Poor children need rich teaching, not deficit labelling

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This chapter explores directions of curricular change in the context of neoliberalism and austerity politics in the UK. It examines a succession of flawed explanations for underachievement in schools, which in various ways construct working-class students as intrinsically defective learners. It highlights the failure of managerialist school reform to produce greater opportunity or equality. After a brief history of neoliberal and neoconservative trends in curriculum reform, I outline some key principles for pursuing curricular and pedagogical justice.

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It was common, forty years ago, to imagine that poverty belonged to the past or to faraway places – images of *Oliver Twist* or famine in Ethiopia. It was widely assumed that it would disappear entirely once under-developed countries became 'modern', and that residual poverty in places like Britain was largely due to idleness or alcohol. Few can still believe that now. Despite dramatic increases in productivity associated with ICT, and a boom time for the mega-rich (Dorling 2014; Sayer 2015), we have reached the stage where a third of children in the UK live below the poverty line.

There have been repeated political attempts at denial. Margaret Thatcher reputedly banished the word 'poverty' from policy documents. Tony Blair insisted on constructing the issue in terms of 'social inclusion' (Levitas 2005). Now the preferred stance of a Conservative Government is to blame the victim. Millionnaire *Chancellor of the Exchequer* George Osborne pronounced that life on unemployment benefits was a 'lifestyle choice' (Guardian 9.9.2010). Derogatory caricatures of families and neighbourhoods in poverty have become a media bloodsport (Jones 2011).

Policy talk about the need to increase 'social mobility' provides a diversion from the grotesque and growing inequalities of wealth and income (see Littler, 2018). 'Austerity politics' loaded the consequences of the bankers' greed onto low-income families, while the wealth of the 1000 richest individuals in the UK doubled from 2010 to 2015 (Clarke-Billings, 2015). We are living in a surreal world where the rich are running out of ideas on how to squander their money. For instance, Bentley owners can now buy a fly-fishing kit to fit their car boot for a mere £60,000. Rather than upward social mobility, we see worsening conditions for most people on average incomes and destitution for the poorest (Dorling, 2014). Meanwhile, in his swansong as outgoing Chief Inspector for Schools Michael Wilshaw berated schools in the North East of England – probably the region worst affected by deindustrialisation – for the fact that no child on Free School Meals (FSM) had gone to the University of Oxford (Wilshaw, 2016). But then, the odds of entering Oxford are one

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hundred times worse for FSM pupils in state schools than pupils attending fee-paying private schools.

Explaining poverty and underachievement

The link between socio-economic status and school achievement is undeniable, but with little agreement on why. Historically however, we can see a pattern of blaming working-class students and their families, now reinforced by attacks on their teachers for being 'ineffective'. (For a detailed account, see Smyth & Wrigley, 2012, chapters 3-6.)

In the late nineteenth century, it was generally expected that schools should fit children for their place in society. Only with the growth of the Labour Movement, did it become unacceptable for policy documents to speak in such terms (Cowburn, 1986, p.122-5). A new political discourse had to be found. The first option was to argue that working-class children were intellectually inferior, based on the doctrine that intelligence was genetically inherited. The first research study by pioneer educational psychologist Cyril Burt compared the attainment of the (privately educated) children of Oxford academics with the children of manual workers in the town. He regarded the superior attainment of the former as self-evidently genetic in origin (Rose et al. 1984: 86-7). 'Intelligence tests' were then used to justify confining almost all manual workers to a rudimentary education and curriculum. There was, needless to say, a certain irony in children spending hundreds of hours in school practising to raise their test scores in a competence which was supposedly innate.

When, after Burt's death, his celebrated 'identical twins' research was exposed as fraudulent (Rose et al. 1984, pp 101-6), new explanations of under-achievement were rapidly adopted, based on the supposed linguistic deficit of working class families. Even Bernstein's (1971) sophisticated version of language deficit theory was built on the assumption that manual workers and their families only spoke about what was in front of their nose – a 'restricted code'. This became the standard explanation in teacher training and across the profession from the mid-1960s, though critics such as Harold Rosen (1972) pointed to the richer discourses of social and political debate in many working class communities, and other researchers pointed out that standard patterns of language use in classrooms were themselves restricting children's language development.

It is important to recognise that, even when major theories are refuted academically, they can live on in professional common-sense and institutional norms. Thus it is commonplace for five-year-olds to be segregated onto different "ability tables" within weeks of starting school, without anyone stopping to ask what is meant by these judgements of "ability". Although it is true that children's vocabulary when starting school tends to vary with family background, it is a mistake to conclude that those with lower vocabulary counts start school with insufficient language to participate and learn.

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Language deficit theories should be viewed as a subset of the ongoing tendency to construct parents in poverty as 'bad' parents. The assumption of deficient parenting recurs frequently in policy, but also in schools, largely because many teachers working in hard-pressed neighbourhoods have little direct knowledge of local communities. A single encounter with an angry mother can lead to negative generalisations about entire communities. This tendency is inevitably reinforced by the current political assault on benefit claimants (discussed earlier), though there is as yet no research to show how stigmatisation is infiltrating into staffroom conversations and classroom interactions.

Another important explanation of the poverty-underachievement link blames children and their parents for having 'low aspirations'. It is widely assumed that the parents simply do not care about their children's futures. The policy discourse fails to grasp that aspirations depend on opportunities if they are to be sustained: they are not simply a product of personal optimism.

> What might look like "low aspirations" may often be high aspirations that have been eroded by negative experience (Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012, p. 4).

Young people are very much aware of the disappointments experienced by their parents, older siblings and peers, leading to a sceptical response when teachers' try to persuade them to work harder and gain qualifications. As the mother of one young man in a North of England deindustrialised town expressed the situation:

> My son, they've made him go on these trainin' schemes an' it's just cheap labour. They had 'im trainin' to be a welder, an then he were back on' dole; then they 'ad 'im doin' joinery on ET [Employment Training] an' then he were back on' dole again; now they've got 'im doin' fork-lift truck drivin', so I guess next he'll be an unemployed fork-lift truck driver (Charlesworth, 2000, p. 96).

This emphasis on aspiration has its counterpart in the policy discourses of school accountability. Rather than recognise that poor employment prospects will damage the academic engagement of 11-16 year olds, policy documents (eg Swinney & Clayton, 2011) irrationally ascribe the lack of job opportunities in northern England to its (marginally) lower success rates at GCSE – as if a few more GCSEs could re-open a shipyard or steelworks!

Shame and futility

Fundamentally, poverty in our society is *not* caused by idleness or "lifestyle choice"; the transmitter is economic not cultural. Nevertheless, while child poverty has direct effects (eg through poor nutrition or housing), it also has psycho-social consequences. For instance, the unaffordability of transport and leisure facilities can lead to social isolation, as children are unable to join in activities

with friends. The stigma attached to poverty is further magnified in a consumer culture, affecting confidence, social development and self-esteem:

> If you don't wear trendy stuff… not so many people will be your friend 'cos of what you wear. (Charlene, 12 years, two-parent family). (Ridge 2006, p. 68)

In our book *Living on the Edge* (2012, p.37), John Smyth and I summarised these effects as a sense of *shame* and *futility*. Experiences of *shame* (low self-esteem, sometimes manifest as aggression) point to a fundamental question of current identity, whilst *futility* relates to future orientation – a sense of disappointment and hopelessness when even the best plans never seem to work out. Both of these sentiments profoundly affect young people's attitudes at school. More than this, however, we argue that traditionally schools have tended to reinforce both of these feelings. For example, disciplinarian regimes and derogatory ways of speaking to students damage identity and self-esteem; whilst allocation to a 'lower ability' group, or repeatedly receiving fail grades, instils a sense that future success is unattainable.

School improvement and accountability

Compounding the above explanations, neoliberalism has worked through into education as a systemic transformation of governance in ways which have not helped disadvantaged students. Indeed, stimulating quasi-market competition between schools has led to escalating levels of school exclusion as well as covert selection processes. New management models and styles, along with ubiquitous numerical data, have added a new layer of blame, now directed towards teachers.

Neoliberalism has transferred business values and management styles to the public sector in ways which are especially damaging to schools serving impoverished communities. New Public Management imposes a generic and decontextualised managerialist approach which is particularly at odds with the needs of these schools. Accountabilility mechanisms are based on the tacit assumption of a quasi-market and inter-school competition, with the explicit assumption that lower attaining schools are defective. Such data-driven accountability systems, even when they attempt to factor in socio-economic background, have the side-effect of obscuring the real lives of the students. Datafication reduces the complex disadvantages experienced by diverse young people to a single monochrome, or, in a parody of intersectionality, creates spurious entities such as "white British working-class boys".

In England at least, School Improvement, as a particular approach to educational change (Wrigley, 2013), is accompanied by a hollowed-out discourse of 'leadership'. Official 'school improvement' discourses assume, in effect, that producing good data is the ultimate aim of education. For all the rhetoric of democratic participation in school development theory, teachers are expected to align

themselves uncritically with whatever agenda is currently being passed down from central government (Gunter, 2001, pp.122-144). This approach has, not surprisingly, proved largely incapable of 'closing the gap'.

Culture

One particular aspect of neoliberal School Improvement theory is its reductionist deployment of the term 'school culture'. This is ironic given that *culture*, following Raymond Williams and others, offers rich ways of understanding the significance of established patterns of behaviour, daily rituals, discourses and environments in a class society. Instead, 'school culture' is regarded simplistically as a management tool - as something that 'school leaders' can / should manipulate in order to notch up the school's attainment data in competition with nearby schools.

Teachers and school leaders concerned about child poverty need to reflect carefully on *culture* as part of the process of school self-evaluation, asking about the messages and beliefs carried by physical environment, ways of talking with children, seating arrangements, as well as about the curriculum, assessment and teaching styles. An evaluation of school culture conducted in the interest of social justice should consider, for example, the ways in which children's families are discussed among the staff, as well as patterns of classroom language use which systematically deny a voice to the learner. (See Wrigley, 2003, p. 36-7)

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The organisation of learning should also be examined for its cultural implications, and particularly for how it might reproduce social hierarchies. Placing six-year-olds on the slow learners' table - whatever name it is given, since children are quick to decode our labels - has an impact on their self-belief and future progress. Such 'ability groupings' operate without any clear notion of what 'ability' might mean. Habitual ways of speaking about families in the staffroom inevitably leak through into ways we treat children in class.

A further dimension of culture derives from Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) concept of 'cultural capital'. In a nutshell, powerful social institutions such as schools tend to honour some forms of cultural activity and ignore or denigrate others. To give a crude example, a high school pupil having cello lessons might be assumed to be cultured, intelligent and from a 'good family'; if another pupil has learned bass guitar from his dad, the teachers probably don't even know, and if they do they might not recognise it as culturally worthwhile. This has major implications for curriculum and pedagogy.

Bourdieu is not suggesting that some sections of society are *more* cultured than others, though it is true that money affects the opportunity to pursue cultural interests. His argument is one of mis/recognition. This raises important questions about which communities and cultures are valued,

and points to the importance of building upon community-based cultural practices as 'funds of knowledge' (Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Thomson, 2006).

The struggle over curriculum and pedagogy

Curriculum and pedagogy, in the broadest sense, are central to any serious attempt to improve education for children in poverty. Both concepts imply a recognition of the distance between the learner's initial state of understanding and experience and a desired state. In educating the young, this entails a recognition of age-related development, but also the need to expand young people's horizons beyond the parameters of local awareness, towards membership of a national and international community of knowledge. This raises complex issues when learners' class or ethnic origins are distant from 'educated society'. A brief history is needed here of how the tension between the everyday lives and knowledge of working-class children and the claims of high-status culture and scientific knowledge has been handled, specially in the English school system.

In the early decades of state education 'for the masses', the solution was simple: a truncated, low cost, elementary curriculum in the "3Rs" (reading, writing and arithmetic) accompanied by socialisation as subservient workers and loyal citizens of Empire. In time, this was supplemented by a rudimentary factual knowledge of history, geography and science and basic practical training such as woodwork or cookery. Eventually a small percentage of manual workers' children were admitted to grammar schools, often gaining access to an academic curriculum at the cost of cultural alienation from their family and neighbourhood.

Structural changes in the early 1970s – the school leaving age was raised to 16 and comprehensive secondary schools were established across most of the UK – underpinned serious attempts to make academic learning accessible and meaningful to all. The basic pattern was a common curriculum with some degree of subject choice from age 14, but also pedagogical innovation designed to engage all learners. In the comprehensive school where I worked, 14-16 year olds pursued courses in car mechanics or childcare, construction or hairdressing, but alongside traditional school subjects: nobody suggested that these same students should not also be studying history or drama. The principle of choices within a 'broad and balanced' comprehensive school curriculum was upheld by the inspectorate, local authorities and schools until the early 1990s.

Once neoliberal thinking worked through into school policy, this sense of unity began to collapse in a way that was socially divisive and damaging to disadvantaged students. It came under attack from two different ideological directions. (See Wrigley, 2014 for a more detailed explanation of how these competed and combined.)

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i) Neoliberal accountability mechanisms began to undermine the sense that various kinds of learning were meaningful in themselves, and not just as a means for increasing the school's competitive advantage. In Marx's terminology, the use-value of school learning was eclipsed by its exchange-value, i.e. the numerical scores attached to qualifications and grades.

ii) Around the same time, a neo-conservative ideology of 'cultural restorationism' (Ball, 1993) was re-asserted, particularly by restoring nationalistic / traditionalist versions of English, geography, history and music. This nostalgic tendency re-emphasised the traditional canon, and further disconnected the curriculum from learners' identities and experience. Parallel moves were focused on destroying the legacy of progressivism in primary education.

> The Victorian schoolroom and the grammar school are the lost objects of desire, standing for a time when education was simple, when learning meant doing and knowing what you were told by your teacher. Kenneth Clarke's classroom has desks in rows, the children silent, the teacher 'at the front', chalk in hand, dispensing knowledge... This is an education of deference, to the teacher, to the past, to the nation, and to your 'elders and betters' – the traditional values of Victorian middle-class childhood. (Ball, 1993, p. 208)

This was deeply alienating to children from many manual working-class families, especially where communities had suffered the ravages of deindustrialisation, precarious employment and poverty. Curriculum content standardised by the state (under the direction of graduates of elite schools who lacked any understanding of working-class lives) made it increasingly difficult for teachers to relate school learning to the victims of neoliberal economics.

Blair's *New Labour* government single-mindedly pursued a neoliberal rather than neoconservative direction. Their attempt to close the statistical attainment gap entailed re-callibrating qualifications, so that pre-vocational courses in Health and Social Care or Travel and Tourism scored as highly as traditional academic qualifications, regardless of challenge and quality. Indeed in 2006, the same government passed a law (*Education and Inspections Act*) declaring that 14 year olds opting for a vocational diploma had no entitlement to History or Geography, a language, Design and Technology, or the creative arts.

Since most of these pre-vocational courses had little credibility, including with employers, it was easy for a newly elected Conservative-dominated coalition in 2010 to reassert a neoconservative ideology, narrowing curriculum choices and 'raising standards' to the extent that working-class children would find it difficult to make the grade. The so-called English Baccalaureate demanded good grades in English, Maths, Science, a foreign language, and History or Geography, whilst giving no credit to the arts or to practical subjects, or indeed to spoken English. Needless to say, this has done little to motivate disadvantaged students. Parallel changes in the primary school

curriculum involved, for example, a strong emphasis on formal grammar, resulting in young children being drilled to identify subordinate clauses and subjunctives. Practical exploration, creative activity and problem-solving have been marginalised in this cerebral version of learning.

In 2016, standardised tests for 11-year-olds were made so difficult that nearly half the children failed one or more of Reading, Writing or Mathematics. Indeed, two-thirds of children on free meals were failed in at least one test (51% failed reading, 46% maths, 41% writing). Texts in the reading test were remote from their experience:

> Maria and Oliver are attending a party in the garden of a house that used to belong to Maria's family. They sneak away to explore the grounds.

> Maria and Oliver were quite a distance from the party when they found the little rowing boat in the grassy shallows of a small lake beyond the garden. Glancing nervously behind her, Maria suggested that they row out to the island in the middle of the lake. Oliver looked at her questioningly. Maria explained that there was a secret monument on the island to one of her ancestors.

Many children were mystified. Living in a house not a flat? Owning not renting? A house with a garden? A garden party? A garden with a lake? An ancestor? Only rich people in England have 'ancestors'!

None of these twists and turns of curriculum policy, whether inspired by neoliberal or neoconservative ideologies, have benefited children growing up in poverty. Neoliberal accountability has undermined any authentic participation in learning, reducing everything to the exchange-value of credentials – which, for these students, are often minimal. Conversely, neoconservative nostalgia has restored versions of school subjects which are archaic, remote and sterile. Creative and practical courses, though often motivating for disengaged students, have been marginalised once more.

Which way now?

In this concluding section, l will try to outline some principles for constructing a socially just curriculum and pedagogy. Firstly, to avoid misunderstanding, an assertion: all young people have an entitlement to the ideas and disciplinary reasoning of the natural and social sciences. However – and beyond the claims made by 'social realists' (see Wrigley 2017 for a critique) – something more is needed to make knowledge *powerful* in terms of agency, ethics and democratic citizenship. The knowledge and procedures deriving from established disciplines are important, but so too is much of the vernacular knowledge deriving from working-class and ethnic minority communities 'funds of knowledge' (Moll & Greenberg, 1990).

Without a well developed social and cultural rationale for curriculum building, the 'core knowledge' arguments of Hirsch (1987) simply result in shallow transmission of lists of facts like crumbs falling from the rich man's table. While elite schools teach children to play the cello or trombone, other children will learn how to label musical instruments on a worksheet.

The curriculum is not simply 'knowledge', in a narrow view of the word. For instance, the arts are particularly important for extending horizons of possibility, and they offer intrinsic satisfaction not simply the promise of a grade. This is particularly important for marginalised young people, as participation and performance (presentation, display, etc.) raises self esteem and creates a sense of achievement. Creative and performing arts, as well as Design and Technology, help counter those senses of *shame* and *futility* I referred to earlier.

We have to pay serious attention to warnings from Jean Anyon (1981) and Michael Haberman (1991) about pedagogies of poverty experienced by disadvantaged students. These young people have a particular need for authentic engagement, creativity, critical literacy and problem-solving if they are to transcend the social position into which history has deposited them and retain a capacity for human flourishing. *Poor children need rich teaching.*

This is not to neglect other aspects of schooling. My early case studies of successful multiethnic urban schools (Wrigley, 2000) revealed patterns of empowerment across the various message systems: curriculum, pedagogy, ethos, links with the wider community, and school development processes.

For example, all ten schools had strong and respectful community links, and a prominent place for the arts in the curriculum. Similarly inspiring case studies can be found in the international collection *Changing Schools* (Wrigley, Thomson & Lingard, 2011). Schools cannot substitute for economic change, but they can help provide a sense of satisfaction and engagement for young people whose lives are damaged by poverty. Education can provide counter-experiences beyond the shame and futility engendered by neoliberal austerity, and provide knowledge and attitudes which make political change more possible.

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