The Local Matters: Working with Teachers to Rethink the Poverty and Achievement Gap Discourse

Carl Emery
Louisa Dawes
&
Carlo Raffo
University of Manchester
England

Abstract: This paper is concerned with the current achievement gap policy agenda and associated material and discursive power that shape teachers' work in schools with high child poverty rates. More specifically, it explores how a university/school research collaboration – Local Matters – can disturb such forms of subjectivation by enabling educators to resist such policy agendas/discourses by drawing on locally contextualized knowledge and place-based evidence. Based on fieldwork undertaken over the past three years at more than 40 schools with 84 teachers across five Local Authority regions in Northern England, we provide a critical discourse analysis of a series of semi structured interviews and focus group activities of those who participated in the project. Based on an interdiscursive and linguistic analysis of the data we show how educators wrestle with the tensions between attempting to enact a social

justice, collaborative and a democratic pedagogic approach and dealing with policy requirements that focus on the achievement gap problem and associated 'what works' discourse solution. Through the enactment of the program we show how educators, in collaboration with activist researchers, can develop forms of principled resistance that shake up and unsettle dominant forms of child poverty practice and discourses in schools.
Keywords: subjectivation; teacher/activist researcher collaboration; poverty discourses; achievement gap; principled resistance

Lo local importa: Trabajando con el profesorado para repensar el discurso sobre el rendimiento escolar y la pobreza infantil

Resumen: El presente artículo expone una crítica a las políticas actuales destinadas a la mejora del rendimiento escolar que delimitan el desempeño docente en centros educativos con alto porcentaje de alumnado en riesgo de pobreza y exclusión social. Explora específicamente como un proyecto de colaboración mutua entre universidad y escuela ("Local Matters") puede alterar estas formas de subjetivación al favorecer que los educadores se ajusten a estas políticas institucionales desde una intervención basada en el conocimiento de la situación y evidencia local. A través del trabajo de campo llevado a cabo durante los últimos tres años en un total de más de 40a centros escolares en cinco regiones locales del norte de Inglaterra, facilitamos un análisis crítico del discurso (ACD) detallado de la serie de entrevistas semiestructuradas y actividades de grupo llevadas a cabo por los participantes del proyecto. Para ello se contó con la colaboración de 84 profesores. Basado en el análisis interdiscursivo y lingüístico de los datos, mostramos como los educadores soportan las tensiones generadas entre el intento por desarrollar un enfoque pedagógico colaborativo y democrático que favorezca la justicia social y los requerimientos institucionales del sistema educativo. A través de la implementación del programa concretamos como los educadores, en colaboración con investigadores en activo, pueden desarrollar formas de resistencia que desestabilicen modelos imperantes de practica educativa en la atención a jóvenes en situación de pobreza infantil.
Palabras-clave: subjetivación; colaboración entre profesor/investigador; discursos de pobreza; rendimiento escolar; resistencias

O que são assuntos locais: Trabalhando com professores para repensar o discurso sobre desempenho escolar e pobreza infantil

Resumo: Este artigo critica as atuais políticas de melhoria do desempenho escolar que limitam o desempenho docente em escolas com alto percentual de alunos em risco de pobreza e exclusão social. Explora especificamente como um projeto de colaboração mútua entre universidade e escola ("Local Matters") pode alterar essas formas de subjetivação, incentivando os educadores a se ajustarem a essas políticas institucionais a partir de uma intervenção baseada no conhecimento da situação e nas evidências locais. Através do trabalho de campo realizado nos últimos três anos em um total de mais de 40 escolas em cinco regiões locais no norte da Inglaterra, fornecemos uma análise crítica do discurso (ADC) detalhada de uma série de entrevistas e atividades semiestruturadas. pelos participantes do projeto. Para isso, colaboraram 84 professores. A partir da análise interdiscursiva e linguística dos dados, mostramos como os educadores resistem às tensões geradas entre a tentativa de desenvolver uma abordagem pedagógica colaborativa e democrática que favoreça a justiça social e as exigências institucionais do sistema educacional. Através da implementação do programa especificamos como os educadores, em colaboração com pesquisadores atuantes, podem desenvolver formas de resistência que desestabilizam os modelos vigentes de prática educativa no cuidado de jovens em situação de pobreza infantil.

Palavras-chave: subjetivação; colaboração professor/pesquisador; discursos de pobreza; rendimento escolar; resistores

The Local Matters: Working with Teachers to Rethink the Poverty and Achievement Gap Discourse

This paper is concerned with education policy and the subjectivation of social actors, specifically teachers working in schools with high child poverty rates. Drawing on the thinking of Foucault (1990) and developed by Butler (1997) and more recently Youdell, (2006) when referring to subjectivation we mean the making or shaping of a subject, in our case pupils living in poverty and teachers, through the enactment of material and discursive power.

In order to illuminate the relationship between subjectivation, performativity and poverty truths (told to us, about us and by us) amongst schools and teachers, our work interrogates data gathered from a university/school research collaboration, 'Local Matters'. This program supports schools and teachers to draw on locally contextualized knowledge and 'place based' evidence to enhance and enrich school practice and positioning when responding to poverty.

The Local Matters approach advocates an understanding of locale through the relational dialectic and interconnected transactions of all appropriate place-based stakeholders. In so doing, we believe it disrupts the dominant positivist paradigm of 'valid' research within the prevailing accountability policy arena. It does this by going against the grain of the authorized 'what works' performativity agenda and achievement gap discourse found in many practitioners' professional working lives and training. To this end our research questions are:

a) what discourses and genres did educators draw on when talking about child poverty in their schools?

b) how did participation in the Local Matters research program shape the educators' thinking and doing regarding child poverty in their school?

The methodology that Local Matters employs has been advanced through the work of Comber and Kamler (2009), Anderson and colleagues (2012), and more recently developed by Beckett (2016) and Gorski (2016). These researchers have identified the need for a lived imperative, whereby practitioners across the education spectrum collaborate with communities to build research-driven accounts of poverty that are located in, and drawn from, local experience. In so doing it makes evident the localized reality of poverty inducing structural inequalities that pertain to people's lives, thus providing a research driven bedrock for teachers to better understand and respond to the many challenges faced by local people within their context.

The study draws on fieldwork undertaken over the past three years at more than 40 schools with 84 teachers across five Local Authority regions in Northern England.

Acting as critical secretaries (Apple, 2016), and standing beside our teaching colleagues, we provide a critical discourse analysis of a series of semi structured interviews and focus group activities with teachers, school leaders and Local Authority education leaders who have participated in the project. In so doing, we explore the possibility for discursive agency within the individuals and schools tasked with narrowing the achievement gap of children living in poverty in a poverty policy context that, we contend, is constructed by ongoing education policy to categorize, compare and fix achievement in order to build a specific, taken for granted, 'market-serving' truth.

We take the achievement gap as being the persistent aggregate social class differences in children's cognitive measure and achievement of academic qualification. The market serving truth that has in essence underpinned mainstream policy response to this gap over a number of decades is

located within a broad 'what works' agenda that essentially defines children living in poverty as being a homogeneous, uniform collection of students who simply need to be taught better and work harder in order to raise achievement levels

Essentially, this paper is concerned with exploring the extent to which practices of resistance (Nealon, 2008) and contestation can be used by schools and teachers' to reconfigure their understandings and responses to mainstream poverty and achievement gap policy/practice discourses. To this end, our aim is to explicate a different equity discourse and agenda, one that builds from the collaborative work of grassroots teachers and schools allied to activist orientated university researchers. Such an approach valorizes a set of pedagogical skills and knowledge as well as an understanding of poverty and place that currently sits outside of the achievement gap discourse.

Our thinking builds on the work of Gorski (2016) who notes that 'how we interpret the educational disparity determines our understanding of the problem' (p. 380). By understanding the realities of students living in poverty, teachers can engage in critical analysis of their pedagogic repertoires and in so doing, reclaim approaches that respond to students within their context thus moving beyond the prevailing 'what work' agenda that bleaches out place.

The paper will start with an examination of the current policy background and in particular the 'what works' discourse that operationalizes a particular narrative of educational disadvantage and the achievement gap. We articulate the interconnected, normative and empirical failures of such an approach, ones that suggest simplistic, linear, causal and individualized notions of intervention and improvement. In so doing it is an approach that laminates over the social determinants of educational disadvantage; bleaching out the deeply relational and ecological ways in which the interconnected challenges of poverty and inequality play out at the local level. Local Matters is a project that is not about the implementation of externally developed and 'tested' interventions but is, instead, one that privileges processes of reflection, inquiry and changed perceptions and actions. In the second part of the paper, the project will be described in the context of how teachers initially articulated the difficulties of narrating their ideas about poverty and inequality and their impacts on education, ones that evolved, sometimes in contradictory ways, as they attempted to make sense of the achievement gap. The third section, through critical discourse analysis of teachers' perceptions of engaging with the local matters intervention, makes more explicit teachers articulations of lived realities of working in high poverty schools, including their emotional labor. Such articulations demonstrate act of learning, unlearning and resistance connected to our approach.

Our evidence speaks to the literature concerned with teachers empowering their professional judgment and 'knowing their own knowledge' (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2011). It challenges those abstracted discourses of evidence-based policy/practice interventions that 'are from nowhere' and instead recognizes, acknowledges and valorizes the local, relational co-action of individuals who are attempting to make things better 'here'.

The Policy Background

> There need be no difference in performance – none whatsoever – between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from wealthier homes. (Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, 2012, n.p)

Child poverty is a stark manifestation of economic and social inequality, leading to short-term hardship and long-term damage at the individual, family and community level. It is a significant problem in England and one that is growing. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the child poverty rate was 30%, which equates to nine children in each classroom of 30 living in poverty (Taylor-

Robinson et al, 2019). Across England, as Hirsch and Stone (2019) note, many of the districts suffering the sharpest child poverty increases over the past five years are in the north of England including Greater Manchester. As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic there is every suggestion that these figures are likely to increase.

Over the decades, in England, child poverty and its impact on education have been responded to through a focus on narrowing the achievement gap. At present disadvantaged pupils in English high schools are more than 18 months of learning behind their peers by the time they finish their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) whilst primary school pupils are more than 9 months behind their non-disadvantaged peers (Hutchinson et al, 2020). The same sources identify that at the current rate of change, it will take over 500 years for the disadvantage gap to be eliminated at secondary level.

The current educational policy response to the achievement gap is the Pupil Premium Grant (PPG). The PPG is a monetary grant delivered to schools and designed to improve educational achievement for disadvantaged pupils. Each child in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) brings with them the PPG which equates to £1,345 per year for a primary child and £995 for a secondary school child. The school chooses how this money is spent, has to account for the spend and demonstrate the impact of it. Accountability is ensured through the PPG spend and impact forming part of the Ofsted inspection process and government-imposed performance measures. Research demonstrates that the money is most commonly used to support small in class teaching interventions, extra teaching and teachers or support staff, wellbeing interventions, pre and post school extra-curricular activities, schemes such as breakfast clubs and trips out and extra material resources such as books and equipment (Morris & Dobson, 2020).

To support head teachers and teachers make best use of the PPG allocated, the government in 2011 also established the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). The EEF is a grant making charity tasked with supporting the PPG through generating evidence informed guidance regarding 'what works' in improving the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. The organization is a powerful and influential body within the education world and its understanding and enactment of the term evidence is through the funding and evaluation of randomized controlled trials (RCT) alongside implementation and process evaluations. Building on previous metricized teaching and learning toolkits in 2018 the EEF published a guide on the Pupil Premium designed to support schools in maximizing their PPG spend.

Discourses, Numbers and Teachers' Attitudes

We contend that the achievement gap discourse is a discursive genre of the broader 'what works' discourse. By genre, drawing on Fairclough (1992), we mean a socially endorsed way of talking about a social activity, in this case, poverty and disadvantage that begets a particular way of acting. These actions can be seen in the FSM metric, PPG initiative and EEF guidance, all of which, as tools of enactment, measure and maintain (or from a discursive perspective produce, construct and distribute), a simplistic, income related, version of poverty and utilize a range of standardized interventions and standardized (deficit) understandings of children in poverty that attempt to fix underachievement. They do so by focusing on the individual without redressing structural inequalities nor challenging problematic causal inferences or exploring localized, tailored and community-driven responses. Within the achievement gap discourse the student is the central unit of analysis with all the attendant social, emotional, historic and economic forces extracted from the equation.

Central to the achievement gap discourse and its attendant tools is an attachment to a particular ideology, or view of the world, commonly referred to as a deficit ideology. Deficit ideology in relation to poverty and education, labeled in Lewis' (1966) work as the 'culture of

poverty' outlines traits and behaviors that can be universally observed and attributed to those living in poverty.

This 'culture of poverty' paradigm is predicated on the belief that poverty is the natural outcome of intellectual, moral, ethical and other shortcomings of people in poverty. From this perspective children in poverty do not achieve positive academic outcomes for a whole number of reasons including poor parenting, dysfunctional home environments, an absence of cultural capital and experiences, limited vocabulary and low ambitions. This troubling perception has been advanced in particular through the work of Payne's [*A] Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005), which with its table and narratives of 'poor peoples'' behaviors (including a propensity towards violence), that has enhanced a universal mindset of poverty (Gorski, 2016) within which poor people all think and act the same.

Research, mostly from America (Milner, 2013; Ullucci & Howard, 2015), but also emerging in England (Lupton, 2016; Lyndon, 2019; Simpson et al., 2017) tells us that this deficit ideology has shaped teachers attitudes towards children living in poverty, resulting in some educators thinking and responding to poverty in schools through misperceptions, stereotypes, prejudices and bias. This raises interesting questions as to what is the nature of the 'present' for teachers working in high-poverty schools in England and whether the Local Matters program has disturbed this present.

Our Approach

The Local Matters' Program

Local Matters (Emery & Dawes, 2021) is a program based at the Manchester Institute of Education and driven through the institute's Disadvantage and Poverty Research Group. It draws on the work of Bibby et al. (2017) and has two central principles. Firstly, enabling learning in high-poverty communities is not necessarily about teachers engaging in 'authorized' or 'correct' pedagogies or removing educational barriers based on pathologized views of disadvantaged students in order to raise achievement. Rather, it starts with understanding disadvantage directly within the local community by recognizing that poverty is fluid and takes different forms in different places at different times and hence impacts differentially on the educational agency of young people. Secondly and commensurately, this means there is no 'one size fits all' response to poverty and certainly no simple off the shelf interventions. Instead, Local Matters advocates the complexity of teachers' work, one that necessitates deep critical, research driven, local knowledge, evidence and practice that can question, adapt and develop the nature of a teachers work. It is a type of work that recognizes the mutuality of all those involved in the educational project that includes pupils, parents, colleagues and the local community. Hence, our approach promotes a need to understand the locale and the dialectic agency of all parties in relation to the locale. This argument has been advanced through a series of educators in the UK and the US (Beckett, 2016; Gorski, 2016) who have identified the need for a different normative imperative, one where practitioners across the education spectrum collaborate on building research-driven accounts of poverty and disadvantage that are located in, and drawn from, locally lived experiences. In so doing, they illuminate structural inequalities and support teachers in building a 'place-based' critical response to poverty and disadvantage.

Local Matters is a 12-month university and school-based adaptive and responsive research approach with an associated adaptive and responsive theory of change. The program tool for exploring teachers (and researchers) shifting perceptions/positions on poverty and education (and actions) is discourse analysis. 'Local Matters' works alongside school staff through lectures, seminars, focus groups and research training to investigate and explore: a) what we know about poverty (locally and nationally); b) interrogate current poverty discourses including where they came from, who they serve and alternative approaches; c) train participants to become social researchers

by introducing participants to social research methodologies and methods; d) apply social research methods to construct and deliver, with participants, a school attitudes to poverty questionnaire; e) and explore the local poverty context alongside the school community and questionnaire findings and then apply this knowledge and research skills, through action research, to make changes to school practice and policy.

Methodology and Methods

Our methodological approach to this research is perhaps best described as critical secretaries (Apple, 2016), employing our academic position and skills to illuminate the dynamics of power and stress the political and social processes inherent to and shaping of education practice. We draw from action research traditions (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Kemmis, 2006) that encourage the rethinking of the established hierarchy of academic knowledge over practical knowledge and reframing practice as a site of knowledge generation as opposed to solely application. It breaks with the formal-practical knowledge distinctions by 'working the dialectic' to embrace local knowledge and emphasize how this can be thought of as applicable in both local and wider contexts to become public knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

We are undertaking this process to reveal the limits and possibilities for teachers working in high-poverty schools. Guided by Apple's question of 'whose knowledge is of most worth?' we see ourselves as critical educators working beside teaching colleagues immersed within schools located in high-poverty areas. We believe that the lived realities of teaching in a high-poverty school, with their commensurate gritty materialities, have been consciously removed from the policies and practices of schooling.

In positioning ourselves as critical secretaries we are conscious of the challenges and perhaps contradictions of this role. Stepping down from the balcony is often a messy and complicated process and one cannot simply be shorn of the knowledge, histories and power of the academy as those steps are taken. We recognize that it is our duty to find a balance between the theory we utilize and not losing sight of the lived realities of the practitioners we talk of and work with. We trust this balance comes through in our determination to connect the theory and lived realities of practice in a manner that is accessible and active, in so far as it sets out both a thick portrait of power at play but also actions that can be taken to ameliorate this. Secondly, we are aware that in taking this position we could be charged with simply talking on behalf of others. We counter this position in so far as we believe we are utilizing our intellectual and pedagogic skills to 'assist communities in thinking about this (this being poverty and emotions), learning from them (them being teachers), and engaging in the mutually pedagogic dialogues that enable decisions to be made in terms of both the short-term and long-term interests of dispossessed peoples (teachers in poor communities)' (Apple, 2015).

Data were therefore gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group activities with eight teachers, head teachers and district leaders. The interview questions were concerned with exploring and testing the impact of the Local Matters research program on the schools and staff taking part. The interviews were conducted by a research associate and held either at the university or school during the final month of the Local Matters project. The interviews were digitally recorded, and the dialogue was transcribed through what has been termed a 'naturalized' approach (Oliver et al., 2005).

The data analysis employed Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis, as it allows for an exploration of the lexical preferences used by respondents (textual analysis); the production, distribution and consumption behind the textual selections (discursive analysis); and the historical, ideological and contextual influences on social practices (social analysis). Key to this issue was the task of illuminating which discourses were at play during the activity

(interdiscursivity and intertextuality) and which genres were drawn on. We utilized this approach alongside knowledge gained from our previous studies (Emery, 2016) and the five steps model of analysis as referenced by Ziskin (2019). We coded the data from each transcript through the following lenses: discursive practice (the production, distribution and consumption of research); text (the language [wording, grammar, use of nouns] genres and discourse orders used by the interviewees) and the social practice (broader social/cultural/economic/political events). It should be noted that certain aspects of data fell within and across multiple categories. Guided by the research questions, emphasis was placed on the discursive practice, for as Fairclough notes, discursive practice acts as a bridge linking the text to the wider social practices, thereby revealing in whose service and interests the discourse operates. The final stage involved bringing all the transcripts together and interrogating them as one body of data through the social practice lens. This approach supported a narrative reconstruction of meaning, allowing us to reveal the genres and styles at play and explore how the language was positioned or positioning; whose interests were served (or negated) by this positioning and what were the consequences of this positioning (Fairclough, 2003, p. 329).

The transcripts inevitably remain, at best, partial representations and highly interpretive accounts (Ochs, 1979). We acknowledge that meaning making is conceived through a perpetual oscillation of the subjective accounts of a meaning and their collective interpretation (Dunová, 2018). Concomitantly, the accounts by teachers and educators are of a strongly situated nature, drawn from interviews at the end of an extremely intensive program whereby social interactions and power dynamics were inevitably present and therefore could have potentially shaped participant responses. However, we contend that the analysis draws the reader to a series of validity claims based on the configuration of context, language and its analysis that converge to form holistically understood singular meanings (Ziskin, 2019). Indeed, the analysis reveals implicit meanings that are rarely surfaced and often either assumed or backgrounded.

Findings and Discussion

Direct quotes are taken from the research participants, and these are presented in italics with the participant's role defined by either a HT (Headteacher), T (Teacher) or DL (District Leader).

Interdiscursivity and Textual Analysis

We focus primarily on two areas of analysis of the data, namely interdiscursivity and linguistic analysis. Fairclough identifies interdiscursivity (the discursive genres, styles and ideological resources used to carry out the interaction), as the bridge between the text and the wider social practices at play. Identifying the discursive practice allows us to recognize the deeper ideological forces at play and the power relations that shaped the interviewees' thinking and doing of child poverty policy and practice in their schools. Linguistic analysis within the text also links language, as a social practice, to these ideological forces, as well as illuminating notions of agency and identity as educators. Therefore, we look specifically at nominalization (denoting vagueness, passivity or a lack of agency) and modality (referring to commitment to truth) that are shared features of language within the group.

Our data reveals an elaborate and high degree of interdiscursivity across the interviewees. A broad range of discourses were drawn on indicating that, for our participants, a new interdiscursive mix was emerging that combined elements of social justice thinking (Fraser, 2009), localism (Bibby et al, 2017), collaborative inquiry (Gorski, 2016) and democratic educator (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018). However, there were also enduring traces of the achievement gap genre, deficit ideology and the broader 'what works' discourse. Indeed, it was clear that many of the participants were in a

strategic 'skirmish', wrestling with the labels, categories and practices of current dominant understandings of child poverty and their lived experiences of being educators on high-poverty schools. This skirmish is exemplified in the following statements:

> (Local Matters) has helped us to develop our decision making and practice in school in terms of attempting to "poverty proof" aspects of the school year. Staff working directly with the project definitely have more awareness of the impact of poverty on school and we now want to roll this out further to the whole school community. (HT1)

> We have recognized it's important to understand that not all disadvantaged pupils struggle to meet expected or greater depth standard and not all fall behind with their progress. By gaining a deeper understanding of the underlying factors that allow some children to achieve success, we would hope to gain a better insight into the proven strategies that support disadvantaged pupils within our school. (HT2)

One can see the tension between the different discourses within HT1s thinking. Notions of inquiry and localism are foregrounded yet these are tempered and understood within a 'what works' discourse that seeks interventions, in this case, Poverty Proofing, to fix the poverty problem.

The problem of poverty and fixing it for HT1 is also articulated in a typical 'what works' intervention that abstracts the locale and therefore frames the school as 'us' and the community as 'them', again adopting a 'fixing' position rather than collaborative one.

At a textual level, for HT2 the discursive mix contains strong modality (*recognized*, *important*), that is claims to truth, regarding the problematic nature of the universal mindset and metrics of the deficit approach to poverty. This contestation is built on the value being placed on research and inquiry to better understand the lived realities of local poverty. Yet this inquiry approach is still, in part, understood through an evidence based 'what works' discourse (*proven strategies*), vague references, built on assumed truths, to '*disadvantaged pupils'* and achievement gap language such as '*achieve success'*; all nominalizations that leave us to populate meaning ourselves. Indeed, one could see the '*achieve success*' statement as a clear example of what Apple (2004) refers to as 'agreed common sense', a discursive process intended to redefine common sense for the purposes of the (education) market.

The tensions noted above are present in many of the interviews. However, for most participants this tension reveals itself less directly, through representation, (the relation between two entities, how x is connected or set against y) rather than words. The impact of participating in Local Matters was frequently articulated through the frame of problem/solution with the problem being the achievement gap and deficit 'fix' discourse and practices, current policy, and the solution a localized, collaborative, inquiry process.

> The project is raising professional esteem at all levels in the project schools. Teachers are regaining their professional pride; the action research projects are informed by their experience and knowledge; they are regaining a sense of self-determination after being 'told' what to think for too long. (DL1)

Utilizing a range of discursive genres including inquiry, localism and democratic educator, DL1 frames the impact of Local Matters against the problems associated with an implicit diminishing of professional judgement associated with the one-size-fits-all aspects of the 'what works' approach. For DL1, this approach has resulted in teachers losing professional autonomy and voice, something that a collaborative and inquiry driven response has allowed them to regain and

raise. The thoughts of DL1 speak directly to 'teachers empowering their professional judgment and 'knowing their own knowledge'" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2011).

Similarly, in the quote below, DL2 sets the impact of Local Matters against the problems associated with the current dominant discourse. Utilizing discursive notions of the democratic educator and the value of localism, DL2 identifies that current abstracted discourses of evidence-based policy/practice interventions that 'are from nowhere' have bleached out the local and diminished teacher agency as well as negating the local community. At the textual level, although undefined and perhaps rather vague nominalizations, the use of *rediscovering, influence, rediscovered, asking questions*, creates a dynamic transformative discursive mix.

> Local Matters has challenged us to think about our children, our staff, our parents and our communities. Schools are re-discovering the importance of the 'local', which they can influence, as opposed to the 'national', where they feel powerless. The classroom has become a new focus of social interaction and pedagogy. Colleagues have rediscovered their sense of 'service' to the community. (DL2)

Our analysis identifies a high degree of interdiscursivity, with a multitude of discourses being drawn together reflective of change taking place (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). This change is evident, not only in the genres and in styles, but it is also illuminated through the text employed. The final quotes in this section illustrate this process of change or transformation before we move onto unpicking what this change means with regard to subjectivation.

> Through the research we were involved in we ended up reflecting on and thinking about what we had planned and previously done with disadvantaged families and realized this is not the best approach. (HT3)

> The research has focused us as a school community upon the needs of our local community. It has given us context and ideas, as well as challenging some of our existing practice. (T1)

Resistance

Having explored the discursive mix, using representation as a tool to illuminate the relationship between entities (and therefore their connectedness or collocation), we have illuminated deficit discourses that are juxtaposed with transformative thinking amongst the interviewees. Using data analysis has allowed us to see the hybridity of this discursive mix. It is a discursive mix that indicates changes in attitudes of educators in relation to the 'market-serving truths' of the 'what works' agenda and pathologizing children (and their families) living in poverty as a result of their participation on the program. Some interviewees illustrated the unsettling nature of the Local Matters process in particular the whole school's exploration of attitudes towards poverty that exposed attitudes and disrupted assumed truths amongst staff and colleagues that were serving communities living in poverty.

> The (poverty) questionnaires have exposed hidden attitudes among some staff that they overtly or covertly support these deficit views, which has been quite shocking if not entirely unexpected. Behind all this, we have learned something about the subliminal effects of policy and value judgements that may be hidden and how this might impact on expectations. (T3)

However, as with the previous section, interviewees were also able to clearly articulate the transformational change in attitudes. As HT5 demonstrates below, he starts to problematize the

nature of the present for teachers in his school including their assumed truths about poverty, their associated problems and how they might be fixed.

> I think it has opened teachers eyes and we talked a lot about the premium, the poverty premium trap when they are living in poverty it costs more to buy things for children and for your normal every-day life anyway so we talked about all of that….and you could see the sort of 'oh right ok…' so I think it really is starting to help people think about ways. (HT5)

Within the context of this research, we see resistance as an expression of educators' professional agency being enacted in one particular site of struggle. This is a struggle for counter discourses and the freedoms associated with the possibility of transformation (Foucault, 1988). In exploring resistance, we draw on the thinking of Ball (2015) and Youdell (2006) and approach this subject through a relational frame recognizing that resistance does not simply occur as a fixed position within the individual but rather ebbs and flows across and within the individual and their connections to colleagues, trade unions, professional networks, political parties etcetera. Across the interviews, one can see a consistent call from the participants alluding to and claiming the possibilities of being otherwise.

> This programme has had a profound effect on how we see government policy and the credibility we might give it. (T2)

> We understood this was not the way in which we wanted to support our families. This programme has changed that approach. We now look local, asking what experiences, skills and resources we can draw on in the community. (HT4)

> Teachers are looking at research they wouldn't have before and asking questions of policy. Directly and indirectly, this project is responsible for a new sense of purpose in our schools. (DL2)

Drawing on Holstein and Gubrium (2016) and recognizing that meaning reflects relatively enduring local contingencies and conditions of possibility (in our case educators interrogating the achievement gap discourse and exploring collaborative alternatives), it is evident that our interviewees are acting with intent to turn away from the dominant discourse and associated binary and metricized, practices. For T2, one can see a discursive agency emerging that is willing to move away from the present prescribed discourse. Interestingly this transformation with T2 continues to utilize the language of the 'what works' agenda (employing the word '*credibility*' as a tool to challenge and resist) and uses a weak modality *'we might give'* that suggests some hesitancy in the face of wholesale resistance to government policy, perhaps with an eye to discipline through metrics? Whereas HT4 presents a strong modality and therefore commitment to truth, firstly, in voicing a confident '*this was not the way*' they wished to understand and respond to poverty and secondly '*we now look local*' revealing an emphatic sense of assurance in the school's new approach to community engagement.

The data presented above speaks to notions of principled resistance (Santoro and Cain, 2018) whereby educators are thinking and doing things differently through the enactment of pedagogic, professional and democratic ideals. As our data indicates the research participants are '*look(ing)local*', '*asking questions of policy*', '*looking at research they wouldn't have before*' and doing this with an eye on the *'subliminal effects of policy'*. This (principled) resistance could be attributed to the situated nature of the interviews and therefore born from the social relations and power dynamics experienced during the research process as well as a new sensitivity and awareness of specific

language and discourses that were explored with us. However, we believe that this 'doing things differently' for the educators is partly grounded in the collaboration with ourselves as activist academics, not driven by us nor created by us but rather a joint construction, through agentic space and inquiry (Apple, 2015). Our thinking here is supported through the strong and direct modality the participants express when talking about Local Matters, for example, *'This programme has had a profound effect…', 'This programme has changed that approach'.*

The resistance we are talking about here has built through moments of infusion whereby we identified a shared common ideological approach that, if it were to be named, perhaps is best understood through the lens of 'democratic reformers' (Cochran- Smith et al, 2018). By 'democratic reformers' we mean educators with a desire to speak of, challenge and transform the unjust and inequitable thinking and doing of present child poverty discourses.

Finally, it is important to take a moment here to again consider the responses in regard to the situated nature of the interviews. As our intention with the Local Matters approach was to interrogate and disrupt the current dominant 'what works'/achievement gap discourse. It is, therefore, perhaps no surprise that this has been revealed in our findings. This begets the question as to whether we are replacing one fixed approach with another. The answer to this is no, as it is evident our interviewees are not talking about imposed, albeit alternative, solutions to poverty but rather collaborative research driven processes and inquiry. Such processes may present solutions and if they do they will be localized to the community in which the school resides.

Subjectivation

Bringing our findings directly back to the question of subjectivation, one can identify a number of key points revealed through our interrogation of the present (Foucault, 1988) and its making and unmaking, by both our participants and ourselves.

The first of these points is associated with the role of prevailing and broader discourses in constituting the participants and ourselves working alongside our own practices of self. 'What works' and deficit discourses have shaped everyone during this research approach yet, and particularly for the participants, these may have been not consciously known. And for those for whom such discourse was explicitly known, their *meaning* may well have been ascribed differently according to positionality and relationships with wider discursive frames such as professionalism, leadership, whiteness etc.

What we are saying here is that we did not see subjectivation within our research process as a deterministic, universal, doing unto the individual subject or body that produced a fixed outcome. Rather, we witnessed the issue of multiple teacher subjectivities being interrogated within the context of constraint, productive powers and complex and fluid notions of discursive and material agency (Youdell, 2010). The quote from DL2 below captures how the research process was driven by 'doing with' rather than 'unto'. We are not replacing one truth, or fixed position, with another, rather we are working towards notions of CDA shaped educator praxis.

> Being part of Local Matters has enhanced our teachers' understanding of what school-based action research really means. The seminars have allowed them to explore established UK and international research findings in this area of work and has exposed them to a range of research tools and instruments. Teachers now have a clear appreciation of the cycle of inquiry and recognize that the process, if it is to be truly valuable, takes time. As a result, they have improved their investigative, evaluative and analytical skills. (DL2)

The second point to draw from our data is the unsettling of our constituted subjects, in this case the educators, through their troubling of the present relationship between child poverty truths

they see and respond to on a daily basis. Therefore, the gap between their truths (and how power tells them what this truth is) and what responses are legitimate and authorized (Ball, 2016). This troubling of poverty truths, not just outside but within the academy, can be seen at play in the following quote where T3 identifies an explicit unsettling, one that is captured through a troubled inference. The hedging, perhaps, reflecting the uncomfortableness in overtly illuminating the distance between lived experiences and authorized discourses.

> I went to do more work with staff on benefits…and that's come up through the research…misconceptions amongst staff about people who claim benefits living a better lifestyle than people who don't. I think some of our teaching assistants, I mean I was a teaching assistant myself and I know the wage is just terrible, so we have been talking about doing work around that as well. (T3)

The present 'what works' has been recognized as a deficit discursive frame and, through different forms of resistance, has been reconfigured (perhaps only ephemerally and only whilst within the Local Matters space) and unsettled. What we are saying here is that we cannot and would not want to claim a cause and effect between Local Matters and any preconfigured and perceived changes in educator's discourses, discursive agency and practice. However, what we can say with confidence is that the Local Matters approach, as a process provides for a skirmishing, shaking up and unsettling of child poverty practice, discourses and agency, ones that provide for an enhanced teacher subjectivation, that corresponds to authentic lived issues of child poverty in schools.

Conclusion

The study was located in schools with high child poverty rates and focused on teacher perceptions and actions around notions of the attainment gap. Our position in undertaking this work was based on exploring the relationship between subjectivation, performativity and poverty truths in the lives of teachers and schools and how these discourses might be questioned and disrupted by our Local Matter interventions. It was about working with teachers and schools in a collaborative way to help them engage with a localized knowledge and place based evidence to enhance and enrich school practice and positioning with responding to poverty. In many respects, it was about examining the extent to which such knowledge and practice could be used as sites of resistance and contestation by schools and teachers in order to reconfigure their understandings and responses to mainstream poverty and achievement gap policy/practice discourses. Discourse that we have seen produce, construct and distribute, a simplistic, income related, version of poverty and utilize a range of standardized interventions and (deficit) understandings of children in poverty that attempt to fix underachievement. In terms of the research questions that positioned this paper what did our evidence and thinking suggest about the discourses and genres that educators drew on when talking about child poverty in their schools and how did the Local Matter intervention shape their thinking and doing?

Based on interdiscursive and linguistic analysis of interview data and focus group activities we recognized the deeper ideological forces at play and the power relations that shaped the teachers thinking and doing of child poverty policy and practice in their schools. Linguistic analysis within the text also linked language, as a social practice, to these ideological forces, as well as illuminating notions of agency and identity as educators. Our data revealed an elaborate and high degree of interdiscursivity across our teachers. A broad range of discourses were drawn on indicating combined elements of social justice thinking collaborative inquiry and democratic educator, yet also traces of the achievement gap genre, deficit ideology and the broader 'what works' discourse. Indeed, it was clear that many of the participants were in a strategic skirmish, wrestling with the

labels, categories and practices of current dominant understandings of child poverty and their lived experiences of being educators in high-poverty schools. These findings talk directly to and develop the work of Gorski (2016) and Bibby et al. (2017).

It was also the case that the Local Matters intervention impacted our teachers' interdiscursive thinking and doing. Our evidence speaks to emerging notions of principled resistance with teachers now look(ing) local, asking questions of policy, examining research they would not have examined before and doing this with an eye to what might be viewed as the subliminal effects of mainstream policy and its discourse. We believe that this principled resistance of teachers was not only due to a new sensitivity and awareness of specific language and discourses but also due to the processes of collaboration with ourselves as activist academics through a joint construction of thinking and doing through space and inquiry. It was a resistance built through moments of an emerging infusion of a common ideological approach; one that took the form of a democratic reform attempting to challenge and transform the unjust and inequitable thinking and doing of present child poverty discourses. In that sense, we can say that our work troubled any deterministic notions of teacher subjectivation. Instead, what we witnessed was multiple subjectivities being interrogated within the context of constraint, productive powers and complex and fluid notions of discursive and material agency. There was learning and unlearning taking place which speaks to process questions of how we could govern ourselves as educators within a world of powerful ideological social practices and discourses that construct the 'problem' of poverty (Ball, 2019, Cochran-Smith, 2018).

So, what does our research suggest for our field of inquiry and for policy and practice going forward? In essence what our research suggests is that there is a possibility of dynamic complexity underpinning teacher's reflexive thinking and agency in high-poverty schools. What this means for collaborative inquiries and interventions on teachers' reflexivity and agency is that there cannot be a predictively articulated theory of change as to how particular activity or intervention will generate a desired causal outcome in teachers' educational thinking and doing. What our research points to instead is a much more evolving and ecological understanding about activist collaboration with teachers – ones that can only generate a skirmishing, shaking up and unsettling of child poverty practice, discourses and agency. It is a form of shaking up and unsettling that can provide an alternative more corresponding discourse of what teacher subjectivation might be in relation to child poverty in schools. The Local Matters approach has partly informed an alternative discourse that goes beyond the current pasteurized version of child poverty in education that has a simplistic beginning, middle and end.

References

Anderson, S. E., Mascall, B., Stiegelbauer, S., & Park, J. (2012). No one way: Differentiating school district leadership and support for school improvement. *Journal of Educational Change, 13*(4), 403-430. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10833-012-9189-y

Apple, M. W. (2016). Challenging the epistemological fog: The roles of the scholar/activist in education. *European Educational Research Journal, 15*(5), 505-515. https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904116647732

Apple, M. W. (2015). Reframing the question of whether education can change society. *Educational Theory, 65*(3), 299-315. https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12114

Ball, S. J. (2016). Subjectivity as a site of struggle: Refusing neoliberalism? *British Journal of Sociology of Education, 37*(8), 1129-1146. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2015.1044072

Ball, S. J. (2019). A horizon of freedom: Using Foucault to think differently about education and learning. *Power and Education, 11*(2), 132-144. https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743819838289

Beckett, L. (2016). *Teachers and academic partners in urban schools: Threats to professional practice.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315739441

Bibby, T., Lupton, R., & Raffo, C. (2017). *Responding to poverty and disadvantage in schools: A reader for teachers.* Springer. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-52156-9

Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative.* Routledge.

Cochran-Smith, M., Carney, M. C., Keefe, E. S., Burton, S., Chang, W. C., Fernandez, M. B., Miller, A. F., Sánchez, J. G., & Baker, M. (2018). *Reclaiming accountability in teacher education.* Teachers College Press.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). Teacher researcher as a stance. In S. Noffke & B. Somekh (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of educational action research* (pp. 39-49). Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857021021.n5

Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2011). Commentary: Changing perspectives on practitioner research. *Learning Landscapes, 4*(2), 17-23. https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v4i2.381

Comber, B., & Kamler, B. (2009) Sustaining the next generation of teacher-researchers to work for social justice. In S. E. Noffke & B. Somekh (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of educational action research* (pp. 226-237). Sage Publications.

Durnová, A. (2018). Understanding emotions in policy studies through Foucault and Deleuze. *Politics and Governance, 6*(4), 95-102. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i4.1528

Emery, C. (2016). A critical discourse analysis of the New Labour discourse of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) across schools in England and Wales: Conversations with policymakers. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 24*(104). https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.24.2236

Emery, C., Dawes, L. (2021). *Local Matters: Case studies of a university/school poverty research programme.* National Education Union. Available at https://neu.org.uk/child-poverty/local-matters-educating-sense-place

Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315834368

Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality: An introduction, volume I.* (Trans. R. Hurley). Vintage.

Fraser, N. (2009). Social justice in the age of identity politics. In G. Henderson & M. Waterstone (Eds.), *Geographic thought: A praxis perspective* (pp. 72-91). Routledge.

Gorski, P. C. (2011). Unlearning deficit ideology and the scornful gaze: Thoughts on authenticating the class discourse in education. *Counterpoints, 402*, 152-173.

Gorski, P. C. (2016). Poverty and the ideological imperative: A call to unhook from deficit and grit ideology and to strive for structural ideology in teacher education. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 42*(4), 378-386. https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2016.1215546

Gove, M. (2012). *Speech to Brighton College. A coalition for good - how we can all work together to make opportunity more equal.* https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretary-michael-goves-speech-to-brighton-college

Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2016). Narrative practice and the active interview. In D. Silverman (Ed.), Qualitative *data analysis* (pp. 67-82). SAGE.

Hutchinson, J., Reader, M., &Akhal, A. (2020). *Education in England: Annual report 2020.* Education Policy Institute. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/36268/1/EPI_2020_Annual_Report_.pdf

Jorgensen, M. & Phillips, L., (2002). *Discourse analysis as theory and method.* Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208871

Kemmis, S. (2006). Participatory action research and the public sphere. *Educational Action Research, 14*(4), 459-476. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790600975593

Lewis, O. (1966). The culture of poverty. *Scientific American, 215*(4), 19-25 https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican1066-19

Lupton, R. (2016). Rethinking values and schooling in white working-class neighbourhoods. In *Youth in education* (pp. 233-248). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315658148-13

Lyndon, S. (2019). Troubling discourses of poverty in early childhood in the UK. *Children & Society, 33*(6), 602-609. https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12354

Milner IV, H. R. (2013). Analyzing poverty, learning, and teaching through a critical race theory lens. *Review of Research in Education, 37*(1), 1-53. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X12459720

Morris, R., & Dobson, G. (2021). Spending the pupil premium: What influences leaders' decision-making. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 49(*2), 284-302. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220905062

Nealon, J. (2020). *Foucault beyond Foucault.* Stanford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804768443

Ochs, E. (1979). Planned and unplanned discourse. In *Discourse and syntax* (pp. 51-80). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004368897_004

Oliver, D. G., Serovich, J. M., & Mason, T. L. (2005). Constraints and opportunities with interview transcription: Towards reflection in qualitative research. *Social Forces, 84*(2), 1273-1289. https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2006.0023

Payne, R. K. (2005). *A framework for understanding poverty* (4th ed.) Aha Process.

Santoro, D. A., & Cain, L. (2018). *Principled resistance: How teachers resolve ethical dilemmas.* Harvard Education Press.

Simpson, D., Loughran, S., Lumsden, E., Mazzocco, P., Clark, R. M., & Winterbottom, C. (2017). 'Seen but not heard'. Practitioners work with poverty and the organising out of disadvantaged children's voices and participation in the early years. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 25*(2), 177-188. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2017.1288014

Taylor-Robinson, D., Lai, E. T., Wickham, S., Rose, T., Norman, P., Bambra, C., Whitehead, M., & Barr, B. (2019). Assessing the impact of rising child poverty on the unprecedented rise in infant mortality in England, 2000-2017: Time trend analysis. *BMJ Open, 9*(10), e029424. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2019-029424

Ullucci, K., & Howard, T. (2015). Pathologizing the poor: Implications for preparing teachers to work in high-poverty schools. *Urban Education, 50*(2), 170-193. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085914543117

About the Authors

Carl Emery
University of Manchester
Carl.emery@manchester.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7282-3602
Carl Emery is a lecturer in education and Research Fellow for Social Responsibility at the University of Manchester. He leads the Power, Poverty and Place Research Group and teaches the Social Justice and From the Global to the Local undergraduate and postgraduate units. His work is interested in the intersection between poverty, mental health, and education with an emphasis on language and identity, through a critical discourse analysis approach. His work has appeared in *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, *British Education Research Journal and The SAGE Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies*.

Louisa Dawes
University of Manchester
Louisa.dawes@manchester.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5061-8525
Louisa Dawes is a senior lecturer and doctoral student at the University of Manchester. She teaches on several initial teacher training programmes as well as undergraduate and postgraduate course units on social justice including the course From the Global to the Local. Her doctoral research uses a critical discourse analysis approach to illuminate how teachers in high-poverty contexts articulate their pedagogic identities and emotions. Her work has appeared in *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education.*

Carlo Raffo
University of Manchester
carlo.raffo@manchester.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2361-1325
Carlo Raffo is professor of urban education at the University of Manchester. He teaches on the MA (International) Education programme and various other undergraduate and postgraduate units. His work is interested in multidisciplinary approaches to exploring the intersection between poverty and education with a theoretical emphasis based on Dewey's metaphysical ideas of transactionalism. He has led research projects funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Economic Social Research Council and is currently principal investigator on an Educational Endowment Fund literature review project focused socio-economic disadvantage and educational attainment His work has appeared in *British Journal of Sociology of Education, Oxford Review of Education, and The Curriculum Journal.*

About the Guest Editors

Carmen Rodríguez-Martínez
University of Málaga
carmenrodri@uma.es
Full professor at the University of Malaga. Her lines of research are developed in teacher training, educational policies and gender.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0423-458X

Javier Marrero-Acosta
University of La Laguna
jmarrero@ull.edu.es
Professor of didactics and school organization at the University of La Laguna. His lines of research focus mainly on the study and analysis of "Power, Knowledge and Subjectivity in Education".
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1589-6335

Diego Martín-Alonso
University of Málaga
diegomartin@uma.es

Teacher in the Department of Didactics and School Organization of the University of Malaga. His lines of research focus on the study of curricular and educational policies, teaching knowledge, initial teacher training and masculinities.
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7367-7862

About the EPAA/AAPE Editorial Team: https://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/about/editorialTeam

Please send errata notes to Audrey Amrein-Beardsley at audrey.beardsley@asu.edu

Join EPAA's Facebook community at https://www.facebook.com/EPAAAAPE and **Twitter feed** @epaa_aape.