Disenfranchised boys’ perspectives on their urban schooling experience

Amanda Nuttall
Institute of Childhood and Education, Leeds Trinity University
Disenfranchised boys’ perspectives on their urban schooling experience

Two pieces of practitioner enquiry work:

1. Practitioner enquiry to explore the perspectives of disadvantaged WB boys on their urban schooling experience (Nuttall and Doherty, 2014)

2. Practitioner enquiry into the use of ‘Storyline’ in the case-study urban primary school (Nuttall, 2016)


Outline of this presentation

1. The policy context and ‘official’ perspectives on poverty.
2. Lived realities in a case-study urban primary school.
3. The ‘curriculum challenge’ for teachers and pupils.
The policy context: ‘official’ perspectives on poverty

Teachers’ talk of the effects of poverty is often seen as ‘making excuses’:

• Ed Balls (2009) ‘no excuses’;
• Michael Wilshaw (2013) concern lies not with material poverty but the poverty of expectation and aspiration;
• Nick Hudson (2013) ‘poverty of expectation’ in Yorkshire and North-East leading to lower attainment;
• Nicky Morgan (2015) what is needed is more rigorous and robust assessment in schools.

Use of ‘like’ schools based on proxy indicators (FSM, SEN, BME, etc.) fails to take into account complexities of historical, cultural, geographical and economic context. Comparisons used to drive the ‘no excuses’ culture.

**Ball (1997) problem in the school and in the teacher, but never in the policy.**
Deficit narratives dominate

- Poverty and inequality transmitted inter-generationally in poor parenting and low aspirations (Walkerdine, 2016; Wrigley, 2016)
- Teachers and school heads typically lack critical perspective on social class and poverty (Lupton and Thrupp, 2013; Gorski, 2012)
- Social inequality can be eliminated through educational interventions alone (Ellis et al., 2016)
Counter-narratives

School context matters, as do school management structures, policy directions, teachers’ understandings, and wider social policies which have a significant effect on families’ wealth and well-being (Walkerdine and Jiminz, 2012; Cooper and Stewart, 2013; Lupton and Thomson, 2014).

Building a counter-narrative relies on providing a platform to share the consequences of dominant deficit discourses as experienced by teachers, students and their families (Beckett, 2014; 2016; Nuttall and Doherty, 2014).
The realities in school
Kirby and Cullinane (2016) for Sutton Trust: white British disadvantaged boys continue to be lowest attainers at age 16. Suggested further targeted academic intervention programme and increase in ‘highly-qualified’ teachers in urban schools.

Ofsted (2013): the most important interventions include: “rigorous monitoring of data and its effective use in feedback, planning, support and intervention; ensuring access to the highest quality teaching; providing strong and visionary leadership; working with pupils and parents to increase engagement and raise expectations.”
Lived realities

An enquiry into the perspectives of a group of disadvantaged white British boys and their teachers. Building a contextualised understanding of the sample group was revealing:

- Three experienced violence in the home
- Three displayed aggressive behaviour within the home
- Three experienced house moves
- All had unstable family networks
- Two experienced significant gaps in early education
- All had been referred for counselling/emotional support
Yes, school just ruins my life... it takes away 16% of your life...”

“What’s the point of reading tests? ‘Cos for my job what I want to do I don’t need to be able to read at all.”

“Science... what’s the point? You just listen to the teacher and Mr L goes on and on in a boring voice.”

“I don’t like RE... Why do we have to learn it?”
The curriculum challenge

“Doing all this stuff is great, the assemblies and posters and stuff, but I worry about the books . . . what if we get moderated [for writing]? There’s got to be so much evidence . . .” Year 2 teacher

“. . . the whole of Year 6 really is geared up towards the SATS test isn’t it? . . . There’s the pressure on the teachers of the school and you want them to do well, but actually are they learning anything whilst you’re trying to prepare them for that test? Are they learning the right things in the right way all the time?” Year 6 teacher

“... in my class this year... we’ve talked about things that’s got nothing to do with what I’ve planned to, you know what we’re learning about or anything, but they’ve wanted to find out about birds, was one of the things, but the only time we’ve had to do that is you know a quick chat about it before register on an afternoon because we decided every afternoon to see if we could name as many birds... but... they want to find out more about that but when do you do it, you know, with the curriculum as it is...” Year 1 teacher
“We used to nurture them [pupils], but they couldn’t read and write. So now we teach them to read and write; they get their loving nurture when we say, ‘Come and sit and read with me’.”

School Head
Where next?

The boys

- All pupils need to become protagonists of their own education within a school ethos that restores value to their lived experiences and cultures.

The school

- Teachers should be supported to develop a research perspective that points towards a more nuanced, contextual understanding of students in poverty and their families.

Policy

- Policy needs to take account of teachers’ research-informed practice in order to move in radically different directions and to think beyond schools alone.