 times greater than the amount spent on a state school pupil (Ryan and Sibieta 2010, p. 2; OECD 2012, p. 257).

Perhaps more significantly, Tawney also challenges the commonly perceived purposes of education:

> individual happiness does not only require that men [*sic*] should be free to rise to new positions of comfort and distinction; it also requires that they should be able to lead a life of dignity and culture, whether they rise or not, and that, whatever their position on the economic scale may be, it shall be such as is fit to be occupied by men. (Tawney 1931, p. 146)

This is another cause of educational injustice: the utilitarian and instrumental imperative that the purpose of education is to valorise and maximise the *economic* capacity of every individual. Griffiths has challenged this, writing that education should 'also concern itself with living educational experiences as part of what makes a good life' (2012, p. 655). Education should be valued when 'it cultivates valued outcomes in an individual, such as autonomy, citizenship, imagination and critical thinking, all of which are significant for the establishment of cohesive, democratic and free societies' (p. 656). Such a conception of education, of cultivating or building the individual within and as part of broader society is cognate with the German educational tradition of *Bildung*, the cultural maturation of the self, recognising individual diversities, developing agency, talents and abilities. *Bildung* is thus, as Georg Hegel argued (1985 [1840]), about keeping oneself open to that which is the other (Jurist 2000).

Griffiths maintains that education should be liberal, in the *Bildung* sense, as being an intrinsically pleasurable process that is 'part of what makes a good life good, not just as part of what is requires to produce a good life [in the future]'

(2012, p. 656). Such a broader, humanistic education has at its core both individual, personal growth and fulfilment, but also the improvement of society (and the whole of humankind). Eleonora Belfiore refers to humanities and arts education as having the power to 'instil civic values, thus contributing to the progress of humankind' which 'have a crucial moral function of guidance' (Belfiore 2011, p. 32).

This contrasts most uneasily with the exposition of the English Minister of State for Schools, Nick Gibb, in an address on 'The purpose of education' (Gibb 2015a). In this he stresses that:

> Education is the engine of our economy, it is the foundation of our culture, and it's an essential preparation for adult life. … [it is] about the practical business of ensuring that young people receive the preparation they need to secure a good job and a fulfilling career.

The purpose of schooling, he went on, was to 'ensure that more people have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in a demanding economy… [which] starts by getting the basics right. Here too, our long-term performance has lagged behind those of our international competitors' (Gibb 2015a). This sense of education as a competitive performance has pervaded the UK's neoliberal discourse for more than 40 years, as will be examined in more detail below, and Gibbs' views on various aspects of teaching and testing in Chapter 3, (Hutchings 2021a). By comparison, the Scottish Executive's policy of the purpose of education is significantly broader, less instrumental, and aspire to combine both individual and societal outcomes and benefits: 'our aspiration for all children and for every young person is that they should be successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society and at work' (Curriculum Review Group 2004, p. 12).

## What do we mean by social justice and equity?

Before examining our approach to the key terms that define this book series – 'educational science' and 'public good' – it may help to offer some notes towards a definition of our underlying axiological drivers, social justice and equity.

In some ways, equality has been a particularly British (or more precisely, English) obsession. Matthew Arnold (the poet and critic – and the Chief Inspector of English state schools in the 1880s) spoke of the English 'religion of inequality' (1878, p. 333). In an address to the Royal Institution, he spoke of the greed of the aristocratic and middle classes for 'wishing and trying for the bigger share' (p. 313). Arnold had at this point nearly 27 years' experience of visiting elementary schools across England on a near daily basis: he deplored 'the wall of partition' between the middle classes and the working classes: 'they seem to belong to two different worlds' (p. 323).

A commonly used measure of economic equality is the Gini coefficient (Gini 1911, 1936), which measures the frequency distribution of a population on a scale from zero (perfect equality, all incomes are the same) to one (total inequality, one

person has all the income). The Gini coefficient on disposable income (after taxation) can be used to show both changes in a country over time, and comparisons of the relative distribution between countries (ignoring actual differences of overall or average incomes in each country). Most European countries had a Gini index of between 0.25 and 0.35 in the 2010s (Balestra and Tonkin 2018), and these have shown slight rises in inequalities over the past 50 years (for example, Germany rose from 0.25 to 0.29; Italy rose from 0.30 to 0.34; Sweden rose from 0.21 to 0.26 and the Netherlands from 0.26 to 0.29); in contrast, in the UK the index has risen more rapidly from 0.24 in the mid-70s to 0.35 in 2010 (thus a growing inequality). Another measure of inequality is the share of wealth or of post-tax income between each tenth of the population: Table 1.1 shows the changes in income distribution between 1979 and 2015/6 and the even greater disparities in the distribution of wealth in 2012–2014 by deciles.

John Rawls addressed issues such as these in *A Theory of Justice* (1971). He argued that the rules of distribution within a group would be fair if a person agreed to be bound by those rules, even when s/he was unaware of how those rules affected them – whether by adding to their personal share, or lessening it. Rawls thus combines egalitarianism with a form of mutual moderating liberalism: his innovation counters the way that utilitarian models of equality subordinate individual claims to the overriding demand for the general public good. Inequalities were only permissible to Rawls if they left everybody better off. From this he concluded that:

> … resources for education are not to be allocated solely or necessarily mainly according to their return as estimated in productive trained abilities, but also according to their worth in

**Table 1.1** Distribution of post-tax income 1979 and 2015/6, and wealth 2012–14, United Kingdom

|            | Income | | Wealth |
|            | 1979 | 2015/16 | 2012 - 14 |
|------------|------|---------|-----------|
| Top 10%    | 21   | 23.0    | 40        |
| Second 10% | 14   | 15.3    | 20.5      |
| Third 10%  | 12   | 12.3    | 13.5      |
| Fourth 10% | 11   | 10.3    | 9.5       |
| Fifth 10%  | 10   | 8.8     | 7         |
| Sixth 10%  | 8    | 7.7     | 4.5       |
| Seventh 10%| 7    | 6.8     | 3         |
| Eighth 10% | 7    | 6.0     | 1.5       |
| Ninth 10%  | 6    | 5.3     | 0.5       |
| Bottom 10% | 4    | 4.6     | 0.1       |

Notes. 2015/16 income figures exclude non-taxpayers, and include tax credits for some in the bottom decile. Wealth includes property, financial, physical and private pension fund wealth
Sources: Income: 1979/97: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (1997). *Income mobility in Britain (Social Policy Research Report 121)*. York: JRF
   Income: 2015/16: ONS. (2018a). *Household disposable income and inequality in the UK: financial year ending 2017* Table 3.1a. London: ONS
   Wealth: ONS (Office for National Statistics). (2018b). *Wealth in Great Britain Wave 4, 2014 to 2016.* Figure 3. London: ONS

enriching the personal and social life of citizens, *including here the less favoured.* (Rawls 1971, p. 107; emphasis added)

He observed that this countered the model of meritocracy, because the upper classes had disproportionate access to means, rights and organisational authority: 'Equality of opportunity means an equal chance to leave the less fortunate behind in the personal quest for influence and social position' (Rawls 1971, pp. 106–7; see also Chapter 14 in this volume).

Meritocracy has proved to be an unusually and perversely interpreted concept. It was by no means a twentieth century construction: imperial China had established this through competitive examinations for bureaucratic office in the Tang dynasty in the eighth century, and the ossification that followed in the effective inheritance of posts into closed circles of families (Moore 1967, pp. 164–5). Both Rawls and Barrington Moore were drawing on the seminal satire by Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033: An Essay on Education and Equality* (1958) – the title is usually abbreviated to the first five words: the two dates in the title should have alerted all those who have subsequently referred to the book without reading it that this was no ordinary 'essay on education and equality'. Young's work is a satirical fiction, supposedly written in 2034 – a half century after George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – as a sociological explanation of the populist riots of May 2033. Young took the term from an article by Alan Fox (1956), who wrote of 'the "meritocracy"; the society in which the gifted, the smart, the energetic, the ambitious and the ruthless are carefully sifted out and helped towards their destined positions of dominance' (Fox 1956, p. 13). In an academic style, Young sets out – with references to real social analysts before 1957, and many fictional reports and articles after this date – an explanation of how the development of equality of opportunity and attempts to increase social mobility, building on Tawney and many others, had led to the rise of a closed group of wealthier families, who gained privileged access to the educational systems that validated their children's entitlement to power and position.

> Many people were catapulted forward by their parents' riches and influence … they were sent to the best schools and colleges, dispatched on trips abroad and given expensive training for the Bar, counting-house or surgery [i.e. the professions of the law, banking and medicine] … Educational injustice enabled people to preserve their illusions, inequality of opportunity fostered the myth of human equality. Myth we know it to be; not so our ancestors. (Young 1958, pp. 104, 106)

Young's thesis was intended as a dystopian warning: if equality was reduced to the mere *opportunity* to succeed, then it would impede and militate against social mobility. As Reay, writing 60 years later, observes, a small number of elite universities:

> … reproduce the British elite … polishing, refining and accentuating the elitism and sense of superiority acquired in earlier schooling. … Educational choice is based on the resources and social power and networks of the parents rather than the ability and effort of the child. Meritocracy is all ideological bluff with no substance. (Reay 2017, p. 123)

Meritocracy has turned education into a competition for accreditation. Equality of opportunity is used to justify the concentration of educational resources on the

fraction of the population who are judged to 'best benefit' by its efforts. Those with ability and application are rewarded with examination grades and access to particular higher education that entitle them to positions of power, influence and wealth. Those judged not to have ability, or not to make sufficient application to their studies, will fail: but this failure will be justified as a consequence of their lack of talent or of effort. It is turned into a game, with the metaphor of 'a level playing field' being used to justify winners and losers. Despite the rhetoric of 'raising standards', the objective of the educational system is to identify and mark sheep and goats. The losers – and there must be losers, if winners are to emerge – become the authors of their own subsequent misfortunes, and are encouraged to believe and accept this.

Young wrote in 2001, six months before his death, how 'sadly disappointed' he was at the misuse of his book:

> It is good sense to appoint individual people to jobs on their merit. It is the opposite when those who are judged to have merit of a particular kind harden into a new social class without room in it for others. Ability of a conventional kind, which used to be distributed between the classes more or less at random, has become much more concentrated by the engine of revolution. A social revolution has been accomplished by harnessing schools and universities to the task of sieving people according to education's narrow band of values. With an amazing battery of certificates and degrees … education has put its seal of approval on a minority, and its seal of disapproval on the many. (Young 2001)

Access to higher education, in the UK and in most other countries, expanded dramatically in the 1990s and 2000s. But it did so differentially: most of the growth was achieved by recruiting more and more middle-class young people. Instead of a relatively small proportion of the middle classes attending university, as in the 1940s and 1950s, it became for them a *rite de passage*. For working-class young people – always a tiny minority of university entrants – it remains a far less common route (Archer et al. 2003). This is a global phenomenon: Oliver Nachtwey has recently analysed what he calls the 'regressive modernization' of Germany, concluding that 'the more a society is based on equality of opportunity, the more unequal it becomes, and the more legitimate its inequalities' (Nachtwey 2018, p. 99).

There is an argument that this does not matter: the size of the pot is increasing, and almost everyone is, in historical terms, better off than before. Steven Pinker insists that there has been very real progress and change in the world. He is particularly dismissive of the concept of equality, referring to it as 'spiteful envy' (Pinker 2018, p. 98). He suggests that inequality is frequently confused with unfairness, and that most people are unconcerned by inequality, and more concerned with 'fairness'. Pinker cites a study that suggests 'there is no evidence so far that children or adults possess any general aversion to inequality' (Starmans et al. 2017, p. 5). But this study firstly shows that people generally are unaware of the scale of inequality, and secondly assumes a context in which fairness is broadly constructed using Rawls-like understandings of equity. For example, another study of American adults showed that, given a choice between three distributions (two based on real, but unidentified wealth distributions, the third based on absolute equality) and asked which country they would prefer to live in if they were be randomly assigned to a distribution, 90% of Americans would wish to live in a more equitable state than the

USA (Norton and Ariely 2011). When asked to estimate the actual distribution of wealth in the United States, they thought it dramatically narrower than is actually the case, and they said they would prefer an even more equal distribution than the one they erroneously believe exists. The responses were broadly similar for women and men, Republican and Democrat supporters, and by income group.

Inequalities matter even more when they correlate with particular groups. The examples used above relate mostly to socioeconomic class; but there are also inequalities in income, wealth, power and influence between men and women, those with disabilities and those without, and members of different ethnic groups. When there are inequalities between such groups – in competencies or educational attainment, as much as in income and wealth – then there are a consequential range of invidious consequences, as shown in the work of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2009, 2018). More unequal societies (countries, even different states in the USA) have greater levels of illness, premature death, social discontent, violence, and social immobility) than more equitable societies, and the same is true for groups with a society.

Ides Nicaise (2000) has suggested that educational inequalities arise from two forms of failure. Those 'on the demand side' occur when the socioeconomic characteristics of a group lead to individuals in these groups not taking up educational provision. Failures on 'the supply side' happen when educational policies and practices disadvantage members of a group: this includes both institutional prejudice against these groups and the inability of institutions to actively respond to the specific and different needs of particular groups. Both are structural failings; and each interacts with the other. If the 'supply side' institutions cannot adequately support a group, they create a situation in which members of the group lower their aspirations and expectations, and make fewer demands on the educational system. This interaction creates self-sustaining failure.

Many students, teachers, schools and governments have low expectations of groups that do not, on average, do well at school, and such groups need to be supported to expect that they can achieve.

In most educational settings, those responsible for educational provision also have different expectations of how different groups will perform, and make decisions about what level of performance to expect based on the student's gender, ethnic origin, social class – or whatever distinguishing characteristic they believe may impact on attainment and potential (for an example of this, see Strand 2012). Low teacher expectations of a group create the conditions in which attainment is low: low pupil expectations lead to underperformance. We need to tackle both supply and demand in order to achieve equitable outcomes. Learners with low self-expectations perform less well. As Young observed, those judged by the educational system not to have merit are 'easily demoralised by being looked down on so woundingly by people who have done well for themselves' (Young 2001). A teaching profession that represents all in society might be a first step towards raising self-esteem (Ross 2002, 2012). David Olusoga, a distinguished historian and broadcaster, brought up in a working-class part of Newcastle, illustrates the point:

I never had a black teacher or lecturer, I never once met a black British person who held any sort of professional or managerial role. And by the time I was a teenager in the 1980s, I had, through some process of societal osmosis, internalised the idea that black people didn't, or perhaps couldn't, do certain jobs or hold certain positions … That is how racism operates. (Olusoga 2019)

It is the *outcome* of policy and practice that is significant, not the *intention*. That various groups suffer educational disadvantage, despite policy initiatives to counter this, suggests that whatever the intentions, educational systems institutionally discriminate against the disadvantaged. The term 'educational institutional inequality' might be used to identify the collective failure of an educational institution(s) to provide appropriate educational services for minority groups, social, cultural, linguistic, behavioural or other characteristics. Such policies amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and stereotyping which result in the group as a whole achieving lower educational outcomes than the population as a whole (Chapter 13, Hartsmar, Leathwood et al. 2021).

Concerns and ideas such as these about the nature and purpose of educational research, and its potential role in moving towards a greater sense of social justice and the need for striving towards equality of outcomes have permeated most of our work, collectively and individually. But they raise particular issues in the contemporary world: how do they equate with current conceptions of educational research as a science, and how to they relate to various understandings of what might constitute 'the public good' and how and by whom this might be determined? It is to these concerns that we turn in the following two sections.

## Educational science in the context of social justice and equity

Most of the authors of this volume have worked within postmodern and poststructural theory in our research. This creates particular issues when researching policy if one has the ambition of informing and effecting the practice of policy making. Policy makers want to know definitive answers: what works, and how can policy achieve this. Four issues about the nature of 'science' particularly appear to impinge on social justice and equity objectives: ontology, measurement, reproducibility and categorisation.

In everyday life, we look for patterns and certainty, for effects to be the consequence of causes. Working in the social sciences, many of us have rejected notions of a single 'truth' (Francis 2011, p. 8). But one of the shibboleths of much science (or at least, common perceptions of it) is that science is a value-free objective process that produce results that can be replicated, and that social research must be judged by these criteria. In the UK, a government minister (Sir Keith Joseph) decided in 1983 that the country's Social Science Research Council – the conduit for government funding of social science research – did not operate 'scientifically', and required it (under threat of removal of its funding) to redesignate itself as the Economic and Social Research Council. This view of the nature of science does not

seem to be that of many scientists. Roberto Torretti (1999) observes that many physicists hold what is termed an instrumentalist position: that science can show nothing true or false about nature's unobservable objects, properties or processes. Scientific theory is simply a tool that allows no more than the prediction of observations and the formulation of laws that summarise regularities, but do not (and cannot) reveal aspects that *explain* such laws. Niels Bohr's (1928) 'Copenhagen interpretation' holds that reality is determined by the scientist's choice of experiment: some experiments cause light to behave like a particle, while others make it act like a wave – there is no fundamental 'truth' about what light 'actually' is. Sub-atomic particles do not have a precise location until a scientist measures it, and the act of measurement itself determines its position. Werner Heisenberg's (Born and Heisenberg 1925) indeterminacy principle is that if an electron's position is determined in this way, then its momentum at that point cannot also be known, and vice-versa. The more accurately one of these values is known, the less accurate is the other. This is not a function of experimental limitations, but of the nature of the electron. The 'reality' of physics only provides 'answers' when it is directly questioned.

The same seems true of the social sciences. In education, for example, policy makers want to know about how well reading is being taught, on the assumption that reading is capable of both definition and measurement. There is a common-sense notion of what 'being able to read' is, but there are many texts, in English, that many of us are unable to make sense of – we can 'read' the words, but cannot understand what the text means. But 'teaching to read' is something that governments increasingly expect to measure, and common-sense again expects that there is a best way to teach reading and to measure the success of this process. The UK (England) government (among others) has decided that 'the most effective way to teach a child to read is a robust programme of systematic synthetic phonics' (DFE 2015, p. 4). A proxy for measuring progress in reading is thus to assess how well a child can attribute a phonic sound to a set of letters. Policy makers decided in 2012 to 'introduce … a phonics screening check for pupils at [the age of 6]… The simple check asks pupils to read 40 words, of which 20 are pseudo-words. This allows teachers to identify those pupils with a genuine grasp of decoding, and those in need of further support' (DFE 2015, p. 4). Thus to 'measure' something as complex as reading, a proxy is selected that is 'not reading', which is used to indicate a reading ability level. Teachers are required to teach a system of phonics (an analysis of which shows that the English language is full of exceptions to phonic 'rules': Berdiansky et al. 1969). Teachers must prepare children to be able to 'say' words that do not exist – which they do, as within two years of the introduction of this test the proportion able to do so rose from 58% to 74% (DfE 2015). Merryn Hutchings (Chapter 3, 2021a) elaborates further on this. This is as classic an example of the taking of measurements causing the nature of what is being observed to shift as any indeterminacy principle in sub-atomic physics.

Policy makers – and researchers themselves – want research findings to be reproducible: conducting the same study, under similar conditions, should produce the same results. There is, however, a current concern that many scientific findings – in the non-social science area – are not replicable. A survey in 2015 of over 1500

scientists by the journal *Nature* found that 52% thought that there were significant problems over reproducibility, and a further 38% thought it an issue of a lesser order (Baker 2016). Some 70% had tried and failed to reproduce another scientist's experiments, and more than half failed to reproduce their own experiments. Education researchers in general have been castigated by David Hargreaves (1996) as producing findings that were non-cumulative, unsystematic and non-replicable: moreover, the research was not known of, or conducted by, practitioners, in contrast to medical research. 'Replications, which are more necessary in the social than the natural sciences because of the importance of contextual and cultural variations, are astonishingly rare' (Hargreaves 1996, p. 2). His advocacy of Randomised Control Trials in educational research ignores the essential contingencies of educational/learning settings (Hammersley 1997; Koutsouris and Norwich 2018). Hargreaves contrasts educational research with medical research: 'the spread of evidence-based medicine is rooting much medical research firmly in the day-to-day practices of doctors' (Hargreaves 1996, p. 3). Martyn Hammersley's counter to this was to deny that teachers' work could be compared to that of doctors: their work 'is a matter of making judgements, rather than following rules' (Hammersley 1997, p. 147). And medical research itself suffers from the same issues as the other natural sciences: a recent study found that 47 out of 53 medical research papers focused on cancer research could not be reproduced (Begley and Ellis 2012). Social science research in general 'suffers' from non-replicability, but, as has been shown, this is no more than in the natural sciences (Camerer et al. 2018; considered in greater detail in Chapter 2, Menter 2021).

Much empirical social science research has also been criticised for drawing subjects from a very narrow base: one estimate is that 80% of the subjects of non-USA studies are drawn from psychology undergraduates in the capital city of a country (Arnett 2008), which are then extrapolated to be representative of the country's inhabitants in general (Rozin 2001). Samuel Gosling et al. (2004) found that social science research articles purportedly representing the general population were based on samples in which 85% were undergraduates, 71% of the participants were female, and over 80% were White. Joseph Henrich et al. (2010) characterise much social research as being based on 'WEIRD' population samples – Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic. Philippe Rochat (2010) points out that:

> in academia, *a priori* claims of universality sell better than diversity, which complicates rather than simplifies matters. Universality claims get more attention because they are cleaner and sharper, encompassing control and predictive power … [with] greater impact and appeal. This tends to relegate diversity to noise rather than as a primary object of study. (Rochat 2010, p. 107)

The social subject is, by definition, socially constructed, and its activities take place within the context of social interactions (Hammersley 1997). The subjects of the processes of learning – students, teachers, school leaders and policy makers – are grouped and classified as having particular identity characteristics that are often regarded as essentialised and immutable. It can be argued that even what the individual might think to be an intrinsic and natural element of their identity is at least

partially determined by social interaction (Foucault 1977 [1975]; Brubaker 2016). Social constructivism is based on the premise that we can only develop our sense of self-identity through social processes: all our identities are socially determined as we define ourselves in relationship to others, whether in a direct relationship or as the same as or different to the other. Others will also be simultaneously defining our identity in their terms, based on their perceptions and constructions of what they think – or assume – our identity to be, and this will not always correspond, and might even be the opposite of the identities we wish to assume.

Categories of nationality, citizenship and ethnicity are not fixed and predetermined, but dynamically constructed. Francesca Decimo and Alessandra Gribaldo (2017) have referred to:

> the strain of categorization and the proliferation of boundaries … Census records, vital records, passports, identification documents, church records and medical research data establish and grant materiality to the categorisations that inform our identities: beyond sex and age, they designate citizenship, nationality, lineage, religion, ancestry, health, language, ethnicity and race. (Decimo and Gribaldo 2017, p. 5)

Modern states require the classification of their populations: Benedict Anderson pointed to their need to distinguish between 'peoples, regions, religions, languages' in order to impose a 'totalizing classificatory grid' (Anderson 1991, p. 184). A Foucauldian model of the surveillance of state is used by David Kertzer and Dominique Arel to explain how 'the use of identity categories … creates a particular vision of social reality. All people are assigned to a single category, and are hence conceptualised as sharing, with a certain number of others, a common collective identity' (Kertzer and Arel 2002, p. 5; also Nicoll et al. 2013). Instead of situationally-determined complex social linkages, the reification process of identity categories creates neat boundaries between mutually exclusive groups (Kertzer 2017). The process of enumeration and assignation through:

> … body-counts create not only types and classes … but also homogeneous bodies, because number, by its nature, flattens idiosyncrasies and creates boundaries around these homogeneous bodies, since it performatively limits their extent … Statistics are to bodies and social types what maps are to territories: they flatten and enclose. (Appadurai 1996, p. 133)

The presumption that everyone will easily fit into such groups becomes increasingly unlikely as migration patterns in Europe are creating new diversities: more people of mixed origins makes it increasingly difficult to use these identity categories (Vertovec 2007).

These issues – of ontology, of measurement, of reproducibility and reliability, of sampling and categorisation – significantly impact on educational research directed towards developing policies of social justice and equity. It is critical to recognise and emphasise the pragmatic compromises necessary in conducting research in these areas:

- the very processes of both policy and research in education necessarily impact on and alter the processes and nature of teaching and learning;

- defining and analysing and educational activities require the measurement of proxies, that not only approximate but change the character of what is being observed;
- social interactions are so contextually created that they can never be reproduced; and
- classifying and characterising populations is no more than a heuristic device, and should be made contextually, at the time and in the context of the particular research activity.

## Determining the 'public good' in the context of social justice and equity

How does our understanding of social justice influence our construction of the public good? There must be questions about whether and to what extent state institutions – even those that profess to be liberal democracies – can be seen as necessarily the best agents to define the public good. States and their policy agents operate in what they see as the *state's* best interests (or the best interest of the *individual policy maker's* career or political affiliation), rather than necessarily in the public's best interests, or even the best interests of the subset of the public that are citizens of that particular country. Governmental processes, particularly in democracies, operate on a relatively short-term basis, largely related to election cycles: they procrastinate and deflect concerns for longer term conceptions of the public good (as we continue to see in relation to the climate crisis). States distinguish between their citizens, in whose interest they ostensibly operate, and resident non-citizens – who are nevertheless part of 'the public'. States see themselves as competing globally, operating to maximise their position – economically, politically, educationally – at the expense of other states (and their 'publics') in what is construed as a zero-sum game. And states (whether oligarchic, democratic or meritocratic) are essentially operated by self-perpetuating elites, who rationalise their best interests as being the same as the public's best interests.

Neoliberalism is the ideology that so pervasively frames the action of the state in a way that it is often scarcely recognised as an ideology. It appears to be so firmly embedded that it appears a natural, neutral law, similar to evolution or gravity (Štremfel 2018). But it acts to define competition as the central characteristic of social relationships, and the market as a system for allocating values and priorities. Individuals are consumers, and we exercise our citizenship through making choices in the same way as we do through buying and selling. The market trumps planning, direction and control by the state, and the state forfeits its ability and right to make decisions to the market. Limiting competition is regarded as an affront to individual liberty: taxes and regulations are minimised. The market produces a natural hierarchy of winners and losers in a zero-sum game, so inequality is virtuous and consequential. The market rewards those who create wealth and supply the needs of the

market: as Young predicted, the rich are convinced that it is their own merit that is being rewarded, and the poor blame themselves for their failure.

This line of argument would suggest that it is not structural unemployment that is responsible for young people not finding work, but their lack of effort to gain appropriate skills, or to stay in education for longer to gain such skills (Ross and Leathwood 2013). The reason that a state's Gross Domestic Product rises at a rate more or less than its competitors is, erroneously, held to be country's comparative success in the mathematics, literacy and science scores of its young people in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), so policy is directed (as shown above) at improving such scores through activities that may raise test results. The PISA ratings now 'command significance far beyond that of a mere informative basis for decision-making' (Bøyum 2014, p. 857; see also Chapter 3, Hutchings 2021a).

The original proponent of the theory that the market exercised an 'invisible hand' that governed economic relations is attributed to Adam Smith in his treatise *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Much misquoted, Smith pointed to the need for 'the market' to be an area where everyone was equally able to make fully informed choices, an area where the state should minimise the likelihood of 'people of the same trade … meet[ing] together … in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices' (Smith 1970 [1776], p. 200), and one in which the state should be obliged to provide essential monopolies such as lighthouses, roads and canals. These were ignored in the neoliberal tract *The Road to Serfdom* (Hayek 1944), which argued that government interference in the economy would crush individualism and inevitably lead to tyranny. Tony Judt (2011) pointed to Friedrich Hayek's lack of reference to the need to maintain essential state services, at the expense of unfettered competition.

The consequence of the neoliberal ideology is that the public sphere – an arena of deliberation and the reasoned contestation of ideas – becomes a literal marketplace of individual preferences and self-interest. While the influence and vigour of the jurist or the legislator, the academic or the social reformer, came from humanistic values of justice, rights and public society, neoliberalism replaces these with the logic of the algorithm. 'People in this country have had enough of experts,' observed Michael Gove in June 2016, when he was England's Minister of Justice (Mance 2016).

The way in which states have embraced international competitive league tables of 'educational performance' illustrates how the education of individuals has been subsumed to the 'efficiency' of economic outcomes. Education has become increasingly seen as a competitive process, as instrumental reasons are used to justify educational policies and to drive both parental and national ambitions. In international competition, the development of scales and league tables that have followed the introduction of PISA has led to individual governments fretting about international rankings, asserting that these are closely related to eventual economic performance. Quantitative comparison has become the mode of governance: Sotiria Grek refers to this as 'governing by numbers' (2009, p. 23).

George Papadopoulos, responsible for the OECD's educational work from the early 1970s to 1991, reviewed the Organisation's early work in the field in *Education*

*1960–1990: The OECD Perspective* (1994). He noted that the OECD's involvement in educational policy dated back to the 1960s, when educational quality and human resource development were core issues: by the early 1970s, its emphasis had shifted to 'fairer distribution of educational opportunities and the social benefits' (Papadopoulos 1994, p. 106). Although the 1974 oil crisis meant that 'social and equality considerations receded to the background, giving way to economic ones' (p. 202), by the early 1980s, the OECD was aware of the 'painful social consequences, which both sharpened disadvantage and extended it to new groups' (p. 166). By the late 1980s, the OECD began – with pressure and financial support from the USA, to become involved in the collection of statistical time series of educational performance in member states, more aligned with economic imperatives. But, as Fazal Rizvi and Bob Lingard (2009) observed, Papadopoulos had not then realised the extent of this shift: equality and social cohesion through education 'have been thoroughly rearticulated … becoming instruments of economic policy associated with a new vocabulary of the knowledge economy' (2009, p. 437).

Until the 1990s, only eleven states in Europe used national tests in compulsory education, six more began in the 1990s, and by 2009 only four states did *not* have standardised national tests (Rey 2010). PISA was introduced first in 2000, and while it has highlighted issues of inequity (for example, the association between social background and educational performance: see Hartsmar et al. 2021; Chapter 13), its discourse of equity has been incorporated into economic rationality (d'Agnese 2018a, 2018b). Rizvi and Lingard (2009, p. 448) also suggest that equality has been relegated from being a moral value by the OECD to become a component of the development of human capital. Rizvi (2013) had described this as a shift from a social democratic to a market construction of equity. 'Equity has become separated from traditional ideas of social justice and re-articulated as formal access to education and participation in markets' (Bøyum 2014, p. 857).

Steinar Bøyum analyses OECD policy documents in some depth, and concludes that it 'explicitly operates with a loose idea of equal opportunity, compatible with even a merely formal equality, but implicitly with a meritocratic variant of fair equality of opportunity' (Bøyum 2014, p. 865). He concludes that the OECD's processes isolate educational justice from social justice in general: their 'emphasis [is] on equality of opportunity as a means through which to achieve positions in the social hierarchy … [but there] is no discussion of the rightfulness of that social hierarchy itself' (p. 867). This is not merely a European phenomenon: from Ontario, Gol Rezai-Rashtini (2017) and her colleagues report that PISA has led to:

> … [the] redefinition of equity … made possible through neoliberal systems of accountability and performativity involving measurement and facticity (Sardoč 2018). As a result of these strategies, equity policy in education has been concerned with outcome measurement and boys' underachievement, while racial and class inequalities have become invisible. (Rezai-Rashtini et al. 2017, p. 160)

Ambitions to address educational inequity thus fit uneasily with other policy initiatives and ideologies. The European Union has set itself the target of maintaining (or improving) Europe's comparative educational ranking. The Lisbon Council

concluded that the target of becoming 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' (European Union 2000, para. 5) required Europe's education systems 'adapt both to the demands of the knowledge society and to the need for an improved level and quality of employment' (para. 25). The Commission has developed these strategies, and recent documents stress that education should be seen in economic terms, designed to create a competitive economy (European Commission 2007). Educational success is often positioned as key to employment: it becomes not just important to do well in education – other people have to do worse, if one is to gain employment in a competitive market.

There are similar competitive motivations in the way that individuals now view education. Many individual parents and students view education as a zero-sum game: there are inexorably winners and losers. It is not merely that if one child wins, another loses: the point is that the other child *must* lose in order for education to have been 'successful'. The commodification of education, its location in a competitive market, and the dominant discourse of instrumentalism have turned education into a game that requires losers in order to be successful (Ball 2003; Reay 2006a). In our final Chapter 14 in this volume we will return to this analysis of 'the public good' in the framework of social justice.

Our broad conceptions of social justice and equity thus sit uneasily with the dominant policy ideology of the nature of 'scientific investigation' and of the neoliberal political orthodoxy of the use of the market to determine 'public good'. The following section briefly describes how the authors of the chapters in this book worked together as educational researchers for social justice.

## The Institute for Policy Studies in Education

We have all worked together in a single research institute, based in London, that was very largely funded through research contracts with state, parastatals and charitable foundations with variable degrees of independence from state control. We have thus been working within and notionally for the ideological structures and systems that we criticise, operating to a degree to provide research 'solutions' that fit within the ideological mindsets of our funders. There is some utility in such sponsorship, in that the commissions we undertook, by virtue of their patron's position, enabled us to readily access our research subjects. But undertaking such work has inherent disadvantages, in that the sponsor's ideological constructions of the nature of the public good can constrain and pre-determine the direction of research and constrain the scope of its findings. Chris Duke points to the hazard of the 'political practice of commissioning research to support a prepared policy rather than inform its policy': mission-orientated research (such as we have described here) 'in the highly politicized conditions of … a neoliberal era is problematic' (Duke 2016, p. 20). The rhetoric of research-led policy is readily subverted into research that substantiates and validates particular policies, becoming what is policy-led research (Hayler and Williamson 2016). Like Robin Alexander, our 'stance is of both outsider and insider'

(2014, p. 352). We acknowledge that this might make our work vulnerable to criticisms of partisanship, or of being constrained to fit the commissioner's needs, and address this in more detail below.

We were established in early 2000 by the University of North London (now London Metropolitan University): the institution supported four members of staff with a small initial grant of £100,000 a year for five years: thereafter, we were expected to be largely self-supporting through attracting research grants and contracts. We put forward, to the University and to all our potential funders, our very explicit mission to research for social justice and equity in education. Our initial activities were principally a study of higher education and social class, looking particularly at the exclusion of working-class young people (Archer et al. 2003), an investigation of the teacher shortages in London (Hutchings et al. 2000; Ross and Hutchings 2003; Menter et al. 2002) that developed to include the need to recruit teachers from the ethnic minorities (Ross 2002, 2012), a study of student progress of 'non-traditional' students in higher education (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003) and the direction of a Socrates European Academic Network on Citizenship Education (Ross 2000a).

We quickly expanded in numbers, recruiting both established scholars and young researchers, to create a team of, on average, 14 researchers between 2001 and 2011.[1] This growth enabled us to bring into the team people who broadly shared our concerns for social justice, which was an explicit criterion in our appointments process. We asked for a demonstrable commitment to social justice in education, which we saw as broader than simple platitudes about equal opportunities policies, or explanations of 'how everyone should be treated exactly the same'. This did not mean that our understanding of social justice was static: new members of our team shared fresh insights based on their own particular experiences, growing our conceptualisation of the term, and of our research practice. Such development was also true of our collective understanding of the meaning of the 'public good'. We employed a wide range of ethnicities and speakers of different languages, using their experience to work with a wider range of communities and languages in our research. We worked collaboratively and flexibly in teams: overlapping projects, and a talented and multi-skilled team allowed resources to be grouped effectively and efficiently over the life of a project. We covered a wide range of inequalities, but notably did not research areas of special educational need or of people with disabilities, a matter of some regret, but one that reflected our staffing strengths. Over the 16 years, we carried out over 120 research projects, for the UK and Scottish governments, local governments, the European Commission, the OECD, The Economic and Social Research Council, and a wide range of NGOs, research foundations and other bodies. Our

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[1] Beside the authors of this volume, those working in IPSE have included Sarah Adams, Kim Allen, Louise Archer, Jacinta Dalgety, Becky Francis, Katie Glass, Anna Halsall, Sumi Hollingworth, Kathy James, Charine John, Kuyok Kuyok, Sarah McCreith, Ayo Mansaray, Heather Mendick, Maria Tsouroufli, Paul O'Connell, Gill O'Toole, Rossana Perez del Aguila, Jocey Quinn, Jebi Rahman, Diane Reay, Jocelyn Robson, Nicola Rollock, Anthea Rose, Katya Williams and Hiromi Yamashita.

approach was both to respond to tenders and calls for research projects, and to suggest and lobby for particular research we thought important. We often worked collaboratively, with other University researchers and with commercial research organisations.

Clearly, we had to compromise in order to work with many of these institutions. Our preference for using largely qualitative methods in order to elucidate the contextual elements was sometimes less in demand than a requirement to use quantitative methods to illustrate the scale of an issue. For example, we used ethnic categories when necessary, always pointing to their uncertain and transitory definition: in order to address the educational needs of a particular group, we had to use such categories, as a necessary policy requirement to locate and map the scale of disadvantage, and to suggest ways that support might be offered to a group. We applied the current British Educational Research Association's code of ethics (as well as the University's). We were always able to have our findings published in full for the commissioning body, and to make them available publicly.

## This volume: structure and format

This book presents a series of chapters by different authors, all of whom have been associated with IPSE over the past two decades. Each describes particular aspects of one of their research endeavours, and reflects on how their processes attempted to support social justice, and what they think the term means. They also consider how their particular work, in its various ways, could be seen as being of benefit to the community: was it valuable or useful to civic society? How did they know this to be so?

The volume is presented a loose sequence, individual chapters being grouped together, so that they can, if the reader wishes, be taken in order; but equally, each can stand alone. There are three exceptions to this. Chapters 2 and 3 represent initial reviews, based around each author's research works, that confront the two organising themes of the book in the context of the ontological challenge to question our own subjectivities and the ideological construction of the public good in teaching, learning and research.

Ian Menter (Chapter 2, 2021) begins with an overview of various recent discourses about the nature and purposes of educational research, considering:

- its fundamental nature as a *social science* enquiry, grounded in professional practices and the contingencies and contexts of social interaction, that make it largely non-replicable in the way that the physical sciences expect their findings to be capable of being repeated;
- its role in disseminating the practices of such social science to the community of practice of educators, through professional development based on such approaches; and

- the significant potential role of the educational research establishment in the UK in the debates over methodological approaches and desirable outcomes in terms of the public good: his work as President of first the Scottish Educational Research Association (2005–2007), and then the British Educational Research Association (2013–2015).

His epistemological analysis of what should count as educational knowledge and as social enquiry, is developed in Merryn Hutchings' contribution (Chapter 3, 2021a). She discusses her research on the nature and consequences of widespread national testing programmes, considering who requires these to take place, their justification for doing so, and the use (and misuse) to which the results are put. In so doing she opens up the debate on what might be considered to be the public good, and who might determine this. She questions whether these processes of assessment and evaluation serve the public good, and interrogates the research on which such testing processes are based. Political and ethical issues are fundamental to this: who should control or direct such forays into educational practice, and with what justification? Laswell's (1936) definition of politics, summarised in his title *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How,* encapsulates one of the main messages in her chapter. Her other argument is ethical: how do the outcomes of national assessments and gradings of individuals, and the production of league tables, impact on the well-being of learners, teachers and the institutions in which they both work? Does this serve the public good, or merely the good of politicians and a limited section of the public: a theme to which Hutchings returns in Chapter 7.

The following chapters are broadly grouped around research that addresses particular kinds of educational inequalities. The first of these, concerning socioeconomic disadvantage and the particularly English construction of social class, are considered in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7. Gender is examined in Chapters 8, 9 and 10. Ethnicity and identity are the focus of Chapters 11 and 12. All of these factors, and more, intersect and create additional and often hidden further inequities, and some of these are considered in Chapter 13.

The chapters on researching class and socioeconomic inequity in education begin with Andrew McCallum's examination of creativity and social justice in the English language curriculum (Chapter 4, 2021): this chapter is also an example of Menter's point about professional development and educational research, in that McCallum carried out his research as part of a professional Doctorate programme in IPSE. Nathan Fretwell (Chapter 5, 2021) examines disenfranchised working-class pupils and a community intervention programme, that raises important issues around community needs and those of researchers. Sarah Minty (Chapter 6, 2021) describes research in Scottish higher education, and the differential impact of fees and maintenance costs on students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Socioeconomic inequality is not merely a question of poorer people getting less, and the final contribution in this section, by Merryn Hutchings (Chapter 7, 2021b) examines how the strategies employed by some more affluent parents to in effect appropriate greater educational benefits for their children can lead to greater

inequities: a vivid and worrying confirmation of Young's fears about the effects of meritocracy discussed earlier in this chapter.

Gender inequities are examined in the contributions that follow. Jayne Osgood (Chapter 8, 2021) questions the policy reforms of the early years workforce – principally female and overwhelmingly working-class; deconstructing the apparently benign and well-intentioned underpinning concepts of professionalism as deeply problematic. Researching gender inequities in education Marie-Pierre Moreau (Chapter 9, 2021) then examines policy attempts to make the school teaching workforce more masculine in composition, and the policy implications for gender in this. Barbara Read and Carole Leathwood (Chapter 10, 2021) conclude this section by moving on to examine some responses to both the expansion in the proportion of women in the University workforce and in the undergraduate body.

The third area of social inequity that we focus on is around ethnicity and identity issues. Uvanney Maylor (Chapter 11, 2021) looks at the English curriculum reforms of 2007 under New Labour to address ethnic identities, and the subsequent reversals by the Coalition and Conservative governments that followed. Alistair Ross (Chapter 12, 2021b) carries this enquiry into continental Europe, examining how young Europeans define their political beliefs, and thus their construction of the public good, particularly in out-of-school learning.

All three of these areas of inequity intersect, and in combination both heighten and hide further inequities. Chapter 13, (Hartsmar et al. 2021) reviews a 2009 study conducted across fourteen European states of educational policies that were designed to counter inequalities, highlighting the effects of intersectionality across these three areas and more.

The concluding chapter (Ross, Chapter 14, 2021c) falls outside this thematic arrangement, and is presented as a concluding review of the ways in which the chapters as a whole contribute to the debate on what is meant by the public good, and how this should be determined. One might apply the Latin legal term, *cui bono*, to such a discussion: who will benefit from a particular course of action? Who should benefit? And what are the consequences of such benefit to those who might not so benefit? That *cui bono* is used, in legal circles, in assessing the potential motivations in a crime is perhaps also of relevance here: educational policies have consequences, and many of the outcomes of may be to the detriment of particular groups, and may heighten social inequities.

This is the crux of the book that follows: social equity must be the ultimate public good in educational policy, and this is not necessarily achieved either through the processes of majoritarianism – the Jeremy Bentham's 'fundamental axiom' – that 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number … is the measure of right and wrong' (1991 [1776], p. 393), nor through the problematic policies of 'equality of opportunity'. Social justice must be for all, not the greatest number, and must be judged by the outcomes of policies, not simply by their intentions.

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# Chapter 2
# Snake oil or hard struggle? Research to address the reality of social injustice in education

**Ian Menter** 

**Abstract** In recent years two particular tendencies have coincided to bring about new approaches in educational research. These tendencies may raise questions about the rigour and validity of the research. The two tendencies to be considered in this chapter are: (1) the increasing 'commercialisation' of educational research, through the influence of both profit making and not for profit organisations, all of whom are competing for resources within a limited 'market' and, (2) the growth of 'teacher research' as an important aspect of teacher professionalism. The chapter focuses mainly on England and draws on work undertaken on a range of projects over recent years, most notably on 'Closing the Gap – Test and Learn', a nationwide attempt to involve hundreds of schoolteachers in forms of quasi-experimental research. The argument developed in the chapter is that, in the pursuit of social justice in and through education, the engagement of teachers in school-based research is a very positive development. However such engagement needs to be tempered by careful deployment of research methods, an avoidance of a search for 'easy answers' and a healthy dose of critical scepticism.

## Introduction

*Snake oil: a substance with no real medicinal value sold as a remedy for all diseases*

The face of educational research has been changing dramatically in recent years. There has been a temptation to look for panaceas, for easy answers, that will cure all the deficiencies of the education system. Over this period, two particular tendencies have coincided to bring about new approaches which may sometimes be questionable in terms of their rigour and validity.

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The two tendencies to be considered are: firstly, the increasing 'commercialisa-tion' of educational research, through the influence of both profit making and not for profit organisations, all of whom are competing for resources within a limited 'market' and, secondly, the growth of 'teacher research' as an important aspect of teacher professionalism.

In this chapter I consider these two tendencies, especially as they have developed in England, and consider their impact on the nature and quality of educational research. I then demonstrate how they have coalesced under the umbrella of 'evidence-based teaching'. I draw on a large-scale government funded project which was based on many of the popular ideas in educational research during the second decade of this century, not least on the idea of 'closing the gap', that is, seek-ing to reduce the differences in attainment between school students that reflect their socioeconomic position.

Moving towards the conclusion I consider how the fields of policy, practice and research may relate to each other in productive and constructive ways that both maintain the rigour and validity of the research as well as providing teachers with a high degree of agency, as part of their professionalism.

## The commercialisation of educational research

It is widely assumed that a central purpose of conducting research in education is the improvement of provision (Menter 2017), that is, contributing to the public good. This of course begs a question – what is meant by improvement in educa-tion? – and the answer to this rests very largely on what the purposes of education itself are seen to be. In other words this is a question of values. In recent years it has become a commonplace, in line with popular notions of meritocracy, to suggest that a prime purpose of education is to improve the life chances of school students (see Chapter 1, Ross 2021a). In particular the consistent patterns of relative high and low achievement associated statistically with economic over- and under-privilege are at the heart of the attempt to ensure that educational provision provides fair and 'equal' opportunity for all learners.

This is not a straightforward proposition because in a society such as Britain (and in many others), where inequality is deeply entrenched, and where many of the wealthiest families pay for their children to receive a better-resourced private educa-tion, it is highly unlikely that even an education system of the highest quality can overcome these inequalities. As Basil Bernstein said many years ago, 'education cannot compensate for society' (Bernstein 1970, p. 344).

Nevertheless, educationists and educational researchers continue to strive for a more just and fairer education system and politicians of all persuasions as well as policy-makers continue to espouse the best quality of education for all learners. The continuing persistence of educational inequality has been a preoccupation of educa-tional researchers at least since the second half of the twentieth century and the struggle for social justice in and through education continues to feature in the

educational literature of the twenty-first century (e.g. Smyth and Wrigley 2013; Ball 2017; Parker et al. 2017; Brown and Wisby 2020).

One of the major changes that has occurred during recent decades in this long narrative, is the increasing availability of education data. While examination and test results have always featured in the debates about relative attainment, we have seen an explosion in the use of numerical data. Digital technologies have facilitated the creation of comparisons, through the construction of league tables and hence, measurable outcomes of education have become a central feature of these debates, whether at international, national or local level (Mansell 2007; Biesta 2010; Sahlberg 2011). This has been evident not least in politicians' apparent preoccupation with the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results every few years and, in England, national test and exam results were used as a key indicator of a school's success or failure by the inspection agency Ofsted. The latter results were and continue to be used as a basis for closing or amalgamating schools or for enforcing schools to leave their local authority and become 'academies', under the control of independent trusts – and such approaches have been favoured by governments of both main political parties.

However, at the same time as data have become increasingly important in judging success we have also seen other processes at work, affecting the approaches taken in educational research. The impact of neoliberalism on education in England has affected research as well as schooling itself. Much has been written about the marketisation of schooling in England since the 1980s (e.g. Ball et al. 1995; Gewirtz et al. 1995; Gewirtz 2002; Hutchings, Chapter 3, 2021a) and we have also seen the increasing marginalisation of local education authorities (LEAs). Very often the functions previously undertaken by LEAs, including aspects of professional development and overseeing new assessment arrangements, for example, have been taken on by educational trusts, by educational consultants and by a range of organisations with varying degrees of philanthropic or commercial motivations. Stephen Ball has monitored and reported these developments consistently over many years and has depicted the complex networks of governance that are a feature of these new arrangements (Ball 2012; Ball and Junemann 2012).

These new arrangements typically feature a process of offering contracts for work to be undertaken. Thus, calls are usually put out for 'open tendering' and interested parties assemble a 'bid' submitted to the awarding body, often the Government's Department for Education. Bids are then evaluated against a set of criteria and the contract is then awarded to the preferred bidder. While such processes are not new, they have certainly become far more common than they were and apply as much to the commissioning of research as to the provision of other education services, such as professional development and teacher performance assessment.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the majority of educational research was carried out by academic staff working in university departments of education, or departments of sociology or psychology. But a significant element of the work was also undertaken by one or two long-established not for profit agencies such as the National Foundation for Educational Research. These players continue

to be active in this 'contract culture' that has developed, but there are now many additional players on the scene including market research organisations, and a range of 'not for profit' bodies, such as The Educational Development Trust (formerly known as CfBT, the Centre for British Teachers), or the Sutton Trust (see below), or private companies such as the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education.

The overall impact of these changes, I would suggest, has been to commercialise educational research. The contract culture has been increasingly competitive and while it may be said to have ensured an adherence to the principle of achieving good value for money, it has also led to a narrowing of the scope of educational research. There is still some research activity that operates outside of this contract culture and may be seen to be more knowledge driven than policy driven. Some of this utilises funding received from the Higher Education Funding Council for England awarded according to the outcomes of the Research Excellence Framework. Other research is funded by UK Research Councils, notably the Economic and Social Research Council, but educational researchers have not been among the most successful in securing such funding in what itself is a very competitive arena.

In spite of this, it was during this period, the early twenty-first century, that we experienced what was then the largest ever programme of educational research in the UK, The Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). This programme attracted over £35 million of funding (much of it from the governments of the UK) and supported a wide range of projects, many of which were independent of government priorities. The TLRP also had a significant research capacity building element, designed to ensure a broad range of educational research skills were developed across the country. Most of this work was undertaken by university based academic staff. Another concern of TLRP was to maximise engagement and impact of the research with and on 'users' (Rickinson et al. 2011; see also Saunders 2007).

This then is the backdrop against which I turn now to discuss more recent developments in education research and the search for 'solutions' to the continuing patterns of inequality in education.

## The growth of teacher research

The relationships between educational practice and educational research were explored early in the twentieth century by, among others, John Dewey. His work in laboratory schools in the USA sought to explore how teaching might be improved through systematic enquiry and also laid some of the foundations for what would be called 'reflective practice' in later years (see Pring 2014).

In the UK, during the 1970s, the work of Lawrence Stenhouse became very influential, not least through his coining of the idea of 'teacher as researcher' (Stenhouse 1975). This concept was developed at a time when teachers in England had considerable responsibility for shaping the curriculum which they taught, indeed Stenhouse saw teachers very much as curriculum developers. For a short while in England and

the rest of the UK, educational action research flourished, with teachers being encouraged to work in cyclical fashion, planning, implementing, evaluating and revising (see for example, Elliot 1991).

Such approaches were somewhat abruptly curtailed in the late 1980s when the government in England and Wales imposed a National Curriculum and a national assessment system for the first time, through the Education Reform Act of 1988. The subsequent decade saw an increasing prescription not only of what was to be taught but also, most notably through the National Literacy Strategy and the National Numeracy Strategy (1997–2011), how teachers should be teaching (see Chitty and Simon 1993; Helsby 1999; Osborn et al. 2000). For example, in the teaching of reading, particular approaches involving 'phonics' were required and students were to be tested for their understanding of these approaches. One effect of such changes was to severely reduce the autonomy of teachers and their agency in making professional decisions, other than within a very limited sphere.

In England matters came to something of a head in 2010 when the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, sought to intervene in initial teacher education through reducing the role and responsibility of higher education institutions with a strong drive towards school-based teacher education (DfE 2010a). In Gove's view, the best place for teachers to learn to teach was 'on-the-job', that is observing and learning in an apprenticeship style from experienced teachers. Educational research and theory had little place in Gove's mind in the preparation of beginning teachers. Gove also castigated the education research community, describing it as part of 'The Blob' (Young 2014).

Turning our attention away from England for a moment, it is interesting to note that, at almost the same time in the north of the UK, the Scottish Government commissioned a review of teacher education undertaken by a former Chief Inspector, Graham Donaldson. When this review reported (Donaldson 2011), it presented a very different view of teaching and of teacher education. Indeed it called for more sustained and broader involvement of the universities in the preparation of teachers. One of the influences on Donaldson's report was a review of literature which he commissioned, on teacher education in the twenty-first century (Menter et al. 2010). This review suggested that four paradigms of the teacher could be discerned in the research and policy literature, as follows:

- The effective teacher: This model has emerged as the dominant one in much official government discourse, certainly across the developed world, over the last thirty years. The emphases are on technical accomplishment and on measurement. It is the model for an age of accountability and performativity – it corresponds well with Pasi Sahlberg's Global Education Reform Movement – the 'GERM' (Sahlberg 2011). Such an approach may be well aligned with a nationally prescribed curriculum and a national assessment system, which extends down to the earliest stages of schooling.
- The reflective teacher: The philosophical roots of the reflective teaching model may be found in the work of the American educator John Dewey (as mentioned above). Writing early in the twentieth century he developed an approach to teach-

ing which was based on teachers becoming active decision-makers. At the centre of this model is a cyclical approach to planning, making provision, acting, collecting data, analysing the data, evaluating and reflecting and then planning the next step. Built into such a model is a commitment to personal professional development through practice.

- The enquiring teacher: In the UK, the origins of the notion of 'teacher as researcher' is usually associated with the ground-breaking work of Lawrence Stenhouse (1975), who, argued that teachers should indeed take a research approach to their work. He described this as a form of curriculum development. In this model teachers are encouraged to undertake systematic enquiry in their own classrooms, develop their practice and share their insights with other professionals.
- The transformative teacher: The key defining feature of this paradigm is that it brings an 'activist' dimension into the approach to teaching. If the prevalent view of the teacher is someone whose contribution to society is to transmit knowledge and prepare pupils for the existing world, the view here is that teachers' responsibilities go beyond that. They should indeed be contributing to social change and be preparing their pupils to contribute to change in society. In aspiring to achieve greater social justice through education however, it is important to consider the influence of teachers' own beliefs and values which they bring to their work at whatever stage of their career they are at. (Menter et al. 2010, pp. 21–24)

In his subsequent report Donaldson advocated a model of teaching which incorporated all four of these paradigms, saying that teachers should be seen as:

> reflective, accomplished and enquiring professionals who have the capacity to engage fully with the complexities of education and to be key actors in shaping and leading educational change. (Donaldson 2011, p. 4)

It is extraordinary that two such different views of what teaching is should be promoted simultaneously in Scotland and England (see Hulme and Menter 2011). In retrospect we can see how very strongly a crude form of national populism has infected education policy in England, especially in relation to teaching (Childs and Menter 2013). While nationalism is also a key element of Scottish culture and politics, with continuing strong calls for independence from the UK, it appears to take a much less simplistic form than in England.

It was largely the attack on education departments in universities in England, which had been a key resource for educational research (as described above in the section on commercialisation of research), which led the British Educational Research Association (BERA) to establish an enquiry into the relationship between teaching and research. The main report that emerged from this enquiry (BERA-RSA 2014) identified a range of evidence which indicated that 'high performing education systems' were associated with an enquiry-oriented approach to teaching. The report called for teachers to engage with research and to be given the skills to have the capacity to engage in research. These two essential elements together constituted 'research literacy' as defined in the report.

A report into Initial Teacher Training (ITT) (*sic*), commissioned by the English government and led by Sir Andrew Carter, which was published in 2015 (Carter 2015), acknowledged the importance of evidence in teaching and made some reference to elements of the BERA-RSA report (see Mutton et al. 2017). It also led to the establishment of a working group to determine the 'content' of ITT programmes in England, which in turn led to a new statement in 2019 (DfE 2019a, see below).

Meanwhile in the university departments of education there were continuing tensions. Not only had teacher education become increasingly diverse and complex in the nature of provision, with numerous different entry routes, some based on trainees being employed rather than being students (Whiting et al. 2018; Sorensen 2019). Inspection of those teacher education programmes for which the universities were responsible continued to cause considerable anxiety. These inspections were carried out by the national agency, the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Simultaneously, these university departments were also doing their best to demonstrate their own research prowess in order to make strong submissions to the Research Excellence Framework, the assessment system determining the research resources to be allocated to universities from central government funds. This 'double whammy' for education departments in universities was not unique but certainly created considerable tension and stress for many of those working in them (see Menter et al. 2012).

It is paradoxical that at the same time as these moves in England to 'detheorise' teaching and to increase performativity measures both in schools and in universities, there should have been a move to bring evidence to bear in policy and in practice, the movement to which we now turn.

## The attraction of 'evidence-based teaching'

During the 1990s, especially after the election of a New Labour government in 1997, we saw social and public policy increasingly being connected with 'evidence'. Often, though not always, this was to be evidence drawn from research. A new kind of Enlightenment-informed rationalism appeared to be influencing policy making. This was perhaps something of a reaction to the strongly ideologically driven policies that had developed under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her successors (1979–1997). Under New Labour, a 'Third Way' (Giddens 1998) was being sought that was neither full marketisation, nor full public ownership and control. It was indeed a form of New Public Management (Newman and Clarke 1997).

Frequently the approach was underpinned by what became known as a 'what works' stance. The purpose of research under this mantra was to inform and improve public services across the UK. This was most clearly set out in publications by a team based in Scotland led by Sandra Nutley, a university-based social scientist. Their first book was entitled *What Works? Evidence-based policy and practice in public services* (Davies et al. 2000). Subsequently they published *Using Evidence: How research can inform public services* (Nutley et al. 2008). In each volume they

sought to demonstrate how research can shape policy and practice across the full range of public services, including education. They suggested:

> Researchers, as well as other stakeholders, often despair that clear findings are sometimes *not* heeded when decisions are made about the direction and delivery of public services. Indeed, policy and practice decisions sometimes seem to fly in the face of what is considered to be the best available evidence about 'what works'. (Nutley et al. 2008, p. 1)

They also claimed that increased use of research could be seen to increase 'impact', another keyword to emerge early in this century, as the research community sought to sustain and defend their resourcing.

Not surprisingly, education policymakers were among those who were strongly attracted to the idea of focusing research on 'what works'. Given the long struggle of education research to reduce inequality and to lead to improved attainment (see above) the attraction of finding approaches that lead to success is obvious. However, it was not long before some concerns were expressed about the emphasis on 'fixing' educational problems.

Gert Biesta wrote a cogent critique in an article called 'Why "what works" won't work'. He argued that there was a problem with the search for simple solutions:

> The problem with evidence-based education, … is not only that it is not sufficiently aware of the role of norms and values in educational decision making; the problem is that it also limits the opportunities for educational professionals to exert their judgment about what is educationally desirable in particular situations. This is one instance in which the democratic deficit in evidence-based education becomes visible. (Biesta 2007, p. 20)

Nevertheless, in spite of such critiques (see also Pring and Thomas 2004), it soon became apparent that evidence-based policies as well as a 'what works' approach were taking a strong hold in education in England. A large proportion of the government's education research budget was channelled via the Sutton Trust to an enterprise called The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). The initial grant from the DfE was for £125 million in 2011. The Sutton Trust is a philanthropic organisation concerned with improving access to higher education for disadvantaged groups, and more recently took its concerns into schooling provision. Commencing its work in 2011, the EEF commissioned and supported a large number of projects all designed to lead to improvements in educational outcomes especially for those learners categorised as disadvantaged. The EEF's purpose was set out originally as 'to improve performance in our most challenging schools. Those bidding for funds from the EEF will have to outline how their proposals will raise attainment' (DfE 2010b); this was more recently revised as 'to describe and demystify the professional practice of implementation – to document our knowledge of the steps that effective schools take to manage change well' (EEF 2018a, 2018b).

The EEF approach hitherto is perhaps best epitomised by their 'Teaching and Learning Toolkit' (EEF 2018a, 2018b), a guide to 'what works' in a range of packaged schemes which claim to lead to improvements in outcomes. This reports the results of evaluations of particular approaches to improve attainment under three headings: cost, evidence strength and impact. This of course enormously simplifies the results of the research undertaken but is seen by some headteachers and

policymakers (as well as by government and the EEF itself) as being very helpful to hard-pressed teachers and school leaders in making decisions about approaches to be taken in their classrooms and schools.

The EEF is particularly committed to research undertaken through Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs), an approach which has been strongly supported by politicians on both sides of the Atlantic, with many of them claiming that this is the only high-quality approach to educational research. When he was Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove commissioned a medical journalist and researcher, Ben Goldacre, to write a paper on how education could be improved through the use of RCTs. The paper *Building Evidence into Education,* was published in 2013 and argued that teachers were being led astray by research approaches of dubious quality and that what had so clearly worked in medical research should obviously be applied in education (resonating with the earlier work of David Hargreaves; see Ross, Chapter 1, 2021a):

> Where they are feasible, randomised trials are generally the most reliable tool we have for finding out which of two interventions works best. We simply take a group of children, or schools (or patients, or people); we split them into two groups at random; we give one intervention to one group, and the other intervention to the other group; then we measure how each group is doing, to see if one intervention achieved its supposed outcome any better. (Goldacre 2013, p. 8)

Within a very short period therefore, RCTs became the dominant approach in educational research that was backed by the Government. Few other forms of research were supported, other than by independent sources, including the ESRC and some charitable organisations.

But there has been a longstanding antipathy towards the use of RCTs in education. A range of arguments against them has been articulated including ethical concerns (these are 'myths' according to Goldacre), practical concerns and political concerns (Cartwright and Hardie 2012). In his sustained attack on the dominance of RCTs in some settings around the world, Trevor Gale concludes that:

> RCTs offer governments and schools the prospect of more precise instruments to engineer their populations into forms of human capital, which will enable them to claim a controlling stake in a knowledge economy and thus retain disproportionate positions of global power…. RCTs can never deliver on this precision because they operate on a false premise: that the social world is the same as the physical world. (Gale 2018, p. 220)

However, also during the second decade of the twenty-first century, there was an interesting development in teacher research, with a 'grassroots' movement encouraging teacher enquiry, including the use of RCTs and other 'experimental' methods (Churches and Dommett 2016). A range of so-called 'teachmeets' were held in many parts of the country and an organisation called ResearchEd (https://researched. org.uk/) was established under the leadership of Tom Bennett, a teacher himself, who became an authoritative voice for the government in the management of pupil behaviour. There was some uncertainty in the initial phases of these developments about the extent to which the research being undertaken could be described as rigorous and of high quality. However, for teachers themselves the emphasis was very

clearly on improving practice, indeed on identifying 'what works'. In some of the activities, university researchers were also involved, but by no means in all of them.

Another development in this period which may be seen as supportive of the teacher research movement was the creation of so-called Teaching Schools (https://tscouncil.org.uk/). Schools could apply individually or collectively for this designation and if they were successful were expected to develop six strands of innovation, one of which was a research strand (the six were subsequently reduced to three – and research did not survive this cull!). In addition, the creation of The Chartered College of Teaching in 2017 (https://tscouncil.org.uk/), which effectively moved into the space created by Gove's abolition, early during his tenure, of the General Teaching Council for England. From its inception, the College, led by Dame Alison Peacock, was a strong advocate for the use of evidence in teaching and a supporter of teacher research.

So, in summary, the move towards evidence-based practice in social policy developed considerable impetus under the New Labour Governments from 1997–2010 and continued in even more populist form under the Coalition Government from 2010. As we shall see, although Michael Gove had a dominant influence on the shape of these developments, the Liberal Democrat education minister David Laws, was also a key player, not least in the scheme that emerged in 2013, to be described in the next section.

## The appeal of 'Closing the Gap'

In 2013 the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) awarded a contract to what was then called CfBT, to undertake a major project involving hundreds of Teaching Schools across England. The project was called *Closing the Gap: Test and Learn* and although led by CfBT/EDT, it was undertaken by a consortium of organisations, including the Universities of Durham and Oxford as well as the Centre for the Use of Research Evidence in Education (CUREE). The project itself is described in a research report (Churches 2016), but is also described and reviewed in considerable detail in an edited collection called *Mobilising Teacher Researchers: Challenging educational inequality* (Childs and Menter 2018).

The project brought together many of the trends that have been discussed in the previous sections of this chapter. The overall aim was focused on closing the socio-economic attainment gap, the project was designed to assess the effectiveness of a range of educational approaches ('proprietary initiatives'), each of which sought to improve attainment, the core methodology was to be RCTs, the participating schools were Teaching Schools and teacher researchers were to be at the heart of it all. All of these aspects combined to make this very much a project for the times. Looking at the genesis of the project it is clear that David Laws was very influential in its conception and that the rationale was very much in line with the Liberal Democrat Party commitment to improving educational life chances and using a research-based approach to find out what works (see Childs et al. 2018).

There were seven separate initiatives which were selected as being the most likely to lead to a closing of the gap. They were: 1stClass@Number; Achievement for All; Growth Mindsets; Inference Training; Numicon Intervention Programme; Research Lesson Study; and Response to Interventions: Breakthroughs in Literacy. Each of these initiatives offered particular approaches to teaching which were designed to improve student outcomes. Teachers adopting one of the schemes typically underwent a specific training programme in order to implement the particular approach.

Most of the 650 schools involved worked with one of these projects and sought to assess the extent to which the work led to improved outcomes for learners. Schools either undertook the intervention in the first year of the project or served to provide a control group in that year, then having the opportunity to implement the chosen programme during the second year (Churches et al. 2018). Given the considerable investment in the project by the NCTL, the actual outcomes in terms of improved attainment or indeed in 'closing the gap', may be seen as very disappointing. In many cases the existing practice in the Teaching Schools concerned appeared to be as effective as the particular interventions:

> Overall, Teaching Schools associated existing practice (the control conditions for all of the large-scale trials) appears to be at least equal to six of the top seven interventions…, but better than growth mindsets when used with an average group of pupils. (Churches et al. 2018, p. 50)

Richard Churches and his colleagues go on to suggest:

> Although finding that the majority of the interventions showed no effect greater than existing practice is useful, it is but a starting point for further investigation. The established practice in other fields (e.g. medicine) would be to undertake further trials in different circumstances to see if the benefits of these interventions are revealed in different contexts (for example, in struggling schools, with a more tightly defined group of students, or particular age groups). (Churches et al. 2018, p. 51)

It is interesting that not dissimilar results have emerged from much of the work undertaken on an RCT basis by the EEF (see for example postings on the website of the International Foundation for Effective Reading Instruction: http://www.iferi.org/iferi_forum/viewtopic.php?t=591).

However, even if the initiatives themselves did not seem to have a large effect on attainment, the project did achieve a considerable amount in terms of building research capacity in schools. In their analysis of how teachers and schools were engaging in and with research on this project Ann Childs and Nigel Fancourt found that:

> …some Teaching School Alliances were envisioning completely new structural arrangements for the educational research landscape, taking them well beyond their traditional role as research consumers. (Childs and Fancourt 2018, p. 155)

They suggest:

> …it is increasingly the case that schools and alliances are appointing a 'research lead', as the main lynch-pin for school-led projects… and it will be their endeavours which will determine the future shape of these forms of knowledge generation. (*ibid*., p. 156)

The experiences of the Closing the Gap project reveal that, while RCTs may have a role to play in educational research they do not necessarily lead to improved practice and secondly, that proprietary education products of the sort trialled in this project, may not lead to the kinds of outcomes that are hoped for (see Menter and Thompson 2018).

## Research policy and practice – a virtuous or a vicious circle?

The BERA-RSA report (2014), mentioned above, set out a rationale for the relationship between research and the practice of teaching. It also suggested the need for strong relationships between these two communities – research and practice – and the community of policy, that is politicians and policymakers. In the field of teacher education at least it has been the case that the relationship has not always been a constructive or positive one. In a review of teacher education research and its influence on policy, Ian Menter et al. (2019) found not only that teacher education is 'desperately under-researched' (p. 75) but that the use of evidence and data by the Department for Education were found by the National Audit Office to be 'lacking in several areas' (p. 75). Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that there are much more positive relationships between these three communities in other parts of the UK, especially perhaps in Scotland (Teacher Education Group 2016).

In his Presidential address to BERA in 2005, Geoff Whitty suggested the research community should not expect too much from policymakers – there are many influences on their decisions beyond the findings of researchers. Reflecting on this a few years later, writing with Emma Wisby, he urged again that there are many complexities in the research-policy relationship. They wrote:

> Research can influence policy (and practice) in different ways, but this will often be indirect and sometimes in ways that were not intended… Thus, research is best understood as a means of helping policymakers reconsider issues, think differently, reconceptualize what the problem is and challenge old assumptions… (Whitty with Wisby 2016, p. 16).

They also note that the role of intermediary bodies (such as some of the organisations involved in the 'Closing the Gap' scheme) can be significant. Certainly in the case of teacher education, work carried out for a three country comparative study of teachers' careers suggests that in England, some key actors (such as particular university Deans of Education or chief executive officers of non-governmental organisations) act as a kind of research broker for policy makers (see Helgetun and Menter 2020).

Certainly policymakers do not always appear to use research to inform policy, rather they sometimes seem to use it to construct support for policy decisions that have already been taken for ideological reasons (see, for an example of this, Menter 2016). More recently however, as mentioned above, we have seen the publication of a document setting out what should be covered in the curriculum of Initial Teacher Training in England (DfE 2019a). This work was carried out by a working group

appointed by the DfE, chaired by a prominent teacher education academic, Samantha Twiselton, with support from a range of other stakeholders, mostly directly involved in the practice of teacher education in some way or other. This work is notable, especially by comparison with other documents released by the Department for Education. First it has a fairly extensive list of research references which are properly and fully cited. Second, it claims to have been 'independently assessed and endorsed by the EEF' (DfE 2019a, p. 2). Quite what form this assessment and endorsement took is not clear.

## Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter has tracked the sometimes tortuous relationship between the search for 'easy answers' in education and the reality of the complexity of educational processes. The ways in which such fashionable and changing nostrums have been promoted, used and misused in the pursuit of popular policies, is very similar to the notorious sales pitches for snake oil of earlier times.

The reality for educational researchers, policymakers and practitioners is much more likely to be that because of the complexity of educational processes and the complexity of the relationships between education and other aspects of society, the only way in which real and lasting improvements in educational policy and practice are going to benefit from researchers' efforts is through much closer relationships between the three communities, and these relationships will require a much greater degree of trust than has been visible over recent years (see Chapman and Ainscow 2019).

There have been, as noted, a number of positive developments that can be detected, such as the growing interest in and commitment to teacher research, among teachers themselves, as well as the emergence of new teachers' organisations of different kinds. However the continuing prevalence of populist (and nationalist) politics in western societies has made it increasingly difficult to have calm and detailed discussions between our communities, without them being hijacked by simplistic rhetoric from politicians and many sections of the media. The very notion of 'closing the gap' is an example of a slogan that can all too easily obscure deep and complex social inequality.

The argument developed in the chapter is that, in the pursuit of social justice in and through education, the engagement of teachers in school-based research is a very positive development. However, if educational research is meaningfully to contribute to the public good, then such engagement needs to be tempered by careful deployment of research methods, an avoidance of a search for 'easy answers' and a healthy dose of critical scepticism.

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# Chapter 3
# Accountability, social justice and educational research

**Merryn Hutchings**

**Abstract** Accountability has become a central plank of education policies across the world over the last four decades. The form this takes varies, and can include national tests, school inspection and teacher appraisal. A substantial body of research has demonstrated that accountability policies have many unintended negative impacts on teachers and on pupils. Drawing on data from England (UK), this chapter focuses particularly on the way in which current policies further disadvantage those who are already disadvantaged, and are thus contrary to social justice. Despite evidence about negative impacts, policy makers continue to support accountability policies. Their motivations, and the evidence they have drawn on, are explored. It is argued that politicians and educationalists tend to have contrasting understandings of the purposes of education and how it contributes to the public good, and that this results in tensions between the two groups, and a tendency for politicians to disregard evidence from educational research. It is also suggested that researchers could do more to make their findings accessible and usable. The chapter concludes by reviewing recent changes in English accountability policies, and some signs that the negative impacts of current forms of accountability are being recognised internationally, which may result in change.

## Introduction

In England, the notion that schools should be accountable to the government dates back to the nineteenth century. Inspectors were appointed soon after the government first provided any funding for schools. In 1839, the Committee of the Council for Education recommended that 'no further grant be made, now or hereafter, for the establishment or support of … schools, unless the right of inspection be retained' (cited in Dunford 1976, p. 4).

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Concerns about the quality of education and effective use of government funds continued, and in 1858, a Royal Commission on the State of Popular Education in England, under the chairmanship of the Duke of Newcastle, was appointed. Their report, published in 1861, recommended a further measure to ensure accountability:

> … a searching examination by competent authority of every child in every school to which grants are to be paid, with the view of ascertaining whether these indispensable elements of knowledge [reading, writing and arithmetic] are thoroughly acquired, and to make the prospects and position of the teacher dependent to a considerable extent on the results of this examination. (Newcastle Commission 1861, p. 157)

Thus both inspection and national testing were introduced even before primary education was made available and compulsory for all children. This was driven by two key motives. It was argued that an annual examination of each pupil was needed 'so that the public may know exactly what consideration they get for their money' (Lowe 1862). And it was assumed that 'payment by results' would provide an incentive for teachers to ensure that their pupils learned; the Newcastle Commission argued, 'If teachers had a motive of this kind [i.e. financial] to see that all the children in their charge really learned to read, write and cypher thoroughly well, there can be little doubt that they would generally find means to secure that result' (1861, p. 157). The public good, then, was seen mainly in terms of achieving *better* value for money by raising standards.

Despite a catalogue of negative impacts (narrowing of the curriculum, teacher and pupil anxiety, teaching to the test, learning by rote at the expense of understanding, various forms of cheating, decline in number and quality of teachers), payment by results continued for 35 years before it was finally abandoned (Rapple 1992). National testing ceased during the 1890s, and inspectors took on a more advisory role.

The notion that measures should be taken to make schools more accountable re-emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan made a speech in 1976 which initiated continuing debate about the nature and purpose of education. He identified 'fields that need study because they cause concern'; these included:

> … the strong case for the so-called 'core curriculum' of basic knowledge; … what is the proper way of monitoring the use of resources in order to maintain a proper national standard of performance; [and] the role of the inspectorate in relation to national standards. (Callaghan 1976)

However, it was not until 1988, under a Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher, that these ideas were substantially taken forward. The Education Reform Act introduced a National Curriculum and national testing, and subsequently the 1992 Education (Schools) Act created the Office for Standards in Education, known as Ofsted, the body which now inspects schools.[1] Since that time, accountability

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[1] Before this time Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) existed to assess standards and trends throughout the education system; to advise central government on the state of the system nationally; and to contribute to the maintenance and improvement of standards in the system by the identification

demands have been ratcheted up with the introduction of floor standards (discussed below), and performance management for teachers, together with an increasingly challenging curriculum.

The 1988 legislation was criticised by educational experts from the outset, and as time went on educational researchers identified many concerns about the unintended impacts of accountability measures. I was commissioned by the National Union of Teachers (NUT)[2] to undertake a study of the impacts of accountability measures on children and young people (Hutchings 2015). In this chapter I draw on some of the findings of that research, which involved an online survey of teachers, achieving almost 8000 responses, and including extensive written comments as well as tick-box questions, together with case studies of seven varied schools in which headteachers, teachers and pupils were interviewed; for full details see Hutchings (2015). In this chapter both the written comments and the interview data are drawn on.

This chapter begins, then, by describing current accountability structures in England, and outlining ways in which current accountability structures impact negatively on schools, teachers, and children, and particularly on those who are financially disadvantaged and those with special educational needs. I argue that they are therefore contrary to social justice. I then turn to the perspectives of those in government who believe that accountability policies are necessary and are serving the public good, and examine the extent to which their views have been informed by educational science or research.

## *Accountability in England*

The main forms of external accountability impacting on schools in England are hierarchical and market accountability (West et al. 2011). Hierarchical accountability is specified in this OECD definition:

> Accountability … refers to the interaction in a hierarchical relationship between those who have power and those who are delegated authority. Those who are delegated authority have to account for what they are doing with this authority or responsibility. (OECD 2011, p. 430)

Thus all those who work in state schools are accountable to the government, though this may be through intermediaries such as the headteacher, local government, academy trust, school inspectors, etc. The government determines mechanisms (targets to be achieved in tests and exams, inspection reports, teacher

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and dissemination of good practice. Only a small minority of schools underwent full inspections; HMI visited others as part of curriculum reviews etc. Ofsted, in contrast, was designed to inspect all state-funded schools, giving them grades ranging from Outstanding to Inadequate, and publishing reports which could provide information for parents.

[2] In 2017, the NUT merged with the Association of Teachers and Lecturers to become the National Education Union (NEU).

appraisals) and the sanctions that can be applied (e.g. school closure, dismissal of headteacher or governing body, negative impact on teachers' pay, school made to become a sponsored academy).[3]

Market accountability derives from the ideas of right-wing political economists such as Milton and Rose Friedman (1980) and Friedrich Hayek (1973). The key mechanism in education in England is choice of school, exercised by parents. The assumption is that the more successful schools will grow (and gain from extra funding) while the less successful will lose pupils and eventually close. School inspection reports and league tables provide information on which parents can base their choices.

The main elements of the current accountability structures in England were introduced in the 1988 and 1992 Education Acts, and are based around the National Curriculum (created in the 1988 Act).

They include:

- Statutory national tests in English and mathematics at ages 7 and 11.[4] The results of GCSE[5] examinations taken at age 16 serve as an accountability measure for secondary schools.
- School league tables published annually.
- Inspection of state schools by Ofsted, with published reports and grades (Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement, Inadequate). In judging schools, Ofsted have drawn on data from national tests and exams, thus reinforcing the importance of these.

Subsequent measures include:

- Nationally set 'floor standards' for schools; to meet these, a specified percentage of pupils had to achieve 'the expected level' and show sufficient progress in test/exam results (e.g. between tests taken at 11 and 16). From 2016, pupil progress became the main measure used at secondary level. Schools failing to achieve the floor standard faced sanctions. In addition, a 'coasting' standard was introduced; schools below this level for 3 years could also attract sanctions.
- Annual appraisal for teachers assesses their performance against specified targets (which can include test and exam results). Appraisal outcomes can affect teacher pay.

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[3] Academies and free schools, making up about 40% of all schools, are run by multi-academy trusts funded directly by the DfE. Other schools are funded via Local Authorities. Sponsored academies are schools that were previously failing, and are now run by a multi-academy trust (which the government assumes will bring about improvement). They contrast with converter academies which have chosen to become academies.

[4] Science tests taken at age 11 and statutory tests at age 14 were in the original package but have been discontinued.

[5] GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams at age 16 are used both to determine future educational and employment opportunities open to young people, and to measure school performance.

• A phonics test for 6-year-olds was introduced in 2012, and the government is planning to introduce 'baseline testing' of 4–5-year-olds.

Further complexity was introduced by the creation of Regional Schools Commissioners whose responsibilities included 'monitoring academy performance and tackling underperforming academies and free schools' (Foster and Long 2017). Thus both Ofsted and Regional Schools Commissioners were responsible for holding academies to account for their performance.[6]

While the trend has been for accountability measures to be strengthened and sanctions to be more frequently applied, there have been changes in the last year to clarify responsibilities and to remove floor and coasting standards. These were set out in the Department for Education's statement 'Principles for a clear and simple accountability system' (DfE 2018a). It acknowledged weaknesses in the current accountability system, stating:

> It is not always clear how we determine what acceptable performance is …. It can be unclear to school leaders what will happen as a result of Ofsted judgements or performance data … School leaders can feel accountable to multiple masters, with different demands placed on them. (DfE 2018a, p. 1)

The statement indicated that from 2019, sanctions would be triggered only by Ofsted judgements of 'Inadequate'. Ofsted judgements of 'Requires Improvement' became the only trigger for the provision of support. Coasting and floor standards were abolished. At the same time, Ofsted has put in place a new inspection framework, which they claim 'rebalances inspection so that it complements performance tables – rather than intensifying pressure on them,' and:

> … will make it easier for Ofsted to recognise and reward the good work done by schools in areas of high disadvantage, or with disproportionate numbers of pupils with special educational needs, by tackling the perverse incentives that we know can undermine schools. (Harford 2019)

It is hoped that these changes will ameliorate the pressure teachers and pupils have been experiencing, but it remains to be seen how far this is achieved.

## The impacts of accountability structures

It is now well established that the accountability structures described above have a number of negative outcomes: teaching to the test; a narrowed curriculum; more rote learning, and higher levels of stress and anxiety among teachers and pupils (e.g. Ravitch 2010; Hutchings 2015; National Union of Teachers 2016; Brill et al. 2018). In this section I focus on the ways in which negative impacts of accountability

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[6] Other forms of accountability are more local: to the school governing body or multi-academy trust, or the Local Authority (for schools funded through a Local Authority). This chapter does not discuss these.

structures fall disproportionately on groups who are already disadvantaged, and in particular on two groups identified in educational statistics, and entitled to additional support: those who are 'disadvantaged' and those with special educational needs. 'Disadvantaged' refers to parental income, and is the term used to describe pupils who have been eligible for free school meals at any time in the last 6 years, which in turn is determined by eligibility for state benefits.[7] As Becky Allen (2018) points out, this is not a very satisfactory category. It defines a group who are extremely varied, are not necessarily from either the lowest income families (see Hobbs and Vignoles 2009) or from families with the greatest social needs. We know relatively little about the characteristics of those defined as disadvantaged. Similarly, the category 'special educational needs and disabilities' includes a group of pupils with very varied needs, which may be learning difficulties, social, emotional or mental health needs, or sensory or physical needs. However, it is clear that not all children with special needs are included in the category; middle-class parents are more successful in getting their children's needs recognised, while other children may have unrecognised needs (McKee 2017). Thus these labels are not entirely satisfactory, but they are the best we have to work with.

## *Socioeconomic segregation in schools*

Both market and hierarchical accountability have contributed to socioeconomic segregation in schools. International studies have shown that stratification of students between schools by their parental income is linked to lower overall attainment; therefore, in order to maximise attainment, segregation should be minimised (see Gorard 2016). Secondary schools in England have always shown a high level of socioeconomic segregation. Before 1965, this was linked to the 11-plus examination which divided children between grammar and secondary modern schools. Gorard shows that socioeconomic segregation is greater in areas that have retained grammar and secondary modern schools, but still exists even in areas with comprehensive schools, and is linked to diversity in types of school (converter academies, sponsored academies, free schools, specialist schools, faith schools, single sex schools). This diversity was originally promoted as part of the strategy to offer parents a choice of schools (market accountability).

Middle-class and more affluent parents have strategies[8] to ensure their children attend schools they consider to be good – generally schools with largely middle-class intakes – which are more likely to be faith schools or converter academies.[9] The differences between schools are then self-perpetuating; those with

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[7] Some government statistics are based on current eligibility for free school meals rather than disadvantage. Both measures are used in this chapter.

[8] For a discussion of these see Chapter 7, Hutchings 2021.

[9] When converter academies were created in 2010, only schools graded 'Outstanding' by Ofsted were allowed to apply to convert.

disadvantaged intakes and lower attainment are less likely to attract teachers with qualifications in the subject they are teaching; they have more unqualified teachers, fewer experienced teachers and higher teacher turnover than schools largely serving middle-class students (Allen et al. 2016). This then contributes to their relatively poor exam results, and lower Ofsted grades; more than third of the secondary schools in the quintile with the highest numbers of disadvantaged pupils were judged 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate', compared with just 4% in the least disadvantaged quintile (Tierney 2018). Such schools then experience greater pressure relating to accountability, which in turn leads to poor teacher retention, and middle-class parents sending their children elsewhere.

## *Negative impacts on teachers*

Increased accountability is associated with increased teacher stress and poorer teacher–student and student–student relationships (von der Embse et al. 2016). This reflects pressure both from leadership and from performance management systems which can directly impact on pay. In England, a recent survey of teachers found that more than half the respondents considered accountability to have made them stressed in the previous 2 weeks (Teacher Tapp 2019a).[10]

Stephen Ball (2003b) wrote about the 'terrors of performativity'. He described performativity as 'a mode of regulation … based on rewards and sanctions' which requires teachers 'to organise themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations … to set aside personal beliefs and commitments' (p. 216). Many teachers in the NUT research (Hutchings 2015) talked about this:

> Something has got to give! I am so stressed trying to tick all the boxes, that I very rarely have time to spend talking to the children about their day, their life – anything! The children learn from a very early stage that there is only time for work. It saddens me and I feel incredibly guilty and ashamed. I love the children dearly, and feel I am pushing them too far to achieve, based on the data targets that I have been set. (Primary teacher)

> I am now burnt out with accountability measures. … I bitterly regret coming into teaching because it is not about teaching children and setting them off on a passion for lifelong learning. It's about setting them up to feel worthless and insecure and anxious. … I don't feel like a 'professional' any more. (Secondary teacher)

While teachers in all types of school recounted similar pressures, they were felt most acutely by those in schools with poor Ofsted grades, which, as shown above, tend to have a higher percentage of disadvantaged pupils. Ofsted's teacher well-being research (Ofsted 2019a) reported that 60% of teachers in schools judged

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[10] Teacher Tapp is an app which allows teachers to share thoughts and opinions by answering three short multiple-choice questions sent to their phones at 3:30 pm each day. They are sent the results, which are also published online. The number of teachers responding to questions on the app is growing. In October 2019 there were almost 5000.

'Inadequate' said their well-being was low, compared with just 25% in schools judged 'Outstanding'. This is a concern at a time when teacher retention is poor and there is 'a substantial and growing challenge of ensuring there are sufficient numbers of high-quality teachers employed in schools' (Worth and Van den Brande 2019).

## *Gaming the system*

The pressure to help pupils succeed in high-stakes tests[11] leads teachers to engage in a variety of practices which American research has referred to as 'gaming the system'. These range from legitimate practices such as question spotting and teaching the topics you expect to come up in the exam, to practices that are clearly cheating, such as giving students hints during a test (Meadows 2015). The incentive to 'game the system' is clearly greater in schools that may have difficulty reaching the government targets; which tend to be schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged pupils. Teachers in the NUT research reported a number of instances of dubious practice and malpractice:

> [In my previous school] there was an inordinate amount of pressure put on teachers to ensure that students achieved their target grades. … Teachers whose students did not achieve a C grade or better in the controlled assessments were told to redo and redo and redo the assessment until those grades were hit. One colleague conducted the same speaking assessment with students up to 12 times! (Secondary teacher)

> I have heard … a teacher … boasting in the corridor about how they helped the children answer the SATs [national tests taken at age 11] questions! The headteacher hushed it all up by telling the staff concerned to be careful, because if it got out, the school would be known as a school of cheats! (Primary teacher)

'Gaming the system' also includes strategies relating to which children are included on (or excluded from) the school roll. Both disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs are now being perceived as a liability that may jeopardise the school's ability to achieve satisfactory test and exam results. A headteacher spoke out about the covert selection strategies that some heads use to ensure an intake of high-attaining, or affluent, pupils, and thus avoid the potential negative impact on attainment of disadvantaged pupils (Garner 2015). And those already on the school roll can be permanently excluded or moved to alternative provision.[12] Another strategy used by some schools is 'off-rolling'; this has been defined by Ofsted as 'the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without using a

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[11] High-stakes tests are those for which the results that have real consequences for pupils and/or teachers and their schools. GCSE exams have consequences for both. The national tests taken by primary school children have real consequences only for teachers and schools.

[12] Alternative provision is education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour.

permanent exclusion, when the removal is primarily in the best interests of the school, rather than the best interests of the pupil' (Owen 2019). The Education Policy Institute (Hutchinson and Crenna-Jennings 2019) reported that a small minority of schools have particularly high numbers of unexplained pupil exits in the period leading up to the GCSE exams, suggesting that some at least were removed from the roll because they would achieve low results. The pupils that are excluded, sent to alternative provision and off-rolled are disproportionately those with low attainment; those that had previously been excluded for a period; disadvantaged pupils; Black pupils, and those with special educational needs (see also Thomson 2018).

Another strategy some schools have used is to boost their results by entering pupils for exams that are relatively easy to pass, such as the European Computer Driving Licence, which produced far more 'A' grades than other subjects and required very little teaching time; these schools tended to be sponsored academies catering for large numbers of disadvantaged pupils (Nye 2018).[13]

## *The curriculum*

There is substantial evidence that schools provide a narrower curriculum as a consequence of test-based accountability; when the stakes attached to test results are high, teachers focus on the demands of the test at the expense of other aspects of the curriculum (House of Commons Education Committee 2008; Alexander 2010; Spielman 2018). David Berliner argued that this is a 'rational response' (2011, p. 299). While middle-class families may be able to compensate for a limited school curriculum, this is not generally the case for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who are less likely to have access to wider learning and cultural opportunities outside school (Berliner 2011; Francis and Hutchings 2013; Neelands et al. 2015; GL Assessment 2019). In this way, curriculum narrowing increases the gap between disadvantaged and more affluent pupils.

For many years, schools have been blamed for such curriculum narrowing, but in 2018, Amanda Spielman, Ofsted's Chief Inspector, acknowledged that inspection arrangements have focused too much on outcomes, a perverse incentive leading to curriculum narrowing. She reported that Ofsted found curriculum narrowing in primary schools, with 'lessons disproportionately focused on English and mathematics' in preparation for the tests taken at age 11. They also found that preparation for GCSE exams taken at age 16 could start at age 12 or 13; some subjects were completely dropped, and 'many pupils spend their secondary education learning narrowed and shallow test content rather than broader and more in-depth content across a subject area' (Spielman 2018). Schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged

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[13] The European Computer Driving Licence has now been removed from the list of qualifications that 'count' for accountability purposes.

pupils and those that had achieved poor Ofsted grades are the most likely to start GCSE courses early (thus narrowing the curriculum their pupils experience); this practice has increased over the last 3 years because GCSEs have become very much more demanding (see below) (Teacher Tapp 2019b).

The NUT research showed that, within a school, curriculum narrowing particularly affected low-achieving and disadvantaged pupils because they were often removed from other lessons to do extra maths and English:

> These children are pulled out of broad curriculum subjects to try to close the gap. Their experience at school must be horrible – in assembly they've got to do phonics intervention, then a phonics lesson, a literacy lesson, a maths lesson, lunch, reading, extra reading intervention and then speech intervention. What else are they learning about the world? They are 6 years old, and all their school experience tells them is that they are failures (already) and have to be pulled out constantly to work on things their peers can already do, and miss out on the fun bits of learning. (Primary teacher)

Those teaching children with special educational needs also talked about the negative impact of accountability measures. Teachers in both mainstream and special schools complained that they were forced to teach academic subjects to pupils who needed a much greater emphasis on life skills, and those in mainstream schools were concerned that their pupils had to enter tests and exams they were unlikely to pass:[14]

> They would benefit from learning life skills, building their confidence and self-esteem. … They are constantly comparing themselves with their more able peers. They struggle and regularly feel like they are failing in English and maths. (Primary teacher)

A new curriculum was introduced in 2012/2013 which was designed to include more demanding content and set higher expectations for all students, and thus raise standards (DfE 2012a; House of Commons; 2013). Teachers argued that this had a particularly negative effect on pupils who were already struggling, many of whom were disadvantaged. A secondary teacher explained:

> Maths is becoming a lot more difficult. … You have students who start to work out, I can't do this and I'm never going to be able to do this. Every lesson is another lesson where I'm falling further and further behind in my understanding. (Secondary teacher)

He argued that students became disaffected, anxious or depressed because they were not able to cope with the work they were being asked to do. Thus he considered that the new curriculum could widen the gap between disadvantaged and other pupils and increase disaffection. Primary school teachers also expressed concern about the effects of a curriculum which is now related to age rather than level of attainment. They argued that children are asked to learn things for which they are not ready, and as result are turned off education. There is evidence that there is already a gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers

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[14] Schools can ask for specific children to be 'disapplied' from taking national tests. In the NUT research, some headteachers said they put in requests for specific individuals, on the grounds that preparing for and taking the tests was placing inappropriate pressure on the children in question, but that their requests had been turned down.

when they first enter school. The impact of an age-related curriculum, which sets the same expectations for all 5-year-olds, is more negative for those who are already behind. One teacher reported, 'Already I have had parents complain that their child is crying and not wanting to come to school because they "can't do the reading".'

## *Pedagogy*

There is extensive international evidence, reviewed by Samuel Lobascher (2011), that high-stakes testing and accountability measures discourage creative teaching (see Chapter 4, McCallum 2021). It is replaced by 'instructional activities … of a low level in terms of the cognitive processes that are called for by students' (Berliner 2011, p. 299). When pupils have to take high-stakes tests, there is a strong motivation for teachers to do everything possible to enable them to pass. A large majority of teachers in the NUT research reported that the focus on targets meant there was less time for creative, investigative and practical activities, including play in the early years; one argued 'national expectations cannot be met without lots of repetition and rote learning.'

This particularly affected schools that had negative Ofsted judgements and were awaiting further inspection (and, as shown above, these schools tend to have higher numbers of disadvantaged pupils). Teachers often reported school policies requiring uniformity in lesson structures:

> Consistent use of PowerPoint presentations to be used at specific points during a lesson. Mandatory for all lessons. The PowerPoints will be uniform for each class. Only adaptations allowed would be adjusting certain frames to suit the lesson. Learning Intentions, Levelled Success Criteria and lesson specific vocabulary displayed and referred to regularly during every lesson. (Primary teacher)

A senior leader in a school graded 'Requires Improvement' commented that the staff there had previously prided themselves on the imaginative and creative lessons they offered, but that in preparation for their next inspection they had moved to more uniform (and dull) lesson structures. A number of teachers in such schools commented that, as a result, children were bored.

> As a teacher you are not allowed to teach any more. You have to deliver a subject in a generic way just the same way as every other teacher … This does not allow for any creativity or originality that pupils thrive on. As a result, pupils are bored. They know the format of the lesson before you start and rather than see this routine as helpful and logical, they see it as dull and boring. Imagine being a pupil and having these types of lesson every day, every week, every year. (Secondary teacher)

## *Children's emotional health and well-being*

Perhaps the most obvious impact of the pressure created by accountability measures has been in emotional responses. The World Health Organisation (Currie et al. 2012) found that 11- and 16-year-old pupils in England felt more pressured by their school work than is the case in the vast majority of other European countries. The 2015 OECD Programme for International Assessment (PISA) asked specifically about anxiety about school work and tests, and students in the UK reported higher levels of anxiety and stress than was the case in the vast majority of OECD member countries (OECD 2015). Similarly the 2018 PISA data showed that, on average, students in England were less satisfied with their lives than those in almost all other OECD member and partner countries, and satisfaction had declined more since 2015 than in most other countries (Sizmur et al. 2019; OECD 2019a). Childline, the counselling service for children and young people, reported that school and exam pressures are one of the biggest causes of feelings of stress and anxiety among children and young people, and each year increasing numbers of children call helplines about school work, tests and exams:

> Exam pressures manifested themselves in many ways, but the most frequently talked about were feeling depressed, panic attacks, excessive crying, low self-esteem, self-harming and suicidal thought. (Childline 2016, p. 28)

Test and exam anxiety affects children of all ages; in the NUT research, primary and secondary teachers talked about pupils' anxiety about national tests, and a 16-year-old pupil who had just done GCSE exams reported, 'Some people would be crying for most of the exam, they were just so stressed out. I knew people that was crying before they went into the exams.' Teachers said anxiety about tests affected a wide range of pupils, including those who are high-attaining and conscientious (particularly girls), as well as those with low attainment or special needs. There is evidence that high exam anxiety has a negative impact on outcomes (e.g. Putwain 2008).

In some pupils, exam anxiety has long-term effects. Teachers reported instances where tests or exams had been the immediate trigger for mental health problems such as self-harming or anorexia, which then continued. Exam anxiety can also trigger relapses; Childline (2016) pointed out that for some young people who had previously been self-harming, exam stress triggered further self-harm.

Most seriously, exam pressure could lead to suicidal thoughts, and to suicide. Rodway et al. (2016) examined existing documentary evidence on suicides of young people over a 16-month period, and found that among those under 18 years, academic pressure was an antecedent in 38% of cases, and 'current exams, impending exams, or exam results at time of death' in 25%. The large increase in numbers of children and young people with mental health problems is well-documented, and it is clear that there are many reasons for this (including for example, bullying and social media), but there is now evidence that the intense pressure related to school work is one of the causes (e.g. Sharp 2013; Bennett and Burgess 2015; Childline 2016).

The Department for Education's response to reports of anxiety, stress and mental health problems related to testing has been to state that tests should not be stressful and that good schools manage tests appropriately (Burns 2016), thus blaming teachers for the consequences of government policies. Ministers have been aware of the extent of mental health problems in schools, and have made a number of suggestions for improving this (including character education to develop resilience, and more competitive sport). But their main proposal was that schools should provide better mental health support. However, a more appropriate response would be to tackle underlying causes of the problem. As one special needs coordinator in the NUT research argued, 'You can't be counselling them for what you are putting them through at school.'

## *Impact of failure*

Both parents and teachers have expressed concern about potential negative effects of attaching the label 'fail' to any child, particularly to young children:

> I find it very disheartening that in Year 1 [children aged 5–6] we assess a child and then have to send home something to parents to say whether their child is good enough or not. So you're starting their career in education in a primary school by saying 'your child can or can't do something.' (Primary teacher)

In 2018, almost one in five 6-year-olds failed to reach the 'expected' standard in the phonics check. Those eligible for free school meals were less likely to do so, as were those with special educational needs. Both the percentage of children 'failing', and the 'gaps' relating to disadvantage and special needs, increase as children progress through the school (Table 3.1).

Thus large numbers of children, and particularly those from poorer families or with special needs, experience what they see as failure. The numbers failing have increased rather than fallen in recent years, because the government has introduced new and more challenging tests which they believe will raise standards (DfE 2012a; House of Commons 2013). The younger children within each year group are more likely to fail; for example, in 2018 there was a 13 percentage point gap in numbers of 5–6-year-olds 'passing' the phonics test between pupils born in August (the

**Table 3.1** Percentage of children *failing* to achieve the 'expected standard'

| Test | *Eligible for free school meals* | Not eligible for free school meals | *With special needs* | No special needs |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *%* | *%* | *%* | *%* |
| Phonics test aged 6 | *30* | 16 | *56* | 11 |
| National tests aged 11 | *54* | 32 | *79* | 26 |

Sources: DfE (2018b, 2018c)

youngest in their year) and in September (the oldest) (DfE 2018b). While this was anticipated, age was not taken into account in setting standards for the phonics test because 'the government has high expectations for all children' (Standards and Testing Agency, 2012, cited in Moss 2017).

The government view has been that children need to know when they are failing:

> It is a misguided notion on the part of some educational theorists that if work is graded some children and their parents will think of themselves as failures. Pupils need to be told when they are doing badly just as much as they need to be told when they are doing well. (DFE 1992, para. 1.41)

Research suggests that responses to failure vary with the stakes attached to the test. While many do 'fail' in regular class tests (low-stakes assessments), and cope with this, failure in high-stakes tests often leads to discouragement and a downward academic spiral (Amrein and Berliner 2003; Symes 2017). It is particularly low achievers who become 'demotivated by constant evidence of their low achievement' (Harlen and Deakin Crick 2002, p. 5). Pupils interviewed in the NUT research talked about the negative impact of poor marks; for example, an 11-year-old explained that poor marks 'make people that aren't as good and don't have enough confidence in themselves, have, like, less confidence.' Similarly, a secondary special needs coordinator said that there had been an increase in the number of pupils entering secondary school with poor self-esteem who did not believe they could succeed in academic work. The children most likely to fail tests and exams at all levels are those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special needs. These groups therefore suffer disproportionately from disaffection, demotivation and loss of confidence.

## Rationale behind accountability policies

The previous section has shown that the NUT research found a wide range of negative consequences of accountability structures in England, and demonstrated that these impact disproportionately on groups of children who were already disadvantaged. The findings echoed those of previous research both in England and the USA; the particular contribution of the NUT report was that it drew together evidence about the whole range of negative consequences, and thus it was hoped that it would impact on future policy.

However, governments have generally taken very little notice of evidence suggesting that accountability policies have unintended negative impacts. When they have commented, it has generally been to blame schools for narrowing the curriculum, making children anxious etc., without any acknowledgement of the pressure schools experience from accountability measures. Or, alternatively, government simply reassert their own aims – as in this comment on the NUT research:

> Part of our commitment to social justice is the determination to ensure every child is given an education that allows them realise their potential. That's why we are raising standards

> with a rigorous new curriculum, world class exams and new accountability system that rewards those schools which help every child to achieve their best. (Department for Education spokesperson, cited by BBC 2015)

This suggests that the rigorous new curriculum and the new accountability system are driven by a commitment to social justice. But it seems somewhat bizarre to believe that simply making examinations harder will produce more equitable outcomes, and this was certainly not the experience of teachers in the NUT research. In England, various policies have been implemented to improve attainment of disadvantaged pupils. Currently schools receive 'Pupil Premium' funding for each disadvantaged pupil, and are accountable to Ofsted for the way they spend this. But the attainment of disadvantaged pupils has never been one of the main targets prioritised for accountability purposes.

This section considers why, despite the evidence of negative impacts, governments in England continue to have a strong commitment to accountability policies, and discusses what they hope to achieve through them. It shows that three key motivations are to provide information for parents; to raise standards; and to have greater control over what is taught in schools. These are considered in turn, and the limitations of the politicians' arguments are discussed.

### *Information for parents*

Politicians have argued that accountability measures will inform parents about the progress of their own children, and will give them valuable information to inform their choice of schools. Both these arguments are flawed.

One of the arguments used to support the introduction of national tests was that test scores would give parents more useful information about their child's attainment and progress than was found in the traditional school report. Test scores relate to defined standards and can be compared with the outcomes for other children (DES 1987). Parents undoubtedly want information about their own children's progress, but it is less clear that they want this in the form of a test score. An alliance of parents' groups and education professionals, *More than a Score*, is currently campaigning against the dominance of national tests, arguing that a child is 'more than a score'. Their website states:

> Primary school is a time for self-discovery, building confidence and nourishing potential. But primary school children in England are being let down by a system that cares more about measurement than their education. Our system is obsessed with league tables, turning children into data points and denying them a broad, stimulating education at key stages in their development. It puts an unnecessary burden on children, parents and teachers alike. (More than a Score 2019)

Test scores are also key to market accountability, discussed earlier. This was particularly dominant in the 1990s, following the White Paper *Choice and Diversity* (DFE 1992). It was assumed that league tables and inspection reports would enable

parents to make informed choices of school. This in turn would lead to some schools expanding and others shrinking (and eventually closing). There are a number of problems with this. Many parents have no real choice, either because only one school is accessible, or because their first-choice school is already full. The notion that 'good' schools can expand to meet demand is simply unrealistic. Moreover, in a state education system, schools cannot just be allowed to fail. Rather, they are given extra support to bring about improvement.

There are also social justice concerns. Middle-class parents are far more likely to use league tables and Ofsted reports, and to have the financial and cultural capital to get their child into the schools they want (Francis and Hutchings 2013; see also Chapter 7, Hutchings 2021b). Researchers have consistently argued that while choice policies may lead to better quality schooling for some, they further disadvantage the groups who are already disadvantaged (see Whitty 2002).

## *Raising standards and achieving value for money*

Raising standards has always been the main desired outcome of accountability policies, though this is talked about in a variety of overlapping ways – in relation to value for money, international competition and the needs of the economy, each discussed separately here.

As the introduction to this chapter showed, payment by results in the nineteenth century aimed to ensure value for money by raising standards, and the Thatcher government which re-introduced accountability had similar aims:

> The Government's principal aims for all sectors of education are first, to raise standards at all levels of ability; and second, since education is an investment in the nation's future, to secure the best possible return from the resources which are found for it. (DES 1985, para. 2)

In the 1988 Education Reform Act the aim of achieving value for money operated mainly through the market. Schools would be funded according to the number of pupils they attracted, and published league tables of attainment data would allow parents to make informed choices. The aim of raising standards was to be achieved by 'by specifying attainment levels in core subjects [English, maths and science], developing appropriate syllabuses and testing for standards of various ages' (Griffiths 1987). Thus 'standards' were defined narrowly in terms of test or exam results in a few subjects.

So do national tests raise standards? A wide range of research in the USA has shown that high-stakes testing has a positive impact on students' attainment in tests (e.g. Carnoy and Loeb 2002; Hanushek and Raymond 2005). However, other research (e.g. Wiliam 2010) demonstrates that this does not necessarily indicate any greater understanding or knowledge, but simply that pupils have been prepared for that particular test. Audrey Amrein and David Berliner (2002), in a study of the impact of the introduction of high-stakes testing in 18 US states, showed that while

there was clear evidence that linking high-stakes consequences to test outcomes had increased scores on those tests, use of a range of other tests showed no evidence of increased student learning. Similarly, in England, the number of 16-year-olds achieving the expected level in GCSE exams (the high-stakes test that teachers focus on) increased by 14 percentage points between 2006 and 2012 (DfE 2013a), but in the same time period, scores in PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment – a low-stakes international test taken only by a sample of schools) remained stable (Wheater et al. 2013). The issue here is not whether GCSE or PISA is the more effective test, but that there is a difference in scores between tests for which pupils have undergone intensive preparation (e.g. GCSEs) and those for which they have not prepared (e.g. PISA).

The government regularly claims that standards have risen; for example, Nick Gibb (School Standards Minister) claimed in January 2019 'It's been clear for some time that standards are rising in our schools' (DfE 2019b). But recent increases in the difficulty of tests and exams, and changes to the key accountability measures, have made it impossible to compare standards achieved in different years. In view of this, the Department for Education stated that they would assess the impact of their reforms 'by reference to international tables of student attainment, such as PISA' (House of Commons Education Committee 2015). In PISA 2015, England's results showed no improvement compared with previous years (Jerrim and Shure 2016). The 2018 reading and science scores also showed no significant change, but there was a statistically significant slight increase in mathematics scores. However, some other countries did less well than in previous years, and England consequently improved its place in the international ranking for each subject (Sizmur et al. 2019).[15] This enabled politicians to claim PISA evidenced the success of their policies (e.g. Gibb 2019).

## *International competition and raising standards*

One of the arguments put forward for the 1988 Education Reform Act was that children in other countries were said to be more advanced than those in England. Thatcher (then Prime Minister) said in a speech in 1987, 'In a subject such as mathematics, children in this country at the age of sixteen, are not nearly as competent as those in France, Germany or Japan' (Thatcher 1987a).

Comparative international studies of student achievement have been undertaken since the 1960s.[16] PISA, created by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), and intended to evaluate national educational

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[15] The number of countries scoring significantly higher than England in reading decreased from 12 in 2015 to 9 in 2018; in maths, it decreased from 19 to 12; and in science increased from 9 to 10 (Sizmur et al. 2019).

[16] Current tests include TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), in addition to PISA.

systems by testing 15-year-olds in maths, science and reading, is the most influential of these tests:

> PISA results are anxiously awaited by governments … They have begun to deeply influence educational practices in many countries. As a result of PISA, countries are overhauling their education systems in the hopes of improving their rankings. Lack of progress on PISA has led to declarations of crisis and 'PISA shock' in many countries, followed by calls for resignations, and far-reaching reforms according to PISA precepts. (Meyer et al. 2014, p. 1)

The drive to improve results is often described as a race – here, for example, by Michael Gove, then Secretary of State for Education:

> Since the 1990s our performance in these [international] league tables has been at best, stagnant, at worst declining. … we are still falling further behind the best-performing school systems in the world … leaving our children behind in the global race. (Gove 2013a)

As David Kamens (2015, p. 421) puts it, 'national test scores have come to signify a nation's level of comparative modernisation and constitute an important source of national prestige in a global context.' Critics of PISA see this as dangerous; for example, Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Aaron Benavot (2013) argue that the dominance of PISA is creating an unprecedented process of educational standardisation across the world.[17] And Yong Zhao argued:

> The entire PISA enterprise has been designed to capitalize on the intense nationalistic concern for global competitiveness by inducing strong emotional responses from the unsuspecting public, gullible politicians, and sensation-seeking media. … The league tables are intended to show winners and losers, in not only educational policies and practices of the past, but more important, in capacity for global competition in the future. [This has resulted] in irrational policies and practices that are more likely to squander precious resources and opportunities than enhancing capacity for future prosperity. (Zhao 2014)

The drive to improve PISA scores has led many governments to put greater emphasis on national tests, despite the fact that trends in national test scores are not necessarily reflected in PISA.

## *The needs of the economy and raising standards*

Politicians argue that raising standards is necessary to equip individuals to gain jobs. For example, Gove, then Secretary of State for Education, argued, 'Children who leave school with no skills or low skills will find their employment opportunities limited and their horizons narrowed' (Gove 2014). But while they often talk in terms of the needs of individuals (presumably in order to appeal to the electorate), the argument that carries greater weight with them is that raising educational

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[17] In addition to concerns about the impact of PISA, critics have voiced concerns about the validity of PISA's findings, identifying serious problems with sampling, international comparability, and the use of statistics (e.g. Goldstein 2004, 2013; Kreiner 2011; Meyer and Benavot 2013; Meyer et al. 2014).

standards is necessary for economic growth. For example, Tony Blair, Labour Prime Minister, claimed 'Education is the best economic policy there is for a modern country' (1995). Education is seen as producing human capital, and the quality of human capital is a key factor supporting growth. This is not controversial, but what is problematic is the assumption that the quality of human capital can be measured by scores achieved in national or international tests which assess only a limited part of the school curriculum. However, this is the link that has been made by some researchers. Gibb, Schools Minister, and one of the few politicians to regularly refer to research evidence, highlighted this relationship:

> Our long term economic prosperity depends upon an education system with the very highest standards. As research by Hanushek and Woessmann has found, a 25 point increase in PISA scores could raise the UK's GDP growth rate by 0.5% every year. (Gibb 2015b)

Eric Hanushek and Derek Kimko (2000) first showed a link between PISA scores and GDP, taking test scores as a measure of labour force quality. Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann (2010) came to the same conclusion, as Gibb points out. However, other researchers have questioned both methods and findings. Francisco Ramirez et al. (2006) pointed out that Hanushek and Kimko had used 'estimated' values of student achievement for countries that did not participate in international tests. They also found that if the four Asian 'tiger' economies (South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan, which have undergone rapid industrialisation) were removed from the analysis, the relationship between test scores and economic growth was much less strong, and was not consistent over time. Kamens (2015), with the advantage of a much longer run of international tests, explored the same issue using different time lags between test and growth figures. He found little evidence of effects of test performance on subsequent economic growth. He suggests a number of possible reasons for this: the attitudes and behavioural patterns of future workers may be more important than their cognitive skills; globalisation may limit the extent to which any country can control its economy; countries may not be able to use their educated young people effectively; and so on.

There are also questions about whether the current testing regime is producing young people who meet the needs of business and industry. Meyer and Benavot (2013) argued that the standardised education resulting from a focus on PISA may be reducing the extent to which schools prepare students for independent thinking and civic participation. And business and industry leaders in England have expressed similar concerns. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) warned that businesses were 'concerned that the examination system in place in recent years has placed young people on a continuous treadmill of assessment,' and that while young people were academically stretched, they failed to show the 'series of attitudes and behaviours that are vital for success – including determination, optimism and emotional intelligence'. Thus, they said, 'the current exam system risks turning schools into exam factories that are churning out people who are not sufficiently prepared for life outside the school gates' (cited in Garner 2014). The Institute of Directors (2016, p. 14) similarly argued that 'an over-emphasis on testing comes at the

expense of teaching children to employ the creativity and entrepreneurial talents they will need to insulate them against the unpredictability of the future.'

The evidence therefore suggests that focusing on the standards achieved in national or international tests may not be an effective strategy to bring about economic growth. Moreover, Les Bell and Howard Stevenson (2006, p. 3) argued that 'as the emphasis on economic utilitarianism as a rationale for educational policy increases in significance, then equity issues become subservient to the economic imperative.' They showed that focusing on the economic utility of education at the expense of its many other potential contributions is likely to have other negative consequences for society and for individuals. It can lead to a neglect of consideration of values, citizenship and social justice.

## *Controlling what is taught in schools*

In the 1980s and 1990s when current accountability measures were introduced, many politicians were concerned about what was going in in schools, and supported mechanisms through which they could exert greater control. A House of Commons debate on reading standards in 1991 illustrates some of these views. Poor reading standards were associated with 'permissive educational regimes' and 'overdependence on curious child-centred methods'. In contrast, what was required was 'greater rigour, greater discipline and greater structuring of reading and the way in which it is taught' and 'good, systematic teaching, principally using phonics' and 'traditional methods' (House of Commons 1991). Politicians also argued that controlling what is taught in schools could ensure school leavers had the skills and knowledge needed by employers, and could create a more cohesive and stable society as a result of 'the explicit reinforcement of a common culture' through focusing on British history, Standard English and the English literary heritage (Tate, 1994, cited in Ross 2000b, p. 152).

The Education Reform Act 1988 gave the Secretary of State sweeping power to change the curriculum and testing arrangements; this attracted much criticism at the time (Gillard 2018). These powers have been used. A particularly effective way of changing what is taught in schools is to change assessments or accountability measures. Thus the tests taken at age 11 and GCSE exams at age 16 have been made much more challenging; new tests of phonics and of grammar, punctuation and spelling have been put in place resulting in far more time being devoted to these areas; and changes to the list of qualifications that can be 'counted' in the floor targets have resulted in schools teaching more academic and fewer vocational subjects. In this way, the government is generally able to achieve its desired outcomes in relation to curriculum.

It is more questionable whether the curriculum they have created is best fitted for achieving their aims for economic growth. The CBI (2015) deplored the reduction in time dedicated to science teaching in primary schools, and in particular, the limited opportunities in primary and secondary schools to carry out practical

experiments. They concluded that too few young people were studying science and technology subjects at school and beyond, and that shortages of scientists, engineers and technologists would limit Britain's effectiveness in certain industries and in an increasingly competitive global market.

There are also concerns that the curriculum is dominated by facts to be learned, and that school leavers are not able to engage in critical thinking. A Vice-Chancellor argued:

> The problem we have with A-levels is that students … tend not to take a critical stance; and they tend not to take responsibility for their own learning. But the crucial point is the independent thinking. It is common in our institution that students go to the lecture tutor and say, 'What is the right answer?' (House of Commons Education Committee 2008, para. 129)

Conservative politicians have consistently supported a knowledge curriculum. For example, Nicky Morgan (2015), then Secretary of State for Education, argued explicitly that children should acquire knowledge rather than learning critical thinking, because critical thinking, in her view, is not possible without knowing the facts. The counter-argument is that we do not know what facts will be important in the future, so children need to learn how to access factual knowledge, and to evaluate and use it in a range of contexts.

Recently this emphasis on knowledge was criticised by Andreas Schleicher of the OECD, the lead PISA expert. He said England's school system is losing ground to the Far East because of an emphasis on rote-learning. In contrast, countries like China had embraced a skills-based approach to education (Hazell 2018).

## Politicians, educational science and education research

So far in this chapter, I have shown that politicians have largely ignored the substantial body of research showing that accountability policies have unintended negative impacts which particularly affect disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs. In this section I consider the reasons for this, a long-standing distrust of all those working in education, and very limited use of research evidence. I also consider the problems that can arise when politicians base policies on a single piece of research, and discuss how the research community could present their findings more effectively.

### *Distrust of teachers and education researchers*

Politicians' distrust of teachers and education researchers has a long history. A 'discourse of derision' (Ball 1990, p. 22) of teachers characterised the *Black Papers*, a series of right-wing pamphlets published between 1969 and 1977, which attacked progressive and comprehensive education and portrayed teachers as left-wing and

politically subversive. Teachers have been presented as part of the problem that accountability would solve. Thatcher, then Prime Minister, spoke about 'hard-left education authorities and extremist teachers' who were depriving inner-city children of the education they deserved (Thatcher 1987b).

And while politicians have repeatedly asserted a commitment to evidence-based policies, in England there has been a long history of policy makers distrusting educational researchers. As far back as 1973, the new DES planning unit argued that:

> The field of educational research has given rise to a number of research workers of sound academic reputation but with fixed ideas/prejudices about the direction in which education ought to be moving. Unfortunately these prejudices tend to spill over into their research and the results that come forward are not entirely unbiased. (cited in McCulloch 2018, p. 185)

Some politicians have seen it as acceptable to ridicule research that uses 'jargon' and does not have immediate implications for classroom practice; in a House of Commons debate, a Conservative MP, referred to:

> … Kimberley, Meek and Miller, who are, to their eternal discredit as teachers of reading, on the record as saying that within the psychosemiotic framework, the shared reading lesson is viewed as an ideological construct where events are played out and children must learn to position themselves in three interlocking contexts. What nonsense. (House of Commons 2003, vol. 408, Col 797)

This reflects a view that teaching and learning are straightforward processes that depend on common sense, rather than complex processes that we need to understand better.

And some politicians have dismissed research evidence that disagrees with their own views. For example, when 100 leading education researchers wrote an open letter to Gove (Secretary of State for Education) arguing that proposed changes would result in a narrower curriculum and more rote learning (Bassey et al. 2013), he dismissed their intervention as 'bad academia' (Shepherd 2013a), and labelled them 'the Blob'; 'the new Enemies of Promise … a set of politically motivated individuals who have been actively trying to prevent millions of our poorest children getting the education they need'; and 'Marxist teachers hellbent on destroying our schools' (Gove 2013b).

Ball noted:

> Part of the significance of the [New Right] discourse is the impossibility of reply. The culpable teacher, the implicated educational establishment, are excluded from valid participation in debates which affect them directly and within which they are spoken of. The discourse rests upon their failings, their culpability, thus their responses, their anguish, their outrage can all be set aside, for 'they would say that wouldn't they'. (1990, p. 58)

This distrust of teachers and education experts was very evident in the initial process of writing the National Curriculum and designing tests. Once the general shape of the National Curriculum and the principle of national testing had been established by the government, the work of writing the curriculum and designing the tests was undertaken by carefully selected task groups, some, but not all, of whom were educational professionals. But the involvement of educationalists resulted in many disagreements between working groups and ministers. These have

been well documented (e.g. by Ball 1990; Coulby and Bash 1991; Ross 2000b). For example, the English working group draft report included Standard English as one dialect among many, which should be used on appropriate occasions, and referred to 'knowledge about language' rather than grammar (Ross 2000b). Memos within the Prime Minister's office repeatedly expressed concern that the English working group draft report did not state clearly the need to teach Standard English, and formal grammar (e.g. Griffiths 1988). And as a result the wording in each case was changed – though perhaps not to the extent that Ministers would have preferred.[18]

The group set up to advise on the national tests to be taken at ages 7, 11 and 16 brought their expertise in assessment and testing to the task of meeting the government aim, and made proposals that recognised that children progress at different rates and that the main aim of assessment should be to inform future teaching (DES 1988). But Thatcher (then Prime Minister) expressed many concerns about the report, deploring its use of 'impenetrable educationalist jargon' (Thatcher 1993, p. 595), and emphasis on formative and diagnostic assessment (leaked memo cited in Ball 1990, p. 191). Although the group's report was published, most of the proposals were gradually abandoned in favour of traditional written tests and age-related standards. Thus educational professionals' attempts to create a curriculum and tests that were informed by educational science or research were generally unsuccessful.

## *Limited use of education research in policy making*

Evidence from education research has rarely been used in policy making (Gorard 2018). It would of course be unreasonable to expect that every member of parliament could read relevant research on every topic, even with the support of the researchers that they employ. Ministers might be expected to access more in-depth analyses. But David Laws (Minister for Schools in the Coalition government) said he had been surprised that civil servants tended to offer practical advice rather than academic evidence. As a result, he claimed, 'Politicians are prone to make decisions based on ideology and personal experience' (cited by Wilby 2017).

One arrangement to try to ensure that evidence is scrutinised is the Parliamentary Select Committee. Select Committees are cross-party groups of MPs who undertake an in-depth examination of specific issues, with a wide range of interested parties including education researchers offering written or oral evidence. The Committees then report write reports with recommendations, and the government has to reply to these. Unfortunately, the Education Committee's careful investigations, and the recommendations made, are very often dismissed by the government. This can be seen

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[18] This concern was not fully addressed until some 25 years later when the Conservatives were again in power, and introduced a Spelling Punctuation and Grammar test for 11-year-olds, in which they have to show understanding of over 50 grammatical terms, including some which few adults are aware of: e.g. fronted adverbial, modal verb (DfE 2013b).

in the government response to the Education Committee's inquiry into assessment in primary schools (House of Commons Education Committee 2017a). The Committee had reported concerns about 'teaching to the test', narrowing of the curriculum, and teacher and pupil well-being. They stated, 'We recognise the importance of holding schools to account but this high-stakes system does not improve teaching and learning at primary school' (2017a, para. 66). The government's response (House of Commons Education Committee 2017b) was that schools are required to teach a broad and balanced curriculum, and that restricting the assessment of 11-year-olds to certain subjects avoids over-burdening pupils and teachers. It claims, 'It is important that we have an accountability system that is fair, inclusive and properly reflects the work of teachers to ensure that all children fulfil their potential' (para. 14). Thus the points the Committee had made about the negative impacts of the accountability system were ignored.

Another reason why politicians tend to ignore education research is that they want researchers to produce straightforward accounts of 'what works and why' (Blunkett 2000). Researchers, on the other hand, consider that not all research should have the same focus on raising standards, and that even research with that aim may be rather more complex, asking what works with which children in what context (Whitty 2006).

## *Problematic use of research in policy making*

There is a danger that when a piece of research is produced that claims that a particular strategy 'works' it may have undue influence. An example of this is research about teaching phonics. For many years Nick Gibb (who later became an Education Minister), championed the use of synthetic phonics as the main method of teaching reading, citing one specific piece of research. He told the House of Commons in 2003:

> In a study by St. Andrews university in co-operation with Clackmannanshire education authority, about a dozen first-year primary classes in which a synthetic phonic approach to reading was used were compared with classes using various conventional British methods. Taken as a whole, the comparison showed that pupils taught using synthetic phonics learned about twice as rapidly as those on conventional analytic 'look and say' approaches. The proportion of underachieving pupils was approximately halved. (House of Commons 2003, vol. 408, col. 797)

Gibb made so many references to this evidence in the House of Commons that it became a standing joke; in 2007 members are reported as cheering when he said the words 'synthetic phonics' (House of Commons 2007). His repeated references appear to have been aimed at undermining the credibility of the Labour government who had made a commitment to evidence based policies, and whose strategies for improving reading were proving less successful than they had hoped.

There are a number of problems in using the Clackmannanshire research (Johnston and Watson 2005) as a basis for curriculum change. It was designed to

compare different approaches to phonics: synthetic phonics, analytic phonics, and analytic phonics plus phonological awareness training. After the first year all three groups were transferred to synthetic phonics, which had produced the greatest progress. They were then tracked until they were 12 years old, when their 'word-reading' scores were well ahead of their chronological age, but comprehension scores (the purpose of reading) only slightly ahead. Gibb's reference to 'conventional analytic "look and say" approaches' is a distortion of the project's aims and findings, suggesting some confusion about analytic phonics and other approaches to reading. Sue Ellis and Gemma Moss (2014) identified limitations of using the study as a basis for curriculum change; it did not isolate the impact of the phonics teaching from the range of other factors that might have had an impact; there was no control group; and we are told nothing about what actually went on in the classroom. While it is reported that 20 min a day was spent on phonics tuition, we are not told about time spent on other reading activities, resources used, or support was provided for the teachers. The report shows that the greatest progress in the word reading and spelling tests took place when the children were aged about 11. It is difficult to see how this could have been affected by an intervention which took place when they were aged 5 or 6.

This study, then, does not provide the sort of evidence or detail that would justify changing the reading curriculum for all children. A proponent of phonics, Morag Stuart, argued in evidence to the House of Commons Education Committee that further research was needed:

> We have some inkling of what works: we do not know the fine details of how best to do things. We have not had proper comparative studies looking carefully at the best way to do things and the best way to do things for different sorts of children, because children differ. (Stuart, quoted in House of Commons Education Committee 2005, p. 21)

Nevertheless, when the Coalition government was elected in 2010, and Gibb was appointed Minister for Schools, synthetic phonics became part of the curriculum and the phonics test was introduced. This episode raises a number of issues, not simply about whether so much emphasis should be given to phonics, but about the impact of a single research paper.

The education research community has given considerable thought to how they might improve the relationship with politicians and make their research more accessible and usable. This has been a frequent topic for presidential addresses at the British Educational Research Association's annual conferences (e.g. Furlong 2003; Whitty 2006; Moss 2016). In relation to Gibb's use of Clackmannanshire phonics study, Ellis and Moss (2014) suggested that education might benefit from guidelines by the Medical Research Council (2000, 2008) which identified different phases of investigation from theory though to long-term evaluation focusing on effectiveness in real-life settings, and make it clear that researchers should 'distinguish between impacts they have established in their research, and what can properly be extrapolated as evidence of the practical effectiveness of their research in everyday interaction' (Ellis and Moss 2014, p. 254). They also argued that:

An ethics framework that acknowledged the complexity of intervening successfully in edu-
cation practice should prompt differing research traditions to engage more fruitfully with
each other. It should also prompt researchers to recognise the potential problems of interact-
ing with powerful policy agendas driven by interests that are different to their own, and to
act more cautiously. (p. 254)

It may also be worth reviewing the current research assessment system for higher
education institutions. This encourages researchers to publish, often resulting in
papers being written before a full analysis has been undertaken, which is potentially
dangerous.

## Discussion

The accountability policies in England were put in place by Thatcher's government
with very limited reference to educational science or research, and indeed, at times
with a distinctly negative attitude to all those working in education. These policies
were designed to bring about what politicians saw as the public good – a better
qualified workforce, economic growth, a market in education, and a traditional cur-
riculum emphasising British culture. They were not intended to create equality or
bring about social justice.[19]

Those working in education, in contrast to politicians, tend to see the public good
in terms of making a difference to children's lives, focusing on the impact of school-
ing on individuals and their present and future well-being.[20] In the NUT research,
headteachers were asked who they thought they *should* be accountable to. Many
argued that they should be mainly accountable to the children they teach:

I do think ultimately it's to our future generation that we are accountable. We should be
striving every day to do our best for them … We have … to try and do as much as we can
to keep them learning and wanting to come to school, motivated and enjoying their time,
helping them to make relationships with other people so that they don't have difficulties in
their own lives as they grow older. (Primary headteacher)

Some teachers questioned whether higher attainment in academic subjects was
necessarily the most important goal for every child. Here a special needs

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[19] Other policies have focused on improving attainment for disadvantaged groups. When Blair's
New Labour was elected, the same accountability policies were continued; New Labour was
attempting to find 'a third way' between capitalism and socialism, and maintained many of the
education policies created by the Conservatives. However, they also put in place a number of strat-
egies to raise attainment in deprived areas: sponsored academies, Education Action Zones,
Excellence in Cities, the London Challenge, and City Challenge. And subsequently, the Coalition
government introduced the Pupil Premium – additional funding a school received for each disad-
vantaged pupil, but discontinued some previous policies.

[20] Teacher Tapp (5 Nov 2018) reported that the motivation secondary teachers most frequently
indicated was wanting to make a difference to pupils' lives. Among primary teachers, this was
second only to wanting to work with children.

coordinator recounts her recent interview with Ofsted inspectors about the 16-year-olds with special needs.

> [Ofsted inspectors] asked me how the SEN [special educational needs] students did. I said 'They did OK.' They shot me down and said 'No, they didn't. They were atrocious.' I said, 'Well, all of them were happy, fully involved in school life, got the grades they needed and every single one of them got to where they wanted to go after this school. I consider that success. We had people that weren't wanting to come to school, they were bullied … but now they're a full member of the school.' The inspectors weren't interested in that. Didn't care. They just cared about the fact that they hadn't made so many levels of progress.

Similar accounts were given by teachers in special schools and in schools in deprived areas where children had major social and emotional needs. All that apparently mattered to the inspectors was that test or exam results were not good enough.

The teachers' perspective, starting from the needs of the individual, is very different from that of the average politician who has to think at a national and international level, focusing on the economy, international relations and internal stability. It is thus perhaps inevitable that politicians perceive the ideas of education professionals to be based on ideology – and vice versa. I am not suggesting that all politicians or all teachers think the same, but that their different roles tend to lead to different perspectives.

But at the same time, it is unhelpful, and ultimately unproductive, when politicians dismiss or ignore research evidence. This chapter has shown that there is substantial evidence that accountability policies have a negative impact on many children and young people, and in particular on those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special educational needs. It has also shown that accountability policies are making teaching a less attractive profession, and are one of the factors in teachers leaving the profession, resulting in the current teacher shortage. If governments are unable to recruit enough teachers because they have made the job so unattractive, they lose credibility. Moreover, there is no strong evidence that the government's own aims – raising standards, gaining ground in the international 'race', and improving the economy, are being achieved.

In this light, it is interesting to reflect on recent developments. The latest changes to accountability, removing floor standards, do not go as far as campaigning groups such as *More than a Score* would like. We still have a strongly hierarchical system of accountability. But internationally, there is now a much greater acceptance that accountability with high-stakes tests can have negative impacts. The *UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2017–18* identified many problems with current accountability regimes:

> There is no clear evidence that sanctioning schools for test scores improves learning … Narrowing curriculum, teaching to the test and cheating were found … disproportionately affecting disadvantaged schools and students. … School choice policies benefit more advantaged populations … and reinforce socio-economic divisions. (Global Education Monitoring Report Team 2017, p. 21–2)

It is interesting to note that Andreas Schleicher, the lead PISA expert at the OECD, has changed his views about England's accountability system. In 2014, he told the Education committee:

> We rate England very strongly on the accountability system. You have a good combination. On the one hand, you have test data that are reasonably robust, but you also have one of the best inspection systems looking after schools. (House of Commons Education Committee 2014, Q222)

But in 2018, his comments were rather different. He indicated that the best way forward may be a move towards 'professional accountability' systems and collaborative approaches where 'teachers are accountable not so much to administrative authorities but primarily to their fellow teachers and school principals,' and suggested 'the importance of strengthening lateral accountability in the English system.' He reported:

> This is a feature of many of the highest performing international jurisdictions, where accountability is vested at a more local level and reputational metrics mean that great teachers are attracted to the toughest schools … In such systems teachers themselves are often their severest critics – a managed transition away from a top-down system based on compliance and intervention, to one where the profession takes much greater ownership and responsibility for the quality of the curriculum and pupils' learning is potentially transformative. (Schleicher, cited by NFER 2018)

Such a change could transform schools in England, making the teaching profession more attractive, children less stressed, the curriculum wider and teaching more creative. And it could potentially achieve the government's aims of raising standards and benefiting the economy. In the nineteenth century, schools in England endured some 35 years of payment by results before it was abandoned. Hopefully, after 30 years we may be approaching the end of the current regime of test-based accountability.

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# Chapter 4
# Who gets to be creative in class? Creativity as a matter of social justice in secondary English lessons

**Andrew McCallum**

**Abstract**  This chapter explores how teachers in three secondary schools construct creativity, individually and within the context of shared practice in their own institutions. The particular focus is on how constructions of creativity are shaped by national frameworks of curriculum, assessment and accountability, and how these vary from school to school. This is situated in a period of political transition in the English school curriculum (2010–2015), during which the National Curriculum (which had previously contained 'creativity' as one of its four key concepts) was replaced by a curriculum that made no mention of creativity. The chapter examines the role of policy in the construction of creativity in classrooms, analysing how teachers might resist official policy in the interests of their vision for their subject, and questioning the role policy can play in the implementation of 'exhortative' policies about difficult to measure concepts such as creativity, compared to 'imperative' policies that relate directly to accountability in schools. The chapter constructs creativity itself as a material resource central to the teaching of language and literature, with its relative levels of distribution within different schools and to different students a matter of social justice and equity.

## Introduction

This chapter draws on doctoral research study into how English[1] teachers in three different secondary schools constructed 'creativity' and how this fed into enactments of creativity and creative practices in their classrooms. The research formed the basis of a Doctorate in Education, completed with the Institute for Policy Studies

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[1] 'English' here refers to school subject English as practised in secondary schools in England. This encompasses the study of both English Language and English Literature.

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in Education (IPSE) team at London Metropolitan University. In keeping with the institute's ethos, it was positioned within a model of educational research that sought to interrogate the social justice implications of different policies and practices. This chapter is concerned specifically with those implications: interrogating how creativity was constructed and distributed as a matter of equity in relation to different types of school and within different policy demands.

I begin by outlining the research's design, explaining how schools were identified for small-scale comparative case study work. I then explore the research and policy contexts within which it was carried out, outlining the position of creativity within policy discourse as it related to school English teaching. I moves on to describe an 'epistemology of creativity', a construction of knowledge created specifically for the research, that drew on several theorists who themselves have engaged with creativity as part of their work. This epistemology situates the work squarely within a notion of the 'public good', establishing a framework for seeing creativity as central to possibilities for knowledge-generation and agency (Freire 1970; Williams 1977). The chapter concludes by summarising the social justice implications of how creativity was practised and distributed in the sample schools.

## Research design

The empirical research discussed in this chapter drew on data produced by interviews with 17 teachers in three different secondary schools, selected because of their different institutional structures, terms of governance, geographical locations, broad educational aims, and student bodies. One (Windhover[2]) was a prestigious private, fee-paying school[3] in an affluent satellite town of London, one (Archford) an inner London state comprehensive with a mixed intake containing substantial numbers of both middle- and working-class children, and one (Bloomington) a state comprehensive of predominantly working-class children, situated on the outskirts of London. Of prime concern when choosing the schools was that the student intakes demonstrated considerable differences in terms of social class. The schools were all mixed in terms of gender intake and, as in keeping with the superdiverse population of London and its environs, all three schools contained students from a wide range of national and ethnic groups. The research was insufficiently small in scope, however, to be able to factor in all of these multiple variables.

The research was designed to be at one and the same time the study of a single case and a comparative study of three cases: the former because it treated the English

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[2] Pseudonyms are used for all three schools; all attempts have been made to keep the identity of the schools anonymous.

[3] The high level of fees at many private schools in England automatically excludes the majority of children from attending. The fees at Windhover are currently about three times as high as the average funding per pupil in secondary state schools (£19,000 per pupil per annum, compared to £6300 per pupil per annum).

teachers as a collective professional body, engaged in practising the same subject in three different locations (Simons 2009, p. 29); the latter because it treated them as members of discrete institutions, each with its own practices and demands (Denscombe 2010, p. 55). A case study approach is open to the criticism that it is too small in scale to make credible generalisations. However, it is possible to argue that generalisations hold validity so long as researchers strive to offer a sufficiently rich response 'to help readers make their own inferences' and also 'situate their work within other relevant examples of research and theory' (Knight 2002, p. 46). This approach allowed for an element of comparative work across the schools, with a particular focus on inequities in the way that creativity was enacted.

The research differed from previous studies in its focus on the construction of creativity in secondary English classrooms within a wider body of work about educational rationing (Fraser 1997; Gillborn and Youdell 1999). Creativity was constructed in the research design not just as a method of teaching and learning (Craft et al. 2001; Robinson and Aronica 2015), but as a material resource held in language (Carter 2004; Blommaert 2010) and literature (Attridge 2004), and an important element of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 [1970]), with the potential for teachers to draw on it restricted or enabled in different measures according to the institutional pressures within which they worked. In this sense, the inclusion of teacher responses from a private school was particularly significant. Often, Stephen Ball (2017, p. 169) pointed out, 'policy may be looking in the wrong place' in 'addressing itself to social disadvantage as a free-standing problem'. He explained that this was the case because:

> Inequality is also produced and reproduced relationally by the actions and strategies of the socially advantaged to maintain and enhance their advantages. (Ball 2017, p. 169)

If, as Ball stated, the structures at work in state schools acted to deepen 'the relationship between education policy and social class and the reproduction of social inequalities and privilege and disadvantage' (p. 7), through restricting access to socially desirable resources such as creativity, then, relationally, does it simultaneously enable students in private schools to accumulate more of the same resource?

## Research context

The research project was situated in a moment of transition in England in terms of educational policy. It was conceived in 2010 when a Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition (the Coalition) entered government, displacing a Labour government (New Labour) that had been in power between 1997 and 2010. The interviews were carried out in June and July 2013, 2 months before statutory changes to the curriculum legislated for by the Coalition, which had a direct impact on the shape of secondary English teaching, came into force.

Creativity was central to New Labour educational policy (Jones 2009; Hall 2010), yet it was largely excluded from Coalition policy documentation. This alone

made it a significant concept to study. Why was a concept given prominence by one administration subsequently marginalised and even discredited by another? This contrast suggested that the word has a rhetorical force (Banaji and Burn 2010) beyond its literal meanings, acting as a site of contestation for different approaches to education, both pedagogical and ideological (Marshall 2001).

This significance was particularly pertinent when looking at English teaching. Large numbers of English teachers value the centrality of creativity to their subject practice (Marshall 2000; Goodwyn 2003). Creativity was (and still is), in and of itself, a field of considerable interest at tertiary level in relation to language (Carter 2004), literature (Kearney 1988, 2002; Armstrong 2000; Attridge 2004), and the interplay of the two (Swann et al. 2011). In exploring English teachers' constructions of creativity, then, the research was designed to raise questions about the role of policy on teaching practices, the agency teachers have in deciding what and how to teach, and the possibilities for particular linguistic and literary practices in their classrooms. This did not just include the role played by policy directly relating to creativity, but by a whole raft of measures acting on (primarily state) schools that led to them working in a culture of all-pervasive 'performativity' (Ball 2003b) and 'accountability' (Hutchings 2015; Kulz 2017; see also Chapter 3, Hutchings 2021a). It also allowed for similar questions to be raised about what happened in private schools when these measures either did not apply, or produced different kinds of pressures and outcomes, ones that might, for example, focus on students achieving the highest examination results, rather than meeting particular standards relating to levels of literacy.

## Policy context

Creativity might seem to be a term that exists on the peripheries of policy discourse. Indeed, there are periods of time when it is entirely missing (McCallum 2018). There is some logic to this, given that it is a term generally used in the abstract, with the potential to be applied to multiple fields (Banaji and Burn 2010), and difficult to define with precision (Pope 2005). Despite the relative scarcity of explicit references, this chapter seeks to establish the significant role it has played in policy discourse for over four decades, often acting as a site of contestation for different approaches to education, both pedagogical and ideological, particularly in English teaching (Marshall 2001). The extended timescale is to establish the continuity in policy constructions of creativity.

The chapter also aims to demonstrate that it is a word which 'speaks to professional longings' (Jones 2015, p. 174). Such longings offer alternative possibilities in the face of the anxieties around performativity and accountability discussed above. They can therefore challenge policy as well as being constructed within its parameters, proof that policy on the ground is a question of 'process … involving negotiation, contestation or struggle between different groups who may be outside the

formal machinery of official policy making' (Ozga 2000, p. 2). Policy is only ever a part of what teachers do (Ball et al. 2012, p. 6).

## *Policy about creativity*

In its first policy incarnations, creativity appeared almost exclusively as part of a 'discourse of derision', a term coined to describe the process by which educational policies and practices that seek to promote social justice are discredited by using some of their key terms against them (Kenway 1987; Ball 2006). An overview of policy literature, however, reveals continuity in the construction of creativity as it related to English teaching, despite this apparent contrast. Specifically, it shows that both the mainstream political left and right, as represented by the Labour and Conservative parties respectively, constructed creativity in English in ways that suggested it ran counter to effective learning.

The disparagement of creativity was embedded in *The Black Papers* (Cox and Dyson 1971), the first significant example of 'the discourse of derision' and one of the first documents from the political right to address educational policy. Creativity in English, and its attendant terms such as 'self-expression' and 'imagination', were linked directly to perceptions of wider social disorder and moral decay taking place in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as in this polemical piece addressing a supposed decline in educational standards:

> The deterioration is most marked in English composition. Here the vogue is all for 'creativity'. Bad spelling, bad grammar, and the crudest vulgarisms are no longer frowned upon, but freely tolerated. Instead of accuracy, the teacher aims at 'self-expression'; instead of clear and logical thought or precise description of facts, he – and still more often she – seeks to foster what is called 'imagination'. At the same time parents and members of the public at large are beginning to wonder whether the free discipline, or lack of discipline, in the new permissive school may not largely be responsible for much of the subsequent delinquency, violence and general unrest that characterise our permissive society. (Burt 1971, p. 60)

The inclusion of this essay in the *Black Papers*, in hindsight, seems startling, given the casual way in which the author earlier used a deeply offensive, racially charged quotation to offer an alternative educational approach to one that he is attacking. The words are not his own, but they are used to suggest that educational success (and, by implication, societal order) best comes from the insistence on deeply repressive forms of hard labour for all students. The quotation is as follows: 'Make them work like n****rs,' says the headmaster in Ian Hay's short story, 'that's education in a nutshell' (Burt 1971, p. 55).[4] When constructed in this way, it becomes clear that placing controls on creativity goes hand in hand with wider societal controls, ones that entrench prejudice, intolerance and deep-seated social subjugation.

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[4] The original chapter in the Black Papers printed the word in full, with no consideration for its offensive nature.

New Labour policy (1997–2010), in contrast to a Conservative tradition established by the *Black Papers*, ostensibly embraced rather than rejected creativity. It was still constructed, though, in terms of social control and order. *All Our Futures* (NACCCE 1999), the foundational document for the government's approach, opened with then prime minister Tony Blair stating:

> Our aim must be to create a nation where the creative talents of all the people are used to build a true enterprise economy for the twenty-first century – where we compete on brains, not brawn. (Blair, quoted in NACCCE 1999, p. 5)

Creativity was harnessed to economic competitiveness throughout: creativity and creating a nation, in Blair's terms, required conformity to an economic imperative. Far from being an 'experimental and de-stabilising force' (Sefton-Green et al. 2011, p. 2), creativity was instead co-opted into New Labour's form of neoliberalism (Jones 2009, p. 24). Creativity pertaining to English, though, was notably absent. Not only did the subject receive very little attention in a lengthy document (Marshall 2001, p. 63; McCallum 2018, p. 55), it was also constructed in ways that separated it from creative activity. For example, it posed the question, 'Isn't an emphasis on creativity and culture a distraction from the core concerns with literacy and numeracy?',[5] answering by explaining that it was 'not advocating creative and cultural education as alternatives to literacy and numeracy, but as equally relevant to the needs of this and future generations' and that 'high standards of literacy … are important in themselves' (NACCCE 1999: p. 14). The separation of literacy and creativity was mirrored by another significant document influencing New Labour's policy on creativity, *The Creative Age: Knowledge and skills for the new economy* (Seltzer and Bentley 1999). Also linking creativity to economic competitiveness, it called for a radical restructuring of the curriculum, insisting that 'rather than trying to increase skills levels through conventional qualifications, government should take a different approach to educating for creativity', while simultaneously asserting that 'basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and core subject disciplines will continue to be important' (p. 10).

The similarities in how creativity was constructed in relation to English by all mainstream political parties continued during the time in which the research project was carried out and written up. Both Labour and Coalition policy makers separated creativity from ideas about learning language. For example, then Coalition Minister for Education, Michael Gove argued that 'you cannot be creative unless you understand how to construct sentences, what words mean, how to understand grammar' (Gove 2013c). Then shadow Minister for Education, Tristram Hunt (2015), in a book review, recognised the need for a response to an 'exam factory' model of

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[5] Literacy here refers to the development of a set of language skills integral to competency in reading and writing. They are part of school subject English, though by no means inclusive of all that the subject offers. The use of 'literacy' rather than 'English' by policy makers is indicative of the wider discourse of placing limitations on the subject (and on creativity) explored in this chapter as a whole. For a full discussion of the relationship between English and literacy see Green 2006.

schooling that emphasised testing 'at the expense of teaching children how to employ their natural creativity' but went on to state that:

> … the uncomfortable truth is that there are also large swaths of the English education system that require more not less uniformity. If all our pupils could reach some basic minimum standards of literacy and numeracy by the time they left primary schools, our educational attainment as a nation would be markedly higher... we always need to guard against the soft bigotry of low expectations: the worrying trend of play and expression being adequate for working-class pupils, while leaving the tough stuff … for their better off peers. (Hunt 2015)

The phrase 'the soft bigotry of low expectations' drew on the discourse of derision used previously by politicians, both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. The exact same phrase was first used by former US Republican President, George W. Bush (2000). It was then picked up in policy statements by Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education 2010–2014 (Collins 2013) and his successor, Nicky Morgan (Cassidy 2015). Rhetorically it created a false dichotomy between creativity and literacy skills and suggested that engaging in the former at the expense of the latter was a matter of social justice. This was in spite of evidence to the contrary. A PISA[6] report comparing educational performances across nations, found that the types of activities often associated with creativity in the classroom (such as group work, discussion) were less common in English schools than in other countries regularly cited by politicians as having a more 'traditional' approach. For example, students in English schools were more likely to have to learn material by heart and to work towards specific objectives, and less likely to work in groups than those in Singapore and Hong Kong (McInerney 2013). The report identified one significant exception to this trend: 'Private school pupils reported higher rates of being asked to express opinions in class, completing group work and having their teacher relate learning to their lives.'

The contradictions about the role of creativity in English teaching under New Labour extended into documents outlining and surveying classroom practice. For example, creativity had a prominent place in the *National Curriculum programme of study for English* (QCDA 2007), yet an Ofsted report into teaching that took place under that curriculum, *Moving English Forward* (Ofsted 2012),[7] identified a lack of creativity in the majority of lessons observed. Thus, the *National Curriculum* stated that students should be given opportunities to 'use inventive approaches to making meaning, taking risks, playing with language and using it to create new effects' as well as 'making fresh connections between ideas, experiences, texts and words, drawing on a rich experience of language and literature'; in contrast, *Moving English Forw*ard identified that teachers were 'nervous about taking risks and being inventive' (QCDA 2007, p. 45) in the majority of lessons observed.

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[6] PISA, the Programme for International Student Assessment, is an international study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in member and non-member nations intended to evaluate educational systems by measuring 15-year-old school pupils' scholastic performance on mathematics, science, and reading.

[7] While the report was published during the period of the Coalition administration, schools were still following New Labour policies at the time of the report.

The mismatch between curriculum directives and actual practice was indicative of the contradictory policy messages aimed at English teachers during this period. The practices identified as restrictive in *Moving English Forward* in 2012 were the very same ones promoted by the *National Literacy Strategy* between 2002 and 2008. While non-statutory, the Strategy's *Framework for teaching English* (DfES 2002), which promoted a literacy rather than English agenda (Green 2006), became a *de facto* curriculum, with schools criticised in Ofsted reports if they did not implement it effectively.

## *Policies limiting creativity*

The legislation mandating Ofsted inspections is an example of 'imperative' as opposed to 'exhortative' policy (Ball et al. 2012). Directed towards accountability and performativity measures, imperative policies are enforced rigorously via rigid state mechanisms. Exhortative policies, on the other hand, tend to be more 'writerly' (*ibid.*, p. 94) in that they offer a degree of 'creativity and sense-making' in their implementation. Imperative policies are prioritised over exhortative ones, making it important for any research to look at both side-by-side: in this case, for example, how did exhortative policies of creativity sit within imperative policies about performance standards?

Imperative policies have had a distorting influence on school practice over the past two decades or so. The 'terrors of performativity' (Ball 2003b) and accountability as measured by high-stakes testing (Hutchings 2015; see also Chapter 3, Hutchings 2021a) have resulted in teaching that has focused on tests and mandated outcomes at the exclusion of broader educational aims and experiences. Hutchings, for example, found that in a culture of high-stakes testing in England, teachers made 'less time for investigation, creative activity, play, reflection, stories' (2015, p. 46) even as they valued all of these, and that there was 'a tendency for lessons to be uniform and not involve creative and investigative activities' (p. 66). Similar findings have appeared in research in other countries. An international literature review for use in the Australian school system found that the dominant conclusion to be drawn from a number of studies was that 'high-stakes testing discourages teachers from being creative, and instead encourages didactic teach-to-the-test approaches that reduce motivation' (Lobascher 2011, p. 14).

## An epistemology of creativity

The research drew on a range of theorists who have applied the concept of creativity to the construction of knowledge itself, primarily relating it to a process of 'becoming', whereby knowledge is never fixed, can never definitively be described. Their various theories were combined into an *epistemology of creativity*. At the heart of

this was Raymond Williams' (1977) construction of creativity as relating both to deliberate acts and the unforeseen consequences of those acts. In his words, 'creativity and social self-creation are … known and unknown events' and it is 'from grasping the known that the unknown – the next step, the next work – is conceived' (p. 212).

Epistemologically, then, creativity provided the means to attempt to give voice to, or explain, emergent forms discernible in what Williams called 'structures of feeling'. These could be present in 'the relatively simple and direct practice of everyday communication' (p. 211) or in 'new articulations … which … reach beyond their time and occasion' (p. 211). Significantly, they were opposed to simple reproductive forms of social practice and so offered a challenge to the status quo without making grand and unsubstantiated claims about what might be to follow.

The reflexivity built into Williams' work was given further substance by drawing on various theories of affect. In particular, these allowed for recognition that a concept like creativity, that tends to gather positive emotions around it, might also lead to negative feelings. For while creativity points towards further possibilities, they cannot always be acted upon, particularly when they come up against powerful, dominant discourses. This was a very useful perspective when considering the emotions that form around teachers' constructions of creativity. What emotions did it produce when talking about how they were unable to act on their own ideas and beliefs? And what did it lead them to talk about besides creativity? In this context, concepts such as Laurent Berlant's 'cruel optimism' (2011), Kathleen Woodward's (2009) 'statistical panic' and 'bureaucratic rage' and Sara Ahmed's 'hap' (2010) took on relevance. The first two attempted to articulate feelings that cluster around a sense of frustration brought about by contemporary existence. Ahmed argued that 'hap' was a more useful word than 'happiness', as it recognised the impossibility of assuming that only positive emotions can be transformative, or even desirable. In her construction, negative emotions are not 'simply reactive … but creative responses to histories that are unfinished' (Ahmed, p. 217).

Paulo Freire's (1970) constructions of 'banking' (pp. 52–6) as opposed to 'problem-solving' (pp. 64–5) forms of pedagogy completed the epistemology. Banking forms of pedagogy rely on the simple transmission of knowledge, one of the means by which dominant groups maintain power; problem-solving forms encourage people to bring learning into their own realm of knowledge and to reflect and act on it in a process of *praxis*. Thus, the world is no longer 'static' but 'in process, in transformation' (p. 65). Freire drew a direct link between pedagogy and creativity, saying that 'banking education inhibits creativity' while 'problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality' (p. 65). Authentic existence, he added, is only possible when people are 'engaged in inquiry and creative transformation' (p. 65).

## Creativity and social justice

Some of the significant empirical data gathered for the research is summarised here. It suggests significant differences across the three schools, with the biggest difference being the contrast between practices at the private school Windhover (W) and the two state schools, Archford (A) and Bloomington (B). These differences, in turn, raise questions about the distribution of creativity in English lessons in English schools and how these relate to notions of social justice and the public good.

Teachers across all three schools constructed creativity as a concept in similar ways. They all valued its connotations of originality, independence, self-expression, imagination, adventurousness, and possibility. As a whole, these concepts could be seen to construct learning and knowledge as a process of *becoming* (Freire 1970) and of possibility (Jones 2009). The terms referred to were firmly consistent with ideas about what constitute the process of linguistic and literary study (Applebee 1996). They were also consistent with socially just notions of what the subject could and should do to develop the learning and thinking of young people in equitable ways. Similarities between the conceptual constructions of creativity across all three schools suggested a shared understanding of the term's potential significance to English teaching.

Significant contrasts began to emerge when teachers were required to articulate how they implemented creativity within their own lessons. Teachers at Archford and Bloomington, the two state schools, felt limited in opportunities to bring creativity into their classrooms. They attributed this in large part to accountability pressures. These came from both within and beyond the school. Individual teachers within an institution were expected to achieve particular results for their students; these pressures, in turn, stemmed from central government requirements for schools to publish examination results in publicly available league tables comparing all schools, and from Ofsted's inspection criteria making judgements in relation to these results. Edie (A10),[8] for example, felt that the school's concerns were 'more about the results, the attainment of the students' than 'the experiences'. Stephen (B20) spoke explicitly about how particular requirements of the GCSE examinations[9] 'actually stop creativity' and how 'creativity gets squeezed out of exams, because it's hard to measure'. Simone (B1) felt that examination pressures made her rush through work, not leaving time for creativity. She said, 'I feel like I'm hurrying along, that I'm really rushing my students through coursework and through exam skills and it's just really relentless.'

Teachers at the private school, Windhover, did not feel the same pressures. They recognised the potential for examinations to limit creativity to the extent that they 'have become the be-all and end-all through league tables and the growing pressure

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[8] Pseudonyms are used for all teachers who took part in the study. Capital letter refers to school, number to the teacher's years of teaching experience.

[9] GCSE: General Certificate of Education, nationally administered examinations taken by 16-year-olds in England.

on university entrance at sixth form' (Neil, W25). However, they felt that these limitations could be circumvented. In large part, this possibility was constructed as lying in the hands of teachers themselves. Alan (W40) commented that 'often, if you want to be creative as an English teacher, it has to be in spite of the exam syllabuses, not because of them.' He thought that 'it's important to circumvent the exams.'

Several Windhover teachers made their statements about examinations and creativity from a position of privileged knowledge. Ewen (W37), Matt (W20) and Neil (W25) were all principal examiners for various awarding bodies and examination papers. This gave them an air of confidence in what they said. When Ewen was asked if 'the exam system restricts creativity', he disagreed and instead identified creativity as a quality of good responses. 'At its best, the examination system produces some superb answers [which are] articulate, fluent, well-paragraphed, well informed and imaginative.' He implied that creativity was the responsibility of the teacher and that where students weren't able to demonstrate creativity they had been taught poorly, in a uniform fashion. He contrasted 'the dull stuff where I can hear the teacher reading notes' with an approach 'where I can hear something from the discussion they've had in class where they've really got into it and got enthusiastic about a text.' In similar fashion, Neil suggested that some teachers deliberately avoided teaching certain aspects of exam syllabuses in creative ways. He gave as an example an A Level[10] coursework option that required the study of three texts. It was, he said, 'deliberately designed to be freer and more open to interpretation by teachers and students, effectively as an individual research task.' Teachers were encouraged to 'provoke, stimulate, nudge candidates to choose what they want, to choose their own texts, the directions they are going to study, the research they are going to do,' resulting in them getting 'a sense of academic creativity'. The reality in many schools was, in his judgement, very different:

> Of course, a lot of schools won't do that because they see it as dangerous and uncontrollable. Many schools will decide on three texts that they are going to teach and they will teach them and everyone will do the same question.

The phrase 'dangerous and uncontrollable' suggested that Neil felt that in many schools there was a fear of stepping outside tightly prescribed boundaries and a general discourse of compliance. It suggested that this was not the case for teachers at Windhover, though: they felt able to offer a version of English that included creativity as a matter of course. It was a version that highlighted their own subject expertise and insider knowledge of the examination system, and which served to differentiate their approach from that of other schools, thus entrenching the types of 'relational' differences often established between private schools and others (Ball 2017, p. 169). It was a version only made possible because their school sat outside the system of accountability measures by which state schools were judged.

Creativity and creative practice were in limited supply in Archford and Bloomington schools. Mark (B8) visibly winced when asked to describe a lesson he

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[10] A Levels: nationally administered subject examinations taken by 18-year-olds in England.

recently taught or observed that was creative. 'It's a tough one,' he said, 'give me a minute – it will be really hard to think of one.' His colleague, Sally (B40) to the same request, simply said, 'I can't.' Jo (A25), also failed to come up with anything: 'I'm just trying to think, I'm a bit blank on that,' she said. Edie (A10) was visibly panicked. 'Okay, let me think about that for a minute,' she said. 'Oh God – Oh God – I don't think this is going to be particularly creative but ….'.Edie did eventually come up with her own example. However, the examples drawn on by three of her colleagues, Rhonda (A1), Samantha (A12) and Lee (A5), were all from lessons that they observed others teach or taught themselves a long time ago. Rhonda, for example, described a lesson that she taught more than 12 months previously, while she was a trainee teacher. Lee described an A Level lesson taught by a colleague, and Samantha recounted her role in supporting another teacher's creative writing lesson. In a similar act of displacement from everyday practice, Stan (B3), drew on a taster lesson he taught to primary school students visiting his school as his example. As such, this lesson was not subject to the school's usual requirements about teaching in a particular way. He talked about the freedom that came with this, articulating it as 'knowing that we don't have to get any work out of them at the end of the day,' and being confident that 'that's allowed.'

In contrast, creative practices at Windhover were transformational in nature. When asked for examples of creativity in their lessons, the school's teachers often talked about 'recreative' or 'transformational' writing (Pope 2005; Knights and Thurgar-Dawson 2006). This involved students demonstrating understanding of a text by rewriting it in some way. Bill (W6), for example, talked about how, when students were studying Wilfred Owen's war poetry, 'along the way they wrote their own war poems from a particular perspective,' and, similarly, retold Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* 'from a modern perspective – the Dustbinman's Tale and things like that.' Rowena (W6), talking about teaching the novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, explained how she guided students 'to do activities where they had to write from the mother's perspective, or from the father's perspective at the end of the story, or even write as Christopher after the end of the story.' Windhover teachers were also keen advocates of a recreative response option in various GCSE and A Level examinations. Matt (W20) said that 'we're very keen to maintain recreative responses as a way of responding to a literary text,' and Neil (W25), speaking in his capacity as a principal examiner, talked about an optional recreative task at A Level, which he had 'been pushing schools towards for a long, long time, but meeting quite a lot of resistance.'

Examples of recreative practice were mentioned by the state school teachers, though none did it as an examination option.[11] The only examples cited related to GCSE examination texts (Windhover's related to texts outside prescribed syllabuses) and the work was done to develop knowledge for the examination. Specifically

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[11] Public examination syllabuses for English have some limited opportunities for students to demonstrate their critical understanding of a text by offering a 'recreative' or 'transformative' response.

students role-played characters in *An Inspector Calls*. Thus, even when they were performing different identities, they were still ones linked to the official curriculum.

Meanwhile pupils whose parents could afford the high school fees at Windhover were performing as dustbinmen among other things. Drawing on recreative practices enabled them to bring knowledge into their own sphere of being, rather than passively accepting existing formations (Freire 1970). Permitted to do it far more than their state school counterparts, creativity, it might be argued, was constructed here as the means by which one social group reinforced its privileged position by enabling its young people to engage with a wide range of linguistic resources, while relationally those in the two state schools were denied choice and experimentation.

Talking about creativity generated strong feelings, with several state school teachers expressing negative emotions in their voices and comments. These emotions were often in relation to frustrations at not being able to bring creativity into lessons. In particular, this was the case with older teachers in the state schools, who compared what they felt able to bring to lessons at the time of the interviews with how they taught earlier in their careers. Sally (B40) provided a pertinent example. One week from full retirement at the time of her interview, she valued creativity enough to say that it marked 'the difference between really being alive and just being dead.' She recounted how early in her career she taught in ways that drew on her own experience of the subject, involving a high degree of creativity. She linked this closely to issues of social justice, so that talking about creativity led her to talk about her broader motivations for becoming a teacher, which involved wanting 'to actually change society in a way – to introduce new thoughts about society and how we relate to each other.' Her vision for creativity fed directly into ideas about young people – and society as a whole – taking, in Williams' terms, 'the next step' (1977, p. 212):

> I think you should be encouraging children to think for themselves, to see things from other people's perspectives, which is where your imagination comes in – if you're just reinforcing the status quo you're not getting – I mean sometimes it's uncomfortable getting kids to challenge things, but I think … you're not going to get a just society, a democratic society, by just feeding kids ideas about what they should think and how they should react to things.

Her words constructed the current system as denying students the prospect of *becoming*, and so of significant changes to dominant discourses. She expressed this by explaining that currently there was a focus on 'the mechanics of life' rather than offering students 'a different dimension to life'. She ended her interview with anger demonstrably in her tone, as she drew on a literary allusion to E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*, invoking a family in the novel who only saw the world in functional terms, to illustrate her frustrations and fears:

> I really don't want all Wilcoxes in this world and the Wilcoxes are on the increase particularly in Conservative Britain. They're not interested in the other things of life really, and what makes it more enjoyable. No one thinks about that, what is an enjoyable experience, and for children often when they're creative that's when it's most enjoyable – they're creating something. If you drive creativity out of the curriculum – and that's what people don't understand with English in particular – just this functional thing, I mean what world do those people live in where they think those sorts of things are useful?

## Conclusions

Significant issues were raised by this research into how creativity was distributed in English. While too small in scale to be definitive, the differences between constructions of creativity in the private school compared to the two state schools were large enough to warrant some generalisations being speculated upon when placed within broader patterns drawn from additional research. These included a strong case for creativity in English as, itself, a matter of social justice. Creative classrooms, the study suggested, were places of 'becoming', where students were able to take on new voices and roles, and to explore different possibilities. Classrooms where creativity was suppressed were places where the focus was driven by final examination outcomes, with limited opportunities for thinking beyond tightly prescribed ways of being. These tightly controlled classrooms, counter to notions put forward by a 'discourse of derision', were found in the state sector. Classrooms in the private school were much more likely to draw on creative practices, so suggesting a construction of creativity which relationally reinforced existing advantages.

Teachers themselves in the state schools did not seek to place limitations on creative practice in their lessons. Their constructions of creativity corresponded closely to those of their private school counterparts, both in terms of its formation and its value to the subject. In articulating their inability to put their beliefs about creativity into practice, they revealed the degree to which their practice was led by a pressures to conform to pressures of performativity and accountability, against their better professional judgement. That the private school teachers did not feel these pressures can in part be explained by the fact that their schools sat outside the state school accountability system. However, their students still, by and large, sat the same set of public examinations. Clearly, then, they did not feel any incompatibility between teaching for and through creativity and high academic attainment. Such a consideration makes the difference between the distribution of creativity in the state and private schools all the more pertinent: it would seem, that in some way, policy was acting to constrict access to creativity for state school students, compelling teachers to teach in a particular way. Students' thinking and possibilities for 'becoming' were being limited, while in the private school they were being encouraged. Existing social hierarchies were not just being entrenched, but potentially widened, with state school students locked in a kind of educational stasis, while the private school ones extended the possibilities for who they were and what they could become.

The research, then, has significant implications for notions of a 'public good'. The frustrations voiced by state school teachers were not replicated by private school ones. Policy, then, was having a direct impact on their professional satisfaction and judgement. In turn, the restrictions under which they felt compelled to teach were being passed on to their students, so limiting their experiences of language and literature, their possibilities and how they related to their wider lives. No such restrictions were being placed on the private school students. We can only speculate as to what students in the different schools felt about this, but we can infer that the frustrations of the state school teachers were being passed on to their

students, while the private school students were benefiting from their teachers' confidence in engaging in creative practices.

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# Chapter 5
# Between home and school: Mobilising 'hard to reach' White British parents to engage with their children's education

**Nathan Fretwell** (ORCID)

**Abstract**  The last two decades have witnessed an increasing politicisation of parenting and the emergence of parenting support as a key element of social policy. This policyscape is governed, however, by a narrow conception of the public good. The state has delegated responsibility for children's future outcomes to parents, extolling parenting support as the means for redressing inequality and securing social mobility. This chapter focuses on a particular variant of parenting support: the use of link workers in mobilising parents to become more engaged in their children's education. It draws on the evaluation of a local government initiative aimed at improving educational outcomes for White British, working-class pupils by encouraging attitudinal and behavioural change amongst parents deemed 'hard to reach' and disengaged from education. I argue that behaviour change approaches are misguided and that improved parental engagement cannot compensate for the impact inequitable socioeconomic conditions have upon families' lives and children's attainment. The chapter challenges deficit constructions of White working-class parents and contests the parental determinism underpinning social policy. It calls instead for a broadened conception of the public good that accords value to all families and seeks to address the adverse socioeconomic conditions affecting parents' lives rather than simply seeking to (re)form their character and conduct.

## Introduction

This chapter draws on dominant constructions of parents and parenting within English social policy to critically frame an intervention aiming to improve parents' engagement in their children's education. The last two decades have witnessed an increasing politicisation of parenting both within the United Kingdom and

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internationally (Daly 2015). Family relationships, childrearing practices, home learning environments and parental behaviours have all come under intense political scrutiny and a broad consensus has emerged that 'good' parenting is vital to the future prosperity of the nation (Field 2010; Allen 2011; Family and Childcare Trust 2015). This policyscape is governed, however, by a narrow conception of the public good. Convinced of the causal importance of parenting, the state has absolved itself of responsibility for children's future outcomes, extolling parenting support as *the* means for redressing inequality and securing social mobility. This strategic dissembling of structural impediments to families' lives is emblematic of a neoliberal political rationality that recasts social problems as the responsibility of citizens and their communities. It also places an uneven burden on socially and economically marginalised parents, those problematically labelled 'hard to reach,' to meet normative parenting ideals and intensifies regulation of their lives (Gillies 2011).

I focus on a particular variant of parenting support: the use of link workers in mobilising parents to become more engaged in their children's education. It draws on the commissioned evaluation of a local government initiative – the *Raising Achievement for White British Pupils*[1] project – aiming to improve educational outcomes for White British, working-class pupils by encouraging attitudinal and behavioural change amongst parents deemed 'hard to reach' and disengaged from education. The evaluation took place during the piloting of the project in an inner-London borough across the 2014/15 school year and utilised qualitative methods to collect data from all key stakeholders (e.g. parents, senior staff within schools, members of the local authority, and the link workers). The defining feature of the project was its use of link workers to serve as a bridge between home and school. The two link workers hired for this purpose were strategically chosen for sharing demographic characteristics fitting the profile of participating parents; that is, both were mothers from White British working-class backgrounds who had long-standing associations with the area in which the project was to be delivered. In addition to supporting parents in schools and advocating on their behalf, the link workers provided pastoral guidance and sought to enlist parents on a range of activities aimed at improving their communication skills, their effectiveness in engaging in at-home learning, and their employment prospects. As I suggest below, the link workers operate in the liminal space between home and school to foster active and responsible parent-educators. Examining their role highlights the limitations of behaviour-change as a strategy for addressing educational injustice. Whatever benefits parental engagement may hold, it cannot compensate for the impact of inequitable socioeconomic conditions upon children's educational attainment (Hartas 2014; Reay 2017).

The chapter opens with an account of the fetishisation of parenting within contemporary social policy and situates the initiative within the wider context of the neoliberalisation of parenting (Jensen 2018). The discussion then turns to parental

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[1] To preserve the anonymity of participants a pseudonym has been substituted for the original title of the project.

engagement and educational inequalities; where parental engagement is understood in an extended sense as referring to both involvement with schools and engagement in at-home learning. The remaining sections focus directly on the *Raising Achievement for White British Pupils* project. I outline key details of the project and its evaluation, before considering the implications of constructing parents as 'hard to reach' and the link workers' role in encouraging parents to adopt normative conceptions of 'good', pedagogically engaged, parenting. The chapter challenges deficit constructions of White working-class parents and contests the parental determinism and parent-blame underpinning many areas of social policy (Furedi 2008; Jensen 2018). In conclusion, I argue for a broadened conception of the public good that acknowledges the worth of *all* families and seeks to address the adverse socioeconomic conditions affecting parents' lives rather than simply aiming to (re) form their character and conduct.

## The parenting policyscape

Over the last twenty years parenting has emerged as a policy fetish across the political spectrum, with parents, particularly mothers, endowed with almost supernatural powers to determine children's future outcomes, reverse social inequalities and save or imperil the nation (Lee et al. 2014). The state, of course, has long intervened in family life, but what is distinctive about the contemporary policyscape 'is the scale and breadth of state instructing and governing parenting' (Daly 2013, p. 228). Indeed, there has been striking consistency on the importance of parenting across political administrations. It was a prominent theme during (New) Labour's period in office between 1997 and 2010; as indicated in the following:

> We know that parents are the major influence on a child's life. Parenting in the home has a far more significant impact on children's achievement than parents' social class or level of education. (DfES 2006, p. 4)

But it was also a significant emphasis throughout the administrations of David Cameron. First during the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition (2010–2015) and then during Cameron's brief tenure as Prime Minister in a Conservative majority government (2015–2016):

> What matters most to a child's life chances is not the wealth of their upbringing but the warmth of their parenting. (Cameron 2010)

> Families are the best anti-poverty measure ever invented. They are a welfare, education and counselling system all wrapped up into one. (Cameron 2016)

The politicisation of parenting has reshaped social policy, instigating a 'population-wide behaviour modification project' on a hitherto unprecedented scale (Henricson 2012, p. 30). 'Good' parenting is lauded as essential for the prosperity of the nation (Family and Childcare Trust 2015), whilst 'poor' parenting is represented as a social scourge; draining public resources, engendering disorder, and imperilling the moral

fabric of society (Cameron 2011a). This discourse is shaped by an unwavering conviction in the truth of parental determinism (Furedi 2008). Parents are positioned as *the* determining factor in children's future success and inadequate parenting is denounced as the root cause of social problems; indicating how readily parental determinism morphs into parent-blame (Jensen 2018).

Although this policy drive ostensibly addresses all parents, disadvantaged groups are subject to particularly acute scrutiny (Gillies 2011). The prevalence of the gender-neutral term 'parent' also disguises the fact that it is mothers who constitute the principal targets of parenting support (Daly 2013). Disadvantaged mothers from low-income and minority backgrounds are particularly subject to public opprobrium, often judged unfavourably against normative parenting ideals modelled on White, middle-class parenting practices (Reay 2008; Dermott 2012; Vincent 2017). Depicting disadvantaged parents as motors for the generational transmission of disadvantage further entrenches the view that 'poor' parenting constitutes a pathology requiring remedial intervention. As Janet Goodall (2019) remarks, this invidious logic equates raising children in conditions of poverty with a poverty of parenting. Solutions to this alleged crisis in parenting evidence a neo-Victorian resurgence of responsibility and moral character as bulwarks against material disadvantage (Gillies et al. 2017). For instance, a free-market think tank has recently campaigned for the expansion of parenting classes precisely on the grounds that they 'help combat the 'deficit' in character and values that lie behind many social problems' (Odone and Loughlin 2017, p. 3).

What is effaced here is the context of families' lives. The family appears as a 'black box' wherein the 'material and social context in which the mother is struggling is forgotten' (Vincent 2012). The conditions of parenting are dissembled through an overarching emphasis on parents' conduct. Parenting is uncoupled from social context, producing the fantasy of an unencumbered parent unconstrained by, and able to rise above, any adverse eventualities standing in the way of their families' future success. This fantasy is central to the neoliberalisation of parenting. It reconstitutes the family as an incubator of human capital and recasts parents' chief prerogative as the pursuit of positional advantage through maximising children's cognitive, social and emotional development (Rosen 2019). Shifting the burden of responsibility onto parents, it should be noted, is also particularly convenient in the context of a decade of drastic reductions to public expenditure under a regime of fiscal austerity (Vincent 2017). By affording parents almost miraculous powers to overcome systemic inequalities and material disadvantage, responsibilisation fetishises parents whilst simultaneously obscuring structural failings. This is utopian politics for a dystopian age.

## Parents, schools and education

The 1988 *Education Reform Act* transformed the relationship between parents, schools, and education in England, repositioning parents as active consumers in a market economy of schooling. It also increased expectations on parents to become more directly involved in their children's education; a viewpoint crystallised in New Labour's White Paper *Excellence in Schools*:

> Parents are a child's first and enduring teachers. They play a crucial role in helping their children learn. Family learning is a powerful tool for reaching some of the most disadvantaged in our society. It has the potential to reinforce the role of the family and change attitudes to education, helping build strong local communities and widening participation in learning. (DfEE 1997, p. 53)

The perception that parents constitute surrogate teachers and that policy can intervene in parenting to produce positive educational outcomes for children remains dominant. The home learning environment, for instance, has been presented as 'the single biggest influence on a child's development – more important that material circumstances or parental income, occupation or education' (Allen 2011, p. 57). However, this policy drive also blurs the distinction between home and school (Gillies 2011), redefines parents' roles vis-à-vis education, in a process that has been described as the pedagogicalisation of parenting (Popkewitz 2003), and transfers responsibility for children's outcomes from educational institutions to parents (Doherty and Dooley 2018). Moreover, the reality of entrenched inequality and social immobility casts doubt upon the optimistic narrative underpinning parental engagement. There is not the space here to enter into a detailed discussion of the insufficiency of parental engagement, but two salient points warrant further consideration.

First, social class matters. Despite the conviction that '[w]hat parents do is more important than who they are' (Allen 2011, p. xiv), socioeconomic circumstances impact upon children's educational outcomes. Dimitra Hartas' (2014) secondary analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study data – a large-scale, longitudinal birth cohort study following the lives of children born in 2000–2001 – demonstrates that children's class background is a stronger predictor of educational outcomes than either parenting styles or the quality of the home learning environment. Parental engagement and the home learning environment matter, she concludes, just not in the way policy makers intend; that is, 'as mechanisms to overcome structural inequality and equalise opportunity for young children' (p. 46). For this, concerted political action directed at attenuating structural inequalities is required. Children are not raised in a vacuum. The adverse material and social contexts of family life create countervailing pressures that impact upon parents' efforts to support learning and their ability to accrue resources to maximise educational opportunities. Class background is important and parental engagement is no magic bullet automatically ensuring social advancement. Indeed, as Lee Elliot Major and Stephen Machin (2018) conclude in their withering account of social (im)mobility in twenty-first century Britain: 'it has become increasingly the case that where you come

from – who you are born to and where you are born – matters more than ever for where you are going to' (p. 19).[2]

Second, education is a positional good, functioning 'as an enormous academic sieve, sorting out the educational winners and losers in a crude and often brutal process that prioritises and rewards upper- and middle-class qualities and resources' (Reay 2017, p. 26). In this regard parental engagement strategies are myopic, neglecting the constraints placed upon low-income groups by the educational protectionism of more affluent families. Elliot Major and Machin (2018) depict this in terms of an 'ever-escalating educational arms race in which the poorest children are hopelessly ill-equipped to fight, and where the increasingly rich rewards go to the offspring of the social elites' (2018, p. 87). The educational protectionism of the upper and middle classes, charted in greater detail in Chapter 7 of this volume, presents in several ways: the maintenance of educational segregation through selective schooling (Kenway et al. 2017); the careful gaming of school 'choice' (Ball 2003a); the monopolisation of resources and opportunities within schools (Triventi et al. 2019); the strategic cultivation of children's capabilities as a means for securing future advantage (Vincent and Ball 2007); the increasing use of private tuition (Kirby 2016); and, the colonisation of high-status universities (Bathmaker et al. 2013). As Diane Reay (2017) and Elliot Major and Machin (2018), amongst others, have pointed out, there are clear winners and losers in the battle to secure educational advantage. Children and young people from low-income backgrounds with limited financial resources tend to be occluded from the opportunities privilege affords. Charging parental engagement with the power to redress this injustice would seem optimistic at best.

The fetishisation of parenting combined with strategic disregard for structural explanations of inequality and the advent of behaviour change as the optimal method of conducting social policy (Jones et al. 2013), has led to an inordinate emphasis on modifying parental behaviours as the key to securing positive outcomes for children. But even proponents of parental engagement have questioned the probity of this approach on the grounds that it absolves the state of any accountability for inequitable outcomes (Goodall 2019). Behaviour modification is misguided, instead policy must work to redress educational inequalities by reducing the pressures adverse socioeconomic conditions bring to bear on families' lives (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim 2019).

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[2] Elliot Major and Machin's (2018) findings, which are based on a study of intergenerational income mobility, have been contested by researchers utilising social class categories as a means of tracking social mobility. Drawing on the National Statistics Socioeconomic Classification framework, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2019) argue, for instance, that the extent of social mobility in the UK has remained stable over time, although downward mobility has increased. However, despite these contradictory findings there is a general consensus that education alone cannot guarantee social mobility or reduce inequality. (See Chapter 7, Hutchings 2021b, for a fuller discussion of the different approaches taken by researchers to studying social mobility and the contradictory findings they have produced.)

## The *Raising Achievement for White British Pupils* project

Having surveyed the contemporary parenting policyscape and outlined some limitations with parental engagement as a strategy for redressing educational inequalities, the remaining sections of this chapter focus directly on the *Raising Achievement for White British Pupils* project. Conceived as a broad form of parenting support, the project was concerned with 'how to enable and encourage parents to be able to be the best parents that they can rather than bringing them in to be told what to do by schools' (senior member of the local authority). It combined an emphasis on parental engagement in education with wider family support and activities aimed at encouraging parents to (re)enter employment and education. The notable feature of the project was its use of link workers as a means of supporting families and it focused largely on transforming parental attitudes and behaviours. Of particular interest here is the positioning of low-income White British parents as 'hard to reach' or disengaged, the strategies employed by link workers to engage parents, and the changes in parents they endeavoured to effect.

Piloted in an inner-London borough during 2014/15, the project sought to improve the academic performance of White British working-class pupils by changing parents' attitudes towards education, encouraging greater participation in children's learning, and building more effective home-school relations. Despite research indicating that eligibility for free school meals constitutes a crude classificatory method which fails to account for the 'hidden poor' in society (Hobbs and Vignoles 2009) – those, for instance, who are marginally ineligible or who, for whatever reason, do not apply or avail themselves of the benefit – it was nevertheless adopted by the project organisers as a proxy for families' social class backgrounds. The focus on *White Britishness* as a key criterion for participation also proved problematic. It not only had the effect of racialising the issue of educational underachievement, as I discuss below, but also caused confusion amongst parents and schools as to whether mixed-race families were eligible.

Setting aside for the moment the project's emphasis on 'whiteness', educational underachievement amongst this cohort of pupils had long been acknowledged as a concern within the borough and the organisers concurred that more could be done to support the community. To deliver on its objectives the project employed two link workers to work closely with parents identified by schools as 'hard to reach' and disengaged. Their responsibilities included: building relationships with parents, encouraging greater use of relevant services and resources, fostering 'good' parenting, establishing constructive relations between home and schools, and providing pastoral guidance and support. They also advocated on behalf of parents in their dealings with schools and other services, helped them build skills to improve their employment prospects and encouraged them to undertake further education and/or training. To secure parents' investment and maximise participation, it was decided the link workers should come from the community themselves (i.e. be from White working-class backgrounds and live within or have historical ties to the borough)

and be based within the community rather than schools. For the same reason, it was decided that parents' participation on the project would be entirely voluntary.

The evaluation of the pilot employed qualitative methods of data collection (semi-structured interviews, observations, group interviews and focus groups) and sought to report on the effectiveness of the pilot in engaging parents; to assess the strategies employed for this purpose; and to offer recommendations to inform future planning, development, and delivery. In total, across the three phases of the pilot, 19 interviews were conducted with parents (including two focus groups); 19 interviews with school staff (including five group interviews); two group interviews with local authority staff, and five interviews with the link workers (paired and separately). Standard ethical procedures were followed throughout. To preserve participants' anonymity pseudonyms have been used throughout, including for the title of the project, and the identity of the local authority delivering the project has not been disclosed.

## Constructing 'hard to reach' parents

The project was clearly motivated by a desire to improve outcomes for White British families and sensitivity was shown towards the challenges the community faced. However, in concentrating on what parents do rather than on socioeconomic constraints, it bolsters the view that an inadequate home learning environment is the principal cause of educational underachievement and risks reinforcing deficit understandings of low-income White British parents.

The perception that home cultures obstruct educational achievement permeates politics. In a recent interview, for example, Angela Rayner (the Labour opposition spokesperson on educational matters in England and someone who has herself derived considerable political capital from trading on her working-class roots), derided the White working class for a culture of low aspirations, fecklessness and resistance to education:

> They have not been able to adapt. Culturally, we are not telling them that they need to learn and they need to aspire. They are under the impression that they don't need to push themselves, in the way that disadvantaged groups had to before … I think we need to do much more about the culture of White working class in this country. (Rayner, cited in Nelson 2018)

Representations of White working-class communities as anachronistic and unable to adapt to societal change are prominent in public discourse (Lawler 2012). They are discursive accompaniments of 'a new spatialisation of government' in neoliberal polities, wherein 'community' is instituted as a technology of government and social issues 'are problematized *in terms* of features of communities and their strengths, cultures, pathologies' (Rose 1999, p. 136; original emphasis). The designation 'White working class' suggests a homogenous culture distinct from mainstream society. It also undermines cross-cultural solidarities by racialising working-class identity; ascribing a problematic 'hyper-whiteness' to the working

class that is counterposed to the 'ordinary', acceptable and cosmopolitan whiteness of the middle classes (Lawler 2012). Middle-class imaginaries of cultural decay, moral decline, economic impotence and nativist racism coalesce in a figure of pathological whiteness producing and produced by middle-class disgust (Lawler 2005). Accentuating the whiteness of the White working classes has the double effect of obscuring economic inequality and pathologising working-class culture as a site for necessary intervention. Benevolent intentions notwithstanding, the danger with initiatives like *Raising Achievement* is that educational underachievement transmutes into a problem with the White working classes themselves; confirming perceptions of cultural deficit whilst simultaneously shielding the system from criticism.

Constructing White working-class parents as 'hard to reach' contributes to this process. The term is prominent in social policy, functioning as a 'dividing practice' (Foucault 2002, p. 326) separating mainstream society from its 'others' (see Kakos et al. 2016). It conveys the sense that 'hard to reach' populations constitute a problem requiring remedial intervention (Osgood et al. 2013). Discourses of 'hard to reach-ness' establish the normative core of society and problematise its peripheries, reinforcing social hierarchies via a spiralling logic of marginalisation and (re)integration through which deviant populations are encouraged, nudged or compelled to accommodate mainstream norms. Nikolas Rose (1999) argues that government, understood here as strategic, calculated action to shape individual and collective conduct, is made possible 'only through the discursive mechanisms that represent the domain to be governed as an intelligible field' (1999, p. 33). Nomenclature such as 'hard to reach' carries out this discursive work. The White working classes, as 'hard to reach,' are defined and made visible, and through their visibility become subject to efforts to better 'mobilize the forces and entities thus revealed' (1999, p. 33).

In terms of *Raising Achievement*, parents were primarily recruited through school referrals. Under the instruction of the local authority, schools selected families according to identity-based criteria, children's educational performance and parents' perceived lack of engagement. But as a conferred identity 'hard to reach' possesses a stickiness which fastens it to particular parents and makes it hold. It attaches to White working-class bodies, for instance, but slides off others. As one of the head teachers in the study quipped, 'We've got disengaged millionaires' children and there's no project for them.' White working-class parents are tautologously constructed as 'hard to reach' simply by virtue of their being White and working class. One way in which parents were positioned as 'hard to reach' concerned their limited use of community resources:

> This group don't use what's available in the area; they don't use the children's centres as much as they could. And they don't use the homework club and all the different resources that are there. So, part of it was actually having the resources working in partnership with each other and the schools. (Project Organiser)

However, parents' own accounts paint a more complex picture of disengagement and challenge the presumption that it arises from a lack of knowledge, enthusiasm

or interest. Instead, it throws light on external factors inhibiting engagement, including the relative inaccessibility of services themselves (Crozier and Davies 2007).

On first inspection there appeared some consensus that the local area lacked resources for families. Carla complained that, 'for young children there's nothing for them here. It's very hard, you know, for teenagers, or any, you know, children round here. Because there's nothing for them I don't think.' But further probing revealed that the vast majority of parents were in fact aware of a considerable range of resources: after school and homework clubs; community centres, children's centres, tenants' associations, and so on. However, their use of these resources was restricted by financial constraints, safety concerns and feelings of disenfranchisement and alienation. Qualifying her earlier claim, for instance, Carla indicated that costs could be prohibitive. Abbi similarly bemoaned the fact that some activities were accessible only to those with sufficient financial wherewithal. Parents were also perturbed by crime in the area and this coloured their perception of community provision. Abbi refused to allow her children to attend local youth clubs as there had been shootings in the area and she worried that 'all the kids that go there carry knives.' Alice indicated she would avoid particular after-school clubs and play centres based on the perception that 'a lot of rough children go there.'

Respondents' accounts also revealed elements of racial segregation within the locale. The perception that some resources were the preserve of other ethnic groups contributed to parents' sense that White British families were being underserved and provoked feelings of disenfranchisement and alienation, which in turn impacted upon their desire to exploit these resources. The local homework club, in particular, was singled out as being inhospitable:

> I think it [homework club] is open to everyone but it's dominated by a lot of Somalis and to go in there, I'm going to be honest, I feel out of place. So, it's uncomfortable. So straight away it's like I'd rather be at home doing my research on the internet and be able to give some information back to my children rather than sit there, looking in books. Everyone looking at you and saying what's she doing here? (Alex, Parent)

Sentiments like this were not uncommon. However, parents were conflicted about how to acknowledge the reality of racial divisions without appearing racist themselves. This was also evident in parents' ambivalence towards the official labelling of the project as being 'for' White parents. Whilst they welcomed the targeted allocation of resources, many nevertheless felt uncomfortable with its potential connotations. The tensions in parents' accounts suggest a sensitivity to wider societal discourses that frame the White working class in terms of 'an unreflexive, axiomatically racist, whiteness' (Lawler 2012, p. 410). Efforts to mitigate the appearance of prejudice were counterbalanced, however, by parents' aggrievement at the preferential treatment they believe had been afforded to minority ethnic groups (Hewitt 2005; Thomas and Sanderson 2013).

Focalising attention on race and whiteness to the relative exclusion of social class risks inflaming existing tensions regarding the distribution of resources. The decision to remove explicit reference to social class from the title of the project gave parents the misguided impression that *all* White British pupils are struggling in

schools, irrespective of their socioeconomic status, and diverted attention away from the barriers affecting low-income families across different ethnic backgrounds. This is not to diminish the persistence of race inequalities in education (Gillborn et al. 2012), but to suggest, rather, that accentuating whiteness as a determining factor of underachievement masks the class inequalities faced by other ethnic groups (Sveinsson 2009).

The preceding account suggests participating parents are misdescribed as 'hard to reach,' inasmuch as their access to and engagement with community resources was constrained by factors outside their control. Indeed, it would be more apt to describe services themselves as 'hard to reach' for particular groups (Crozier and Davies 2007; Osgood et al. 2013). To its credit, *Raising Achievement* showed some appreciation of the barriers faced by parents, particularly concerning engagement with schools. Hence, alongside working directly with parents, link workers also encouraged schools to devise strategies for better accommodating their needs. Nevertheless, positioning *parents* as 'hard to reach' firmly steered the emphasis towards changing parental behaviours as a means of resolving educational underachievement.

## Engaging 'hard to reach' parents

The central concern driving *Raising Achievement* was how to get parents *as a community* more engaged with their children's education. Mobilising the community to address educational underachievement and changing attitudes and behaviours towards education were thus the principal focus of link worker activities. However, since participation was voluntary, it was first necessary to secure parents' interest and investment in the project. This was accomplished by cultivating parents' trust (Fretwell et al. 2018).

As Emma Wainwright and Elodie Marandet (2013) observe, building rapport is an essential element of effective parenting support. The link workers employed various techniques to establish this rapport, including capitalising on what Alison Howland et al. (2006, p. 63) refer to as 'community connectedness':

> I'll be honest with you, I think I can relate to them really well because I could be one of them, I'm working class, I'm White, I'm a single mum. So, I can really relate to them in that way, and I think that makes a massive difference for the trust issues. (Denise, Link Worker)

Link workers allayed parents' unease by emphasising their independence and distancing themselves from institutions that were a source of anxiety, such as schools and social services. They also based their operation in places familiar to parents. In this regard, the initiative functioned as a form of community learning, utilising spaces within the local vicinity as pedagogical sites. This combination of factors helped establish link workers as representatives of the community capable of serving as 'cultural brokers' between home and school (Martinez-Cosio and Martinez Iannacone 2007).

Like the Home-Start volunteers in Jenny Fisher et al.'s (2019) study, link workers operate in the 'liminal spaces of parenting support' (p. 250), occupying a threshold position between a professional and a friend. They fostered friendly relations with parents by providing holistic care and support that extended beyond a focus on learning within the home or assistance in engaging with schools. Parents were offered a safe, non-judgemental platform where they could discuss personal issues affecting their lives, vent their frustrations and 'let off some steam' (Yvonne, Link Worker). Most importantly, they tended to avoid pressurising parents, relying instead upon their interpersonal skills and amiability as a means of recruiting and engaging parents; maintaining, as Denise put it, 'a happy upbeat sort of way about you to keep them going'. I have argued elsewhere that this friendly approach is contrived in the sense that it is deliberately pursued as a means of making parents more receptive to the link workers' agenda (Fretwell et al. 2018). Friendship in this regard serves as essential groundwork for subsequent efforts to mould the character and conduct of parents and enables power to be exercised in a 'supportive' way (Wainwright and Marandet 2013).

Despite their positioning as 'hard to reach,' the link workers had considerable success in engaging parents:

> A lot of the schools are saying…To give an [example], one school we've been given the worst engaged parents of all, and yet they are engaging with us. We've earned their trust which I think…They're so untrusting with authority in any way shape or form, and to us to just walk in someone's house that they've never met before, they've only spoken to on the phone… (Denise, Link Worker)

Several parents reported undertaking pedagogical work within the home and all were enthusiastic about the project and the impact it might have upon their children's education: 'I'm hoping that it will help my son, you know, achieve more and build up his confidence. And that's all I want because that's what every parent wants – the best for their child' (Carla, Parent). Nevertheless, as Denise's comment above implies, parents faced barriers in engaging with schools. Distrust and poor communication were singled out as prominent issues. Abbi described her relationship with school as extremely negative and characterised by a lack of trust, something she explicitly linked to the perceived judgemental treatment she received as a young single mother from a working-class background. Other parents reported similar experiences. Alex, for instance, depicted her children's school as 'not very welcoming,' remarking that 'soon they will be asking you to make an appointment to pick up your child from the school gate. That's how bad it's got up there'. For Alex, the inhospitality of the school engendered distrust: 'It just feels like there's something to hide, the school has something to hide. That's how it feels to me.' Although not all parents were affected by these issues and some reported positive relationships with schools, they were common across the sample. Again, this suggests that the nomenclature 'hard to reach' simplifies the complex reality of parental engagement and deflects attention away from institutional barriers.

Establishing friendly relations enabled the link workers to enlist parents on a range of different activities designed to enhance their knowledge and skills. They

also facilitated book clubs and social events. Participation in these activities and events fostered a sense of community, affording parents new attachments and a peer-support network. As Wainwright and Marandet (2017) observe, targeted initiatives can forge a sense of community and belonging which participants themselves find valuable, and this aspect of the project was singled out as being amongst its key strengths:

> And as a group they've just become really supportive of each other and that's been one of my favourite things to see out of this whole project actually is how this group of mums, a couple of whom knew each other, the rest of whom didn't, have really formed this bond. (Yvonne, Link Worker)

This was confirmed by parents: 'we've all got to know each other, it's like, in a weird sense it's like a little family, a separate little family.' Encouraging communal bonds had the effect, moreover, of mobilising parents to police one another's participation to ensure that everyone availed themselves of the opportunity to develop their skills:

> Like when one of them doesn't come, the other ones will give them a hard time. Like one of them wasn't going to go on the residential and the others were all giving them grief 'why aren't you coming?' 'What do you mean you're going…' – to wherever she was going to go – 'No. You're coming on this learning weekend' kind of thing. (Yvonne, Link Worker)

Individual and collective responsibility are bound together here in an ethico-politics that nurtures self-government and activates parents' obligations to themselves and their community (Rose 1999). Parents are encouraged by the link workers to improve their skills and they encourage each other so that together they might better serve the community's needs. These comments attest to the success that link workers had in engaging parents and in forging communal bonds. The following section develops this by turning attention to the changes in parental attitudes and behaviours that link workers sought to effect by trading on the power of friendship.

## Changing 'hard to reach' parents

Link workers deploy friendly power to mobilise parents to become better parent-educators. As Hartas (2014) indicates, a simple logic underpins this endeavour: 'parenting knowledge leads to attitudinal change, then to behaviour change and finally to outcomes for children' (p. 107). Creating 'good,' pedagogically engaged parents involves instilling desirable attitudes, behaviours and dispositions. A key focus for the link workers was thus encouraging parents to adopt new habits and to comport themselves in ways that would facilitate more constructive dialogue with schools. There was an overriding perception, for instance, that parents' demeanour was antagonistic and counter-productive:

> They don't always know how to get their point across succinctly and calmly, which is what we're helping them with. And, so it can often be a time issue, the staff don't necessarily have loads of time to listen to someone ranting for ages and seemingly not having a point.

> And I think as a parent, certain kind of parent you can get yourself a bad reputation of being like: 'Oh, that troublemaker mum that just comes in and shouts really inappropriately.' So, then the school aren't going to make the time to see you when they know what's coming, which is why working with them on their communication skills is really important. (Yvonne, Link Worker)

Link workers challenged parents' behaviour, attempting to instigate the kind of culture-change often advocated at the level of policy (Paterson 2011; Family and Childcare Trust 2015). As Denise put it, 'We're quite blunt with them, quite honest with them.'

There are echoes here of parent-blame. Parents are implicated as obstructions to, if not causes of, children's underachievement. This chimes with the tendency within neoliberalism to reframe social problems as problems of ethical conduct concerning the way that 'problem' groups comport themselves (Rose 1999). Within this context, the conduct of parents appears as both problem and solution:

> They're learning to control their emotions … and they also realise now, you know, how important it is as well for their kids to get a good education. Some of them are really supporting them with their homework as they didn't do before. (Denise, Link Worker)

The language here is as condemnatory as it is celebratory. It confirms the belief that 'bad' parenting hinders children's educational development and condemns parents' pre-intervention character and conduct. In celebrating the emergence of parental self-government, moreover, it suggests that becoming a 'good' parent is a matter of taming and training working-class parents to constrain their impulsiveness and become more reflexive (Fretwell et al. 2018). Parents, in other words, are schooled in responsibility.

Efforts to instil responsible self-disciplined agency in parents are framed within neoliberal imaginaries of 'good' parenting which reconceive intimate family relationships as capital investments (Rosen 2019). Parents are encouraged to expend energy, time, resources on the family so children can reap future dividends (Vincent and Maxwell 2016). For parents in the study this meant developing capabilities and skills that would establish them as positive role models for their children:

> The whole aspiration side … of this project was if they'd got no role models within their family who care about learning or who are working then that's part of the problem. Whereas if these mums are now working and doing loads of extra learning with their kids at home then it can make a difference … You want the kids to be seeing that in their parents and that's what the mums say isn't it now; they feel that their kids see them as being a good role model and they're going to college and learning things and reading and all those things and modelling that to their children. (Yvonne, Link Worker)

Through nudging parents to (re)enter employment and undertake further education and training the link workers play a role in producing active, aspirational citizens personally responsible for the well-being of themselves, their families and their community (Rose and Miller 2008; Raco 2009). Parents investment in themselves is simultaneously an investment in the children's future. The home is thereby transformed into a space of human capital development; a site in which the capabilities of parents and children are activated and developed in equal measure.

Viewed critically, *Raising Achievement* exemplifies the neoliberalisation of parenting and the displacement of economic assistance in favour of behaviour modification. Yet it is important to recognise that parents themselves derived considerable benefit from their participation. Parents welcomed the investment in their community and roundly praised the link workers for their dedication. They valued the opportunity to acquire new skills and appreciated gaining confidence in supporting learning within the home. Parents also reported feeling empowered by the link workers and better equipped to engage with institutions and their representatives:

> I do speak up now and I think that's all due to confidence building with the group and through the parent support through the group as well. (Alex, Parent)

> They're not doing things for you; they're increasing the things that you're already good at and making you feel like you can tackle these things. It's situations whether it be school, health, education, work, they're not telling you what to do; it's about working with you rather than for you. (Lily, Parent)

Whilst programmes of empowerment apply normative pressures on citizens to align themselves with governmental aspirations and objectives (Rose and Miller 2008; Dean 2010), it would be a mistake to neglect the positive impact such programmes can have on participant's lives. Policy initiatives working with targeted populations can be enabling, improving participants' lives even as they work to consolidate existing power regimes (Wainwright and Marandet 2017).

The enabling dimensions of the project complicate the critique of parenting support as a vehicle for the diffusion of neoliberal rationalities of government. As responsible citizens, parents bear the weight of educational underachievement, but in being mobilised to take this burden upon themselves also derive considerable benefit from their participation. For all its commendable features, however, *Raising Achievement* feeds into and reinforces deficit constructions of White working-class parenting cultures. It is what parents do, how they conduct themselves and how they raise their children that are singled out as the critical hinge upon which children's future outcomes rest. Addressing underachievement thus means changing parents both individually and as a community: changing their attitudes, practices and behaviours; changing the way they conduct themselves; changing their cultures. Educational achievement is a complex phenomenon affected by an array of factors, including, importantly, socioeconomic circumstances, but the myopic privileging of parental engagement occludes this complexity, substituting it with simplistic reductions that ultimately serve to absolve the system of responsibility through the very project of seeking to solve parents (Goodall 2019).

As a species of informal, community learning the initiative engaged local spaces and places as sites of transformational parent pedagogy. The social justice implications of doing so are ambiguous, though. On one hand, parents found the use of the local area reassuring and the link workers were well-situated in the locale to provide ongoing and ad-hoc support. However, on the other, their very proximity to parents also meant that the link workers could exercise benign surveillance ensuring that parents had limited scope for evading their tutelary supervision and presented opportunities for coercing their participation. As I argue elsewhere, these

entanglements of care and control are a central feature of link worker-parent inter-actions (Fretwell 2020). Operating within and through the community thus complicates programme delivery. It is both of benefit to parents and yet also constrains their autonomy.

## Conclusion

*Raising Achievement* was well-received and helped parents develop confidence, skills and networks of peer support, but as a solution to persistent educational underachievement within low-income White British communities it is misguided. The exclusive emphasis on what parents do, on their attitudes, practices and behaviours, positions parents as causally responsible for children's educational achievement and precludes serious consideration of the structural barriers and impediments impacting upon family life. This skewed focus is indicative of the power and pervasiveness of parental determinism. Politically expedient sleight of hand conjures away the adverse and inequitable conditions in which low-income parents raise their children, summoning instead the figure of an unencumbered parent invested with near-magical properties for determining the family's destiny. Within this context the problem of educational underachievement is recast as a problem with the community itself and the pursuit of social justice transmutes into a technical concern with mobilising responsible parent-educators. For all their dedication and support, or, more precisely, through their dedication and support, the link workers serve as agents of this process. Exercising friendly power, they address the alleged parenting deficit within the community by inducing parents to become self-governing and undertake the necessary work upon themselves that will transform them into 'good' parents. Focusing on parents' attitudes and behaviours also unwittingly reinforces deficit constructions of White working-class parents. As I have argued, participating parents were misdescribed as 'hard to reach;' rather, their accounts indicate that factors beyond their control limited engagement with schools and community resources. These findings caution against the use of such stigmatising language and suggest that it may be more appropriate to describe services themselves as 'hard to reach' (Crozier and Davies 2007; Osgood et al. 2013). The racialising of educational underachievement in *Raising Achievement* is doubly unfortunate insofar as it also undermines possibilities for fostering cross-cultural solidarities that could unite the local area rather than inflame tensions between different ethnic groups.

The challenge for the researcher in cases like this is of bringing critical analysis to bear whilst doing justice to the experiences of service-users themselves. Despite its stigmatising and pathologising implications, parents clearly valued the project and felt it was having a positive impact upon their lives. Although discomfiting, projects like *Raising Achievement* highlight the complexities and contradictions within the parenting support agenda. Making visible these contradictions is an essential step in the pursuit of more socially just policy solutions to problems like educational underachievement. Whilst it would clearly be unfeasible to expect a

small-scale project of this nature to address wider structural inequalities that rightly require attention from central government, it nevertheless represents something of a missed opportunity, especially given parents' receptiveness to the project. Rather than racialising the issue of educational underachievement or focusing on changing parenting cultures, the public good might have been better served by mobilising parents to become active representatives of the community engaged in campaigning for the right to a more equal share of social wealth. An alternative approach along these lines could incorporate the following strategies: first, helping establish cross-cultural solidarities by educating parents about the extent of class-based educational inequalities; second, creating platforms for parents to work together across cultural boundaries where they can explore possibilities for undertaking concerted political action; and, third, training parents to become community activists prepared to defend their rights and interests and suitably equipped to campaign for social and political change. This alternative would avoid stigmatising parents whilst simultaneously mobilising them to challenge the systemic injustices masked by neoliberal responsibilisation and help shift the locus of responsibility for children's future outcomes back to the state. Parental engagement need not be limited to what happens pedagogically within the home or relationships between home and school, engaging with the politics of education is of equal import. This chapter has highlighted some of the complexities and contradictions of policy initiatives aimed at serving the public good. In particular, it is instructive for thinking through the unintended effects of initiatives targeting specific populations which can subvert the original aims by further marginalising participants and reinforcing existing societal divisions. In this regard, more farsighted conceptions of the public good are required that contribute to creating a coherent and cohesive sense of publicness.

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# Chapter 6
# Ability to learn, or ability to pay? How family and finance influence young people's higher education decisions in Scotland

**Sarah Minty** [ID]

**Abstract**  Scottish Government policy explicitly frames higher education (HE) as a public good, stating that access should be based on the 'ability to learn rather than the ability to pay'. But while Scotland's system of free tuition distinguishes it from the rest of the UK, students must still fund their living costs and most do so through a combination of parental contributions, student loans, bursaries and part-time work. This chapter explores the ways in which young people's HE decisions are bounded by family and finance. Longitudinal semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 young people and their parents before and during their time in HE. The research finds that despite free tuition, the 'ability to pay' constrains young people's institutional and accommodation decisions. It illustrates how students' horizons for action are broadened and limited by their family backgrounds, challenging the popular misconception that Scottish students are more immune to financial considerations in their HE decisions than in the rest of the UK, and that the system is thus fairer. While finance is but one of many factors influencing HE decisions, the living costs associated with HE study continue to reproduce inequalities in HE transitions.

## Introduction

Scotland is now the only part of the UK which offers free higher education (HE) tuition. Scottish-domiciled HE students who remain in Scotland to study have their fees paid by the Scottish Government (although those who travel to the rest of the UK are charged up to £9250 per year – the same as their counterparts in England).

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Tuition fees were first introduced UK-wide in 1998/99 and since then, Scotland and England have, on the face of it, taken increasingly divergent paths towards the funding of HE. The Scotland Act of 1998 devolved a range of powers to Scotland, including education, and led to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. In response to the recommendations of Scotland's Independent Committee of Inquiry into Student Finance (known as the Cubie Commission, ICISF 1999), Scotland replaced tuition fees with a graduate endowment payment in 2001/02. This was later scrapped completely by the SNP-led Scottish Government in 2007 (Macpherson 2019). Meanwhile, tuition fees continued to rise in the rest of the UK. Devolution has thus led to a situation where the price paid for tuition depends on where you live within the UK, and whether you leave to study in a different UK nation.

Scottish Government policy explicitly frames HE as a public good, stating that access to HE should be based on the 'ability to learn rather than the ability to pay' (Scottish Government 2013). Free tuition is a flagship Scottish Government policy, with the decision to abolish tuition fees in 2007 held up as a symbol of a more egalitarian and socially just approach to education in Scotland and linked to principles of equal access and fairness (Hunter Blackburn 2016). It is frequently used to differentiate Scotland from the rest of the UK, where high fees and high debt are viewed as factors which would deter students from the poorest backgrounds from going to university. The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has framed free tuition policy as a continuation of the Scottish tradition of universal access to school education, noting that 'a commitment to universal education has been part of our identity' (Sturgeon 2015). This has led many in Scotland, including students and their parents to conclude that access to HE in Scotland is 'fairer' than the rest of the UK (Minty 2016a). Yet participation data suggests the Scottish system remains highly stratified according to social class background, despite free tuition (Croxford and Raffe 2014; Hunter Blackburn et al. 2016). This focus on free tuition hides some of the inequalities within the Scottish system. Students must still fund their living costs and, as in the rest of the UK, most do so through a combination of parental contributions, student loans and part-time work.

This chapter draws upon qualitative findings from a mixed-methods ESRC-funded PhD to explore how students' higher educational horizons for action are bounded by family background and finance. With a focus on institutional and accommodation decisions, the chapter asks whether Scotland's system of free tuition is as fair as might be assumed? I begin by briefly outlining the Scottish context in respect of HE access and funding, before describing the research methodology. The key findings in relation to young people's horizons for action within the context of their HE decisions are discussed, before finally drawing out some of the implications.

## The Scottish context

The Scottish HE system is distinct from elsewhere in the UK. HE funding is a clear difference (explored in detail in the next section), but there are other key characteristics to be aware of. The majority of degree programmes in Scotland take four years to complete rather than three in the rest of the UK, meaning that students must fund an additional year of living costs. Scotland has its own qualification system, and students enter HE based on the results of their Higher and Advanced Higher exams. Scotland is unusual within the UK as a substantial proportion of HE provision takes place within further education (FE) colleges, accounting for 17% of Scotland's HE participation (Hunter Blackburn et al. 2016). The majority of students undertaking HE in FE colleges are enrolled on Higher National Certificates (HNCs) or Higher National Diplomas (HNDs). These sub-degree programmes (often offered in more vocational subjects) are discreet qualifications within their own right. They can provide students with an alternative route to university through a process of articulation, whereby students can gain direct entry to the second or third year of degree programmes, usually to the less selective universities, upon completion of an HNC/D (Riddell and Hunter Blackburn 2019).

Another key feature of the Scottish system is the high proportion of students living at home, among the highest in the UK (Donnelly and Gamsu 2018). While living at home is one strategy to reduce debt (Hutchings 2003a; Christie et al. 2005), it has long been a feature of Scottish HE participation, particularly among students from the West of Scotland (Paterson 1993; Forsyth and Furlong 2000, 2003). This area, particularly Glasgow and its surrounding towns, has higher levels of deprivation and lower life expectancy compared to most other parts of Scotland (Audit Scotland 2012). The relationship between neighbourhood deprivation levels and attainment is well recognised in Scotland (CfFA 2019). Yet there has been a paucity of Scottish research in recent years into wider regional educational inequalities and how debt aversion might influence the desire to live at home. My own research found that young Scots were more debt averse than their counterparts in the north of England, and that Scottish debt avoiders were more likely to intend to live at home (Minty 2016b). Finally, the most well-known characteristic of the Scottish HE system, at least outside of Scotland, is that tuition is free. The focus on free tuition, however, obscures other aspects of the Scottish funding system which are less favourable, and it is these I now turn to.

## Hidden inequalities in Scottish higher education funding

As the Scottish Government pays the tuition fees of Scottish-domiciled students who study in Scotland, the number of university places for such students is capped (although Scottish universities are able to take unlimited numbers of fee-paying students from the rest of the UK). This creates stiff competition for places between

**Table 6.1** Student support available to Scottish-domiciled students in 2019/20

| Household income | Young Student Bursary | Maintenance loan | Total support available |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| £0 to £20,999 | £2000 | £5750 | £7750 |
| £21,000 to £23,999 | £1125 | £5750 | £6875 |
| £24,000 to £33,999 | £500 | £5750 | £6250 |
| £34,000 and above | £0 | £4750 | £4750 |

Source: Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) (2019)

Scottish-domiciled students, particularly at the most selective 'ancient' Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews (Hunter Blackburn et al. 2016; Whittaker 2016), which tend to cater to students from the most advantaged backgrounds. By contrast, most HE expansion in Scotland has occurred in FE colleges delivering HE level courses, where those from poorer backgrounds participate disproportionately (Riddell and Hunter Blackburn 2019).

Both Scotland and England offer repayable maintenance loans to students to help fund living costs. In Scotland, these are supplemented by means-tested non-repayable maintenance grants in the form of the Young Student Bursary for those aged under 25 and the Independent Student Bursary for those over 25[1] (England abolished student grants in 2016/17). Table 6.1 outlines the combinations of student loan and bursaries available to those aged under 25.

While Scotland chose to retain non-repayable bursaries, the amount students were eligible for was significantly reduced in 2013/14 to 'simplify' the funding system. At the same time, the amount of maintenance loans students were entitled to was increased, resulting in a 40% reduction in spending on grants overall (SAAS 2014). Prior to 2013/14, Scottish-domiciled students who moved away from home to study elsewhere in Scotland, the rest of the UK or in London were entitled to higher levels of support. Since then, Scottish-domiciled students have been eligible for the same means-tested levels of support irrespective of whether they live at home or move away. Given that the costs of moving away from home are higher, particularly for those moving to London where accommodation costs are greater, this could be seen to create a policy disincentive to poorer students to move away, not just to study in the rest of the UK but also outside of the home region within Scotland. Free tuition ensures Scottish students attending Scottish universities accrue significantly lower levels of overall debt than their counterparts in England (Hunter Blackburn 2016). However, the total support available to Scottish students (£7750 per year for those from the lowest income households and £4750 for those from households earning more than £34,000) is unlikely to cover all of the costs of living away from home. Accommodation costs alone can range from between £4000 to £8000 per year, with food, bills, books, travel etc. additional to this. This means students must either have parents willing/able to top up their support, or take on large amounts of part-time work. The RBS Student Living Index (2019) found that

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[1] Scotland retained the non-means-tested Student Nurses Bursary. England abolished this in 2016/17 but announced plans to reinstate this in some form in 2020/21.

Scottish students have some of the lowest term-time incomes in the UK and are more likely to work during term-time.

By contrast, although English tuition fees have continued to rise and student grants have been abolished, the total support provided (albeit loans only) to those from poorer backgrounds who live away from home in England is more generous than in Scotland. The English system continues to differentiate in terms of where a student studies, so that those studying away from home or in London are entitled to higher levels of support (Save the Student 2019).

Differences around student loan repayment mean that Scottish students, especially those from low income backgrounds, are more likely than their counterparts from the rest of the UK to repay all of their debt (Hunter Blackburn 2016). The repayment threshold is lower in Scotland, so that Scottish students begin to repay their loans earlier and make repayments for longer, although interest rates in Scotland are lower than elsewhere in the UK. Lucy Hunter Blackburn's work (2016) shows that students from poorer backgrounds in Scotland accrue higher levels of debt than their more affluent peers who are better able to rely on their parents to fund their living costs. It can be argued that it is these middle-class families who benefit most from free tuition.

## Horizons for action and higher education decision-making

In Scotland, the amount of student loans and bursaries 'young' students (those aged over 25 are considered 'independent') are entitled to is determined by their family's household income, yet policies tend to focus on young people as individuals rather than operating within, and influenced by, this wider family context. While the role of family in young people's HE decisions has been a key feature of the literature in England (Brooks 2002; Reay et al. 2005; West et al. 2015), there has been little consideration in Scotland of family dynamics and how economic resources and attitudes to student finance may influence decisions about institutions and where to live. Work by Hazel Christie and colleagues on local students who commuted to university (Christie et al. 2005; Christie 2007), and Alisdair Forsyth and Andy Furlong on young people's HE participation in the west of Scotland (2000, 2003) points to the role of family influence, particularly on decisions about where to live, but parents did not form part of these studies. Rather than viewing decisions about where to study through the lens of geographic mobility (see Donnelly and Gamsu 2018), I focus on the cultural distance travelled by young people in their HE decisions, the extent to which they feel able to leave their comfort zone and travel to another area. Phil Hodkinson's work on careership (Hodkinson et al. 1996; Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997) is useful. A key aspect of this is the concept of pragmatically rational decision-making which is 'always bounded' (Hodkinson 2008, p. 12), constrained or enabled by an individual's horizons for action; that is, the actions which seem possible as a result of one's habitus, or the values and dispositions inherited from one's parents (Reay 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant

1992). Careership recognises the role that interactions with parents, teachers and others in the field may have, situating young people's HE decisions within the limits of changing structural forces.

## Methodology

The findings outlined in this chapter are based on mixed-methods doctoral research at the University of Edinburgh. Multivariate analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) student records data from 2014/15 was used to predict the likelihood of Scottish-domiciled students living at home and/or attending a university in their home region. Those from working-class backgrounds whose parents did not have an HE qualification were most likely to live at home. Region was found to have an additional affect. Middle-class students from the Strathclyde region (encompassing 11 local authorities in the West of Scotland) were more than twice as likely as their middle-class counterparts from Edinburgh and the Lothians to live at home.

Qualitative family case studies (a young person plus one of their parents), which are the focus of this chapter, sought to explore possible reasons for these regional patterns and, more widely, to consider how young people chose where to study and where to live. Sixty-one longitudinal semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 families. Most participants were interviewed twice; initially face-to-face in 2017 when students were aged 17–18 and about to leave school, and then again, by telephone in 2018/19, by which point students were in their second year of HE. This enabled the twists and turns in young people's HE decisions to be tracked over time, exploring the differences between their planned and actual decisions. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, before being written up as family case studies and analysed thematically: firstly on a case-by-case basis, exploring the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies particular to each individual family and the contradictions and similarities between the views of the young person and their parent; secondly, across families from the same school and finally across the whole sample. Parents were approached for interview only with the permission of their child. All participants and schools are referred to using pseudonyms.

## The case study schools, families and students' higher education destinations

The young people were recruited from two state schools, referred to using pseudonyms. Eight students attended 'West High', located in a small ex-mining town in the West of Scotland, an area identified by the quantitative analysis as having high proportions of students living at home. The school's intake, as measured

by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD is adopted by the Scottish Government as a proxy for social class. It is similar, though not directly comparable to the classification of HE Participation of Local Areas, or POLAR, used in the rest of the UK), includes high proportions of students from the most deprived 40% of postcode areas, while a significant minority of pupils lived in the least deprived 20%. Levels of attainment at the school are lower than average, as is the proportion of school leavers progressing to HE; around a third do so vs the national average of 41.1% (Scottish Government 2019). Nine students attended 'East High', a school located in an affluent inner-city area in the East of Scotland where leaving home to study is more common. The majority of school leavers live in the 20% least deprived postcode areas. Attainment is substantially higher, and more than two-thirds of leavers go on to HE.

Table 6.2 provides a demographic summary of the case study families. The young people interviewed reflected the characteristics of their overall school populations. West High families were fairly mixed in terms of SIMD, social class background by parental occupation and level of parental occupation. All apart from one family were local to the area. Those from East High were more affluent, lived in the least deprived SIMD postcode areas, had HE qualified parents working in

**Table 6.2**  Demographic summary of the case study families

|  | West High | East High | Total (n = 17) |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***SIMD*** |  |  |  |
| Least deprived 40% (SIMD 4 & 5) | 4 | 6 | 10 |
| SIMD 3 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Most deprived 40% (SIMD 1 & 2) | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| ***Social class by parental occupation*** |  |  |  |
| Higher managerial and professional | 1 | 7 | 8 |
| Lower managerial and professional | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| Working class occupations | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| ***Level of parental education*** |  |  |  |
| Both parents have HE qualification | 2 | 6 | 8 |
| One parent has HE qualification | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| Neither parent has HE qualification | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| ***Household income at 1st interview (2017)*** |  |  |  |
| More than £70,000 | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| £34,000 to £69,999 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| Less than £34,000 | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| ***Single parent household*** | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| ***Parental origins*** |  |  |  |
| Parent/s from local area | 7 | 1 | 8 |
| Parent/s from wider Scotland | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| Parent/s from rest of the UK | 1 | 6 | 7 |
| Parent/s from the EU | 1 | 1 | 2 |

higher managerial and professional occupations and tended to have parents who were from outside Scotland. Nonetheless, the majority of students interviewed came from middle-class backgrounds (higher and lower managerial and professional occupations), reflecting the fact that those from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to attend HE. All the families in the study were White. Scotland has a lower proportion of people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds than the rest of the UK, and West High's intake in particular was overwhelmingly White.

There were very distinct patterns in terms of HE level studied, university/college location, type of term-time accommodation and forms of financial support between the two samples (Table 6.3). All eight of the West High students lived at home and commuted to college or university, while all but one of those from East High moved out of the family home. Half of West High studied HNCs at FE colleges, while just one student from East High sample did so. Just two West High students received regular financial contributions from their parents, with most working part-time during the term. East High students had less necessity to work during the term, with eight students receiving regular financial contributions from their parents.

Although not the focus of this chapter, attainment was a key factor in the HE decisions of the students interviewed, especially those from West High where attainment was significantly lower. This accounts for the higher proportions studying HE courses in FE colleges, some of whom had planned to go to university but did not achieve the grades required. The impact of family background and parental education on the gap in attainment between those from different socioeconomic backgrounds in Scotland is well documented (CfFA 2019). As the following section illustrates, family background and income operated in additional ways to further limit the young people's options, shrinking their horizons for action over time.

**Table 6.3** Students' HE destinations

|  | West High | East High | Total (n = 17) |
|---|---|---|---|
| *HE level studied by student* |  |  |  |
| University Degree | 4 | 8 | 12 |
| HNC at college | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| *University/college location* |  |  |  |
| Home region | 8 | 2 | 10 |
| Elsewhere in Scotland | 0 | 6 | 6 |
| England | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| *Term-time accommodation in First year* |  |  |  |
| Parental home | 8 | 1 | 9 |
| Halls of residence/private accommodation | 0 | 8 | 8 |
| *Financial support* |  |  |  |
| Student loan | 5 | 5 | 10 |
| Regular financial support from parents | 2 | 8 | 10 |
| Part-time work during term | 6 | 1 | 7 |
| Pay digs to parents | 2 | 0 | 2 |

## Shrinking horizons for action

All eight of the West High students lived at home during their first year of HE, either commuting into Glasgow or attending local college campuses in their hometown. Half of these students (all those who went directly from school to university) initially set out to move away from the family home. At the time of the first interview, all of these students hoped to attend universities which were considerable distances from home, with some having chosen these institutions specifically because they felt this would allow them to justify leaving home. However, the students' horizons for action gradually shrank over time, constrained initially by attainment, but then further via a combination of parental encouragement to live at home, a desire not to cost their parents money and a general belief that it made financial sense to live at home.

At the time of the first interview, Naomi wished to study at the University of Edinburgh, keen to 'start afresh' in a new city and excited by the prospect of independent living. She was rejected by Edinburgh and instead decided to attend the University of Glasgow, despite offers from universities elsewhere in Scotland. Commuting into Glasgow (a journey of 1.5 h each way) was framed as the most obvious choice, a decision which came about with apparently little discussion within the family. As Naomi said, 'it just made more sense in terms of it was way cheaper to do that'. This was despite her established middle-class family background. Both her parents were degree educated and employed in higher level managerial and professional positions, and with a higher household income (£70,000–£99,999). Naomi's was the only West High family who were not local to the West of Scotland. She anticipated graduating with no student loan debt, entirely supported by her parents. It is likely that the family could have afforded to pay for her accommodation. Why then did she live at home? Both Naomi and her father, Mark, suggested regional culture had played a part, pointing to the fact that all of Naomi's close friends from school commuted to the same university.

By the time I interviewed her in second year, Naomi had moved into a private flat in Glasgow (her parents paid her rent). She said she regretted living at home in first year, saying it had been difficult to socialise and make friends. Similar difficulties were raised by the other three university students from West High who commuted in first year, all of whom were still living at home in their second year and looked likely to do so for the duration of their degrees.

Isla had won a place on a highly competitive apprenticeship in England but later decided to accept a place at the University of Strathclyde, having decided a degree would allow her more flexibility. While happy to have chosen the degree route, she seemed somewhat wistful at having not moved away. Despite this, Strathclyde was the only university she applied to, partly, she said, as a result of the costs involved.

> I had thought about the accommodation. And 'cos Strathclyde is most well-known and best for [my subject]. So that was the main thing that drew me there. It was like quite handy that it was close by anyway. But I had thought about applying other places and then I kinda

thought there's not really any point 'cos I wouldn't want to have to spend the money on moving away. (Isla, West High 2017)

Isla's mother, Mary, had moved away from home herself to go to university, an experience which she said, 'gives you that freedom, that flexibility'. She emphasised it was Isla's choice to live at home, but in the extract below, it is possible to see how she may have influenced her daughter.

I was very open with Isla and said, 'look if you do want to move away it's fine, we'll look at it, but you have to seriously consider, you know, the cost implications as well', when in fact you have Strathclyde which has got the best [for the subject]. (Mary, West High parent 2017)

While Isla's options were clearly bounded by concerns about the costs associated with moving away, Amy, who had hoped to study at the University of Edinburgh, worried about not belonging. She struggled to articulate exactly what made her feel out of place, describing the University as 'more formal'. Amy questioned her right to study at Edinburgh, relating this not just to her own sense of habitus (Reay 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) but also to her sense of regional identity, as a student from the West coast.

I don't know, 'cos it's, like, Edinburgh [University] and it's so… I mean, they're all quite prestigious but I feel like Edinburgh's a bit more like… I felt like, 'I'm from [West High town], I don't know if I can be here!' (Amy, West High 2017)

In the end, Amy was also rejected by Edinburgh, and chose to study at the University of Glasgow (again despite offers from universities elsewhere in Scotland), noting it would be 'easier' and 'cheaper' to commute. She also bore in mind the views of her parents:

I think my mum and dad both want me to go to Glasgow [University] as well, like, my dad always drops hints, 'you really like Glasgow, don't you?' [laughs] (Amy, West High 2017)

It is interesting that although Isla and Amy came from relatively well-off families, there was no discussion of them living in halls once they decided to study in Glasgow. Amy and Isla's backgrounds, and those of a number of other West High students, could be described as what Reay et al. (2005) term the 'novitiate' middle classes. Their mothers were first generation entrants to HE who had risen from their working-class origins, moving into relatively well-paid lower level managerial and professional positions (by the time of the second interview Isla and Amy's household incomes were between £70,000 and £99,999). Their fathers, meanwhile, tended to be employed in working-class occupations and had little experience of HE. Crucially, all the West High parents (apart from Naomi's) were originally from the local area, with some suggesting their children may have been influenced by their peers, the majority of whom also lived at home. As a Depute Head from the school commented, 'West High students stay in West High town.'

While regional culture and school attainment played an important part in decisions, it was also clear that parents subtly encouraged their children to live at home, contradicting their stated views of leaving home being an essential part of the student experience. This extract from Lewis' mother, Sally, is typical of how parents

frequently reminded their children of the costs involved in moving away from home. Sally's focus on costs, however, is interesting given the family had a household income of more than £100,000.

> And I probably did say to him, 'well, you know, do you want to have all the extra hassle of then having to be completely on your own and think about paying bills, and budgeting, and things like that?' And fortunately, he kind of saw my side of things and was quite agreeable to staying at home in first year. (Sally, West High parent 2019)

A number of West High parents suggested that students who live at home can 'have their cake and eat it'. Despite these parents having themselves had positive experiences of living away from home, they questioned why their children would want to move out given the costs involved.

The students discussed above all came from families with higher incomes. By contrast, Jack came from a working-class family earning just over £34,000, meaning he was only eligible for the minimum loan of £4750. Jack had hoped to study at the University of Edinburgh, partly because he was aware that it would be more difficult to justify moving if he went to an institution closer to home. 'I'm eager to get out. I can't wait to move,' he said. Jack's mother, Claire, had not attended HE herself, and she worried greatly about the cost of living away from home and about the distance between her and Jack.

> [Sighs] We only work basic. I'm in retail, his dad works… like, it's no major money, and I thought 'how are you gonna support yourself?' That was a big thing. (Claire, West High parent 2017)

The interviews with Jack and his mother chart a process of negotiation and subtle persuasion. He worked hard to explain the student loans system to her, and having been rejected by Edinburgh, they appeared to have reached a compromise whereby Jack would attend the University of Strathclyde and move into halls of residence in Glasgow. This agreement changed when the university offered him a room but allowed him just a few days to pay £600 to secure it. The University expected the deposit to be paid in June. Given Jack would not receive his student loan until September, this constituted a hidden and unexpected cost for the family. Despite Jack's enthusiasm to move and the considerable effort he put into convincing his mother, his family could not afford to pay the upfront charges at that time and he instead lived at home. Echoing the views of the students above, Claire described the decision to commute as a 'no brainer':

> I just thought, 'no'. I mean he could travel up and down [from West Town to Glasgow] for a couple a' hundred a month. It was a no brainer and he's got his meals and his food and everything, do you know what I mean? Or his washing and everything like that all done, his bills paid. (Claire, West High parent 2019)

For the parents whose children lived at home, preparing meals and laundering clothes were seen as part of a parents' role in supporting students (both boys and girls) while they were in HE. Despite the in-kind support received from parents, there was a greater sense of financial responsibility among the West High students who were less reliant on their parents for financial contributions than their peers at

East High. Jack was one of two male West High students who paid digs to their parents of £50 a month, following a working-class tradition of school leavers contributing to the household income.

There is not space here to consider in any detail the situation of the four West High students who studied HNCs in FE colleges (see Minty 2018). In contrast to their peers who went straight to university, the college students expressed a desire to live at home from the start, with cost and distance from home acting as the over-riding factors in their decisions. In this respect, they reflect much more localised patterns of HE participation particular to those attending college (Henderson 2019). Despite having narrow horizons for action from the outset, partly as a result of significantly lower levels of attainment, they limited their HE plans further as the financial realities of HE set in. It is notable that three of the four college students came from families with low to middle household incomes. Their decisions were based on how easily, and how cheaply they could reach college. Most turned down offers from colleges in Glasgow they were initially keen to attend, choosing instead to attend colleges within a ten-minute walk from home.

This section has charted a process whereby students' horizons for action shrank over time. As the following section demonstrates, the opposite can be seen among the majority of East High students.

## Anywhere but home

All but one of the nine East High students interviewed lived away from home in their first year of HE, and most (seven students) moved a considerable distance from home to attend university. Unlike the West High students, there was little change regarding decisions to move away from home between the first and second interviews, although there were some instances of students having to rethink their options as a result of not having received their first choice. East High students had much wider horizons for action, helped by higher levels of attainment, but also by their parents who expanded their ideas of what might be possible, both culturally and financially.

The East High families were more uniform than the diverse sample from West High in that the majority of those from East High could be said to be part of the established middle class. Students generally tended to come from families where both parents worked in higher managerial and professional occupations, such as medicine, finance and the clergy. Most families from East High had higher household incomes of more than £70,000 (four earned more than £100,000). Families had access to intergenerational wealth, with some noting how grandparents helped out with the costs of their children's HE and others mentioning recent inheritances. East High parents were familiar with the HE system with a long history of family engagement with HE and particularly with prestigious institutions like Oxbridge or other research intensive universities. Most parents had moved significant distances to go to university and expected their children to do the same. Only one East High

family was local to East City; most were from the rest of the UK or elsewhere in Scotland.

Distance was also a factor in institutional choice for the East High students, though in a different way to those from West High. Here, students limited their options to a lesser extent by either not applying to institutions in their home city, or applying to them with little intention of taking up a place there. The desire to get away from their home city, and explore somewhere new was frequently expressed, along with refrains along the line of 'anywhere but [East City]', as these excerpts demonstrate:

> I mean, I pretty much knew I wanted to go live somewhere else, get away from [East City]. (David, East High 2018)

> I want to move out, away from home, so [East City] wasn't really on the list. (Helen, East High 2017)

> [Why was Glasgow University your top choice?] It wasn't [East City]! (Sarah, East High 2017)

While they excluded their home city from their decisions, East High students had much broader ideas as to the options available to them. This was largely supported by the knowledge that their parents were willing/able to support them financially. Eight of the nine East High students received regular financial contributions from their parents to cover accommodation and/or living costs. Three students (all from families earning more than £100,000) had the entirety of their living costs covered by their parents. None of these students worked during term and all anticipated graduating debt-free. Unusually, two students from East High went on to study at English universities. Cross-border study in Scotland is uncommon, and has long been confined to those from the most privileged backgrounds (Whittaker 2016). Scottish-domiciled students who study in institutions in the rest of the UK are subject to tuition fees of up to £9250, adding an important layer to young people's HE decisions.

Sophie followed in her older sister's footsteps by moving to England. Their father, Paul, paid both his daughters' tuition fees upfront and funded all of their living costs. Sophie explained that her father had always emphasised that she and her sister should not limit their options on the basis of cost.

> We have a plan as a family. My dad has always said that we shouldn't have to base where we go to uni on the price, and we shouldn't shut doors to anything because of the money. 'Cos he's always said that he's always been prepared to pay. (Sophie, East High 2017)

It was clear that their father's views, and ability to pay, played a huge part in their decisions. Like many of the East High parents, Paul viewed moving away from home as an integral part of study, something he and his wife had done as Oxbridge students.

> Part of the university experience is going somewhere new to live in. That's probably the only input I've given to my kids about which university to go to is they're not allowed to go to [East City]! They have to go somewhere else. [Laughs] (Paul, East High parent 2017)

Helen also went on to study at an English university. Torn between studying in Scotland or England, her father, Adrian, encouraged her not to allow the costs to influence her decision.

> We wanted her to realise that there was a financial cost to choosing [to study outside Scotland], but I never wanted her to feel that that was something which should over-influence her decision. (Adrian, East High parent 2019)

Helen's household income was lower than Sophie's (£50,000–£69,999 in 2017, rising to £70,000–£99,999 by 2019 after her father's promotion). She took out a tuition fees loan and a maintenance loan, which were topped up with £500 per month from her parents. She justified the decision to study in England on the basis that degrees in England are shorter with consequently lower living costs, and highlighted the fact that accommodation costs in St Andrews, her Scottish back-up, were far higher.

Helen and Sophie's decisions to study outside of Scotland were linked to a desire to go to completely new places where they could be unknown. While Helen's father described her decision to study in England as 'an opportunity to widen her horizons', it was notable that her HE choice was not without an element of familiarity as her family had strong connections with her university town. Likewise, both Helen and Sophie (and indeed a number of other East High students) had chosen very similar degrees to those of their parents.

One of these was David who studied medicine, like his mother. Rejected by his first choice, the University of Glasgow, he went on to study at the University of Dundee. With a household income of more than £100,000, David's parents paid all of his living costs, ensuring he was able to move away from home as he hoped. Crucially, it meant he would graduate with no student debt, something which was important to David's father, John:

> We both really felt for young people, coming out of uni with a large debt isn't the nicest way to start your career, especially if you want to move and buy a property later on. So we made the decision that we would help do that and avoid having to take a loan out themselves. (John, East High parent 2017)

Moving away from home was conceptualised by East High students and parents as an integral part of the student experience. Living in halls of residence was variously described as the 'natural step' after school, a time to 'mature', 'grow up', 'make friends' and a 'stepping stone to independence'. The West High students' decisions to live at home were assumed rather than discussed. Among the East students, moving away from home was likewise framed as a 'non-decision'.

Sarah wished to study a highly specialist course offered by only two Scottish universities. She was rejected by her first-choice Scottish university and accepted a place at a local university. Despite this, there was never any question of Sarah remaining at home with her parents and instead she moved into a shared private flat. Her parents paid her rent, while a student loan was used to cover the rest of her living costs. Both she and her mother expressed a desire for her to move out, with her mother describing it as 'natural' for Sarah to want to leave home. Likewise, David's father, John, said that had his son only been accepted to a local university

he would still 'expect him to move out, not because we want to throw him out, but I think he'd gain more from it' (John, East High parent 2017).

Reading the interviews with East High students, it is notable how much less frequently the costs of HE are mentioned in regards to these students' HE decisions. While West High students often discussed the price of train tickets, books, accommodation etc, these comments were largely absent among the more advantaged East High students. The main costs raised related to ruling out study in the rest of the UK, with some students saying they could not justify the additional costs that tuition fees would bring and therefore restricting themselves to universities within Scotland. Heather moved to Glasgow to study. She said that although her parents had told her 'don't let any finances get in the way. If you want to go to England, we'll pay for it', she felt she could not 'justify' the additional costs involved and was deterred by the possibility of high student loan debt. Nevertheless, she did not wish to live at home, and although her course is only offered in two Scottish universities she purposely did not apply to the course in East city.

> I can't justify it to myself or to them staying in accommodation they're paying for when I'm in the same city. I'm close enough to the campus that I could walk in. I can't justify that to them, so I don't really want to go to [local university]. I want to spread my wings and fly as it were. (Heather, East High 2017)

## Discussion

The Scottish system of free tuition is frequently contrasted with the higher fees and high debt of England. Free tuition is presented as a route to fairer access, described by Scottish ministers as a system based on the 'ability to learn rather than the ability to pay' (Scottish Government 2013). Yet debates about HE funding and access tend to focus solely on tuition fees, rather than exploring the details of means-tested student grants/bursaries, and ignoring the fact that the Scottish system is similarly predicated on the idea of student debt, albeit for living costs only. Scottish HE students must fund at least four years of living costs (as many as six for those who undertake HNC/D courses prior to their degree). In a system which provides a maximum loan of £4750 to students from families earning more than £34,000 (irrespective of where they study), additional financial support from parents is essential to cover the costs of accommodation. But despite this, the relationship between higher levels of living at home in Scotland and attitudes to finance has been ignored in recent years, both in Scottish policy and research literature, as has the role of parents in these decisions.

The findings outlined in this chapter challenge the assumption that access to HE in Scotland is somehow fairer and shed light on the ways that parents mould and shape their children's HE decisions. The stories of the students and their parents demonstrate how family background and affluence continue to influence young people's HE decisions despite free tuition. The extent to which students feel

financially and culturally able to move away from the parental home and how this influenced institutional decisions was bounded by students' horizons for action.

While West High students were initially keen to move away from home, their horizons for action shrank over time. Most West High students who applied directly to university from school were rejected by their first-choice institutions having not achieved the necessary grades. Despite having offers from universities further away from home, they chose to study locally, and for these students, studying locally equated with living at home. Either aware that their parents could not afford it or reluctant to ask their parents for financial contributions, the West High students concluded it made little sense financially for them to move out. Parents played a strong role in this, subtly reminding their children of the costs involved. Despite conceptualising the student experience as being one in which students move away (and with most of those with an HE qualification having lived away from home themselves), these parents described living at home as a way for their children to 'have their cake and eat it'. In the case of Jack, who sought so hard to leave home, the lack of fit between the university's accommodation policy and the timing of student loan allocations made living away from home a financial impossibility. The same was true for the West High students who went on to study HE courses at college, most of whom were from low to middle income households. These students were heavily sensitive to distance and financial considerations, prioritising institutions that could be most easily and cheaply reached.

The East High students, by contrast, had much broader horizons for action. Some in this group were also rejected by their first-choice institutions, but where this happened their higher levels of attainment and more affluent backgrounds meant they had a greater range of options to fall back upon. East High parents helped to expand their children's ideas of what might be possible, both culturally and financially, so that the majority strove to study anywhere but in their home city. In moving considerable distances from home to study, East High university entrants modelled the behaviours of their own parents, most of whom had moved to East city from outside Scotland either as students themselves or later on for work. Most of the families at East High were high earners, with the financial clout to support their children's living costs. Financial considerations were rarely mentioned by East High students, safe in the knowledge that their parents would step in. The financial implications of crossing the border to study were, however, raised and this had clearly encouraged some students to remain in Scotland who might otherwise have considered studying in England.

East High parents from established middle-class families with high household incomes and a history of moving considerable distances for work and education helped to inculcate the same dispositions in their children. Leaving home to study was a non-decision for these young people doing what was expected of them by their familial habitus (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Reay 1998). Meanwhile, the novitiate middle-class and working-class students from West High sought to move away from West Town but in the end conformed to regional patterns of participation. The West High parents in/directly deterred their children from considering moving away from home, despite their relatively high incomes and their own positive

experiences of moving away themselves as students. The West High family case studies support the findings of my statistical modelling which found middle-class students in the Strathclyde region were more likely to live at home. The interview data provides insights into the effect of a deep-rooted regional cultural phenomenon, with both students and parents pointing to the influence of peer groups, among whom moving away from home is rarely encountered.

In Scotland, HE is framed as a public good, with universal free tuition presented as a means of ensuring fairer access. Yet free tuition has not led to wider participation, and Scottish HE remains highly stratified according to social class background, both in terms of institution and qualification level. The findings presented in this chapter suggest that Scotland has some way to go before social justice is achieved between students from different family backgrounds. The interview data point to the emergence of a two-tiered system in Scotland where by only those whose parents are able to top up student loans, or pay the full costs associated with moving away (thus avoiding the need for student loans), feel able to leave home. In making all Scottish-domiciled students entitled to the same levels of support irrespective of where they study, Scottish funding policy potentially further disincentivises disadvantaged young people who might previously have considered moving away from home. The chapter illustrates how students' horizons for action are widened and limited by their family resources and habitus. It challenges the popular misconception that Scottish students are somehow more immune to financial considerations in their HE decisions than in the rest of the UK, and that the system is thus fairer. While finance is but one of many factors influencing HE decisions, the living costs associated with HE study continue to reproduce inequalities in HE transitions in Scotland, so that having the ability to pay ensures greater choice.

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# Chapter 7

# Inequality, social mobility and the 'glass floor': How more affluent parents secure educational advantage for their children

**Merryn Hutchings**

**Abstract**  The UK has high levels of income and wealth inequality. However, successive governments have been unwilling to put in place policies to reduce inequality. Instead they have focused on social mobility, assuming that people will be more contented if they can see the possibility of improving their position. In particular, they assume that a meritocracy (in which positions in society reflect differences in talent and effort) can legitimate inequality, and will ensure no talent is wasted. Education is seen as the main way of creating social mobility and a meritocracy. Research evidence summarised in this chapter suggests that social mobility is limited by a 'glass floor'; those from higher social classes use a range of strategies to ensure that their children do not drop down the social scale. The chapter discusses whether current or potential education policies in England can increase social mobility or, more importantly, reduce inequality; what other policies might be needed; and how researchers could contribute more usefully in these areas.

## Introduction

This chapter is about economic, social and educational inequalities, how they are maintained, and policies adopted to address them. In particular it focuses on socio-economic inequalities in educational outcomes, measured as the gap between the average attainment of pupils classified as disadvantaged and that of their peers.[1] In England, there is already an attainment gap when children start school, and this

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[1] Disadvantaged pupils are defined as those who have been eligible for free school meals at any time in the last six years (a proxy for economic disadvantage) and looked after pupils (children in the care of the local authority).

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widens, rather than narrows, through the years of schooling.[2] Successive governments have aimed to reduce attainment gaps as part of their strategy to increase social mobility, but with only limited success. It has been estimated that even if the narrowing continues at the current rate, it would take over 500 years to eliminate the gap at age 16 (Hutchinson et al. 2019).

One of the forces which serves to maintain the gaps is the actions taken by affluent and middle-class parents to ensure that their children are successful in education, and achieve careers at a similar level to those of their parents. These actions are the main focus of this chapter; they involve parents deploying their economic, social and cultural capitals, and are in some cases facilitated by aspects of current education policies. I focus mainly on strategies for educational success, because credentials are increasingly required to gain entry to further and higher education courses and to employment (even when the specific knowledge and skills that have been acquired are not needed to perform the job). But as I will show, parents' strategies are not focused only on education, but also on other ways of ensuring future social and economic success. The chapter draws on data from research undertaken with Becky Francis (Francis and Hutchings 2013), together with a range of other research evidence, and sets this within a discussion of the broader issues of inequality in society and government policies.

The educational context described in Chapter 3 (Hutchings 2021a) is an essential backdrop to the discussion in this chapter. Chapter 3 explained how the success of pupils and schools in England is currently judged entirely on the basis of test and exam results, and set out the negative impacts this has had on the curriculum and pedagogy, and the pressure it has placed on both teachers and pupils.

In this introduction, I first outline the ways in which the education system in England has historically made different provision for children from different class backgrounds, and show that opportunities to create a more equitable system have not been fully taken. I then discuss social and economic inequalities, and successive governments' aims to increase social mobility rather than reduce inequality.

## *English education and inequality*

Education arrangements in this country have long reflected – and contributed to – economic and social inequality in society. Until the second world war, schooling was organised on a class basis, with the more affluent parents paying to send their children to private schools, and working-class children attending elementary schools. Many saw the purpose of education for working-class children as preparation for work. Andrew Ure pointed out that 'the male spinners, even the most rude and uneducated … always prefer children who have been educated at infant school,

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[2] Hutchinson et al. (2019) have calculated the gap as the number of months disadvantaged pupils are behind their peers. They show that this increases from 4.5 months at age 4–5, to 9.2 months at age 10–11 and 18.1 months at age 15–16.

as they are obedient and docile' (1861, p. 423, quoted in Anthony 1977, p. 64). The upheaval of the second world war led to many arguments for social reconstruction to produce a fairer society. Some proposed taking all schools (including private and church schools) into state control, and creating a single type of school called variously the common, multilateral, multi-bias, or (later) comprehensive school (Gillard 2018). For example, Sir Fred Clarke (1880–1952), Director of the London Institute of Education from 1936–1945, argued:

> We can hardly continue to contemplate an England where the mass of the people coming on by one educational path are to be governed for the most part by a minority advancing along a quite separate and more favoured path. (1940, p. 44)[3]

However, these proposals were not supported, and the 1944 Education Act created a 'tripartite' system of secondary schools: grammar schools mainly attended by the middle classes; secondary moderns mainly serving working-class pupils; and a few technical schools. Private schools continued, and churches retained their schools and were allocated more state funding.

Another opportunity to create a more equitable system came when a Labour party government was elected in 1964. Their original aim was to replace grammar, secondary modern and technical schools with comprehensive schools, but they weakened this because they feared opposition from some Local Education Authorities. Consequently a mixed system evolved with the majority of schools becoming comprehensives, but a few local authorities retaining grammar and secondary modern schools.[4] Since 1988, market policies in education have given parents a choice of schools, and have prompted the creation of a range of types of school.[5] This has resulted in there still being some segregation along class lines, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

## *Economic inequality*

Income and wealth inequalities in the UK are higher than in most comparable countries and are predicted to rise (Joyce and Xu 2019; McGuinness and Harari 2019).[6] Wilkinson and Pickett (2009, 2018) have shown that high levels of inequality are associated with worse health, lower life expectancy, and higher rates of infant

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[3] Ironically, this is the situation we have in 2020; nearly two-thirds of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's cabinet were privately educated (The Sutton Trust 2020).

[4] In January 2019 about 85% of secondary pupils in England attended state comprehensive schools, with smaller proportions in fee-paying schools and state selective (grammar) schools (DfE 2019f).

[5] For example, specialist schools, technology colleges, two types of academy (some being 'failing' schools that were forced to convert, while others were highly successful schools which chose to convert) and free schools.

[6] Income inequality is measured in various ways: for example, by comparing the income of the top 10% with that of the bottom 10%, or by using the Gini coefficient, which measures inequality across the whole society rather than simply the extremes. The outcomes are similar on all mea-

mortality, mental illness and obesity. Unequal societies are more violent, have lower levels of trust, and community life is weaker. They also have lower levels of child well-being and educational attainment, and less social mobility. Unequal societies are unhappy societies.

Despite this evidence, politicians remain unwilling to tackle inequality, because they believe that it is essential for economic growth. Thus Boris Johnson, currently Prime Minister, claimed, when he was Mayor of London:

> For one reason or another – boardroom greed or, as I am assured, the natural and god-given talent of boardroom inhabitants – the income gap between the top cornflakes and the bottom cornflakes is getting wider than ever. I stress, I don't believe that economic equality is possible; indeed, some measure of inequality is essential for the spirit of envy and keeping up with the Joneses that is, like greed, a valuable spur to economic activity. (2013)

Many economists have argued that some inequality is necessary to stimulate the economy: there need to be people who have enough surplus money to invest in new businesses, for example. But there is a growing consensus, including from the International Monetary Fund and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), that high levels of inequality have a negative impact on economic growth (e.g. Cingano 2014; Grigoli and Robles 2017).[7] However, this evidence has not impacted on UK government policies; there is only limited redistribution through tax and benefits systems. Since the Coalition government was elected in 2010, and subsequently, the Conservative party gained power, redistributive policies have weakened. State benefits have been reduced, as has the amount of tax paid by the highest earners, and therefore inequality has increased. Johnson (2013) explained his attitude to this:

> After five years of recession people are feeling this inequality – much greater, after all, than it was in the 1980s – and rightly or wrongly they care about it. It seems to me therefore that though it would be wrong to persecute the rich, and madness to try and stifle wealth creation, and futile to try to stamp out inequality, that we should only tolerate this wealth gap on two conditions: one, that we help those who genuinely cannot compete; and, two, that we provide opportunity for those who can.

However, the Conservative party's record since 2010 has not met these conditions. State benefits have been reformed and then frozen. While the freeze ended in 2020, the Resolution Foundation (2019) concluded that, after adjusting for price increases, the real level of benefits has been cut by 6%. Thus those who genuinely need help are not all receiving what they need. Johnson's reference to 'providing opportunity for those who can' highlights social mobility. He argued this should be increased, saying, 'I worry that there are too many cornflakes who aren't being

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sures. For recent figures see Chapter 1 (Ross 2021a). Note that while this chapter focuses on educational policies in England, statistics for inequality and social mobility are for the UK as a whole.

[7] Cingano (writing for the OECD) argues that the impact of inequality on growth stems from the gap between the bottom 40% and the rest. Grigoli and Robles (IMF) show that the negative impact on growth occurs in countries with Gini coefficients over 27%. The UK Gini coefficient is currently estimated at 34% (McGuinness and Harari 2019).

given a good enough chance to rustle and hustle their way to the top' (2013). Social mobility is discussed below, but first I consider inequalities related to social class.

## Social class and inequality

As the previous section showed, inequality is often measured in terms of income and wealth, but the inequalities within society are also experienced in terms of social class. Class is used to talk about a wide range of issues: wealth and poverty, lifestyle, taste, privilege, exploitation, exclusion and so on. As Will Atkinson (2015, p. 1) argued, 'the sheer variety of things the concept of 'class' appears to cover can sometimes seem bewildering, if not downright contradictory.' In the 1990s, some argued that class boundaries were weakening. In 1999, Tony Blair, Prime Minister, claimed that the class war was over; John Prescott his deputy, reportedly said in 1997, 'We're all middle class now.' Even some sociologists agreed; Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters, in their 1996 book, *The Death of Class,* argued that class is a historical phenomenon. But despite this, class is still used in everyday conversation and in the media, and it remains a preoccupation for politicians. The *British Social Attitudes Survey* reported that only 3% of people claimed they were not members of a class group; of the remainder, 60% considered themselves working class and 40% middle class (NatCen 2016).

Over the years, sociologists have conceptualised class and class boundaries in a variety of ways, all of which have impacted on contemporary sociological thinking. Three individuals have been particularly influential. First, Karl Marx distinguished between two main groups: capitalists (business owners) and the proletariat. He saw this as a relationship of mutual dependence and inevitable conflict as the capitalists exploited the workers. For Marx, social analysis was a means of bringing about political change (Atkinson 2015).

Max Weber, in contrast, saw social analysis as a means of explanation, not a basis for action. A class was made up of a collection of individuals in a common class position who had similar 'life chances' (in terms, for example, of housing or heath). He saw life chances as being determined by 'market situation' or capacity for generating income, including property ownership and levels of skill and education. Weber also identified other forms of social division, including status (prestige, social esteem) (Atkinson 2015). Weber's work has influenced subsequent sociologists and in particular John Goldthorpe, who with colleagues devised a system of social class categories which is the basis for that used currently in the UK census, the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC). It is used extensively in quantitative research about social class. This uses two different principles to differentiate people; their work situation (that is, their position in terms of systems of authority), and their market situation (their sources and levels of income, their degree of economic security and chances of economic advancement). These are the NS-SEC categories:

1. Higher managerial and professional occupations

   1.1  Large employers and higher managerial and administrative occupations
   1.2  Higher professional occupations

2. Lower managerial and professional occupations
3. Intermediate occupations
4. Small employers and own account workers
5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations
6. Semi-routine occupations
7. Routine occupations
8. Never worked and long-term unemployed

The third perspective starts from the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, and is used extensively in qualitative research. Bourdieu saw an individual's position in social space as being determined by possession of economic, social and cultural capitals (1986). Classes are best seen as clusters of individuals with similar capitals rather than hierarchical layers. Cultural capital is of particular interest here because Bourdieu introduced it to explain differences in academic success:

> The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success … to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions. (1986, p. 243)

It is unsurprising, then, that a great many of those researching class differences in educational outcomes refer to cultural capital. However, it is used in a wide variety of ways. Diane Reay commented: 'There is a growing tendency for cultural capital to be sprayed through academic texts like intellectual hairspray without doing any theoretical work' (2006a, p. 23). Bourdieu wrote that cultural capital could exist in three forms: the objectified state (cultural goods, books, pictures etc.); the institutionalised state (educational qualifications); and the embodied state (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, including, for example, the sense of entitlement which middle-class parents often pass on to their children) (Bourdieu 1986). All three of Bourdieu's capitals are central to the analysis of social reproduction.

Bourdieu's ideas were used in the Great British Class Survey led by Mike Savage, an investigation into how people in modern Britain understand divisions in society, and whether distinct class groups could be identified (Savage et al. 2015). The findings, based on a survey which asked people questions designed to explore their economic, social and cultural capital, resulted in the identification of seven classes. Of these, the most clearly differentiated are the 'elite' (some 6% of the population with incomes twice as high as any other class, engaging in highbrow culture, and with extensive social networks), and the 'precariat' (about 15% of people with low incomes, little or no savings, and limited cultural and social capital). Between these two groups, Savage et al. identified five other groups who had varying mixes of the three forms of capital, as represented in the survey.

While sociologists have been concerned with describing and classifying class differences, politicians' references to class can often be seen as an attempt to attract voters. For example, Theresa May (Conservative Prime Minister 2016–2019) said:

> If you're from an ordinary working-class family, life is much harder than many people in Westminster realise. … The government I lead will be driven not by the interests of the privileged few, but by yours. … When we pass new laws, we'll listen not to the mighty but to you. When it comes to taxes, we'll prioritise not the wealthy, but you. When it comes to opportunity, we won't entrench the advantages of the fortunate few. We will do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you. (2016a)

Like all British Prime Ministers since 1990, May's promise to the working class was the possibility of social mobility.

## *Social mobility and meritocracy*

As economic inequality has increased over the last forty years, the political consensus in many countries has been to focus on increasing social mobility rather than reducing inequality. As Erzsébet Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2019) explained:

> It has been found attractive to suppose that a greater inequality of condition will become more acceptable if a greater equality of opportunity, leading to higher rates of social mobility, can be created. (p. 2)

Gordon Brown, then Labour Prime Minister, said in 2010, 'Social mobility will be our focus, not instead of social justice, but because social mobility is modern social justice' (Speech at the Fabian New Year Conference, 15 January; cited by Richard Breen 2010, p. 414). Reay argued that this perspective is 'part of the degradation and side-lining of social justice in contemporary British society' (2013, p. 663). Equality of opportunity is seen by politicians as more important than equality of outcome: the *Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019* (2019, p. 2) stated, 'every child should have the same opportunity to express their talents and make the most of their lives.'

Social mobility, in political speeches, is consistently presented as upward mobility; as Geoff Payne (2012, p. 15) put it, 'There is no room in this bright new future for the embarrassing fact of downward mobility and no need to dismantle the entrenched positions of the most advantaged class.' But around the time that politicians in the UK adopted social mobility as a key policy, they were warned that increasing social mobility could have negative impacts; a 2001 paper from the Performance and Innovation Unit pointed out that mobility would be downward as well as upward, creating economic instability and social tensions, and that in a meritocracy 'the losers would have no one to blame for their circumstances but their own lack of ability and commitment' which could create unhappiness and resentment (Aldridge 2001, para. 14).

In the last three decades many politicians have advocated a particular version of social mobility – meritocracy. Tony Blair, Labour Prime Minster (1997–2007) used the term repeatedly: 'We are light years away from being a meritocracy' (July 1995); 'I want a society based on meritocracy' (April 1997); 'The Britain of the elite is over. The new Britain is a meritocracy' (October 1997) (cited in Wheen 2001). The notion of meritocracy originated in Michael Young's 1958 book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Young (2001) explained that the book was 'a satire meant to be a warning' about what might happen in a society where 'merit' became the sole means of determining status. He went on to explain:

> I expected that the poor and the disadvantaged would be done down, and in fact they have been. If branded at school they are more vulnerable for later unemployment. They can easily become demoralised by being looked down on so woundingly by people who have done well for themselves. It is hard indeed in a society that makes so much of merit to be judged as having none. No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that.

He was therefore horrified that politicians had 'caught on to the word without realising the dangers of what [they are] advocating.' It is also a concern that those at the top of society can believe that they have reached this position as a result of their own talent and efforts rather than as an accident of birth. Since Young made these comments, the term meritocracy has been used more extensively, notably by May, Prime Minister, who spoke of her 'vision for a truly meritocratic Britain' (2016b).

While the creation of greater social mobility, leading Britain to becoming a meritocracy, has been characterised as desirable, the findings of research about the extent of social mobility, and whether it is increasing or decreasing over time, are contradictory. A series of studies undertaken by John Goldthorpe and colleagues since the 1990s investigated class mobility using the NS-SEC classification. They have shown that the extent of social mobility has not changed over time, and that the UK's record is similar to that of other European countries (see, for example, Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2019). However, they pointed out that downward mobility has increased. They explained this by showing that the class structure of society has changed over time. Between 1951 and 1991 the proportion of men in NS-SEC classes 1 and 2 grew from 11% to 35%, and the proportion in classes 6 and 7 fell from 55% to 30%. In this period, then, upward mobility exceeded downward mobility. But since the growth of the middle class slowed down, the figures for upward and downward mobility are more similar. It has been suggested that one limitation of Goldthorpe's approach is that the use of a few social classes hides a lot of variance in income and living conditions. There are also concerns about using class categories for international comparisons (Gregg et al. 2017).

A different approach was taken in an international comparison of intergenerational mobility which used income as the main measure; this was published in 2005 by the Sutton Trust (Blanden et al. 2005). Its findings contrast with those of Goldthorpe and colleagues. It concluded that intergenerational income mobility in Britain was lower than in many other countries and had declined over time (based on a comparison of cohorts born in 1958 and 1970). These findings received considerable publicity and were repeated in a book published in 2018, written by Lee

Elliot Major, then Chief Executive of the Sutton Trust, and Stephen Machin, one of the authors of the original report. The publicity achieved by the Sutton Trust research has resulted in policy makers accepting that social mobility in very low. For example, Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, claimed in 2012:

> More than almost any developed nation ours is a country in which your parentage dictates your progress. Those who are born poor are more likely to stay poor and those who inherit privilege are more likely to pass on privilege in England than in any comparable country.

However, Goldthorpe and colleagues responded to Blanden et al.'s work by arguing that the use of income mobility is misleading because data sources are inadequate, and that the work did not take on the difference between absolute mobility (i.e. including the changing shape of the class structure, and the end of dominance of upward mobility referred to above) and relative mobility (which calculates the chances of any individual ending up in any class position) (e.g. Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2019).

Jo Blanden (2013), lead author of the Sutton Trust report, has subsequently explored the relationship between approaches to mobility using social class, income, and years in education. She argued that the fact that social class measures of mobility show a different pattern from income and education measures may reflect the fact that the three measures are not necessarily related. This suggests a need to examine the pay achieved by those who are upwardly mobile in terms of social class measures. Savage et al. (2015), drawing on data from the Great British Class Survey, showed that those who are upwardly mobile into the elite do not acquire the same capitals as those born into the elite; they are paid less, are less well-connected and less engaged in highbrow culture. And Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison (2019) added detail; they reported that those from working-class backgrounds who achieve prestigious jobs earn, on average, 16% less than colleagues from privileged backgrounds. These findings would support the notion that income mobility is lower than class mobility.

Savage et al. (2015) also found that in the middle ranges of the social hierarchy there is mobility, but like the studies above, that it is at the extremes that mobility is most limited. The majority of those in the precariat had parents who were in NS-SEC classes 6–7 (manual workers or never worked), while over half the elite had parents in NS-SEC class 1 (higher managerial or professional).

While the disciplinary approaches and methods used in studying social mobility have varied, and have produced findings that appear contradictory, a number of conclusions seem to be shared.

- The increase in the number of middle-class jobs in the second half of the twentieth century led to an increase the size of the middle class, and upward mobility dominated. This trend has now ended, and downward mobility has therefore increased.
- Mobility is generally short-range – few people move from the bottom to the top or vice versa. When a society is very unequal, as Britain is, such moves become more difficult.

- The groups in the middle of any distribution are inevitably more mobile than those at the extremes because they can move either upwards or downwards. The elite can maintain their class position or fall, and the precariat maintain or move up.
- Class origins have a strong impact on educational achievement – which in turn impacts on social position achieved. Class origins also impact directly on social position. In a society with equality of opportunity (or a meritocracy) this would not be the case. The education/destination link would be strong, but would not be affected by class origins.
- Mobility into the elite (highest classes, highest income groups) is limited as a result of the strategies used by elite parents to ensure their children's educational success. This has been described as a 'glass floor' preventing downward mobility. Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2019) suggested that the glass floor is stronger than the 'glass ceiling' preventing upward mobility into the elite.
- Education alone cannot reduce inequality or create social mobility. Other policies are needed.

This last point contrasts with the political consensus that it is schools that are responsible for increasing mobility. For example, Gove (2011), then Secretary of State for Education, said, 'schools should be engines of social mobility.' And Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister 2010–2015, said in a speech in 2013, 'If we want to live in a society where everyone has a fair chance to live the life they want – and to bounce back from misfortune too – then education is the key.' These views are reflected in the use of educational indicators to measure social mobility: 11 of the 16 indicators used in the Social Mobility Index relate to the education of children categorised as disadvantaged (Social Mobility Commission 2017).[8,9]

The next section focuses on the strategies the middle classes, and particularly the elite, use to ensure their children's success and prevent them from falling through the 'glass floor'.

## How middle-class parents ensure their children succeed

This section draws partly on the findings of a 2012 survey designed to explore the strategies used by parents to enable their children to succeed (Francis and Hutchings 2013). While at that time there was a body of qualitative research on middle-class strategies (e.g. Reay and Ball 1998; Ball 2003a; Lareau 2003; Power et al. 2003;

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[8] Note that the category 'disadvantaged' is based on parents' eligibility for state benefits. It is not synonymous with social class; Thompson (2019) showed that in 2006, one in eight pupils categorised as disadvantaged were from NS-SEC classes 1 and 2. Nor does it represent those from families with the lowest incomes (Hobbs and Vignoles 2009). But it is the only measure we have for describing differences between pupils that may relate to class or income inequality.

[9] This also illustrates the assumption that social mobility policies are about *upward* mobility.

Vincent and Ball 2007), we wanted to find out the extent to which working-class parents used the same strategies. Our findings therefore have all the limitations of surveys; what people wanted to say may not have fitted the categories we offered; respondents may not recall earlier actions or may choose to present themselves in a particular way. The on-line survey asked parents of school-age children a series of questions about the education of their oldest child. It was conducted by YouGov, a research and data analytics group based in London. This meant that the social groupings or grades used are those used in most market research, which are based on occupation. While these are widely used, they do not have the sociological strengths of the NS-SEC occupational classification with its foundation in employment relations and conditions of employment.

A    Higher managerial, administrative and professional
B    Intermediate managerial, administrative and professional
C1   Supervisory, clerical and junior managerial, administrative and professional
C2   Skilled manual workers
D    Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers
E    State pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only

Social groups ABC1 are generally seen as middle class and C2DE as working class. The survey we designed was repeated by the Sutton Trust in 2018 (Montacute and Cullinane) and this chapter also draws on their findings. Overall, we found that the higher the social group, the greater the proportion of parents who reported taking various actions to support their children's education.[10] In this section I set out our findings together with those of other researchers.

The section is structured around comments made by Katie Hopkins, a TV reality show contestant and subsequently columnist and TV personality, whose outspoken views on class and race have attracted criticism and protest. Here she was being interviewed for *The Guardian* newspaper:

> Do I think social mobility policy will ever work? Absolutely not. Is social class a much more efficient way of getting people to the top? Absolutely. Social class has worked for years. Born into the right family, go to the right schools, even if you're not super-bright to start with you'll turn out bright. You go to the right university, you get the right job, you have the right connections, you make it to the top. Job done, very efficient. [Efficient at what?] Efficient at getting smart, well-connected people to the top. (Hopkins, cited by Aitkenhead 2014)

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[10] The only exception to this was Social group E (pensioners, the unemployed with state benefits and the lowest grade workers). The characteristics of those making up the group were very varied; some were highly educated (but presumably unemployed) and their reported behaviour fitted better with social group A and B.

## *Born into the right family*

Hopkins' criteria for success start with being born into the right family. This was not something our survey addressed, but family background it is clearly very important. There is already an attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers when they start school. The 'right family' to protect against downward mobility will be one in which the parents have a high level of education – preferably degrees. Abigail McKnight (2015), using data from a birth cohort study, found that children who scored low on cognitive tests at age 5 were more likely to be successful in education and in the job market if their parents had degree level qualifications. Similarly, parental levels of education were associated with their offspring's levels of education and earnings in an international comparison of inequality and intergenerational mobility (Jerrim and Macmillan 2015).

The way parents bring their children up has also been shown to have an impact on children's educational success and subsequent careers. Research in this area generally uses samples which can be clearly classified as middle class or working class, rather than investigating similarities and differences across the whole class spectrum. In an ethnographic study in the USA, Annette Lareau (2003) distinguished two styles of upbringing. The middle-class parents in her sample used what she termed 'concerted cultivation'. This involves structured activities and an emphasis on children's language development and reasoning through negotiation and discussion. In contrast, the working-class parents used a style she termed 'natural growth', in which children are given clear directives and there is limited negotiation. They are encouraged to respect those in authority. Lareau revisited some of the children involved in this research ten and 20 years later (2011, 2015). She argued that the style of their upbringing gave the middle-class children a greater sense of entitlement in asking for help. They learned how to navigate bureaucracy, manage their time, and challenge authority effectively – all forms of cultural capital needed to remain in the middle class.

Jessi Streib (2011) found similar contrasts among young children in a preschool classroom. The upper-middle-class children in her sample spoke, interrupted, asked for help, and argued more often than those from the working-class, and this linguistic style effectively silenced the working-class children, giving them less power, and allowing them fewer opportunities to develop their language skills.

The amount of conversation in middle-class families also enables children to build up a framework of knowledge and ideas to which they are then able to 'pin' further information. This was apparent in research investigating how children constructed ideas about work (Hutchings 1997). The most stark contrast was between two 11-year-old boys. One was middle-class; in interview he drew on his substantial knowledge of his parents' and brother's work; on television programmes, and on his observations of the differentiated job roles and hierarchy in the school. The other boy had parents who were long-term unemployed. He knew very little about work, and though he watched all the same television programmes as the first boy, he said they did not tell him anything about work, and nor did his experience at school. It

seemed that he lacked a basic framework on which to build new ideas. This same phenomenon is apparent, for example, when taking a walk with a geologist; the expert will notice a whole range of things that the non-geologist simply does not see.

A question which inevitably arises is whether class and income inequalities merely reflect inherited cognitive ability. Peter Saunders has consistently argued that innate intelligence plays a key role, as in a report published by the right wing think tank Civitas: 'Talented people filling the top positions will tend to have above-average ability children who can also compete for these positions' (2012, p. iii). He claimed that it is wrong to assume that any association between origins and destinations must be the result of unfair social advantage. Johnson (2013), Prime Minister from 2019, certainly assumed innate intelligence when he talked about 'human beings who are already very far from equal in raw ability, if not spiritual worth.' He was apparently unaware that a substantial body of research shows that cognitive ability is not fixed, as Bukodi and Goldthorpe explain:

> While variation in cognitive ability does have a genetic component … the important point is that this component is not fixed in some once-for-all way but is, rather, open to environmental modification in its expression, and especially, it would seem, in the course of early life. (2019, p. 110)

Or, in Hopkins' words, if you are born in the right family, 'even if you're not super-bright to start with you'll turn out bright.'

## *Go to the right school*

The next step in Hopkins' recipe for getting to the top is to go to the right school. In England 7% of children attend private schools, and the rest attend a range of different types of state school. This diversity offers middle class and more affluent parents the opportunity to try and ensure that their children attend schools where they will achieve good results and move on to elite universities.

Private schooling undoubtedly confers advantage in the job market; a disproportionate number of those at the top level in government, the civil service, the armed forces, the law and the media attended private schools (Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission 2019). In our survey, parents in all social groups reported sending their children to private schools, but this ranged from 13% of respondents from social group A compared with less than 2% of those from C2 and D. Of those who did *not* send their child to a private school, almost half said they would have done so if they could have afforded to. However, almost as many indicated that they would not want to do so.

Those who opted for private schools cited teaching quality, small class sizes and social networks as their reasons. Small class sizes and plentiful resources result from private schools spending around three times as much per pupil as state schools (Staufenberg 2016). There is also some evidence that teaching approaches are

different in private schools. In an analysis of PISA data,[11] Laura McInerney (2013) found that British students in private schools were more likely than those in state schools to report being asked to express opinions in class, complete group work, or have their teacher relate learning to their lives. Those in state schools reported that they did many more 'traditional' than 'progressive' activities; they learned materials by heart, and they rarely worked in groups or had any say in the direction of the lesson. This reflects the accountability structures in state schools (see Chapter 3), but may be disadvantaging those attending them. McInerney argued that the teaching in private schools resembled that of the highest performers in PISA tests, such as Hong Kong and Singapore.

Parents opting for state schooling are faced with a choice of schools; a key part of the creation of a market in education in the 1988 Education Reform Act. They are provided with information to assist their choice (league tables of test and exam results, inspection reports, information about each school). The government created a range of different types of state school (DFE 1992) (see also Chapter 3). At secondary level, 11% are single-sex, 18% are faith-based; 7% are selective,[12] and 75% are academies or free schools run by a trust, rather than funded through the local authority (DfE 2019f).[13] There are differences in the characteristics of pupils attending different types of school; some cater disproportionately for middle-class children (selective schools, converter academies, faith schools), and others for working-class (non-selective schools in area which have selective schools, sponsored academies). While some types of school achieve, on average, higher exam results, this largely reflects the differing characteristics of their pupil intake rather than the type of school (Gorard 2018).[14] But, as Chapter 3 showed, the differences between schools are then self-perpetuating; those with disadvantaged intakes have lower attainment and as a result face more accountability pressures; they are therefore less likely to attract teachers with qualifications in the subject they are teaching; they have more unqualified teachers, fewer experienced teachers and higher teacher turnover than schools largely serving middle-class students (Allen et al. 2016). This then contributes to their relatively poor exam results, and to middle-class parents choosing other schools.

Parents list schools they would like their child to attend, with around 90% achieving their first choice of primary school and 80% first choice of secondary (DfE 2019d). The characteristics of the pupil intake are mainly determined through school admissions policies (Burgess et al. 2020). Thus the intake of a school partly reflects the nature of housing around each school; distance is often used as a

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[11] PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment.

[12] In areas with selective schools, the non-selective schools obviously do not have intakes representing the population as a whole.

[13] In the primary sector there is a higher proportion of faith-based schools than in the secondary sector, but fewer academies and free schools. No primary schools are selective and only a handful are single-sex.

[14] Estimates suggest some 10–20% of the difference in educational outcomes is down to the school attended (Burgess et al. 2020).

criterion for admission, so that a school in an area of expensive housing will have more pupils from middle-class families. But school intakes do not necessarily match the socioeconomic characteristics of their catchment areas. Cullinane et al. (2017) found that the secondary schools with the best exam results had fewer disadvantaged pupils than would be expected from their catchment areas, suggesting that they were using their admissions criteria to select more affluent pupils who might be expected to achieve better.[15] However, teachers are generally unaware of this; Cullinane (2020) showed that a majority of those in the most socially selective schools believe their intake has the same or higher levels of disadvantaged pupils than the neighbourhood.

Our survey showed that middle-class parents were more likely than working-class parents to collect a range of information to inform their school choices; a higher percentage from the middle classes used each of the sources of information we listed. Having selected a preferred school, the next step is to ensure that the child gains a place. It is widely accepted that parents use a variety of strategies ranging from those that are legal (albeit potentially very costly), such as moving into the catchment area of their preferred school, or purchasing tuition to access entry to selective schools; to those that are ethically dubious (such as attending church services for a few months to gain entry to an over-subscribed church school), or possibly illegal (such as using a false address).[16] In our survey, middle-class parents were significantly more likely to say they had used strategies that involved economic capital, such as moving into an area with 'good' schools, or into the catchment area of a specific school, or employing a tutor. Similarly, the repeat survey (Montacute and Cullinane 2018) found that middle-class parents were more likely to appeal against the school allocated, using their social and cultural capital. Class differences were much less marked for strategies that cost nothing, such as attending church specifically to gain access to a religious school.

The market policies offering parents a choice of schools are, then, being exploited by middle-class and more affluent parents who use their resources to gain entry to their chosen schools. Some schools adopt admissions policies to attract middle-class students (who are likely to achieve good test and exam results) because of the importance attached to attainment outcomes by accountability policies (see Chapter 3, Hutchings 2021a).

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[15] This results from the accountability system described in Chapter 3.

[16] In 2009, Harrow Council used the Fraud Act to prosecute a parent who had used a false address, but had to withdraw the case when they were advised that the Act did not apply in such circumstances (BBC News website, 3 July 2009).

## *Success at school*

A key element of the 'glass floor' preventing elite and middle-class children from downward social mobility is to ensure that they have additional help with their school work from parents or private tuition. In our survey, the majority of parents reported that their child was regularly supported with their school work either by family members or by a private tutor. However, a minority reported giving no support from either source; this ranged from 11% of social group A respondents to over 20% of those in social groups C2DE.

Private tuition is most often used to prepare for examinations which impact on a child's future (entrance exams for private or selective schools, public exams at ages 16 and 18). The number of pupils aged 11–16 ever receiving private tuition has risen from 18% in 2005 to 27% in 2019, and those from 'high affluence' households are more likely to have ever received private tuition (34% v. 20% 'low affluence') (The Sutton Trust 2019a). Our survey similarly showed that private tuition was most used by social group A parents, but around 40% of the parents in groups C1, C2, D and E who had *not* provided their children with private tuition said that they would do so if they could afford to. It is worth noting that those who sent their children to fee-paying schools were also the most likely to pay for additional private tuition (47% compared with 20% of state school parents) (Montacute and Cullinane 2018). Similarly, recent data from Teacher Tapp (2019c)[17] showed that 46% of teachers in fee-paying schools have been asked to tutor one of their pupils for extra cash, in comparison with 30% of those in state schools. This indicates how important the affluent middle classes believe it is to use their financial resources to ensure that their children achieve good results.

In our survey, over half the parents in all social groups said that they supported their child with their school work at least once a week – though obviously it is not possible to tell what this support actually involved, or how useful it was to the children. When repeating the survey, Montacute and Cullinane (2018) also asked young people aged 11–16 how often their parents helped them. Responses here were graded by level of household affluence; a higher proportion of those from more affluent household reported receiving any help. This may be because parents who have lower levels of educational attainment are not necessarily able to provide the support that is expected, and that the government expects them to provide (see Chapter 5, Fretwell 2021). Reay (2017) described the efforts made by Josie, a working-class mother who had little success at school herself, to help her son. She was very anxious that he should learn to read, but her anxiety made her get upset and angry. She said she had tried to talk to his teacher:

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[17] Teacher Tapp is an app which allows teachers to share thoughts and opinions by answering three short multiple-choice questions sent to their phones at 3:30 pm each day. They are sent the results, which are also published online. The number of teachers responding to questions on the app is growing. In October 2019 there were almost 5000.

When I went to see his teacher I was pretty upset about Darren not reading, and it may have come across like 'how come Darren's not reading. If you aren't hearing him read what are you doing then?' It may have come across like that but what I meant was can he possibly have some extra time. Can someone here, for God's sake give him some extra reading and let him get on … cos I couldn't really help him. (cited in Reay 2017, p. 70)

The teacher, in an interview with Reay, described Josie as 'far too needy, aggressive and over-emotional' (p. 72). Reay noted that she had interviewed many working-class parents who had failed to gain the support they were seeking.

Jessica McCrory Calarco (2014) found considerable class differences in parents' understandings of how they should relate to the school in her ethnographic research in an elementary school in the USA. Like Lareau, she chose samples which provided a clear contrast between middle- and working-class families. She found that even when their children were struggling with their school work and they themselves were unable to help, working-class parents were very reluctant to approach the teachers. In contrast, the middle-class parents were comfortable and confident in intervening and questioning teachers' judgements about group placements, homework etc. Many of them were also regularly involved in the school as volunteers or supporting parent-teacher organisation events; this gave them an insider status.

Our survey findings about parental involvement with the school were similar. Middle-class parents (and particularly social group A) were more likely than working-class parents to have become a governor, a member of the Parent Teacher Association committee, or a class representative. And, in line with Calarco's findings, middle-class parents were more likely to say they had initiated contact with the school to discuss their children's progress. However, the class differences we found were not as clear-cut as those in her study. About one in five parents in all groups had *not* initiated any contact with the school in the last year (but this was significantly higher in social group D). In social group A, 39% of the parents had contacted the school more than six times, but only 22% of those in group D had done the same. The vast majority of parents of all social groups said that they 'always' attended parents' evenings, but the middle-class parents were more likely to say this, and this difference was more marked when the survey was repeated (Montacute and Cullinane 2018). Over half of each social group said that what they heard at the parents' evening had changed the way they supported their child at home, but middle-class parents (groups ABC1) were more likely to believe that the conversation with teachers had resulted in the teacher changing the way they worked with the child.

Calarco (2011, 2014) has also added detail to Lareau's research in the USA on different styles of upbringing and how they impact on children's behaviour at school. The middle-class parents she interviewed said that they coached their children to use the most effective ways of interacting with their teachers, stressing both the benefits of seeking help and their entitlement to help ('teachers are there to help you'). Working-class parents, in contrast, equated help-seeking with selfishness or laziness, and discouraged it. They encouraged their children to work hard and to try to work their problems out themselves. The effects of these contrasted approaches were apparent in the Calarco's classroom observations. Middle-class children

regularly asked for help, and generally persisted until they were satisfied with the outcome. But the working-class children rarely admitted they were struggling, and so the teachers spent far less time with them. Even when they did seek help, this often involved sitting with a raised hand, whereas the middle-class children would call out to the teacher or get up out of their seats to go and find her.

Finally in this section, I consider the benefits of having books in the home, an objectified form of cultural capital. There is evidence from international studies that the number of books in a young person's home is related to both the number of years of schooling they achieve, and to their literacy, numeracy and IT skills. This effect is independent of other factors such as parents' education, occupation and social class (Evans et al. 2010; Sikora et al. 2019). But inevitably, those with economic capital tend to have more books, so middle-class children are more likely to benefit.

## *Other educational activities*

Our survey showed that middle-class parents were significantly more likely than working-class parents to provide enrichment activities for their children, such as regular out-of-school classes (including sports, music and drama), attending plays and concerts, and museum and gallery visits. However, the differences across social groups were greater for activities that generally cost money (e.g. classes, plays and concerts) and smaller for activities that are free (visiting museums and galleries).

The way in which middle-class parents provide 'educational enrichment' has been well-researched. Lareau (2003) noted this as a key part of middle-class 'concerted cultivation'. Carol Vincent and Stephen Ball (2007, p. 1061), drawing on qualitative research with parents about the range of extra-curricular activities such as learning musical instruments, sports, arts and so on, concluded:

> … enrichment activities are one response to the anxiety and sense of responsibility experienced by middle-class parents as they attempt to 'make up' a middle-class child in a social context where reproduction appears uncertain.

## *Go to the right university*

Parents can support their children's higher education in various ways: providing advice about applications, financial support, and in some instances, on-going academic support. Our original survey did not ask about destinations after leaving school, but when it was repeated, parents were asked how confident they felt advising their children about applying to go to university or to do a degree-level apprenticeship. The proportion of young people going to university whose parents did not do so has increased (50% in 2015/16, HEFCE 2017). And the information needed by applicants is increasingly complex (Hutchings 2003b; Apps and Christie 2018). The survey showed a clear class gradient with 48% of those in social group A saying

they felt very confident compared with just 21% in social group D. When asked about degree-level apprenticeships there were also class differences, but these were less marked; in particular, the middle-class groups (ABC1) were much less confident offering advice about apprenticeships than they were about university (Montacute and Cullinane 2018).

Inevitably some working-class young people rule out the idea of going to any university because of the costs involved. Loans are available to cover tuition and living costs (up to about £18,000 per year in total), but many working-class students are deterred by the amount of debt they will build up. A survey in 2018 found that on average, parents of those currently at university are contributing £360 per month (*Which* 2018). For a more detailed discussion of student finance see Chapter 6 (Minty 2021).

## *Get the right job*

Entry to employment was outside the scope of our research but has been investigated by others. The Sutton Trust conducted a survey of recent graduates (Cullinane and Montacute 2018). They found that almost half of graduates under age 24 have done an internship to gain experience in their preferred field and make contacts that could help them get a job. Internships are not all advertised and in some sectors such as finance and law, they depend on personal contact, resulting in most opportunities going to middle-class graduates. Unpaid internships are an ongoing concern both because of their doubtful legality and because they clearly favour those with financial resources. A quarter of graduates had undertaken at least one unpaid internship: half of these lasted more than four weeks, and a tenth were over six months. The cost to the young people has been estimated as a minimum of £1100 a month in London, and £885 a month in Manchester, clearly favouring those from more affluent families.

The 'glass floor' may be created largely by parents doing their best for their children, but is also maintained by a wider range of people. Friedman and Laurison (2019) reported that many middle-class employers give preference to middle-class young people; those from working-class backgrounds are less likely to gain employment in elite occupations, and those who do are paid less than those from middle-class backgrounds, as shown earlier. They found a number of explanations for this. One criterion used to select and support new entrants was the extent to which they 'fitted'. For example, in financial jobs in the City, 'polish' was emphasised. In contrast, in television there was an emphasis on informality – but this had to be the 'right' informality, the right kind of trainers, the right style of rather ironic humour. Support also came from above; senior leaders identified junior protégés and were able to help fast-track their careers; these sponsor relationships were, Friedman and Laurison argued, almost always forged through a sense of class-cultural affinity. Talent, individual skill and ability do exist, Friedman and Laurison accepted, but their concern was that the ways that 'merit' is identified constitute a 'class ceiling'.

## *Summary: how the middle classes secure advantage*

This section has identified ways in which middle-class parents try to ensure their children's educational success, and prevent them from falling through 'the glass floor', and ways in which middle-class young people are privileged in seeking employment, creating a 'glass ceiling' for their working-class counterparts. Middle-class success involves deploying all Bourdieu's capitals. Economic capital is crucial; it enables parents to choose private schools, employ tutors, pay for a wide range of out of school enrichment activities and support children through university and unpaid internships. Social capital ('having the right connections' in Hopkins' analysis) is useful at all stages of a child's education, but has a particular role in accessing work experience, internships and employment, and in career development. All the forms of cultural capital are important – the parent's own education, the books they have in their homes, and perhaps most importantly that sense of confidence and entitlement that enables them to intervene effectively in their children's schools, and to teach their children to demand the help they need.

While our survey consistently showed a gradient by social groups, with group A the most likely to report using strategies that potentially advantaged their children, we also identified a small group of parents who were particularly active in this way. We referred to them as 'hyper-choosers' because they made use of a large number of different information sources in choosing schools. They were also the most likely to take action (such as moving house or employing a tutor) to ensure their child could gain entry to their chosen school; to regularly support their child with their school work; to take on roles such as parent governor; to attend parents' evenings and to initiate contact with the school; and to pay for their child to undertake out-of-school activities. The 2018 survey showed that this group also tended to have higher incomes.

But our research was not designed to focus simply on the success of the middle classes; it was also designed to explore whether the working-class parents employed similar strategies, or would do so if they had the money. It is important to recognise that the data does not suggest a clear-cut difference between middle-class and working-class strategies in the way that has been suggested in some research that has contrasted middle-class and working-class samples. Rather, it shows that similar strategies are adopted by some parents right across the social spectrum, but that more middle-class parents use them. Economic inequalities were at the heart of many of the differences we found – for example, in the use of private schools and private tuition, and the range of out-of-school classes and other enrichment activities undertaken. As Reay (2017) asserted, working-class parents do not lack aspiration, they lack money, time or the levels of education needed to effectively support their children.[18] Obviously no one would want to prevent middle-class parents from providing educational support, but it is crucial to ensure that working-class parents

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[18] David Cameron (Prime Minister 2010–2017) argued that low aspirations were a key factor in limiting social mobility (Merrick 2013).

also have opportunities to achieve their aspirations for their children. In the next section we consider policies that might help with this.

## Discussion: inequality, social mobility, policy and research

As I showed earlier in the chapter, governments have consistently identified education as a key way of creating social mobility by offering opportunities to all, and narrowing attainment gaps between disadvantaged and other pupils. In this section I review some current education policies which are designed to do this. I then consider how other educational policies impact in these areas, and identify potential ways of changing these to promote greater equality, as well as potential actions not in education. Finally I discuss how researchers might make a more effective contribution.

### *Current policies to narrow the gap and promote social mobility*

Perhaps the most important current policy to narrow the attainment gap is the Pupil Premium, introduced in 2011 to provide schools with extra funding for disadvantaged pupils. Schools have to report spending plans and outcomes on their websites and are accountable to Ofsted for use of the funding. This is a redistributive policy and is widely welcomed by headteachers, who see it as a positive policy; a Sutton Trust poll (2019b) found just over half believe it is contributing to closing attainment gaps in their schools. However, while nationally gaps have narrowed in primary schools, this has been less marked in secondary schools. It is unclear how much this relates to Pupil Premium funding; the Sutton Trust poll found that more than a quarter of secondary schools were using the funding to plug gaps elsewhere in their budgets; almost 70% reported that as a result of budget cuts they had had to reduce staff numbers. One might argue that the Pupil Premium has prevented attainment gaps from increasing in a period of austerity. While it is generally seen as a positive policy, concerns have been expressed about limitations both of the way in which disadvantage is defined and the way in which gaps are calculated from the average attainment of two groups (Allen 2018; Gorard 2018). Becky Allen (2018) also argues that reporting requirements drive short-term, interventionist behaviour which does not bring about long-term change; future attainment outcomes may shed light on this.

   A second key government strategy to narrow the attainment gap is the reform to exams taken at age 16. There is now an expectation that the vast majority of pupils, including those who are disadvantaged, will take academic subjects including English, maths, a science, history or geography and a modern foreign language (comprising the English Baccalaureate) in order to 'allow all pupils to benefit from the knowledge that will open doors' (DfE 2017, p. 16). This has pros and cons. On

the positive side, it means that for the first time, most state school pupils experience the same curriculum to age 16, rather than there being separate pathways catering mainly for middle-class or working-class pupils. The emphasis on taking exams in academic subjects is clearly important in that good passes are required for entry to further and higher education courses and by many employers. Lacking these can limit young people's future options. However, a much lower percentage of disadvantaged pupils achieve the good passes needed, and it can seem as though they are being set up to fail. In addition, while the credentials are required, it is not always the case that the job (or course) actually involves using the skills and knowledge that have been acquired. Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2019, p. 150) argued that 'credentialism can … constitute a serious and unnecessary barrier to social mobility, reinforcing in the labour market the inequalities of opportunity initially arising within the education system.'

A more recent policy designed to improve social mobility involves what is being referred to as cultural capital. Gove, then Secretary of State for Education, argued in 2013, 'The accumulation of cultural capital – the acquisition of knowledge – is the key to social mobility' (Gove 2013d). Similarly, Nick Gibb, the School Standards Minister, claimed:

> Ensuring that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds have the same opportunities as their more affluent peers to benefit from the cultural capital of a stretching and rigorous curriculum is key to addressing the burning injustices in our societies and driving forward social mobility. (2018)

As a result of these ideas, the latest school inspection handbook states that 'inspectors will consider the extent to which schools are equipping pupils with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life' (Ofsted 2019b, para. 178). It is clear that this notion of cultural capital has little to do with the ideas of Bourdieu, discussed earlier in the chapter. Reay has criticised it, saying, 'The key elements of cultural capital are entwined with privileged lifestyles rather than qualities you can separate off and then teach the poor and working classes' (quoted by Mansell 2019). Policy makers have apparently conflated Bourdieu's 'cultural capital' with the notion of 'cultural literacy' put forward by E.D. Hirsch (1987), which proposes that sharing in a national language should also mean knowledge of a canon of ideas, texts and cultural allusions that underpin that language. There are also concerns about the nature of the culture featuring on the curriculum, with its emphasis on the classics and highbrow culture; this does not fit with Savage et al.'s (2015) claim that the nature of the cultural capital that is valued and gives prestige is changing. Nor is the focus only on White British culture appropriate in a multicultural society.

The government publication *Unlocking talent, fulfilling potential* (DfE 2017) listed a number of other policies intended to create social mobility, but many of these are short-term (such as the creation of Opportunity Areas where disadvantage is most entrenched), or are pilots for possible later roll out (for example, home-learning programmes to support early language development). Education in the early years is rightly prioritised, but a substantial amount of funding is allocated to

child care, and while this may enable parents to work, limited evidence is put forward that this will promote social mobility (House of Commons Treasury Committee 2018). High quality vocational courses for post-16s (T-levels) are being introduced from September 2020. The intention is that these should have equal status with A level courses.

There are then a number of strategies in place to narrow attainment gaps. The discussion above shows that they have limitations – but a greater problem is perhaps that there are policies in education and other areas which act to widen the gaps, discussed below.

## *Other education policies that impact in this area*

Some current education policies have the effect of widening attainment gaps relating to class and economic disadvantage. Only a few can be mentioned here. As shown earlier in this chapter, and discussed more fully in Chapter 5 (Fretwell 2021), current parental involvement policies tend to 'out-source' much of the responsibility for children's educational progress to parents, and this inevitably strengthens inequality because some parents do not have either the education or the time needed to play their part. One way of changing this could be to ensure that all 'homework' is undertaken in school with teachers on hand, rather than at home where the quality of support is variable. The removal of the coursework component in public examinations created a fairer exam system, because there is no doubt that many middle-class parents made substantial contributions; however, coursework was valuable in assessing a wider range of skills than traditional exams, and the removal of coursework represents a further narrowing of children's educational experiences (McLynn 2005; Crisp 2008). What is needed are strategies that widen the curriculum to include the elements that coursework was designed to assess (research skills, critical thinking, independent learning etc.) but do so without involving parents.

Chapter 3 (Hutchings 2021a) showed the way in which current accountability policies work against schools serving disadvantaged pupils. The DfE have acknowledged this (2018a), but it is unclear as yet whether changes to the Ofsted inspection framework will prevent such schools being disproportionately judged to require improvement or be inadequate. The extent of socioeconomic segregation of schools and its damaging effects were also discussed in Chapter 3. The most segregated patterns are in areas where there are selective (grammar) schools; they should be replaced with a truly comprehensive system. But even in other areas there is still segregation relating to market policies offering parental choice, and to the creation of many different types of schools, some of which have more prestige than others. To reduce levels of inequality and raise overall attainment, admissions policies could be radically changed, introducing banding by ability (with each school taking an equal share of each band) or using a lottery, a strategy that has been introduced in a few areas with mixed success (Gorard 2016; Millar, F. 2017). A related point is the use of setting and streaming. As Reay (2017) pointed out, the experience of

being in the bottom set or stream (or group in a primary school) is a profoundly negative one for pupils. Francis et al. (2017) argued that research evidence on the benefits of mixed-ability teaching has had little impact.

Reay also drew attention to the fact that 'most working-class children and young people experience education as failure' (2017, p. 176). This has been exacerbated by government policies increasing the rigour and challenge of the curriculum and tests. In 2015, 83% of disadvantaged 11-year-olds achieved the expected level in national tests, whereas after the revisions, in 2016 only 39% did so (DfE 2015b, 2016).[19] In order to learn effectively, children need to have self-confidence and willingness to tackle challenges. The current system can destroy these characteristics with its emphasis on failure. This suggests that what is really needed is a complete change of system. At present the English education system seems designed to grade pupils in preparation for entry to work. Similarly, Kenneth Saltman (2014) suggested that some trends in education in the USA are about 'teaching children to channel the stress produced by poverty by learning how to endure drudgery for potential opportunities in capitalist labor markets' (p. 51) – remarks very similar to those of Andrew Ure in 1861, quoted at the start of this chapter. It is important that the wider purposes of education are recognised, and that schools support children and young people from all classes in developing a sense of personal worth and self-confidence.

One element of this would be to ensure that the teaching styles used enable children to develop a wide range of skills such as ability to cooperate and negotiate. The current emphasis on a knowledge-based curriculum has been criticised by Andreas Schleicher of the OECD, the lead PISA expert. He said England's school system is losing ground to the Far East because of an emphasis on rote-learning. In contrast, countries like China[20] had embraced a skills-based approach to education (Hazell 2018). Similarly, McInerney's (2013) analysis of PISA data discussed earlier in the showed that such strategies are used in countries that do well in PISA tests as well as in private schools in this country. State school pupils are disadvantaged in this respect. But Lareau's (2003) research suggests that those from middle-class families may learn cooperation and negotiation skills at home, whereas those from working-class families are less likely to.

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[19] The changes also impacted on more advantaged students, reducing pass rates. However, the decrease in percentage of pupils achieving the expected level was 12 percentage points greater for disadvantaged pupils than for other pupils.

[20] This may apply only to those areas of China entered in the PISA tests – Shanghai for example. Those who have visited Chinese schools recently do not all support Schleicher and McInerney's analyses.

## *Policies outside education*

Researchers have argued that if there is a real desire to reduce inequality or to create social mobility, the main policies that are needed lie outside education. A key step is to use fiscal policies to reduce economic inequality. Elliot Major and Machin (2018) suggest that it is time for the government to act, by, for example, increasing inheritance tax and closing tax-loopholes. At the other end of the scale, benefits could be increased. Clearly it is not helpful to have benefits at a level that could discourage some people from working – but it is also not helpful to have them so low that people cannot afford to feed their children properly, as is currently the case with a proliferation of food banks. The 2020 increase in the National Living wage (the official adult minimum wage) is welcome (BBC 2019), but the government also needs to ensure that businesses are able to pay this and the increase does not result in job losses.

Reducing the size of the gap between the richest and the poorest, it is argued, would also increase social mobility (Elliot Major and Machin 2018). This is partly because when inequality is high, the OECD (2014) has shown that the people at the bottom do not invest in developing education and skills. This relates both to a lack of stability and security (created, for example, by zero-hours contracts) and to limited opportunities for progression.[21]

Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2019) highlighted the need to create more higher-level jobs so that the middle classes can continue to expand (or at least, do not shrink). This would increase absolute mobility. They contest the idea put forward by then Prime Minister Gordon Brown that creating an educated workforce would pull in jobs. He claimed:

> The old belief that there were limited numbers of jobs at the top, and then only for a well-educated elite, thus imposing a limit to the ambitions of the many, is now simply wrong. In a globally competitive national economy, there will be almost no limits to aspirations for upward mobility. Globalisation dictates that the nations that succeed will be those that bring out the best in people and their potential. (2008)

Bukodi and Goldthorpe argued that Britain must be at a disadvantage in comparison with the newly industrialised nations in Asia where labour, at all levels, is much cheaper. The danger here is that current policies may be creating an over-qualified workforce; this is suggested by the number of graduates working in areas that do not need their skills (DfE 2018d).[22] They therefore argued for a renewal of manufacturing, development of the national science and technology base, and a development of the welfare state.

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[21] Almost 900,000 people were recorded as being on zero-hours contracts in 2019 (Office for National Statistics 2019).

[22] In 2018, only 57% of graduate 21–30-year-olds were in high-skilled employment, 4.3 percentage points lower than ten years earlier. The DfE noted, 'this fall provides some indication that since 2008 young graduates have increasingly found employment in medium/low-skill roles, potentially due to the absence of high-skill opportunities' (2018d).

## *The role of research*

One of the difficulties facing policy makers is that issues relating to economic and class inequality and social mobility are not straightforward to research, and researchers have come up with findings that appear contradictory or have been disputed. This makes it difficult to make sense of the issues – and this is particularly worrying when the research is in an area which is a focus for policy makers.

One instance of contradictory findings has been the conflicting evidence about whether social mobility is particularly low in the UK. It would be helpful if researchers ensured that they at least mention research which is offering different views, so that readers can investigate alternative perspectives. But Elliot Major and Machin (2018) referred to only the aspects of Goldthorpe's findings which matched their own, and this is unhelpful because it promotes their findings as the 'only' story.

An example of disputed findings is Leon Feinstein's (2003) graph indicating that some children from working-class backgrounds who scored well on cognitive tests at 22 months were subsequently overtaken by those from middle-class or wealthy backgrounds who initially scored much lower. The graph was taken up by politicians and the interpretations put on it went beyond the data presented. It was also criticised on statistical grounds (e.g. by John Jerrim and Anna Vignoles 2011a). However, as Ruth Lupton (2015) pointed out, problems arose because the title and abstract of Jerrim and Vignoles' critique were in somewhat alarmist language, signalling 'dramatically different results' and 'serious methodological problems' (p. 3). This was interpreted by some as indicating that Feinstein's paper was entirely incorrect (which a subsequent newspaper article makes clear was not the intention, Jerrim and Vignoles 2011b). Jerrim and Vignoles' paper was then used by right-wing commentators to critique social mobility policies and argue that differences in outcomes are largely genetically determined (e.g. Saunders 2012).

Much of the research about inequalities and social mobility is quantitative. Quantitative researchers have a particular style of writing based in their statistical backgrounds (as Lupton put it, 'dense statistical text which few people have the training to understand,' 2015, p. 371), and it is not always clear to a non-statistician exactly what the findings mean in real life. It might be helpful to have all quantitative papers reviewed by non-statisticians as well as statisticians, to ensure that the findings are presented in a way that can be understood by a wide audience. It would also be helpful if the limitations of specific research studies were clearly set out. This may be particularly important in quantitative research where the use of numbers gives an impression of clarity and precision which tends to appeal to policy makers. The limitations of methods and data are often in the body of the paper, but rarely feature in the summaries that policy makers are likely to read.

Lupton (2015) also argued that the emphasis on 'impact' in current research assessment arrangements in the UK is encouraging disciplinary specialists to:

> find meaningful policy implications to add on to their scholarly articles in order to further careers and promote university reputations, although most operate without detailed knowl-

edge of the policies upon which they are commenting or the wider evidence base that should inform these. (p. 373)

She suggested that there should be a place for papers that do not have policy implications. But if we do expect academics to operate as policy experts then it will be important to find 'better ways of creating dialogue between researchers … and ways to synthesise and communicate findings across disciplines' (p. 373).

It is apparent that policy makers tend to rely on a narrow range of research sources. Chapter 3 (Hutchings 2021a) discussed David Laws' experience of rarely being provided with any research by civil servants when he was a Minister in the Department for Education. An example of limited use of research findings is the briefing prepared for a parliamentary debate on inequality and social mobility; it included Blanden and colleagues' conclusion that social mobility in Britain is low, but did not mention the conflicting evidence coming from Goldthorpe and colleagues set out earlier in this chapter. It is undoubtedly the case that some organisations (and particularly think tanks and foundations) are better at ensuring that their research achieves publicity and is brought to the attention of politicians. Academics should perhaps learn from them. But it may be a concern that their research does not undergo a process of peer review. Lupton noted that quantitative research is more likely to be taken up by policy makers, and identifies a need for the synthesis of small-scale qualitative studies 'so that policy-makers can see what they collectively add up to' (2015, p. 373).

Thus researchers perhaps need to make greater efforts to present their findings in accessible ways. But policy makers and those who brief them should explore a wider range of research, and resist the temptations to latch onto, and exaggerate, findings from a single source of evidence (see Chapter 3, Hutchings 2021a). Evidence-based policies should draw on a range of evidence.

## The public good

Finally I return to the notion of the public good. This chapter has argued that politicians see increasing social mobility and creating a meritocracy as a public good. While some of their policies (particularly in education) are aimed at doing this, this chapter has identified many other strategies that they could put in place. It has also argued that the public good would be better served by reducing inequality.

This is not an easy task: I have shown that the middle classes and elite work hard to ensure that their children achieve educational success and good jobs, and that this creates a 'glass floor' to prevent their downward social mobility. This in turn limits the chances of the rest of the population to be upwardly mobile. It is perhaps inevitable that in a capitalist economy there will continue to be some inequality in both class and income – but the government could do a great deal to reduce the level.

But as well as this, a priority must be to increase the well-being of the population. The 2018 PISA results showed that pupils in England were, on average, less

satisfied with their lives than pupils in any other European country or the USA, and that disadvantaged students were significantly less likely to say they were satisfied than their more advantaged peers (OECD 2019b). The English high-pressure education system in which many children, and particularly those who are disadvantaged, experience only failure must be contributing to these low levels of satisfaction. Children and young people need to experience the joy of learning, get a sense of achievement from acquiring and using new skills, and learn to live with others, communicating, negotiating, cooperating and collaborating. They need to be able to set and work towards their own goals and to have a part in determining their own futures. We should not tolerate a society in which working-class lives are dogged by poverty and failure.

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# Chapter 8
# In pursuit of worldly justice in Early Childhood Education: bringing critique and creation into productive partnership for the public good

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**Jayne Osgood** (iD)

**Abstract**  This chapter attends to a critical analysis of the ways in which the early childhood education workforce in England experiences a series of fundamental social injustices. Through a decade or more of research framed by a concern with social justice the ways in which government policy and therefore public discourse frames the workforce has been addressed. This body of research revealed that the workforce is presented as holding a contradictory position: as both saviour of society and shambolic. This troubling construction, which continues to persist, has provided the justification for endless national strategic plans and workforce remodelling projects. The ECE has undergone unprecedented reform for over 20 years and during that time structural injustices (i.e. low status, poor pay and unfavourable working conditions) persist. However, this highly gendered and classed workforce maintains its commitment to the youngest children (their families and local communities), and it is through increased education that this workforce has found creative ways in which to circumvent and rework neoliberal apparatuses (curriculum diktats, inspection regimes and other accountability measures) to ensure that it contributes to the public good through practices of worldly justice.

## Introduction

The early childhood[1] workforce represents an interesting conundrum to policy makers, parents and the general public more broadly. Views that are held about the workforce directly relate to the societal value that is placed on very young children.

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[1] In the UK early childhood education and care is defined as birth to five with formal school beginning at age 5. However, some schools are now taking children as young as 2 into nursery classes.

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The infamous quote, often attributed to Ignatius Loyola – *'Give me a child until he is seven and I will show you the man'* – signals something of the way in which early childhood is understood: as preparation for a later, more significant, more important and more valued stage of life. All the time that early childhood as a life stage is viewed as a precursor to something bigger, and all the time that early childhood is generally underestimated, so too will its workforce. This has been a preoccupation to many researching the field of early childhood, myself included, who want to argue for another conceptualisation of the child and hence argue for the importance of the early childhood workforce to the lives of very young children, and the public good more generally.

The research that I undertook with colleagues at the Institute for Policy Studies in Education (IPSE) between 2002 and 2015 sought to address the ways in which the early childhood workforce in England was subjected to endless policy reform that altered the field in significant and long-lasting ways. Whilst the reforms were framed by claims to want to address an apparent 'crisis' by introducing new qualifications and regimes of accountability and inspection; fundamental social injustices experienced by the workforce nevertheless remained (and still remain) unaddressed. The status attached to working with very young children remains low, the early childhood workforce continues to be denigrated (educators report being treated as little more than 'glorified babysitters' and 'bum wipers' Osgood 2012; Osgood et al. 2017). None of the reforms during this period meaningfully addressed structural issues associated with the sector such as poor pay, unfavourable working conditions, and a continued lack of parity with school teachers (despite increasing qualification levels across the sector). A number of important factors make the continuation of these social injustices possible, namely the gendered nature of the work, the gendered composition of the workforce, and the fragmented nature of the field as an employment sector. Yet these social injustices were spared the attention of mainstream research in the field. It was through a series of publications that some uncomfortable truths about the workforce were launched into the world as a means to open up debate and begin to tackle social injustices experienced by the workforce. Through journal articles (Osgood 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2010) and a monograph (Osgood 2012) I publicised the fact that Early Childhood Education (ECE) is typically work undertaken by women, from working-class backgrounds, the majority of whom are employed in private sector provision with few opportunities to connect with others in the field, or to have a trade union or professional body to defend and advocate for them. Whilst there was an established and growing body of research about the 'feminised' nature of ECE (Elfer 1994; Penn and McQuail 1996; Cameron et al. 1999) and a lively debate about the need to bring more men into childcare (Owen et al. 1998), there was much less attention to the classed nature of the work and the fact that young, working-class girls were actively being prepared for working-class jobs (i.e. childcare or hairdressing) (see Osgood et al. 2006).

The prevailing research into the early childhood workforce, for many years has tended to be narrowly concerned with the identification of best practice, and measurement of effectiveness (e.g. Sylva et al. 2004) in a quest to pursue an idealised model of ECE in the name of improved standards and better outcomes for children

(i.e. school readiness). This preoccupation in ECE research, though, fails to engage with the workforce as a group of marginalised women striving to keep the child at the centre of their practice, whilst constantly having to withstand endless judgment and critique of their chosen profession. The research undertaken within IPSE sought to address this imbalance and to foreground the importance for research designed to unearth and trouble the endemic social injustices embedded within education policy and workforce reform. It was through consistently placing a critical social justice lens on the ECE workforce that new knowledge and ways of contemplating how ECE makes a difference in the world could be pursued.

## The policy context

Early Childhood Education services in England have received unprecedented attention, resources and initiatives for over 20 years. *Meeting the childcare challenge* (DfEE et al. 1998) marked the beginning of a political preoccupation with the Early Years workforce, which was regarded as a means to secure national economic prosperity (by enabling more parents to work), and as a means to prepare the child of today to become the worthy citizen of tomorrow. Under the New Labour government (1997–2010) educational provision was massively expanded so that ECE became available to all 3 and 4 year-olds. Since 1997 an unparalleled raft of initiatives, developments and policies have been introduced with a shared agenda to expand ECE provision, and to ensure that it is affordable, high quality and accessible. This agenda continued under successive governments as evidenced in a series of five- and ten-year strategies which variously promised 'choice for parents' and 'best starts for children'. This sustained policy reform was framed around an urgent need to heighten 'professionalism' and to 'raise standards'. This reform agenda continues to reshape the field of ECE and alongside the reforms is lively debate, much of which is fuelled by questions surrounding the notion of professionalism that is being promoted and its incongruence with an underfunded, over regulated and demoralised workforce (Elwick et al. 2018).

The workforce then, has been the subject of on-going reform and restructuring, persistently framed by a rhetoric of 'raising quality' which infers that quality is in some sense always lacking. The workforce is persistently framed as deficient and therefore in need of constant reform. Key to raising quality have been expectations for standardisation, transparency and accountability which are achieved through quality assurance measures, curriculum frameworks and inspection regimes. The need to raise quality through heightened professionalism has been framed in particular ways through dominant discourses and rests upon a socially constructed perennial 'crisis' in the early years, which provides justification to tirelessly tinker with the ECE workforce. The twin concepts are inextricably entangled since the logic follows that 'quality' ECE relies upon a well-qualified and 'professional' workforce, but this linear and rational logic has been extensively troubled (e.g. see

Osgood and Giugni 2016) and the concept and pursuit of quality in ECE remains contested (Jones et al. 2016).

## Critical discourse analysis of policy

This policy landscape, whilst seemingly well-intentioned – *Who wouldn't want more and better early years provision? Surely this can only mean that the very youngest of children are finally gaining the recognition they deserve, and therefore the workforce is also recognised as valued and valuable?* – was also deeply troubling, especially when taken from a social justice perspective. Attempts to problematise the seemingly common-sense messages being conveyed in government policy required a project of critical discourse analysis. Through several publications (Osgood 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2010, 2012), government policy texts were subjected to Foucauldian inspired, feminist post-structuralist analysis which involved deconstructing, dismantling, problematising and tracing the political intentions underpinning the apparently benign rhetoric about wanting to raise quality and professionalise the workforce in times of perennial crisis. When government policy is understood as both text and discourse it becomes possible to conceive of policy makers seeking a 'correct reading' or the promotion of certain discursive truths. Within government policy it is possible to trace the ways in which the workforce has been constructed in contradictory ways: as the salvation of society *and* as shambolic/disordered. Through policy discourses, governments orchestrate a particular discursive landscape, one that in the case of ECE, heralds the workforce as central to the economic prosperity of the nation. The nursery worker becomes constructed as the guardian of the nation's children, and her capacity to protect, nurture and educate them in the *right* ways becomes all-important in the government vision for the nation state:

> Investment in learning in the 21st century is the equivalent of investment in machinery and technical innovation that was essential tin the first industrial revolution. Then it was physical capital, now it is human capital. … We know that children who benefit from nursery education – especially from disadvantaged backgrounds – are more likely to succeed in primary school. … Our aim is that all children should begin school with a head start in literacy, numeracy and behaviour, ready to learn and make the most of primary education. (DfEE 1997, pp. 14–16)

But the nursery worker has more than just the success of the nation state to deliver. She also becomes the means by which (other) women can become full and active citizens through participation in the paid labour market. A great deal rests upon her metaphorical shoulders – she can enable parents to work, thereby ensuring national economic prosperity *and* she can cultivate children to become the right sorts of citizens of the future to safeguard long-term economic well-being. Whilst elevating the ECE workforce to these heady heights, government policy also makes clear that ECE is a career for working-class women, to enable middle-class parents to work. So, there is an implicit recognition that a career in ECE is both gendered

and classed. Furthermore, the nursery worker is constantly called into question for her lack of skills and professionalism:

> Our goal must be to make working with children an attractive, high status career, and to develop a *more* skilled, flexible workforce … *improve* the skills and effectiveness of the workforce. (DfES 2003, p. 10, my emphasis)

Through these projects of critical deconstruction of policy discourses, I was able to demonstrate that governments carefully craft and cultivate particular 'truths' designed to have specific effects. Governments make political ambitions and goals for ECE appear logical, necessary and founded upon sound research evidence. However, I argue that the ways in which the workforce is fabricated through text are both deliberate and intentional. The deficit discourses that can be identified throughout policy texts, and which are then detectable in public discourse, promote particular discursive truths or persuasive fictions about the (lack of) professionalism amongst nursery workers and the urgent need to tackle the 'crisis'. These persistent deficit discourses secure the prominence of the workforce in government policy *and* act to divert attention from the structural disadvantages of working in the sector. Working-class women engaged in caring occupations are readily exploited. In order to attain approval in public discourse, working-class women invest in a construction of the 'caring self' and in doing so achieve a level of ontological security that would otherwise be denied on account of their classed and gendered identities. Furthermore, the rescue from 'neglect' that policy discourses promise can be seductive. For members of the ECE workforce, finding themselves centre stage in policy terms, coupled with the rate and pace of reform to their working practices, diverts attention from the fact that they are conforming to a narrow version of professionalism (one that values technical competence over critical reflection). It was only through excavating and dismantling policy texts through a social justice lens that it became evident how policy discourses work (in subtle yet powerful ways) to confer particular subjectivities upon members of a workforce.

## Hearing the stories of the subaltern

Alongside critical analysis of policy discourses, to expose the ways in which social injustices are normalised and further reinforced through workforce reform agendas, was a need to create opportunities to hear the stories of members of the workforce. Whilst a great deal of research in ECE has been undertaken with leaders and managers there was a noticeable absence of the voices of members of the frontline workforce, endearingly referred to as 'the girls' typically found 'on the floor' engaged in the day-to-day work of educating, caring and nurturing young children. As a feminist researcher I was inspired to create space to hear the narratives of these marginalised women who were the subject of so much policy attention. In 2003, I began research in three central London nurseries (a Local Authority nursery, a Private Day nursery, and a voluntary sector community nursery). The study aimed to explore

nursery worker constructions of 'being professional/doing professionalism' and specifically to examine the ways in which nursery workers negotiate the intersection of a professional identity with their classed, gendered, 'raced' identities. I wanted to compare and contrast the ways in which public discourses position nursery workers, and to examine the extent to which practitioners resist and draw upon these public discourses to negotiate their sense of professionalism. The ultimate aim of this feminist, post-structuralist study was to present an alternative account to that offered and sustained through hegemonic public discourses. I privileged certain discursive 'truths' over others to achieve the emancipatory goal of the project by offering insights into the marginalised lives of nursery workers.

Through life history interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and ethnographic observations over an 18-month period, I was able to gather rich, multi-layered accounts of 'professionalism' as it manifested in the everyday lives of a group of (principally working-class) women making sense of the endless demands made of them to do their work in more professional, accountable, transparent ways. This research culminated in a book (Osgood 2012) and numerous presentations to both national and international audiences. It has been adopted to the reading lists of many undergraduate and postgraduate programmes from Oslo to Australia; and from Chile to China, reaching many other countries in between. This politically motivated study resonates in other contexts because it talks an alternative 'truth' to power. It holds governments to account, and it exposes the ways in which discourses come to have currency, how they circulate and with what effects. It creates a platform from which difficult debates about social injustices as they directly affect an entire workforce can find expression. This is research that is intended to make known the contribution that this workforce makes, the sacrifices made and the means by which it is possible to pursue other ways in which to be professional. The study concluded by identifying a series of counter discourses from within the workforce that promoted the idea of the 'critically reflexive emotional professional' over the 'competent technician' that is so readily promoted in government policy and related apparatuses.

## Professionalism in ECE: critique

My work on professionalism has contributed to complicating debates (Osgood 2004, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2008, 2010, 2012) by identifying and troubling how social injustices are created and sustained in the ECE workforce. By unearthing and challenging the significant implications of hegemonic framings of professionalism (based on White, middle-class normative ideas about what professionalism should be) for a principally working-class and female workforce, my research holds the potential to realise its political ambitions to unsettle received wisdom and to provide the foundation for a workforce to agitate and resist. As my research attests, for working-class women working in 'caring' roles what it takes to do the job well sits outside dominant ideas about what it is to be 'professional'. I was concerned to

investigate how particular professional identities were conferred upon early years workers and what this meant for their sense of self and their ontological securities in undertaking work with young children for the public good. I argued that professional identities are generated from the ways in which human subjects (nursery workers) are positioned and self-position within discourses. Through projects of critique and deconstruction, I attended to the ways in which policy discourses, maternal discourses and media discourses work to position the early childhood education workforce in particular ways.

I was at pains to stress the significance of gender and social class and how these intersecting subjectivities make professional identities more or less possible for different members of the early childhood workforce dependent upon social context:

> Professionalism is a performance that is shaped and determined by powerful actors, so that it manifests in myriad ways, and is dependent on context and on recognition by an audience. Therefore, contextual specificity is crucial to understanding professional identities. (Osgood 2010, p. 233)

## The pursuit of professionalism continues …

I was met with a mixture of trepidation and joy when undertaking research with the same workforce nearly a decade later. What, if anything, might have changed? Supported by a team of researchers, I was commissioned to undertake a study (Osgood et al. 2017) designed to investigate the extent to which two newly introduced early years qualifications (Early Years Educator; and Early Years Teacher) had contributed to raising 'quality' in the sector. These two new qualifications were introduced as a result of *The Nutbrown Review* (Nutbrown 2012). Whilst my intention is not to revisit the problems and tensions that are generated by yet more on-going reviews and reforms to the workforce, what this study into new qualifications revealed was a desperately familiar story. Despite successive policies and on-going workforce reform, the contemporary early years workforce, and the related debates about professionalism and quality, look alarmingly similar to those circulating over a decade ago. Whilst there have undoubtedly been significant gains in respect to the qualification levels across the sector, this appears quite fragile when the workforce remains underpaid and undervalued. When additional demands are made of an already overstretched workforce, we see recruitment and retention issues escalate (NDNA 2016). This more recent research reveals that the workforce continues to suffer a lack of parity with schoolteachers, and is blighted by under-funding, a confused qualification landscape, divisions across the sector, and a persistently gendered workforce that continues to feel marginalised and devalued. The early years workforce continues to be positioned within policy and public discourse as deficient and therefore in need of further reform.

However, in the throes of undertaking this research it became clear that some members of the workforce have a much clearer sense of how they are positioned within government policy discourses, and how related apparatuses – such as

inspection regimes, accountability frameworks, curriculum directives – are designed to produce a certain (narrow) form of professionalism (the competent technician raises her neoliberal head once more). There is a critical reflexivity and a deep investment in pushing against normative and standardised ways in which to demonstrate 'quality'. So, it appears that my earlier attempts to understand professionalism, as produced through discourse, presented important opportunities for resistance and subversion based upon the identification of a counter discourse from within. This counter discourse celebrated that which falls outside of hegemonic framings of professionalism, but which is highly valued and foundational to doing the job well. Nearly a decade ago (Osgood 2012), I argued for the centrality of humour, emotion, empathy, compassion, intuition, love and commitment as constituting professionalism from within the ECE sector; and I am heartened to see this is still the case in more recent research (Osgood et al. 2017) despite a never-ending drive to impose another (policy-driven) version of professionalism where such traits have no place. I witnessed these qualities: humour, emotion, empathy, compassion, intuition, love and commitment being actively celebrated and mobilised as a resource, as a means to push back against the relentless policy drive to standardise and regulate. It was also encouraging to find that early years staff are readily engaged in research underpinned by a social justice agenda. At one case study nursery included in the study (Osgood et al. 2017) all staff were required to engage in research on their practice; to question received wisdom about how children learn; to question why they practice the way that they do; to deliberate all aspects of their work including how they are framed in policy; and to grapple with the complexities of working with young children, their families and diverse local communities. There was strong evidence of the 'critically reflexive emotional professional' I had argued for in 2012. As a long-serving member of the staff team noted:

> In a nutshell we don't use the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum to guide our practice. We take elements from our practice to satisfy key parts of the EYFS that we need to do. But it is linking it with conversations we have with each other. … We've always had outstanding Ofsted inspections but that is down to things like the teaching team, the practice, the environment and our social skills. When they (Ofsted) come in, they can talk to anyone in the teaching team about how we do this or that; and it's all there. They go and talk to the practitioners and they can see they are spending time with the children but it's also being able to communicate and articulate what we're doing, why we're doing it the way that we do, what is important to us; and that it is all there. (Osgood et al. 2017, p. 64)

This quote illustrates a degree of professional confidence that is shared amongst the staff team to resist being dictated by curriculum frameworks and inspection regimes. It appears that demands for criticality and reflection embedded in university programmes are directly translating to the mobilisation of a social justice agenda within ECE settings. The ECE educators that pursued undergraduate degrees and Masters degrees (in Osgood et al. 2017) felt that they had developed deeper knowledge and the capacity to critique and problematise all aspects of their work. Many recounted how postgraduate study, in particular, had enabled them to critically assess workforce reform and to understand that the early years as a sector is crafted and refashioned by successive governments to satisfy political imperatives

rather than necessarily stemming from a concern for children to flourish from high quality early years experiences. Higher levels of study also instilled greater professional confidence to critically engage with inspection regimes and curriculum frameworks; it can provide a healthy scepticism and the capacity for deep reflection. Participants went on to stress the importance of a firm connection between early years theory and practice. Although combining study and work was demanding, a number of participants stressed that it is only by working directly with children, colleagues and families whilst studying, that theory comes to life. Most held the view that the theory-practice divide (Lenz Taguchi 2010) is lessening in early childhood practice, especially where routinely engaging in research was encultured into daily practice.

So it appears that the extensive and sustained critique and deconstruction of government policy, media discourses and public perceptions pursued through research framed by a social justice agenda is infiltrating practice; and whilst hegemonic ideas about 'quality' and 'professionalism' remain in place there are nevertheless opportunities that are being seized by the ECE workforce to navigate ways through. This is encouraging and I wonder what happens when another logic is deployed in research and practice? A logic that seeks to reach beyond critique alone and instead makes critique the basis upon which to create other possibilities. This is something that ECE educators are grappling with, as we see in the following quote where an ECE setting is seeking to reconfigure ideas and practices about 'quality':

> We are working on developing a methodology and process through which we can share multiple experiences of people working with a reconfigured understanding of quality. We hope that by sharing practitioners' experiences of working with a view of quality that acknowledges the complexities and entanglements of each individual momentary manifestation of quality, we will help make the discourse and debate about quality more accessible to a broad spectrum of practitioners across multiple settings. (The Red House 2016, p. 138)

## Bringing critique and creation together

A turn to Rosi Braidotti's (2013) promise of the intimate connection between critique and creation offers a potentially rich possibility which is increasingly finding expression in early childhood research. There is a growing field of early childhood enquiry that seeks to bring critique and creation together to explore other, more generative, ways in which to consider contentious issues within early childhood education (Osgood and Guigni 2016; Osgood 2019a, 2019b, 2021b; Osgood and Mohandas in press). This 'turn' in early childhood research is framed by feminist new materialist philosophies, theories and methods that invite researchers (and practitioners) to grapple with what this connection offers to imagine sustainable alternatives which go beyond de-construction and open up possibilities for an ethics of (re-)affirmation.

This chapter therefore reaches towards an open-ended but hopeful conclusion as a means to contemplate what feminist new materialist encounters (Strom et al.

2019) with professionalism might produce. Asking a series of questions concerned with creation might take investigations in other, potentially more generative directions than critique alone makes possible. Following key feminist new materialist scholars, I want to ask *what if* (Haraway 1988, 2008, 2016) and *what else* (Manning 2016) might it be possible to learn about professionalism in ECE if we resist regarding it an exclusively human matter of concern. What if we move beyond a preoccupation with only discourses and think about professionalism as more than exclusively concerned with human subjectivity? What if professionalism is considered something that is constantly produced and mutating through everyday, mundane habits and practices in early childhood contexts? What else might happen if we were to understand professionalism as emergent and momentary rather than fixed and knowable, or residing in human identities and practices? What if space, place, matter, bodies and affect are brought more squarely into the frame of our inquiries within nurseries? What other stories might be told? What if we embark upon an inquiry into professionalism as materialised figuration (Haraway 1988)? What else might we come to encounter in our investigations of what counts as professionalism, how it is produced and with what affects? This worldly (Haraway 2016) approach to ECE stresses the interconnections between human subject, place, space and objects. It is arguably extending notions of 'the public good' as it reaches beyond a humanist understanding of 'public'. Rather, a feminist new materialist approach insists that by taking matter and affect seriously we can recognise our entangled place within the world and how what we do, what we touch, and how we exercise our ethical responsibilities through our everyday encounters can have far reaching consequences (see Osgood and Mohandas in press).

## Telling other stories about professionalism in ECE

Inspired by Donna Haraway (2016, p. 35), it is possible to tell different stories about professionalism than those narrowly formulated in curriculum frameworks, inspection regimes, and normative pedagogical practices. This requires that attention is paid to how stories come about, how they come to hold currency and the affects that they generate. This theoretical framing allows for the material-semiotic-discursive and affective entanglements that unfold within early childhood strategy and research to gain some purchase over more familiar stories about professionalism. I want to consider how else ideas about professionalism in early childhood might be encountered; what might happen if space is made for other stories about professionalism in early childhood. Taking embodied encounters with affect and materiality seriously creates possibilities to think again about professionalism as *produced* within early childhood contexts. It might be that professionalism can be encountered as imperceptible, everyday processes that manifest through small events and moments, that are sensed and felt (rather than as an external concept that is imposed and performed or contested). Taking this approach to reconfiguring professionalism opens generative possibilities because it becomes something that is sensed as constantly shifting,

sliding and mutating. It becomes a slippery concept that is materialised through the everyday, and therefore, something that the ECE workforce can work towards registering and working with rather than a measurable construct imposed via government discourse. Working from this framework opens up the ways in which a given phenomenon, such as professionalism or quality, can be explored (for recent examples, see Osgood (2019a), which recounts how the humble Lego brick can teach us about gender in ECE; Osgood (2019b), for an investigation into glitter and what it can teach us about childhood art and our ethical environmental responsibilities in ECE; and Osgood and Mohandas (in press), to learn how else learning materials in early childhood classrooms might be encountered and so recognise our worldly connections and responsibilities in ECE).

My most current research stresses that there is a pressing need to change the story, and to this end researchers and practitioners need to narrate and think outside of human-centric accounts of the world. Storytelling can nurture, or invent or discover, or it can 'be cobbling together ways for living and dying well' (Haraway 2016). This chapter now moves on to highlight where productive fissures between discourses, frameworks and practices exist and therefore allow other stories about professionalism in early childhood to find expression. It requires wonder at the unremarkable, habitual and mundane within early childhood so that professionalism might emerge in unanticipated forms. The task then is to think, to figure and to story professionalism differently. I turn to an example from early childhood practice that endeavours to illustrate how professionalism might be encountered as materialised figuration (Haraway 1994) through the everyday happenings in early years practice and research.

## Strategising for 'quality': Violet's Story

I walk into the room and it smells of spices. There are always different smells coming from this room as the adults are always adding natural objects to the sensory shelves. Elena once brought in some funny shaped pebbles that she found on her holiday. We spent time looking closely at these pebbles trying to work out where they might have come from and how they got to become that shape. I found out that every pebble has a story. I once saw my friend Katie play with the pebbles adding them to a shopping bag and pretending they were magic beans. Katie had selected the smooth shiny pebbles that felt cold and hard in our hands, I preferred the rougher scratchy pebbles, I liked the way they left marks when I pressed them into my palm, even when I put them down it felt like they were still in my hand. I was a bit worried that Elena's pebbles might get lost but as Katie put them into her shopping bag I heard Betty remind Katie that when she had finished with the pebbles she must return them to the shelf so that other children can enjoy them. Katie did, but we noticed that one was missing, we all decided to have a look for the missing pebble, but although we searched everywhere we couldn't find this pebble. We wondered where it might have gone. Elena noticed the missing pebble but she wasn't upset and said that she would collect more next time she was on holiday. (Violet's story 2012, p. 9, quoted in The Red House 2016, p. 137)

This extract is from the Strategic Plan of a not-for-profit children's centre in the private, voluntary and independent sector located in the West of England. It captures

an attempt to work creatively in the in-between spaces between policy and practice. The staff at The Red House, frustrated by the hegemonic framings and demands for 'quality' and 'professionalism', identified leakages and ways to work within and beyond neoliberal constraints. A conventional strategic plan, complete with targets, prescribed outcomes, milestones, reviews and neoliberal expectations for standardisation, transparency and measurable performance was discarded in favour of a multi-sensory story that makes materiality and affect central to reconceptualising quality and professionalism. Spices, shopping bag, magic beans, and the absent-presence of a missing pebble provide an alternative means with which to figure professionalism. Violet's Story and all its human, non-human and more-than-human actors work to produce affects and unanswered questions. It does not offer a formula for 'quality' or 'professionalism' rather, it is open-ended and uncertain. This simple story about apparently 'not very much' is acutely provocative, and densely packed with microscopic detail. By dwelling on the mundanity of the everyday it induces wonder at early childhood practices, spaces, relationalities and objects: 'every pebble has a story.' Pursuing the multiple possible stories that each pebble presents takes the early years practitioner on adventures that might reveal an enormous amount about themselves, their values, perceptions, worldviews and practices. Furthermore, Violet's Story provides the staff team with a focus for deep thoughtfulness, and functions as resource and conversation starter for the wider nursery community. What the story does to its readers (parents, Ofsted Inspectors, and you: the reader of this chapter) and what they then do with it acts diffractively. An encounter with Violet's Story creates new stories, multiple interpretations, impressions, imprints, wonderings and wanderings.

The story is a bold and political move by staff at The Red House. They report feeling concerned with normalising discourses of quality that circulate in guidance documents on how to plan, deliver and evaluate their practice (Osgood et al. 2017). They sense and navigate the endless demands to perform 'quality' and 'professionalism' yet, by embracing a new materialist, post-humanist framing for their strategic plan, Violet's Story sets them free from a constant preoccupation to gauge performance against standardised measures. Here we start to see the intimate connection between critique and creativity that Braidotti advocates. By placing the focus on multi-sensory moments, through everyday, mundane and extra-ordinary encounters it is possible to trace the counter narrative of professionalism from within – that celebrates emotion, humour, intuition and compassion – circulating within the space and context of the nursery. These are not personality traits that reside within human subjects, but rather, affective charges that are produced and circulate from material-semiotic-discursive entanglements. It is the early childhood assemblage – comprising nature shelf, smooth pebble, rough pebble, adult-body, Ofsted criteria, child-hands, memories, child-adult ratios, imagined futures, fantasy play, shopping bag, spicy smells, Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum and, and and… – that works together to produce other ideas about nursery practice, childhood and professionalism. Crafting a narrative account from a fictional child's embodied perspective of everyday life in the nursery ignites new generative possibilities for the entire nursery community. The narrative strategies within the story act to decentre the

human protagonist, Violet, and so bring to the fore all that she is entangled with: smells, sounds, sights and senses which in turn generates new ways for practitioners to become engaged in world-making practices. The crafting of the story, and subsequent engagements with it (as tool for reflection; in discussion with each other, parents and Ofsted) underscores the liveliness of a story and its generative possibilities. With each reading and re-reading something else is produced. Returning to Haraway's insistence that 'the point is to get at how worlds are made and unmade, in order to participate in the processes, in order to foster some forms of life and not others' (Haraway 1994, p. 59) we can identify precisely how Violet's Story functions to deepen how 'quality' and 'professionalism' are thought about and enacted through the organisation of space, place, objects and people. As Cary Wolfe stresses:

> Far from surpassing or rejecting the human, post-humanism actually enables us to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations, and affective investments with greater specificity … it forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of homo sapiens itself by re-contextualising them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own auto-poietic ways of bringing forth the world. (Wolfe 2009, p. 25)

Such post-humanist encounters with neoliberalism in early years contexts are shaped by wonder, serendipity, unpredictability yet the metanarratives framing the field often act to contain and regulate with serious implications that stifle creativity and create 'docile bodies that yield to the discourse' (Foucault 1980, p. 255). As Violet's story demonstrates there are possibilities available to work with, through and across the metanarratives that frame 'quality' and 'professionalism'. By attending to microscopic investigations of seemingly inconsequential, mundane events it becomes possible to reconfigure our relational entanglements with policy, curriculum frameworks and everyday lives lived in early childhood contexts. There are challenges and dilemmas that are felt in minute material-semiotic-discursive encounters but embracing an opened view of the world is to focus on the seemingly inanimate and insignificant and this can afford generative possibilities to realise the ambition of going beyond narrow conceptualisations of professionalism.

Research then becomes more experimental and uncertain, and it allows the leakages between the discourses and frameworks that frame and constrain early years practice, and what else unfolds in the everyday to be identified. Exercising curiosity in early years research and practice offers other, potentially more hopeful, ways to see and be in the world and to reassess established ways of thinking about a range of issues, including professionalism. This does not mean that critique disappears from investigations; unsettling taken-for-granted assumptions, and engaging practices of problematisation and challenge, remains vital. Identifying discourses that position educators within regulatory regimes and subject them to the terrors of performativity (Ball 2003b) is important but having done this, what next? What else?

A feminist new materialist mode of researching, practising and theorising privileges creative experimentation over critique but does not abandon commitments to interrogating power and inequity. It is the practice of bringing critique and creativity together that holds generative potential to extend ideas and debates about

professionalism in early childhood education. As Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2017) urges, we need ways, multiple ways, to avoid getting stuck in familiar ways of thinking and doing. Therefore, attempts to reconfigure how we approach professionalism involves charting the terrain, experimenting and resisting the comforts of recognition, reflection and identification. Or as Claire Colebrook (2015) urges, we might place a focus on important problems and matters of concern in order to chart the conditions of creation so as to transform those conditions and the problem itself.

Violet's Story charts the relationships between affect and research and insists that questions are asked about the affective processes, and about the collection and production of embodied data, that takes place within a 'zone of inventiveness' (Knudsen and Stage 2015: 3) where what counts as 'data' is called in to question (Lather and St. Pierre 2013). Generating 'data' that might be considered banal or unsophisticated, mundane or ordinary, such as these entanglements of pebble, shelf, spicey smells, memories, imagined futures and shopping bag are significant because they generate affective forces, that have the capacity to trouble taken-for-granted ideas about early childhood practice and professionalism. Violet's Story insists that professionalism in early childhood contexts is more than an exclusively human endeavour. The multiple materials, the environment, the pace and tempo of the micro-events, the presence of policy discourses and curriculum frameworks hang in the air – it is the relational entanglements of all of these actors that produce varied accounts of how professionalism is sensed. Professionalism is not an intentional human performance, rather, professionalism can be conceptualised as a blurring of boundaries that traditionally prescribe subject or object, life or matter, dull or vibrant. Professionalism emerges through a series of intra-active fluid relations between the human, non-human and more-than-human.

Working with post-humanist logic urges that affect and materiality provide the analytical starting point, it therefore becomes possible to dwell on the ruptures and the uncomfortable affective charges that are produced within these minor events (see Osgood 2019a, 2019b; Osgood and Scarlet 2016; Osgood and Mohandas 2019; for examples of this). Such an approach to reconfiguring ideas in ECE allows for a deep consideration for the ways in which professionalism is produced through these multiple micro events via material-discursive entanglements. It then becomes possible to reach understandings of professionalism as fleeting, fluid, shifting, co-constituted and produced through processes rather than fixed within human subjects. Resisting the urge to stop at critical deconstruction of that which appears obvious when undertaking research in ECE settings (gender asymmetries, social class, race, age differentials, pedagogical short comings, imposition of curriculum, regulation of working practices) offers opportunities to figure professional practice more expansively. When research is transversal – that is, able to follow, or sense the myriad connections and intensities that coalesce in micro-events (Renold and Mellor 2013), and also be oriented towards the not-yet-known, then new knowledges are produced that extend our ideas about early childhood practice and professionalism.

Such complex assemblages of relational entanglements offer alternative ways to consider the politics of seemingly inconsequential events and everyday occurrences

within nurseries. In order that educators and researchers might persistently grapple with that which seems mundane, habitual and unremarkable which can produce alternative and more expansive understandings of matters of concern in early childhood contexts. Violet's Story illustrates the possibilities that become available for educators and researchers to become entangled with the materiality of their practice in ways that enable a critical engagement with policy, curriculum, best practice, quality, professionalism and so on, with which they are expected to work and which they in turn shape. As important though is that such approaches challenge habitual ways of thinking and being in early childhood and therefore present generative possibilities to become unstuck. By attending to forces and movements the capacity to affect and be affected opens up possibilities for deeper engagements with what professionalism is and how it gets produced.

## Towards the pursuit of worldly justice in ECE

This chapter has sought to illustrate that post-structuralist accounts of professionalism stress that it is socially constructed through discourse. Through research framed by a concern with social justice, it has been possible to identify how powerful discourses act to produce discursive positionings that early years workers take up (or contest). As professionals, early years practitioners can become fixed, measured and contained by such discourses. Inviting practitioners to engage in projects of critical deconstruction is productive, since it exposes the ways in which they are positioned and can invite the cultivation of counter discourses (i.e. the critically reflective emotional professional in place of the competent technician). This chapter has then gone on to explore the intimate connection between critique and creation by working with post-humanist logic to reconfigure how professionalism gets produced. This has involved a close examination of world-making practices (Haraway 2008) that routinely unfold in everyday nursery practice. Taking opportunities to step back to observe the material-semiotic-discursive entanglements that are unfolding within early years contexts every day, makes it possible for the familiar to become strange, and to ask the 'what if' and 'what else' questions about matters of concern in early childhood. Expanding our conceptualisations of professionalism, beyond humanist concerns with the subject, towards viewing it as emerging through entangled processes, creates possibilities to reshape our pedagogical and research practices so that they become more committed to contributing the public good; in its very broadest sense. I have sought to illustrate that there are possibilities to bring critique and creativity together in generative ways that take debates about professionalism in other directions but that are still invested in recognising that ECE remains a workforce and a sector shaped by and committed to tackling social injustices. I have extended the idea of the 'public' good to include human, non-human and more-than-human actors and to stress that it is through our worldly connections that the ECE community can exercise its capacity to contribute to more liveable worlds through exercising on-going ethical responsibilities to make a difference (Haraway

2016) however minor. So perhaps the project then becomes one of pursuing worldly justice though our everyday practices which places an emphasis on registering and addressing inequalities of all kinds, not only those created by and endured by humans.

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# Chapter 9
# The masculinisation of the teaching profession or gynophobia as education policy

**Marie-Pierre Moreau** ⓘ

**Abstract** This chapter draws on the research conducted by the author on gender in the teaching profession over the past decade. It is informed by a broad range of data, including semi-structured interviews with teachers, statistical data analysis and policy analysis. It explores the gendered assumptions underpinning discourses of teaching. It critically engages with the claim that teaching is 'feminised' (a polysemous term), and the rather widespread view that the masculinisation of teaching is desirable. The chapter analyses the range of discourses of teaching and gender which circulate in a diversity of contexts, including in policies, the media and in schools, with specific reference to the UK (particularly, though not only, England). It reflects on the effects of these discourses on gender equality and on how these can be countered with the emergence of counter-discourses which do not invisibilise, misrecognise and devalue what and who is associated with 'femininity'.

## Introduction

Gynophobia: (ˌɡaɪnəʊˈfəʊbɪə, ˌdʒaɪnəʊ-)
Noun. A dread or hatred of women. (Collins 2019)

In the UK, where I write from, school teachers are subject to numerous and sometimes conflicting expectations. Educational policies, in the form of various documents issued by the government and various agencies and public bodies, establish and specify the content of national standards, statutory duties and employment contracts. These documents require that teachers foster the development of well-rounded children, while enabling their learning and 'raising standards'; that their practices are underpinned by creative pedagogies, while strictly following the National Curriculum and adopting 'good practices'; that they nurture the child,

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equip the future worker with skills relevant to the labour market of tomorrow, and 'empower' the citizen (DfEE 1998; DfE 2010a, 2012b, 2014a). Also worth recalling here is the fact that the now defunct General Teaching Council for England[1] regulated teachers' skills and conduct according to its Code of Conduct and Practice for Teachers (GTCE 2009). Expectations from the wider public can be equally conflicting and wide-ranging (Braun 2015; Moreau 2015), and while they may appear less coercive, they are part of a broader apparatus which regulates teachers' behaviour (Foucault 1969). This surveillance of teachers is particularly pronounced in an educational sector described for some times as a quasi market (Glennerster 1991). Decades of neo-liberal policies have increased the competition between schools and threaten schools which do not meet their objectives with closure (Mahony and Hextall 2000; Faucher-King and Le Galès 2010). In this neoliberal policy context, teachers have been increasingly held responsible for students' educational attainment (Gewirtz et al. 2019). With this in mind, it is maybe unsurprising that who takes up a positional identity as a teacher attracts many concerns, from policy-makers and the wider public. Likewise, it is maybe unsurprising that such concerns go beyond teachers' professional identities and skills, and cross over to their private personas (Moreau 2014).

Earlier research shows that this concern about members of the teaching profession is shaped by power relations of gender, class, race, dis/ability and sexuality (Moreau 2014). In this chapter, I focus on gender, in its intersections with these other identity markers. In particular, I explore how, over the past thirty years, the feminisation of school teaching has represented a persistent presence on the policy agenda and has been constructed as a 'public policy problem', in Marilyn Cochran-Smith's words (2005, p. 3), while the masculinisation of teaching has been constructed as desirable and, when achieved, as a cause for celebration. Drawing on a recent monograph on the topic (Moreau 2018), I start by deconstructing the multiple meanings of 'feminisation' and their underpinnings. Consistent with a feminist post-structuralist approach, I acknowledge that discourses are performative rather than indexical (Foucault 1969) and shape 'how we see ourselves and the world' (Litosseliti 2006, p. 9). Thus, the construction of the feminisation of teaching as a problem is not a mere rhetorical question: discourses 'matter', i.e. are significant to, and create, the worlds we inhabit. For example, discourses will lead to policies being forged, priorities being established and resources being allocated or withdrawn. In this chapter, I also explore some of the effects of these discourses and argue that the construction of the masculinisation of teaching as a legitimate endeavour and as conducive to the 'public good' – a key concern throughout this volume – needs to be read against a gynophobic policy context, with gynophobia defined as a 'dread or hatred of women' (Collins 2019, online).

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[1] The General Teaching Council for England was the professional teaching body in place from 2000–2012. Sometimes referred to as the 'teaching watchdog' (Shepherd 2010), some of its functions were taken on by the Teaching Agency, joined with the National College for School Leadership in 2013, to become the National College for Teaching and Leadership in 2013, then the Teaching Regulation Agency in 2018.

## Discourses of teaching and feminisation

Mentions of the term feminisation in relation to teaching in UK education policy are widespread and polysemous, yet the term feminisation is rarely defined by those who use it (Skelton 2002). Drawing on a range of sources (including interviews with teachers and headteachers, education policies, and media articles), I unpack the various meanings of this term and broadly identify three main definitions. To clearly articulate the distinctiveness of these meanings, I distinguish between three discourses of feminisation, which I refer to as the 'feminised', 'feminine' and 'female-friendly' discourses (Moreau 2018).

### *Discourses of teaching as 'feminised'*

This discourse of teaching as 'feminised' implies that women numerically dominate the teaching profession. It can refer to a specific moment or to a process (see examples in Wylie 2000; Kelleher et al. 2011). While, in countries where such data are collected, the majority of teachers are women, their presence in teaching varies considerably across local, regional and national contexts and periods of time (Șerban 2015; OECD 2017). Adopting a socio-historical perspective also highlights some considerable variations in the proportion of women and men in teaching, with these variations linked to changes in policies and cultural norms. Most notoriously, the marriage bar in place in parts of the UK excluded married women from the profession from the early twentieth century until its abolition by the 1944 Education Act (Oram 1996; Tamboukou 2003). In the UK, as in other countries, women's presence also varies considerably across education phases, institutions, positions, subjects and roles (DfE 2014a; Șerban 2015; OECD 2017).

Numerical definitions of the feminisation of teaching are usually based on the percentage of women teachers, a rather raw indicator which fails to acknowledge the distribution of women and men across the labour market and also renders invisible women's disproportionate exclusion from the segments of the education sector associated with higher pay and prestige, itself a widespread and persistent pattern (Hutchings 2002; OECD 2017). Thus, the view that teaching is feminised in numerical terms obscures the complex distribution of men and women and the gender power relations at play in the teaching labour market. Claims relating to the feminisation of teaching as a numerical process often appear blurry and assume a steady increase in the proportion of women in teaching. Instead, in the UK as in many other countries, women's access to the profession has never been a linear process (Oram 1996). As noted above, their presence in teaching has fluctuated significantly across periods of times and contexts, under a range of economic, social, political and cultural influences. Claims of this nature are often underpinned by a mytho-poetic, anti-feminist narrative exemplified by the likes of of Steve Biddulph (1995) and William Pollack (1999), which refers to an unspecified 'golden age' of teaching

(Delamont 1999), when men are thought to have numerically dominated the profession and society at large (Roulston and Mills 2000).

## *Discourses of teaching as 'feminine'*

In other instances, discourses of the feminisation of teaching are informed by a view of the profession as 'feminine', in the sense that teaching is thought to require some of the 'qualities' and skills culturally associated with femininity and, more specifically, motherhood (Grumet 1988; Dillabough 1999; Atkinson 2008; Gallagher and Sahni 2019; Restler 2019). Hence, the discursive focus is on the qualities of the teacher rather than numbers. However, the numerical and cultural definitions of feminisation are sometimes linked, for example, when it is claimed that as a result of the numerical presence of women in schools 'feminine values' permeate educational spaces, ultimately turning schools in an environment where girls and women are said to thrive (see the critique in Martino and Kehler 2006). This discourse is not new and, if anything, has lost currency in sociological circles since Patricia Sexton (1969) described schools as 'feminine institutions' damaging to boys and men. However, this view tends to prevail in the accounts of self-styled educational consultants (Biddulph 1995; Pollack 1999) and in the media (Pells 2016; Sellgren 2016).

   This discourse of teaching work as culturally 'feminine' and close to 'motherly love' (with the female teacher constructed as a 'mother made conscious': Steedman 1985) is problematic. It naturalises and essentialises femininity. It simultaneously negates the multiplicity and intersectional diversity of women's and men's identities, taking White middle-class heterosexual identity as the norm and ignoring the fact that women's identities and aspirations are not always distinct from men's (Grumet 1988; Acker 1995; Dillabough 1999; Braun 2015; Moreau 2015). By constructing women teachers as innately caring, and teaching as an extension of motherly love, this discourse also contributes to the devaluation of women's work and qualifications. Because of this association, women risk being 'trapped inside the concept of nurturance', as argued by Valerie Walkerdine in her discussion of the gendered implications of child-centred pedagogies (1990, p. 19). This association also threatens the recognition of women teachers' professional identity in a context where educational policies are increasingly described as care-free and masculinist – a point I will return to. Last, due to its gender essentialist underpinnings which construct masculinity and femininity as fixed, universal and always distinct, this discourse assumes that the presence of women's bodies suffices to generate a cultural shift in school spaces. This masks the distinction between statistical and social domination. In other terms, numerical sameness is not tantamount to equality: when men enter a predominantly female profession, they tend to benefit more than women, despite their numerically minority status; the reverse is not true when women enter a profession in which men form the majority (see discussions in Fortino 2002, and Williams 1992). Teaching provides a befitting illustration of this point as, even in contexts where women represent the majority of the teaching

workforce, positions of power tend to be disproportionately occupied by men (DfE 2014a; OECD 2017).

## *Discourses of teaching as 'female-friendly'*

A third discourse of the feminisation of teaching implies that teaching is 'female-friendly'. This view of teaching is underpinned by various assumptions, chiefly that it is a profession which can be easily combined with caring responsibilities, particularly mothering (Dillabough 1999; Crompton et al. 2007). In light of the long-lasting cultural association between women and care work, forms of employment and professions considered to be 'family-friendly' come to be understood as 'woman-' or 'female-friendly'. More specifically, this 'family-friendliness' is thought to derive from the alignment between the temporalities of teaching work and those of students', whether it is on the scale of a day, of the school year or of their career (for example, when teachers go part-time or leave the profession, before returning when their children are older).

Such claims are problematic and need to be unpacked. First, they naturalise and normalise the association between women and domestic work, since 'family-friendly' usually implies 'female-friendly'. Although it is often taken for granted that the presumed 'work-life balance' of teaching is instrumental in women's decision to teach, research highlights that, in that respect, gender differences are rarely significant (Moreau 2011a, 2015). This view of teaching as family- and thus female-friendly is also underpinned by a rather conventional, heteronormative and altogether narrow construction of what constitutes a family. Second, this definition ignores the intensification of teaching work which has taken place over the past decades across a number of countries, including the UK (Şerban 2015). For example, a recent survey of UK primary school teachers found that they work just under 60 hours a week on average, and often struggle to spend time with their family as a result (Shepherd 2013b), with abundant qualitative evidence corroborating this point. Looking for example at some of the many online discussions of 'work-life balance' in teaching, one poster commented: 'teaching is a career for young singletons with no life' – a far cry from the 'family-friendly' image of the profession (Duggins 2017). Third, the supposed 'female-friendliness' of teaching does not extend to women's careers. As already mentioned, women are concentrated in the segments of the teaching labour market associated with the lowest levels of pay and prestige. Moreover, those who use the flexibility measures leading to teaching being labelled as 'female-friendly' often pay a heavy price careerwise, in a societal context where professional commitment tends to be equated with full-time, continuous careers (Waters and Bardoel 2006; Crompton et al. 2007; Moreau et al. 2007).

## Feminisation as a 'public policy problem'

As evidenced throughout the previous section, the meanings of 'feminisation' vary considerably. Yet, beyond their semantic diversity, these discourses concur in constructing the feminisation of teaching as a problem that needs to be tackled through a public policy intervention, with masculinisation presented as the solution. While some counter-discourses circulate, broadly described by Elina Lahelma and colleagues as 'gender equality discourses' (see e.g. Lahelma 2014, p. 171), these have rarely prevailed in recent UK education policies. Instead, as I have argued elsewhere, 'Discourses of feminisation… often constitute a challenge to gender equality as the use of the term associated with femininity is usually marked inferior' (Moreau 2018, p. 36). Statistical and cultural understandings of feminisation are drawn on to to blame the feminisation of teaching and women themselves for the low attainment of children, and of boys in particular, for the lack of discipline in schools and for the status of the profession. Suffice here to recall the words of Anthea Millett, the former Chief Executive of the then Teacher Training Agency (TTA): 'The feminisation of the [teaching] profession leads to an absence of male role models for many of our pupils, particularly those from the majority of one parent families' (Millett 1999, p. 2). The scapegoating of women teachers extends beyond the school gates, as the feminisation of school is also blamed for destabilising the (patriarchal) structures of society (see, e.g. Vine 2016). Without probing into each of these claims in detail, suffice here to note the lack of supportive evidence. And, of course, there is an irony in blaming women teachers for the low status or deprofessionalisation of the profession considering that they are disproportionately excluded from positions of power in educational policies, in unions and in schools. More generally, these narratives are informed by a deficit view of women teachers, who are deemed to lack competences, aspirations, authority, and leadership. Again, this is in sharp contrast with research showing, for example, that, across the UK, women who teach tend to have on average higher academic credentials than men, and very similar motivations and professional identities (Moreau 2015; Riddell et al. 2005).

While the 'family-friendly' discourse of feminisation is maybe more likely to be constructed in positive terms compared with its 'feminised' and 'feminine' variants, it has, however, sometimes been used to challenge the status of the profession. For example, flexible working practices have been deemed contrary to the ethos of the professions, expected by definition to be greedy on a temporal level (see discussion in Cacouault-Bitaud 2001). In the 1960s, Amitai Etzioni infamously described teaching as a 'semi-profession' because of its statistical feminisation, while also claiming that 'the normative principles and cultural values of professions and organisations and female employment are not compatible' (Etzioni 1969, p. vi). Echoes of a discourse which misrecognises those (in the main, women) trying to establish new ways of working so as to juggle the conflicting demands of teaching and unpaid work can also be found in the recent declarations of Andrew Carter, a former

government adviser and current head of an Educational Trust who described it as 'wrong and immoral' for teachers to seek reduced hours (Gibbons 2019).

The above claims have been associated with calls for 're-masculinising' teaching – a term which, like feminisation, is often left undefined and polysemous. In the main, the prevalent argument in favour of the remasculinisation of teaching has argued that bringing more male bodies in the profession will necessarily transform school cultures and bring various benefits to children, schools, their local communities, and the broader society. This narrative can be read as part of the recuperative masculinity and backlash politics often associated with conservative and neoliberal understandings of gender-based and other social inequalities (Faludi 1991; Lingard and Douglas 1999; Moreau 2018). According to this perspective, the gender order has been inverted, with men left with little but a 'crisis of masculinity' (see critiques in Lingard 2003; Arnot and Mac an Ghaill 2006; Moreau 2011b). In schools, this has often led to a 'poor boys' discourse, with calls for more male teachers justified by a 'role modelling' rhetoric arguing that being taught by men will have a positive impact on boys' attainment, behaviour and identity (see, e.g. DfES 2005), despite a growing body of evidence invalidating these claims (Francis et al. 2008).

## Masculinisation as a solution or gynophobia as education policy

The increasingly fraught relationship between teaching work and femininity is maybe best illustrated by some of the teacher education programmes which have been implemented in the UK since the late 1990s. The New Labour government's arrival in power in 1997 was quickly followed by the publication of a Green Paper, *Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change* (DfEE 1998) which called for the 'modernisation' and 'remasculinisation' of teaching. The document draws a miserabilist picture of the teaching profession, claiming for example that 'The shabby staffroom and the battered electric kettle – which endured for so long because teachers always choose to put their pupils first – can become things of the past' (DfEE 1998, p. 13). This call for the modernisation and professionalisation of teaching takes neo-managerial undertones as with proposals for the creation of the National College for School Leadership (which became an executive agency of the Department for Education); the development of performance-based management and of evaluation procedures; and increased accountability for teachers. This managerial turn is also underpinned by a masculinisation of the profession, as care and other so called 'feminine values' hardly get any mention, and as the professionalisation and modernisation of teaching are linked in implicit ways with its masculinisation, for example when the same report calls for more men to join the profession, or when it offers some rewards to those teach subjects in which there is a teacher shortage (which happen to be subjects in which men are concentrated).

The Teach First programme[2] in particular provides a useful illustration of the association of 'new middle-class managerialism' (Apple 2001, p. 417) with the masculinisation of teaching. The narratives of Teach First participants and the programme's marketing material suggest a construction of the teacher as a high-achieving, middle class, young, male, suit-wearing and cosmopolitan professional destined to quickly become a leader (Moreau 2018; Smart et al. 2009). In contrast with the reality of the teaching workforce, the Teach First website was populated at the time of conducting the research underpinning this chapter with pictures of young men, with some of the promotional documentation listing the higher proportion of male recruits compared with other teacher education programmes as an 'added value'. Yet, since the Teach First programme made this claim, the proportion of male recruits has substantially fallen and the programme now includes some action specifically targeting women such as STEMinism (Teach First 2020).

In many respects, the Teach First programme offers some stark contrast with another teacher education which emerged shortly after its inception: Troops to Teachers.[3] Like Teach First, Troops to Teachers was imported and adapted from a US programme. Its launch was announced in a DfE White Paper (DfE 2010a), followed by a pilot in 2012 and finally the roll out of the programme in 2013. Unusually, the programme was originally opened to both university graduates and non-graduates (Price 2019). In its earlier iterations, it fed into the role model rhetoric discussed earlier and, among other things, aims to 'ensure that there are many more male role models entering teaching' (Gove 2011b, online). In contrast with Teach First, it is also part of a more conservative turn in politics and a general drive to inject a military ethos in schools. Michael Gove, then Secretary of Education, argued that 'Every child can benefit from the values of a military ethos. Self-discipline and teamwork are at the heart of what makes our armed forces the best in the world – and are exactly what all young people need to succeed' (DfE 2012b, online). The programme's low take-up (41 for the first intake, none of them graduates; 61 for the second intake, including a minority of degree-holders) led to shortage subject requirement being dropped. In contrast with the discourse of middle-classness and leadership of Teach First, Troops to Teachers may read as a return to a more traditional type of hegemonic masculinity, in a context where most recruits are men. This programme may be viewed as being part of a broader strategy to 'occupationalise' teaching in a context then characterised by renewed attacks against teachers and with a significant proportion of those in the army being in non-graduate positions. Military metaphors are deeply embedded in its rhetoric,

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[2] Teach First is a social enterprise running an employment-based teacher training programme open to university graduates which involves the completion of a postgraduate teaching qualification while gaining some wider leadership skills. Teach First trainees are placed in primary and secondary schools where socially disadvantaged students are concentrated.

[3] Troops to Teachers is an employment-based teacher training programme seeking to attract members of the military into teaching. It is open to university graduates and non graduates.

with for example the inclusion of references in various policy and marketing documents to the 'front line'. This masculinisation of teaching as embodied by the Troops to Teachers programme is not as concerned as Teach First with improving the status of the profession. Rather, it may even be read as a means towards its 'occupationalisation' in a context of repeated attacks against teachers and their representative organisations. This masculinisation and militarisation of teaching are expected to bring more discipline in classrooms. In respect to this point, the 2010 DfE White Paper notes that:

> The greatest concern voiced by new teachers and a very common reason experienced teachers cite for leaving the profession is poor pupil behaviour. We know that a minority of pupils can cause serious disruption in the classroom. The number of serious physical assaults on teachers has risen. And poorly disciplined children cause misery for other pupils by bullying them and disrupting learning. It is vital that we restore the authority of teachers and head teachers. And it is crucial that we protect them from false allegations of excessive use of force or inappropriate contact. Unless we act more good people will leave the profession – without good discipline teachers cannot teach and pupils cannot learn. (DfE 2010a, pp. 9–10)

> Among other objectives, the government announced its intention to:

> • Increase the authority of teachers to discipline pupils by strengthening their powers to search pupils, issue same day detentions and use reasonable force where necessary.
> • Strengthen head teachers' authority to maintain discipline beyond the school gates, improve exclusion processes and empower head teachers to take a strong stand against bullying, especially racist, homophobic and other prejudice-based bullying. (DfE 2010a, p. 10)

I am only seeking here to illustrate how the discourse of teaching as culturally 'feminine' is being constructed as a problem, rather than engage in-depth with the discourses of the masculinisation of teaching which characterise these two programmes. However, it is clear that there are tensions between the various discourses which circulate in UK education policy. In particular, there is a contradiction in claiming that boys need 'role models' with characteristics similar to themselves when the Teach First participants, usually middle-class, concentrate primarily in disadvantaged schools. Besides, how encouraging the deployment in schools of staff who, for some, may not have pre-existing pedagogical and subject knowledge usually required from teachers, as has sometimes been the case with Troops to Teachers, can raise standards and 'fix' disciplinary issue remains unclear. As also noted by Tarrant and colleagues, 'Troops to Teachers reinforces a particular version of masculinity associated with being tough and "macho", both physically and mentally, attributes that ironically seem to underpin a large part of the existing "problem" of boys' (Tarrant et al. 2015, p. 68).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have considered how the feminisation of teaching has been fore-grounded on the UK educational policy agenda and consistently constructed as a problem that needs tackling. In the context of a policy rhetoric often underpinned by gender essentialism, which opposes, fixes and universalises gender categories, mas-culinisation is constructed as desirable. The rhetoric surrounding this topic is not innocuous. For example, discourses of feminisation and the 'poor boys' discourse (Epstein et al. 1998) often linked to these have far-ranging effects on children, schools and communities. As I have argued elsewhere, these discourses of feminisa-tion also have a more entrenched effect as they reassert the gender binary and, more often than not, operate in ways which reinforces gender inequalities in the disfavour of women and of the men who do not subscribe to narrowly defined performances of masculinity (Moreau 2018). They also individualise and commodify gender as, in the current policy context,

> …gender and other equality matters are not constructed as social relationships of power. Instead … they are problematically subjected to processes of objectification, commodifica-tion, naturalisation and individualisation which construct these as attributes or forms of capital wielding benefits for those who hold them (e.g., for men teachers performing the 'right' type of masculinity), for those who can purchase them (schools) and for those who will be exposed to them (students). (Moreau 2018, p. 4)

Above, I have referred to two specific teacher education programmes and to how both construct different types of masculinities as 'the solution' to various educa-tional and societal issues. Under New Labour, much concern was expressed about the status of the profession. The Green Paper *Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change* (DfEE 1998) was an attempt to modernise the profession through a number of way – one of which was its 'remasculinisation'. This masculinist model of the managerial teacher was maybe best illustrated by the Teach First programme. Subsequent governemnts have launched initiatives which aimed to remasculinise teaching. For example, Troops to Teachers clearly focused on a pool of potential applicants who were clearly mostly composed of men. In that case, bringing troops to teaching was seen as a way to reinstall discipline, with women presumably lack-ing disciplinary skills. It is worth noting here that the implementation of Troops to Teachers corresponded to a political era were the profession was constantly under attacks, most notoriously under the Conservative Minister Michael Gove. In that context, it is tempting to contrast Teach First, which attempts to appeal to middle-class masculinities and repositions teaching as a profession, with Troops to Teachers, which seems to predominantly targets, at least in its early iterations, more working-class masculinities and repositions teaching as an occupation by putting it on a par with some parts of the military. What is clear from these two examples is that in both cases, bringing more men is thought to bring some benefits: a better status with Teach First and a reprofessionalisation of the profession under New Labour, more discipline in the classroom and a military ethos, under the Coalition and the subse-quent Conservative governments.

Policies calling for the remasculinisation of teaching are gynophobic, in the sense that they convey a hatred or dread of women and of everything that is associated with femininity that is both extreme and irrational, including bodies, epistemologies and pedagogies socially constructed as 'feminine' (Burke and Moreau 2020). This dread of women is often normalised, including in sectors, like education, where they concentrate. Rather than being conducive to the 'public good', one may argue that these discourses generate 'public harm', particularly against women and against those men who do not perform dominant forms of masculinity and/or concentrate in those groups which are socially disadvantaged (e.g. LGBTQ and BME groups). In reinforcing the gender binary and reasserting the superior value of masculinity over femininity (or 'valence différentielle des sexes' in Héritier's words: Héritier 1996, 2002), these discourses strengthen patriarchal norms and constitute a challenge to gender equality and other forms of social justice.

Foucault famously argued that 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (Foucault 1979 [1976], pp. 95–96). This resistance is also activated by the multiplicity of discourses which coexist and, often, conflict, in a given space and time. We live in a world where a man bragging on tape about sexually assaulting women can become President of the United States; where girls across the world are deprived of an education, kidnapped or murdered, sometimes just for being girls. This is a world where 'girly swot' and 'great big girl's blouse' are the terms of choice for Prime Minister Boris Johnson to describe one of his predecessors (David Cameron) and the leader of the opposition at the time of writing (Jeremy Corbyn) (Walker 2019). However, this is also a world where after decades of assaulting women, one of the most successful Hollywood producers is now in jail; where the #MeToo movement has given a voice to women across the world; and where the current Prime Minister of New Zealand has recently given birth and shows no intention to step down. Education policies may be gynophobic, yet discourses of feminisation are contingent and fluid. The global renewal of collective mobilisation around gender equality and other social issues exemplifies how discursive reworkings always remain a possibility.

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# Chapter 10
# Gender and the politics of knowledge in the academy



**Barbara Read** and **Carole Leathwood**

**Abstract** What counts as knowledge? Who are valid, legitimate 'knowers'? In this chapter we revisit work that we have conducted collaboratively over the last decade, focusing and elaborating on a single theme that has threaded through much of our work: the dynamics of gendered knowledges in higher education. We draw on a range of intersectional perspectives in discussing the dynamics of gender and the politics of knowledge in higher education institutions, drawing on work we conducted on the gendered, classed and racialised assumptions underlying notions of a perceived 'feminisation' of the higher education sector. We then move on to discuss more recent studies we have conducted to explore the continuing effects on knowledge production (and the teaching and learning of knowledge) of audit accountability measures such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework, and the casualisation of teaching in the sector. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the growing challenge to the 'elite' academy from the radical/far right and how this is involving new (and some very old) gendered conceptualisations of what knowledge is seen as valued, acceptable and appropriate in the contemporary academy.

## 2009: Gender and the changing face of higher education: a focus on knowledge

In the opening chapter of our 2009 book *Gender and the Changing Face of Higher Education: A Feminised Future?* we cited a number of attention-grabbing newspaper headlines that were proclaiming that university institutions had become 'feminised'. 'Ladies First: women take over universities', proclaimed the UK's *Guardian* (18 May, 2004). '…: Men Go Missing on Campus', claimed the USA's *Herald Tribune* (14 February, 2000). The same country's *Star Tribune* pronounced with a

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degree of fatality as to the seeming irreversibility of the outcome of this 'gender war': 'Pack it Up, Guys. The Takeover is Complete' (17 January, 2004) (Leathwood and Read 2009, p. 1).

As we went on to discuss, the seeming 'feminisation' of the higher education sector indicated by these headlines was based on undergraduate enrolment statistics that masked wide divergences in terms of institution type/status, region/nation, and subject discipline. Moreover, as a raft of feminist scholarship over previous decades had shown, a greater proportion of women undergraduate students masks a continuing gender disparity in favour of men in more senior academic roles and leadership positions (Morley 2005, 2013; Acker and Webber 2006; Blackmore and Sachs 2007). A concern with numerical gender parity ratios of students or staff also implies that there can be a simplistic equivalence of an individual's gender identity and the production and dissemination of curricula, pedagogical styles and forms of interaction in the academy in gendered ways that 'match' each individual's identity – hence an increase in the numbers of 'female bodies' in an institution can somehow increase the 'feminisation' of that institution's culture (from an ostensibly neutral, implicitly 'masculine', base). And although discussions of the identities/positionalities of individual staff and students in higher education institutions are important, a focus solely on such statistics misses the more central question over the ways in which academic cultures and practices are themselves gendered, classed and racialised in complex ways, that do not correlate with numerical patterns of enrolment or employment. Such questions are crucial for researching social justice and higher education for the public good.

Taking the production and dissemination of academic knowledge as one particular strand of academic culture and practice, it is clear that the power dynamics involved are highly complex, geographically and historically fluid and contextual, and entwined with broader facets of inequality relating to institutional status/prestige and national/regional dominances that have been shaped through colonial legacies. A key argument in our 2009 book is that, despite a prevalent conception of the academy as a place of 'neutral', disinterested knowledge production and dissemination, the university as an institution, and the knowledge that is produced and circulated, has always been, and remains, complexly gendered, 'raced' and 'classed'. And in terms of gender, a 'masculinised' conception of knowledge has been – and arguably remains – more dominant within the academy, despite the numerical changes in participation that have instigated the 'panic' around feminisation. Indeed, our analysis of representations of women and men students and academics on a selection of university websites (Leathwood and Read 2009, pp. 71–94) illustrated the ways in which the university is constructed as both 'feminised' with regard to numbers of undergraduate students as well as masculinised in terms of the academic body and the culture of the academy.

We were concerned to draw attention to the ways in which the knowledge studied at university has not somehow magically arisen into discrete categories of discipline and subject. The social construction of such categorisations – and their associated value and status – reflects wider power dynamics, including, of course, the dynamic of gender (Evans 1982, 1997; Trowler 1998). We examined the historical origins

and development of academic knowledge in the Global North, which became constructed through the prism of Enlightenment discourses of the possibility of objectivity and a single 'truth' that could be uncovered by rational, disinterested researchers (see Derrida 1976 [1967]; Foucault 1979 [1976]; Harding 1984; Irigaray 1985).

It was largely feminist scholars who pointed out that the enquiring, rational subject of Enlightenment thought was a masculinised one (e.g. Cixous 1981; Harding 1984; Hekman 1990). The binary logic underpinning much of Enlightenment thinking often constructed concepts such as 'truth', 'objectivity' and 'rationality' as implicitly – or explicitly – masculine, and valued these concepts more highly than their feminised opposites of falsehood, subjectivity, and irrationality. The influence of these discourses ensured that the dominant conception of the scholar (and the academic student) was a masculine one – with the notion of women students, let alone academics, initially treated with open ridicule (Dyhouse 1995, 2005). And during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as women began to be admitted into higher education institutions worldwide, there remained significant constraints or barriers towards the study of certain disciplines and subjects deemed to be more appropriate for men, including the sciences. In the UK for example, women were initially excluded from professional scientific societies, and then steered towards certain areas such as medical and biological sciences – an interest in the human body and its care possibly rendering these subjects slightly more acceptably 'feminine' than the 'hard' sciences of physics, chemistry and engineering (Watts 2007).

We attempted in the book to chart the ways in which decades of feminist and other critical scholars have gradually chipped away at the power of such dominant discourses. Such challenges included not only a change as to who was considered acceptable as students or scholars, but also a challenge to the seeming neutrality of the academic knowledge that was produced and studied (see e.g. discussions in Holloway 1998; Thornham 2000; Vander Stichele and Penner 2005). This included, for example, critiquing masculinised conceptions of 'genius' and the lack of women and minority ethnic artists and authors included in the established 'canon' in literature and art (Gourma-Petersen and Mathews 1987; Parker and Pollock 1987; Nead 1992); and feminist historians similarly challenged the concentration in historical accounts of the actions of powerful individual men (Scott 1999). There also emerged a growing recognition amongst feminist academics that it was not enough to just 'add women and stir' into established curricula – what was needed was a deeper critique of the social historical circumstances of women that might inhibit their ability to produce literature or art, and to shift perspective from individual, privileged actors to social groups, topics and perspectives that were often ignored or marginalised (Lerner 1979; Scott 1999). At the same time, African American and Black feminists internationally were challenging the inclusivity of the feminist movement, arguing that critiques and campaigns often focused on the interests and perspectives of White, middle-class women whilst claiming to speak for all (hooks 1982; Crenshaw 1989). In recent decades the growing popularity of poststructuralism and queer theory have provided additional perspectives from which to critique established curricula and the notion of neutral 'objective' academic knowledge (Butler

1991; Epstein et al. 2003; Bird 2004; Stewart 2007). Finally, another key aspect of challenge to the mainstream curriculum – the field of Women's Studies – emerged since the 1960s as a major way of critiquing traditional canon and perspectives in the academy in many countries across the globe, with concerns and critiques reflecting their own national and cultural contexts (Pappu 2002; Coate 2006; Stake 2006). However, as we noted in 2009, Women's Studies as a field has always suffered from public conceptions that it is an invalid 'Mickey Mouse' subject (Marchbank and Letherby 2006), along with ambivalent institutional support and precarious funding – only exacerbated by the market imperatives of neoliberal governance (Stake 2006; see below). Jen Marchbank and Gayle Letherby (2006) argue that Women's Studies may have declined in some countries (such as the UK) because of the movement's broader success in challenging masculinised academic curricula – a topic we will return to below.

In the vast majority of countries in the world higher education is now accepted as the province of both women and men – although to greater and lesser degrees the original embodied conception of the ideal/appropriate academic and student as White, middle- or upper-class and male can still be seen to have influence, for example in the continued assumption that academics and students will have no caring responsibilities and can attend university at any hour, working on their studies and/or research through the night, with 'wives' or other family providing material, emotional and practical support (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; Leathwood 2006; Brooks 2012; Moreau and Kerner 2015). In terms of access to the production of academic knowledge, a projection by John Pratt (cited in Oxford 2008) suggested that women were poised to outnumber men at researcher and junior levels in the academy – whilst also projecting that it would be 2070 before there was gender parity at professor level. This nevertheless caused a reaction in some quarters familiar to those following the 'panics' regarding feminisation – with a piece in the UK's *Times Higher Education* stating:

> Figures from the Higher Education Statistics agency suggest that at researcher and lecturer levels, women are poised to take over…. Already British universities and their staff are working to come to terms with a feminisation of the academy. (Oxford 2008, p. 30)

In contrast to this perception, we pointed to the clear gender disparity of considerably more men in senior academic roles in universities worldwide, and in positions of research as opposed to teaching. Moreover, we noted at the time, the greater proportions of women and especially minority ethnic academics, as well as those from working-class backgrounds, clustered in short-term, casualised contracts (Reay 2000; Hey 2001).

Notwithstanding the statistics relating to occupational status, the continued gendering of academic knowledge can be seen through a number of more subtle dynamics, including a continuing discursive construction of some forms of knowledge as more 'appropriate' for particular genders, with those most highly valued generally still associated with the 'masculine' (Smith 1974; Spender and Sarah 1980; Bagilhole and Goode 1998; Coate 2006). Research shows that students' conceptions of their own ability to take on, and interest in, particular subjects, are still often

related to the degree to which such subject areas are constructed as 'appropriate' for their gender (Leathwood and Read 2009; see also Francis and Skelton 2005). In the early twenty-first century this was still impacting on the numbers of women students taking up particular scientific subjects at Higher Education level – particularly in engineering and computer science (UNESCO 2018).

These dynamics cannot be understood without reference to the overwhelming influence in the sector of neoliberal imperatives. Our discussion of gender and academic knowledge in 2009 needed to be framed in the context of the trend in the last few decades towards increased marketisation of the sector, along with a rise in a culture of managerialism and performativity (Ball 2003b; Blackmore and Sachs 2003; Naidoo 2003). We also noted the ways in which knowledge in the academy has been increasingly 'packaged' in curricula in commercially more attractive modular forms and across virtual or blended platforms, as universities compete for lucrative fees from (especially) international students (Brecher 2005). Students are themselves cast in the role of consumers of this knowledge, encouraged and warned of the need to be constantly updating their skills and experience to remain 'flexibly' employable in an increasingly precarious and short-term job market (see Morley 2003; Barnett 2004; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Singh 2007). As Rajani Naidoo (2003) and others noted, it is students in higher education institutions most centrally catering to the business and industry sectors – most often those institutions with less status/prestige – that are most affected in terms of the curricula they have access to as a result of these changes. Drawing on a range of international studies, we have discussed how students in these institutions are more likely to be 'non-traditional' – i.e. students from working-class or lower socioeconomic backgrounds, mature, minority ethnic, and in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South and East Asia, women (Leathwood and Read 2009; see also UNESCO 2018). Politically 'sensitive' subjects such as women's studies and peace studies, and less explicitly vocational subjects such as philosophy, are then more vulnerable to be cut due to concerns with 'economic viability' (Jackson 2000; Marchbank and Letherby 2006). As Naidoo noted in 2003:

> Rather than gaining access to powerful forms of knowledge, the majority of disadvantaged students will receive an education that has been reduced to narrowly defined core competencies which have been legitimated on the bandwagon of consumer choice. (Naidoo 2003)

In 2020, it is an explicit concern about students and the economic value of their degrees that is given as a rationale for challenges to less obviously vocational subjects in the UK. The *Review of Post-18 Education and Funding* (2019) concludes with recommendations 'intended to encourage universities to bear down on low value degrees and to incentivise them to increase the provision of courses better aligned with the economy's needs.' (DfE 2019e, p. 10). The subject areas specifically identified as 'low value', a signification that extends well beyond the economic, are social studies and creative arts and design, both areas with significantly more women students (over 60% compared to less than 40% of men) in 2017/18 (HESA 2019). It is also notable that in 2017 the UK government withdrew student bursaries for those studying 'subjects allied to medicine' which include nursing and

midwifery, almost 80% of whom were women in 2017/18. The valorising of disciplinary areas traditionally associated with men and the undervaluing of those marked as 'feminine' continues.

## Gender and the dynamics of research audit

Our book was written and published at the same time as the global financial crisis of 2008 and we were unable therefore to gauge the effects of the fallout on academic culture and practice. However in the UK as elsewhere, pre-existing forms of social inequality across many areas of public life were being – and continue to be – exacerbated by right-wing political rhetoric and policy justified in the name of financial restrictions in the wake of the financial crisis (McCormack and Salmenniemi 2015). Our work in the 2010s included a number of projects looking at academic work and life in the context of a neoliberal performative culture that only intensified with the austerity culture ushered in after 2008. Louise Morley had stated a few years earlier that in academia, 'scholarship has been reduced to income generation' (2003, p. 22), and Stephanie Daza in 2012 noted that by the beginning of the new decade this imperative had been exacerbated, with a 'grants culture', along with 'neoliberal scientism', colonising research in its material and ideological demands for accounting, efficiency, austerity, utility, and measured effectiveness' (p. 773).

It was against this backdrop that we conducted a qualitative project in 2010/11, interviewing over 70 academics in UK institutions by email, asking them about their perspectives and experiences of academic life and work in the context of recent policy trends in the sector (Leathwood and Read 2013). This had included, in England, the removal of the annual government grant distributed to higher education institutions to support teaching in the sector, and was just before the first universities began charging sizeable tuition fees to students as a consequence. We were also in the middle of the latest cycle of the national research audit – the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 would tighten further the funding criteria for university departments, where only academic work judged as 3* 'internationally excellent' or 4* 'world leading' would 'count' towards a department's awarded grade and funding amount. We were particularly interested in ways in which such exercises work in Foucauldian terms as 'disciplinary technologies', that incite academics to ever greater forms of self-surveillance, self-monitoring and performativity as we find ourselves simultaneously governed and compliantly self-governing: as Cris Shore and Susan Wright noted, 'the logic of the modern audit system is to produce not '"docile bodies" but "self-actualised" auditable individuals' (Shore and Wright 2000, p. 78).

As we noted (Leathwood and Read 2013), this has particular gendered dimensions. Feminists have long argued that it is men who are more likely to be deemed as research 'excellent', with traditional 'markers of excellence' such as citation

indices, journal editorships, large grant awards, membership of research panels and the prioritisation of research over teaching all likely to favour men (Van den Brink and Benschop 2011; Leathwood 2017). The emphasis in the UK research audit on specific numbers of outputs over a given timeframe necessarily discriminates against those taking career breaks or those working part-time (an issue recognised in the UK's REF in later iterations of the audit). Moreover, the increased competition and conspicuous need to publicly perform to targets arguably favours those who feel comfortable with the competitive 'display' that Sandra Harley calls 'academic machismo' (2003, p. 78). It also disadvantages those – more commonly women – whose work entails greater involvement with the sort of 'productive non-productivity' and emotional labour underpinning work such as collegial support and student mentoring, as opposed to more immediately measurable outcomes valued more highly by research assessment audits (Harley 2003, citing Strathern 1997, p. 318).

The anxiety and stress caused by potentially not 'making the grade' was evident in our study, particularly as expressed by women participants. We noted:

> Being the 'good girls' of the academy is perhaps less about 'the pleasure of compliance with (masculine formal) authority' in Hey's (2004, p. 37) words, and more about a defence against public shaming if one isn't seen to make the grade. (Leathwood and Read 2013, p. 1171)

Participants in our study discussed the impact of such dynamics on not only their work and lives, but on the academy as a whole, including fears that small-scale, critical, qualitative work, innovative or 'left-field' work, and feminist research were less likely to be funded in the race for securing large grant funding (2013, p. 1166), with implications for the kinds of knowledge that is produced and legitimised. Participants also expressed concerns about research capacity-building and where the new researchers for the future, and the associated new ideas and perspectives, would come from given the difficulties for early career academics to establish themselves in this context.

## Gender and precarity in academia – consequences for knowledge production

In our research on academic life and work we began to draw on the wider sociological literature and theorisation around social precarity that was increasingly being utilised to look at issues around what appeared to be a decline in the proportion of people across global north countries with 'permanent' work contracts that guaranteed associated benefits such as pension contributions, paid vacation and sickness leave (Hudson-Sharp and Runge 2017). We found it useful to draw on wider uses of the notion of precarity beyond the strict correlation with employment contracts, widening to people's experience or feelings of insecurity or destabilisation, of 'slipping over the edge', which could characterise experience in a range of aspects of life

(Ettlinger 2007). Following Judith Butler (2006, 2009a, 2009b), we defined precarity as *social* when it is not simply the product of accident (e.g. slipping on an icy pavement) but is connected to, or indeed induced by, wider sociopolitical policies and practices (e.g. being moved onto a 'zero hours' contract,[1] or falling foul of tightened policies around visa regulation as a 'Tier 4' student[2]). As Butler (2006), Isabell Lorey (2015) and others have been keen to stress, social precarity can be experienced by a wide range of people but is more likely to be felt (and experienced more severely) by those in less advantaged groups in society.

Of course, and as we have already discussed in this chapter, academia has never been a place of secure employment for those differing from the hegemonic conception of the typical 'ideal' scholar, in terms of identity markers such as 'race', social class and gender (see. e.g. Mirza 1995; Reay 2004; Leathwood and Read 2009; Maylor 2009). The dynamics of precarisation exacerbate these pre-existing patterns of inequality, for example the UK's Equality Challenge Unit (2015) analysis found that women, under-35s, disabled and Black and minority ethnic academics are more likely to be on temporary and/or 'teaching-only' contracts.

What are the implications of processes of precarisation for the production of knowledge? A growing number of studies describe the negative effects of the consequences of employment precarity on the quality and quantity of an academic's work. In the 2010/11 study we conducted with over 70 academics, we found that having time to write and publish was a source of anxiety, especially for those on insecure contracts. Pippa for example stated:

> A part-time hourly paid worker is like a temp. She only gets paid for the actual hours worked and so Christmas, Easter and summer are unpaid. There is no time to write or publish because she has to try to find work during these unpaid months. This ends up being almost half of the year when you add it all up. Such stress and anxiety also means that you cannot do your job very well. In my first year as a teacher I had insomnia and panic attacks. (Pippa, Senior Lecturer)

Establishing a specialism was also a key concern. For example, Faye (a Research Fellow in a research-intensive university) stated:

> In part the dilemma is balancing priorities. As a 'contract' researcher once one project finishes (and often before) you have moved to another project and the 'headspace' to write from the former project is less easy to find…[Due to working in a variety of different areas] I feel a confident and experienced researcher but my ability to see myself as a 'specialist' in one specific area is much harder. It is that degree of specialism that leads to really high quality publication. (Faye, Research Fellow)

The importance placed on developing 'a specialism of one's own' is linked to what is often described as 'traditional' or 'collegium' models of the academic role, with an emphasis on the academic as an ethically independent researcher free to conduct research without constraints from institutional or external political entities, and that

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[1] Zero hours contracts are employment contracts with no guaranteed hours of work.

[2] International students are required to apply for a 'tier 4' visa in order to be allowed to study in the UK, with higher education institutions mandated to monitor tier 4 students' attendance/engagement with their course.

might have no immediate utilitarian value (Read and Leathwood 2018; also Leathwood 2013). Quite apart from the argument that the ideal of the academic 'disinterested pursuit of the truth' has never been disinterested, nor able to produce the truth, it was also clear in our study that participants were heavily influenced by an alternative discursive construction of the academic produced through a neoliberal lens. In this construction of the academic, and academic knowledge, what is most highly valued is research that that can be judged and evaluated to be 'high quality' through the metrics of research audit (as is implied by Faye's last sentence above). 'Making the grade' in this regard was a pervasive source of anxiety for a substantial number of our participants, tied as it was to the ability to possibly secure, or retain, a permanent contract that will allow for paid research time. The relentless cycle then continues, as – if successful in acquiring or keeping this research time – academics then feel constrained to continue to utilise this time to produce the forms of knowledge, and the formats in which it should be packaged, that will again allow them to 'make the grade' in the next audit on the horizon.

Although there is no simplistic equation between a person's gender, social class position or ethnicity and the focus or political nature of their work, two key developments impact negatively on research. Firstly, the greater number of women, working-class and minority ethnic academics on insecure contracts that negatively impact on their ability to conduct the research they would ideally like to specialise in. Secondly, the constraints academics reportedly feel in terms of 'playing safe' with the sorts of (politically mainstream) topics and (quantitative, large-scale) research designs that are more likely to attract research funding. These developments combine to paint a research landscape in which more critical research, with innovative qualitative methodologies, conducted by academics from a rich diversity of backgrounds and experience, becomes less and less likely to be realised.

In this context, it is those with the greatest material, social and cultural security (predominantly privileged White men on secure and more senior contracts in the elite universities in the Global North) that are more able to determine/define research topics and questions to be asked, and to produce the knowledge that becomes legitimised in the global academy.

## Gender and precarity in academia – consequences for the curriculum

Our next collaboration involved a research project looking more specifically at casualised contracts, with a focus this time on the possible impact of this for academics' teaching and their relationships with students (see Leathwood and Read 2020; Read and Leathwood 2020). The research, conducted in 2017/18, involved qualitative email interviews with 20 UK-based academics who were on some form of insecure academic contract, including fixed-term and hourly paid. Of particular

relevance here are the participants' accounts of their perceptions of the implications of their contractual status on their teaching and curriculum preparation, with the marginalisation that they experienced as casualised staff and the insecure short-term nature of their employment underpinning most of the issues they raised. A major concern was what we identified as a 'last-minute modality', with many participants reporting, for example, last minute issuing of contracts or only receiving notification of their teaching shortly before they were expected to take a module. Olivia, for example, explained:

> I was also not told I was convening an additional module until I arrived back this week – there was no forewarning or handover or time to prepare and many colleagues in my position have experienced similar issues.

Participants reported that they were often expected to teach on someone else's module, frequently with very little time to prepare. For example, Julia revealed that she would wait up until late in the evening for the module convenor to send her the teaching plan for her 9am session the following morning, and if it hadn't arrived by midnight, she would get up very early the next day in order to prepare for her teaching. Concerns were expressed not only about the overall quality of what they were able to offer to students but also about the lack of time and opportunity to be innovative or to update the knowledge base of the teaching sessions. Jane, for example, explained that because of the last-minute notification of her teaching, she had been unable to change a module that was 'very White and male', whilst Jennifer reported trying her best to 'decolonise and genderise' a sociological theory module 'which was the usual Durkheim and his White-man gang', but her arrival shortly before the start of term made this difficult.

The use of short-term temporary contracts for academic staff therefore has serious implications for the curriculum, with students potentially denied access to innovative and critical knowledges.

## Gender, knowledge, and challenges from right-wing populism/authoritarianism

Another developing dynamic in relation to gender and academic knowledge that we had not previously focused on has been the rise in populist anti-intellectual rhetoric, accompanying a rise in the number of far right parties and leaders gaining power in Europe and the US, finding common cause with other far right/authoritarian leaders across the globe (see Clarke and Newman 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019). For many governments and political movements, the academy has long been seen as an obvious target, especially in relation to the attempt to (and in some cases success in) cracking down on dissent and critique of those in power either by academics themselves and/or student protest movements. Government constraints and crackdowns on the autonomy and 'academic freedom' of universities is of course pervasive globally; see e.g. recent developments in Turkey (Abbas and Zalta 2017; Aktas et al.

2019) and Egypt (SAR and AFTE 2019). Moreover, it is by no means a recent phenomenon (see Altbach 2001).

Academics such as Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2019) and Siri Hustvedt (2017) have situated the long-developing rise in the popularity of far right politics in many global north countries as part of a growing cultural backlash against the gains of civil rights, feminist and other equality activists in recent decades by those who feel that the privileges they might have once securely and unquestionably held, especially in terms of 'race', religion, gender and sexuality, are now uncomfortably challenged: epitomised by the oft-used metaphor that 'the pendulum has swung too far the other way'. For example, a pressure group called 'Stop Abusive and Violent Environments' stated that single-gender scholarships favouring women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields at US universities was an example that 'the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction' (Dutca-Lovell 2019).

Attacks on 'liberal elites' can include a complex mix of inegalitarian discursive rhetoric that not only invokes an obvious racism, nativism and xenophobia, but also includes a gendered strain invoking a particular kind of macho anti-intellectualism that targets critical progressive academics and academic work from a number of different angles.

In relation to higher education, the implicit misogyny, as well as racism, of right-wing attacks on 'political correctness on campus' are epitomised by the ridiculing of practices such as 'safe spaces', trigger warnings, and 'no platforming' (a protest against the invitation of an external speaker). This became the topic of a paper by one of us (Read 2018), where a comparison was made between the 'macho' masculinity of rhetoric against weak 'snowflake' students who could not tolerate alternative views, with the older discourse of 'neutral disinterested objective knowledge' traditionally espoused as the ultimate purpose of the university. As we have discussed throughout this chapter, this second discourse is actually highly gendered, classed and 'racialised'. And the discursive construction of liberal/progressive students as intolerant 'snowflakes' adds a further and more explicitly aggressive tenor to the long-established critique of research on the left as biased, and anti-racist and feminist intellectuals as too strident and aggressive for the academy.

These discursive constructions can have a 'chilling' effect on the types of knowledge produced and taught at university that is akin to, and also distinct in some ways from, the constraints and pressures of neoliberal performativity described earlier. In the guise of standing up for 'free speech', government leaders such as Donald Trump can threaten, for example, to withdraw federal funding for universities such as UC Berkeley (Reilly 2017), and websites can be established where students are encouraged to report lecturers who they believe to be too politically biased (Matthews 2019) – moves akin to the 'chilling' effect of UK's 'Prevent duty' strategy (see Nagdee 2019). In relation to gender, feminist academics, along with minority ethnic colleagues, have increasingly been the target of relentless trolling on social media in an attempt to undermine or silence their discussions – Karla Mantilla (2013, p. 565) argues that what she terms 'gendertrolling' 'nearly always occurs in

response to women speaking out about some form of sexism.' Such attacks only continue in intensity in the aftermath of global movements such as MeToo (Orchard 2019), and are not always overtly vitriolic, or even from the right. Moira Donegan (2019) notes that backlashes to MeToo and other feminist and progressive movements are often 'cloaked in the rhetoric of reasonableness and respectability':

> In other words, the backlash could be thought of as a return to familiar social and intellectual habits, habits that subvert justice but which are comforting to the powerful. Among these habits are that of depicting women as incompetent and untrustworthy, of thinking of men as honorable and incapable of meaning any harm, of thinking of feminists as unreasonable, and their calls for men to think more about the emotions, rights and desires of women as unreasonable, even totalitarian. (Donegan 2019)

Interestingly, Prince Andrew, a member of the UK royal family, recently claimed his 'mistake' in continuing a friendship with a convicted child sex offender (Jeffrey Epstein) was due to his being 'too honourable' (Baynes 2019).

There are obvious connections here to the traditional hegemonic academic discourse of the 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' of knowledge that we have argued above is actually highly masculinised, and often invoked implicitly or explicitly to undermine academic knowledge that challenges established inequalities of power, for example the dismissal of feminist and anti-racist critical work as 'identity politics' (see the discussion in Alcoff and Mohanty 2006), without a recognition that this critique serves the identity interests of those who sense their privilege is challenged. In this age of increasing attacks on academic freedom from the far right, it is crucial to note that the academic discourse that one of us (Read 2018, p. 594) labelled 'Ivory Tower rationalist' continues to powerfully undermine the 'academic freedom' of alternative perspectives in the name of objectivity and the search for 'truth'.

## Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed and revisited some of the work we have conducted over the last ten years on the topic of gender and the politics of knowledge in the academy. As such, there is much in relation to the topic that we have had to leave out or condense because our work has inevitably concentrated on specific issues and geographic areas. A key area of focus we are aware we have not paid due attention to as yet is the gendered politics of knowledge in relation to the global south. We have attempted to draw on studies and authors from around the globe where possible and appropriate (the topic of academic precarity for example is one that does not translate well into many global south contexts, where 'precarity has arguably always been the norm even if it has not been called by this name': Millar, K. 2017, p. 6). Nevertheless there are pressing issues relating to gender and knowledge in these regions that have not been covered here, for example the difficulties of pursuing feminist critical work beyond policy rhetoric of parity and the more technicised strategies of gender mainstreaming (Hale 2009; Mama 2011); continuing north–south inequalities that can be manifest, for example, in terms of the continued limits

on access to academic publications under paywalls, and continuing 'epistemological racism' (Connell 2007; Fennell and Arnot 2008; Almeida 2015) whereby the work of scholars from the global south are often marginalised or ignored in the north.

Threading throughout the chapter has been the complexities of the gendered dynamics of power in relation to the production, teaching and learning of knowledge in the academy. In doing so, our aim has been to contribute to discussions in this volume and beyond that aim to problematise the notion of the university, and the academic knowledge it produces, as an uncritical, universal public good. Critical, intersectional and transnationalist feminist educational work more broadly has made an enormous contribution to the public good by focusing on issues such as the minimisation of inequalities both inside and beyond the campus and school gates, and the valuing and inclusion of diverse identities and diverse knowledges. Nevertheless, beyond the surface statistics of women undergraduates 'taking over the university', just what can be considered valid knowledge, and who are considered to be valid, legitimate and appropriate knowers, continues to be a site of ongoing contestation and struggle.

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# Chapter 11
# Curriculum Diversity and Social Justice Education: From New Labour to Conservative Government Control of Education in England

Check for updates

**Uvanney Maylor** [iD]

**Abstract** A retrospective lens is applied in this chapter to understand former New Labour government's reasoning for advocating an ethnically diverse curriculum to be delivered in English schools; the role it saw the National Curriculum as playing in British society and in raising the attainment of ethnically diverse groups; together with how such expectations led to the commissioning of two National Curriculum diversity reports. Drawing on social justice perspectives, the chapter discusses how New Labour's emphasis on recognising ethnically diverse students and British identities in the curriculum was rejected by subsequent Coalition and Conservative governments in favour of the negative positioning of student diversity through the Prevent agenda under the guise of threats to national security. The chapter concludes with discussion of the 'public good' and how an ethnically diverse curriculum can enhance the equality both of opportunity and of outcomes.

## Introduction

In 2005, London was brought to a standstill by the bombing of the London underground train system carried out by a group of young British Muslim men. This occurred at a time when the New Labour government, who were in power at the time, were already concerned about community cohesion between the majority White British population and Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslim communities in three northern English towns (Oldham, Burnley, Bradford) where riots had occurred between these communities in 2001. Commissioned by the British government to investigate the cause of the northern town riots, Ted Cantle (2001) found that White British and Muslim communities were living polarised lives and using different

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services, including those for education. This led Cantle (2001, p. 11) to argue that local community cohesion plans should be developed, which 'foster understanding and respect, and break down barriers'. He went on, 'the opportunity should be taken to develop a programme of "myth busting"'. Given this recommendation, it is unsurprising that after the London bombings the New Labour government saw a greater urgency in schools in England developing their understanding of the factors undermining community cohesion, particularly amongst school students.[1] As such, New Labour wanted schools to develop aspects of the curriculum in English schools which promoted an understanding of ethnic and cultural diversity, and of inclusive British identities that encompassed both majority and minority ethnic communities. The government saw such knowledge as both necessary and essential to 'serving the public good', and in the best interest of society. In other words, the survival of a cohesive society depended on the development of such knowledge, but for this to be accepted by educationalists across the country an educational research study (outlined below) was needed to inform the government's approach.

In examining curriculum diversity, this chapter focuses on the English education system, primarily because England is the most ethnically diverse of the constituent UK countries (i.e. Scotland, Wales, England, Northern Ireland), with over 20% of the population from a minority ethnic background (ONS 2012), and it has the largest numbers of school students from minority ethnic communities attending primary (33.5%) and secondary (31.3%) schools (DfE 2019f), as outlined in Table 11.1.

Equally important, after Asian[2] students, Table 11.1 shows that the next largest minority ethnic group studying in English schools are 'White non-British pupils'

**Table 11.1** Percentage of pupils by ethnic origin in state-funded schools in England

| Ethnicity | Primary | Secondary |
| --- | --- | --- |
| White British | 65.5 | 67.0 |
| White non-British | 8.1 | 6.2 |
| Asian | 11.2 | 11.3 |
| Black | 5.5 | 6.0 |
| Mixed | 6.3 | 5.5 |
| Chinese | 0.5 | 0.4 |
| Any other | 2.0 | 1.9 |
| Unclassified | 1.0 | 1.7 |

Source: DfE (2019f)

[1] The UK government only has responsibility for education in England (powers are devolved to the governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), but assumes a responsibility for 'British Identity'.

[2] 'Asian' in Britain usually refers specifically to people of South Asian heritage (Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans). Government surveys (e.g. DfE 2020) that collect ethnicity data from those willing to give it currently obtain data according to the primary group 'Asian or Asian British', and then the secondary groups 'Indian', 'Pakistani', 'Bangladeshi', and 'Any other Asian background'. 'Chinese' is a separate category, not included in Asian. This is different from usages in other countries; for example, in the USA, 'Asian' is used to refer to people of East Asian heritage.

which emphasises that diversity is not just related to skin colour. Alongside ethnic diversity, over 300 languages other than English are spoken by minority ethnic students in English schools (DfE 2018e). Such ethnic and linguistic diversity is not, however, evenly spread across all English schools: depending on geographical location, some English schools can be described as predominantly White and monolingual, some have a more even ethnic mix, whilst others are largely minority ethnic (ONS 2012). One of the challenges presented in educating ethnically diverse students is that the teaching profession in many parts of England is predominantly White[3] (NASUWT 2017; DfE 2020), and while some may have experience/understanding of ethnic and cultural diversity present in England, this is not true of all teachers (Maylor et al. 2003; Maylor et al. 2006; Lander, 2014), and some parents are wary of the school community becoming any less White (Maylor 2019).

The New Labour government's concern about teachers' and school students' understanding of cultural diversity and community cohesion, discussed in more detail in the following section, led to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) commissioning two studies: Keith Ajegbo et al. (2007) and Uvanney Maylor et al. (2007). Maylor's team were appointed to provide a literature review and case study research to support the work of Ajegbo et al.*'s* Diversity and Citizenship Curriculum Review Group. The research brief covered:

- curriculum diversity, identity construction and conceptions of British identities in published literature;
- where and how the National Curriculum provided insights into ethnic and cultural diversity and British identities (local and national);
- how teachers used the National Curriculum to promote school students' understanding about the UK as an ethnically and culturally diverse society and its longstanding[4] nature; and
- how the citizenship education curriculum (predominantly taught in secondary schools) facilitated students' understanding of British identities as comprising both majority White and people from Black and Minority Ethnic[5] (BME)

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[3] Workforce data collected by the Department for Education (2020) in England show that in 2018, 85.1% of classroom teachers identified as White British and 5.6% as White Irish/Other: 90.7% White in total.

[4] Black people are not recent arrivals to the UK as it is often assumed. Black Africans first arrived in England as soldiers in the Roman army in the third century, 350 years before the English are known to have been in England. Black Africans have been recorded in England in greater numbers since the Elizabethan times – and not all were in subservient positions or enslaved, often they were skilled and highly regarded craftspeople; an example of which is the King's trumpeter, John Blanke in the early sixteenth century (of whom there are two portraits). There is historical evidence of Black Africans having married English natives, which means that many 'White' Britons today will have at least one of them as a (distant) ancestor of Black Africans. A detailed analysis of the history of Black people in the UK can be found in Fryer (2018).

[5] Black and Minority Ethnic refers to people who would describe themselves as Black African, African–Caribbean, Mixed White and Black, Black Other; Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Mixed White and Asian (ONS 2012).

backgrounds, and the contributions of BME communities to the development of the UK (economically and culturally).

Preoccupied with engendering a British identity through the school curriculum, the New Labour government sought through this study to understand teachers' and senior management's perceptions of the viability of adding a 'British identities and [common] British values' strand to the secondary citizenship curriculum, and what that content might entail. At that time the government had not defined British values, though a speech by Tony Blair in 1997 offers some indications of their thinking: he said his party had the values of 'compassion; of social justice; of the struggle against poverty and inequality; of liberty; of basic human solidarity; and … these are indeed the best of British values too' (Blair 1997).

Maylor et al.'s (2007) study comprised six school case studies (three primary, three secondary) conducted in regions that were both predominantly White (e.g. the North East, South West) and ethnically diverse (e.g. East and West Midlands, the South East) – locations based on census data current at the time. This range of ethnic diversity allowed for student and teacher experience of multi-ethnic Britain and British identities to be examined alongside their experience of an ethnically diverse curriculum. A qualitative interpretive approach (Cresswell 2013) was adopted with in-depth interviews conducted with 15 teachers and focus group discussions with 95 students (of whom 51 defined themselves as White British and the rest variously identified as White European and BME).

This chapter sets out New Labour's policies at the time of the research, Maylor et al.'s findings and how these resulted in policy changes. It explores the benefits of a social justice approach in implementing an ethnically diverse school curriculum to enhance BME student attainment. The change in policy relating to diversity following the election of a Coalition government in 2010 is discussed. The chapter concludes with a review of the ways in which curriculum diversity should be perceived as a 'public good'.


## New Labour and curriculum diversity and Maylor et al.'s findings

Following the findings of Cantle (2001), the New Labour government was aware that the National Curriculum was ethnocentric, and encouraged schools to cover culture and ethnic diversity within the core curriculum subjects (English, mathematics and science) as well as in history, citizenship education and religious education. New Labour's emphasis was then on recognising the identities of both ethnically diverse and British students in the curriculum (Maylor et al. 2009). To foster knowledge in this area amongst teachers, continuing professional development sessions were funded by Local Education Authorities. For trainee teachers and teacher educators New Labour funded the development of culturally diverse teaching resources (creating culturally relevant knowledge and skills concerning race and ethnicity,

social class, bi/multilingual learners, religious diversity, Refugees and Asylum seekers, Travellers and Gypsy Roma, and challenging racism) and exemplar scenarios through the Multiverse initiative,[6] a professional resource network for initial teacher education delivered by eight higher education institutions across England. Thus there were already attempts to ensure a culturally diverse curriculum was provided.

However, while Maylor et al. (2007) found that some schools did deliver a diverse curriculum especially through the subjects of English, history, geography, art, music and citizenship education, this was not the norm. This was in spite of the fact that some 20 years earlier the Department for Education and Science, through the Swann report (1985), had recommended implementation of a culturally diverse National Curriculum across England with a key aim to foster the attainment of African-Caribbean students, who were at the time drastically underachieving compared with White British students. Crucially, some teachers were not aware that the National Curriculum could be disapplied, so as to deliver a diverse curriculum. In some cases a diverse curriculum was not delivered because some schools did not think students in predominantly White areas needed to experience a culturally diverse curriculum, or increase their knowledge about the length of time BME communities had lived in the UK, or about the contribution such groups had made to the economic and social development of the UK. Implementing a diverse curriculum was also thought to detract from time schools felt could be better spent on enabling students to achieve higher grades in standard assessment tests in primary and general certificate in secondary education (GCSE)[7] examinations in secondary schools.

A key finding by Maylor et al. (2007) came from the classroom observations in case study schools, which suggested that some White teachers were more interested in BME students' 'unique' origins such as being from Southeast Asia or the Caribbean. For example, in one lesson observation the teacher made 21 references to 'the Caribbean' and wanted the students in the class to find the Caribbean island, 'St Lucia' on the world map, which the teacher referred to as a 'little dot'. In another lesson, a student who had been to the Caribbean '11 times' was called on to share his experiences of his Caribbean holiday visits, which he said that he was 'tired' of talking about. Although it might be argued that the teachers in the lessons observed were valuing student ethnic diversity through showcasing BME student experiences, their actions not only excluded White British and other identities, but suggested that the teachers were more reliant on the BME students present in the lessons rather than on researching and sharing information about the Caribbean and other countries which all students could benefit from.

Another key finding related to White British students, in both ethnically diverse and predominantly White schools, who felt that their British identities (i.e. Scottish, Welsh, English and Northern Irish) and experiences of cultural diversity in their

[6] Multiverse was government funded from 2003 to 2010. Funding ended when the new Conservative-led Coalition government was formed in England.

[7] GCSE examinations are taken at age 16.

locality, across England and in other countries, were either ignored or not sought by schools. This led them to feel that schools were only interested in BME students with different cultures to White British people, as two students explained:

> There's lots of different White people, there's Scottish, British, English … but like when they [teachers] say, 'What are your backgrounds?' we say, 'We're from England, we're White'. We don't say: 'Oh I'm half Scottish, I'm half Irish' because they're [teachers] not interested. It's not different … we don't learn about White people and their backgrounds, so we do feel a bit left out. (White female, aged 13/14)

> Being Welsh isn't anything that makes you different. (White male, aged 10/11)

Maylor et al. (2007) reported that some schools did not implement a diverse curriculum because they did not think students in predominantly White areas needed to experience a culturally diverse curriculum. Such an argument ignored both the importance of all students, wherever they live, learning about the cultural diversity within England, and the experience many White students in these schools had of diversity (for example, through travel in non-White countries for holidays, or having previously lived in ethnically diverse areas in England). A teaching opportunity was missed because the teachers concerned associated teaching about cultural diversity as only necessary for non-White groups.

The fact that British identities were ignored by some teachers was also noted by BME students. For example:

> We don't really talk about Scotland and that. We talk about other countries abroad. (Asian male, aged 8/9)

Advocates of a culturally diverse curriculum (e.g. Gay 2010; Banks 2016) have highlighted the importance of the diversity in White ethnicities being explored.

Maylor et al.'s (2007) findings contributed to recommendations by Ajegbo et al. (2007) for a whole school strategy to implement a diverse curriculum in both predominantly White and multi-ethnic schools. They also led to the recommendation of student knowledge being developed as to how ethnically diverse communities co-exist together, as there was a realisation through the case study schools that though White and BME students shared a school space, they often lived in segregated communities (Cantle 2001). Ajegbo stated:

> I believe issues around 'race', identity, citizenship and living together in the UK today are serious matters … I believe that schools, through their ethos, through their curriculum and through their work with their communities, can make a difference to those perceptions … We passionately believe that it is the duty of all schools to address issues of 'how we live together' and 'dealing with difference'. (Ajegbo, in Ajegbo et al. 2007, pp. 4–5)

Ajegbo's reference to 'dealing with difference' relates to ethnic, cultural and religious diversity being explored through the school curriculum. However, Ajegbo et al.*'s* recommendations were concentrated within the revised secondary citizenship curriculum, whereby emphasis was placed on 'Identities and Diversity: Living together in the UK', and teachers were encouraged to recognise diverse cultures and identities and promoting the interconnections between the UK, the rest of Europe and the wider world. Schools it was argued should 'establish what they currently

teach that is meaningful for all pupils in relation to diversity and multiple identities … and ensure that coverage is coherent' (Ajegbo et al. 2007, p. 9). In other words, the New Labour government associated exploration of 'diversity' and 'difference' with community cohesion rather than valuing diversity for its benefits to individual student learning. Arguably, Ajegbo et al. were building on recommendations by the Swann Report (Swann 1985) which had suggested 'inclusive multiculturalism' be experienced by majority and minority ethnic students so as to enable them to 'participate fully in shaping society …whilst also allowing, and where necessary assisting ethnic minority communities in maintaining their distinct ethnic identities' (Swann 1985, p. 5). More significantly, it was drawing strongly on the findings of Maylor et al. (2007): 'the curriculum needs to allow pupils to understand and appreciate diversity and its values, and that they have their own identities within this diversity. This is a sensitive and controversial area, in which teachers need to be given firm support to develop' (p. 9).

## New Labour's policy changes following Ajegbo et al.*'s* report

Ajegbo et al.*'s* Review findings were accepted by the Secretary of State for Education, and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) revised the National Curriculum for Citizenship education. The new 2007 programme of study included a new element, 'Identities and Diversity: Living together in the UK', in which citizenship was to support community cohesion. Key concepts closely reflect the conclusions of Maylor et al.:

- Appreciating that identities are complex, can change over time and are informed by different understandings of what it means to be a citizen in the UK.
- Exploring the diverse national, regional, ethnic and religious cultures, groups and communities in the UK and the connections between them.
- Considering the interconnections between the UK, the rest of Europe and the wider world.
- Exploring community cohesion and the forces that change in communities over time.

(QCA 2007, p. 7)

As David Kerr et al. (2008) state, the last strand 'considerably alters the focus of the citizenship curriculum, and makes explicit its role in educating for community cohesion' (p. 255). But the connection between the reports of Ajegbo et al. and Maylor et al. was not always evident: Audrey Osler (2008) complained of 'a lack of transparency in identifying the evidence base of the [Ajegbo et al.] review. Although Maylor and her colleagues explain their methods and the processes of data collection (2007, pp. 64–68), the Ajegbo et al. report does not make it explicit when it is drawing on Maylor's work' (Osler 2008, p. 18).

The revised National Curriculum took effect from the autumn of 2007, and was used for six years, to the summer of 2013. The QCA also produced cross-curricular guidance in 2009, in which 'identity and diversity' featured as one of seven dimensions to be considered by schools when designing and planning their whole curriculum.

Maylor et al. identified 'a lack of knowledge and understanding of diversity in initial teacher education and in continuing professional development … leading to teachers having a lack of confidence and a fear of getting things wrong' (2007, p. 26), and Ajegbo et al. repeated this as one of the report's key findings: 'there is insufficient effective teacher training – in Initial Teacher Training … [and] Continuing Professional Development' (2007, p. 7, Key finding 10). Consequently, when the Professional Standards for Teachers were revised by the Training and Development Agency for Schools[8] in 2007, 'tak[ing] practical account of diversity and promot[ing] equality and inclusion in their teaching' became one of the core standards (2007, p. 9).

The Maylor et al. review identified teacher concerns about the 'lack of books and resources that pertain to the particular ethnic make-up of the pupil population … teachers required books and other resources that "reflect society today" and not just White society' (2007, p. 79), and argued that this was 'not an area that can be developed simply by providing more information or more resources: teachers and schools need to understand the purposes of this approach' (p. 110). Ajegbo et al. duly recommended that 'subject associations… should compile databases of the best resources and develop new resources' (2007, p. 9), and the Department for Education and Skills subsequently commissioned the Association for Citizenship Teaching to produce *Identity, Diversity and Citizenship: A critical review of education resources* (2008).

Another aim of New Labour's education policy at this time was to raise attainment. Towards the end of 2007, the New Labour government introduced *The Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures* (DCSF 2007) which included goals for what every child should be achieving by 2020:

- every child ready for success in school, with at least 90% developing well across all areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile by age 5;
- every child ready for secondary school, with at least 90% achieving at or above the expected level in both English and mathematics by age 11; [and]
- every young person having the skills for adult life and further study, with at least 90% achieving the equivalent of five higher level GCSEs by age 19 and at least 70% achieving the equivalent of two A levels by age 19.

                                                                                    (DCSF 2007, p. 14).

The QCA, responsible for the National Curriculum, built on these goals: they described their implementation plans to the House of Commons Education Committee in a memorandum in March 2008. This envisaged the future role of the

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[8] The Training and Development Agency for Schools was at that time the body then responsible for the initial and in-service training of teachers in England.

National Curriculum in creating 'successful learners' (House of Commons Education Committee 2009, p. 3, para 1.3) with the programmes of study containing attainment targets for each subject (*ibid.*, p. 4, para 1.10). A key goal is to 'secure improved attainment, further involvement in education, employment or training' (*ibid.*, p 3, para. 1.4). To achieve this, a 'good personal knowledge of the learner is essential in setting challenging and realistic goals for progress and achievement' and is considered 'vital in driving up standards of achievement' (*ibid.,* p. 9, para. 4.2).

However, teachers' developing understanding of ethnic and cultural diversity were not prioritised as part of increasing standards of attainment. *The Children's Plan* noted that while some minority ethnic groups had low attainment, others did better than White British children, and the gaps between the low-attaining groups and White British children were narrowing. There was a commitment to monitor this closely, but there was no emphasis on the importance of a diverse and culturally relevant curriculum and what it offers.

The next sections discuss the arguments for a diverse curriculum and the potential benefits it offers; and set out the social justice framework that underpins the chapter. Following this, the changes of policy following the election of a Conservative-led coalition government in 2010 are outlined.

## Curriculum diversity

A diverse and meaningful curriculum has been shown to be critical in engaging students and enhancing their attainment.

A culturally diverse curriculum should invariably provide students with dialogic opportunities to discuss cultural similarities and differences within and across ethnic groups and which 'lead to the creation of new meanings' (Messiou 2019, p. 311; see also Banks 2016; Race 2016). American educationalists take a culturally diverse curriculum one step further and associate it with teacher commitment to culturally relevant/responsive teaching, which Geneva Gay defines as:

> using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students. Culturally responsive teaching is the behavioural expression of knowledge, beliefs, and values that recognize the importance of racial and cultural diversity in learning. It is contingent on a set of racial and cultural competencies [which include] seeing cultural differences as assets; creating caring learning communities where culturally different individuals and heritages are valued; using cultural knowledge of ethnically diverse cultures, families, and communities to guide curriculum development, classroom climates, instructional strategies, and relationships with students; challenging racial and cultural stereotypes, prejudices, racism, and other forms of intolerance, injustice, and oppression; being change agents for social justice and academic equity; mediating power imbalances in classrooms based on race, culture, ethnicity, and class; and accepting cultural responsiveness as endemic to educational effectiveness in all areas of learning for students from all ethnic groups. (Gay 2010, p. 31).

A diverse curriculum is conducive to students understanding how racialised identities are constructed, how individuals/groups develop a sense of belonging to the society they live in through the positive diverse images they encounter and experiences they have in common or different to majority and minority ethnic communities (Thomas 2015; Banks 2016). It is also conducive to enhancing student attainment, which is discussed later in this chapter.

The delivery of a truly culturally diverse/culturally responsive or recognitive (Fraser 2003) curriculum is, however, dependent on teacher knowledge of ethnically diverse communities; how diversity (including resources) can be applied in their subject area; and teacher confidence in responding to student queries and challenging/neutralising racist attitudes about particular ethnic groups (Macpherson 1999; Race 2018). Yet it is evident that not all teachers feel confident to teach ethnically diverse students (Pye et al. 2016) whilst some are fearful of talking about issues to do with 'race' (Leonardo 2009; Lander 2014).

Enhanced attainment can be achieved through making the curriculum academically demanding; utilising global teaching and learning materials because 'knowledge is not just a western construct'; and ensuring that students are provided with 'positive role models from different cultures' (Rashid and Tikly 2010, p. 30). Culturally relevant teaching and learning requires that teachers recognise individual student differences – social, cultural, ethnic, linguistic – and provide personally relevant learning experiences for the student population (Ladson-Billings 1995; Gay 2010; Nelson Laird 2011; Lee et al. 2012). Essentially, teachers adopting culturally relevant teaching and pedagogy need to make sure that 'the strengths students bring to school are identified, nurtured, and utilized to promote student achievement' (Richards et al. 2004, p. 3; see also Ladson-Billings 1995). High achievement is further facilitated by educators having high expectations of all students and challenging them 'to strive for excellence'. Richards et al. argue that 'teachers need to continually "raise the bar," giving students just the right amount of assistance to take them one step higher, thereby helping students to strive for their potential' (2004, p. 7).

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) contends that a key aim of a culturally relevant pedagogy is that students should ultimately experience academic success, which is facilitated by the cultural competence (i.e. knowledge of their own culture and that of others) they acquire. Essential to considering oneself as culturally competent is that students should not abandon their own culture in favour of adopting another's in order to secure academic success. This is contrary to expectations of an ethnocentric curriculum, which, in ignoring or not recognising the cultures of ethnically diverse students, suggests that educational success is best achieved through minority ethnic communities assimilating or absorbing or integrating into British society and an English curriculum. This also suggests that academic success is only associated with Whiteness, though such a contention is disavowed by the high achievement of students from Chinese and Indian communities in English schools (DfE 2019f). Chinese and Indian high achievement in English schools may in part reflect the higher expectations that teachers may have for these students compared with Black African-Caribbean students who persistently underachieve (Gillborn 2008;

Strand 2012; Gillborn et al. 2017) even where they have middle-class backgrounds (Rollock et al. 2014). Ladson-Billings (1995) contends that school support of minority ethnic cultures can support BME students' learning and does not conflict with high achievement. Being academically successful is also reliant on students who experience a culturally relevant curriculum developing critical consciousness; Ladson-Billings argues: 'Not only must teachers encourage academic success and cultural competence, they must help students to recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities' (Ladson-Billings 1995, p. 476; see also Maylor 2019).

Teachers are often fearful of introducing cultural diversity into an ethnocentric curriculum, especially where they do not think it can positively influence student attainment. However, Thomas Nelson Laird (2005) found that students who have positive education experiences of diversity in teaching and learning 'are more likely to score higher on academic self-confidence, social agency, and critical thinking disposition … [and] that diversity experiences may work together to foster development of certain aspects of self' (Nelson Laird 2005, pp. 384–385). Thus, a culturally diverse curriculum can underpin 'students' self-confidence in their academic abilities … [and] whether they view themselves as critical thinkers' (p. 382).

Implementing a diverse and culturally responsive curriculum is therefore an important step in working towards social justice in schools.

## Social justice: Challenging educational inequality

According to John Rawls, social justice is a function of:

> the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation. (Rawls 1971, p. 7).

Essentially, social justice is informed by the way that society and institutions are structured and organised and the ways in which individual liberties, equality of opportunity, rights, well-being, inclusion, access to resources and outcomes are emphasised (Lucca-Silveira 2016; Hibbert 2017). This is explained in more detail by Sally Hage et al. (2011, p. 2794):

> Social justice is generally defined as the fair and equitable distribution of power, resources, and obligations in society to all people, regardless of race or ethnicity, age, gender, ability status, sexual orientation, and religious or spiritual background. … Fundamental principles underlying this definition include values of inclusion, collaboration, cooperation, equal access, and equal opportunity. Such values are also the foundation of a democratic and egalitarian society. … In addition, a crucial link exists between social justice and overall health and well-being. For individuals, the absence of justice often represents increased physical and emotional suffering as well as greater vulnerability to illness. Furthermore, social justice issues and access to resources are also inexorably tied to collective well-being (e.g. relationships and political welfare) of families, communities, and society.

In trying to achieve social justice it is important to understand how society is structured and attempts to provide equal freedoms. For Rawls, the 'basic structure

of society is arranged so that it maximises the primary goods available to the least advantaged to make use of the central aims of … social justice' (2005, p. 326). He further contends that citizens have a collective responsibility to maintain 'the equal basic liberties and fair equality of opportunity and for providing a fair share of the primary goods for all within this framework' (*ibid.*, p. 189).

If, in Rawls' words, social justice should benefit the 'least advantaged', then, when applied to education, one would expect better outcomes for students who have experienced lower teacher expectations and/or who previously underachieved compared with the national average (Hytten and Bettez 2011; Woods et al. 2014). Education is a universal human right, and students have a right to be treated equally and fairly (Osler 2015) and to have equality of opportunity (Rawls 2005). Egalitarian principles seek to ensure that students have equal access to a good education and opportunities for advancement within the institution. Following Nancy Fraser (2003) and Annette Woods et al. (2014), educational social justice must be comprehended as both recognitive (recognition of diverse groups in education) and redistributive (of teaching and learning resources). 'Balancing a focus on the equitable redistribution of resources and ensuring there is recognition of the lifeworlds, experiences, values and beliefs of all children and their communities, is the way to progress toward the goal of a high quality, high equity education system' (Woods et al. 2014, pp. 511–12). Social justice applied in education in this way seeks to redress negative educational experiences and unequal educational outcomes (Kymlicka 2002; Blacker 2007); provides culturally responsive teaching (see Gay 2010, 2013); and calls for teachers to challenge educational inequalities, which include low teacher expectations and the disproportionate exclusion from school of Black students, especially in the UK and the USA (Gillborn 2008; Gay 2010; US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights 2014; Gillborn et al. 2017; Race Disparity Unit 2019).

Social justice, which seeks to challenge, reduce and ultimately eliminate societal injustices (Sen 2009), also underpins Amartya Sen's (1993) capabilities approach, which emphasises human well-being from the perspective of individual freedom of choice, and the freedom to achieve what individuals value. Studying how people function and the activities they perform, Sen (1992) considers individual well-being to include their ability to be highly educated and to autonomously function as well-educated individuals in employment. Sen (1993, 2009) views the actions undertaken by individuals as integral to achieving social justice, but he also recognises that actions are performed within institutional contexts. Therefore, an individual's autonomous choices in education would need to be made in the context of institutional-based equal opportunities (Robeyns 2016).

The concept of social justice is not without criticism (Hytten and Bettez 2011; Lucca-Silveira 2016) because inequality is an expected outcome of neoliberalism and the operation of market forces in capitalist societies (Hayek 1976). Moreover, as the government expects school and higher education to produce a skilled workforce to occupy various employment roles, it is inevitable that some students complete their post/compulsory education with more qualifications and skills than others, especially where they have the benefit of additional economic, social and

cultural capital resources (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]; Lareau 2003; Xu and Hampden-Thompson 2012; Sy et al. 2013). Inevitably some students, through their advanced studies in college or university, the employment they undertake and the social class positions they occupy, will go on to reproduce further societal and educational inequality, mainly where they have the wherewithal to access schools with a proven track record to produce higher educational outcomes, regardless of whether this is their intention or not. The intersection of ethnicity and social class is of significance, given the propensity of middle-class parents – predominantly White – to disproportionally access schools with higher examination and test outcomes (Chapter 7, Hutchings 2021b). While inequality and unequal relations may be a permanent feature of capitalism, this does not however mean that we cannot strive for more equal educational outcomes for all students. It is notable that BME parents have invested considerable resources in private tuition and supplementary[9] schools for their children: this has undoubtedly contributed to the rising success of BME students in national testing and examinations (Maylor et al. 2009, 2013; Rollock et al. 2014). This is the value of a social justice perspective, as it advocates introspection and reform, suggests intervention strategies, facilitates consciousness raising and provides tools to challenge the status quo (Goodman et al. 2004; see also Hage et al. 2011; Hytten and Bettez 2011).

Education informed by a social justice/equity perspective requires teachers in White-dominated societies to develop an understanding of educational inequality and the factors including societal histories, power systems and pedagogical practices that contribute to unequal educational outcomes, especially for African-Caribbean students compared with majority White students. As Suanne Gibson observes:

> schools, colleges, universities, managerial procedures, practitioners, students, and general pedagogic practices stem from a hegemony which sees the world in one specific way – from the gaze and mind of a modernist, male, heterosexual, white, middle-class being. (Gibson 2015, p. 881)

Taking Gibson's comments about educators and education systems into account means that, if BME students are to get the most out of their education attendance, it is incumbent on teachers to comprehend the salience of equity-based pedagogy and consider how to include this in their teaching, and at the same time strive to ensure that all students (regardless of ethnicity or cultural background) have an equal

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[9] Supplementary schools are community-organised and community-led independent ventures, that operate outside of normal school hours for 2–3 h during the evening, and/or at the weekend usually on a Saturday. These schools prioritise extending BME students learning in the curriculum areas of mathematics, English and science, whilst reinforcing their cultural identities through cultural enrichment activities not offered in mainstream education and developing strategies to resist racism encountered in schools. Students are taught in small groups, pairs and one-to-one. Supplementary schools provide tuition via a mixture of no charge, parental donations and a small fee, which allows low-income parents to access these schools. For a detailed discussion and understanding of the impact of supplementary schools on the educational outcomes of BME students see Maylor et al. (2013).

opportunity to achieve to the best of their ability. Clearly, a national curriculum in any society is never delivered in a political vacuum as it will inevitably speak to the expectations of the government in power.[10] Notwithstanding this, Richards et al. point out that 'if instruction reflects the cultural and linguistic practices and values of only one group of students, then the other students are denied an equal opportunity to learn', whereas 'instruction that is culturally responsive addresses the needs of all learners' (Richards et al. 2004, p. 8). They make clear that teachers have 'a unique opportunity to either further the status quo or make a difference that will impact not only the achievement but also the lives of their students' (*ibid*.). For such impact to transpire in education Goodman et al. state that educators should 'prioritise social justice work, making it integral to the curriculum and not just an appendage to traditional academic programs' (Goodman et al. 2004, p. 829). Moreover, a social justice perspective believes that to be transformative teachers should be prepared to challenge:

> Where the curriculum falls short in addressing the needs of all students, teachers must provide a bridge; where the system reflects cultural and linguistic insensitivity, teachers must demonstrate understanding and support. In short, teachers must be culturally responsive, utilizing materials and examples, engaging in practices, and demonstrating values that include rather than exclude students from different backgrounds. (Richards et al. 2004, p. 8)

Gay (2013) identified two further challenges in delivering a culturally diverse/responsive curriculum and which support a social justice perspective. Firstly, teachers would have to 'replac[e] pathological and deficient perceptions of students and communities of color with more positive ones' (Gay 2013, p. 54). Secondly, in misunderstanding the purpose of a diverse curriculum:

> teachers may concentrate on only 'safe' topics about cultural diversity such as cross-group similarities and intergroup harmony, and ethnic customs, cuisines, costumes, and celebrations while neglecting more troubling issues like inequities, injustices, oppressions, and major contributions of ethnic groups to societal and human life. (Gay 2013, p. 57)

This suggests that delivery of an effective culturally diverse but socially just curriculum is dependent on teachers having in-depth knowledge of a range of issues experienced by ethnically diverse communities and a willingness and ability to effectively challenge inequities (Luke et al. 2011).

This chapter will go on to demonstrate that in 2020, the National Curriculum delivered in English schools remains ethnocentric and is not representative of all the different student ethnic groups attending schools in England. With a third and sometimes fourth (UK-born) generation of BME communities attending English schools, one has to ask why? Moreover, without experience of a diverse curriculum how can the persistent underachievement of African-Caribbean students (Gillborn et al. 2017) be effectively removed and their talent developed for future employment

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[10] In the UK, only schools that are funded through a Local Authority have to follow the National Curriculum. Other schools (academies and free schools) can 'follow a different curriculum' (https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school). However, most schools follow the National Curriculum because it is closely linked to the syllabuses for national tests and exams.

(McGregor-Smith 2017)? The next section will address these questions by exploring British government educational provision and priorities since 2010.

## Coalition and Conservative education policy and National Curriculum, 2010–2019

The New Labour government was replaced in 2010 by David Cameron's Coalition government (Conservative and Liberal Democrat), which returned to implementing an ethnocentric National Curriculum favouring White British students (the majority ethnic community). Cameron argued that 'multiculturalism' had failed in England and wider Europe. In his speech at the Munich security conference, he said, 'Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We've failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong'. He concluded 'instead of encouraging people to live apart, we need a clear sense of shared national identity that is open to everyone' (Cameron 2011). The failure of multiculturalism, he said, was evidenced by bombings across Europe – although he did not distinguish far-right terrorism (experienced in the UK and continental Europe[11]) as being underpinned by an ethnocentric way of being or White supremacist ideals, which reject recognition of and educating about ethnically diverse cultures.

Such criticisms are not confined to the UK: Magdelena Lesińska (2014, p.37) argues that European leaders 'describe "multiculturalism" – portrayed as uncritical acceptance of cultural diversity – as a failure, and suggest more "realistic" (read: less tolerant, more assimilationist) policy strategies'.

To this end Cameron sought to implement education policies that promoted integration and asserted a more unitary sense of Britishness. His Munich speech was widely interpreted as meaning that he regarded an ethnically diverse curriculum as encouraging BME communities to maintain their 'minority' home, culture and identity to the exclusion or ignoring of White British culture and identity (Race 2016, p. 12, pp. 211–12). The ONS (2012) records several areas in the UK as being 'White' and there is evidence of 'White flight' when BME groups move into an area (Maylor 2019). Yet remarkably Coalition and Conservative politicians never question White identities or describe White individuals and families who opt to live and maintain lives separate from BME communities as being segregationist.

In 2014 the National Curriculum was revised by the Coalition government (DfE 2014b); these changes were maintained when the Conservative government took over in 2015, and this version is currently used in English schools. These changes were implemented in the face of the desire of most teachers to retain certain aspects

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[11] In 2011, Cameron would have been familiar with for example, the bombing carried out by Anders Breivik a far-right Norwegian terrorist, who in July 2011, killed 77 people many of whom were aged 16–22.

of the previous National Curriculum. In a consultation exercise on the proposed changes, 61% of those expressing an opinion on Citizenship wanted it to be retained: they 'believed that pupils should learn about … the challenges of living in a diverse society [and] that it was essential to retain a statutory Programme of Study to ensure that issues such as racism, discrimination, diversity and inclusion were covered by all schools, in all year groups' (DFE 2013c, pp. 29–30). The changes that were implemented reflect an assimilationist curriculum, which dates back to the 1960s when migrant children from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent were being educated in English schools and there was an expectation that this would be done without reference to students' culture (Race 2018).

Only two subjects make explicit reference to diversity: history and citizenship education. Citizenship education allows for developing insights into:

> diverse national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom and the need for mutual respect and understanding, the different ways in which a citizen can contribute to the improvement of his or her community. (DfE 2013d, p. 3)

The history curriculum promotes an understanding of different societies through students studying the 'diversity of societies and relationships between different groups, as well as their own identity and the challenges of their time', and 'how Britain has influenced and been influenced by the wider world; know and understand significant aspects of the history of the wider world: the nature of ancient civilisations' (DfE 2014b, p. 82). However, the history curriculum is considered problematic (e.g. Olusoga 2020). First, for secondary aged students it becomes an optional subject from age 14, so there is no guarantee that students will maintain an interest. Second, positive contributions of Black communities to the development of British society (e.g. Olusoga 2017; Fryer 2018) tend to be restricted to one month of the academic year – 'Black history month' (October) – and for the rest of the time emphasis is placed on Black experiences of slavery. This restricted pattern had been the subject of a prominent complaint by students in the study by Maylor et al. (2007), and had not changed. Additionally, teachers are required as part of the Equality Act (2010) and schools' equality duty to 'take account of their duties under equal opportunities legislation that covers race … religion or belief' (DfE 2014b, para. 4.2) but it is not evident how this should materialise within the National Curriculum and the pedagogical content to be taught. More explicit is the secondary National Curriculum's requirement for students aged 11–14 to develop:

> understanding of democracy, government and the rights and responsibilities of citizens', … the precious liberties enjoyed by the citizens of the United Kingdom, the nature of rules and laws and the justice system, including the role of the police and the operation of courts and tribunals, the roles played by public institutions and voluntary groups in society, and the ways in which citizens work together to improve their communities. (DfE 2014b, p. 71)

This underpins the government's desires for common British values and identities to be followed, and for these to be regulated by a National Curriculum that denies, subjugates and ignores the knowledge, cultures and values of minority ethnic communities (Osler 2015). As noted by Richard Seltzer et al. conservative educationalists view a culturally diverse curriculum as 'creat[ing] unhealthy divisions

between groups [and] betray[ing] the true purpose of education' (Seltzer et al. 1995, p. 124), which is to equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in employment.

Rather than providing opportunities to explore diverse cultures present in the UK, the Coalition government advocated a National Curriculum which emphasised (through the subject of citizenship education) teaching about inclusive British identities (encompassing White British, Black and minority ethnic communities) and British values, defined as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs (DfE 2014c). 'Britishness' continues to be associated by many in BME and White communities as 'White' (e.g. Gilroy 1987; Maylor 2010). Schools are required to promote British identities (but not how, for example, Black and Asian people come to be defined as British, or even how long Black people have had a presence in England), and 'fundamental British values' as part of students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (DfE 2014c). Arguably, the British government conflated British identity with British values, and this possibly accounts for diversity not permeating the whole curriculum as advocated by James Banks (2016).

Similarly committed to the promotion of British values and engendering commitment to British identities, the current Conservative government (from 2015) applies sanctions to schools through the Prevent Strategy (UK Home Office 2011; DfE 2015c), a counter-terrorism measure which is designed to promote community cohesion. Compliance with this is secured through the schools inspectorate (Ofsted). Schools are downgraded as a sanction measure when they are deemed to have transgressed in this area (Maylor 2019). Ultimately, the British government expects that, through engendering belief in British values and British identities, minority ethnic groups will regard themselves as British and an integral part of British society, and that this will eliminate any threats to community cohesion. However, research suggests that students' experience of education and sense of belonging in educational institutions is informed by their culture and ethnicity (Ireland et al. 2018) and where recognition of their culture and ethnicity is absent this is likely to negatively impact on their sense of belonging/inclusion and attainment outcomes (Read et al. 2003; Johnson et al. 2007; Thomas 2015). In following an integrationist discourse in which the emphasis is on integrating BME students into the British population (Cantle 2012; Race 2016, 2018), and an assimilationist National Curriculum (Arora 2005) in which cultural differences are not recognised and minority ethnic groups are expected to assimilate/absorb the majority White British culture (Arora 2005), both the Coalition and Conservative governments failed to understand that a culturally diverse curriculum is necessary if xenophobia, racism and hostility towards minority ethnic communities are to be challenged (Banks 2016). A diverse curriculum is also crucial to raising student attainment.

## Conclusions: Education for the 'public good'

Gay (2013) argues that educational underachievement will not be addressed if the difficulties encountered are merely restated: constructive strategies have to be employed. Therefore, a culturally diverse/relevant teaching approach, as advanced here, is necessary to reverse the lower attainment of all ethnic groups where this occurs. The significance of such an approach cannot be underestimated. The extent to which ethnically diverse students connect with the school curriculum requires an understanding of the number of different ethnicities (even amongst White students) present in school classrooms, and of the ways in which they connect (or not) with various aspects of the curriculum, and the type of support or interventions required to help them to fulfil their academic potential. This requires further research and evaluation of successful interventions.

The political context and fears which underpin the British government's maintenance of an ethnocentric National Curriculum, and its continued emphasis on British identities and British values, has not lessened as terrorist attacks (such as those at the Manchester Arena in 2017, and London Bridge in 2017, 2019) have continued in England. These attacks, together with racial incidents in schools (Youth Select Committee 2016; Busby 2017) reinforce perceptions of ethnic divisions rather than of community cohesion in England, and it is likely that the UK exit (31 December 2020) from the European Union will further exacerbate such tensions. Clearly, terrorism is a real and actual threat in England, and is carried out as much by far-right racist nationalists as it is by Islamist extremists, and arguably, is used by the British government to justify an ethnocentric National Curriculum, in the same way that it emphasises British values being taught in English schools (Maylor 2016). Notwithstanding, without a genuine understanding of the different cultural groups in English schools and wider UK, facilitated through a culturally diverse National Curriculum, it is not just minority ethnic attainment gaps which will be difficult to close but generating meaningful cultural insights and knowledge will remain challenging, if not impossible. This assertion is supported by my experience at a conference in 2020 where I was invited to speak on the topic of 'supporting Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students'. I discussed the need for teachers to have a better understanding of BAME backgrounds and cultures to effectively teach and meet their attainment needs. Afterwards a White British headteacher of a school in London asked me, 'where can teachers learn about student ethnic diversity?' If a headteacher of a school in an ethnically diverse area of the UK does not have such knowledge, it is less likely that teachers in predominantly White areas will have such insights. It is also unlikely that there will be greater community cohesion, especially as minority and majority ethnic communities in many parts of England still live in segregated areas (ONS 2012), and as found in Maylor et al. (2007), student and staff experience of ethnic diversity can be limited to a narrow radius of one or two miles. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that implementing a diverse curriculum, whilst also maintaining intellectually rigorous standards, can be difficult even where teachers seek to recognise ethnically diverse students in

the curriculum. A longitudinal study by Woods et al. (2014) illustrates that delivering such a curriculum and seeing achievement gains may take between three and five years, but this should not mean that efforts should not be made to revise the curriculum. What is needed is actual political will and deep commitment as well as 'whole school' approaches.

To return to the concept of the 'public good'. Governments worldwide spend much of their time making pronouncements on measures they will implement as part of the 'public good'. In the context of the focus of this chapter, it might be assumed that a culturally diverse/relevant curriculum will only benefit BME student communities and therefore is a waste of government resources, and as such is not for the 'public good'. Such a view is however undermined by the responses of White British people in Maylor et al. (2007), which poignantly illuminated how White British students craved for recognition of their own ethnic identities and backgrounds, and for this to be explored within the school curriculum, so that they too would feel included and valued. Everyone belongs to at least one ethnic group; where heritages are mixed the number of ethnic groups may vary. Social justice in multi-ethnic societies demands that all ethnic groups are represented within the National Curriculum and that such inclusion is deemed essential for the 'public good'. For knowledge to be enhanced to benefit the 'public good', it is necessary that everyone is included within the pedagogy applied and experiences shared. Moreover, what is determined to be for the 'public good' should be agreed by all, not one group (such as the government) alone, as this will mean that the group with the greater voice will have power over the other, and this cannot be for the 'public good' in any society. That said, the American Educational Research Association entitled its 2020 annual conference: 'Power and possibilities for the public good'. Significant in this title is the word 'power' and what power enables for the 'public good'. There is an assumption here that without power, change is impossible. Yet supplementary schools - which are accessed outside of compulsory schooling (see footnote 9 ) - demonstrate that the power to reduce educational inequity experienced by some BME communities is not confined to policymakers, and that educational change does not only occur in mainstream school contexts. Saliently underpinned by philosophies similar to those held by historically Black colleges and universities in America, Black supplementary schools in England create learning environments that affirm human capacities and encourage high academic achievement which serve to challenge contentions of Black educational inferiority (Hotchkins and Dancy 2015; Mwangi 2016; Tafari et al. 2016). As a Black parental educational strategy, Black supplementary schools are integral to Black students' ability to not only achieve highly, but to resist institutional racism and potential school exclusion (Maylor et al. 2013; Andrews 2013; Musoke 2016). Supplementary schools have been shown to be transformative and instrumental to the educational re-engagement especially of young Black men who have been excluded from mainstream schools, and enabling them to survive and succeed in school and higher education (Wright et al. 2021).

Before concluding this chapter it is useful to consider how best educational research serves to justify, challenge, or change existing teaching/curriculum

practices, and the extent to which the Maylor et al. 2007 study changed or refined the starting points of researcher concern for 'the public good'? One of the best ways in which educational research seeks to challenge existing classroom practices outside of being adopted by policymakers is through widespread dissemination. Findings from Maylor et al. (2007) have been widely shared in the UK and internationally with academics in higher education through conferences and seminar presentations, and individual and group discussions as the findings and the need for social justice in English education are still relevant today.

Has the Maylor et al. (2007) study changed or refined my starting points of concern for education as the 'public good'? My conceptualisation has been refined to a degree as the finding that White British students felt excluded from the school curriculum/classroom was surprising and has stayed with me. Therefore, when I raise issues about the absence of a culturally diverse curriculum or the need to decolonise the curriculum and generate understanding of student identities in English schools, and I am challenged by educators for opposing a Eurocentric national curriculum which they argue would benefit the White majority student population, I highlight this finding of how a Eurocentric curriculum can also exclude White students, just as much as it does BME students. This finding also reinforces my expectation that education for the 'public good' should include all, and not exclude any student. Reflecting further on the diversity and citizenship project, while it emphasised the salience of understanding student identities and a culturally relevant curriculum to aid teaching and learning and a sense of belonging in the classroom and wider British society, it did not resolve the continued lower attainment of Black students, which has been a longstanding concern since the 1960s (Swann 1985). Addressing social justice issues of inequitable educational outcomes particularly experienced by Black students demonstrates that there is no quick fix to educational under-attainment without the political will and a desire - supported by policy and funding – to change the status quo. Given that the Conservative government will probably be in power for another four years, this means educational change will not happen anytime soon. Ultimately, this suggests an inherent weakness in my conceptualisation of education for the 'public good' as educational inequalities are widening not reducing (DfE 2019f). Notwithstanding this, the desire to embed social justice in providing educational opportunity and positive educational outcomes means I will continue to use every opportunity that I can to highlight the salience of supplementary school education in helping to redress the inequitable educational outcomes many Black students encounter in mainstream education (Rollock et al. 2014; Wright et al. 2021).

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# Chapter 12
# The Construction of Political Identities: Young Europeans' Deliberation on 'the Public Good'

Check for updates

**Alistair Ross** (iD)

**Abstract**  Analysing young people's willingness, their ability to participate in political action, and the discourses that they employ to do this, are clearly issues of the 'public good'. This chapter examines how many young Europeans appear to be constructing identities that include a globalised and/or European dimension, that coalesces around issues of political, social and environmental rights. This response to the changing political culture in Europe, the increased cultural diversity of the continent, and the growth of social media have led to a new generation that is differently mobilised for political activity, and which has a particular characterisation of what might constitute 'the public good'. The work described in this chapter developed from the work on young English identities described by Maylor in the preceding chapter, and focuses on the methodological issues of using less structured deliberative discussion group techniques, in a study of 29 countries in continental Europe. The young Europeans' discussions of the values of diversity, and how for many Europe was defined in terms of a culture of human rights values, have particular implications for educational practice in terms of political and civic awareness and the competencies needed for active participation, and for understanding how young people construct 'the public good'.

## Introduction

This chapter is in some ways rather different from others in this book. It is not directly about education policies: indeed, questions about educational processes were largely avoided in the fieldwork with young people aged between 11 and 19, although the findings have significant implications for schooling and curriculum policies. This is about learning and development that takes place outside the school

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setting and formal education. Unlike the studies in other chapters, it is not based on an institutionally funded project, nor does it focus on a simply-expressed set of research questions, or a particular 'need' for specific knowledge. The work it describes is not complete: as this book goes to press, fresh data is being collected that will add to our understanding of the issues with which it is concerned. It barely touches on issues in Britain/the United Kingdom, unlike mostly other studies in this book. But in other ways, the work and findings described in this chapter are very directly related to many of the core themes explored in this volume. What is the nature of 'the public good', as understood and expressed by young people? How do social scientists develop respectful and equitable methodologies of working with young people (particularly those who are still in education), in eliciting their beliefs and understandings? How do young people categorise the self and others, and construct meanings for such categories? The particular focus on how young people in Europe construct themselves in socio-political terms has wider implications for social classifications, on what young people see as 'the public good', and on the need for social scientists and policy makers to respect young people's concerns about the public good. There are many examples of young people taking on leading roles in commenting on global issues. The example of Malala Yousafzai was particularly prominent in the human rights area at the time of the fieldwork of this study, which had a particular focus on the political, but more recent events have shown other young people demanding an end to environmental degradation as a public good, as shown in the work of Greta Thunberg (2019).

Young people, and particularly their political understandings, have emerged as a specific area of study over the past couple of decades. 'Young people' are often generically dismissed in academic literature as apathetic and disengaged, and in popular literature as either the same, or as naïve and semi-deranged idealists. For example, Madsen Pirie and Robert Worcester have asserted that 'today's young people say they are not interested in politics and do not regard political activity as worthwhile. They know little about the institutions of government at various levels, and feel little loyalty to the communities of which they are a part' (Pirie and Worcester 2000, p. 35; see also e.g. Putnam 2000; Forbrig 2005; Calenda and Meijer 2009), while in some of the popular press, young climate activists have been dismissed as hysterical dreamers: Thunberg was, for example, described as 'a mentally ill Swedish child who is being exploited by her parents and by the international left' (Flynn 2019).

There is a danger that young people become reified as a sub-group, both as an object of study and as a group of people who have things 'done' to them. Many older people patronise the young, and treat them as a group that needs to be controlled, manipulated or guided in some way. Many of the interactions between young people and their elders take place in asymmetrical power relationships: parents guide and control their children (often through legal requirements to do so); schools and educators manage and constrain their learning (again, often through legislative constraints); other professionals with whom they come into contact often construct them as particular subjects to be managed and regulated (for example as patients, clients, those to be constrained, even as potential malefactors). Agents of capitalism

construct them as consumers, as perhaps particularly soft targets whose desires can be manipulated and fashioned (among other ways, through gender stereotyping). Politicians, if they notice them at all – young people generally not yet being voters – regard them as a group that needs to be instructed and directed about political processes, often with partisan objectives. The media contribute to these processes, for example through constructing the young as snowflakes, naïve idealists, uninformed about the 'realities' of life (and thus as a threat to the culture of the older consumers of their products). Generally, though not in every instance, society tends to construct young people as those not yet adequate to be citizens. They may have rights – for example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that 'the child who is capable of forming his or her own views [has] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (United Nations 1989, Article 12) – but these are limited, subject to adult consent, and not always available (the USA, for example, is not party to the Convention). Young people are aware of their subaltern status (Spivak 1988), which may on occasion affect their ability and freedom to communicate their feelings and beliefs: this makes researching their views particularly important, and sometimes difficult.

This chapter will discuss the ways in which researchers work with young people, and in particular how researchers engage in discussions with them about how they construct themselves as citizens, and the values and beliefs that they hold around this: what they see as 'the public good'. The significance of this lies both in what these young people describe as their political priorities, which are a necessary component in constructing what is held to be the public good, and in establishing procedures that allow this to be expressed in a respectful and equitable manner, and that do not demean, infantilise or patronise them.

## Issues in researching young people's views and identities

The research that forms the background to this chapter is a personal project, undertaken as a post-retirement project by the author, with largely personal funding. I had a long-standing interest in how young people develop as political beings, and how they construct political identities that appear to be multiple and flexible (Ross 1980, 1987). Much has been written about multiple identities: a variety of models have been used to characterise the plasticity of social construction, of political and locational identities, including Zygmunt Bauman's liquid identities (2000), Oana Balescu's description of identity as a palimpsest of successive configurations, each partially written over earlier versions (2009), and the way that Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Patricia Collins (2015) use intersectionality to describe multiple identities as constructions that explain oppression and advantage. My particular interest was in the mechanisms by which this is done, and specifically in how political identities bridge a wide range of political structures: those of the immediate locality, the region or province, the state; the nature of European identity (largely,

but not exclusively, that associated with the European Union); and global identities. This was intended to be exploratory and descriptive: why and how do they do this? How do they manage the conflict that might seem implicit in this? How do they express themselves and operate in such contexts? It was not undertaken with particular theoretical objectives or models to test and explore. In its first phase (2010–2013), it explored how young Europeans in the states that had joined the European Union after 2004 (and some candidate states for membership) variously constructed their political and social identities in terms of their locality, country and Europe (Ross 2015), and in its second phase (2014–2016) this was extended to include the earlier European Union members (except the UK, Republic of Ireland and Greece) and the European Free Trade Association states of Norway and Switzerland (Ross 2019a). Further phases are projected, in the Ukraine and the South Caucasus and in the Balkan peninsula. To date some 29 European states[1] have been included, through deliberative discussions – which will be discussed in more detail below – with small groups of young people, aged between 12 and 19. The total number of groups was 324, with 2000 young people participating, in 104 locations.

### *Origins of the study*

The origins of this study date back to 2006, when I was a member of a research team that examined the understanding of identities by young people in England: this is partly described by Uvanney Maylor (Chapter 11, 2021). The research included a literature review of diversity and citizenship in the English National Curriculum which sought to 'identify the type of contemporary British identities and values' that were promoted in schools, and case studies in six diversely located schools which included twelve focus groups with young people (Maylor et al. 2007, p. 4). The study was to inform a review of how the teaching of citizenship approached ethnic, religious and cultural diversity across the curriculum, and whether there should be specific teaching of modern British social and cultural history (Ajegbo et al. 2007). Our study suggested that schools tended 'to emphasise the discourses of culture and religion to the exclusion of other aspects of diversity (e.g. social and White British diversity)' (Maylor et al., p. 5), and that '"Britishness" is often equated with Englishness (thus excluding other groups such as Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish), "Whiteness" and also with "Christianity"' (Maylor et al., p. 6). The project was commissioned by the English Department for Education, who stated that we

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[1] The countries in phase 1 (2010–2013) were Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus [Republic of Cyprus and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus], Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Turkey (all states joining the EU after 2004, and the candidate countries in 2010). Phase 2 (2014–2016) involved Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland (states that joined the EU prior to 2000, and the EFTA countries).

should examine 'Britishness', and specifically that we should use this term to examine young people's responses to it.

The focus groups showed how many young people, regardless of their ethnic background, saw themselves as having multiple identities. Identities were variously derived from the heritage of their parents/other relatives, where they were born, where they lived, their religion (if they had one), the languages they spoke, friendship groups, their personality and in some instances their hair, eye or skin colour. The following examples are all drawn from Maylor et al. (2007, pp. 89–95). At the individual school level, pupils in more ethnically diverse schools suggested that their background and those of other pupils were respected: 'People aren't racist here … there's so many different ethnicities in the school, no one can get really picked on as being the odd one out, 'cos most people have got people to relate to' (White female, 15). The study required that we directly question the focus groups about whether the young people saw themselves as British. The presentation of a particular category meant that group members tended to focus particularly on this term. For example, one 14-year-old White girl said, 'I think British because my family comes from lots of different parts of England … I don't know why I think more British because saying British rather than English joins all the countries together as though we are allies.' A 10-year-old girl of Asian heritage said, 'I think I'm a little bit British because I was born here, but my parents were born in Bangladesh.' In schools where students came from diverse backgrounds, there was a greater tendency to use multiple categories as descriptors: thus another 14-year-old girl described herself as 'a bit English, Danish, Spanish, Welsh – and Scottish as well,' and a 10-year-old boy in a different school said 'I'm not British'cos my granny's Japanese, my dad was born in Huddersfield and his dad was mostly a lot Scottish, so I'm half Scottish, a third English and a tiny bit Japanese'. Others sometimes sought to ascribe a single identity to an individual, like a 10-year-old boy who described a fellow pupil (not present in the group) as follows: 'he looks like he comes from India, but he's from England, so he's quite brown 'cos I think it's his dad that's English and his mum's a bit Indian. So he looks like he's Indian, but he's really English.'

This earlier study contributed to the design and scope of the work described in the rest of this chapter: it made me more aware of the ability of some young people to juggle complex and contingent descriptions of their identities, but also cautious of proposing particular categories to a group, or of using words such as citizenship or nationality, or categories such as English and British, that might be seen as directive or constraining. I also realised that the direction of the focus groups (necessarily) was towards experiences of schooling, and that respondents were sometimes reacting to our questioning as though we were in some way examining their learning.

Four issues became evident over the course of this earlier study, that have contributed to the framing of the study examined here. These were:

- the problems arising from projecting potential identity categories to participants, thus possibly framing and limiting responses;

- the perception that this might be a test of young people's knowledge, triggering an assumption that there were 'correct' answers;
- the issues in generating a narrative that develops respect and equity in the research interchange with young people, and avoiding any suggestion of being patronising; and
- the need to counter the assumption that there is such an entity as a 'public opinion' about issues of socio-political identities.

These are now addressed in turn.

## *Problems of categorisation*

The study examined here was intended to elicit young people's own constructions of identity, in a way that did not present them with preconstructed categories, but allowed them to put forward their own descriptions and definitions, anticipating that these might be multiple and would be contingent upon the context and nature of the discussion at the moment they were put forward. Identification with a nationality or a nation can be problematic. Walker Connor describes the term nation as 'terminological chaos' (1993, p. 112), and argues that the nation-state barely exists, and that the terms nation and state should not be used as though they are coterminous. Most modern states contain significant national minorities: elsewhere Connor (1978, p. 382) refers to a 1971 survey of 132 'entities generally considered to be states', pointing out that 90% of them had national minorities of a tenth or more, in 70 more than a quarter of the population were minorities, and nearly 30% had more than half the population as 'minorities'. The categories of nationality, citizenship and ethnicity are neither fixed nor predetermined, but dynamically constructed. Francesca Decimo and Alessandra Gribaldo (2017) refer to the:

> census records, vital records, passports, identification documents, church records and medical research data [which] establish and grant materiality to the categorisations that inform our identities: beyond sex and age, they designate citizenship, nationality, lineage, religion, ancestry, health, language, ethnicity and race. (Decimo and Gribaldo 2017, p. 5)

Modern states *require* the classification of their populations: Anderson pointed to their need to distinguish between 'peoples, regions, religions, languages' in order to impose a 'totalizing classificatory grid' (Anderson 1991, p. 184). The Maylor et al. (2007) study outlined above required that the category 'British' be put to young people to elicit their responses. A Foucauldian model of the surveillance of the state (1977) was used by David Kertzer and Dominique Arel to explain how 'identity categories create … a particular vision of social reality. All people are assigned to a single category, and are hence conceptualised as sharing, with a certain number of others, a common collective identity' (Kertzer and Arel 2002, p. 5; see also Nicoll et al. 2013). Instead of situationally-determined complex social linkages, the reification process of identity categories creates neat boundaries between mutually

exclusive groups (Kertzer 2017). The processes of enumeration and assignation through:

> … body-counts create not only types and classes … but also homogeneous bodies, because number, by its nature, flattens idiosyncrasies and creates boundaries around these homogeneous bodies, since it performatively limits their extent. (Appadurai 1996, p. 133)

The presumption that everyone will easily fit into such groups becomes increasingly unlikely as migration patterns in Europe are creating new diversities: more people with mixed origins makes it increasingly difficult to use these identity categories (Vertovec 2007). The design of the present study aspired to circumnavigate such limited categorisations by pressing the respondents to offer their own groupings and combinations. I therefore avoided introducing terms such as nation, state, Balkan, or Nordic, only using these when they had themselves introduced them (Ross 2019b). (Similarly, I did not directly ask about concepts such as values or rights, unless and until one of the group members had used such a word, when I could then ask them to elaborate on their understanding and use of such a term.)

## *Problems of 'testing knowledge'*

The second issue arising from the Maylor et al. (2007) study was that it could be difficult to avoid giving the impression that there were correct answers to the questions being put in the focus groups. Young people in a school context very often anticipate questions to be closed, because they are used to teachers (and many other adults) using questions to test or assess their knowledge (Alexander 2008; Hodgen and Webb 2008). They therefore expect a question to have a 'correct' answer that they are supposed to supply, and often feel obliged to find the 'right' response. Putting categories such as English or British to informants creates a presumption that these are the sort of responses that they are expected to provide; and this is further accentuated by asking the question in a setting associated with the testing of learning.

The g*ruppendiskussionsverfahren* [group discussion method] offers one method of beginning to neutralise such assumptions. It has been described as 'an open interview, intended to let respondents develop a topic in their own language, in their symbolic system and their relevant framework,' so that analysis 'can avoid projecting into single utterances meanings that are not appropriate … [we] learn more if this statement is put into a narrative context by the respondent … in his/her own language' (Bohnsack 2000, p. 21, translated by Scheunpflug et al. 2016). This method is less structured and more open than traditional focus group techniques. Annette Scheunpflug et al. (2016) write of it as a method 'in which respondents can set the structures and contents of the conversation by themselves,' thus exploring 'knowledge stocks that are not located on the surface of conscious and clear explicable attitudes and values, but which are beneath the surface' (2016, p. 10). Wagener (2018) refers to this as 'conjunctive knowledge … implicit, action-guiding

knowledge … based and acquired in fundamental experiences … that groups of individuals share with each other' (2018, p. 92). My method was very similar to this, providing narrative-generating stimuli to initiate discussion. As described in more detail below, I began by exploring immanent issues – the topics, accounts and language that the group members use in their narratives – and only later move to ask exmanent questions – my own agenda of themes, thus giving the group the opportunity to develop structures that seem relevant to them.

### Respect and equity in researching young people

A third issue arises from the somewhat patronising approach to young people adopted by some older people, such as by Pirie and Worcester (2000, above). It was claimed by Davide Calenda and Albert Meijer (2009) that younger people are less interested in politics, not because of their age, but as a cohort effect: 'older generations now were more politically active as youngsters than young people are today,' and this 'can be attributed to a changing attitude towards politics … related to a more individualistic, and even hedonistic, attitude' (Calenda and Meijer 2009, p. 879). But, in contrast to this, Maurice Devlin (2006) pointed out that many observers patronise individual young people as members of a group 'deemed to be idealistic and dynamic at the same time as … irresponsible, threatening and given to excess … Diminishing and patronising young people limit[s] their access to any equality of standing or status in society' (Devlin 2006, p. 3). Matt Henn and Mark Weinstein (2006) found that young people in the UK wanted political parties to reach out to then in more direct and non-patronising ways: political parties were described as cynical, not listening to young people, 'being fake with us' and making 'token gestures and talking down to us' (p. 527). In response to this, Sarah Pickard has recently developed a checklist of approaches to the study of young people's political participation 'that would produce more realistic results and analysis': these include:

- 'avoid being hermetically sealed in an academic speciality [and] … favour inter-disciplinary approaches';
- 'reject narrow definitions of political participation';
- use 'qualitative approaches with open questions that allow young people's voices and views to be heard';
- 'move beyond the political apathy analysis';
- 'acknowledge the nature of post-materialist values, everyday politics, lifestyle politics';
- 'avoid … reductive and subjective binary classifications of political participation';
- 'observe intragenerational differences; and
- 'distinguish between intragenerational and intergenerational differences in political participation' (Pickard 2019. p. 80).

Most of these approaches were independently developed in the course of the research described here. This issue is essentially one of developing a discussion that produces a narrative of respect and equity in the research interchange with young people. The deliberative discussion process adopted in this study included all these strategies.

## *The concept of public opinion*

Much social research is designed to produce generalisable and reproducible findings. There is an assumption among policy makers that research can and should produce a discernible view of what the public sees as a desirable outcome, a majority consensus that represents a sense of a 'public opinion' that is relatively robust, and which can be broadly repeated with a relatively high degree of confidence. Pierre Bourdieu was critical of the assumption that opinions and beliefs could be statistically summarised; he argued that public opinion is effectively a construction of policy makers, who want transparent and resilient statements of what can be presented as public needs or demands:

> Any opinion poll assumes that everyone can have an opinion; or, in other words, that the production of an opinion is within the reach of all. At the risk of undermining a naively democratic feeling, I will dispute this first postulate. Second postulate: it is assumed that all opinions are equal. I think it can be shown that this is not the case and that to combine opinions that do not have the same real strength leads to the production of meaningless artefacts. Implicit third postulate: in the simple fact of asking the same question to everyone involved is the assumption that there is a consensus on the issues, i.e. there is agreement on the issues that deserve to be addressed, to be asked. These three postulates imply, it seems to me, a whole series of distortions which are observed even when all the conditions of methodological rigour are met in the recollection and analysis of the data. (Bourdieu 1973, p. 1292)

He goes on to suggest that asking questions is in itself difficult, because it 'perniciously … put[s] people on notice to answer questions they have not asked themselves' (p. 1297), demanding that those polled make choices between alternatives, none of which may reflect their own situation. Examining the kind of questions asked, he suggests that 'the great majority of them were directly related to the political concerns of the "political staff" ['*personnel politique*']' (p. 1294). He continues

> public opinion is an *artefact*, pure and simple, whose function is to conceal that the state of opinion at a given moment of time is a system of forces and tensions. There is nothing more inadequate to represent the state of opinion than a percentage. (Bourdieu et al. 1991 [1973], p. 1295, emphasis as in original)

He observed that not everyone has an opinion on every issue, that the simple summation of what opinions are expressed only produces 'meaningless artefacts' (*ibid*., p. 1292), and that using an identical question with all respondents implies that there must be a consensus about the validity of the issue that is being addressed.

Posing questions is problematic: it 'perniciously … put[s] people on notice to answer questions they have not asked themselves' (*ibid*., p. 1297), and asks respondents to make choices that are not necessarily situated 'as they really are in the real world in real practice' (*ibid*., p. 1304) of the respondent. Such 'simple statistical aggregation of opinions' produces 'the artefact that is "public opinion"' (*ibid.,* p. 1309).

Accordingly, this study was designed to uncover the *range* and *diversity* of opinion, rather than to arrive at a generalised summary of young people's opinions. Philippe Rochat points out that 'in academia, *a priori* claims of universality sell better than diversity, which complicates rather than simplifies matters … This tends to relegate diversity to noise rather than as a primary object of study' (Rochat 2010, p. 107). This study was *intentionally* noisy, reflecting the diverse populations of these countries.

## Towards a methodology

The methodology adopted in this study reflects many of the concerns, findings and proposals that are considered in the works of Bourdieu, the g*ruppendiskussionsverfahren* writers and Pickard. Discussions were explicitly framed with assurances to the participants that there were no right answers, that disagreement was anticipated, and that any response would be accepted and valued. The objective was to establish an empowering rapport, so that discussion was, to a substantial extent, directed and paced by group members: they were to feel that it followed their direction, not mine.

I had, over a number of years before this study began in 2010, established personal contacts with many social science academics in over thirty European countries, which formed the basis of my set of collaborators, and I supplemented this with contacts through organisations such as the British Council and the German *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung* (Federal Agency for Civic Education). I worked with them to select locations of varying sizes and in different regions across each country: generally four to eight locations in countries with populations greater than 11 million, and two to five in smaller counties (though only one in Luxembourg). Each of my collaborators was asked to identify two schools or colleges in their area that would be willing to work with me, one in a working-class district, one in a middle-class district. In each school, I usually recruited two groups of six to eight young people. Schools were asked to select from the whole population of the school, not just the most or least able students, and where possible to include an appropriate representation of any minorities, and not only those who were formal citizens.

The young people participating were diverse: some 56% were female, about half had parents in working-class occupations. There were minority-origin young people in many discussion groups, reflecting the distribution of minorities in each country and Europe as a whole: by country of origin, 76.7% had both parents and grandparents from the country they were living in: of the remainder, 7.4% had at least one parent/grandparent from another European Union country, 8.4% from a European

country not in the European Union, and 7.4% from outside Europe (figures based on what was volunteered in discussion): these broadly correspond to the demographic profile of the 28 European Union states at the time (Eurostat 2015a, 2015b; Agafiţei and Ivan 2016, p. 1). This was not intended to be a statistically representative sample, but a range of potential views across each country: from different regions, social backgrounds and cultural origins. Much empirical social science research draws subjects from a narrow base: Jeffrey Arnett (2008) estimates that 80% included in non-USA studies are drawn from psychology undergraduates in the capital city of a country. These are extrapolated as representative of the country (Rozin 2001). Within the constraint that the population being sampled was of young residents of these European countries (largely industrialised, democratic and comparatively rich), the recruitment process was designed to avoid the sampling limitations in cross-national studies (disproportionate numbers of White, urban, middle-class populations) criticised by Joseph Henrich et al. (2010).

Ethical approval was given by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee of London Metropolitan University in 2009 and 2014, and ethical decisions were based on the then current British Educational Research Association's Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. Consent was obtained from school principals, and written consent from the young people's parents (all of those under 16, and older in some countries) and the young people themselves. Letters to parents, in the national language, explained that I was 'making a small study of young people's ideas … about how they feel as part of their community, region and country', and gave details of my local colleague for further information, and specifying that they could withdraw from the study at any stage. All names used are pseudonyms.

Some of the approaches employed to initiate discussions that produced this kind of dialogue were as follows:

- not to introduce leading terms, such as nation or state, but to use words such as 'country' (in Cyprus, I said 'on the island', rather than 'in this country');
- to only use terms such as nation, state, Balkan, or Nordic – or terms such as values and rights – after they had themselves introduced the term;
- questions to be asked in a transparently open manner (if someone said they were French, I might respond '*Why* are you French?' – an unusual question, to which clearly no single 'correct' response could be anticipated);
- to accept all responses as valid (nodding, saying how interesting the response was), to maintain direct eye contact with each speaker (showing I was following them);
- to loop conversation back to earlier comments, when appropriate, following up specific comments and points made earlier (so that it appeared that the group was determining the agenda);
- to ask as few questions as possible (giving space for disagreement, supplementary comments);
- not directly to ask an individual to respond (not everyone replied to each question: this was a discussion, not a sequential interview); and
- to ask for elaborations, explanations and examples.

These stratagems – which include many of the approaches suggested by Pickard (2019, p. 80) – were not always wholly successful, but all but one group sustained a conversation for more than 30 min (the average was 45 min), and several lasted 90 min or more (the longest was 105 min). Most young people (about 95%) made more than a minimal contribution: two thirds could be described as fully participant for the entire session.[2]

The conversations were varied in focus and emphasis, and my questions changed in response, and in their wording, in order to maintain the mode as conversational rather than interrogatory. All were recorded and transcribed in full. While I had areas that I wanted to explore, I did not refer to this in the discussions, or stick to a particular sequence. Therefore responses cannot be numerically analysed in way: I can describe apparently significant trends, but not make quantitative claims, such as '67 per cent declared themselves to be European' – and even had I put an identical question to every one of them, the statistic would still be meaningless. This is not to suggest that the conversations had no structure: I had my 'instruments of construction' (Bourdieu et al. 1991 [1983], p. 248). I held up a series of lenses, that allowed them to move between defining themselves ('we') and the other as being variously: a local group; a country-identified group (or of a mix of countries); a specific region area of the country; as a generational group; as European; or as global citizens.

## The processes of discussion

In this section, I focus on the processes that emerged in four particular kinds of events, which took place in most discussions, which generated material particularly pertinent for this chapter:

- firstly, the opening exchanges, and the way in which identification with a country was articulated;
- secondly, the discussions on the nature of the extension of human rights in areas such as the rights of migrants and LGBT rights;
- thirdly, the ways in which countries such as the USA and Russia were 'othered' as not having a European construction of human rights; and
- fourthly the ways in which the discussion of 'being European' often shifted from its instrumental practical benefits to the more abstract construction of an agency promoting rights and values.

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[2] Discussions were often in English, or largely English with my collaborators translating where necessary. About 15% were largely in another language.

## *Identification with a country*

I began by asking each person to describe themselves to me, in a few sentences. This usually allowed me to make some points about similarities, such as 'are you all Macedonian?', or 'x says she's Macedonian, and y says he's Albanian – what about the others?' This often produced a discussion of the range of reasons for having an attachment to a particular country (or countries), as with the following group of 17- and 18-year-olds in Odense, Denmark. Agnethe and Lilli both began by describing themselves as 'Danish girls'; Cæcilie said 'I feel – very Danish [laughs] – even though my grandfather immigrated from Scotland.'

| | |
|---|---|
| Julius | All three of you said you were Danish, rather than European – so … we are nationalists! [general laughter] |
| Evald | I also feel Danish, but my father, and my grandfathers, my grandmother, they emigrated from Germany, so I also feel some connection with Germany – but I feel mostly Danish. |
| Hussein | My parents came from Palestine, but I'm born and raised in Denmark – I don't feel as quite as Danish as the others, I feel more a bit of both – I feel more European than Danish. |
| AR | I wonder what it actually means when you say you 'feel Danish' or you 'feel mostly Danish'? |
| Lilli | I feel that it's mostly about the culture of the country. When I say I feel Danish it's not like I feel that I *belong* in this country, I could easily move to another country … |
| Cæcilie | I think most of it has to do with the way I was raised – for example, my mum feels more Scottish than me, so she sort of raised me to be proud to *be* Scottish … |
| Hussein | When we talk about different identities, people often mistakenly say that there is a clash of cultures, that the youngster doesn't know where to put himself. … I see different cultures as being an advantage – you take the best of both cultures … and make your own. |
| Cæcilie | I think our nationality is a way of expressing ourselves when we're abroad, but also at home, using it to feel secure … you can tell people that I do this because I was raised in Denmark, because I feel Danish …For example, I feel European as well, because we have some fair rules and stuff that unites us – even though we have very different cultures in the different countries in Europe. |

Similar discussions were found in many groups, with a variety of explanations – ancestry, birthplace, language, culture, length of residence – or usually some combination of these. There were also more essentialist understandings of nationality: in another Danish town, Janko (M,15 Serbian birth and origin) argued, 'I'm not Danish – if you want to, you can feel Danish if you're not born Danish – but I feel more like Serbian, because I'm Serbian, it's in my blood.' There were also, and more commonly, sharp rejections of any wish to be associated with a nationality: in Stockholm, Margreta (F, 16) was emphatic:

Swedish is nothing more than my passport says that I'm Swedish. I'm born here, and so were my parents – but to me that's not exactly relevant. I have Swedish citizenship, and

therefore I define myself as Swedish … This nationalistic movement [*Sverigedemokratern*], and patriotism growing stronger – to me that became very serious, because I don't want to be whatsoever identified with them, I don't want someone to think that … I am a nationalist, because of what's happening in Sweden and in the rest of Europe – it's become important to *not* identify myself with where I live, or where other people are from.

Others saw their attachment to the country as a matter of chance: in Sevilla, Sancho (M 14) used Ayelet Shachar's (2009) term, a lottery, to describe his citizenship: 'it's a lottery that you are born there – if you are born there and you love your country, and agree with the rules, and the people that are with you – then you are Spanish.' In Prilep, Macedonia, Lazar (M 18) was of the same view, and thought that he had had a poor deal: 'we are all Macedonians, but not by our choice – we are unlucky to be born here. I wish I was born in Denmark because here we are surrounded by poverty, by corruption, and the unemployment rate is high.'

## *The extension of human rights*

Many young people spoke of solidarity and of respecting others, often with reference to ethnicity, gender equality, sexual identities, social class and social welfare provision. Fairness was a very common theme, often expressed as dissatisfaction with current inequities in society: social values and human rights were constant and positive themes, often expressed generically as part of the nature of Europe (Ross 2020a). None of these terms was suggested or introduced by the author: all were volunteered by the young people themselves.

For example, in Lëtzebuerg, Anaïs (F 13) said, 'We have established Europe to have peace. The members are all democracies, and people want to have peace.' But there were also reminders of progress yet to be made: in the same group, Ludovic (M 14; father from Cape Verde, mother Luxembourgish) responded, 'in Europe there are not so many people that are Black, they treat me as though I have no value, as an African.' European social values were widely mentioned. In Amsterdam, Kawthar (F 16) said that 'people who live here have freedom of speech,' and Renaat (M 15) added, 'good justice – in Europe we have one of the best systems – a lot of other countries don't have an independent law system,' and he instanced American justice as harsh, and Chinese as government-controlled.

Equality was often referred to, but generally, it was the *lack of equality* that was the focus. In Austria, Elgin (F 16, Turkish origin) said, 'compared to Turkey or America, in Austria you can see the equality between the sexes, and there isn't as much racism. … Austria's a good place, not the best, we could still improve, there's still racism and sexism … [but] we care about equality and stuff.' In a school in Olsztyn with some Roma classes, the young Poles insisted that the *Romowie* (they used this term, rather than the more common derogatory *cygański*) were unfairly

stigmatised: Bożenka (F 12) explained, 'everyone should be treated equally: we are all different, but we should all be treated the same.'

The rights of the LGBT communities, and prejudicial behaviour towards them, were a particular concern, more common in western Europe, but not only so: in Zagreb, Dragan (M 14) used the acceptance of gay rights as a marker of European behaviour, arguing that although Croatia was [at that time] about to join the European Union, 'we will never be on that level of European society, because here people … don't accept differences – when Gay Pride was in Zagreb, people came to throw stones at them.' In Wien, Karolin (F 16) thought generally, 'our generation are more open to homosexuals – if you are, then you are, if you're lesbian, then you're lesbian.' In Malmö, Sarah (F 16) described coming out to her parents: 'my mother was like "Well, I hope you don't marry a girl, because that won't be acceptable!" at first, because when she was younger it was – well, not really a disgrace – but [now] no one cares … It's just that they grew up in a whole different perspective, we've evolved since then.' But there were also some who were against LGBT rights. In Nantes, Ediz (M 15, of Turkish origin) said '[what] I don't like about France is that gay people can marry now.'

Many young people saw the response to the 2015 refugee crisis as a European Union matter, and thought it a positive and welcome example of European humanity and solidarity which increased their sense of European identity. The dominant narrative was that refugees should be welcomed and supported, as an obligation of implementing human rights. 'Europe' was frequently invoked as a champion of human rights. In Berlin, Samaria (F 18, of Indian origin) said Germany's policy was to be a 'humanitarian country, standing for European values, and appealing to other countries that are now fleeing from the responsibilities that they took on when becoming European Union members.'

But in the late summer of 2015 such feelings were being compromised by the actions in Hungary. The following comments were all made in September 2015. Jacinta (F 17) in Bellaterra said, 'I've been hearing about Hungary not accepting refugees from Syria for example – that's a big divergence from the European mindset, that we should help them.' In Madrid, Jaime (M 11) said 'now I feel less European, because almost all the countries of Europe collaborate over Syria, but some don't – all the continent should work in a group.' In France, Albane (F 17) in Paris said that European identity 'at this time is a very important question, because of the problem with Syria and immigration, when some counties of Europe close their borders. Yes, at this time I don't feel European,' and, in a rural school near Montpellier, Rosalie (F 14) said, 'in Hungary, they rejected the refugees – in France we try to welcome the refugees as well as we can.' Amandine (F 15) burst out, 'I feel less European – we can't be proud of what has happened – what Hungary is doing now is not human.'

## *Othering countries that do not have a European construction of human rights*

The third process that became evident in the discussion of the nature of 'being European' came when discussion groups discussed particular countries that had other attitudes towards human rights and values of equality. These often arose spontaneously in references to the United States (and it should be noted that the following examples were all collected before Donald Trump was even a Presidential candidate).

The lack of social security was widely seen as creating inequalities. Jule (F 13) in Hannover pointed to 'things which aren't allowed in Europe are allowed in the United States – there you don't have to be medically insured.' In Dortmund, Rahel (F 17) spoke of 'our social insurance system, our medical insurance systems, and I think that's a big difference to the USA,' and Anke (F 15) in København spoke of Danish 'unemployment benefit – in the USA they don't have this security.' The existence of the death penalty in America was also often raised. In the Icelandic town of Akureyri, Katrín (F 17) described 'capital punishment [as] a civic rights issue – people who do really bad things should be kept in prison for life, but they shouldn't be killed – I don't like that about America, and that's what I like about Europe, the death sentence isn't allowed.' In the Italian town of Frascati, Coralie (F 14) said that in Europe 'there's no capital punishment – in the US they are killed. In Europe, they are kept in prison for a lot of time. For me, they have the right to live, one of the most important rights,' and Rose (F 17) in Lëtzebuerg was critical that 'it seems normal that everyone in America has a gun, and that they have the right to shoot.' Environmental issues were another area of divergence between European and American values. Flemming (M 17) in København observed, 'there's a lot of people in Europe who feel that we have to take responsibility, while the US doesn't – global warming and stuff like that, Europe has rules and laws about $CO_2$, Europe has more feeling of responsibility to the world than most other countries.'

Russia was another country seen as having a very different attitude towards democracy and rights that the dominant European ethos. I sometimes, towards the end of a discussion, asked a group how they might react to the idea of a [highly hypothetical] Russian application to join the European Union. This was often responded to in terms of Russia lacking certain 'European' attitudes towards democratic norms. Thus in Lisboa, Rufino (M 16) said, 'Russia is a dictatorship, and most of the European countries are democracies … so I wouldn't think that they could be part of Europe,' and in Bologna, Eurialo (M 16) said, 'it is unacceptable that Europe should let Russia in: [they are] very backwards in terms of civil rights, too strong a state, a centralised state'. In the Danish town of Slagelse, Nelly (F 15) focused on the particular responses in Russia to LBGT rights: 'If Russia was allowed to join the European Union I would be outraged … they don't have the right to be homosexual – they can be arrested for it, actually. It's not in the laws of all [European Union] countries yet … It is very important that a country in the European Union has human rights, the basic rights to be yourself.'

## *The shift in discussion of 'being European' from instrumentalism to an agency for human rights*

The discussions ranged across what it meant to be European: were there particular characteristics of such an identity? These discussions often began with very practical and instrumental reasons: the freedom to travel, study and work were often cited, particularly in the post-2004 member states: Afina in Oradea (F 15) wanted 'to go to study somewhere other than Romania – in Austria, for example,' and in Presov (Slovakia) Ladislav (M 16) said, 'I want to study abroad – I think the quality of universities in western Europe is better.'

But as many discussions continued, there was often a distinct turn towards a construction of Europe as something fundamentally much more than this. The context of this turn was sometimes contingent on comparisons made, as in the preceding section, with both more authoritarian regimes and with more neoliberal states such as the USA. These othering processes, which led to a more tautly defined positive sense of 'being European', centred on the recognition of a distinctive and shared approach to human rights. In Brussels, Loes (F 17) was an example of this: she both talked herself into being European, and then was further moved on by the comparisons she made. She began 'I also don't feel European – I guess that we have advantages in that it is easier to travel, and I like that … so it is easier, and everything is more open.' Five minutes later in the discussion, she observed, 'I think that Europe has this common goal … to make Europe a better place, make sure that everyone has equal rights. I don't think that we are there yet.' Then a colleague suggested that President Putin did not appear to be very democratic: Loes's response was almost explosive:

> not very democratic? I think Putin is not democratic *at all* – the complete opposite. It's the complete opposite of what we want to do with the European Union – if we let him have more power in the European Union, then that's the end, all people who are not straight will be prosecuted, a lot of people who aren't in the right place, in his opinion, will just be moved – it would tear the European Union apart.

In Lëtzebuerg, Amaury (M 17) began by saying, 'the greatest good that the European Union gave us is the free circulation – this suppression of the borders is a gift.' But minutes later he reflected further: 'It's also a thing of values, because in the European Union we should share all the same values – democracy, and liberty, liberty of expression, and that's also what the European Union stands for,' and then, a few minutes later, 'I think the main right is democracy – we see now in Poland there was a big reaction by the European community because their liberty of expression was partly suppressed. We have this sense of democracy in common, because there is this reaction to it.' This reference was to the European Commission's announcement, 2 weeks earlier, of a review into the new right-wing Polish Government's possible violation of the standards of rule of law and the proposed replacement of members of the constitutional court (Pop 2016). For Amaury, the European Union's significance shifted over 15 min, from enabling his passport-less

travel to being a power with the potential to sanction anti-democratic tendencies in a member state.

It was not only that human rights had been established in Europe, but that the European Union was active in ensuring that they were upheld. In Lille, there was a long discussion on how rights had to be maintained, peppered with references to recent examples and violations. Laurence (M 16) raised the attempt by the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, to re-introduce the death penalty in Hungary, and how the European Commission had frustrated this: 'that's a nice aspect of Europe, that he had to abandon it because … he would have been sanctioned economically by Europe.' Blaise (M 15) then recalled European diplomatic sanctions in 2000 against the Austrian far-right politician, Jörg Haider, leader of the Bündnis Zukunft Österreich: 'he took away some rights of homosexuals as unmarried couples – but the European Union was there to restrain him – it's like a dog leash.'

## Some conclusions about the process

These examples show how young people were, through their discussions with each other, making statements that suggested a sense of what they considered to be the public good. Taking time to discuss, in depth, issues about society and politics that they would like to change, allowed them to do much more than exchange ideas, but to refine and extend them, synthesising and exploring, in a process that allowed deliberation, yet did not demand a conclusion or an agreement. But the learning that is addressed in this study was very largely learning that took place outside of formal educational settings. While schools and colleges were used to recruit the participants in each group, most discussions did not feature school-based activities. At the end of each discussion, I would ask if they talked about 'the kind of things we've been discussing' with the friends, or their parents, or their teachers. Teachers, and school activities, were in a poor third place in the great majority of discussions (Ross 2020b).

Four issues about doing social science research with young people were raised early in this chapter, and the discussions of the methodology and the findings of this project that followed this have attempted to suggest some resolutions to these problems. Firstly, there was a fairly determined effort not to suggest categories, or even types of categories, to the young people, but to let them propose and define their own. 'Fairly determined', because on transcription I discovered that occasionally I had slipped, and introduced some prompts: for example, in three of my 33 discussions in the Balkan states of Croatia, Macedonia and Bulgaria, I did introduce the word 'Balkan'. But the categories used in nearly all cases were those selected and discussed by the young people themselves. There was an explicit effort on my part not to frame questions in a closed style: in particular, I tried to make many questions responses to what had been raised by the young people themselves. I did, towards the end of many discussions, ask a direct question about their potential reaction to a neighbouring state joining the European Union, selecting a state that I surmised

(often from their earlier comments) might be viewed with some antagonism: but I always concluded this by asking if they thought this 'might be a good thing, a bad thing, or not matter' – admittedly a rather crudely defined set of alternatives, but succinct and intended to indicate that any or no response was acceptable. And finally, I was always prepared to accept, without commenting or applying pressure, that the young people might have no views on an issue, or none they were prepared to advance. Yet in many cases the issues they discussed were relevant, wide-ranging and significant – but not always unanimous. Not everyone wished to participate on every issue discussed; some views were quickly abandoned in the face of others (more strongly held, or more strongly argued), but there was no attempt to combine opinions, or to reach a consensus.

As has been noted above, Bourdieu (1973, p. 1292) suggested there was no resolution of what their agreed opinion might be.

This approach was supposed to be inclusive, in that all were able to contribute, and most who wished to contribute (the great majority) were able to do so, though inevitably not always at the precise moment they may have wanted to intervene. In particular, I adopted a very catholic approach to accepting all comments as being relevant in some way: none were dismissed; none were corrected on matters of fact unless I was specifically asked if a factual comment was right or not. This happened fairly rarely, and I usually was either able to give a crisp confirmation or correction, or to say that I didn't know. I was, rather more often, but not frequently, asked for my opinion on an issue: I always stressed that I was interested and wanted to hear their views, but would discuss my views with them afterwards, if we had sufficient time (there usually was). In particular, it was often possible to encourage critical disagreements: I stressed at the outset that I expected disagreements, and it was gratifying to note just how often someone said something like, 'I must disagree with that …'. I did not lay down initial specific rules of discourse, but there was no occasion, in any of the 324 discussions, where exchanges were not equitable and respectful of each other (Pickard 2019).

Pickard's checklist of ways to approach young people's political participation (2019, p. 80) also encapsulates much of the approach that was employed. For example, I avoided references to particular academic disciplines, such as politics or economics. I found I could not avoid the word 'society', but did not use sociology. Sometimes they would introduce these words – economics more than politics – but not often, with the exception of my closing question, when I would ask if they often discussed 'things like this': at this point, a number of groups spoke about the infrequent times that they discussed 'politics'. I made no narrow distinctions about the nature of political or social action, and had no need to make assumptions about their political apathy, though I did sometimes ask, in response to their listing of political problems, what they could do about them. I also prompted discussion of intergenerational values and differences: there were many other such issues discussed that are more fully reported elsewhere (Ross 2015, 2019a).

In short, it did not seem difficult to create the conditions for young people – largely of school age – to discuss, articulately and with confidence, contemporary political issues in terms of their own values, beliefs and experiences. They did not

agree on issues, within or between groups, but could deliberate and debate differences. Though the purpose of these discussions was not to arrive at a notion of what young people held to be 'the public good', it is very clear that individually most had a clear conception of what some of the elements of 'the public good' might be. The dominant discourses have been sketched in the extracts given in the chapter, but there were other, less widely-held positions: the significance lies not so much in any of the views themselves, but that they were held and expressed in terms of values that they thought important, and were seen as public values that were held to be 'good' in some way. The troublesome point is that these views are infrequently heard, and in particular, that they are so uncommonly heard in the context of the school: something would appear to be dysfunctional. Why? In terms of the general thrust of the essays in this book, it would seem important to acknowledge that any determination of what might be construed as a good and worthwhile education ought to firstly include and recognise young people's own values and views, and secondly to include activities that encourage the processes by which young people can freely articulate and deliberate their views on social and political issues.

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# Chapter 13
# Can educational programmes address social inequity? Some examples from Europe

**Nanny Hartsmar, Carole Leathwood** (iD)**, Alistair Ross** (iD)**, and Julia Spinthourakis** (iD)

**Abstract** What are the characteristics of educational intervention programmes that appear more successful in attempting to address social inequalities? This chapter reflects on the conclusions and recommendations of a study made by a seven-country team that in 2006–2009 investigated policies relating to different kinds of inequality and disadvantage in 14 states, locating them within the educational cultures, structures and policy discourses in each state. This chapter examines changes over the last decade in four particular areas: socioeconomic disadvantage, gender, migration and ethnicity, together with the intersectionalities between these. We then review changes in the policy discourse in three of these states: Greece, Sweden and the United Kingdom. We identify particular organisational approaches and perspectives that appear to correlate with more positive and lasting outcomes. This chapter offers some significant analysis of what might be understood by 'the public good' with reference to educational policies, and prioritises equity over efficiencies.

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## Introduction

Educational policies and practices have the possibility of either reproducing social structures, or of changing them. If a society has substantial and persistent inequalities – whether of the distribution of wealth, or of recognition of rights, or of access to social provision, or of recognition of culture or language – then it is possible, indeed probable, that educational practices will replicate these inequalities. In 2006 a group of seven European Universities[1] were commissioned by the European Commission to explore why many educational policies that were designed to address issues of social inequality appeared to be failing to achieve this. This chapter derives from that study – Educational Policies that Address Social Inequality (EPASI) (Ross et al. 2009), and analyses some subsequent changes in policy and practice.

Three principal arguments are generally employed – with differing emphases and priorities – for educational policies to be directed at minimising social inequalities. The Commission's commissioning brief used all three. Firstly, there are social reasons (the Commission's brief suggested 'an harmonious education': European Commission 2006, p. 5). If different social groups feel they are treated less equally than others, in terms of their access to social, economic and cultural rights, societies are likely to be less cohesive, and some groups may be less likely to participate in civic behaviour, believing that they will not be listened to. But education is only one of the potential agents for such change (Wilkinson and Pickett 2018). Secondly, economic justifications may be advanced ('the importance of key skills for the development of knowledge-based economies': European Commission 2006, p. 5). If groups fail to meet their potential, then there is a wastage of human capital. But activities that exclusively focus on education to increase economic competitiveness tend to reproduce and frequently increase inequalities. Thirdly, there is the human rights and equity argument ('provid[ing] everyone with a high-quality education': European Commission 2006, p. 5). Respect for the rights of all requires recognising, as far as possible, differences between individuals and groups and minimising the differential access to rights that society may impose – not just political and civil rights, but also social, economic, cultural, religious and linguistic rights.

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[1] The original project team was drawn from seven Universities. **London Metropolitan University** (**Institute for Policy Studies in Education** [**IPSE**]): Alistair Ross (Project Coordinator and UK Team leader), Carole Leathwood, Sarah Minty, Marie-Pierre Moreau, Nicola Rollock, Katya Williams (researchers), Andrew Craven, Robin Driscoll, Nathan Fretwell (project administration). **Katholieke Hogeschool Zuid-West-Vlaanderen** (Belgium): Hugo Verkest (BE Team leader), Evelien Geurts, Bie Lambrechts, Andries Termote. **Univerzita Hradec Králové** (Czech Republic): Pavel Vacek (CZ Team leader), Daniela Vrabcova, Jan Lašek, Michaela Pišová. **Montpellier Université III Paul Valéry** (France): Richard Étienne (FR Team leader), Bénédicte Gendron, Chantal Étienne, Pascal Tozzi. **Panepistimio Patron/ Πανεπιστήμιο Πατρών** (Greece): Julia Spinthourakis (GR Team leader), Eleni Karatzia-Stavlioti, Georgia-Eleni Lempesi, Ioanna Papadimitriou, Chrysovalante Giannaka. **Universitat Autònoma Barcelona** (Spain): Melinda Dooly (ES Team leader), Claudia Vallejo, Miquel Essomba, Virginia Unamuno, Ferran Ferrer. **Malmö högskola** (Sweden): Nanny Hartsmar (SE Team leader), Margareta Cederberg, Svante Lingärde, Jan Nilsson.

The Commission's brief for this research was to identify policies that lead to equality of educational *outcomes*, not mere equality of opportunity: they expected education to have the power and potential to transform social outcomes. It suggested that there were (unspecified) groups 'at risk' of underachievement, and that the study should focus on programmes that systematically targeted such groups – not individuals – through the distribution of resources and programmes, at both local and national policy levels, including non-governmental organisations. This was a recognition that teaching and learning took place in a variety of settings, not simply within educational institutions, and that these also required analysis.

This chapter builds on the conclusions of this study, and analyses changes in the subsequent decade, focusing firstly on four areas of inequalities: (socioeconomic disadvantage, ethnicity, migrancy and gender) and the intersectionality between these areas. Secondly, we focus on changes in the policy discourses and practices in three of the states in the study (Greece, Sweden and the UK). We add some discussion on issues related to migrants and second language learning, based on subsequent research. Our re-evaluation of policy changes in these countries and areas directly addresses the relationship between 'the public good' and educational policies that prioritise equity over efficiency.

## The research strategy

Our strategy in 2006–2009 was to carry out three parallel investigations. We focused on seven groups of those potentially disadvantaged (who might or might not be equally disadvantaged in each country for a range of reasons). We recognised that the conceptualisation of social difference varies between countries.

Seven **thematic reports** were produced that focused on:

1. *Socioeconomic disadvantage*: where a significant marker of educational underachievement is family poverty, but economic disadvantage alone does not explain all social disadvantage, and other characteristics intersect with this and must be employed to explain the institutionalisation of disadvantage and discrimination.
2. *Minority ethnic disadvantage*: groups experiencing racism and other disadvantages include those of long-settled migrant origin, more recent migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. In some countries, identifying ethnic groups is in itself regarded as racist; other states hold that racism can only be challenged by identifying these groups, and then targeting provision and monitoring achievement. Some states identify ethnic minorities that have settled in the country for several generations as 'immigrant', even though there may no longer be any meaningful association with the country of origin.
3. *Gender*: an area of deeply-ingrained cultural attitudes that lead to different social expectations of roles, and hence to discriminatory and disadvantaging practices. Stereotypical behaviours can lead to gendered practices in educational provision and expectation, impacting on attainment, subject choice and future employment. Under the term gender we also consider discriminatory behaviour related to sexual orientation.

4. *Indigenous minorities*: including Europe's longstanding indigenous minorities, such as the Roma, Sinti and Sámi.
5. *Disability*: in that data suggests that this is a disadvantaged group, and the term covers much more than those with impaired physical abilities.
6. *Linguistic minorities*: where a dominant language marginalises and discriminates against linguistic minorities, even when these are long-standing and widely spoken in particular regions.
7. *Religious minorities*: where the relationship between religion and education has led to particular structures and expectations about the role and place of religion in state education.

A series of **country policy reports** were produced; these analysed each state's specific educational policy discourses: Belgium (Flanders), Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom (UK) (largely England). In each of these we analysed recent educational initiatives, producing nearly 300 short **Project Studies** on these.

The issues of how and why these various categories of disadvantage were identified and named (and are thus socially constructed) have consequences in terms of how people have a sense of themselves, and this became significant in the organisation of our research strategy. The reification of a category may have the potential to empower a community, but may also be used to shift responsibility onto the group members to solve 'the problems' for themselves. Thus, the neoliberal offer of a 'choice' can shift the onus for change to a group who may not be in any sense responsible for, or able to address, wider structural and attitudinal causes. Further, intersectionality is a critical factor in understanding the multiple identities and categories that arise: For example, in Sweden, Alireza Behtoui (2006) showed the intersection between ethnic background and social background, the former being used in popular discourse to discount the effect of poor living conditions: social class acquires an ethnic face. Many groups suffer educational disadvantage through multiple aspects – for example, being poor, members of an ethnic and religious minority, and speaking a different language to that of the majority of the population: each may contribute to overall disadvantage in a different way, and it is analytically useful to identify how marginalisation is identified and created through categorisation.

Our focus was on inequalities between groups (rather than individuals) and social structures, rather than personal attributes, but decisions about educational engagement are, in part, the consequence of individual actions. Some of these will be made by educators (such as advising and guiding pupil choices, streaming, etc.) and policy makers (such as determining types of school, subjects and examinations). Others will be made by the individual or their families, some of whom will be aware of their family's history of educational non-success, fear of failure, and the potential costs of such a decision. Such decisions may be risk-averse, though rationalised in a discourse about further study 'not being for people "like us"' (Archer et al. 2003, p. 178). Richard Breen and John Goldthorpe (1997) argued that young people showed 'relative risk aversion', and their goal in schooling was to acquire a level of education enabling a class position at least the same as that of their family,

avoiding downward mobility. Breen (2001) extended this, arguing that educational career decisions arose from pre-established family decisions about attaining a particular educational threshold and beliefs about the probability of educational success. None of this denies individual agency, but it does recognise the powerful structural and cultural limiting constraints.

## *Our research questions*

Throughout all aspects of the work, we kept the following research questions before us:

- What educational policies have been used to combat group social inequalities?
- How have policy makers identified and analysed these inequalities? (Systematically or reactively? Considering all possible causes?)
- Was the policy initiative focused on the group, or on wider society?
- How were the subjects of these intervention programs targeted and resourced?
- Were groups themselves consulted and involved in these policies?
- Were programmes implemented to sustain the policy? Were changes embedded in professional practice?
- Were policies national or local in their design? Was there opportunity for local initiative? Did local actors have ownership over policies or programmes?
- Were policies evaluated and monitored (and if so, how?)? Was this systematic and independent? Did it feed back into policy-making?
- How can the project inform future policy development?

## Intersectionality and inequalities

Throughout our analysis there were many instances where there are combinations of factors that are seen as responsible for particular inequalities, where two or more of the various factors have intersected with each other to cause greater, and more complex, inequities, that are multifaceted and more difficult to address. In the analysis above, we have shown examples of socioeconomic disadvantage interacting with ethnicity, and with gender, and with other factors such as minority language use and disability.

Intersectionality provides an analytic frame to address this. The term was originally used by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), to describe the intersection of gender and race in the US legal case of DeGraffenreid *vs* General Motors. Emma DeGraffenreid's case was that General Motors had factory floor jobs available for Black men, and office jobs available for White women: Black women were thus unemployable. The case was lost, as the court ruled that Black women could not combine their race and gender claims into one: it was asserted that as they could not prove that their

experience was the same as what happened to White women or Black men, the discrimination against them could not be considered. As Crenshaw (2015) wrote much later,

> as a young law professor, I wanted to define this profound invisibility in relation to the law. Racial and gender discrimination overlapped not only in the workplace but in other arenas of life; equally significant, these burdens were almost completely absent from feminist and anti-racist advocacy. Intersectionality, then, was my attempt to make feminism, anti-racist activism, and anti-discrimination law do what I thought they should — highlight the multiple avenues through which racial and gender oppression were experienced so that the problems would be easier to discuss and understand. (Crenshaw 2015, on line)

Leslie McCall (2005, p. 1171) describes intersectionality as 'the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations', encompassing 'perspectives that completely reject the separability of analytic and identity categories' (2005, p. 1171, fn 1). While Crenshaw's original axes of identity used in intersectionality in 1989 were those of gender and race: 'intersectionality has broadened to encompass a number of additional social factors — sexual orientation, nationality, class, disability and others' (Emba 2015).

But intersectionality is not just about identities but about the institutions that use identity to exclude and privilege. The better we understand how identities and power work together from one context to another, the less likely our movements for change are to fracture' (Crenshaw 2015). Social oppression is not the consequence of these various factors acting independently, but their intersection creates multiple forms of oppression and discrimination (Ritzer 2007). The examples we have highlighted above show the educational institutionalisation of discrimination through multiple intersections of inequality related factors. This suggests that policy programmes to address particular educational inequalities will need to be finely tuned and focused to recognise, acknowledge and address these intersections in their programmes and the evaluation of their outcomes.

## Changes in four areas of inequality

We now consider four particular areas of inequality – socioeconomic status, ethnicity, migrancy and gender, looking at the situation when we first reported in 2009 and the changes in the decade that followed.

### *Inequalities in socioeconomic status*

In our thematic report on socioeconomic disadvantage (Cederberg et al. 2009), education was emphasised as a way of compensating for structural factors of socioeconomic disadvantage. Variables such as parents' educational level, social class, social heritage, gender, ethnicity, living conditions, and the risks of poverty were

discussed. For example, we described how, in Sweden, by 2002, migrants from the Middle East and North Africa had an unemployment rate that was four times greater than that of those who were Swedish-born, and their self-sufficiency level was only 30% of the level of those who were of Swedish heritage. But ethnic background is not a homogeneous category, with substantial differences between and within ethnic minority groups. Emphasis on ethnic background might conceal the effects of class, when this could have been foregrounded. Social class acquired an ethnic face, as Bolette Moldenhawer (2001) argues. We concluded that socioeconomic disadvantage and segregation needed to be discussed 'in relation to diversity, institutional discrimination, and the complex interplay between the educational system, individuals, groups, and the surrounding society' (Cederberg et al. 2009, p. 13). In 2009 on average 19% of children within the European Union (EU) were defined as poor and 10% of all children lived in households with no one employed. Of all these children, 60% lived within what the European Commission defined as the poverty zone. Children of working-class families are, of course, not automatically poor. However, they may encounter other forms of disadvantage when they come across the upper- and middle-class hegemony characteristic of many educational institutions. Pedagogic discourse is sometimes constructed to consistently favour middle-class groups, neglecting the experiences and communication styles of others, and thus negatively impact on these groups (Bernstein 1993; Skeggs 1997). In official reports and documents diversity was often expressed as both a resource and a problem – but with an emphasis on the latter. There were seldom identifiable examples or explanations of any substance as to why diversity *per se* could be positive.

Issues of socio-economic inequality arise because of social practices outside the school setting, and the direct control of educational policy, yet nevertheless have a profound effect on the school's potential to effect changes in teaching and learning. For example, developments in learning that require access to electronic technologies, whether of the availability of hardware or of high-speed internet access, serve to reinforce social inequalities. Schools in less privileged social locations may have informal policies to make less use of such learning, because of the inequities this will highlight across their school population, thus disempowering even those students who do have such access.

Since our 2009 report was completed, all the countries involved have undergone a period of economic upheaval following the collapse of Lehman Brothers bank in late 2008. The consequences of this, unrolled over the following months and years, was the European Debt crisis that has impacted – sometimes dramatically - on the economies, and thus the level of socioeconomic disadvantage, of all the countries in our study over the decade 2009 to 2019. The most significant impact was on Greece, whose large structural deficit and level of international debt left it particularly vulnerable. There were severe cuts in governmental expenditure, and a series of substantial loans made by the EU, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank. Unemployment rose to 28% by 2013, and youth unemployment to 62%. Very little of the loans went to support government expenditure; most was used to refinance existing loans held by private banks. The economy was not declared by the European Commission as restored until 2018. Sweden, outside the

Eurozone, fared much better: its floating currency rate gave it a short-term advantage, and structural reforms and constraints, coupled with labour concessions, tax reform, and a low level of public debt allowed for a swift economic recovery. The UK, also outside the Eurozone, began to make a similar recovery, but the May 2010 election brought about a coalition government (Conservative, with Liberal Democratic support) bent on reducing the overall state share of the economy. They claimed that the deficit recovery policies of the previous government had increased borrowing levels, and introduced dramatic cuts in public services to 'reduce the debt' they had inherited (UK Government, 2010, pp. 15–16). The planned five-year programme for debt reduction was extended a for a further four years in 2015 (Conservative Party 2015, pp. 7–9).

The consequences of these changes in the various countries were that by 2017 the percentage of children and young people (0–17) who met the EC criteria for being at risk of poverty or social exclusion was 19.4% in Sweden, 27.4% in the UK, and 36.2% in Greece (EU-28 average 24.4%) (Eurostat 2019a). The severe material deprivation rate, as defined by Eurostat, in each of the three countries in 2016 was 0.8% in Sweden, 4.0% in the UK, and 22.5% in Greece (EU-28: 7.5%) (Eurostat 2019b). The OECD, reporting on the socioeconomic divide in Europe in January 2017, concluded that income inequality was at an all-time high; female unemployment was 9.8% greater than it was for men, and their earnings were 12.8% lower; low-skilled youth who were not in employment or education comprised 17% of 15–29-year-olds in the EU and at risk of permanently being 'left behind' in the labour market; and significant gaps in educational outcomes depending on parental socioeconomic background remained: a child from an advantaged background scored an average 20% higher in mathematics than one from a disadvantaged background (OECD 2017a). Immigrants tend to have lower outcomes in terms of labour market or incomes than the native-born in most areas, and those who were employed were twice as likely to live below the poverty line, and the youth unemployment rate for immigrant groups was almost 50% higher (OECD 2017b). Young people at risk of leaving school early was a particular issue in the 2010s (Ross and Leathwood 2013).

## *Inequalities in ethnicity*

Educational inequalities in relation to ethnicity are widespread, but this is a complex area. As we noted in the original study (Williams et al. 2009), debates about race and ethnicity are framed differently across Europe, with differences between countries in terms of conceptualisations and definitions as well as different policies on data collection and monitoring. This makes any comparable assessment of the forms and extent of educational disadvantage for minority ethnic groups difficult. This remains the case: Lilla Farkas (2017) observes serious shortcomings in data on racial and ethnic minorities across Europe, with proxies such as immigration status, language, nationality or religion sometimes being used instead of concepts ethnic origin, despite these being the focus of the EU's Racial Equality Directive (European

Council of Ministers 2000). Indeed, as we noted in 2009, in some countries there is a reluctance to name 'race' or ethnicity as the basis for any educational or social disadvantage, reflecting a desire to avoid debates about racism. Where minority ethnic disadvantage is evidenced, there was a tendency to explain this (away) by reference to language skills, parental educational background and/or socioeconomic issues. For example, politicians in Sweden cited an inability to speak Swedish as the main cause of minority groups' educational disadvantage and we argued that, 'the cross national focus on immigrants' socioeconomic and linguistic status constructs them as citizens in training who only need to acquire the right outlook and skills to gain the full citizenship afforded to the native population' (Williams et al. 2009, p. 6).

Nevertheless, in the 2009 study we were able to identify educational disadvantages that were experienced by particular minority ethnic groups in certain contexts. For example, we identified reports referencing that while differences in literacy levels between native and first generation migrant children were widespread across Europe, differences between native and second generation migrants were much less in the UK and Sweden, and somewhat greater in Germany and Austria. In Greece minorities such as Roma, repatriates, immigrants and members of the Muslim minority of Thrace were most likely to be identified as functionally illiterate. In Sweden, more than 40% of first generation migrant students performed below level 2 in maths (having only basic maths skills), compared with a small percentage of those of Swedish heritage. For those countries where data was available, minority groups were less likely to complete compulsory schooling and less likely to reach the standard measure of attainment than 'native' students. However, not all ethnic minority groups were found to be educationally disadvantaged and there were also notable differences within groups. Furthermore, some minority ethnic groups outperformed their majority ethnic peers, for example the children of Chinese and Indian heritage in the UK.

Where data are available, there is evidence of progress for some minority ethnic groups over the twelve years since our original research. For example, educational attainment for Black and minority ethnic young people in the UK is improving, with students from almost all minority ethnic groups making faster progress on average than the majority White group (Morris 2015; UK Cabinet Office 2018). But the EU-MIDIS II minorities and discrimination survey (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2017) found that Roma children across Europe still lag behind their non-Roma peers on all education indicators.

Furthermore, educational disadvantage and inequalities extend far beyond that evidenced by performance measures and outcomes data. In 2009 we reported the intensification of negative attitudes particularly towards refugees and new migrants, and social segregation was seen as a matter of concern, exacerbated by 'White flight' from multi-ethnic areas as one consequence of the move towards increased parental choice of schooling across Europe. Racist bullying and social exclusion affect many minority ethnic groups across different national contexts, with racist practices in education manifested in low teacher expectations, stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes, and harsher sanctions to those from particular ethnic groups.

If anything, overt racist attitudes and behaviours across Europe seem to have worsened since 2009, as the monitoring reports of the Council of Europe's commission on racism and intolerance in Greece, the UK and Sweden (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance [ECRI], 2015, 2016, 2018) indicate. Increased racial hatred and violence against immigrants, Roma, Jews and Muslims was noted in Greece; in Sweden, rising incidences of racist and homophobic hate speech directed at migrants, Muslims, Black persons and Roma were reported, with antisemitic hatred remaining a problem; and in the UK, intolerant and xenophobic discourse from some politicians and the tabloid press has added to a climate of fear, with a sharp rise in anti-Muslim violence and the highest level of antisemitic incidents ever recorded in 2014 (ECRI 2015). A study of Eastern European young people living in the UK found that half of the participants reported an increase in racism and being bullied since the Brexit referendum in 2016, with many not reporting such incidents as they thought that neither teachers nor the police would be interested (Sime et al. 2017), and the scale of racism in UK higher education has recently been highlighted (Batty 2019).

Against this backdrop, there have been a number of policy initiatives in member states and across Europe to address ethnic inequalities in education, although much of the focus in recent years has been on first generation migrants rather than on the disadvantages experienced by those minority ethnic groups with long histories in the country. There also remains a reluctance to mention racism as a factor in educational inequalities – something that appears not to have changed since 2009.

## *Inequalities in education for migrants and those of migrant background*

Since our work in 2009, there has been additional analysis of educational equality policies relating to the educational rights of migrants and their families. Shortly before the conclusion of the EPASI project, IPSE was asked by the Migration Policy Group, based in Brussels, to scope the possibility of adding educational criteria to evaluate different States' policies on the education of migrants, as part of their Migration Policy Index (MIPEX) longitudinal programme.

IPSE (Hollingworth and Ross 2008) devised indicators for analysing whether each state encouraged children of immigrants to achieve and develop in school in the same way as the children of their own nationals, including whether:

- migrant children (whatever their legal status) have equal **access** to all levels of education;
- the **specific educational needs** of migrant children (and their parents and teachers) were targeted;
- the **new opportunities** immigration brings to schools (such as experience of diversity, exposure to new languages and cultures) were used to benefit all pupils; and

- all pupils and teachers were supported to learn and work together in **intercultural education**.

Twenty-six indicators were selected across these dimensions, drawn from some 59 conventions, resolutions, recommendations, advice and goals from the Council of Europe, EU, the International Labour Organisation, OECD, the UN and the UNESCO. Each indicator was assessed for each state in 2010 by two national education policy experts. These initial results were then published by the Migration Policy Groups and the British Council (Huddleston et al. 2011) as an overall comparative evaluation of migrant integration. The study has been repeated, with a second analysis published in 2015, and a further analysis is imminent.

Table 13.1 shows the findings for the three states we are considering in this chapter, over the period 2010–2014. The proportion of first and second generation migrants in all three states was very similar (between 13% and 15%). Greece, 21st of 38 States in 2010, did not change in its provision over this period (which concluded before the significant arrival of Syrian and other refugees in Greece in 2015): the country, already in deep in a monetary crisis, did not worsen its policies on migrant education. The UK, on the other hand, slumped very significantly in 2011, with the arrival of a Conservative coalition government determined both to cut overall public expenditure and to 'create a hostile environment' for immigrants

**Table 13.1**  MIPEX results for Education Policies for Migrants, 2010–2014: Greece, Sweden and the United Kingdom

Greece

| Policy dimension | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Access | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 |
| Targeting needs | 23 | 23 | 23 | 23 | 23 |
| New opportunities | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 |
| Intercultural education for all | 40 | 40 | 40 | 40 | 40 |
| **Total** | **36** | **36** | **36** | **36** | **36** |

Sweden

| Policy dimension | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Access | 42 | 42 | 42 | 58 | 58 |
| Targeting needs | 90 | 90 | 90 | 90 | 90 |
| New opportunities | 80 | 80 | 80 | 80 | 80 |
| Intercultural education for all | 80 | 80 | 80 | 80 | 80 |
| **Total** | **73** | **73** | **73** | **77** | **77** |

UK

| Policy dimension | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Access | 42 | 42 | 42 | 42 | 42 |
| Targeting needs | 80 | 53 | 53 | 67 | 67 |
| New opportunities | 60 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 |
| Intercultural education for all | 90 | 90 | 90 | 90 | 90 |
| **Total** | **68** | **59** | **54** | **57** | **57** |

Source: MIPEX (2019)

(Yuval-Davis et al. 2018; York 2018). The overall score fell from 'slightly favourable' to 'half-way favourable'), and the policy dimensions of Targeting Needs and New Opportunities fell very significantly: the UK's score was only maintained as high as this by its 'Intercultural Education for all' score. Sweden, on the other hand, maintained its overall leading State position, and raised its Access rating in 2013.

## *Inequalities in education and gender*

Gender equality in education is central to rights of access, participation, recognition and being valued. In our original report (Spinthourakis et al. 2009) we pointed to the different contexts, funding and implementation models within which educational polices on gender were implemented. All the countries studied demonstrated commitment to the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination, but few programmes were complete, especially in their evaluation, monitoring and dissemination (*ibid*., p. 16). Without such information the usefulness of these projects is significantly reduced.

Each country had its own history of addressing gender inequalities. Most state policies had a position on gender-related disadvantage, and projects were designed essentially from a structural viewpoint. The major issues, regardless of differences in policy, were career and subject choice and fighting gender stereotypes. Combating stereotypes was found throughout, and in the area of gender and attainment, boys' underachievement was often an issue in policy discussions. Many felt that this was used to conceal deeper issues of gender inequalities and outcomes (Arthur and Davies 2010). The absence of policies addressing sexuality in most countries suggested that they were not a priority over the decade.

Since 2009 approaches to gender inequality have in some cases remained static, and others have fluctuated, not always in ways that might have been foreseen. While gender equality is a moral, human rights and justice issue, it is now argued (and increasingly researched) in the 2010s that it has a potential economic cost (Klasen and Minasyan 2017).

The language of gender and sexuality is evolving rapidly, and the diversification of terminology allows greater identity self-determination for some, but is objected to by others, and this has the potential to increase social inequalities (Dunne and Hewitt 2018). Gender equality may have more prominence in legislative texts, but this does not always equate to the achievement of equity. Malcolm Brynin et al. (2019) examined intersectionality between gender and ethnicity, finding diversification of inequality but also that there is more inequality between different ethnic groups than between gender groups.

The Pew Research Center (2010) referred to 'gender equality' as being 'universally embraced', but questioned whether this had been translated into action. The last decade has shown progress in terms of achieving greater general gender equity, as measured by the European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE] (2019, Table 13.2). EU Commissioner Jourová commented on this, saying '[we must still

**Table 13.2**  Gender Equality Index scores for selected EU Member States, 2005, 2015, 2017

| Country | 2005 | 2015 | 2017 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Greece | 47.0 | 50.2 | 51.4 |
| Sweden | 78.5 | 82.3 | 83.3 |
| UK | 71.2 | 71.5 | 72.5 |
| EU-28 | 62.0 | 66.7 | 67.4 |

Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) (2019). *Gender Equality Index 2019 Work-life.* Figure 2, p.19; Figure 4, p. 20

take] positive measures to address inequalities between women and men and by tackling all forms of discrimination in our society.' (European Commission 2017, p. 5).

Gender policies in EU states have had a positive effect especially for those states with little or no tradition in this area (Lempesi 2019, p. 42), and the reasons for the variations in change between states are complex. Maria Karamessini and Jill Rubery (2020) suggest the UK's policies lack coherence, probably due to unwillingness to acknowledge the negative impact austerity has on general gender equality, while Greece had attempted to create coherent gender mainstreaming, but lacked the resources for implementation. Sweden's efforts and commitment led to the best results in the EU-28.

## Explanations of inequality and policies of evasion in different areas of inequality

Responses to educational inequalities have been varied, at both societal and governmental level. The general discourse of meritocracy is prevalent: a particularly insidious argument that implies that those who do not succeed are themselves responsible for any disadvantages they suffer, discounting institutional and structural impediments. 'Pure meritocracy is incoherent because, without redistribution, one generation's successful individuals would become the next generation's embedded caste, hoarding the wealth they had accumulated' (Giddens and Diamond 2005). Frank Walkey et al. (2013) found that 'promoting low or even moderate expectations and aspirations for student achievement may actually reinforce lower academic achievement' (p. 306). Varieties of explanation for inequality include pathological explanations (including discredited assumptions that intelligence is largely genetically determined); transmitted deprivation (e.g. due to perceived lack of parental education or skills); home-based factors (lack of material resources, etc. in the home); school factors (such as lack of resources or low teacher expectations) and the structure of society (e.g. social class and socially differentiated schooling). All of these have implicit and explicit implications for policy. Some anachronistic explanations are still employed at the policy level, as well as in popular discourse, often without challenge.

We found four particular policy responses that act to undermine and evade the achievement of equality of educational outcomes.

***The denial of the existence of disadvantaged groups*** in, for example, countries where populations asserted a 'national identity' that was reluctant to recognise that the population was not homogeneous, and some groups that were being characterised as 'the other'.

Another response was to ***confuse categories***, subsuming all inequalities under the general category of the (socio)economic. Clearly, family poverty does have a strong impact on educational attainment and participation. But there are other inequalities that intersect with and compound poverty. It may be simpler for governments to attribute inequalities to poverty than to acknowledge more complex patterns of discriminatory behaviour towards disadvantaged groups.

Equality policies may sometimes ***compete with other policy agendas***: as Nancy Fraser (1997) observes, affirmative action policies may not address deeper structures of inequalities, and then, inequalities will persist. The development of an audit culture in education, where schools and teachers are rated according to the successful outcomes of their pupils, may lead to unintended or perverse outcomes. If schools or teachers are judged by the proportion of pupils achieving a particular standard, then they will be tempted to concentrate attention and resources on those pupils who are most likely to move through the threshold to achieve the standard, focusing on pupils in a narrow ability band just below the threshold, thereby neglecting others.

Some ***policies do not address equality of outcome***, even though they have this intention. It is common to focus resources and attention on members of a specific underachieving group, without considering the wider social and teacher expectations that may be leading to underachievement, shifting responsibility for success to the individual, assuming that all that is necessary is to provide 'equality of opportunity', and to stigmatise individuals who fail to take advantage of such 'opportunity'. Widespread assumptions about social and economic roles shape curricular options, which may lead to lower levels of resources, a limited curriculum, and low teacher expectations.

We now therefore turn to the different policy discourses in different states, and examine changes in these between our analysis in 2009 and today.

## Changes in policy discourses about inequalities in education in three states

We now examine policy responses to inequalities in three of the countries we originally studied – Greece, Sweden and the UK – again, reviewing the situation at the time we first reported in 2009 and the changes in the decade that followed.

## *Policy responses to inequality in Greece*

Greek state educational policies aimed at eradicating social exclusion and educational inequalities have historically been contentious (Kazamias 1967). Educational policies are often announced with a high degree of promise, yet are slow to materialise (OECD 2018, p. 14); those that are implemented tend to either gradually contract or simply end due to a lack of institutionalised funding. Three-quarters of policy initiative funding is from European Structural Funding, but this requires the balance to be contributed from national funds, which are not available to maintain programmes in the longer term (Eurydice 2019).

In the last decade policies have been introduced to deliver 'equity, quality and efficiency' through the national educational system to all people, many of whom would otherwise be marginalised. In 2008 we highlighted how educational policy reform in Greece has been characterised as a 'reformist reform', rather than being attuned to structural reform: the educational reformism foci 'have been the modernisation and democratisation of what was believed to be an anachronistic and deficient educational system, one that was extremely centralised and bureaucratised, economically inefficient, socially exclusive and inequitable, and pedagogically authoritarian.' (Spinthourakis et al. 2008, p. 5).

This earlier report described the Greek state as focusing directly on the issues to deal with educational inequalities. National policy pronouncements and programmes were intended to serve as catalysts of change, to be implemented at the local level. In hindsight, it can be seen that this marked the end of nearly a decade of apparent national prosperity, increased funding on social initiatives and the promise of a brighter future. That national trajectory, prior to the economic crisis, appears to have demarcated the end of one of its most vibrant and socially conscious periods of stability in contemporary Greece history.

The financial crisis shifted state policy towards efficiency, though not ignoring issues of equity (Tsatsaroni 2011, p. 4), but it was clearly aligned with austerity. As an example, the Kallikratis Programme (Greece, Ministry of Interior, 2010) – on the 'New Architecture of Local Government and Decentralized Administration' – combined efficiency and equity objectives. Schools were annually reviewed for attendance rates, teacher–student ratios, and 'functionality' (distance and difficulties children face travelling to school), and these measures were used to justify school mergers or closures (*ibid.*, pp. 46–47). But vulnerable populations (e.g., the Roma, the Muslim Minority of Thrace) were exempted from this. Other policies allowed the expansion of Intercultural Schools, so all children could be enrolled, not just the culturally and linguistically 'other', in order to enhance intercultural education and foster cultural diversity (*ibid.*, p. 49).

Special Education Needs policies were criticised in our 2009 report for reinstating an anachronistic medical orientation, but it nonetheless allowed SEN children to attend general classes, based on referrals from Centres for Diagnosis, Differential Diagnosis, and Support. Class teachers voiced concerns about funding, infrastructure, and training, and overall adequacy of this to serve SEN children (Pappas et al.

2018, pp. 4–5). New policies attempt to mediate these concerns, such as the co-teaching model of Parallel Support, where a special education teacher is assigned to a student and not to a classroom: unaffected by the economic crisis, this has been significantly implemented (Mavropalias and Anastasiou 2016).

These efforts to temper inequality have been undermined (OECD 2018; Andriopoulou et al. 2017): the crisis-related austerity measures often particularly impact on inclusion and equity policies (Mitrakos 2014). The 25% reduction in Greece's GDP was comparable to being at war: a new group has been identified of 'the newly excluded', which includes members of the former middle class, previously perceived as privileged or rich (Zafiropoulou et al. 2017, p. 2). But these policy changes were not only attributable to the austerity measures, but must also be understood in the context of Greece's increasing diversity, partly resulting from the refugee crises of 2015 and 2019.

Even under these conditions, efforts at amelioration are being undertaken, such as the three-year plan to achieve 'higher equity' in educational provision and outcomes (Greece, Ministry of Education, 2017). While long-standing challenges to equity are issues of lack of inclusiveness, geographic isolation and refugee status, even small villages have their own schools (OECD 2018, p. 104). Notwithstanding the Kallikratis Programme's policy of merging or abolishing schools, 3.5% of primary schools and 6% of secondary schools are classified as geographically 'difficult to access' by the Ministry (Roussakis 2017). Another challenge, as yet without a clear policy, is the educational needs of the major refugee movement through Greece, which in 2015 was nearly one million (UNHCR 2017). Refugee facilitators in the camps are NGOs, but the refugees' schooling is an issue for the Greek Ministry of Education. Reactions have been mixed, and local communities and schools need to be both prepared and willing to have refugee children enrolled in their schools to minimise segregation and foster integration into Greece society (Simopoulos and Alexandridis 2019).

The challenge of supporting policies to diminish social and educational inequality has been limited in scope, but can be seen in the general focus of the State's policy initiatives (OECD 2018, p. 120). There may also be a need for a range of targeted approaches to be considered to eradicate educational inequalities, rather than such a generalised approach.

## *Changes in inequality in Sweden*

Three Rädda Barnen [Save the Children] reports (Salonen 2018, 2019) investigated the poverty risk for families with children in Sweden. The first showed increasing poverty risk and the second that, though the long-term policy is to reduce child poverty, regional and inter-group differences remained. Many had missed out on the substantial increases in income that characterised Sweden's economic growth after the 1990 crisis. The 2010 policy analysis of family economics was replicated by Salonen in 2019 to examine the extent to which policies equalised incomes and

reduced family economic vulnerability. While families with children had increased income at all income levels up to 2017, differences between groups had increased. Using the EU relative poverty measure of less than 60% of the country's median income, the proportion of families with children in poverty had risen by 2017 to 16%. Swedish family policy is now less able to counter the growing income gaps amongst families with children, and is less able to combat poverty (*ibid*., pp. 28–29).

Socioeconomic segregation contributes significantly to the emergence of segregation patterns. During the last ten years media reports on the state of Swedish schools have generated alarming concern. Children in families in financial need generally have lower grades and leave school earlier, and have higher risks of later developmental and psychosocial problems (Socialstyrelsen 2010). Parents' educational level and income remain the factors that explain most of the grading results. Foreign-born pupils' grades are also affected by the age of immigration (Skolverket 2018). However, for parents born abroad, parents' level of education and degree of allowances have also increased in importance. Segregation challenges what used to be a Swedish ideal of the right to equal schooling (Gustafsson 2010). Segregation is relational: developments in different schools and residential areas interact with each other. A major problem has been the lack of evaluation, measurement and follow up on how segregation develops over time, which makes it difficult to know with any certainty if national strategies to reduce segregation actually work. Delmos [the Swedish Agency against Segregation] suggested there needed to be a cross-sectoral follow-up system based on appropriate indicators. The Government's reform program for reduced segregation in 2017–2025 led to a new 2018 directive to Statistics Sweden to develop a nationwide socioeconomic segregation breakdown for statistical follow-up, carried out in collaboration with Delmos. This revealed signs of increasing segregation in a greater number of locations. Some housing areas now deviate significantly from the national average in terms of unemployment, school results, income, health, turnout and insecurity. The importance of more children taking part in the pre-school programme, and more young people completing secondary education have been identified as important factors for school results and of entering employment.

Skolverket (the National Agency for Education) is required to promote equal access to education and quality environments. The Agency's report (Skolverket 2018) analysed family background and school results for all pupils aged 15–16 between 1998 and 2016, and found that socioeconomic background had become increasingly important for success in primary school. School segregation had increased and, with this, differences between attainment in different schools: Skolverket (2017) found that such school segregation increases the difficulties schools have in their compensatory and value-based work. Pupils with different backgrounds rarely meet in school today (Sernhede 2014). The consequence is that schools now offer fewer opportunities for children with a foreign background to encounter Swedish society (Sernhede 2011). This has particular significance for foreign-born pupils in families with lower levels of parental education and income. School segregation has increased as a result of residential segregation and freedom of choice reforms, and is increasingly structured around social and ethnic factors

(Axelsson 2014; Wigerfelt 2014). Families with stronger resources and Swedish background tend to move away from low status areas and schools. Eva Andersson et al. (2010) showed that schools in vulnerable areas had very few or no pupils who spoke Swedish. Making active choices of school is one strategy for the families to deal with the structurally unequal conditions that apply within the education system. However, Nihad Bunar (2010) points out that in the context of free school choice and market-oriented competition between schools, most families do not choose to leave low-performing schools, as they value personal relationships that contribute to belonging and cultural recognition in the area where they live.

Skolverket (2018) reports that students with the same socioeconomic background receive higher grades if they attend a school with favourable socioeconomic composition compared to if they attend one with less favourable socioeconomic composition. Skolverket (p. 33) also identifies two reasons why the importance of family background has increased. Firstly, schools can no longer support students from poorer backgrounds and secondly, students' home conditions have become more diverse, making compensatory action more difficult. Foreign-born pupils start school with poorer circumstances. This analysis also shows the significance of socioeconomic background has increased for pupils with Swedish backgrounds, but considerably less than for foreign-born pupils. Parental education level remains the most important factor, but increasingly family income is becoming the strongest driving factor behind the increasing importance of socioeconomic background, for foreign-born pupils and those with Swedish backgrounds.

## *Policy responses to inequality in England*

Inequalities in educational participation, outcomes and experiences have a long history in the UK and persist despite government policy commitments to tackle disadvantage. Yet policies can make a difference, as our original study illustrated. At that time a Labour Government, committed to education and social justice, had been in power for over a decade. It recognised that economic disadvantage was linked with low levels of achievement, and that poverty and inequality had increased dramatically since the (Conservative) Thatcher Government's election in 1979, with a third of all children living in relative poverty by 1997 (UK 1999). The Government committed to reversing these trends, with initiatives both to raise educational standards and achievement overall, and to target disadvantaged groups. Funding for education was increased, with school spending per pupil rising by over 50% in real terms between 2000/01 and 2010/11 (Belfield et al. 2018). Initiatives specifically designed to tackle disadvantage included 'Sure Start', a programme supporting learning, social and emotional development targeted at parents with children under four in disadvantaged areas; the Education Maintenance Allowance supporting students from low-income households with the cost of further education; and Aim Higher which sought to increase participation in higher education by young people from disadvantaged groups. Some positive outcomes for each of these initiatives were

reported, with evidence that children from the most deprived backgrounds were beginning to catch up with their more advantaged peers, participation in further education increased (Heath et al. 2013) and more young people were applying to higher education (Passy and Morris 2010).

Other policies focused on inequalities related to gender and ethnicity. In 2007 the Gender Equality Duty made schools and other public sector organisations responsible for tackling gender equality in relation to achievement, career choices and bullying. As we predicted in our original study, a focus on boys' achievement appeared be prioritised, with schools more likely to cite positive impact for boys than for girls (Bukowski et al. 2011). 'Aiming High', a project designed to increase attainment levels for African-Caribbean pupils, was credited with improving achievement for African Caribbean pupils in those schools that participated in the initiative (Tikly et al. 2006).

Our 2009 conclusion was that, despite a government commitment to tackling inequalities and disadvantage and some positive outcomes overall, these were limited by the ongoing reliance on neoliberal market economics and policies of choice, competition and meritocracy that had been introduced by the Conservative government in the 1980s and which continued to reinforce and reconstruct inequalities.

The political and economic context in 2019 is very different. The financial crisis of 2008 and the election of a Conservative-led coalition Government in 2010 committed to implementing what was described as 'the most drastic budget cuts in living memory' (Pimlott et al. 2010) has had a significant impact on the public good. Between 2010/11 and 2017/18, there was a real-terms reduction of funding for local authorities of 49% (NAO 2018). A report by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2018) found that government changes to tax and welfare had resulted in more people in poverty, including children, disabled people, women and some minority ethnic communities. Between 2009/10 and 2017/18, total school spending per pupil fell by 8% in real terms. Some education policies were designed to tackle disadvantage, including extending the free childcare entitlement initiated by the previous Labour Government from 3–4-year-olds to disadvantaged 2-year-olds, but funding for Sure Start fell by almost 50% between 2010/11 and 2016/17 (NAO 2018) leading to the closure of up to 1000 Sure Start children's centres by 2017 (Smith et al. 2018). A further policy designed to address disadvantage was the introduction of a 'Pupil Premium' in 2011, providing additional funding to schools in England to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. Whilst this last initiative does appear to have encouraged schools to focus more on tackling disadvantage, in some cases this extra money was cancelled out by real terms cuts in school funding (NAO 2015). In addition, the Education Maintenance Award was abolished and replaced with significantly less generous funding for bursary awards only for students from the very poorest families, and tuition fees for higher education were raised from £3000 to £9000 a year from 2012. Although projects were designed to encourage more disadvantaged young people to go on to higher education, the emphasis was on the 'brightest' young people going to the elite universities (e.g.Thornton et al. 2014), reflecting the discourse of social mobility underlining

exceptional individual success rather than any challenge to wider economic, social or cultural inequalities.

So those government policies that aimed to challenge educational inequalities continued to be undermined by an ideological commitment to neoliberal market economics and by the actions of a right-wing government and its commitment to a smaller state. Social deprivation still impacts strongly on pupil achievement and school exclusion. Boys do worse than girls at school and are more likely to be excluded, as are those with education support needs, Black Caribbean children and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children. Bullying continues to be a problem, with over a third of girls reporting sexist comments online, and disabled children remain marginalised (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2019). High levels of racial and sexual harassment and sexual violence in higher education have been documented (Blue Marble Research 2018; Batty 2019). The Brexit referendum in 2016 produced further challenges. It is estimated that the UK economy would have been about 3% larger by the end of 2018 if Britain had not voted to leave the EU (Mason 2019), with increased xenophobia and a spike in police reported hate crime of almost a third in the run up to and following the referendum (UK Home Office 2018).

## Conclusions

We can define three critical starting points for analysis. Firstly, that identifying disadvantaged groups will be difficult and probably imprecise, and involve intersecting factors; secondly, that the causal relationships between action and remedy will be complex and call for multiple and parallel programmes; and thirdly, that activities need to be directed towards both the disadvantaged and the advantaged, so as not to further 'other' disadvantaged groups (Kakos et al. 2016).

The recognition of a disadvantaged group has generally come about through the actions of members of those groups themselves and through identifying inequality of outcomes, and from this examining whether these may result from inequalities of opportunities. This has led at different times to the identification and definition of groups that may not previously have been recognised or conscious of themselves as groups. But data collection to demonstrate inequalities is not easy, particularly if there are issues in identifying members of a particular group: some groups may have concerns and fears about being identified. It may be important, therefore, to also use qualitative evidence of inequity.

It also seems critical to understand in all approaches that there will be no simple monocausal relationships between inequalities and programmes. It is very probable that no single programme will remedy all instances of a particular form of inequality; at the same time, almost every programme will successfully address some instances of inequality. To systematically address inequity, with the aspiration of leaving no individuals left behind, multiple programmes of action will be needed, including not only those that take place within formal educational settings, but also projects designed to address disadvantage in the wider community.

In many cases of forms of disadvantage, there is a strong case to work with the non-disadvantaged community as well as the disadvantaged. Tackling underachievement means raising expectations of success, and this involves everyone's expectations, not just the expectations of the lower achieving groups. The assumptions of all professionals, policy makers, community groups and the public at large should be that all groups will achieve educational success.

Based on our detailed analysis of the project studies, we suggested (Ross et al. 2009, pp. 42–44) twelve general principles for action, that still seem useful in planning educational intervention projects.

1. Involve the disadvantaged community in planning, delivery and evaluation. Where communities are involved in the planning, management and evaluation of programmes, the chances of success seem to be higher. Recognising knowledge and experience, being culturally sympathetic, and empowering communities give them a hold over their futures (Cummins 1996; Henley 2006).

2. A strategic aim should be to raise the attitudes and expectations of everyone: inclusive programmes with elements variously addressed to more than just the underperforming group.

3. Institutionalise programmes so they support *all* practitioners. Highly differentiated and targeted programmes can lead to potentially isolated specialists, so most practitioners feel that particular pupils are 'different' and can only be supported by specialists, further isolating the target group.

4. Changes in educational programmes and policies take time to have an effect. It takes many years to educate a child, and more to change the whole teaching workforce. Programmes and expectations should be planned with this in mind.

5. Work with a range of agencies, at a range of levels, in a range of areas. Multi-agency working is more likely to produce coordinated action that reaches more pupils at risk, and approaches them with a variety of support strategies.

6. No single programme will remedy all instances of a particular inequality, but many programmes will successfully address some instances. Fixing on a single programme as the most cost-effective will leave some pupils outside the range of the programme.

7. Members of the minority groups should be part of the education professions. Few members of disadvantaged groups are represented: changing this will raise the aspirations and ambitions, and convey to the whole population that members of such groups are entitled to the same respect, rights and authority as the general population (Ross 2002).

8. Targets for who will be worked with, and what should be achieved, should be clear: identifying the nature of the difficulties, the areas to be particularly addressed, and the anticipated outcomes, help focus activity.

9. As far as possible, policy should be based on actual measures of achievement, take-up and need, rather than on proxies that are assumed to stand for these items.

10. Greater attention needs to be given, at national and European levels, to the collection of statistics on disadvantaged groups. The degree of precision may be difficult, but pragmatic efforts are better than none. Good qualitative data will

identify the existence and extent of inequalities; help determine the distribution of resources; and help evaluate the success of any interventions.

11. Evaluate and learn from success: all projects should have planned, from the earliest stages, mechanisms to evaluate the activity. These should be both internal (continuous and iterative) and external (supportive but critical).

12. Successful programmes should become standard good practice. Mechanisms need to be in place, and resources available to allow this to happen. John Rawls principle was that resources should not be allotted on the basis of economic returns, but 'according to their worth in enriching the personal and social life of citizens, including the less favoured' (Rawls 1971, p. 107).

Education alone cannot reduce inequality, and policies in other areas – for example, housing in Sweden, and public sector cuts in the UK – can undermine and frustrate the impact of education policies designed to address inequity. Our arguments and investigations have been directed particularly at the third element of the European Commission's rationale for the project: that educational policies should seek to minimise inequalities in order to 'provide everyone with a high-quality education' (European Commission 2006, p. 5). The research was based on this requirement for human rights and equity argument, which should be to minimise differences between individuals and groups that may result in differential access to rights – not just political and civil rights, but also social, economic, cultural, religious and linguistic rights. The 'public good' is, we argue, best served by educational policies – and educational research – directed at these enSds.

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# Chapter 14
# The problem of the public good and the implications for researching educational policies for social justice

**Alistair Ross** 

**Abstract** Chapter 1 opened a discussion on what is meant by social justice in education, and the issues involved in defining this, and what research directed towards this would look like. We identified different types of potential injustices, and the subsequent chapters examined various of these in turn, in a range of educational contexts, through the prisms of research directed towards finding policy initiatives that might counter the effects of particular inequities. But our contributors also noted that the notion of the public good was rarely defined, and was unlikely to be agreed on. This concluding chapter takes up this challenge, and seeks to examine what the public is, what the public good might be, and who should determine this. We then turn to the implications of this for the relationship between educational researchers working towards social justice and education policy makers.

## Introduction

Most people would probably agree that education should be directed towards the public good. The issue is that different people will have different constructions of what constitutes the public good. In many societies, 'the public' would be considered to be 'people like us' – perhaps those of the same national or ethnic group, or of those in society who were presumed to best represent the public. However, it might be recalled that the eugenics movements of the early twentieth century, urging the sterilisation and non-education of those judged to be physically or mentally unfit, was seen as essentially being carried out for 'the public good'. Moreover, these were not simply some far right fascist policy proposals, but were equally advocated by champions of the left and of liberal democracy, such as George Bernard Shaw, Marie Stopes, Helen Keller and Bertrand Russell. This concluding chapter begins

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by considering who 'the public' might be, and what constitutes 'the good' of this public.

From this, we next need to consider how the public good can and should be determined: who ought to be involved in this, and how? Should it be some form of plebiscite, a consultation of 'public opinion'? Or should it be settled by the social market, allowing a laissez-faire attitude that the public good can be expressed and achieved by the invisible hand of the market? This leads to a consideration of how the nature of research evidence might and should impact on the determination of public policy 'for the public good', and thus the relationship between educational researchers and policy makers – which many chapters in this volume have suggested may be both precarious and strained.

This volume has shown the many pressures and pressure groups that attempt to determine the nature of educational policy for the public good. Our argument has been that our concern with this should go beyond the instrumental to consider the collective purpose of education as a communal endeavour, a shared effort and commitment to social justice and solidarity. The unfolding challenges of globalisation, pluralism and super-diversity, growing inequalities in wealth and income (both within and between states), populism and the climate crisis all demand educational policies that will empower everyone to understand and react to them for the common good.

## Who is the public?

The conception of 'the public' has always been contentious, from the ancient Greek ruling classes suspicions of the *demos* onwards. Is it the inhabitants of a particular political entity, such as a state, or only those who are formally accredited as citizens of that state? Are there additional qualifications to being a member of the public, such as age, or being a member of the electorate? However defined, does – or can – the public have an opinion? Pierre Bourdieu (1973) argued that public opinion is effectively a construction of policy makers, who want transparent and resilient statements of what can be presented as public needs or demands:

> Any opinion poll assumes that everyone can have an opinion; or, in other words, that the production of an opinion is within the reach of all. At the risk of undermining a naively democratic feeling, I will dispute this first postulate. Second postulate: it is assumed that all opinions are equal. I think it can be shown that this is not the case and that to combine opinions that do not have the same real strength leads to the production of meaningless artefacts. Implicit third postulate: in the simple fact of asking the same question to everyone involved is the assumption that there is a consensus on the issues, i.e. there is agreement on the issues that deserve to be addressed, to be asked. These three postulates imply, it seems to me, a whole series of distortions which are observed even when all the conditions of methodological rigour are met in the recollection and analysis of the data. (Bourdieu 1973, p. 1292)

He goes on to suggest that asking questions is in itself difficult, because it 'perniciously … put[s] people on notice to answer questions they have not asked

themselves' (p. 1297), demanding that those polled make choices between alternatives, none of which may reflect their own situation. Examining the kind of questions asked, he suggests that 'the great majority of them were directly related to the political concerns of the "political staff" ['*personnel politique*']' (p. 1294).

Public opinion in the United Kingdom has historically been an important extrajudicial element in the policing of public morals, being used to sanction those who were not seen as behaving in a moral way: the concept of the 'sanction of public opinion' was put forward by utilitarian philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham (1989 [1780], 1991 [1776]) and John Stuart Mill ('the moral coercion of public opinion': Mill 1859, p. 9) as a way to enforce that what was seen as immoral (but not illegal) behaviour. Alan Ryan (1991) argued that, for utilitarians, laws and morality are both necessary in promoting 'interpersonal goods [such] as peace, justice, and honesty. And both … are backed by what is supposed to be an impartial sanction … moral rules have behind them the sanction of public opinion' (Ryan 1991, p. 164).

Such sanctions of public opinion can, it was much more recently argued by Tim Luckhurst (Professor of Journalism at the University of Kent), include areas such as marital infidelity:

> … popular morality should not ban infidelity or imprison men for betraying their wives, but it could create an incentive to behave responsibly. People tempted to stray might be persuaded to think again by the certainty that their friends and neighbours would think less of them. In these cases, public disapproval is plainly beneficial to social order and contentment because broken relationships can create misery, deny opportunities to children and impose costs ranging from educational failure to crime and anti-social behaviour. The community's interest in private wrongdoing delivers an emphatic public good. (Luckhurst 2011)

Luckhurst was writing in the context of a contemporary inquiry into journalistic standards, and particularly UK press intrusion into the private lives of public personalities by phone hacking (the Leveson Inquiry into 'the culture, practices and ethics of the press' (Leveson 2012, para. 1.3). Luckhurst was cited by Paul Dacre, editor of the *Daily Mail.* In his evidence to the Leveson Inquiry: under his editorship some of the more egregious and salacious examples of public shaming had been published, and he was an unwilling witness to the Inquiry:

> The country's interest in public wrongdoing is an emphatic public good … Perversion in society has been with us for a long time. … 'privacy' is … impossible to define. I think the public interest is a different matter. … it would be a worthwhile exercise – to define what the public interest is and try and codify that in some way. The one constituent of British life that hasn't been consulted by this Inquiry is the general public. (Dacre 2012, pp. 14–15)

Luckhurst and Dacre were not without their critics (for example, Wilby 2014; Petley 2019), and this is a construction of the public good that is suspect within its own terms, let alone in the framing of public policy. Jon Nixon refers to what he sees as a 'recurring strain' in British public life, of

> those who collapse the public good into public interest and public interest into public preference. According to this refrain, the public good can be read off from the consumer choices of a market niche within the population as a whole. If enough of us want to buy into it and consume it, it is deemed to be an incontrovertible public good. (Nixon 2011, p. ix)

If the public good is not the exercise of popular morality over public wrongdoing, and not 'the logical outcome of a market-driven consumer society' (Nixon, p. ix), then what is it?

## What is the public good?

Bentham proposed in his utility theory in 1776: a 'fundamental axiom [was that] it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right or wrong' (1991 [1776], p. 393). This proposal that the 'public good' could be arrived at in an almost arithmetical manner, adding together various degrees of 'happiness' to arrive at a definitive sum, has many critics: Utilitarianism was revised and expanded by Bentham's student John Stuart Mill. Mill sharply criticised Bentham's view of human nature, which failed to recognise conscience as a human motive. Mill argued that Bentham's failure to address [human] rights in the utility calculus, and to recognise conscience was to argue that a person's 'selfish interest would prompt him [*sic*] to a particular course of action' (Mill 1833 [1897, p. 402]), and the effect was 'to have done and to be doing very serious evil' (*ibid*., p. 403). Gerald Postema suggests that:

> No moral concept suffers more at Bentham's hand than the concept of justice. There is no sustained, mature analysis of this notion to match the quality of Mill's discussion in Utilitarianism. … [Bentham] was most inclined to respond to talk of justice in an entirely polemical fashion, dismissing it summarily as innocently vague, potentially obscurantist, or a mask for social antipathy or malevolence. (Postema 2019, p. 148)

Mill argued for the individual to have and exercise moral agency: he believed the effort to achieve utility was unjustified if it coerced people into doing things they did not want to do. Likewise, the appeal to science as the arbiter of truth would prove just as futile, he believed, if it did not temper facts with compassion.

> He who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties. ….

> Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing. (Mill 1859, p. 106, 107)

Mill sought to humanise Bentham's system through the protection of everyone's rights, particularly the minority's: he therefore introduced the harm principle:

> that the sole end for which mankind are warranted … in interfering with the liberty of action (of any of their number), is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear [from any action] because it will be better for him … make him happier [or] because … to do so would be wise, or even right. (Mill 1859, pp. 21–22)

More recently, John Rawls radically advanced the relationship between liberties and justice. In *A Theory of Justice* (1971) he proposed that everyone should derive

the principles of justice from behind a 'veil of ignorance' (p. 12), in which they are unaware of how such principles would advantage them (or not): he then uses this to advance two principles. The first and prior of these is that each person should have an equal right to the widest possible basic liberties that is compatible with everyone else having the same right (p. 60), these rights including political liberty, freedom of expression and assembly, freedom of thought and conscience, freedom from assault and oppression, freedom from arbitrary arrest within the rule of law, and the right to hold personal property. From this, the second principle requires that any social and economic inequalities should be arranged so that they simultaneously:

(a) are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged ('the difference principle') – so any variation from equality of primary goods ('anything a rational person would insist on having, whatever else he wants', p. 174) can only be justified if it will improve the position of the worst-off, under that distribution in comparison with the previous, equal, distribution – and that due note must be taken of what will be left to future generations; and

(b) observe the 'equal opportunity principle', that 'offices and positions' (p. 302) are distributed not merely on the basis of meritocracy, but that everyone must have all opportunities to acquire the skills on which merit is assessed, particularly if one does not have the material resources to do this (p. 73).

From these postulates, Rawls derived what is the most just path for educational policy. Genuine equality of opportunity requires that society gives more support to those with 'fewer native assets, and to those born in less favourable social positions' (pp. 100–101), following from which he argues that 'greater resources might be spent on the education of the less rather than the more intelligent, at least over a certain period of time, say the earlier years of school' *(ibid.)*. Moreover, he argues:

> the value of education should not be assessed solely in terms of economic efficiency and social welfare. Equally if not more important is the role of education in enabling a person to enjoy the culture of his [*sic*] society and to take part in its affairs, and in this way to provide for each individual a sense of his own worth. (Rawls 1971, p. 101).

Rawls' principles thus very effectively take us from utilitarian and liberty-oriented construction of the public good towards a public good that is specifically focused on policies in the educational arena. But this is not sufficient: the material provisions to address inequalities, even if unequally distributed to favour the dispossessed, have not proved to be sufficient to prevent the ingrained obstacles that Nicaise (2000) identified: 'obstacles on the 'demand' side of education (which can be referred to as 'unequal opportunities', dependent on the socioeconomic environment of the pupil) and on the 'supply' side (unequal treatment or discrimination on the part of educational institutions)' (2000, p. 37). The demand side factors might include socioeconomic consequences of poverty; material and cultural deprivation; poor health; unstable family relations; lack of cultural and social capital – factors that largely lie outside the educational system. The supply side factors include the ways in which educational and societal institutions and their agents contribute to prejudice against students from particular backgrounds or

groups (gendered, classed, racialised, by disability or sexuality). These interact with each other (see Chapter 13, Hartsmar et al. 2021).

## The public good in education

The various contributions to this volume have each reflected on how the research that they describe has impacted on the public good, which has proved an interesting experience for each of them. Working together in educational policy research, we have each held particular constructions of what social justice might mean in various educational policy contexts. Many of us have focused on different educational stages or structures: early years settings, schools, higher and further educational institutions. We have also occasionally referred to informal educational settings, that operate in parallel to state institutions, such as the supplementary schools referred to by Maylor (Chapter 11, 2021). Many state educational institutions are associated with informal social groups, whose behaviours impact on inequalities: we have not analysed these here in any depth, but we have done so elsewhere: for example, how inequalities play out in university peer friendship groups, student accommodation settings, and meetings from bars to conferences (Read et al. 2018). Similarly, Osgood (Chapter 8, 2021) researched social justice in early years community settings, examining how a charity that promoted music-making to 'support children to develop personally and socially, as well as musically' was extending its work with families in a range of early years settings, such as children's centres, libraries and parks (Osgood et al. 2013). They found an urgent need to reconceptualise what is meant by 'hard to reach,' and to resist pathologizing or othering groups of families who were not part of a white, middle-class normativity. They argued that such programmes needed to make their work more relevant, accessible, and appealing to all families, as part of the public good.

We have all had particular areas of social injustice that have principally motivated us – gender, social class, 'race' and ethnicity. Social justice, or the lack of it, is partly contingent on these specificities. These contribute to each of the various definitions and deliberations that have been advanced in each chapter. But there is nevertheless a high degree of congruence in the notion of the public good in education.

Fretwell (Chapter 5, 2021) stresses inclusion as a necessary condition of the public good, and for policies that address the demand side: reversing the adverse socioeconomic conditions that affect parents' lives. Policies that stigmatise and strive to reform parenting cultures should instead empower and mobilise them to create cross-cultural solidarity; to understand (and resist) class-based inequities; and to actively defend their rights. Minty (Chapter 6, 2021) also makes the socioeconomic central to her case that higher education should be a public good, and thus not merely free of fees, but with the maintenance support that would make it universally available. McCallum's (Chapter 4, 2021) position takes the argument that education is not merely of instrumental value, but that it should recognise the

public good – and social justice – in stressing the cultural and creative benefits of education, which, he argues, are currently much more readily available to those who are privately educated, and thus rationed on a class and wealth basis.

Moreau (Chapter 9, 2021) reflects on how moral panics about the 'feminisation of teaching' amount to the creation of 'public harm', in that they demand of the teaching profession a masculinised performance (and one that is heterosexual). Read and Leathwood (Chapter 10, 2021) extend this argument, focusing on higher education, arguing that far from promoting social justice, the academy – crucially in its role of manufacturing, legitimating and purveying knowledge – acts to promote masculinist, racist and classist assumptions. Maylor (Chapter 11, 2021) argues that a plural and culturally diverse curriculum for all, reflecting the diversity of communities in the population, will benefit all students, not merely those in minority groups, and thus be a general 'public good'.

Minty (Chapter 6, 2021) points out that policy attempts to address stratification in higher education, for example by providing free tuition in Scotland, unlike the rest of the UK, has not been successful. The most disadvantaged are the most likely to undertake HE courses in FE courses or to attend the post-92 institutions. Free tuition has led to the capping of places for Scottish students studying in Scotland which has created greater competition for places, particularly in the ancient universities.

Menter (Chapter 2, 2021) points to the necessary question of values that under-lies all these: if the central purpose of conducting research into educational policies is the improvement of provision (and not merely in the cause of improved economic productivity), then this must be driven by an emphasis on values, rather than value. To meaningfully contribute to the public good, researchers' engagement needs to be moderated through the avoidance of a search for simplistic nostrums, and to be tempered with critical scepticism.

Hutchings (Chapter 3, 2021a) particularly engages with the relationship between the policy makers and the educational researchers. Who should decide what the public good is? She argues that however much researchers illuminate the flawed policies of accountability-driven policies, policy makers continue to support them. She concludes that politicians and educationalists tend to have differing understandings of both the purposes of education and of how it might contribute to the public good. She argues that little in England has changed since the 1861 Newcastle Commission, when the public good was principally construed as achieving better value for money, subsequently reinforced by Thatcher (Prime Minister from 1979–1990) and her successors, who required education to create a more skilled workforce to achieve economic growth and a curriculum that promotes a 'British culture'. Educationalists, on the other hand, generally conceptualise the public good in terms of making a difference to children's lives, focusing on the impact of schooling on individuals and their present and future well-being.

Throughout this volume, we have argued that the neoliberal model of education as a market, in which consumer and commercial forces will determine the common good, is deeply flawed. Striving for efficiency through policies based on principles such as 'what works' is simplistic and results in damaging outcomes. In the complex

social interactions of teaching and learning, no policies or practices, in any aspect of education, 'work' for everyone. Even a relatively efficient policy – one that works for say 95% of learners – is detrimental to the other 5%, who risk being stigmatised and ignored. This cannot be the public good. Frank Smith, writing of the different methods of teaching reading, pointed out that every method worked with somebody, but no method worked with everybody (Smith 1985).

As Mustafa Eryaman observes, the concept of the public good 'is never static as it is continually restated by various discourse communities' (Eryaman 2017, p. 8). In educational policy terms, he connects the public good to 'a mutual understanding concerning the common goal of public education, an obligation to social justice and equality, and a focus on that which provides learners with the skills needed for a meaningful role as a citizen in a participatory democracy' *(ibid.)*. However, as Menter noted (Chapter 2, 2021), there are tensions and disagreements about what the common goal in education might be: this will be explored in more detail in the following section. The understandings of the public good as being intimately connected with social justice, individually and collectively, of the writers of this volume have developed as we have worked together over the past two decades. But, as has been argued above, the common good is not simply the aggregate of individual goods: individual interests cannot be totalised to produce the public good. Nixon insists that determining the public good in education necessarily 'involves complex moral and political judgements' about 'the polity as a whole' (Nixon 2011, p. x).

Eryaman (2006) offered a set of principles that he argued would guide educational researchers towards a shared understanding of the public good: expressed under a series of philosophical categories, these were, in summary:

**Ontological** – 'challenging our presumptions and subjectivities … eliminating our prejudices … [but maintaining] critical commitment to serving the public good';
**Epistemological** – 'validating the way we describe knowledge and knowing … [and not showing] ethnocentrism';
**Political** – 'who shall control the selection and distribution of knowledge … [in order to] promote a democratic vision of good education?';
**Economic** – linking 'the control of language and discursive practices to the existing unequal distribution of knowledge';
**Ideological** – 'what knowledge … [is] most worthy of teaching and learning? Whose [is it]?';
**Technical** – 'how shall [this] be made accessible to communities … of inquiry? … What strategies should be used to serve [the] public good?';
**Aesthetic** – how should educational researchers link the foregoing to 'the discursive practices of their own … without falling into objectivism and ethnocentricity?';
**Ethical** – how should we 'treat others responsibly and fairly … and pursue social justice without imposing our presuppositions about emancipation and socio-political transformation); and
**Historical** – what discourses already exist on such 'issues of educational and social research? (Eryaman 2006, p. 1213).

These considerations lead towards a well-argued construction of the public good in education made by UNESCO (2015). The authors called for a dialogue of stakeholders, 'inspired by a humanistic vision of education and development based on respect for life and human dignity, equal rights, social justice, cultural diversity, international solidarity, and shared responsibility for a sustainable future' (UNESCO 2015, p. 9). They argued that the 'fundamental purpose of education' should be 'sustaining and enhancing the dignity, capacity and welfare of the human person, in relation to others and to nature' (p. 36). They conclude with a definition of the public good in educational practice:

> The notion of the common good goes beyond the instrumental concept of the public good in which human well-being is framed by individualistic socio-economic theory. From a 'common good' perspective, it is not only the 'good life' of individuals that matters, but also the goodness of the life that humans hold in common. It cannot be a personal or a parochial good. It is important to emphasize that the recent shift from 'education' to 'learning' in international discourse signals a potential neglect of the collective dimensions and the purpose of education as a social endeavour. This is true in both the broader social outcomes expected of education, and for how educational opportunities are organized. The notion of education as a 'common good' reaffirms the collective dimension of education as a shared social endeavour (shared responsibility and commitment to solidarity). (UNESCO 2015, p. 78)

What, then, might be the test of whether an educational system is achieving 'the public good' in its policies? I would argue that if a group of the population (defined broadly, even loosely, as having some common characteristics) are achieving a less favourable distribution of education-related outcomes than the majority (not just a lesser capacity for economic output), then a reasonable initial presumption would be that social and educational policies have been unequal. The objective of policy should be to ensure that all groups within society have similar profiles of attainment. To achieve this may require differential (*unequal*) treatment for particular groups. The onus should be on those responsible for educational policy to demonstrate that all necessary policies are in place to achieve this. It is useful here to develop the principle set out in the *Macpherson Report* (Macpherson 1999), which examined institutional process within a UK police force around the racist murder of the teenager Stephen Lawrence. The report defined the term 'institutional racism' as

> the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. (para. 6.34)

In other words, it is the *outcome* of policy and practice that is significant, not the intention. In respect of the discussion here. The fact that various groups continue to suffer educational disadvantage, despite policy initiatives to counter this, suggests that *whatever the intentions*, educational systems may institutionally discriminate against the disadvantaged. The term educational institutional inequality might be usefully employed to identify *the collective failure of an educational institution or set of institutions to provide an appropriate educational service to any groups of the*

*population because of their social, cultural, linguistic or behavioural characteristics. This can be detected in educational policies and practices that amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and stereotyping which leads to the group as a whole to achieve a lower set of educational outcomes than the majority population.* And this definition also contains an explicit presumption of the nature of the common good: to treat both individuals and collectivities according to their needs, their experiences, and their social and economic situations.

This position, of social justice predicating a particular construction of the public good, was one which we arrived at in 2009, during in our work on the EPASI project, described in Chapter 13 (Hartsmar et al. 2021). There were many incipient incidences of this in our work over the previous decade (for example, this volume has referenced Hutchings et al. 2000; Menter et al. 2002; Ross 2002; Archer et al. 2003; Read et al. 2003; Osgood 2005; Leathwood 2006; Reay 2006b; Moreau et al. 2007; Maylor et al. 2007; Francis et al. 2008; Hollingworth and Ross 2008; Maylor 2009, 2010; Leathwood and Read 2009), and subsequently there have been many more iterations and developments, as evidenced both in the chapters in this volume and elsewhere (for example, we have referenced in this book Osgood 2012; Ross 2012; Francis and Hutchings 2013; Maylor et al. 2013; Hutchings 2015; Minty 2016a; Reay 2017; Menter 2017; Fretwell et al. 2018; Moreau 2018; Maylor 2019; Leathwood and Read 2020; Read and Leathwood 2020).

## Who determines the public good?

But such definitions and tests of efficacy require consensus. Determining such a construct of the public good requires an understanding and acceptance of the timescale over which decisions are made, and the timescale over which they should seek to operate. Who are the stakeholders who need to agree on the public good?

Contemporary democratic institutions – perhaps particularly in an age of populism – are not necessarily well suited to do this. Politicians have a keen regard to the likelihood of needing to be re-elected, both at the level of their own career and the future of their political party or faction. These require the need to be seen as 'popular' with the electorate, both with regard to either the fixed term or maximum time cycles of elections, and with that section of the public whom they expect or want to support them). Politicians in government office will be mindful of their own political progress as a minister: will they be in office (or in the same office) in the future, to assume responsibility for their actions? There is a balance of advantage in being innovative and interventionist with a 'new' policy initiative in terms of their ministerial career prospects.

Career civil servants have an increasingly similar perspective in planning their own career trajectories. Both of these groups of policy makers have an inherent interest in the short-term, and in short-term intervention with plausible, rather than necessarily evidence-driven, educational policies.

Local government politicians and administrators may possibly have a longer-term view of the time frame in education policy making terms, perhaps particularly so when they are, or were, the owners of the stock of educational establishments.[1] However, it should be noted that in England as a whole over the past four decades on more, local government has been less supported by central government funding, and increasingly denied the ability to raise its own funds from local taxation. Moreover, in the past decade in particular, much of the secondary school educational stock has been removed from their control, under the shibboleth of freedom from bureaucratic control.

Parents *qua* parents have in some sense been installed by the neoliberal ideology as 'the consumers' of education. They are enjoined to exercise 'choice' over which schools to send their children, and one of the rationales of the assessment and testing regime that was analysed by Hutchings (Chapter 3, 2021a) has been to inform parents about the 'value' and 'success' of individual schools, through league tables and the like, so that they can act as informed consumers in the educational market. The consequences of this have been seen in Hutchings' second chapter in this book (Chapter 7, 2021b). Those parents that do exercise their choice in this way may have a timeframe over educational policy issues that relates particularly to the schooling period of their children.

There are other stakeholders, some of whom will also be policy makers in more limited settings, for example classroom teachers, headteachers, school governors. These will bring professional perspectives and an ethos of professional values to the discussion. Teachers in England have not always been considered as having views that should be taken into account in recent decades. The Conservative government of 1979–1997 held that professionals (in most areas) tended to speak primarily in their own material self-interest, and there was often particular suspicion of their presumed political positions. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1987 spoke to her party conference about 'the plight of individual boys and girls' which worried her:

> in the inner cities … the opportunity [for a decent education] is all too often snatched from them by hard left education authorities and extremist teachers … children who need to be able to count and multiply are learning anti-racist mathematics—whatever that may be … Children who need to be able to express themselves in clear English are being taught political slogans. … And children who need encouragement … are being taught that our society offers them no future. (Thatcher 1987b, p. 7)

She did go on to say that there were, in the country as a whole, some excellent teachers. Her successor, John Major, claimed to support teachers, but also described them as being shabby:

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[1] State schools in England were all owned by a Local Educational Authority (LEA) or the Diocesan Board of a Church. Since 2011, these bodies have been obliged, at the request of the School's Governors or at the direction of the Secretary of State, to grant a 125 year lease at a token minimal annual rent, to an Academy Trust that is independent of the LEA. By 2019, 72% of secondary students, and 30% of primary students, were in Academies or 'Free' schools (Roberts and Danechi 2019).

> what I want to achieve is a position where the man in the woolly sweater and the battered sedan and the grimy house at the corner of the street is not the good teacher. We want the good teacher to live in a good house and drive a good car. (Major, cited in Klein 1994)

Teachers were consulted more during the Labour (1997–2010) and Coalition (2010–2015) governments, but this was often seen as tokenistic. Educational researchers also have tended to be seen as partisan, and not providing 'hard' evidence for their 'opinions', as was described in Chapter 1 (Ross 2021a).

Many journalists and members of the political commentariat also see themselves as stakeholders, ready and willing to comment on and suggest educational policy around their perceptions of the public good. There has been very little analysis of the way in which educational issues are reported, though a study (of Australian teachers) reported that teachers regard newspaper reporting of education as 'predominantly, and unfairly, critical … frequently inaccurate and generally superficial' (Shine 2017, p.1).

Many of these potential policy makers and policy influencers who effectively determine 'the public good' of education have themselves had a very limited experience of the state education system. The current proportion of young people attending private education is 6.5% (ISC 2019, p. 8). But this has risen: in the 1980s, for example, when many such policy makers and influencers were probably being educated, the proportion was just 4.5% (*ibid*). Table 14.1 shows the proportion of these groups who have attended private school.

Most senior policy makers' and commentators' direct experiences of education have been extremely narrow.

**Table 14.1**  Proportions of UK policy makers and policy commentators in 2019 who have attended private schools

| Position | % privately educated |
|---|---|
| Cabinet Ministers | 39 |
| Members of Parliament (Conservative) | 45 |
| Members of Parliament (Labour) | 17 |
| Members of the House of Lords | 57 |
| Civil Servant Permanent Secretaries[a] | 59 |
| Local Government Chief Executive Officers | 9 |
| Parents | 5 |
| Newspaper columnists | 44 |
| News Media editors | 43 |
| Teachers working in state education | Unknown |
| Teachers working in private education | Unknown |
| Education researchers | Unknown |
| **Secretaries of State for Education (or equivalent) 1980–2020** | |
|     Labour governments | 50 |
|     Conservative and Coalition governments | 58 |

Sources: The Sutton Trust (2019c, pp. 6–7); definitions of categories p. 99; Mortimore and Blick (2018, pp. 127–208); ISC (2019, p. 8).
[a]The chief civil servant in a UK Government ministry

## Research and making policy for the public good

How have these policy makers used research evidence in determining educational policy? The evidence is mixed. Sometimes findings are resisted, but implemented. For example, the IPSE report on teacher shortages in London (Hutchings et al. 2000) was resisted in its original form by the commissioning body, the Teacher Training Agency, and we were asked to dismantle the list of our recommendations and insert each recommendation into the relevant part of the body of the report. This made it difficult for any reader to easily identify how many recommendations had been implemented, although over the subsequent five years we found than the great majority of them had been addressed. The report on the study on curriculum diversity (Maylor et al. 2007; described in Chapter 11, Maylor 2021) was rapidly incorporated into the Ajegbo report, with subsequent changes in the National Curriculum and the programmes for teacher education, as Maylor describes in her chapter. Of course, there are forms of policy research other than that commissioned by policy makers themselves, and it is noticeable that in England central government has, since 2010, commissioned much less research into educational policy.

Discussion over the relationship between research and policy is sometimes conducted in terms of 'evidence-based policy', where policy makers present themselves as rationally considering research evidence in order to come to a policy that has due regard for 'the facts'. But Carol Weiss (1993) described policy research as 'a rational enterprise that takes place in a political context (Weiss 1993, p. 94). Researchers and evaluators, she argues, must therefore recognise that:

- such research takes place as a political decision, so any implementation of policies remains subject to political pressures;
- because it is commissioned to feed into the decision-making process, its evidence becomes only part of the other factors that are taken into consideration when making a decision; and
- by its very nature, research makes 'implicit political statements about such issues as the problematic nature of some programs and the unchallengeability of others, [and] the legitimacy of program goals and program strategies' (p. 94).

In such contexts, rather than research being commissioned by policy makers to support 'evidence-based policy', it is all too easily proposed in order to collect 'policy-based evidence' that will add legitimacy to a pre-determined policy.

Weiss had previously argued that policy was implemented with at best partial regard to evidence: 'politicians and officials have ideological convictions and constellations of interests that largely set the course they steer. … [R]esearch information … is best seen as helping policy makers decide which policies are best suited to the realisation of their ideologies and interests' (Weiss 1983, p. 217).

She also suggested that there were three possible ways in which policy research might be used by the policy establishments: as data, as ideas, and as arguments (1991, p. 40). As data, this represented a technocratic view: policy makers seek to be competent and efficient, and research data meets their need in this. As ideas,

research is more humanistic: proposals about complex problems may not immediately match policy makers' needs, but they may take researchers' ideas to be 'filed away higgledy-piggledy in [their] … minds and may emerge when new equations arise' (p. 40). As arguments, research may be used in adversarial decision-making to advance a particular case.

She suggests that research-as-data is more likely to be used in cases where there is one of the following: a consensus on goals and values; where choices are sharply defined, for example to test alternatives; in circumstances of rapid change, where the situation is unclear and data may provide the background to action; and when decision makers have a sophisticated understanding of research and can properly assess the quality and limitations of data (Weiss 1991, p. 41). Given the argument that has been made earlier in this chapter that there is currently little consensus about the goals of education, then such research will often have limited impact.

Research-as-ideas, Weiss argues, is likely to be used in one of four situations: at early stages of policy discussion, when there is some latitude and positions have not yet been taken up; when policy is in disarray, are new ideas may offer ways out; when there's a high degree of uncertainty; and in decentralised policy areas, where different bodies may be involved in decision-making – 'in arenas like … education, where authority for decisions is relatively dispersed, a relatively simple idea can travel farther … than detailed data' (p. 41). It might be noted, as previously remarked, that decision-making processes in education in the UK (especially in England) have become greatly centralised over the past few decades.

Research-as-arguments is more likely to be influential in one of three contexts: when there is a high degree of conflict over policies, research evidence may be used by proponents of one cause to support their beliefs (or ignored, if does not do this); in legislative forums, in support of argumentation over ideologies and interests (as evidenced in Hutchings' account of Nick Gibbs's parliamentary advocacy of research that supported his understanding of the teaching of reading: Chapter 3, 2021a); or for the *post hoc* legitimation of a decision, to support those implementing a policy (Weiss 1991, p. 42.)

James Beyer (1977) developed Weiss's (1991) three types of uses policy makers made of research as instrumental, for background conceptualisation, or as symbolic. He argues that policy making was more concerned with interpretation, argumentation and persuasion than it was about using research knowledge. Nabil Amara et al. (2004) used these categories to survey 833 Canadian policy makers about how they used research: 22% said conceptual research was most important to them, 16% said symbolic research, and 12% said instrumental research. They suggested that there was very little difference in the way that research was used across different government agencies.

This suggests that educational policy researchers need to be very conscious of the both the reasons why a policy maker might commission a piece of research, and of the ways in which their findings might be used. The relationship between the researcher and the policy maker have an effect on the outcomes of research, and the uses to which it is put, which are discussed in the following section.

## What are the consequences of this for research, policy and the interface between the two?

Nixon defines the public good as one that is 'more than the aggregate of individual interests [but] denotes a common commitment to social justice and equality' (2011, p. 10). This accords with the UNESCO definition quoted earlier: it is 'the goodness of the life that humans hold in common … the purpose of education as a social endeavour … [it is] "common good" that reaffirms the collective dimension of education as a shared social endeavour' (2015, p. 78). Research to support this often runs up against the policy makers' demand for research to support the existing neoliberal interpretation of the public good, and for quantitative evidence to support this. But social scientists are aware that the contingencies and contextualisation of social practice often means that qualitative research offers deeper insights into meanings and values. Teachers want evidence not simply of '"what works", but to the more nuanced "what works when, for whom under what conditions?" Answers to these more fine-grained questions are critical' – for practitioners, as much as for policy makers (McDonald and Schneider 2017, p. 187). Cameron made this point cogently:

> it would be nice if all of the data which sociologists require could be enumerated because then we could run them through IBM machines and draw charts as the economists do. However, not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.' (Cameron 1963, p. 13)

Can researchers avoid situations in which policy makers use our research in ways which misuse, abuse or ignore our findings? How can we work to bring the values of social justice and equality into a construction of the educational public good as a social endeavour, rather than as the utilitarian sum of individual goods?

Could the research community get issues of equality and social justice in education put higher on the agenda of policy makers? From our experience in IPSE, we could suggest a number of possible tactics. For example, when tendering for a research contract to a government body, it is sometimes possible to add an equalities dimension to the investigation as an added value to the research brief: indeed, this may appeal to the civil servants charged with selecting a tender. It is also possible to include equalities dimensions in research projects where it is not specifically called for: thus in the research into teacher shortages in London referred to earlier, we were able to collect data on the ethnicity of teachers and on their demographic characteristics, and to demonstrate both the under-representation of ethnic minorities in the existing teacher workforce at that time, and the benefits (both in terms of addressing the shortage, and in terms of equity) to recruiting more minority ethnic teachers. This evidence led to local government institutions becoming more attuned to social inequity issues (specifically the Mayor of London's office), commissioning further research into these issues.

Researchers of educational policy should also insist that research reports which are commissioned by policy makers should be publicly available and published, and that data collected in the process should be available (suitably anonymised) to other

subsequent researchers. There should also be an agreement that policy makers should not constrain the researchers from reporting their findings and analyses – even analysis beyond the original remit – in other outlets, such as academic journals and books, and forms of public media. Policy researchers should also have, and use, the freedom to contest the misuse and ignoring of research data.

How do we manage the plurality of understandings of different realities in the sphere of educational policy? Given our position on the social construction of social knowledge, how do we validate and analyse educational policy in a non-subjective way, free from ethnocentric and other presuppositions? How can we justify our critique of the state against our own determination of social values and the public good? Does our work simply reproduce inequalities in the distribution of power and wealth in society? How can we challenge such power, and disseminate our findings to it and beyond it?

Above all, how do we act in a way that does not reproduce ethnocentric, gendered, class-laden values, and treat all – learners, educators, policy makers – in a way that accords them their equality, without imposing our own suppositions about social justice and educational transformation?

We have in this volume attempted to address the principles set out by the editors of the series in which it is published. We have sought to set out for the educational research community ways in which social science investigations can generate findings and conclusions that promote and support social equity and justice in education, with a particular vision that such equity and justice is an essential characteristic of 'the public good'. We hold that it is equality of outcomes that are significant, not equalities of opportunities; that the creation of competitive processes in education creates educational losers as well as winners, and that this in inequitable; and that the meritocracies that have emerged over the past 70 years have entrenched their position through structures that reproduce inequalities.

We have examined the nature of educational knowledge, working from a variety of disciplines, and employing these to dissect the structural factors that produce inequity: particularly class, ethnicity, sexuality and gender, and have done so in dialogue with social organisations that represent such interests. (We recognise that there are other inequities, on which we focused on less, such as those of disability, language and age.) We recognise the epistemological issues of validating knowledge, and generally use qualitative research approaches to understand how individual and groups contingently construct the language and terms of use of categories and processes, so that these can then be used appropriately in any quantitative survey. We have insisted that our findings are made public, maintaining in nearly all cases ownership of the data and the interpretation, and publishing findings in a range of academic, professional and more popular areas, as well as through 'official' reports to the policy community.

We worked together as a team for over fifteen years. We still work, in a variety of institutions across the world, and independently, researching education for social justice. Our ambition remains as strong: to use rational dialogue, discourse and research in education policy, but not simply to '*interpret* the world in various ways'; we follow Marx's thesis that 'the point, … is to *change* it.' (Marx 1976, p. 5)

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