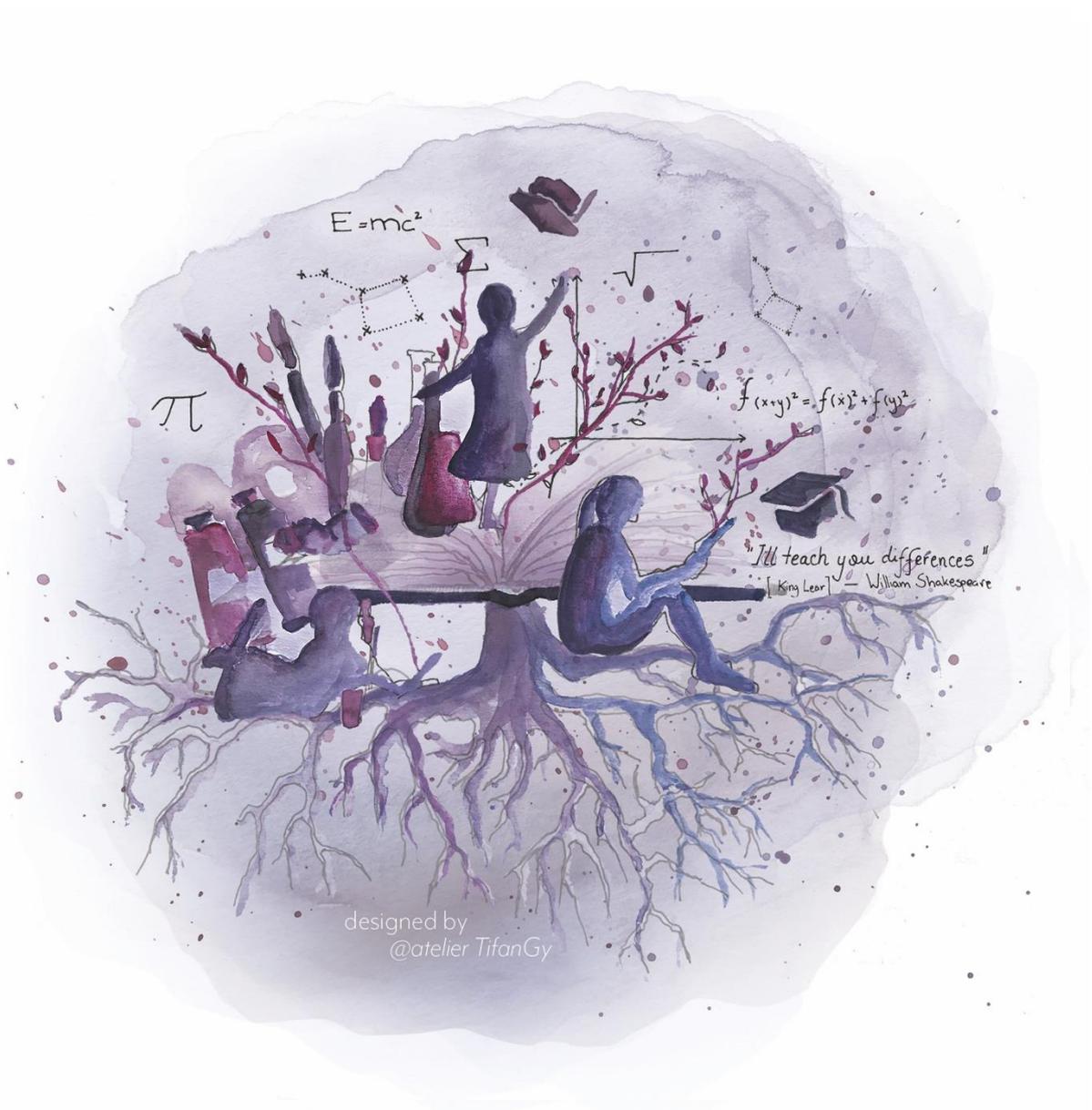


# English schools and disadvantaged communities: some clues on closing the gap

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## English schools and disadvantaged communities: some clues on closing the gap

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As a School of Education that prides itself on our collaboration with practitioners, the Carnegie Education Research Summaries series was created to make our research truly accessible. With the peer review process often extremely lengthy and journals mostly behind paywalls, these summaries distil our research into shorter articles that focus on the key findings from our projects.

## Background

2010 witnessed a seismic shift in policy positioning of the state in the United Kingdom. Labour's 13 years of large state interventions with their inherent long term aims, financial investment and strategic planning were replaced overnight by multiple cries of 'we cannot afford it', that is the welfare state which shrank as a result extremely dramatically. The Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, announced a return a schooling system based upon a coalescence of neoliberal and neoconservative philosophies (Martin, 2016). With hindsight we can view 2010, the start of the decade of austerity, as one of the most radical shifts in state's positioning since Thatcherism was introduced in 1979. The outgoing Prime Minister's Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which had signalled in 2007, through the introduction of the first comprehensive long term plan for children and young people (DCSF, 2007), an inclusive and holistic approach involving English schooling being integrated within the broader services available to children and families. The shift in 2010 from DCSF to the Department for Education (DfE), the name used by the Thatcher government, marked a transformation of the department to one fixated on schooling accompanied by a denial of the wider issues that children face. Schools were directed to focus upon learning in the classroom and excellent teaching (Ball, 2013), broader issues were a distraction from the core business. Other than two matters raised by the Liberal Democrats, one in their Coalition agreement with the Conservatives (HMSO, 2010) that introduced the Pupil Premium, an additional payment to schools where families were on low incomes; and a second later in that Parliament, free school meals for all children in their first years of primary education, there was a denial of the factors that impacted upon children's learning identified through Labour's extensive research in the previous decade.

Research conducted across 2010 to 2019 has revealed while ministers demanded schools should focus almost solely on the classroom and the quality of teaching, many schools have continued on a similar pathway constructed through Labour's more holistic approach to schooling. The research noted that this was particularly the case where schools are sited within impoverished communities. These schools worked together in consortia arrangements with the ambition to tackle what many described as barriers to learning as opposed to interschool competition for pupils in the marketplace. They had learnt that Gove's dismissal of factors outside the classroom (5th September 2013, DfE) did not assist in improving their league table positions or their Ofsted inspection judgements. These schools during the last decade have continued to engage with pupils and families in the context of Education in its Broader Sense (EBS) as describe by Fielding and Moss (2011) while government demanded a focus upon excellent teaching in the classroom that is Education in its Narrower Sense (ENS). The consortia of schools central to this research view ENS as only part of the solution to closing the educational divide marked by poverty. This research briefly outlines the story of this consortia that

embraced EBS to tackle the factors that impacted upon their pupils and provides clues as to closing the gap.

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## The Consortia of Schools

A diverse range of schools came together to work collectively with the aim to improve educational standards. These were schools sited in poor communities adjacent to each other. There were 10 primary and secondary schools involved with a diversity of organisational and management structures. They included faith schools, LA funded schools and academies directly funded by central government. Some of these schools had high proportions of pupils with additional needs and ranged from white working class to culturally diverse communities. Their Ofsted inspection judgements rated from 'requires improvement' to 'good'. There were some consistent themes all schools shared associated with poverty across all their communities. High levels of unemployment which were double the level of that of the local authority and national average when considering those claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) and Universal Credit (UC) and required to seek work. Over 12 % of those residing in these communities were experiencing fuel poverty with 10% nationally, 6% of these households officially classed as overcrowded and less than half with access to a car. In terms of educational attainment as children grew up their progress fell back when compared with national averages. The Early Year Foundation Stage children were at 60% expected level of learning compared to 71% nationally and at Key Stage 2 locally 60% compared to 65% nationally. But at Key Stage 4 only 26% of young people achieved good English and mathematics GCSEs compared to 44% which contributed to high levels of young people being classed as not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The schools in these communities reflected upon how 'we have considerably more to do when compared to leafy lane schools'. This commonly held view fostered a spirit of mutualism and co-operation that led to a joint approach to school improvement and the establishment of the consortia of schools. A tangible result that emerged from partnership working was the construction of a support team of staff drawn from existing employees working in isolation within the schools and

new appointments led by an Assistant Principal that managed and coordinated all support across schools and liaised closely with community services. This team brought to the consortia a much wider range of skills than traditionally found within the school workforce.

## The Research Methodology

A qualitative methodology was adopted to gain insights and understandings as to why these schools considered their approach, which appeared to be in conflict with ministers and DfE officials, would bring about school improvement. These schools seemed to have rejected the theme which pervaded the decade of austerity, school improvement should be solely focused upon the technical approaches linked to teaching in the classroom. In order to gain understandings as to their stance, data was collected from school websites, through LA reports and statistics and from school improvement plans and anonymised pupil data provided by school leaders. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school leaders in both primary and secondary sectors, teaching staff and a wide array of support staff to capture views as to why the school took this approach and to understand the 'offer' made to pupils and families. Interviews were also conducted with LA staff and those from community based services supporting the families living in these communities. Conversations also took place with parents of the pupils from these schools.

## The lessons learnt: there is much more to schooling than the classroom

Three key themes emerged from the analysis of data:

### *1. A highly skilled teacher workforce alone is not enough to improve standards*

Successive ministers across the decade have adopted an approach that good schools are about high quality teaching only. This was rejected by the leadership of the consortia. The school leaders that formed this consortia recognised the importance of teaching and strived towards 'outstanding' in all their classes. Some leaders revealed they considered ministers and the DfE out of touch with reality as they dealt on a minute by minute basis with what one called 'the fallout of society'. Leaders stated their day to day work was deeply influenced by the impact of extreme poverty, domestic abuse, the chaos resulting from alcohol and substance misuse and the alienation from society of significant swathes of their pupil's families. They applauded the introduction of Pupil Premium and their budgets benefited from the high number of poor families and also universal free school meals for the first years of primary education. Leaders talked of Ofsted inspectors while drawing together a profile for their school recognised in one way poverty but appeared to disregard its influence in the inspections as they were carried out. Inspectors were interested in the more 'technical issues' such as how Pupil Premium was used, how Children Looked After were progressing and more recently a strong focus upon safeguarding children, but not the wider context of children's

lives outside the school gates. There was a clear tension between the policy rhetoric coming from DfE and the reality on the ground for these schools in poor communities striving to improve standards. Ministers were espousing ENS as the solution to school improvement across England while on the ground those striving towards this through classroom practice also considered much wider, more radical action was needed and resorted to adopting EBS through their emphasis on understanding and responding to factors outside the classroom. The latter consideration led to understanding the pupil set within their broader lived experience. Teachers said they needed to take this approach as their pupils brought so many issues into the school and for those that did not attend regularly, they were aware of family circumstances that contributed to this position. Teachers viewed these issues as illustrations of barriers to learning comparing them to those tackled by interventions such as breakfast clubs 'children cannot learn if they are hungry, similarly if they are upset about family issues such as violence within the home'.

There was a clear tension between the policy rhetoric coming from DfE and the reality on the ground for these schools in poor communities striving to improve standards.

The team of staff that worked across the consortia were asked to engage with pupils where issues such as persistent absence and arriving late to school were evident. As well as these being key performance indicators for schools they were also viewed as barriers to learning and that solutions through understanding children's home life had to be found. One member of staff commented that 'it does not matter how good my teaching is for the child that does not come to school, for whatever reason, we have to sort the issues out that are stopping them coming to school so they can engage in learning'. This led to pupils in both primary and secondary provision being identified by teaching staff as needing extra support. These children and young people included those that may be engaged with children's social care or where families had been identified as with chaotic lifestyles but not viewed as at risk of serious harm. Workers from the support team were attached to these families. Often a connection was made between the family and their children that may be in both primary and secondary schools in the consortia with each teacher that engaged with individual children now able to offer a coordinated family based response. A free bus service was sent out to homes were

pupils were consistently late or not attending school following a family support worker's assessment of the situation. From this single assessment emerged a host of issues that families were grappling with which were previously invisible to the teaching staff. The support team resolved practical factors such as a lack of hot water, unfit housing and less complex matters such as negotiating a gas or electric bill and offered advice through referral to experts in areas such as managing debt. Other practicalities that came to light were for example no access to information technology in the home, where previously teachers had assumed this or where homes were overcrowded and there was little chance for the child to be able to complete homework.

Through the team engaging with the family many issues were resolved fairly simply like the purchase of beds where children were sharing or where there were no beds in the home. However, accounts were provided by research participants that there was a deep mistrust amongst a significant proportion of families as to schooling itself. These families viewed schools and their staff as policing them and they were not considered part of the mainstream society which they felt victims of and hence there was a lack of trust and strong messages past to their children that school was 'a waste of time'. Many support workers that took part in the research echoed this parental view and that somehow their role was to bridge this divide. The support team worked with these families to try to change parents' perceptions of schooling. This was viewed as the greatest challenge and intensive work was undertaken to shift what the team learnt was an intergenerational problem. Teachers were the same as police officers, social workers and housing staff – policing their lives, undertaking assessments and making authoritative judgments. The highly skilled team worked with these families to negotiate arrangements so that children could access schooling and for these parents to form a partnership with the child's school – one worker stated that 'whatever the situation a family is in parents still want the best for their children and we are able to use that to get the child into school'.

Other negotiations took place where young people were not attending school and were within the youth justice system. A proportion of these pupils were viewed by their parents as beyond their control. The youth workers employed within the team engaged with these young people and negotiated for example placements in less formal learning so that they could access some form of learning and build relationships with adults outside of the peer group which were said to regularly comprise of offenders. The aim of this approach was to progressively re-engage these pupils back into school and re-establish a positive relationship with them, their parents and teaching staff.

## *2. Essential knowledge required to improve achievement*

The support team leader, the Assistant Principal, was sited within one of the secondary schools to manage the initiative. This member of staff was a highly skilled professional with deep knowledge of schools and the performance demands made

on them in terms of measures of 'success' and had for many years worked within service delivered in deprived communities. The Assistant Principal brought a unique set of skills to the consortia and became according to other leader's accounts a 'highly valued person and central to the partnership of schools'. These schools had previously considered welfare in narrow terms in the context of SEND or child protection. This leader brought new skills and also an outstanding knowledge of working with families living in vulnerable circumstances. Another key area for school leaders to understand was mutual partnership working, which the Assistant Principal was well versed in. School leaders had seen Labour relax to some extent hard line competition and the market that schools worked in but 2010 saw a return to 'survival of the fittest' as one leader referred to schools working in competition. The Assistant Principal was able to introduce a perspective that put partnership first and could also negotiate common understandings across schools in the consortia, further adding to the valuing of their joint working and that of the team. The support team became a highly respected and a treasured resource for all school leaders in the consortia and while some classroom teachers did not understand how they were able to negotiate with families and pupils to re-engage children with school, these teaching staff knew that the support team was contributing to children's engagement with learning.

An essential key to success highlighted by this team was the knowledge base they developed and shared with the schools.

The support team added a wealth of resource to the schools being able to link readily with external services such as housing, domestic abuse, substance misuse, criminal justice, job centres and providers of so called 'alternative provision'. An essential key to success highlighted by this team was the knowledge base they developed and shared with the schools. A secure database was established with protocols so that these support workers could pool information with regard to families they were working with. This was considered essential knowledge which helped the Assistant Principal and the team understand where the child or children were positioned in terms of their family and broader community relationships. The team did not, as many professionals have to do, learn or rediscover vital information that helped them understand the child's position as they had what they called 'essential information at hand'. Through this the consortia of schools became trusted partners with wider community services holding a unique set of data which

served to support children with their education but also provided the ability to better work on areas such as safeguarding children or where there may be local issues such as anti-social behaviour. The Assistant Principal said this positioned the consortia of schools 'in an early intervention and prevention context' as opposed to 'picking up the pieces when things had gone wrong'. Holding this deep knowledge of families was essential to the team's success and represented a much wider bank of knowledge than schools maintain outside of their SEND provision.

### *3. Schools have the capacity to offer more than Education in its Narrower Sense (ENS)*

Despite government ministers in 2010 imposing an agenda of ENS upon all English schools, this consortia selected a twin track approach. While taking on the narrower but vital agenda of teaching in the classroom a second pronged attack on raising standards was opened up via adopting a position that reflects Education in its Broader Sense (EBS) through developing the home- school relationship.

Throughout the later part of the previous decade some schools had responded to Labour's request to become hubs of community services (DCSF, 2008) or EBS. As a result this consortia had started work on before and after school clubs and similar activities, but the answer for the call for improved standards caused the leaders of these schools to not just rely on ministers' judgements that it is all about the classroom, but they made a conscious decision to use their budgets to employ a comprehensive support team that they felt was essential to improving children's achievement. Through this they were able to improve SATs results and maintain and improve Ofsted judgements alongside broader improved outcomes by engaging with families. Other key measures such as attendance and behaviour improved greatly. The schools also provided a place, previously considered alien to a significant proportion of parents, where families could go for help and advice as the impact of austerity grew. These schools became 'a place where problems could be discussed and positive support provided at a time when many services were retracting' due to LA budget reductions in funding. The schools became respected by other services in the area that understood these schools had a deep, broad and up to date knowledge of their pupils which placed them central to key roles in their communities such as safeguarding children, child criminal exploitation, and community development. They were linking with parents to improve their skills and open up opportunities for further education or employment. For those newly settle in England language support was provided, also help for parents to understand the nature of English schooling. Through a relatively small allocation of school budgets to develop the support team they were demonstrating that schools in disadvantaged communities have the capacity to do much more than teach children.

## The role of schooling and the potential for much more

This research identifies a rift between the policy direction set by ministers and Whitehall officials and those accountable for the delivery of primary and secondary schooling in impoverished communities. Deeper investigation of contemporary schooling policy suggests that education is under siege from the growth of centralised bureaucratic control of Whitehall (Mongon and Leadbeater, 2012). When Gove launched the opportunity for ‘outstanding schools’ through the Academies Act 2010 to transfer from LA to the control of DfE this marked an enormous shift towards centralisation (Ball, 2013). While the political rhetoric of the time was of parents taking control of local schools (HM Government, 2010) through Free Schools, which all academies are, the reality was the reverse in terms of local people and their relationship with their local school. The accent of these newly converted schools to academy status concerned further improving of the quality of teaching, however these schools that converted by proxy left local accountability behind and were usually outstanding schools in their own right (Ball, 2017). These academies joined together to form Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) which in effect are self governing bodies with no accountability to communities or local democracy (Fielding and Moss, 2011). By the end of the decade over half the pupils in English state funded schools were learning in either academies or free schools (DfE, 2019) with the management through Multi-Academy Trusts and these organisations acting rather like head offices distantly located away from parents and the communities they are serving.

Deeper investigation of contemporary schooling policy suggests that education is under siege from the growth of centralised bureaucratic control of Whitehall.

This research illustrates that despite the trajectory towards centralisation and a remoteness from community links based upon interschool competition, these leaders including those running academies came together to share a cross school team that engaged with communities. The support team represented a broader everyday approach to learning and family lives, one which reflected that of social pedagogical stance where care and education meet (Petrie et al, 2006). The leaders of the consortia through working across the boundaries of care and education

created a deep understanding of their pupil's lives. Martin (2016) refers to this as a form of mutual professionalism which brings together expertise from a range of professional disciplines and joins their understandings of the child in a holistic way as opposed to the partial understandings described by Anning et al. (2006) and Frost and Robinson (2004). Gove's focus upon the classroom teaching replicates Anning's critique, a partial understanding of the child in this case purely set within the context of the classroom, reflecting ENS.

Through viewing the child through a multi-professional holistic lens we are able to reverse professional training that is usually silo orientated in nature, and when combined with the impact of neoliberal notions of competition between services (Apple, 2000) contributes to the forming of a partial view of children or as Martin (2019) describes this as a fragmented understanding of childhood. By reversing these silo pressures on professionals, we can open a door to an understanding of childhood that challenges us, but also challenges ministers' and Whitehall officials' dictates of the last decade. Further to this we also open an understanding of what schools could 'do' in relation to a broader community role. Mongon and Leadbeater (2012) refer to this as 'Public Value' in that the school sited within the community can act as a much more valued asset than a school purely focused upon teaching. Taking this concept of Public Value further and combining it with a mutual multi-professional approach to children and their families provides a structure to support community change, build aspirations and confidence and set within the past decade, 'the austerity experience', a vehicle that could offer a lifeline to suffering communities. Fielding and Moss (2011) refer to this as an essential of schooling, where education is owned by the community and opens possibilities beyond the simplistic neoliberal aspirations of ministers of the past decade. These schools, through their work as a local consortia with mutual interests instead of that of competition, have opened up the promise of much more than improving teaching through classroom practice at a time when poverty is on the rise and community aspirations falling (Alston, 2018).

## Conclusion

In 2010 the national education experts directed schools to bring about improved standards via striving for excellent classroom teaching and broader issues associated with the social positioning of pupils were at least a distraction and at best an excuse for poor performance. This consortia of schools made a conscious decision that they needed to improve teaching within the classroom but they also had to engage with a broader understanding of where their pupils were positioned. To improve individual pupil attainment meant they had to understand the wider child's lived experience and respond to the issues outside the classroom which school leaders understand impacted upon learning. Through doing this they improved attainment, despite ministers and organisation such as Ofsted disregarding this aspect of their work. They improved standards during a decade

where many schools judgements fell backwards leaving Wilshaw, Ofsted's Chief Inspector, in 2016 highlighting issues of low attainment in poor communities . This raises the question who is best placed to decide how to improve school performance? Is it Whitehall officials or ministers or are those working within communities that are better placed to make that decision? A second and extremely important question raised through this research concerns the nature and purpose of the English schooling. Is it purely about the quality of teaching only or could our schools at a time when child poverty and in work poverty is rising offer much more? This research suggests the latter; let's learn from those working on the ground.

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