DOING THE RIGHT THING? AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF, AND ETHICAL RESPONSE TO, 'DISADVANTAGE' BY SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

by

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ABSTRACT

This study problematises the categorisation of students eligible for free school meals as 'disadvantaged' via the mechanism of the Pupil Premium grant in English schools. Whilst previous research has often focused on the effectiveness of different strategies to remediate identified deficits in this group of students, here the focus is turned back on the practices of schooling. A poststructuralist discourse analysis approach has been used to develop understanding of how teachers perceived the 'disadvantage' of their students, and how this construction of 'disadvantage' shaped their responses to the students.

Online interviews were carried out with 22 subject teachers in five secondary schools. Four types of self-attributed teacher 'work' were identified within the data analysis: 'seeing', 'sorting', 'saving', and 'changing' work. These teacher constructions and responses were analysed with reference to a range of powerful deficit discourses of 'disadvantage' within a performative schooling system. The teachers were found to be both subject to, and implicated in, perpetuating such discourses, but also at times resisting them.

Ideas from Derrida and Levinas were used to explore the tensions and contradictions experienced by these teachers in trying to 'do the right thing' in response to the perceived needs of their students. The teachers were found to be performing ethical work in navigating the aporia generated in the everyday life of the classroom. The analysis of teachers' responses to these aporia used Levinas's notion of 'absolute alterity' to illuminate the importance of avoiding totalising discourses in the pursuit of more just and equitable practice in schools.

It is suggested that whilst accountability for the educational success of students from a lower socio-economic background is vital in the pursuit of equity, mirroring statistical categories of difference in classroom practice can have negative unintended consequences. There were clear implications for teacher education in addressing the persistent deficit discourses of 'disadvantage' found in schools, particularly in relation to social class. An open responsiveness to the individuality of each student was identified as a necessary starting place in a move towards social justice in schools.

DEDICATION

In loving memory of my parents, Anthony and Kathleen Herbert,

who taught me to try to do the right thing.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

In February 2024 I visited an exhibition of the work of the visual artist Barbara Kruger. Kruger's practice is predominantly text-based and in one work she had annotated a piece of writing with these words:

> *Categories are useful tools that can parse the complexity and thickness of the world. But they are also canny devices that feed us that world in increments, in spoonfuls and slices that make for both understanding and misunderstanding. They are forensics that might allow us to (mis)perceive wholeness* (Kruger, 2024).

In many ways this quotation seemed to sum up my approach to the subject of 'disadvantaged' students in this thesis. Within the study I wish to highlight the ways in which the categorisation of a group of students can be simultaneously a useful tool to 'parse complexity' but can also lead to misunderstanding and a misperception of wholeness.

Aims and objectives and research question

The aim of this study is twofold: to explore the construction of 'disadvantage' by teachers within five English state-maintained secondary schools and to consider the nature of these teachers' responses to their 'disadvantaged' students. A key focus of the study is to investigate the uneasy relationship between the official designation of 'disadvantaged' to those students eligible for free school meals and other understandings of the term. It is currently the case that socio-economic background remains the strongest predictor of academic attainment in the English school system (Francis *et al*., 2017; Early *et al*., 2020; Von Stumm *et al.,* 2022; Kaye, 2024) and for that reason the achievement of 'disadvantaged'

students remains high, at least ostensibly, on the agenda of government and in English schools. In the broadest terms, my objective is to cast light on how the construction and performance of 'disadvantage' in schools can be seen to advance or restrict the development of social justice and equity in our current educational system.

Therefore, my research question is:

How is 'disadvantage' constructed by teachers in secondary schools, and how do they respond to their construction of 'disadvantage'?

My focus is on the experience of teachers and how they are involved in the performance of 'disadvantage', i.e. what happens in schools in relation to the students designated as 'disadvantaged'. Whilst there is an on-going drive to research the effectiveness of specific approaches or interventions aimed at 'closing the gap' between 'disadvantaged' students and their peers, led by the Education Endowment Fund (EEF), there is a dearth of research which asks subject teachers in secondary schools directly about their experiences in the classroom with these students. In this study I aim to contribute to filling this gap in empirical evidence, with the purpose of understanding what role teachers might play in the development of more just and equitable outcomes for these students. By questioning teachers about what they do at an everyday level, my aim is to understand how they construct their idea of 'disadvantage' in interaction with a range of powerful discourses within which they operate. Through my research I am trying to unpick some of those discourses and consider how they operate on and through teachers in schools in their responses to their students. Part of this process involves trying to understand to what extent teachers feel that they can respond to the perceived needs of students as they would wish. By exploring this area, I hope to challenge what seems to be a somewhat careless use of the word 'disadvantaged' in schools

and policy documents. Through my research I aim to encourage teachers in schools to continue to reflect on their own practice and also, importantly, to highlight to others the complex ethical work in which teachers are engaged in their day-to-day practice.

To set the scene for this study, it is necessary to consider first the context in which a specific group of students in English schools began to be described at national policy level as 'disadvantaged'. This requires an overview of recent educational history relating to the introduction of the 'Pupil Premium' into schools.

'Word mongering' - 'That's a funny word to use'

It might reasonably be expected that a study focused on the 'disadvantaged' would begin with a definition of that word. An ordinary member of the public is likely to hold an understanding of the word similar to that offered within a dictionary definition such as 'not having the standard of living conditions, education, etc. that most people have' (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2024). However, whilst this offers a simple and apparently transparent description, it is of limited use for this study, which seeks to problematise the word as it is currently used in schools in the English educational system. Whilst 'disadvantaged' has the meaning in the English language given above, it has also acquired a specific technical meaning in schools in recent years, where it is most often used as a synonym to describe students eligible for the 'Pupil Premium' payment. Over time, whilst the term 'PP students' has also remained in use in schools, it has become typical to refer to this group of students as 'disadvantaged'.

This word 'disadvantaged' is thus used very commonly in schools, but there appears to be limited focused academic reflection on the meanings it holds for those who use it. An

exception can be found in an early review of the use of the Pupil Premium by Carpenter *et al.* (2013) that acknowledged that school staff often had different ideas about who the additional funds should be spent on. In the Irish context, therefore not related specifically to the Pupil Premium initiative, Tormey (2010) discusses the concept of 'educational disadvantage' and argues that the 'output-led' model of discussing the notion of 'disadvantage' obscures the fact that the idea itself is open to contestation. However, in this country, whilst there is clarity provided by government about the technical meaning of 'disadvantaged' in terms of eligibility for Pupil Premium, I have seen little explicit discussion in relation to this policy of the effects of the associations of the word 'disadvantaged' on teachers. A space has thus been created which I will argue can easily be filled with assumptions and stereotypes. I will suggest in this study that there has been a move to find solutions for the 'problem' of 'disadvantage' without sufficient time or attention being spent on what it is understood to be and how this might influence teachers' responses to their students. There is also a lack of considered reflection of what might constitute an ethical response to 'disadvantage'. Whilst it is understandable that such questions become overlooked in the melee of school life, there is a responsibility for those of us who stand outside the fray to consider more deeply what is going on and try to shine some helpful light upon it. In the words of Apple (2003, p.285), there is no place in education for standing on the balcony.

In 'Confabulations' (2016) John Berger discusses how a word can become separated from its meaning:

> *Words, terms, phrases can be separated from the creature of their language and used as mere labels. They then become inert and empty. The repetitive use of acronyms is a*

> *simple example of this. Most mainstream political discourse today is composed of words which, separated from any creature of language, are inert and dead. And such dead 'word mongering' wipes out memory and breeds a ruthless complacency* (Berger, 2016, p.7).

In this thesis I argue that some 'word mongering' has taken place in which the words 'disadvantage(d)', and also the acronym 'PP students', have become 'inert and empty' within schools, used as a label which can indeed breed a 'ruthless complacency' in which school staff accept and use this label without thought. But I also argue that at the same time the word 'disadvantaged' is not entirely inert and dead but has instead acquired a kind of zombie half-life (c.f. Reay, 2006), in which it continues to have powerful effects in schools, some of which are negative.

One of the seeds of this research was sown as I sat in a governors' meeting in the large urban secondary school which my children attended. A senior teacher was explaining the measures that the school had put in place to address the needs of their 'disadvantaged' students. After a couple of minutes, one of my fellow governors interrupted the speaker very politely and asked who she was referring to when she said 'the disadvantaged students'. The teacher explained that these were the students who were eligible for free school meals and therefore triggered the Pupil Premium payment to the school. As a governing body, we had been given several presentations over the preceding years about these 'PP students', who made up a high percentage of the school population. The teacher clarified that the terminology used in school to describe these students was no longer 'Pupil Premium' students, but rather, following the practice of the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) in their School Inspection Handbook in 2015 'disadvantaged' students was now the preferred term. It is a

common phenomenon in schools that where OfSTED leads, then schools tend to follow. The governor's response to this explanation was: 'Disadvantaged, that's a funny word to use'. His disquiet reflected my own response, and I began to think about the use of this 'funny word' in schools and what kind of effects it might have on the thinking of teachers. The belief that I held, influenced by Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis approach, was that language is never neutral (Fairclough, 2013). Here was an example of practice in schools where it felt important to adopt a critical approach rather than to simply accept and replicate the taken for granted.

In common parlance, the word 'disadvantaged' has a range of associations, all with a negative flavour. The nature of the word is that it is the antonym of 'advantaged', the negative 'dis' shadow of something desirable. A click on Microsoft Word offers a list of synonyms beginning with 'deprived, underprivileged, depressed, needy, destitute'. Whilst the term 'disadvantaged' could be explained in the school context to be attached to an objective measure of material poverty, I felt that my fellow governor's comment hinted at the troubled history within education of perceived difference, of negative stereotypes of certain groups of students and the effects of such stereotyping. It seemed to me that 'disadvantaged' had a slippery and shape-shifting quality, which encompassed potentially within its sphere of reference aspects of social class, cultural behaviours, additional learning needs, and a hearty dose of judgement. I was not aware of a discussion either in schools or in the academic literature about the way in which this word was being used, but it seemed to me to be worthy of further study.

A note about language

Because the purpose of this study is to interrogate the understandings and the use of the words 'disadvantage/disadvantaged' and their effects, I have chosen to use inverted commas around the words in my writing. This is to indicate that whilst they may be used often in a taken-for-granted way within school settings, I am choosing to step back from this discourse and consider their meanings and effects critically. The questions that I put to my interview participants used the language of 'disadvantage', but in analysing the responses I was always aware of the doubleness of the work that this word was doing. Teachers were constantly working with this doubleness. Some of the time when they spoke to me, they were referring to the students eligible for Pupil Premium, while at other times they were working within their own definitions of 'disadvantage'. The identification of this lack of clarity in the messy reality of practice is fundamental to the purposes of this research.

The context

The Pupil Premium – history and policy framework

Below I provide a brief summary of the history of the introduction of the Pupil Premium and the policy framework that has developed around it. The motivations of government are interpreted in the existing literature in different ways, with some commentators accepting the overt commitment to improving social justice, and others challenging such rhetoric. Michael Gove's stated aim, as Secretary of State for Education, was to bring an end to 'an accepted correlation between wealth and achievement at school; the soft bigotry of low expectations' (DfE, 2010). Therefore, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition

administration that came to power in the United Kingdom in 2010 introduced the Pupil Premium in 2011 with the express aim of improving outcomes for students from a lower socio-economic background in state-funded schools. The introduction of the policy borrowed heavily from a long-established discourse of social mobility via education as a route to success in life for students from a 'disadvantaged' background that has been prevalent since the 1944 Education Act (Goldthorpe, 2016).

The Labour administration in office from 1997 to 2010 had set up a Social Mobility Commission as part of its declared aim of creating a fairer society through 'education, education, education' (Blair, 1997). A discourse of raising standards was aligned with a wider educational agenda of competition and accountability exemplified in the attention given to the annual publication of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data, an international league table of school performance in Mathematics, Science and Reading. Yet, despite this aspiration, the evidence by the end of the Labour administration in 2010 from Key Stage 2 Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) and General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results was that there remained a significant gap in attainment between students from poorer families and their peers. The introduction of a Pupil Premium payment into schools was thus a flagship policy of the Liberal Democrat party, at that time a coalition partner in government, which was motivated by a stated desire to 'help close the unacceptable gap between the life chances of advantaged and disadvantaged children' (Laws, 2010). At the beginning, there was a suggestion also that the increased funding that was attached to these students would act as an incentive to schools classed as 'good' by the national inspection body to take more 'disadvantaged' students and thus help to support a more balanced intake of students across schools (Treasury, 2010), but there is currently

inconclusive evidence of this effect (Gorard *et al.*, 2019; Morris and Dobson, 2021). The means chosen for demonstrating the desired improved outcomes was a reduction in the 'attainment gap' at statutory assessment points at Key Stage 2 and at GCSE between 'disadvantaged' students and their peers (Department for Education, 2015).

Therefore, beginning in the school year 2011-12, schools in England and Wales were allocated an additional payment for each student who was eligible for free school meals based on their low level of family income, and the policy has continued since. The measure currently includes any student who has been eligible for free school meals in the last six years (the FSM Ever 6 criterion). The definition of 'disadvantaged' also covers students who are, or have been, in the care of the local authority (Looked After Children (LAC)). In the first year, the payment was set at £488 per student. The amount allocated to Pupil Premium has risen over the years and the funding for secondary school students in Years 7-11 in 2024-25 is £1050 per student (or £2570 for LAC). The percentage of students classified as eligible for the Pupil Premium varies, of course, from school to school, however the national average percentage of Pupil Premium students in 2024 is 24.6%. At the time the data for this study were generated, in 2021, the national average percentage was 20.8%. Whilst there have previously been additional funds allocated to schools based on demographic factors, the high-profile political nature of the introduction of the Pupil Premium has raised the profile of 'disadvantage' in schools as well as activating systems of accountability, both to governing bodies and also to the national school inspection body, OfSTED.

The ‘attainment gap’

The aim of the payment of the Pupil Premium has been couched in the language of ‘closing the gap’ between the attainment of students from lower income families and their peers. However, although overall attainment in schools has risen, the statistics show that despite the payment of this money to schools - £2.9 billion in 2023-24, - the gap (measured nationally) in English and Maths at GCSE stayed very similar over the period between 2010 and 2021. It was 27.4 percentage points in 2010 and 27.5 percentage points in 2021 (DfE, 2022). The Sutton Trust - an organisation established to increase social mobility for ‘disadvantaged’ students - in an election briefing in February 2024 titled ‘Closing the Attainment Gap’, frames the impact of the Pupil Premium positively. The report points to an initial positive effect in the early years following its introduction, whilst acknowledging that this progress had ‘stalled’ (Sutton Trust, p.1) even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The report goes on to claim, however, that the pandemic has ‘wiped out 10 years of progress’ (Sutton Trust, p.1), suggesting that students’ external circumstances bear all the responsibility for the attainment gap. Whilst there is a growing evidence base that the educational progress of many children from poorer families was disproportionately negatively affected by the pandemic (Anders *et al.*, 2021; Blundell *et al.,* 2021; Roberts, 2023), it is important that this does not obscure or distract from the need to investigate what factors within schools rather than within students might also be implicated in this under attainment.

Monitoring of the funding – mechanisms of accountability

Having decided that the way to address the attainment gap was to provide additional funding via the Pupil Premium, the government also required mechanisms of accountability for the use of the money to be put in place. The policy discourse around PP at the time of introduction was that schools should have freedom to use the money as they saw fit, and that schools were best placed to make decisions about its use based on their own individual circumstances, and this has continued to be the narrative since (DfE, 2024). There seems here a tacit acknowledgement that there is no simple prescription that would be suitable for different school contexts. Yet in 2012, parallel to this discourse of freedom and individual judgement for school leaders, OfSTED published the findings of the first investigation into 'How schools are using the Pupil Premium funding to raise achievement for disadvantaged pupils', for which the inspectors had gathered data from interviews with school leaders. A significant finding by the inspectors was that in many schools the PP payment was being absorbed into the main school budget and should instead be 'carefully targeted at the designated children' (OfSTED, 2012, p. 6). However, the DfE policy was clear that money was not to be attached to individual children in the way that might happen, for example, with high needs funding for children with special educational needs (SEN). In its most recent guidance, the DfE underlines again that:

> *Pupil premium is not a personal budget for individual pupils and schools do not have to spend pupil premium so that it solely benefits pupils who meet the funding criteria. Pupil premium can be used to support other pupils with identified needs, or used for whole class interventions that will benefit all pupils* (DfE, 2024b).

Whilst there is not a fundamental contradiction between these two positions, i.e. that PP is not a personal budget and that it nevertheless needs to be targeted to designated children, it does nevertheless create some grey and confused areas which will be explored further in this thesis.

A recommendation was also made by the inspectors in 2012 that schools 'should be able to identify clearly how the money is being spent' (OfSTED, 2012, p. 6), highlighting the issue of accountability. It should be borne in mind that the introduction of the PP took place in an environment of economic 'austerity' where school budgets were under pressure (Lupton and Thomson, 2015, p.11), and this context may well have contributed to decisions about how the funding should be used. It is important for the purposes of this thesis that the complicated nature of the pressures of accountability under which school leaders and teachers are working, which include this financial context, are taken into account.

The apparatus that surrounds the PP funding has grown considerably since its introduction in 2011. A significant part of this apparatus is the Education Endowment Fund (EEF), founded in 2011 by the Sutton Trust, with a large initial funding grant from the DfE. The EEF styles itself as 'an independent charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement' (EEF, 2024) and is the source that schools are directed to by the DfE for everything related to PP/ 'disadvantaged' students. It aims to achieve its purpose primarily by generating a robust evidence base for strategies that lead to higher educational attainment for 'disadvantaged' students (EEF, 2024). It also provides a bank of resources, including access to a summary of its evidence base, that supports school leaders in developing their approach to securing improved attainment and thereby closing the gap.

Whilst there has always been a requirement on schools to be able to show the impact of PP funding in the interests of accountability for public funds, the systems for doing so have become increasingly regulated since 2011. Schools are required to produce a PP strategy document demonstrating how the money is being used, which should be publicly available on their school website. Since September 2021 it has been mandatory to use the DfE 'strategy statement' template to present this information. An increasing number of resources have been produced by the EEF to guide schools in the content as well as the format of these reports. Despite the EEF being an independent charity, it is inextricably connected with the DfE, via embedded electronic links in DfE PP documents, which lead the reader through a breadcrumb trail of guidance for school leaders, evidence summaries and exemplar strategy statements to the required templates, and schools are explicitly 'encouraged' to use these resources in developing their PP strategies (DfE, 2024b, p.3). In the 2024 EEF guidance document school leaders are told that they can select from 'within the framework set out on the menu' approved within the EEF evidence summary. Whilst this 'menu' of approaches is broad, ranging from 'Developing high-quality teaching, assessment and a broad and balanced, knowledge-based curriculum' to 'Supporting pupils' social, emotional and behavioural needs' (DfE, 2024b, p.13), there is a firm warning that evaluation of success must be only be based on 'outcomes' for students, which must not be 'vague' or based on 'the perceptions of those delivering the activity' (DfE, 2024b, p.12). Whilst the focus on outcomes for students is admirable, the creation of this apparatus is not guaranteed to solve the problem of the attainment gap. It appears to be an attempt to tame the complex and multi-faceted issue of 'disadvantage', and in this thesis I will suggest that the creation of this additional layer of accountability and surveillance for school leaders does not

necessarily have the intended consequences and may in fact contribute towards unforeseen and undesirable effects.

The usual framings of the issue and what my research adds

The most recent measures of attainment at GCSE show that post-pandemic the attainment gap has widened and is now at its highest level since 2011 (DfE, 2024a). Unsurprisingly, therefore, the main focus of much research on 'disadvantage' as framed by the Pupil Premium discourse is on how schools can compensate for out of school factors. There are studies that identify the deficits of 'disadvantaged' students and suggest which are most important in terms of school performance. There are studies of interventions to mitigate the effects of 'disadvantage' and studies that seek to explain why students present with these deficits. However, my research is part of a broader field of enquiry that covers a range of approaches to the subject area, including work that critiques the representation of 'vulnerable' or 'marginalised' groups and that seeks to explain why, for example, working-class students or those from an ethnic minority background underperform in school. In contrast to discourses that locate the problem of 'disadvantage' in students and their families, some researchers have identified the problem as located in broader structural issues (Raffo *et al.*, 2009; MacDonald *et al.*, 2020; Gewirtz *et al.*, 2021; Gazeley, 2024; Parrish, 2024). Such analyses focus on the way in which political imperatives dictate the system of schooling and constructions of educational success in this country. In relation to 'disadvantaged' students, it is argued by such authors that this macro educational

environment then leads to a reductive approach to measurement of the impact of the Pupil Premium (Craske, 2018; Piattoeva and Boden, 2020; Gazeley, 2024).

Elliot-Major and Briant (2022), however, argue the case for moving beyond the simple binary of explanations which frame the issue *either* in terms of structural political and societal factors *or* in apolitical 'school effectiveness' terms, suggesting that there is evidence to support the influence of both. In my research I aim to do something that complements the existing scholarship, working in a nuanced space between structural and school-effectiveness analyses. My research is not about denying that factors outside school are important influences on students' academic progress or that some pedagogical approaches are more effective than others. However, to focus solely on these areas is potentially to miss the significance of what happens specifically in the interactions between teachers and students. So, my aim in this study is to see what can be found by turning the spotlight back on the teachers and to generate some empirical evidence about what they think and do in response to the 'disadvantaged' students that they find in front of them in their classrooms.

Considering the 'noise'

In the early days of researching the topic of 'disadvantage', I inevitably came across the work of Stephen Gorard who has researched and written extensively in this area. In a book written in the early days of the Pupil Premium in 2013 Gorard is critical of the quality of some of the research that has been conducted around 'disadvantage' in schools, particularly in relation to the effectiveness of different interventions to reduce the attainment gap. As a champion of rigorous randomised controlled trials (RCTs), Gorard urges researchers to be aware of the distracting 'noise' (2013, p.74) that sometimes confounds research. Whilst I

agree with Gorard that rigour is of great importance in RCTs, I am also convinced that in the type of research that I am pursuing the metaphor of listening to the noise is a useful one. An example of what I mean by the noise would be the discourse of aspiration which can be seen reflected at the school level in the well-meaning inspirational posters to be found on the walls of schools, suggesting a message of inspiration leading to aspiration leading to educational success. Taking a similarly critical approach, Burn *et al.*(2016, p.437) question the reliance on the EEF Toolkit as the main means of evaluating the effects of the Pupil Premium:

> *Little attention tended to be paid to the ways in which the Toolkit's exclusive reliance on quantitative evidence (drawn from randomised control trials and large-scale experiments) might have constrained the kinds of insight that it could provide.*

In my view the investigation of a discourse such as 'aspiration' is worthwhile because it can offer a different kind of insight into some of the less scrutinised effects of the Pupil Premium.

What are the effects of identifying difference in this way?

Whilst the usage of the specific word 'disadvantaged' was a trigger to thinking about the issue and an important element to consider on its own, this focus on language use was not my only concern. The examination of the construction of 'disadvantage' was always part for me of a larger aim to think about the effects of categorisation in the context of trying to develop more socially just and inclusive schools. I felt it was important to explore the effects of singling out a group of students and to try to analyse what happens in a school when a choice is made to identify a certain kind of difference in this way.

Schools are places of categorisation in which students are continually sorted and tracked. The common assumption of many in schools appears to be that this is a good thing. In the words of Kruger quoted at the start of this thesis, this is an example of the sorting (in this case, of students) into 'spoonfuls and slices' that 'parse the complexity and thickness of the world'. The sorting into categories that takes place is done with the aim of highlighting the needs of students in order to make the best provision for them and thereby to enable the identified groups to make the best possible progress. When justified in this way categories are indeed useful tools. However, there is little clear evidence that the current practice is working well for 'disadvantaged' students. There are several arguments that can be made about the reasons for this lack of progress. As discussed earlier, the Sutton Trust (2024) points the finger at several factors including the cost-of-living crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, reduced school funding and the rise of private tutoring. This analysis may or may not be correct, but my focus is different. I have chosen to address the issue from a different angle, questioning instead whether or how this practice of identifying 'disadvantaged' students is implicated in advancing justice and equity for students in schools.

The introduction of the PP policy begs the question of how the government thought that the payment of an additional amount of money to schools would enable schools to close the attainment gap. The assumption within the Pupil Premium policy seems to be that there exists something that money can buy that would have this effect. In an under-resourced school system, there is always a way to spend more money in a way that seems worthwhile. But perhaps this context has clouded the issue of principle, i.e. whether identifying categories of students and allocating funds on this basis might have consequences that are not positive in the search for justice for all students. Perhaps because of my own

professional history, I see how a parallel can be drawn between approaches to SEN and 'disadvantage' here. The SEN/D Code of Practice, in its definition of 'special educational needs' says that the nature of students with SEN is that they need provision that is 'additional to' and 'different from' that provided for the majority of their peers (DfE and DoH, 2015, para. 6.15, p.94). The difference of these students is thus established with the authority of statutory guidance, but nevertheless the conclusion that what they require is provision that is additional and different to their peers has been hotly debated. For students classed as 'disadvantaged', all they have in common with other students so designated is a family income lower than a given number. However, unlike in the field of SEN/D, there do not seem to be many voices questioning whether using this measure of difference as the foundation for elements of distinct provision is a good thing.

My approach to the research

It is important therefore to understand what teachers think is happening when they participate in the systems that are in place in their schools in relation to 'disadvantage', and this is what I seek to do in this study. I wanted to talk to teachers because they are the ones who are involved and implicated at the everyday level. They did not create the systems, but they implement them and thus enact policy. Craske describes the Pupil Premium in a way that felt apt to me, as:

> *a highly moralised policy by which teachers are judged within a tight performance system: where the twin peaks of equity and economic efficiency are deployed within a specific programme for dealing with social justice issues in neoliberalised systems.* (Craske, 2018, p.527).

I wanted to know what teachers thought and felt about working within this system. Did they think or feel anything? From my perspective as an interested observer, not entirely outside or inside, it seemed like something important was being done in schools in the name of promoting social justice and I wanted to know how this was playing out in practice.

My research question, therefore, focuses on the 'performance' of disadvantage, through teachers' construction of and response to it, in a small selection of secondary schools within my local area. I generated data by conducting semi-structured interviews with 22 subject teachers and PP Leads across five schools. I analysed the data using what I would describe as a broadly poststructural approach. My observation is that there has been much interesting work done on policy analysis using a poststructuralist approach, but there are fewer examples which start with teachers' accounts of what is happening in their classrooms. Whilst understanding the policy framework around 'disadvantaged' students is an important aspect of considering teachers' construction and response to the subject, I wished to begin with practice rather than policy. In this thesis I have used insights from Jacques Derrida and Emanuel Levinas to consider in particular the ethical aspect of the position in which teachers found themselves operating in relation to Craske's 'twin peaks of equity and economic efficiency' (2018, p.527) quoted above. I will discuss in greater detail the way in which I was drawn to a poststructural approach, and judged it to be appropriate for my purposes, in the Methodology chapter. However, by way of introduction, I would say that it was the potential of Derrida's idea of the 'aporia' to explore the tension and contradiction held within the everyday decision making of the classroom that led me to use this theory. And despite holding a fundamentally different metaphysical position from Derrida, Levinas's ethical

insights are complementary to this discussion, as he interrogates the fundamental nature of responsibility between humans.

My positionality

My professional background is as a teacher in a variety of different contexts. I initially worked as a teacher in primary school and then as a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo). Later I became an advisory teacher with a local authority team, where my job role was to support staff in primary and secondary schools to make provision for their students with additional needs in the area of cognition and learning. I then moved to working in higher education, where I have taught on a range of programmes as part of an SEN & Inclusion team and have led a programme training specialist dyslexia teachers and assessors. During this time, I have also been a school governor with oversight of SEN/D in a large secondary school. All these experiences have contributed to my interest in trying to understand what including *all* students in a just and equitable way could look like in practice and working towards trying to achieve this vision. To work in this field is to be reminded every day of the injustice that exists and is sometimes perpetuated through the educational system. It is also to be reminded that whilst the word 'inclusion' is bandied around freely in the educational world, what that word means to the people using it can be quite varied and is often contested. Although SEN/D is my area of professional expertise, my concern about 'inclusion' in school has inevitably spilled over beyond the limits of thinking about students with learning difficulties. Whilst none of this personal history is directly concerned with dealing with the issue of 'disadvantage' in schools, it has relevance to how I have approached this study.

Firstly, it has sensitised me to how the use of language can affect how people think and behave. Secondly, I have often reflected on the potential effects when some students are identified within the school system as different from their peers. Steeped as I am in the world of SEN/D, an awareness of the social and medical models of disability (Oliver, 1983) no doubt inflects my thinking about what I see happening in schools in relation to groups of students who are identified as in some way different. It is perhaps exposure to this idea which makes me more inclined to move the focus of interest away from the students and the 'problems' that they embody and to consider critically the environment in which they find themselves. The dilemma of deciding whether it is more helpful to students to think of them as the same or different is ever-present in debates about types and forms of teaching approaches and interventions to meet the needs of those identified as having SEN/D. And thirdly, even when there is agreement about what just and equitable outcomes for all students might look like, the means of achieving these outcomes are far from being universally agreed and the practice of trying to implement what has been agreed remains a work in progress. A final note about my positionality in this research should perhaps include the information that before I became a teacher I flirted briefly with the law, qualifying as a solicitor. Whilst the law was not for me as a profession, I remain interested in the interplay between what is legal and what is just, and by attempts to codify behaviour so as to legislate for people to do the right thing.

Thesis structure

Chapter 2 is a review of literature relevant to this field, indicating how this thesis fits in relation to what has gone before and suggesting where it might have something relevant and

useful to add to existing understandings of the issues. I will consider in detail what this contribution is and how my research is in conversation with previous research (Kamler and Thomson, 2014, p.39).

Chapter 3 is the Methodology chapter in which I explain my use of a discourse analysis approach with a poststructural orientation. In this chapter I also provide a rationale for my choice of semi-structured interviews as a data-generation method, the ethical approach that was put in place and the conduct of the interviews. I then provide an explanation of my process of analysis and the chapter finishes with an introduction of the ways in which I have used theory to elucidate my findings.

Chapter 4 is the Findings chapter. The findings have been presented using an organising concept of teacher 'work'. This is a means of describing what the teachers portrayed themselves as thinking or doing in relation to their 'disadvantaged' students, i.e. the 'work' that they attributed to themselves. This chapter is organised into four sections: 'Seeing', 'Sorting', 'Saving' and 'Changing' work.

Chapter 5 is the Discussion chapter in which I explore in detail the ethical aspect of the teachers' work that became apparent during the study. Here I use ideas from Derrida on the experience of undecidability and the aporia, and from Levinas on the nature of ethical responsibility, to illuminate the findings of this research. I build on Carl Anders Säfström's exploration of Levinas's work to create a theoretical spatial model centred on a schooling system which positions teachers on the 'safe side of knowledge'. Within this model I conceptualise teachers moving in and out of aporetic spaces as they grapple with the nature of responsibility that they feel that they owe to 'disadvantaged' students and what this responsibility demands of them in practice.

Chapter 6 is the final Conclusions chapter in which I reflect on how I have been able to answer my research question. I return here to the field of literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and make a case for the contribution that my research has made to this area. I consider what the implications of this research are for the future development of a more just engagement with those students considered by the schooling system to be 'disadvantaged' and make some suggestions for future practice.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

The scope of this review

Within this review of the existing literature, I seek to establish how my study can be situated in relation to previous research and thus to signpost how my work can build usefully upon existing scholarship. I will suggest how my research continues in the tradition of certain framings of the issue of 'disadvantage', but also how it can pose questions to those framings. There is currently a fairly limited body of literature which addresses specifically the issue of 'disadvantage' as related to the Pupil Premium in schools, which is understandable in light of the relatively recent introduction of the Pupil Premium policy in 2011. Many of the studies that do exist focus on the effectiveness of school-based interventions in reducing the attainment gap between 'disadvantaged' students and their peers. As the issue of 'disadvantage' has largely been framed in this way within educational policy terms, this is unsurprising. Whilst much of the existing research focuses on academic attainment, some researchers have chosen to focus on 'softer' outcomes in relation to the use of the PP grant, such as the development of cultural and social capital through the provision of 'enrichment' activities, or the impact of initiatives such as breakfast clubs in schools. These kinds of study which measure the effects of interventions are relevant to this review only to the extent that they provide insight into how 'disadvantage' is understood in the school environment rather than in terms of their findings about comparative levels of impact of different approaches, which is not my focus.

Although the topic of 'disadvantage' in relation to Pupil Premium in schools may not have an extensive academic literature of its own, it draws on and intersects with long-established

traditions within the sociology of education which consider how issues of material poverty, social class, ethnicity, and home culture of students interact with the institutions of schooling and the content of the curriculum. When all these aspects are considered, the breadth of literature available for review is overwhelming. I have therefore chosen to set limits to this review by focusing specifically on literature which provides insight into the issue of how teachers' idea of 'disadvantage' might be constructed and lead to specific types of response, and also on how free teachers then feel to respond to the 'problem' that they identify. As part of my exploration of teacher responses to 'disadvantaged' students, I have considered literature which explores in broader terms how the enactment of educational policies may shape this response and which questions how much influence a policy such as the Pupil Premium can have on what seem to be intractable structural issues.

I have engaged with the most recent studies where current understandings are important but have not excluded anything specifically on the grounds of its age if it speaks to the subject. By its nature the review is partial, however, my aim is to build specifically upon the rationale for my study already stated in the Introduction chapter rather than to complete an exhaustive summary of everything that has already been said on the subject of 'disadvantage'.

The 'problem' of 'disadvantage': deficit discourses

In this first section of the review, I will consider some of the literature which has sought to identify and problematise the deficit discourses of 'disadvantage' which many authors have been found to be at work in schools and highlight how these are relevant to my study.

‘Compensatory education’ and the ‘sad work’ of deficit discourses

A work that continues to echo through sociological analyses of education is Bernstein’s 1970 article, in which he highlighted the long history of initiatives in education aimed at making up for the deficits of certain groups of children through ‘compensatory education’. Already at that time Bernstein considered this to have had a profound effect on the English schooling system. Bernstein found some parents to be judged by teachers as inadequate in terms of their support for schooling and the implication for him was that the education system required students to drop their working-class identity at the school gates. Even though this piece was written more than 50 years ago, Bernstein’s conclusion that it was deficit framings of working-class families that led to the justification for ‘compensatory education’ is relevant to compare with current policy framings of ‘disadvantage’ in which those working in schools are often positioned as needing to compensate for the deficits within their students (Elliot-Major and Briant, 2022). Bernstein makes a strong case for the way in which language becomes implicated in this process of ‘othering’ of children from certain backgrounds, stating:

> *Once the problem is seen even implicitly in this way, then it becomes appropriate to coin the terms ‘cultural deprivation’, ‘linguistic deprivation’, and so on. And then these labels do their own sad work* (Bernstein, 1970, p.387).

In considering the effects of this ‘sad work’, Bernstein criticises the fact that this construction of families distracts from deficiencies in the school system and focuses on the perceived deficiencies within the students’ communities (Bernstein, 1970). A telling point is made by Elliot-Major and Briant (2022, p.20) over fifty years later that much citation of the original article in subsequent discussion has misinterpreted its message by focusing on the ‘clickbait’

title, ‘Education cannot compensate for society’, which ironically then becomes used as a reinforcer of negative discourses about students and their families. In my study I aim to explore whether this ‘sad work’ of language is continuing in current-day English secondary schools.

Perceptions of families

A perceived lack of parental support for the work of schooling, either because of parents’ lack of educational or economic capital themselves or perhaps a failure to value what schools represent has been a strong theme through the literature in this area. Bernstein again offers a valuable insight into what he considered to be the attitude of teachers in his study, characterising it as: ‘If only the parents were interested in the goodies we offer’ (1970, p.387). Youdell (2006; 2011), Kitching (2011) and Kulz (2017) all offer more recent helpful analyses of the mismatch that can occur between some families and school culture. They show how certain groups of students and families, marginalised through social class or ethnicity become positioned by their difference from the more powerful dominant forces within the schooling system as deviant and problematic and thus become characterised as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ families. Some relevant insights can also be drawn here from a small-scale study conducted by Lupton and Thrupp (2013) in which they interviewed headteachers of schools identified as having a relatively ‘disadvantaged’ population compared with their local context. The authors point to the way in which deficit discourses could be detected within the headteachers’ discussion of the effects of material poverty, with a ‘subtext of parental neglect’ accompanied by the language of low parental aspiration for their children and a lack of ‘pushing’ from home (Lupton and Thrupp, 2013, p.775). The behaviours of parents seen

as deficient were contrasted by the headteachers with families who were perceived approvingly as being more 'aspirational' and thus had moved away from the area as soon as possible to seek better opportunities for their families.

This particular study is of interest for several reasons. Firstly, it illustrates the complexities of discussing 'disadvantage' as if it were a fixed, objective reality, as only one of the eight schools featured was in the lowest 25% of most socio-economically deprived schools nationally, yet all the headteachers considered themselves as working with 'disadvantaged' communities. Irrespective of the measures of deprivation used, it was the *perception* of the headteachers of the communities in which they worked that was of importance in the study and is relevant to my own research. What is also worth noting is that the researchers identify that the views of headteachers expressed in deficit-inflected language did not necessarily lead to a predictable course of action in the way that might seem inevitable. They remark, in fact, on the incoherence between action and language of the headteachers quoted. This suggests to me that a nuanced approach is imperative in exploring the relationship between the construction of disadvantage and the influence that this has on teachers' action, and an attempt to understand the complexities of this interaction is central to my study.

Linguistic deficit

One of the most persistent deficit discourses in relation to students who have been identified as 'disadvantaged' is that they are linguistically deficient (Hart and Risley, 1995; Hartas, 2011; Quigley, 2018; Sullivan *et al.*, 2021). Somewhat ironically in light of his views on deficit discourses, Bernstein's description of the 'restricted code' of working-class students

compared to the 'elaborated code' of their middle-class peers (1964, p. 57) has been cited by some researchers as evidence of linguistic deficiency. The disagreement over what Bernstein meant by what he said (e.g. Huspek, 1994; Jones, 2013; Cushing, 2024) perhaps demonstrates that the nuance of his argument has been lost in translation, but also indicates that the issue remains hotly debated. Whilst the idea of linguistic deficiency in low socio-economic communities was vigorously challenged in the 1980s and 90s in both Britain and the U.S. by writers identifying with the critical literacy movement (Brice-Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Freire and Macedo, 1987; Purcell-Gates, 1991), there has not been the same level of challenge in this country in more recent times.

It is of relevance to consider whether the lack of challenge indicates an acceptance of a linguistic deficit stereotype, typically applied to students who would fall into the 'disadvantaged' category. This certainly seemed to be the attitude of the teachers in a small-scale study which I conducted with a colleague, which considered teachers' perceptions of a language and literacy intervention programme (Doveston and Lodge, 2017). We found teachers repeatedly making comments such as 'They (the 'disadvantaged' students) simply run out of words' and 'We've got so many children who are just so short of language' (Doveston and Lodge, 2017, p.238). It is notable that in the discussion of 'disadvantage' and language deficit in both policy documents and academic research, the same piece of research by Hart and Risley, published in 1995, about the vocabulary size of young children in different social classes in the U.S., is quoted repeatedly. This happens despite its age, its American context, and the criticisms that have been made of the methodology used (Jones, 2013; Sperry *et al*., 2019; Dailey and Bergelson, 2021). Whilst the important role of teachers in developing students' vocabulary is unproblematic in principle, the potential to contribute

to a deficit discourse needs to be acknowledged, particularly where it is accompanied by a questionable positioning of literacy as a neutral practice. The practitioner advice offered by Quigley (2018) has become very popular in schools. Whilst this is admirable in highlighting the importance of language and literacy development for all students and provides usable guidance for teachers, it is in danger of falling into the trap of reinforcing deficit discourses (Cushing, 2023).

Cultural capital

Another discourse that has been powerful for some time in the discussion around raising attainment for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds is that of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). There is an extensive literature around cultural capital, which seeks both to explain the concept and to quantify the influence of such capital on young people in education, often exploring the overlap with social class (Lareau, 1987; Sullivan, 2001; Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Archer *et al.*, 2018; Stopforth and Gayle, 2022). My focus in this study is to consider how this disputed concept of cultural capital is currently understood by teachers in relation to their own school context and how their understanding is translated into their responses to their 'disadvantaged' students.

Assumptions about cultural and social capital based on social class were already found to be embedded in the beliefs of teachers about underachievement and influential on the teachers' expectations of students and the way in which they taught in a study by Dunne and Gazeley (2008). Therefore, it is interesting to consider how the emphasis that has been placed within the school system on the development of cultural capital in the years since has affected teachers. It is widely acknowledged that the OfSTED inspection framework has a

powerful influence on the behaviour of school leaders (Gillies, 2013; Gustaffson *et al.*, 2015; Perryman *et al.*, 2018), so the emphasis on the role of schools in developing students' 'cultural capital' in the OfSTED inspection framework of 2019 is highly relevant. The usage of the phrase 'cultural capital' by OfSTED was met initially with some scepticism within the professional educational sphere, encouraging the rehearsal of some familiar arguments in the media, for example about the value of the teaching 'the canon' in literature, including the 'three Shakespeare plays' recommended by the DfE (2019), and which areas of history are chosen for study (Olah, 2019; Bleimann, 2019). The reference in the framework to developing 'the cultural capital they need to succeed in life' (OfSTED, 2019, p.43), begs the question of what such capital is, and who decides (Bates and Connolly, 2022; Thomson and Hall, 2022; Stillings, 2024). This debate is rehearsed by Nightingale (2020), who argues that the use of the phrase 'cultural capital' by OfSTED is a misappropriation of Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) theory of how education reproduces inequality. Instead, Nightingale sees it as a device inextricably linked to the notion of the 'knowledge-based' curriculum encouraged by Hirsch (2016), describing the OfSTED-approved version of cultural capital as 'a mechanism for disciplining schools and teachers who fail to deliver the required curriculum' (Nightingale, 2020, p.232). His claim that this version of cultural capital 'merely recycles cultural deprivation while, somewhat slyly, insisting that all students are entitled' (2020, p.242), needs consideration in my attempt to understand how teachers construct their idea of 'disadvantaged' students and decide how they should respond to them. However, whilst there is a case to be made that this is a danger, it is interesting to see that a recent study based on interviews with teachers (Bates and Connolly, 2024) concluded that although such policy definitions of 'cultural capital' have had some effects in narrowing the curriculum, this

is not the full picture. They found evidence that teachers exercised some agency in taking a broader view of the term and took it as 'an opportunity to explore a range of curricular and extra-curricular learning' (Bates and Connolly, 2024, p. 1351).

The 'zombie stalking English schools'

There is a strong case made in the literature that deficit attitudes of school staff towards students from lower socio-economic groups are often closely associated with social class, although these attitudes are usually expressed in an implicit rather than explicit fashion. Gorski, albeit speaking from a U.S. perspective, explores how easily teachers can become 'vessels for class-based and other stereotypes' (2012, p.303) thereby contributing to a 'culture of poverty' stereotype that poor people do not value education. Although low family income, which is the measure used to officially designate 'disadvantaged' students is not always associated with lower social class, this is often the case and therefore the literature of social class is important to this study. Class-based negative narratives about children of lower socio-economic status in schools have been explored by a range of researchers (e.g. Gazeley and Dunne, 2005; Dudley-Marling, 2015; Reay, 2017; Jones, 2019), who see deficit attitudes in teachers as fundamental to the reproduction of the current underachievement by 'disadvantaged' students within schools. Whilst the policy discourse around 'disadvantaged' students may emphasise the importance that high expectations play in enabling success (Education Endowment Fund, 2024), it is apposite to consider this current discourse in the context of a long history of low expectations of students from lower social classes.

One of the most vocal critics foregrounding social class in schools is Diane Reay, who characterises it as the 'zombie stalking English schools' (2006, p.288), alive despite reports of its demise, but largely unacknowledged. In her work Reay contributes to a discussion of 'disadvantaged' students by suggesting that the educational establishment as it currently operates conspires to silence a distinctive working-class voice and experience, thus making schools a psychically uncomfortable place for some students (Reay, 2015). Hall and Jones (2013) take a similar position about the 'invisibility' of social class in the British educational system, claiming that this leads inadvertently to the normalisation of what they see as middle-class behaviours in schools and the 'othering' of working-class students, which leads to an acceptance of underachievement by these students as an 'natural outcome of class-related deficits' (Hall and Jones, 2013, p.419). Whilst policy makers would claim explicitly to be trying to address such historical issues of low expectation through the effective use of the Pupil Premium, some researchers argue that the introduction of the Pupil Premium has not diminished the power of negative class stereotypes (White and Murray, 2016). Evidence is offered, for example, by Reay of class stereotypes operating amongst both middle-class parents and students, noting that ability sets in schools often reflect class divisions and quoting a student from one of her studies, who jokes that 'the top sets are chav free' (Reay, 2017, p.140). In the context of discussing a clash of culture between schoolteachers and students Exley (2019, p.45) refers to examples where this has taken an unusually openly prejudiced form in the teachers' pejorative discussion of their students' 'chav' names.

One explanation for the continued power of this classed discourse is offered in a study which examines 'against the grain' choices of secondary schools by middle-class parents (James, 2015) and which draws attention to the 'mutual affinity' between white middle-class

children and schools working in highly performative conditions. One aspect of the affinity found in this study was that these students were seen as a desirable addition to schools by headteachers, who were prepared to 'go to great lengths to attract and keep them' because of the better educational outcomes that they typically achieved (James, 2015, p.106). The relevance of this finding for 'disadvantaged' students is in the potentially damaging stereotypical perception of types of students that it perpetuates.

Whilst these researchers assert that there is a tendency within English schools to reject working class culture and thus alienate some students, there is little evidence of a recognition of this as a problem by those working within schools. The identified lack of congruity between the life experience of many schoolteachers and their students is seen to contribute to what Savage describes as 'the unacknowledged normality of the middle classes' which 'needs to be carefully unpicked and exposed' in education (2003, p.536). One aspect of this process which may be relevant in considering the teachers' responses is highlighted by Gorski who raises the pertinent question of 'How are we, as educators, socialized to contribute to class inequities, even when our intention is to counter them?' (2012, p.314). In arguing that 'education is best viewed not as a class-neutral space', Hall and Jones (2013, p.417), noted the predominance of middle-class students entering teacher training programmes. The point made by Hall and Jones is that many of these teachers bring classed assumptions with them to the profession, and such assumptions are reinforced by the encouragement of high-achieving students from prestigious universities (who are disproportionately of middle-class backgrounds) to work in 'disadvantaged' areas, potentially contributing to a superior 'saviour' mentality. Whilst it should not be assumed that all middle-class students hold the same views, it is of note that the research of Thompson,

McNicholl and Menter (2016) found that student teachers tended to attribute low achievement to family and cultural factors, rather than to socio-economic or school factors, suggesting that certain deficit discourses around families still had influence at the time of that study.

Meanwhile in a study in 2019 Jones found that novice teachers themselves felt that their personal class identity and associated cultural capital might not be equally valued in all school settings, suggesting that teachers from a working-class background felt the middle-class nature of English schools. In his dystopian vision of 'meritocracy', Michael Young (1958) identifies the way in which individuals who credit themselves with creating their own success in life feel justified in making harsh judgements on those who have not achieved the same level of success. While teachers' personal attitudes and beliefs about students do not necessarily translate into teaching any of these students less well, there is some evidence of potential effects, for example in teachers' predictions of examination results (Lee and Newton, 2021). An awareness of this history of deficit discourses associated with students who might be classed as 'disadvantaged' is therefore relevant to exploring teachers' constructions of 'disadvantage'.

Responses to the problem of 'disadvantage': discourses of improvement

Having first considered some of the discussion within the literature around the discourses of 'disadvantage' I will now move on to consider research around what I characterise as discourses of improvement, i.e. how it is proposed that the problem of 'disadvantage' might

be tackled. These discourses are important to enable understanding of how teachers' responses to their students might be formed.

Social mobility

A recurrent theme in the discussion around 'disadvantage' in education is social mobility (Elliot Major and Machin, 2013; Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2019; Exley, 2019). To borrow David Foster Wallace's metaphor (Foster Wallace, 2007), the discourse of social mobility is the water that school leaders and teachers swim in, with the notion of social mobility as the primary aim for 'disadvantaged' students running through the policy documents associated with the Pupil Premium (e.g. DfE, 2015; EEF, 2024). Therefore, what teachers believe about social mobility and its relationship to education is likely to influence how they approach the issue of closing the attainment gap for 'disadvantaged' students. However, there are now an increasing number of voices questioning whether social mobility is indeed the uncomplicated and desirable goal that many have previously assumed (Bloodworth, 2016; Hanley, 2016; Zhao, 2016; Exley, 2019; Weiss, 2019).

The question asked by these writers is whether in practice social justice is advanced by social mobility through education. An argument is made by Dorling (2015) that the idea of social mobility is encouraged in unequal countries because it provides an excuse for inequality and an alternative to the larger political project of reducing poverty, which would arguably be of greater benefit to a larger number of 'disadvantaged' students. Whilst a full examination of the wider argument is beyond the scope of this literature review, it is relevant in highlighting the emphasis given within much of the discussion of social mobility in schools to facilitating the progress of the talented and ambitious, potentially to the exclusion of other less

exceptional students (Smith and Wrigley, 2013). An emphasis on the importance of targeted support of the most academically able 'disadvantaged' students aligns with what some would regard as an outdated model of social mobility (Reay, 2017), but may yet be a strategy adopted within some schools as the easiest way of claiming that they have enabled at least some of their students to 'escape' their backgrounds. The framing of social mobility as an escape route, implying, whilst not saying openly, that being a working-class person positioned at the bottom of the social ladder is undesirable, is identified as problematic by some (Hanley, 2016; Reay, 2015; 2017). A good case is made by these writers that alienation may be caused by the way in which schools privilege the pathway to university, and that the negative emotional effect of the 'leave to achieve' message communicated by schools is not always appreciated by teachers, who do not share the life experience of many of their students.

There is undoubtedly a tension between a policy discourse of achievement for all and a marketised system of winners and losers, which creates an 'educational arms race' (Elliot Major and Machin, 2018). How this has played out in practice in the past for 'disadvantaged' students is pertinent to consider. It has been pointed out that, contrary to the declared principles of meritocracy, and the 'glass ceiling' that has been in the past in place for some students, there seems also to be a 'glass floor' in operation in British society, that prevents those from more advantaged backgrounds from slipping back down the ladder of social mobility, and that this glass floor is established in part via the school system (Bloodworth, 2016; Elliot Major and Machin, 2018; Exley, 2019). Smyth and Wrigley warn against falling 'into a meritocratic ideology of individual upward mobility for a few' (2013, p. 201), which fails to question why some groups are persistently more successful than others. Adding to

this worry for those concerned with how schools can genuinely constitute equitable institutions, is the rise of the 'shadow education' industry in which those able to afford it buy additional tutoring for their children outside school in order to try to give them a competitive edge (Entrich, 2020; Bray, 2021). If school leaders do see themselves as operating in this competitive 'arms race', then the potential consequences of this for 'disadvantaged' students need to be considered in terms of how this affects the ethos of achievement communicated to students, the detail of the curriculum content chosen, and the qualification pathways offered.

In the context of this study a useful example is offered by Maslen (2018) of the use of critical discourse analysis to interrogate how language can be used to promote the idea of social mobility as a common sense good. Maslen argues that the language of social mobility, exemplified in this case by a report by the Social Mobility Commission in 2014, is based on ideas of gaining competitive advantage over peers. The language of competition used within the report, e.g. 'marginal gains' and being 'sharp-elbowed', is highlighted effectively by Maslen as a means of arguing that, through the use of metaphor, 'the report seeks to justify, disguise and normalise such competition, and make it seem common-sensical' (Maslen, 2018, p.2). While Maslen's critique is informed by a rejection of the extension of a neoliberal ideology of competition into the educational sphere, his article is characteristic of the field, in how it shows how this dominant ideology disadvantages the 'disadvantaged' but does not go on to offer an alternative vision or means to achieve it.

Vocational qualifications: a 'crappy knock-off'?

One of the arguments that is offered in the problematisation of the idea of social mobility as a desirable goal for 'disadvantaged' students is the disproportionate fashion in which some of these students have historically been offered, or indeed channelled into, pursuing vocational qualifications. It is argued that these students thus become a necessary but expendable resource for low paid, casual work, contingent on the demands of the market (Atkins, 2010; Tomlinson, 2013; Allen, 2014). Tomlinson claims to have identified a common pattern of behaviour in educational settings towards a particular sub-group of 'disadvantaged' students, the 'ignorant yobs' of her account (2013), who are predominantly low-income, low social class males, typically with low educational achievement. In doing so, she shines a light on a group who are routinely overlooked in a discourse which often seems to centre on routes to university admission for the most academically able among the 'disadvantaged' group, as if this were the most desirable outcome for all (Jin and Ball, 2020). In the educational arms race identified by Lee Major and Machin (2018), the argument is made that losers are needed to maintain the value of the educational winners, and Reay has claimed that working-class students can become a form of 'educational collateral damage' (2017, p.142) that ensures the success of their more privileged class 'others'.

Whilst policy makers would claim that they have recognised the historical problem with the low status of vocational qualifications and have acted to make these qualifications more rigorous and therefore valuable (Wolf, 2011), the perceived low value of vocational qualifications can be still be seen reflected in the way in which the word 'BTEC' has gathered a derogatory meaning in popular culture, used according to the Urban Dictionary (2024) to mean 'a crappy knockoff'. More recent studies have shown that although there is an increase

in the numbers of students entering higher education with some vocational qualifications (Vidal Rodeiro 2018; Williamson and Carroll 2018) there is still evidence that such qualifications enjoy lower status amongst parents and teachers and are also disproportionately taken by those from a 'disadvantaged' background (Williamson and Carroll, 2018; Bursnall *et al.*, 2019; Vidal Rodeiro and Vitello, 2020; von Stumm *et al.*, 2022). Whilst consideration of vocational qualifications is not directly relevant to the attainment gap at GCSE for 'disadvantaged' students, it is pertinent in evaluating the classed nature of secondary school institutions, and the potentially prejudicial effect on some students. Tomlinson is happy to pursue an argument of neoliberal conspiracy, in which, despite the rhetoric of achievement for all, there are powerful forces at the macro level invested in the maintenance of the status quo. But however convincing this argument may be, the case against teachers is less clearly established. Working at the micro level, they are caught in the dilemma of trying to provide qualifications which are appealing and useful to students but also valuable to the school in terms of their league table status. This study will enable further exploration of how teachers are implicated in this discourse.

Psychological framing of success: the discourse of 'aspiration'

Psychological explanations of behaviour are often seized upon enthusiastically in education, particularly by those looking to find an explanation that shifts the perceived balance of responsibility for student achievement from policy set by government to individuals. There is a body of literature which explores the influence of individual psychological factors, such as personal motivation, expectation, and self-efficacy on student success (Bandura, 1997; Dweck, 2012; Gutman and Schoon, 2018), which is often referred to in professional teacher

contexts. This literature offers a range of findings that suggest that these individual psychological factors do have some influence on individual students' success, although the balance of psychological and external structural factors is disputed. Therefore, it needs to be considered what the influence of such framing of student behaviour and attitudes might have both on teachers' construction of and responses to 'disadvantaged' students.

One of the most powerful discourses in the debate around the balance of responsibility for the attainment of 'disadvantaged' students between students and their families and their schools, focuses on one of these psychological factors, i.e. the role of aspiration. There are two distinct positions to be found within the literature. One position treats 'aspiration' as an unproblematic objective phenomenon, susceptible to measurement, although acknowledging that this measurement may be difficult in practice, whereas another rejects this position and seeks to problematise the notion of aspiration in education itself. The empirical studies aligned with the approach to aspiration as an objective phenomenon attempt to measure the levels of aspiration amongst young people and their families, and to analyse what the determining factors for high or low levels of aspiration might be, in order to produce policy that will lead to reproduction of this high aspiration (Benner *et al.*, 2016; Moote *et al.*, 2020; Villanueva Basega, 2022). The alternative body of literature critiques these types of studies both in terms of the reliability of their findings and the way such studies are used to inform policy which positions young people and their families in negative ways (Strand and Winston, 2008; Atkins, 2010; Croll and Attwood, 2013; Allen, 2014; Best, 2017; Spöhrer *et al.*, 2018; Stahl, 2018).

Understanding the way that the discourse of 'aspiration' has been employed within the education policy sphere is vital to deconstructing how 'disadvantaged' students might be

viewed by teachers. Again, the construction of 'disadvantage' and the suggested means to approach the issue are tightly interlinked. For example, Atkins (2010) identifies how the policy discourse around such young people is typically one of negativity and deficit, with the repeated use within government documents of language such as 'non-academic' and 'disaffected'. In this way, she argues, the scene is set to offer the solution embodied in the word 'aspiration', which is used frequently and usually preceded by the words 'low' and 'raise'. Atkins' argument is important to my study of the construction of 'disadvantage' because it demonstrates how language can mould thinking through repetition (Fairclough, 2010), creating a potentially inaccurate picture of certain groups of young people, and shifting the locus of responsibility for change from government or schools to individuals. The possible effects of this kind of framing of aspiration in relation to 'disadvantage' are also provided in a study by Spöhrer (2016), who undertook a discourse analysis of the words of teachers in a Scottish secondary school. Examples are offered of teachers characterising 'disadvantaged' students, as feckless, parasitic, and responsible for their own lack of progress by failing to perform the 'self-work' required for self-improvement. Whilst the point that Spöhrer wishes to make is that the responsibility to 'aim higher' has been placed on young people in an oppressive fashion, it could also be argued that the teachers are equally trapped within this discourse and in fact also suffer the burden of this discourse of aspiration via the 'terrors of performativity', as described by Ball (2003, p.216). The potentially malign influence of the concept of 'self-work' may affect both students and teachers negatively and there seems to be a space here to explore further how this influences teachers' conceptions of their levels of responsibility.

Other researchers seem content to treat aspiration as an objective phenomenon and are more interested in measuring where and how much of it can be found in different places. In their review of previous studies, Gutman and Akerman (2008) seek to explain how aspirations are formed and how they relate to educational outcomes. In their report they acknowledge the tensions and contradictions that may be encompassed within the notion, stating that aspirations are formed in response to circumstances, whilst also seeking to emphasise the importance of individual choices. Whilst acknowledging explicitly that these are not straightforward questions to answer, Gutman and Akerman nevertheless produce an executive summary to their report that consists of simple one-paragraph answers to questions such as 'Who has high aspirations?' and 'What are the barriers and facilitators for high expectations? (2008, p.i), which perhaps undermines the subtlety of their analysis. A similar approach to aspiration as an objective phenomenon was taken in a longitudinal study by Baker *et al.* (2014), but the findings, contrary to much of the discussion around the issue, indicated that lack of aspiration was not in fact an important explanatory factor for underachievement of 'disadvantaged' students. Although they found some differences in aspiration (according to their measures) between social classes, they found that aspirations of *all* the students tended to be high. Where there were differences, these were not as great as suggested by the policy discourse and could be better explained by structural inequalities or practical knowledge of how the education system works, rather than 'culturally dependent factors' (Baker *et al.*, 2014, p. 539). This echoes one of the findings of the Gutman and Akerman report, which, although open to criticism both on the grounds of oversimplification and for its focus on the attributes of individuals, does note:

> *There are some groups for whom high aspirations do not lead to higher achievement. In particular, there is a gap between educational aspirations and academic achievement for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds*.
> (Gutman and Akerman, 2008, p.ii).

A rejection of a narrow psychological focus which fails to acknowledge the ways in which 'disadvantaged' students are situated within society and therefore subject to structural barriers, is taken up by a number of researchers (Tomlinson, 2004; 2017; Atkins, 2010; Gorski, 2012). One ground of criticism is typified by Reay, who is clear that 'we should not expect people to transform their lives if they have not been given the resources to make that possible' (2017, p.1970). The mention of resources here is a point around which approaches to the issue of 'disadvantage' often crystalise. For some, the problem of 'disadvantage' could potentially be addressed through economic policies which would remove the material poverty of some students. For others, whether reluctant to concede this as a point of political principle or perhaps feeling it to be so unlikely as to be pointless to discuss, a focus instead on student psychology offers a more appealing approach to the reality of school practice. It is interesting to note that Gorard (2013), a researcher working predominantly using a positivist causal model of study to measure the effectiveness of interventions to raise the achievement of 'disadvantaged' students, also sounds a note of caution relevant to teachers. He argues that although studies may have established some influence of psychological constructs such as aspiration on individuals, this does not mean that such constructs can be taught effectively. He concludes that there is no clear evidence to suggest that interventions to develop aspiration will lead to enhanced attainment that would make a significant difference to the attainment gap for disadvantaged students, and therefore:

> *Given that there are other approaches that can help to overcome the poverty gradient in schools, raising aspirations is not the way for policy to go. The stratification of educational outcomes is more likely to be structural rather than mental* (Gorard, 2013, p.1).

It is unclear whether the existence of the Pupil Premium in schools for some years now has had any effects on the persistence of this explanation of aspiration leading to achievement. It may be, as Exley argues (2019), that the attempt to identify a causal pathway from inspiration to aspiration to achievement, appeals to a human interest in stories of individual success rather than engagement with more complicated types of evidence. The existence of a potential middle way is therefore suggested by Exley, who acknowledges that while it is indeed easier for government to encourage individuals to be resilient, rather than to change material conditions, the tendency for the discussion to polarise into either/or positions of structural or individual explanations is unhelpful in improving the situation for 'disadvantaged' students. In the context of criticisms of 'character education' as 'modern-day missionary work in which low-income people are declared to be missing something, something that privileged people can teach them' (Exley, 2019, p.33), he maintains that action at a school level that helps individuals is perfectly consistent with also tackling the causes of 'disadvantage'. This position may be closer to the reality of what many teachers feel as they operate at the everyday level of school life, and therefore influence their attitudes about how to respond to the 'disadvantaged' students that they encounter.

Teacher agency and constraints

In the next section consideration will be given to what the literature says about whether, if teachers accept a moral or professional responsibility to change their practice in relation to 'disadvantaged' students, how much they can, or think they can, effect change through their own practice. Existing research is shaped by different models and definitions of agency. Whilst there is a current gap in research literature specifically concerning teacher agency in relation to 'disadvantaged' students, many relevant issues have been aired in more general discussion of the constraints and enabling factors of responsive teacher practice to the challenges of meeting student needs in the British educational system. The perspectives brought to bear on the issue of agency range from sociological analyses (e.g. Ball, 2003, 2012b; 2021; Lupton and Thomson, 2015; Shain, 2016; Barrett, 2018; Foster and Long, 2018; Lupton and Hayes, 2021; Yaghi, 2023), which illuminate the influence of structural forces on the social institution of the school, to the work of those (Day and Hong, 2016; Pogere *et al.*, 2019; Grillo and Kier, 2021) who use a psychological lens to explore teachers' feelings of control, or those whose primary concern is to support practitioners in developing a model of inclusive classroom practice (Pantic, 2015; Pantic and Florian, 2017; Pantic *et al.*, 2024). An important distinction to be made in considering these different dimensions of teacher agency is the difference between descriptions of the sense of agency that teachers feel and analyses of the actual types of power and spheres of control that they have.

Emotional labour

When exploring teachers' sense of agency, it is important to consider the implications for teachers of the time and energy required to make provision for students with potentially

different needs, such as the group identified as 'disadvantaged'. For example, Day and Hong (2016) present a study focused precisely on these issues. Their qualitative study of how teachers cope with the everyday demands of their role provides useful empirical evidence of the emotional impact of working within the context of a school with high levels of pupil 'disadvantage'. Although this was a very small-scale study, and set within a primary school context, the themes that emerged from the rich interview data presented reflect the same concerns arising in other school-based research, such as high stress, work-life balance, excessive workload (e.g. Grenville-Cleave and Bonniwell, 2012; Gu and Day, 2013; Perryman and Calvert, 2020; Sims and Jerrim, 2020). The perceptions reported by teachers of the restrictions on their power to achieve what they want include unmotivated students and unsupportive families. Such studies provide a useful illustration of how teachers dealing every day with a highly demanding job might be tempted to tend towards an individualistic analysis which locates the problem of the attainment gap within the students and their families, and thus perhaps shifts some of the responsibility away from themselves. In Day and Hong's account, several factors are identified as contributing to the 'individual, relational and collective emotional resilience' (2016, p.123) that they conclude is necessary in order for teachers to perform to the best of their ability. These factors include the emotional support of the head teacher, as well as the support of colleagues, family, and friends. Papers that have been published since the COVID-19 pandemic have focused on the impact of working in schools at this time, describing teacher 'burnout' and citing the additional emotional burden on teachers of worrying about 'disadvantaged' students with their limited access to technology, poor home routines and less parental support (Madigan and Kim, 2021; Kim *et al.*, 2024). This psychological lens is effective in highlighting how teachers feel the 'emotional

labour' (Hochschild, 1983) involved in teaching in areas of high economic disadvantage can affect their motivation to act, as well as indicating what teachers see as limiting factors on their agency. However, such an approach can also be criticised for failing to problematise or challenge the structure of the schooling system.

Teacher interaction with policy and power in a performative culture

The work done by Ball and colleagues on the 'translation' of policy texts into practice in secondary schools (Ball *et al*, 2012a; Maguire *et al*, 2015) has made a powerful contribution to understanding how teachers come to be implicated in the process of implementing government policy regardless of their personal views. Ball's analysis of a widely embedded 'performative' culture (2003) is important in highlighting the context in which secondary school teachers are negotiating the demands of their jobs, which now also includes the imperative to 'close the gap' in attainment for the 'disadvantaged'. A specific way in which Ball *et al.*'s 2011 account of the workings of educational policy is very useful in considering teachers' responses to 'disadvantage', is that it provides a cogent explanation of how policy can become embedded into the educational culture by stealth, leaving teachers unaware of its influence on their practice. An example is given of the repeated use of the phrases 'obviously' and 'focus' by teachers to illustrate the way in which the language of government policy 'drips' and 'seeps' into educational discourse without transparent discussion of what effect this might have (Ball *et al.,* 2011, p.620). Such analysis is part of an extensive literature which explores how a 'high stakes' examination system with limited opportunities for teachers to adapt the curriculum or their own pedagogy often leaves staff feeling disempowered (e.g. Maguire *et al*., 2012; Huilla, 2020; Gewirtz *et al*. 2021).

An examination of the many sympathetic accounts to be found of the pressures of a performative culture on teachers reveals some interesting tensions in relation to the issue of improving outcomes for more vulnerable learners, such as those identified as 'disadvantaged'. Historically, the criticism has been levelled that accountability measures do not value lower achievement, in the tradition of the discussion of the 'A-to-C economy' in GCSE achievement put forward by Gillborn and Youdell (2001, p.66). A number of critics cite the 'panopticism' of a heavily accountable school system as an oppressive force (Ball *et al*, 2011; Perryman *et al*, 2017), often citing Rose to describe how teachers become involved in self-surveillance through the 'minute arts of self-scrutiny, self-evaluation, and self regulation' required by teachers (Rose, 1989, p.222). Yet the argument could also be made that it is this very accountability which makes the consistent underachievement of the 'disadvantaged' group visible and prioritised within the current political and educational spheres and thus susceptible to change. Ball raises the suggestion that accountability could be used potentially in the pursuit of social justice, but considers the idea unlikely, whereas others are prepared to consider this as a viable direction of travel, despite the contrary pressures (Parker, 2015; Pantic and Florian, 2015). Certainly, the highlighting of the process by which teachers are made subjects of policy (Maguire *et al.*, 2015) provides a useful framework to question how free teachers working within the system are to make choices. A broadly pessimistic view is taken by many of the power that teachers have to influence the curriculum in light of the demands made by the external drivers of accountability, suggesting that while feelings of agency may vary between individuals, these feelings are irrelevant as the actual power to make a change is lacking. It is interesting to note that in his more recent work Ball (2020; 2021) has questioned sociological narratives of 'redemption' through resistance and change

based on principles of rationality and characterised by 'cycles of hope and disappointment' (Ball, 2021, p.390). In doing so, whilst reinforcing a somewhat gloomy view of contemporary schooling practices, Ball also provides a helpful theoretical move towards an embrace of complexity in critiques of schooling.

Barrett (2018) and Craske (2018) have drawn on a recognition of the conflicting pressures on teachers in their studies that consider specifically how teachers try to make sense of the Pupil Premium strategy in their school settings. Craske is effective in pointing out the dilemmas that teachers in his study experienced in negotiating:

> *a matrix of moral/pastoral obligations and efficiency/economic competitiveness, in which the tensions between these two orientations are uncomfortable and unresolved.* (Craske, 2018, p.526)

A consideration of the negotiation of this matrix by teachers is pertinent to my study of their construction and response to 'disadvantaged' students.

Acquiescence or resistance?

Several researchers have argued that the issue of power in the classroom is somewhat more complicated on the ground than might be suggested by the broad brushstrokes picture presented of teachers as 'ventriloquists' of a performative policy agenda (Ball, 2003, p.218). Whilst recognising the insights of Ball *et al.* on the constraints at the macro level, the conclusions reached about lack of power to change practice amongst teachers can be challenged as presenting an overly deterministic representation of what happens in schools. For example, whilst acknowledging a current English educational context that has been described as 'regulated autonomy', Parker (2015, p.22) rehearses the possibility that by

buying into a myth of their own powerlessness, teachers help to perpetuate this state of affairs and calls for further research into how teachers can and do exercise agency. An example of this can be found in Pantic and Florian (2015), who, building on the work of Black-Hawkins and Florian (2012), move the focus from the elements of structural factors that act as constraints on curriculum and practice and look for ways in which teachers are exercising their individual power in the classroom as agents of social justice. Pantic (2015) locates her work in what she describes as international encouragement for teachers to see themselves as agents of social justice, citing examples of Scottish government policy documents. Whilst a social justice policy discourse is perhaps less familiar within the English educational system, the rhetoric of social mobility and 'closing the gap' for 'disadvantaged' students, does challenge teachers to be engaged in improving practice for these individuals. Although Pantic and Florian are writing about practice in the context of students identified as having SEN/D, their discussion is relevant in relation to how teachers address other instances of difference and diversity in the student body, both in how they conceptualise the difference, and in what they do to address it. The focus of their study is not to look directly at how much power or control teachers think that they have, but rather about how teachers exercise choice in delivering the curriculum. They identify potential in this process via the reflexivity of teachers who constantly evaluate their own practices and setting.

Another perspective which suggests a process by which teacher agency is constrained is offered by Wilkins and Wood (2009) in a discussion of teacher professional identity. They are also looking at structural influences which could constrain individual teachers' actions and locate this within teacher pre-service preparation. This research is relevant to issues of how teacher agency might impact on 'disadvantaged' students, as it suggests how new teachers

might develop their values and practice, and how this will then affect their response to the 'disadvantaged' students that they meet in their classrooms. Wilkins and Wood approach this issue of teacher agency from a political perspective founded in a rejection of neoliberal government policy and aiming to demonstrate the malign effects of this policy on teachers and classroom practice. Their argument that teacher preparation has moved from encompassing a critical exploration of values to a mechanistic and technocratic orientation (exemplified in their analysis of the change of wording from initial teacher 'education' to initial teacher 'training'), is well supported by their discussion of the content of teachers' standards and a packed curriculum. However, it is a large leap to make from this to a judgement on the existence of the 'acquiescent professional culture', described by Bottery and Wright (2000) which fails to challenge policy directives which may be damaging to some students.

Some further light on the issue of teacher acquiescence versus resistance is cast by a study of teachers as researchers in a school-based action research context (Lambirth and Cabral, 2015). They considered teachers' willingness to 'seek unwelcome truths' (Mockler and Groundwater-Smith, 2015, p.603) about their schools. The conclusion that teachers struggle to develop a critical 'emancipatory' approach, appears to support the stance of those such as Jones and Stanley (2010, p.151), who argue that teachers are caught in a 'web of collusion and compliance' with policy directives from which they struggle to free themselves. Yet Lambirth and Cabral also acknowledge that they found potential for shifts in pedagogical approach by teachers resulting from the experience of undertaking action research, particularly where teachers engaged directly with student voice. This was also reflected in a small study conducted with student teachers in which they set the students a task of

engaging critically with their placement school's approach to the use of the Pupil Premium grant (Burn *et al.*, 2016). Their findings were that whilst the student teachers demonstrated initially some negative assumptions about students, the experience of the project led them away from a data-focused approach, towards a focus on 'the needs and experiences of particular individuals and on the importance of that knowledge' (Burn *et al*., 2016, p.447). Whilst it is encouraging to find accounts of positive agentic behaviour, the evidence of such accounts seems patchy, and it is important to explore this area further.

Responsibilisation and 'cruel optimism'

Whilst a conceptualisation of teacher as agent of social change challenges the pessimistic view of the teacher as a 'restricted professional', merely an investment in human capital to service the economy (Hoyle, 1986, cited in Bottery and Wright, 2000), equally, there are objections that can be made to any attempt at a straightforward narrative of teachers as agents of social justice. For example, by using Besley and Peters' concept of 'responsibilisation' (2007, p.143), Hellawell (2018) problematises the implication that professionals have a duty to 'work on themselves' in order to promote external policy goals, even where that goal may be seen as desirable by many teachers, such as the development of more inclusive classroom practice. Hellawell's critique of the 'moral burden' (Hellawell, 2018, p.178) potentially imposed on teachers is a useful way of thinking about teacher agency in relation to 'disadvantaged' students, as it plays on the duty of care felt by many teachers towards more vulnerable students. This is well expressed by Done and Murphy:

> *…teachers (as individuals) are led to believe that dutiful enactment of state policy will advance the interests of school sub-populations (communities) to which teachers are committed* (2018, p.145).

Any account which fails to distinguish clearly enough between the delegation of moral/professional responsibility to teachers to raise the attainment of 'disadvantaged' students and the delegation of the power to act autonomously to achieve this, will always contain weaknesses, and is in danger of falling victim to the 'fantasies of empowerment' identified by Wright (2012) in his application of a poststructuralist discourse analysis lens to government education rhetoric. In addition, Berlant's identification of the trap of 'cruel optimism' (2011) is relevant to a discussion of teachers' responses to their 'disadvantaged' students and is used by Moore and Clarke (2016) in their discussion of the way in which the discourse of professionalism constrains teacher agency. Their analysis is that teachers are heavily invested in thinking of themselves as professionals and that after immersion in a culture which equates professionalism with the enactment of policy, they are constrained to implement policy, even where it does not align with their own values. This analysis is of interest because of its emphasis on the process of how policy can be understood as working via affect and exploring how discourse shapes this. Similarly, Perryman *et al.*(2017) analyse how teachers become entangled as subjects of policy through a discourse of self-improvement and reflexivity:

> *…the teacher is hailed as a very particular kind of ethical subject who is left to resolve a set of displaced tensions, in relation to their students, between care and calculation, and intrinsic value and extrinsic worth, while striving for excellence in their practice.'* (Perryman *et al*., 2017, p.755).

Whilst Hellawell contends that some balance can be reached by teachers through a 'dialogic relationship' between the individual as 'responsible moral agent and responsibilised subject' (2018, p.169), she offers limited examples in practice.

The relationship between policy makers and subjects of policy seems to be at the heart of this consideration of agency in relation to 'disadvantage', but more empirical research is needed to consider these how such a relationship might be realised in the context of teachers' responses to 'disadvantaged' students.

The 'grammar of schooling'; what possibility of change?

It would be an oversight in a review that is considering how teachers think about and respond to the problem' of 'disadvantage' not to consider the concept of the 'grammar of schooling', a phrase coined by Tyack and Tobin in 1994 to describe the observed tendency in school systems to resist social justice-informed change. Their analysis of the 'organizational framework that shapes the conditions under which teachers instruct students' (Tyack and Tobin, 1994, p. 455) explores how schools are habitually organised in terms of divisions of time and space and the way in which they gravitate back to the status quo of systems despite evidence which challenges it. An example of the grammar of schooling in practice is contained in Archer *et al.*'s (2018) discussion of the widespread persistence of 'ability setting' in secondary schools, despite the lack of proven effectiveness of this system (Francis *et al.*, 2016). The way in which taken-for-granted practices intersect with constructions of 'disadvantage' is evident in the finding that these ability sets are often closely aligned to socio-economic status. It is interesting to note that the students in these lower sets, disproportionately 'disadvantaged' as well as racially minoritised, were much more likely to

question the legitimacy of the setting system whereas students of higher social class in higher sets tended to see them as fair and natural. The views of the teachers were not examined in this study, however, when Lupton and Thrupp interviewed the headteachers of schools regarded as serving a relatively 'disadvantaged' population, they concluded that:

> *The fact that headteachers' views of families' resources, opportunities, constraints and values are constructed within and framed by the conventions and 'givens' of how schools operate, what education is for and what can be expected of children and parents, will tend to lead to particular perspectives to the exclusion of others* (Lupton and Thrupp, 2013, p.778).

These givens of schooling seem remarkably persistent, so teachers' construction of and response to 'disadvantaged' students need to be considered with this in mind.

The constraint of the curriculum

To conclude this chapter where it started, in quoting Bernstein, it is pertinent to note his words:

> *It is an accepted educational principle that we should work with what the child can offer; why don't we practise it? ….We should start knowing that the social experience the child already possesses is valid and significant, and that this social experience should be reflected back to him as valid and significant* (Bernstein, 1970, p.390).

It would appear from the current literature that a failure to work with what students bring with them to school is still an issue. I have already discussed the policy discourse of cultural capital linked to a Hirschian 'knowledge-rich curriculum' which is current in English schools now, which would certainly appear on the face of it to create barriers to such an approach. A

challenge to this bounded curriculum view is presented by Biesta, who articulates a need to respond to students with an 'empty-handed' approach (2008, p.207), with a concern for their uniqueness which involves giving up or putting aside everything that is known about 'what works', in order to be able to approach students:

> *without an agenda or preconception, but in a way in which we can ask them what they are bringing to the world. It is in this way that educators take responsibility for something they cannot know…..It is this responsibility which has the potential to bring forth educational relationships* (Biesta, 2004, p.208).

Yet there appears to be limited agreement about both how desirable and possible such a responsive curriculum is. Writing from an Australian context, Munns suggests that there do exist 'classrooms worth admiring, where there is a hope that small but decisive gains might yet become long-term miracles' (Munns, 2007, p.301). However, whether long term miracles in respect of 'disadvantaged' students in English schools are possible remains open to question.

In this chapter I have considered the current literature that is relevant to an exploration of teachers' construction of 'disadvantaged' students and their responses to these students. In the following chapter I will explain my research design and my approach to analysis of the data generated in my study.

CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In order to produce a coherent piece of research, data, methods and analytical approach employed within the study should be intertwined (May, 2011; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012; Silverman 2017), so within this chapter I will explain how I tried to design such coherence into my study.

I will begin by outlining my ontological and epistemological position to show how this is consistent with the aims of my study. I will explain how my overarching research question is underpinned by a constructionist ontology which led to the specific methodological approach used. I will then discuss how I generated data in the study, detailing the specific methods used, to show that my research design enabled the generation of data in a consistent and reliable fashion. Throughout this account, at different points, I will explain the ethical considerations that informed my practice in respect of the participants and ensured that this was an ethically sound piece of research.

In the final part of the chapter, I will show how the data generated from my interviews have been analysed, outlining how and why I selected a broadly poststructural discourse analysis approach. I will detail the process of analysis and will explain how I made sense of the discourses of 'disadvantage' that had become visible to me in the data by sorting the data using the idea of 'teacher work'. I will then show why and how I chose to apply the theories of Derrida and Levinas to these data in order to gain a deeper level of insight into the response of teachers to their construction of 'disadvantage' and to understand the ethical work that I identified as happening.

Aim of the study and my research question: Problematising and troubling 'disadvantage'

Research question

The issue of 'disadvantage' and the attainment gap is a large and multi-faceted one, and there are many ways in which it could be explored. However, as it is not possible or necessary within one piece of research to try to give the whole picture (Silverman, 2017, p.117), I will explain the particular focus that I have chosen. Whilst my overarching interest was in the way that 'disadvantage' was enacted or performed in schools, my specific focus was on the role played by teachers in this performance. Therefore, my chosen research question was:

> **How is 'disadvantage' constructed by teachers in secondary schools, and how do they respond to their construction of 'disadvantage'?**

I chose to generate data to help me answer this question through interviewing teachers. Whilst there were other possible means of generating data, such as an ethnographic approach involving observation, I decided that interviews would provide me with sufficient data to answer my question. I discuss this choice later in the chapter in 'Rationale for use of semi-structured interviews'. I will begin this chapter, however, by outlining the ontological and epistemological position that underpinned my study.

Constructionist ontology

My choice of question demonstrated the constructionist approach that underlay my study, in which I identified 'disadvantage' as it is enacted in schools as socially constructed. An

explanation of the constructionist approach that I followed is articulated by Holstein and Gubrium (2008, p.374):

> *Rather than trying to get inside social reality, the constructionist impulse is to step back from that reality and describe how it is socially brought into being.*

Silverman (2017, p.149) asserts that 'For constructionists, social institutions are created and/or stabilized by the actions of participants.' Thus, it would be impossible to understand how 'disadvantage' was being constructed without gathering data from at least some of these participants, in this case the teachers. As this was not a positivist-orientated study, I was not seeking to establish a causal link between teacher beliefs and attitudes and the ways in which they then taught students. This would rely on a realist ontological position in which it was assumed that attitudes towards 'disadvantage' could be identified and quantified within an experimental type of study. Whilst rejecting this type of study to answer my research question, I believed, nevertheless, that the accounts of teachers would be an invaluable resource in building up a picture - which could only ever be partial - of how 'disadvantage' was being constructed and enacted within my chosen schools. I thought that the data generated by interviews with teachers would give me insight into the complex interaction of teachers, students, the curriculum, school policies and the overarching education system, through which 'disadvantage' is realised and potentially reproduced in the school system.

For constructionists, the labelling of phenomena is central to the definition of their character, thus, it was vital to look at 'definitions of the situation' (Silverman, 2017, p.149) to understand how meaning was defined by the actors in this context, i.e. what was 'disadvantage' to these teachers? A core aspect of my study was the attempt to separate an

essentialist definition of 'disadvantage' based on material realities of poverty and associated barriers experienced by young people, from the way in which 'disadvantage' was constructed via teacher perceptions and school policies. My aim was to examine 'how local or 'hyphenated' phenomena are assembled *in situ*,' (Silverman, 2017, p.123), in line with the constructionist assumptions that 'treat what people say and do as realities in their own right without any need to compare them with an assumed, external 'reality' (Silverman, 2017, p.115).

In analysing the practices and interactions associated with 'disadvantage' that were described by teachers, I recognised that every individual experiences and gives meaning to events in the light of his or her own biography. However, I was not interested in interpreting these interactions and practices via an individual psychological lens but wanted instead to explore how the teachers seemed to me to be caught in a complex web of ideas and practices which contributed to their understanding of 'disadvantage'. The philosophical position underlying my investigation was that 'disadvantage' was constructed by teachers based on the framing of ideas that was available to them as they worked within their school contexts, thus my study would investigate how what teachers told me interacted with the discourses of 'disadvantage' that appeared to be in operation in their settings.

My epistemological approach - rationale

Interviews have been described as 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984, p.102, cited in Mason, 1996), and as such can provide 'rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings' (May, 2011, p.131), and this was central to my purpose. Our theoretical orientations are evident in 'how we ask

questions, what we assume is possible from asking questions and from listening to answers, and what kind of knowledge we hear answers to be' (Bauman *et al*., 2002, p.3). Thus, in accordance with my constructionist ontology, I recognised that interviews could provide an 'interactive, situational and generative approach to the acquisition of data' (Dale and Mason, 2011, p.2). However, in answer to what Bauman *et al.* describe as the 'location question' (Bauman *et al*., 2002, p.3) I did not believe that answers could be found simply 'out there' in the form of ideologies or 'in there' in individual attitudes and beliefs. This meant that conducting interviews could not be regarded as a straightforward, unproblematic information-gathering activity. Whilst I believed that interviewing teachers would indeed provide examples of ideologies in practice and individual attitudes and beliefs, I did not accept the idea of interviewer as 'miner' unearthing truths (Kvale, 1996, p.3). Instead, I was of the view that the values and beliefs that teachers shared in interviews would themselves be the result of 'processes of social construction and practices which are fluid, negotiated and contextual' (Bauman *et al*., 2002, p.4). According to this thinking, the interviews would be a site in which knowledge would be constructed, with myself and the interviewees acting as 'co-participants in the process' (Bauman *et al*., 2002, p.5). Within my study, interview data are used in a way that is not based on a naturalist model of subjective interpretation, perceptions and lived experience, but instead a constructionist view of how reality is socially constructed via social processes and 'how' questions, i.e. how are 'disadvantaged' students 'framed' in the classroom? (Silverman 2017, p.134).

The 'insufficiency of voice'

I was aware that the generation of data through interviews needed to be planned and conducted with an awareness of the limitations of this method. In addition to the constructionist notion that there are no essential truths to be uncovered in interviews, I was aware that the process of hearing of voices is also not straightforward; the idea of the interviewer as a facilitator of voice can be simplistic. Mazzei and Jackson (2012, p.746) critique the notion of voice as 'present, stable, authentic, and self-reflective' as a hangover of a metaphysical position that holds that voice is 'still "there" to search for, retrieve, and liberate.' This would be inconsistent with my belief about what I could learn from interviews. My own approach was influenced by MacLure's description of the 'insufficiency of voice', (2009, p.98) in which she discusses the importance of allowing people to mean more than one thing at a time in order to fashion 'mobile and nuanced readings of situations' (Maclure, 2009, p.98). However, whilst being aware that seeking understanding of a situation through the narratives of participants was open to problematisation, in accordance with Jackson and Mazzei (2008, p. 307), I believed that 'The fact that an easy truth cannot be spoken does not mean that truths, or narratives, or experiences cannot be represented', and I was confident that interviews with teachers would play a central role in helping me answer my research question. My epistemological stance did not reify voice. I acknowledged that voice cannot 'speak for itself' and would require interpretation through the use of theory, and in this manner a more nuanced, complicated, and productive story could be told (Mazzei and Jackson, 2012, p. 746). How this belief led to the form of analysis that I adopted will be described later in this chapter.

Justification of how data were generated

Choice of participants

In planning my research, the most appropriate approach seemed to seek a purposive sample that could best inform me about the research problem under examination (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p.148), i.e. how 'disadvantage' was being constructed and 'performed' in a selection of secondary schools. In accordance with the principles of qualitative research, the size of my proposed sample was determined by my judgement about its fitness for purpose (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p.161), and with the aim of generating 'enough texts to address the research question or the area of focus' (Fawcett, 2008, p.4). My choice of schools and teachers was therefore based on my judgement about whether they would possess the relevant characteristics to enable the generation of suitable data.

Teachers have first-hand experience of responding to disadvantaged students; this is their everyday work therefore I considered that they were a valid source of evidence about what was happening in their classrooms in respect of 'disadvantaged' students. Different evidence could have been gathered through observations, or by talking to students. However, these elements were not necessary to this study, as I was not focused on creating a detailed descriptive account of what happens in classrooms, an 'objective reality' approach, but on teachers' interpretations of what was happening and the effects that this had on their responses.

Selection of schools

My initial plan was to carry out my research in a sample of five secondary schools within one city in a single local authority area, with a mixture of academy and maintained schools. This was a large city in the Midlands of England with relatively high numbers of students classed as 'disadvantaged' (Pupil Premium) compared with national numbers, therefore the issue of how best to reduce the 'attainment gap' was a live issue in the city. I had spent 20 years of my professional life working in schools in this city and thought that my insider knowledge of the educational landscape in the city would be useful in helping me identify suitable schools and in establishing contact with them. My work as a teacher had been in primary schools, but I had also worked as a local authority advisory teacher and had been a governor in a secondary school in the city for several years, therefore also had contacts in secondary schools in the city. However, I chose not to approach any of the schools that I had worked with previously to participate in my research. I understood that, within an interpretivist paradigm, positivist notions of 'bias' were problematic, and I was not under the impression that I should aspire to be a 'blank slate' in my approaches to these settings (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p.98). However, it seemed to me more straightforward to be able to come to all the schools in the study in the same way, as an interested outsider.

My plan was to focus on a selection of schools that had varied student populations, where the 'disadvantaged' group of students, whilst sharing the essential feature of low family income, might be seen to present differently in terms of identifiable characteristics, such as ethnicity. I also planned to explore schools that had different percentages of 'disadvantaged' students in their cohorts. I was not interested in comparing directly the different schools, as this would not be consistent with the nature of the study, but I thought that their varied

school contexts might lead teachers to different insights about 'disadvantage'. A limited amount of demographic information about schools was available on the Department for Education school comparison site (DfE, 2021) including the numbers eligible for free school meals (these students made up the vast majority of the Pupil Premium or 'disadvantaged' numbers) and some other information such as the percentage of students speaking English as an additional language (EAL). I used this site as one initial source of information when scoping potential schools to approach to take part as well as using my local professional knowledge.

Although I knew that the small, interpretivist nature of my study would not allow for the generalisation of my data, it was important that the study could be considered trustworthy, which would include justifying the details of the sample selected (Cohen, Manion, *et al.*, 2017, p.226). In my decision to work with five schools, I was guided by the principle in qualitative studies, that the sample should be large enough to generate 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973). Whilst a greater number and variety of schools would have generated a larger quantity of interesting data, in practice sample size also needed to be manageable for the time and resources available to me for the research (Matthews and Ross, 2010, p.163). My judgement was that working with this number of schools would be realistic in my situation as a part-time PhD student with a busy professional life but would nevertheless enable me to generate sufficient data to gain valuable insights relevant to answering my research question.

Recruiting participants

As discussed in relation to the choice of schools, the 'right' number of people to interview depends both on the nature of the project and the manageability of it for the researcher. In selecting a sample of individuals, I needed to consider who could provide a useful perspective on 'disadvantage' in their schools. As Beitin says, 'Asking who can provide a different perspective on a topic by nature of their role can be just as important as asking how many people are needed to answer the question' (2012, p.7). I did not require my participants to be representative of all secondary school teachers or indeed representative of their subject area. I was not specifically seeking teachers who had a strong personal interest in the subject of disadvantage, however, as I was asking for volunteers to take part in my research, it is likely that at least some of the teachers that came forward were more interested in the subject of 'disadvantage' than their peers. Cohen *et al.* (2011, p.160) warn against the dangers of 'volunteer sampling', reiterating that whilst it may be difficult to avoid, the researcher needs to be particularly careful about claiming representativeness or generalisability, but my claim for this research is that it will provide insight into the research question rather than offer a generalisable data set. The aim was to find participants who would potentially have something relevant and interesting to say about the subject. What was necessary was that they were teachers of students who were classified within their schools as 'disadvantaged'; this was the only absolute prerequisite. These individuals would all be examples of 'knowledgeable people' who could give in-depth information relevant to my research question (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p.157).

What I thought would be interesting and would potentially generate some different insights for me was to talk to teachers from different curriculum areas. My hunch was that they

might think there were aspects of the subject they taught, e.g. the content or nature of the subject itself, the curriculum, or how it was typically delivered in their setting, that meant that provision was better or worse for 'disadvantaged' students. Perhaps the thoughts of Maths teachers would be different from teachers of very language-heavy subjects such as English and History or from predominantly practical-based subjects such as Art or P.E.? I considered that the interaction of all these aspects would be relevant to their construction of 'disadvantage' and therefore germane to the study. When approaching schools, I asked therefore if I could speak to a teacher of Maths, English, Science, Humanities and Arts or P.E. I also requested to speak to the Pupil Premium Lead in the school. It is the nature of the role of the PP Lead that they establish the school's vision for this area, as well as the strategic management approach, and the attitude that they communicated to staff might be expected to set the tone for how the issue of 'disadvantage' was understood in school. The PP Lead is also responsible for producing the school's PP strategic action plan that is required by law to be published on the school website, so is responsible for the public presentation of the school's response and I thought that speaking to them therefore would offer an interesting perspective. However, whilst seeking this range of subject teachers, I acknowledged Beitin's point (2012, p.8) that interviewing people with variations in roles may give a fuller and more nuanced picture, but that this does not necessarily correspond to different perspectives, and that diverse members of a social setting may share common perspectives. My sample choice was not based on factors relevant to individual teachers such as age, gender, race, social class, or length of service, as I was not trying to show a causal link between 'types' of teachers and how they responded. Any teacher is an expert in what they do in their

classroom with the students that they teach, and therefore was a suitable participant as a member of the school culture around 'disadvantage' that I was investigating.

Process of recruitment, with ethical considerations

I planned and conducted my research in line with ethical principles with the intention that it caused no harm of any kind to participants. I was guided in this by the principles and guidance offered by the British Educational Research Association (2018) concerning informed consent, confidentiality, and consideration for the feelings of the participants, and by the ethical review processes required by the University of Birmingham. As well as the usual issues of ensuring that participants felt comfortable and respected in the interviews and that they were confident that the data generated by the study would be treated carefully and securely, specific factors that I considered relevant to this study were the timing and length of interviews.

Informed consent

Ensuring informed consent from participants is a key principle of ethical research (Cohen *et al.* 2017, p.122) so in order to ensure that the consent was fully informed I designed an information leaflet for the participants that gave an overview of my research and was transparent about my aims, the nature of the research, the processes and the outcomes that I was hoping for. This information leaflet, with a consent form appended to it (Appendix 1) was sent to any potential participants at the email address that they had provided to me after expressing an interest in taking part in the research. As my participants were all teachers, therefore necessarily literate and used to engaging with pieces of written

information, I felt confident that this was an appropriate medium for conveying information to them. The information leaflet described the purpose of the research, what their participation in the study would involve, the extent of anonymity and confidentiality offered and the right to withdraw all, or any part of, the data from the study up to two months from receiving their copy of the interview transcript. The level of commitment from participants (i.e. one online interview lasting no more than one hour in total) was clearly explained. In order to mitigate the risk that participants exercised their right to withdraw their data from the research, I sought to ensure that participants were clear from the outset about the purposes of the research, and the use of their data. The participants were given my contact details so that they could ask any questions that they wished before agreeing to the interview.

As my usual initial point of contact with the teachers was via the PP Lead in school, I used my initial conversation with that person to repeat the main points of information from the information leaflet so that they were clear about these in their communications with other members of staff. This also gave them an opportunity to voice any questions that they might have before approaching their colleagues.

Assuring teachers of confidentiality and anonymity

It is vital in research that all participants are confident that data concerning them generated in the interviews will be treated confidentially. The teachers in my study were being asked to share reflections about their professional practice and setting, and it seemed a potential danger that they might be anxious about being perceived to be critical of their work environment, particularly of senior management or school policies (Robson and McCartan,

2016). I realised the importance, therefore, of reassuring them that their views would not be shared with any of their colleagues and that the school and local authority area would be anonymised in the finished thesis. I was aware that I needed to establish as much trust as possible, but as none of the participants knew me already and were usually speaking to me in person for the first time just before the interview, there was a limited amount that I could do other than try to establish a friendly rapport. I relied primarily on the written information that I sent to them before the interview to give them confidence in my ethical approach. They were assured via the information leaflet that everything that they said would be treated in confidence by me and not shared with any other colleagues. Their data would be anonymised from the point of transcription of the interviews, with teachers identified in the finished thesis simply by a school number (the order in which I started interviewing in the different schools) and the subject specialism or PP Lead role of the teacher (e.g. School 1, Maths teacher). Nevertheless, with a small number of participant schools, with subject areas of staff identified, and the identifying features of approximate school pupil numbers and percentage of PP students included, it could not be guaranteed absolutely to participants that their comments would not be identifiable by staff colleagues in the same school within the finished thesis should they choose to read it.

Timing of recruitment

In recruiting participants for my study, I was mindful of the heavy additional burden that the COVID-19 pandemic had placed on schools and that teachers might be reluctant to take on an additional commitment by participating in my research. Ethical approval for the study from the University of Birmingham Ethics Committee was received in June 2021 and I was

keen to begin the process of recruitment before the end of the school term in July. Since March 2020 schools had been dealing with the need for partial closures and online teaching in response to lockdown regulations. They were now fully open again but having to navigate the practicalities of following government guidelines alongside responding to the academic impact of students having missed time at school as well as the emotional effects of the pandemic experience on students and staff (Weale and Adams, 2021). It felt like a difficult time to be asking hard-stretched teachers who did not know me to give me even half an hour of their time with nothing offered in return, other than an opportunity to discuss their practice. I therefore thought hard about the best time to approach schools in both practical and ethical terms, consulting with friends and colleagues who were teachers to gather their views. The consensus was that the latter part of this summer term, after the main examination period was a reasonable time to start to approach teachers. I thus began sending out initial emails to potential school participants, approaching headteachers first as the gatekeepers of the organisation. From an ethical point of view, it was important that I showed respect for the headteachers by checking that they were aware of the nature of, and willing for, the research to take place in 'their' schools (Cohen *et al.,* 2017, p.124). In this email I asked them to put me in contact with the PP Lead in the school.

Recruitment process

I had selected some potential schools to contact based on the information available about them on the DfE school comparison site and my local knowledge. My contacts in the local authority area proved to be invaluable in a challenging process of recruitment that was overshadowed by the external context. Despite my contacts, it was still difficult to find

schools willing to take part in my research. For example, the headteacher of the school where I was a governor volunteered to send an email introduction for me to the headteachers of five schools with which she had close connections that fitted my chosen criteria and I followed these up with my own messages a few days later (Appendix 2), but only one school sent any response to this. I was not surprised, knowing that everyone working in schools was constantly inundated with email traffic, and this was a particularly busy and difficult time in the light of the pandemic. Many friends and ex-colleagues supported me in making contact with different schools but most of these initial approaches fell on stony ground.

Once I had secured agreement from HTs to be involved in the research, I then contacted the PP Leads in the schools (Appendix 3) who acted on my behalf to invite other members of staff to be interviewed and gave me email contacts to make arrangements with individuals. Sometimes the teachers themselves volunteered in an interview to ask a colleague on my behalf if they would do an interview. Eventually, after many emails, some phone calls, and a few false leads I managed to secure interviews with 21 qualified teachers and one non-qualified teacher in a total of five secondary schools. Many of the staff had overlapping or unofficial roles in relation to 'disadvantage'. For example, the Design and Technology teacher in School 1 also supported the PP Lead teacher with this role. In School 2 one of the English teachers was acting in the PP Lead role although this was not his official position, and in School 5 the Assistant Headteacher was also covering the PP Lead role in the absence of anyone officially in place. In School 4 the PP Lead was a former headteacher who seemed to be working in something akin to a consultancy role in the school, which involved leading the PP provision, but also included teaching some Science lessons. It was not possible to secure

an interview with teachers from the full range of subject areas in all the schools, however, there was a range of subject areas represented from each school.

The interviews stretched over a period of 11 months because of the difficulties in recruitment. Two of the five schools were in two different neighbouring local authorities to the original planned location. Although the initial plan had been to work with schools which were all in the same local authority, on reflection this did not seem vital to the efficacy of the research design. I had thought that local authority policies might have some influence on practice, but this was not something that had emerged in the interviews in the first three schools, so by the time I recruited the last two, I felt confident that the fact they were in different authorities would not undermine the research.

I was extremely grateful to all the participants who took the time to speak to me, whether or not this was a subject in which they were particularly interested. It was pleasing that several specifically said at the end of the interview how much they had enjoyed having the opportunity to think and to talk about the subject matter of 'disadvantage' in this way. I had hoped from the outset that participating in this research would encourage the teachers involved to reflect on their practices in relation to 'disadvantaged' students and so this was a welcome outcome. Below is a summary of the sample.

School name	**Local authority area**	**No. of students on roll (approx.)**	**Percentage of Pupil Premium students**
School 1	LA 1 (urban)	650	37%
School 2	LA1 (urban)	925	48%
School 3	LA1 (urban)	875	33%
School 4	LA2 (urban)	1675	36%
School 5	LA3 (mixed rural and urban)	1250	14%

Figure 1: Description of school characteristics

	PP Lead	English /Media Studies	Maths	Science	Humanities	Arts/P.E./ D.T	Modern foreign language
School 1	x	x	x		x	x	
School 2	x	x	x	x		x	
School 3	x	x	x				x
School 4	x			x	x		x
School 5	x				x	x	x
Total							**22**

Figure 2: Description of teacher subject specialisms

Design of interviews, with ethical considerations

Rationale for use of semi-structured interviews

In deciding what type of interview to use I considered the type of data that needed to be generated and the degree of control that I wanted as an interviewer over the process (May, 2022). There were aspects of unstructured interviews that were appealing to me, specifically being able to be led more by the interviewee, however, I did not feel that I had enough experience in interviewing to be confident to conduct an unstructured interview effectively. There was a chance of going off topic and not being able to make the most of the interview opportunity and this conflicted with pragmatic considerations. I would only be conducting one interview with each participant as this is all that I considered to be reasonable to ask from them considering the many pressures on their time and energy. Therefore, I wanted to be sure that I had covered the same ground in the interviews with different participants. I needed to keep the interview opportunity focused and use the time wisely (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013, p.359).

With these considerations in mind, I chose to use semi-structured interviews, with the aim that this would allow a 'conversational, flexible and fluid' style (Bauman *et al.*, 2002, p.3). In a semi-structured interview, the interview protocol contains set questions, and this provided a useful framework for me, but there is not the same concern for standardisation and comparability as there is within a structured interview, therefore I was freer to probe the interviewee, seeking clarification and elaboration through dialogue where necessary (May, 2011, p.134). Beitin (2012, p.8) cites Holstein and Gubrium (1995) referring to the way in which people may show evidence of multiple selves or identities within interviews as 'footings'. Although the interview process sets up an obvious power dynamic in terms of who is asking the questions, both interviewer and interviewee have agency in the interaction, as they potentially shift 'footings'. It was important therefore that my interview questions should help guide me as an interviewer but not so rigidly that the teachers were not able to shift perspectives (Beitin, 2012, p.8). I designed the questions to be open-ended enough to enable participants to share their unique experiences, but also to enable me to compare answers from different participants (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013, p. 359). I was aware of the danger in semi-structured as opposed to unstructured interviews that the interviewer does not ask the 'right' questions and that the participant does not bring something up because they think that the interviewer is not interested in it (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Therefore, I considered carefully how to avoid this by planning probes and prompts such as 'Can you tell me a bit more about that?' and 'I'm interested in what you said about…could you give me an example of what you mean?' Whilst I did not believe that the purpose of the interviews was to ask the perfect questions to unlock a hidden answer, I did want to make sure that I had designed questions that would give the participants space to

illustrate the discourses that they were working within and to which they were subject. By asking the teachers to provide specific examples to explain what they were saying, my aim was to enable the operation of the phenomenon under study, i.e. 'disadvantage' to 'become more possible to articulate through the specifics of the narrative' (Bauman *et al*., 2002, p.4). I kept the principle of avoiding leading questions or prompts in my mind during the interviews (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013, p.366) and this became increasingly important to me as the interviews continued over a period of 11 months. When conducting the later interviews, I was already involved in analysing responses to previous interviews, and I needed to remind myself to be careful not just to look for confirmation of what others had already said. It was a reminder of the misleading 'mythology of 'hygienic' research' (Oakley, 1993, p.242). Whilst I could ensure that I asked all participants the same questions, I was aware that each interview was a unique encounter in which the context and myself were slightly different. I reflected further on this in one of the interviews where the teacher described an encounter with a 'disadvantaged' student that had disturbed him. The teacher told me that he had been unable to sleep properly the night after this conversation with the student and he wondered whether this was because he was going to be talking to me in an interview the next day. It is an unknown whether the teacher would have felt the same about the student's comments if he had not been sensitised to the subject by knowing that he was going to speak to me about it, but it was noteworthy to me that there is nothing neutral in human interactions such as interviews. Even before the interview had taken place, its content was inflected by the context.

The interview questions

Below I describe the questions that I asked the teachers and my rationale for each question. The first three questions were all designed to answer the first part of my research question, i.e. how the teachers constructed 'disadvantage'.

1. ***Do you know which students you teach fall into the 'disadvantaged' group? How do you know?***

This question was an attempt to discover both how the teachers conceptualised 'disadvantage' and how this interacted with the school system in which they worked. I felt that these two aspects were tangled together and was interested to see how the teachers responded to a question that might seem to be just a question about systems in relation to the PP students, but also gave them the opportunity to reflect on and question the categorisation of students. I have included later a discussion of my pilot participant's response to this question and a further explanation of my rationale.

2. ***How do you see the 'disadvantage' of those students presenting in your lessons?***

This question followed up the first one, encouraging the teachers to explain their understanding of 'disadvantage' in terms of how students appeared to them, potentially in behaviours, attitudes, academic attainment or physical presentation. Again, the question was phrased in a deliberately open way to give the teachers the opportunity to interpret the question as they chose.

3. ***Are there elements specific to the teaching of your subject that may affect disadvantaged students differently from their peers?***

This question turned the focus away from the students onto the teaching, asking the teachers to reflect how aspects of their subject content or the school curriculum interacted with the students' experience of the subject.

4. ***How do you respond to the needs of the disadvantaged students in your teaching? Could you give me an example of a specific lesson that you have taught recently and how it met the needs of a particular student or students?***

This question was focused on generating answers to the second part of the research question, i.e. how teachers responded to their construction of 'disadvantage'. I was keen to try to prevent the teachers responding to my questions with generalisations and to encourage a degree of specificity about their practices which would enable a deeper analysis.

5. ***Do you have policies in place in school in respect of disadvantaged students?***
6. ***Can you tell me about the policy and how it affects what you do?***

Questions 5 and 6 were designed to probe the impact of school policies in respect of the 'disadvantaged' cohort. I was interested to find out how aware teachers were of official school policies in relation to the 'disadvantaged' students and how much such policies guided their actions.

7. ***Is there anything else that you would like to tell me?***

This question was included to ensure the teachers had the opportunity to include anything that they thought was important that had not arisen during the interview. Although the interviews were led by me and my agenda, I wanted to acknowledge that the product of the interview was a co-construction. Whilst I came to the interviews with my own views, the

teachers were the experts in what was happening in their classrooms, and I did not want to close down what they had to contribute to this discussion.

I asked some additional questions to those who were acting in the PP Lead role. There were two teachers, in Schools 1 and 3, who were not also working as a subject teacher, so I asked them just these questions and also added them, as appropriate, into the questions that I asked the subject teachers who were also doing some kind of PP Lead role.

1. ***Could you tell me about your role as Pupil Premium Lead?***

This was an opportunity to explain how the role was currently operationalised in the school and provided me with useful contextual background for the other interviews.

2. ***What are your aims within the role?***

This question was focused on encouraging the teachers to share their ideas about what they thought was needed in terms of their 'disadvantaged' students, therefore relevant both to their construction of 'disadvantage' and their response to it.

3. ***Could you tell me about your school population of 'disadvantaged' students?***

Again, this question was deliberately very open, encouraging the teachers to share their construction of what 'disadvantage' meant to them in their school context.

4. ***What would you say have been your challenges and successes in respect of your 'disadvantaged' students?***

This was an opportunity for them to provide information about the school response towards 'disadvantaged' students and the way in which they framed the idea of success.

5. ***How is school policy in respect of 'disadvantaged' students created and communicated to staff?***

I was interested in how responses to 'disadvantage' within schools were decided and put into practice and how much of what teachers told me about their individual construction and response to 'disadvantage' was influenced by official school policies.

Conduct of interviews – with ethical considerations

Ensuring consent

The first consideration in conducting the interviews was to ensure that ethical procedure was secure. I checked that the consent form, which was part of the information sheet, had been signed and returned to me by email before the interview. Then, before I began asking questions, I confirmed verbally with the participants that they gave their consent and asked them whether they had any questions about the process. I explained that the interview would be recorded via the Zoom online platform, with an additional recording device being used as backup. A couple of participants asked me to confirm how the interview data would be used and if they would have access to my findings. I referred again to the information provided in the information sheet, confirming that the study would be written up as my PhD thesis and that the results might be shared further in e.g. conference presentations or written publications, and that participants would be offered a summary of the results of the study after completion. All the participants were happy to proceed with the interview. I also reminded the participants before the interview that after I had transcribed it a copy would be sent to them to check that it was an accurate record of the meeting. When this did happen, there were no objections from anyone about the accuracy of the transcription.

Pilot interview - reflections

I decided that conducting a pilot interview would add to the rigour of the study by providing an opportunity to anticipate problems with my proposed interviewing plans and this would enable me to make any amendments necessary required to improve the rest of the interviews (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012, p.142).

I completed a pilot interview with a fellow PhD student who was a secondary school teacher. The purpose of this pilot was partly practical, to check that I was competent in use of the Zoom online interviewing platform to conduct and record the interviews. In addition, I wanted to get a sense of how long the interviews would last so that I could feel confident that I was not making an unreasonable demand on the time of busy individuals. Another purpose of the pilot was to test the clarity of the questions. Also, importantly, I needed to check that my interview questions generated the kind of data in which I was interested (Cohen *et al.*, 2017, p.472), which would enable me to answer my research question. It would also enable me to think further about useful probes to follow up questions if required (Cohen *et al.*, 2017, p.513).

I was an inexperienced interviewer, so this opportunity to practise did give me some confidence in the process, including the technology used. The timing seemed about right, with this pilot interview lasting 29 minutes. I thought that this justified me in telling participants in the information leaflet that the whole interview process would take no longer than an hour, which seemed a reasonable amount of time to ask of participants. Most of the interviews did indeed last around 30 minutes, with a few shorter and some going on for around 45 minutes.

My pilot participant reported that the questions seemed clear to her, with one exception, and the answers that she gave covered the areas that I was interested in, so that gave me confidence that they were pitched correctly. The question that my pilot participant queried was the initial one: 'Do you know which students you teach fall into the 'disadvantaged' group? How do you know?' Her feedback was that she was not sure which students I was referring to when I asked this question. She wanted to know, did I mean just those who qualified for Pupil Premium, or did I want her to include other students who she regarded as disadvantaged, such as those experiencing special educational needs? I had anticipated that this might be a response from participants and had spent a long time wondering how I should express this initial question. My pilot interviewee suggested that I could be clearer about this, and I understood her concern, and reflected on how I should respond to this. From an ethical perspective I did not want my participants to feel confused, uncomfortable, or anxious about giving the 'wrong' answer, particularly at the start of the interview, but it was also very important to me, in line with my whole methodological approach, that I was not too directive or restrictive. After reflection I decided that I did not want to change the question, as my study revolved around problematising the idea of 'disadvantage' and I wanted to prompt my participants to consider what the term meant to them. The imprecision of my question was a deliberate, although indirect, invitation to think about how the language of 'disadvantage' interacted with the categorisation of students. It was useful that this issue arose in the pilot as it enabled me to consider in advance how to respond if this occurred again, and I developed a repertoire of responses such as: 'You can tell me about either or both (PP or some other category of 'disadvantage'), whatever you think' , 'I'm interested in what you think about this', 'There's no right or wrong here'. It was interesting to

see how different teachers responded to this approach. Some pushed for more clarity from me, wanting me to define my terms, while others assumed my meaning and began answering without asking me anything else. Depending on where the conversation went, I sometimes found myself asking a direct follow-up question in response to a comment or description from them, e.g. when one of the teachers seemed to suggest that they did not think of some of the PP students as 'disadvantaged', I prompted 'So who do *you* think the disadvantaged students are?' It turned out to be a fruitful question in terms of eliciting rich responses in respect of the teacher's construction of 'disadvantage'.

Establishing rapport – an ethical relationship

An important aspect of the success of an interview in generating useful data is establishing rapport, as this encourages the participants to relax and talk in detail (May, 2022, p.153). I chose to conduct the interviews via an online platform, in order to facilitate access for the teachers and also because most schools still had prohibitions on 'unnecessary' visitors to the school building at this time. Although this is a relatively new form of interviewing, recent research suggests that it provides a satisfactory level of rapport and has benefits in providing easy access for both parties in the interview (May, 2022, p.158). I was confident that this was a mode of communication that teachers would have become familiar with during the pandemic, and in my experience it did not seem to create barriers to an open discussion. I hoped that providing a simple and time-efficient means of communication would help teachers feel relaxed and happy to talk to me. Having arranged initial contact with the teachers via email in most cases, and via a telephone call in two cases, I was able to discuss a mutually convenient time to conduct the interview with them. It was important to me that I

communicated a high degree of flexibility in terms of arranging a time that suited each participant. I wished to make clear to them that I was very grateful to them for their participation at this especially difficult time working in schools, and I also saw these communications as part of the process of building the necessary rapport to facilitate the interview.

I was aware that when conducting a piece of research that might be seen as challenging the status quo of school practice, it was possible that participants would be suspicious about my role, the purpose of my research and whether their answers would be treated confidentially, particularly if they thought they might be seen as criticising school management. I was sensitive to the fact that interviewees may change or adapt what they are saying in response to the interviewer's verbal or non-verbal responses (Corbin and Strauss, 2015, p.38). Although I appreciated that the idea of seeking an essentially 'genuine' or 'true' response from an interviewee is inconsistent with a constructionist approach, I nevertheless did not want participants to deliberately hide or change responses because of my behaviour. Therefore, I did my best to help the participants feel comfortable. In my introduction of myself I deliberately emphasised my professional background as a teacher. This was partially in the interests of transparency, but I was also conscious that there were potential benefits to be gained from the teachers perceiving me as 'one of them', a person who understood to some extent what their jobs entailed. In this way I was aware, as Kitching suggests, that my 'former self was sometimes implicit' in the data generated (Kitching, 2011, p.162). I wanted them to feel comfortable, but I also thought that they were more likely to be forthcoming with their ideas and feelings if they felt some point of connection with me. I reflected on Mazzei and Jackson's description of 'out-of-field voices that may both contribute to and

complicate meaning' (2012, p. 748) in relation to some of the interviews. There were instances when the teachers made indirect comments, for example, about the lifestyle of certain families, that seemed like coded class references and appeared to be addressed to me as someone who was like them rather than such families. Similarly, in my introduction of myself, I explained my background in working with students with additional learning needs, and several teachers picked up on this and linked what they said about 'disadvantage' to special educational needs and disability, sometimes making comments such as 'You'll understand what I mean'. Reflecting on these responses and how they affected meaning was important to me in considering the trustworthiness of my analysis (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p.101).

Following the completion of the interview process, as I became more engaged in the theoretical framing of my data, I reflected further on the interviews as encounters with what Levinas calls the face of the Other and thought about the ethical responsibility that I owed to these teachers and hoped that I had listened to them with the individual attention that they deserved.

Data management

One aspect of my ethical responsibility was the practical way in which I handled the data. It was vital that all data generated in the research process were kept confidential and stored in a safe way (BERA, 2018, para.50). All correspondence with participants was via my password-protected university student email account and these emails were then saved as PDF files in the school folders. The interviews were conducted using my University of Birmingham, rather than personal, Zoom account. The data, which consisted of video and audio recordings of

interviews and transcripts (anonymised at the point of transcription) were stored electronically in folders labelled with the school pseudonyms, i.e. School 1 to School 5. These electronic folders were stored via my password-protected laptop and backed up in the Microsoft OneDrive electronic 'cloud' storage system. I was the only person who had access to these electronic folders. All of these procedures helped me to feel confident to reassure my participants that their data would be held safely in line with the BERA Guidelines (2018) and the University of Birmingham Code of Practice for Research (2019-20).

Approach to analysis

In this section I will explain the approach that I took to analysing my data in order to demonstrate an audit of the 'decision trail' (Cheek, 2004, p.1147) that leads from my philosophical approach towards the nature of data to the rationale for the chosen presentation of data in my Findings chapter. First, I will explain my choice of a discourse analysis approach.

Definition

Discourse and discourse analysis are both complex subjects, meaning different things to different people (Cheek, 2004, p.1140). As Mills (2004, p.1) asserts, 'discourse':

> *has perhaps the widest range of possible significations of any term in literary and cultural theory, and yet is often the term within theoretical texts which is least defined*.

Therefore, to be clear, the definition of discourse analysis that informed my methodological approach comes from Hodges *et al.*, (2008, p.571) who define different approaches to

discourse analysis in terms of 'orientation to discourse', 'sources of data' and 'analysis'. Following this schema, my approach has a critical discourse analysis orientation, with the sources of data being: 'Samples of written or oral language/texts: *and* data on the 'uses' of the text in social settings; *and* data on the institutions and individuals who produces and are produced by the language texts', with the type of analysis being a macroanalysis of how discourses 'construct what is possible for individuals and institutions to think and to say' (Hodges *et al*, 2008, p.571).

My aim within this study was to interrogate the relationship between what the teachers did and what they said, including what was not said directly but was perhaps implied. In explaining the role of discourse analysis, Taylor (2013, p.10) asserts it is an approach to research intrinsically tied up with ontological belief. In my exploration of the construction of 'disadvantage' in these schools, I was demonstrating my belief that 'language is not a transparent referent for what it designates' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p.43), but instead that it plays a part in making the social world, through a process of 'constitutive causality'. In exploring teacher responses to their ideas of 'disadvantage' I was interested in learning the detail of their practices in the classroom, and in analysing the way in which, according to Foucault, these practices could 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972, p.49).

I had spent several weeks in 2021 (at the same time as I was thinking hard about data analysis) attempting to eradicate the ground elder that had become endemic throughout the flower bed in my front garden. As any gardener knows, ground elder is a persistent weed, extremely difficult to eradicate owing to the rhizomatic structure of its roots. Any fragment of the root left in the ground can regenerate the plant. Whilst there is a danger here of

mixing gardening metaphors, although I was not digging to find essentialist truths about 'disadvantage', I was confident that a discourse analysis approach would help me to make visible some of the complicated rhizome of attitudes and beliefs related to 'disadvantage' within the schooling system. Following Foucault, I wanted to understand how the discourses around 'disadvantage' were constituted but also concealed (Foucault, 1972).

Finding my way to poststructuralist discourse analysis

Whilst critical discourse analysis comes in different forms, my strongest orientation was always towards an approach which was sympathetic to contradiction and multiplicity and did not suggest that there was only one possible reading of a set of data (Cheek, 2004, p.1147). It was this that led me a specifically poststructuralist approach to discourse. As Fawcett says:

> *The use of poststructuralist analytical processes and techniques will produce many different readings of the texts. These readings will variously concentrate on recurring themes, contradictions, and the identification of patterns in the ways in which participant experiences are articulated. Readings will also place emphasis on absences, avoidances, inconsistencies, and contradictions* (Fawcett, 2008, p.4).

I felt that the contradictions in the teachers' accounts needed to be respected as part of an ethical approach to the data in which I made an honest attempt to make sense of it without closing it down and containing it, which could amount to misrepresentation. Foucault's emphasis on power and subjectivity did not speak directly to my concern with the ethical aspect of teacher responses to 'disadvantage'. However, I was comfortable with the belief that, as Rose explains, Foucauldian discourse analysis:

> *is less concerned with being faithful to a source of authority than with working within a certain ethos of enquiry, with fabricating some conceptual tools that can be set to work in relation to the particular questions that trouble contemporary thought and politics* (Rose, 1999, p.5).

I was happy therefore to adopt an 'ethos of enquiry' that problematised 'disadvantage'. In terms of 'conceptual tools', Foucault's claim that 'all is surface' (Foucault, 1972, cited in Scheurich, 1994, p.303) helped to reinforce my belief in the efficacy of looking at the 'exteriority' of discourse, the micro practices of the everyday (Foucault, 1971, p.12) that could contribute to an understanding of what was happening in schools and how teachers were implicated within this.

But they duck the political questions!

I was aware that the poststructuralist philosophers have sometimes been criticised for being apolitical and thus having little to contribute in terms of challenges to educational inequity and the advancement of social justice. Fawcett outlines the critique commonly offered:

> *As everything becomes plural, all claims are relative and none can be seen to claim validity. It therefore becomes difficult to take an ethical position and to recognize and address social justice* (Fawcett, 2008, p.5).

If this were the case, such an approach would not be suitable for my study which was motivated initially by a concern about the inequality of outcome for 'disadvantaged' students and therefore founded on a desire to understand what was happening in schools in order to challenge it and thus advance social justice. However, I am in agreement with Bacchi (2012, p.22) in her rebuttal of the critique that poststructuralism is built on relativist assumptions.

Whilst arguing that how social issues are presented constitutes the way in which 'the problem' is understood, she is clear that this does not lead to ignoring 'the host of troubling conditions in people's (and peoples') lives.' Instead, she insists that 'lives are lived in specific ways due to the shaping impact of proposals that create particular understandings of 'problems' (Bacchi, 2012, p.22).

Undertaking a poststructural-oriented analysis of 'disadvantage' therefore offered me a means of unpicking the 'shaping impact' of powerful discourses operating within the English schooling system by choosing to focus on *how* disadvantage was being performed in schools, rather than in investigating *why* this was so at a macro structural level. Whilst the how and the why are not entirely self-contained, a focus on the complexity and multiplicity of what happens at the microlevel of the secondary school classroom seemed to offer a potentially more fruitful approach towards understanding this and offering alternatives, rather than repeating broader structural analyses of entrenched social issues that have been rehearsed effectively elsewhere, for example, by Tomlinson (2013) or Apple (2017).

In line with Jackson and Mazzei who talk about working 'in the time that we call 'after coding'' (2012, p.14), I did not want to produce what they describe as a 'simplistic' treatment that could:

> *reduce complicated and conflicting voices to analytical "chunks" that can be interpreted free of context and circumstance* (Mazzei and Jackson, 2012, p. 745).

Therefore, whilst acknowledging the need to organise my data in a way that was an honest representation of what the teachers had said, I did not adopt a traditional thematic coding approach. I was concerned that I might lose the important contradictions and 'doubleness' of my data through sorting it into descriptive themes.

With thanks to Carol Bacchi

The method of policy analysis created by Carol Bacchi known as 'What is the problem represented to be' (WPR) (Bacchi, 2009), despite being designed for use with written policy, modelled an approach which was consistent with my ontological and epistemological position and influenced the way in which I chose to engage with my data. Bacchi is keen that her WPR approach is thought of as 'an open ended mode of critical engagement, rather than as a formula' (Bacchi, 2012, p.23), but nevertheless she offers a clear method of discourse analysis which can be utilised by a researcher interrogating a policy. This involves considering six questions in relation to the policy (Bacchi, 2009, p.2), to problematise the way in which the issue is represented. The questions asked cover firstly what the problem is according to the policy, what assumptions underlie this representation and how it has come about. They then move to considering the possible silences within this representation, what the effects of the representation are, and whether these current representations might be questioned or replaced. Whilst I did not ultimately use Bacchi's method, these questions helped me to frame my own understanding of how 'disadvantage' is problematised in schools and the effects that this has, and this way of looking at data underpinned my approach.

Transcription

Initial transcription was done by uploading the interview audio tapes into the Microsoft Word automatic transcription tool and checking this against the video recordings. This produced a mainly accurate transcription of words, depending on the person's accent, with just a few odd phrases produced. It did, however, require a considerable amount of

correction of sentence punctuation as it often confused the end of sentences with speakers pausing, and as my participants were thinking through what they wanted to say in the process of speaking, there were a lot of pauses. My point here is not to produce a detailed account of the finer points of transcription, but rather to note that the meaning of language is easily changed by a full stop in the wrong place. Sometimes as I listened back to the original video recordings, I realised that the tone or emphasis of the speaker had been lost in translation and I needed to go back to the transcript to try to make this clearer to myself, e.g. by using italics or quotation marks, to aid the process of interpretation. This heightened my sensitivity to the issues of the representation of other people's voices. My primary responsibility as an ethical researcher was to record the words of my participants accurately, but I saw how easily each stage of the analysis was open to slight shifts in meaning. This realisation emphasised to me my responsibility to handle data carefully, but also reminded me that any voices heard are filtered through the methods used to gather them. I was reminded that all accounts are curated and that there is no pure presentation of voice in research. This reflection was relevant to a consideration of the trustworthiness of my research.

Making my research trustworthy

As I was working within an interpretivist paradigm, the idea of 'trustworthiness' is relevant to the evaluation of this study rather than the concepts of 'validity' and 'reliability' as understood within positivist-orientated research (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p.92). I attempted to underpin the trustworthiness of my research by firstly ensuring the 'congruence between the research question, methods, data and analytical processes' as

advised by Savin-Badin and Howell (2013, p.477), and also by ensuring that any changes needed owing to the non-linearity of the research process have been recorded in this narrative. In the light of this interpretivist approach, the fact that my interpretation of the data may vary from that of somebody else is not in itself a problem in need of fixing (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p.95). Instead, I aimed to adopt a reflexive practice in terms of considering my design choices, my interaction with participants and in consideration of alternatives to my interpretations.

Acknowledging my positionality in the research

One aspect of trustworthiness is to be reflective about one's own positionality in the research and to consider the possible effects of this. It is the nature of social research that it is conducted by humans with personal values and assumptions and to pretend that these can be eliminated feeds the 'mythology of 'hygienic' research' critiqued by Oakley (1993, p.242). Whilst each methodology brings its own worldview, biases, and assumptions, I recognised that as the researcher I brought my individual versions of these things to the research (Corbin and Strauss, 2015, p.46). The trustworthiness of this project relies partially on a demonstration of a reflexive approach to the research, using Archer's (2007, p.11) definition of reflexivity as a regular consideration of myself in relation to my social context and vice versa.

This exercise of reflexivity has required me to acknowledge my own values and motivations, which have been influenced by many years working in education to support the success of young people with additional learning needs. Within English schools the word 'inclusion' is often used as if its meaning and effects are clear and undisputed, yet even a cursory review

of the academic literature (e.g. Tomlinson, 2017; Slee, 2018; Ainscow; 2020) added to my own practical experience of working in schools and local authorities shows that this is far from being the case. The relevance of this to my study of 'disadvantage' was the way in which it made me sensitive to the potential complexity of the taken for granted and a suspicion that it is often the traditionally less powerful students who are served least well by the status quo of what is offered in the school system, regardless of the rhetoric.

A specific influence on my thinking around 'disadvantage' was my understanding of the way in which additional learning or emotional needs are framed within the medical or social models of disability (Oliver, 1983). In line with the social model of disability in which the focus is moved from 'within person' factors to external disabling forces, my starting position in this study was that all the underachievement of 'disadvantaged' students should probably not be attributed entirely to what they bring to the school environment. Instead, the way that the school system operates in relation to these young people should be closely scrutinised as potentially contributing to the acknowledged gap in attainment between this group of students and their peers. Also connected to the social/medical model debate was my belief that individual students had a right to receive appropriate teaching and support without having to rely on a 'label' linked to diagnostic criteria. Having worked specifically in the field of literacy difficulties/dyslexia for several years I was very aware of the failure in many schools to cater for the needs of all students. An official discourse of 'personalisation' (DfE and DoH, 2015) often conflicted with more powerful discourses of attainment. I knew that my personal views could encourage a tendency to look for and find data which confirmed my existing opinions and ignore those which contradicted them (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p.96). I tried to minimise this risk by being aware of it and by deliberately

looking for a multiplicity of teacher views, concentrating on differences and tensions and scrutinising my own responses for judgement. In doing this I followed Fawcett's description of poststructural discourse analysis:

> *Differences and tensions within and between texts are also studied in detail and the researcher engages in an ongoing interpretative process, simultaneously and reflexively reading the text in association with their own positioning* (Fawcett, 2008, p.4).

The process: identifying teacher 'work'

Having transcribed the interviews and checked with my participants as promised in my ethical process that they were happy with the accuracy of the transcripts, I began reading and re-reading them, to make myself as familiar with them as possible (May, 2022, p.161) and to carry on the process of analysis that had already begun to happen as I was completing the interviews. The lack of linearity in the process of analysis was striking to me. As I re-read the transcripts the question that kept recurring was: What did the teachers think they were doing in relation to their 'disadvantaged' students? An idea took root of using this question as a focus for interrogating my data in terms of teacher 'work'. In reflecting on this idea of 'work', other questions appeared. What types of work did teachers attribute to themselves? What did this work involve for them? The first concept of poststructuralism that had appealed to me was that this approach asked questions of 'how', rather than 'why' things happened in the way that they did. This gave me a new approach to analysing the interviews. I was looking for examples or moments that showed the self-attributed work that was going on. I went back to my transcripts scanning them for verbs and phrases that

could be described as work and highlighting and recording them. I was looking at the surface of what teachers told me, thinking about how the practices that they described constituted work for them. Once I had completed the highlighting, I went through each transcript and created a new document for each school containing my initial thoughts on the work that I thought that the teachers were describing and adding supporting quotations into these documents.

Looking at my interview transcripts in terms of work, enabled me to start making those connections between how ideas, for example, of social class, were being performed in the classroom. If a teacher told me that she needed to fill the gaps in students' experience left by their parents' lack of educational qualifications, then that suggested how her ideas of social class were being enacted through her interactions with her students. When similar ideas were repeated by teachers in other schools, it did not tell me that every teacher would hold this view, but it indicate something about how ideas about social class were being reproduced in these settings.

Seeing, sorting, saving, and changing work

Having scanned the data in terms of teacher work I found that certain ideas were repeating and emerging in my own interpretation of what kind of work was going on. I decided that the teacher work could be represented according to several broad categories: 'seeing and sorting' work and 'saving and changing' work. The idea of 'seeing' work emerged from what teachers told me about the material practices that were in place in their schools to identify the official 'disadvantaged' group, i.e. those eligible for Pupil Premium. Practices were similar across the five schools, and it was clear that this PP group of students was highly

visible to all the teachers in their everyday practice and that this visibility would have effects on teachers as well as students. 'Sorting' work covered the ambivalence that I found in the teachers' accounts when they struggled with the fact that the official PP category did not align fully with their own ideas of what constituted 'disadvantage'. 'Sorting' also spoke to the tension that teachers seemed to be expressing about whether they should think about or respond to 'disadvantaged' students (whoever they thought they were) in a way that was the same or different to other students. 'Saving' work was to represent the ways in which teachers seemed to position themselves as having the responsibility and the power to save students from the lives that their 'disadvantaged' status might otherwise determine for them. The final type of work I identified was 'changing' work. This was related to the 'saving' work, but focused more specifically on what was seen to be required in order for students to be changed into successful products of the schooling system.

This was a fruitful approach in helping me to describe what I found to be happening in schools, mediated through the accounts of the teachers, but also connected with the realisation that had come during the interviews that there was an important ethical dimension to what the teachers were doing. It was important to me that I did not simply create a thematic analysis by another name. This led me to explore the idea of 'ethical work' and thus to use the work of Levinas and Derrida to theorise my findings.

A footnote - drawing pictures and 'moments of glow'

Throughout the period of completing my PhD I drew pictures that expressed my reactions to what I was experiencing in the research. I have included a couple of these relevant to my experience of the process below.

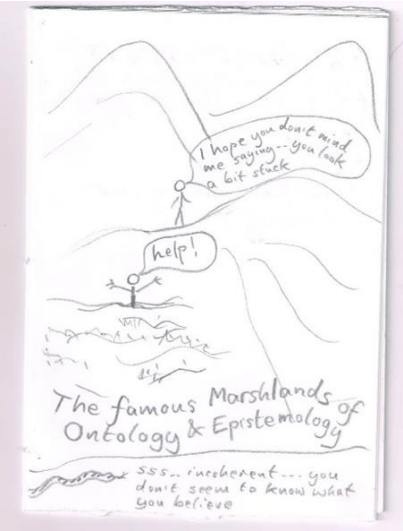


Figure 3: The Marshlands of Ontology and Epistemology



Figure 4: Cuddling up to my data

Part of the process of analysis for me was drawing pictures inspired by words or phrases used by teachers in the interviews. Drawing pictures of key concepts or striking phrases helped me to distil my ideas in the tradition of the 3-minute thesis or the elevator pitch. I have included some of these pictures within the body of this text. These are not included for their artistic merit, but rather as an addition to my description of the process. Some phrases presented themselves as images very viscerally, such as when one PP Lead explained that 'as a Senior Leadership Team we crawl all over the school'. This was an example of a moment that provoked a physical reaction in me, a tiny shiver down the spine, and a hyper-alertness to what was said next. This phenomenon is summed up well by MacLure (2010, p.282) who talks about moments that 'glow' in research and offer insight into a situation. Sometimes these 'moments of glow' in interviews were important because they summed up what several others had said, albeit in a more memorable way, but at other times they were striking because of their individuality, for example in the description of a specific encounter

with a student. Often these phrases would be used in a drawing, some of which I used to present my research at a conference.

Sometimes I understood that the images I drew expressed ideas that I had not quite worked out verbally. The PhD required communication in written form, but at times when this felt too hard, a picture enabled me to record something that felt intuitive rather than entirely thought through and contributed to the process of working out ideas. The non-linear nature of visual representation was helpful to me in holding ideas in a way that felt generative rather than closed. In reflecting on my visual responses to what I heard I realised that these were always inflected by my personal cultural history. Years of sitting in church listening to readings from the Bible made me sensitive to mentions of the messianic. When teachers talked about 'enlightening' students I could not help but be reminded of Holman Hunt's Light of the World painting, while 'keeping a mindful eye' summoned Bentham's panoptican and Margaret Attwood's Gilead. Yet I was aware that someone else viewing the images would not necessarily share the same cultural references. I liked the idea of the openness of an image to interpretation by those viewing it and working in this way seemed appropriate to a poststructural orientation.

The theoretical framework – ethical work, using Derrida and Levinas

Finding theory and noticing the ethical dimension

Whilst the identification of teacher 'work' seemed an effective means for helping me describe the teachers' construction of 'disadvantage', it took some time to identify the

theoretical framework(s) that could help me make deeper sense of the data. I was looking for a framework that would, as Silverman suggests (2017, p.110), 'generate a series of directions' for the research rather than act as a constraint. I was convinced of the need to avoid adding on theory for the sake of it, of applying a little 'intellectual hairspray' (Hey, 2003, cited in Reay, 2004, p.432), and certainly to avoid the use of theory 'for the purpose of obfuscation and erudition' (Mazzei and Jackson, 2012, p. 745). There needed to be an intimate connection between the theory and the seeing, sorting, saving, and changing data, so that each illuminated the other.



Figure 5: Welcome to Theoryland

Two things had jumped out at me from the interviews. Firstly, the dominance of deficit discourses about disadvantaged students and their families was evident in many of the interviews. I could see the links here with sociological literature on social class and education, with Bourdieu and reproduction. Using Bacchi, I could see 'what the problem was represented to be' (Bacchi, 2009) in terms of these deficit discourses. The first part of my

research question, about teachers' construction of disadvantage, seemed partially answered, but the second part, about their response to disadvantage, seemed much more complicated. What had struck me right from the beginning as I interviewed teachers, was an overwhelming sense of them being people with a strong desire to 'do the right thing' in their relationships with 'disadvantaged' students. The teachers who participated in my study gifted their time to me, and I identified the same spirit of generosity in their desire to help students whom they perceived as needy. The desire to support the 'disadvantaged' was expressed sometimes in terms of professional responsibility, but more often in terms of a moral responsibility, either at a personal or political level. I never doubted that the teachers I spoke to had the wellbeing of their students at heart, but often, during a half hour interview, I found myself both impressed by the commitment of the teachers to their students, and yet shocked by the casual deficit stereotyping of those students and their families. At the same time, I heard teachers expressing feelings of conflict about their jobs and giving accounts that revealed the conflicting pressures/discourses within which they were working. It was this contradiction and complexity that I wanted to explore using theory, and which led me to examine the data in terms of an additional level of 'teacher work' which I have called ethical work.

'Plugging in' theory

The work of Jackson and Mazzei (2012) was influential on my analysis as they suggested how 'plugging in' to theory could create a framework for thinking beyond a descriptive account of the data. They suggest a way of resisting the primacy of relying solely on participant voices in explaining what is going on in a situation under study. Instead, they describe the

'assemblage' of voices from both data and theory that can interact with each other in a 'constant, continuous process of making and unmaking' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, p.1) that can create new ways of thinking. Within my analysis I have tried to follow their invitation to:

> *decenter both theory and data to see what emerges in the middle of plugging-in, to show the suppleness and overabundance of all voice, and to diffract rather than foreclose thought* (Mazzei and Jackson, 2012, p.747).

My purpose within this analysis was not to make judgements on the teachers about their views or practice or to decide who was performing most 'effectively' in their role. Rather, I aimed to 'think with theory' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, p.vii) to achieve a better understanding of the day-to-day practice in the schools in this study, thus 'disrupting the theory/practice binary' of educational research (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013, p.449). I decided that the theories of both Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas could be 'plugged in' and 'put to work' (Allan, 2004, p.418) on these data to help make sense of the complexity of ethical micro-interactions within the context of the macro-level policy agendas in which these teachers found themselves embroiled. My data show many examples of teachers struggling within the multiple discourses of 'disadvantage', and the theoretical perspectives of both Levinas and Derrida provided tools to help understand these complexities.

Before beginning this study, the work of these two thinkers was unknown to me. As a novice in this area, I felt intimidated by theory, particularly as articulated by French philosophers whose work, to the inexperienced reader, often seemed characterised by density rather than clarity. Gaining familiarity with the concepts involved a slow recursive circling around ideas that eluded pinning down.

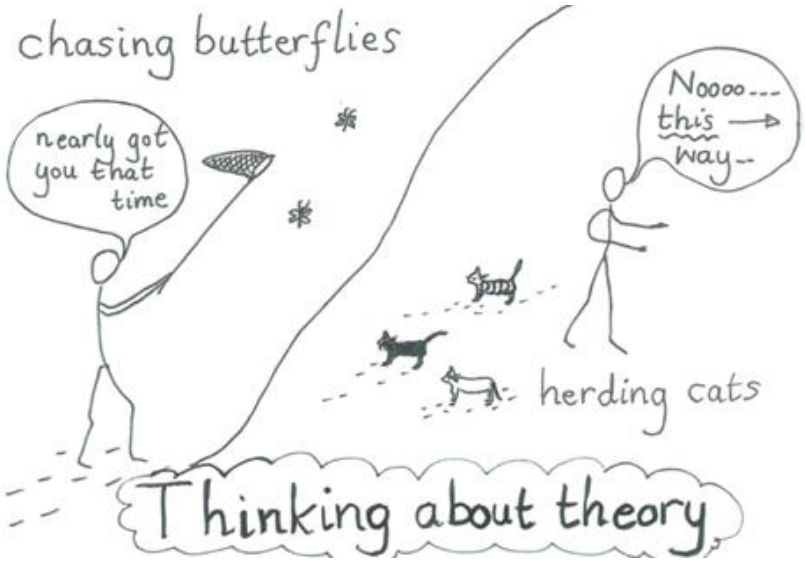


Figure 6: Chasing butterflies and herding cats

Nevertheless, I persisted because Derrida's emphasis on 'variation, contradiction, and paradox' in the poststructuralist tradition (Fawcett, 2008, p.4) and Levinas's centring on the ethical relationship both spoke to the sense of ambivalence and responsibility that I found within the accounts given by the teachers.

Whilst Derrida is commonly regarded as a poststructuralist (although he might have resisted the use of this kind of label as a form of reductive closure), Levinas does not fit entirely comfortably within a poststructuralist frame. Nevertheless, aspects of their work were developed in dialogue with each other, and I recognise a synergy in their ideas around justice and responsibility that is relevant to my analysis of 'ethical work' performed by teachers. I would describe Levinas's work as 'poststructuralist-adjacent' and regard the thinking of these two philosophers as complementary and both rich in insight applicable to my study.

Why Levinas? An ethical response

In Todd's justification of Levinas as a useful theoretician in the field of education, she describes the need to explore the 'day-to-day details of pedagogical encounters to see what they might offer in putting forth an understanding of education as a site of *implied* rather than *applied* ethics' (2003, p. 29). Whereas most discussions of ethics in education concern themselves with the application of a set of ethical 'rules' to particular situations, thus coming to education 'from the outside' (Todd, 2003b, p.28), Levinas is not concerned with the application of rules, but instead, his 'novel idea of human subjectivity' (Zhao, 2016, p.324) makes his work highly relevant to the educational field in which individuals are constantly being confronted with an 'Other' to whom they are obligated to respond.

I will argue that Levinas's description of totalising discourses illuminates the discourses of 'disadvantage' that I found to be operating in the schools in my study and highlights the potential negative effects of these discourses on students and teachers within the school system. However, whilst acknowledging the potential 'totalising violence' (Levinas, 1969) of discourses of otherness and deficit found within the seeing, sorting, saving, and changing work that these teachers ascribed to themselves, I will also explore instances in which teachers described disruptions to their thinking which challenged their own practice. These disruptions to the powerful embedded discourses often seemed to be caused by the teachers catching glimpses of what Levinas describes as the 'face of the Other' (1969, p.199), which gave them pause for thought. I will argue that, far from being a piece of abstract theorising removed from the concerns of the everyday workings of a school, an understanding of Levinas's philosophy of 'absolute alterity' (1969, p.36) offers a means of

using theory to help understand these encounters in the classroom and the impact on teachers' practice.

Why Derrida?

Undecidability and the aporia

I decided to 'plug in' Derrida's idea of the state of 'undecidability' (Caputo, 1997, p.137) to explore how teachers experienced the ethical decision-making required of them in their everyday work as they negotiated the complex matrix of 'moral obligation, pastoral care, efficiency and attainment outcomes' described by Craske (2018, p.527). The sense of tension and contradiction within the teachers' narratives was evident to me as soon as I started the interviews, so I knew that I needed to find theory that cast some light on this. The teachers consistently expressed a belief in the individuality of students, but nevertheless often talked about them in terms of a group identity. There was an element of confusion over the sameness or difference of the 'disadvantaged' students from their peers. Equally, the teachers often seemed conflicted over whether they should be *treating* their 'disadvantaged' students the same or differently from others. Reading Allan's writing about Derrida's concept of the 'aporia' applied to aspects of 'inclusive' schooling alerted me to the idea of the 'double contradictory imperatives' (Allan, 2004, p.426) that teachers could be experiencing in their responses to 'disadvantaged' students.

The nature of the aporia

The meaning of the word 'aporia' has been described in different ways. Burbules begins with the etymology of the word aporia: 'a-poros means lacking a poros: a path, a passage, a way', and goes on to describe how this can feel:

> *Aporia is an experience that affects us on many levels at once: we feel discomfort, we doubt ourselves. We may ask, 'What do I do?', 'What do I say?', 'What's wrong with me?' An aporia is a crisis of choice, of action and identity, and not only of belief. When I have too many choices, or no choices, I don't have a choice; I'm stuck. I don't know how to go on* (Burbules, 2000, p.173).

It has also been interpreted as meaning an impasse, 'a non-way along which one can walk no further' (Allan, 2008, p. 80). Allan points to multiple aporia present in schools, which present 'dual responsibilities' to teachers, e.g. the requirement to raise attainment and promote inclusion, or to keep students with challenging behaviour within school, while also ensuring the safety of staff and students (Allan, 2008, p.81). Derrida thought that it was this state of impasse, of not knowing where to go, which was necessary in order to generate ethical decisions, writing in his discussion of the distinction between law and justice:

> *A decision that didn't go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process. It might be legal; it would not be just.* (Derrida, 1990, p.963).

What is important and relevant to my data in Derrida's conception of the ordeal of the undecidable is that although it involves experiencing a feeling of impasse, it does not result in a state of frozen inactivity. Rather, it provokes decision-making in the face of contradictory demands, responding to the urgency of decisions in the real world; 'Ethical decisions cannot

wait – a decision *has* to be made' (Edgoose, 2001, p.129). Therefore, as I began to analyse the interview transcripts, I decided to scan them for aporia, looking for examples where either teachers were expressing their own recognition of contradictory imperatives in their setting/practice in the response to 'disadvantaged' students, or examples where I felt that there were conflicts or competing pressures evident in what they described to me. According to Derrida's thinking, aporia should not be thought of as binary opposites, in which one, once chosen, can replace the other, but rather that one continues to 'haunt' the other: 'the undecidable remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost – but an essential ghost – in every decision' (Derrida, 1990, p.965).

The aporia within seeing, sorting, saving and changing work

The discourse of 'disadvantage' in schools, as made visible in my data, created its own aporia with which teachers struggled. Firstly, should they see these students as the same or different to their peers? Second, should they follow the Pupil Premium policy in respect of their 'disadvantaged' students, or make their own decisions about how to treat them? And third, should they accept their apparent role of changing students to fit the curriculum and the schooling system, or should they try to work with what students brought to the classroom? Within my Discussion chapter I will explore further how I have plugged in the theories of Derrida and Levinas to the data of seeing, sorting, saving and changing work. This process of plugging in will illuminate these three aporia created by the teachers' construction of, and response to, 'disadvantage'. However, first I will present the findings.

CHAPTER 4 - FINDINGS

Teacher work - Seeing, sorting, saving, and changing work

As explained in the Methodology chapter, the findings of my study are presented here within organising categories of the 'seeing', 'sorting', 'saving', and 'changing' work that I perceived the teachers to be doing in relation to their 'disadvantaged' students. The seeing work section comes first, and it covers the ways in which this group of students and their 'disadvantaged' status was made, and kept, visible to teachers. I then present evidence of the sorting work that I found teachers doing in the light of the unease that they felt about the official classification of students as 'disadvantaged' based on their Pupil Premium status. Where the presentation of these students did not match their personal construction of 'disadvantage', I found them to be exercising their own mental sorting process in deciding which students were 'really' disadvantaged. Both the seeing and the sorting work offer evidence, therefore, in relation to the first part of my research question, i.e. how teachers construct 'disadvantage'. Within the final section of the chapter, I have included data which show how the teachers felt they needed to try, through education, to save students (by changing them) from the unsuccessful lives that the teachers feared the students would otherwise experience. This evidence of saving and changing work is particularly relevant to addressing the second part of the research question, i.e. how teachers respond to their construction of 'disadvantage'. It should be noted that this way of sorting the data was not entirely clearcut. There was often overlap between the different kinds of 'work' identified in

the teachers' accounts, as the ways in which the students were 'seen' were mixed up with how they were 'sorted', and it was the particular construction of 'disadvantage' by each teacher which influenced why and how they thought the students needed to be 'saved' and 'changed'. Whilst there were certain ideas which were repeated frequently by different teachers, they of course did not all share the same views and I have tried to represent this divergence in views faithfully where it occurred. In addition, as explained in the Methodology chapter, individual teachers' views often seemed to include significant areas of contradiction and tension, and this has been highlighted as seems appropriate.

Seeing work: we know who you are

The first section of this chapter is concerned with the seeing work being undertaken by teachers. Included here is evidence of the kinds of systems that the schools had in place that kept the group of students who were known as the 'disadvantaged' constantly visible to the staff. This seeing work was relevant specifically to the students who qualified for Pupil Premium, and therefore fell into the official OfSTED - determined designation of 'disadvantaged'. Using the systems described below by the teachers enabled all the teaching staff to know who these students were.

The effects of visibility – keeping an eye on them

As being 'disadvantaged' is a constructed category that would not be immediately obvious to teachers, schools required the use of certain technologies to make these individuals identifiable to staff. The difficulty in immediately perceiving the difference of this group of students was expressed by one of the teachers in School 4:

And sometimes they might not, you might not see anything, they might fly under the radar. Because just because you're disadvantaged doesn't mean you have to kind of have a big banner on your head that says, 'hello I'm disadvantaged'. (R.E. teacher, School 4)

The teacher's choice of words of 'flying under the radar' suggested that he thought that this would not be a good outcome and it was important that it should not happen. Although the students did not have banners flying over their heads, there were a range of practices in schools which operated to make sure that the 'disadvantaged' students were constantly 'seen' by their teachers. All the schools in the study had systems that normalised the increased visibility of these students to the staff. When the teachers were asked the question about how they knew who the 'disadvantaged' students were, all of them referred to some type of database linked to electronic registers. This typically put a coloured dot next to the student's name, so that every time the student entered a class their teacher was presented with their 'disadvantaged' status while completing the register. Whilst the particular systems used in different schools sometimes varied in name, the mechanisms and effects were the same. The Music teacher in School 2 explained how the system worked in his school:

we use a particular platform called Class Charts, which enables us to not only map the class seating,… but also to store documents, including their SEN profile, which will also then map over onto the seating plan of who these particular pupils are, in a sort of non-invasive highlighting manner. So, there will just be a simple coloured box in the corner with the PP icon, let's say, or a coloured box, just to highlight this person is let's

say PP, disadvantaged or even free school meals is also on there separately too.

(Music teacher, School 2)

As described above, these coloured markings were not limited to 'disadvantaged' students but were also used to identify other categorisations of students, such as those classed as having special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEN/D), or those 'looked after' by the local authority (LAC). None of the teachers interviewed voiced an opinion about this system of identification, other than to report how helpful it was to them in getting to know the students in their classes. For example:

Yes, so we are given the data straight away, so before we even meet our classes, we have the data available. So that's really useful.… I think it's a whole school thing really… there has to be some way of keeping a track on them in your lesson. So, in our faculty we'll do things like we'll seat them in a specific place in the room so that… until you get to know them as individuals. (Humanities teacher, School 1)

The teacher noted that this process had taken place before she even met her classes, so the identification of those students as 'disadvantaged' was firmly established. As she said, 'it's a whole school thing', which required those students to be constantly visible. She also suggested that this 'seeing' process was a step that was necessary so that teachers could know who the students were in terms of what category they belonged to, before they were known as individuals. The practice appeared to be interpreted positively by this teacher, who seemed to accept without question that 'there has to be some way of keeping a track on them'. Similarly, the Music teacher quoted above chose to describe the identification of these students as happening in a 'non-invasive…manner', which appeared to signal his approval of how this system was being enacted.

In School 1, the DT and PP Lead teacher described an additional process that he had devised of making 'disadvantaged' students visible to the whole staff:

> *So, what I did with my faculty, I got all the Pupil Premium photos in a PowerPoint in one of my training sessions, and then rolled that out to the whole school. …. So we'd have a rolling PowerPoint, behind the speaker with 'Hi, my name is…' as people came in. Just so that we can see the face rather than just a name, so yeah that worked well, having them at the forefront of people's minds.* (DT and PP Lead teacher, School 2)

This process could be seen in two ways. Initially it seems as if he is motivated by a desire to humanise the process of categorisation by making the faces of the students visible in this way. However, equally, his comments that this process worked well to keep them at 'the forefront of people's minds' could be interpreted simply as a desire for increased efficiency in making them more memorable and thus consolidating their categorisation.

'It could have been a bit stigmatising' – concerns about students 'seeing' themselves

Some schools went further and transferred the practice of identifying students from an electronic field, on a register visible only to staff members, to a tangible material form in the classroom, with the 'disadvantaged' students given books or folders of a different colour to their peers, or with a coloured sticker on the front. The stated purpose of this practice was to make it easier for the teacher when organising the positioning of these students in the classroom via a seating plan, or when marking their work away from the classroom. The colour of the book or folder or the sticker attached enabled the teacher to apply efficiently

any relevant policies in respect of responding to the students, e.g. the order of marking of students' work.

Some schools also had policies that linked seating plans to student designation as 'disadvantaged' or according to other categories. This is described later in the 'Changing work' section, but it begs the question of how aware students were of their 'disadvantaged' status. As this study has not included students' voices the answer to this is not clear, but it was something that concerned some of the teachers.

The PP Lead in School 4 was clear that he would not want students to be aware of the classifications that happened for the purposes of school organisation:

> *We're not going to turn around and go, you're disadvantaged or you're not. I don't even think the kids know. I hope they don't, you know, I hope it's just part of…and it's something that's going on behind the scenes and we're aware and we're developing them and we're supporting them.* (PP Lead, School 4)

However, the Science teacher in the same school described how the issue of what language to use with students had arisen when some students had been given free revision guides and others questioned why they had to pay for them. One of the effects of this policy was to make the 'disadvantaged' status visible to students as well as staff. The teacher explained this as unavoidable:

> *That had to come up then because the money had come in as a pot to be used to give the Pupil Premium students the revision guides.* (Science teacher, School 4)

The MFL teacher in School 5 also brought up the issue of PP students being given revision guides by the school rather than having to pay for them and how this potentially made them visible to their peers:

…in class they, you know, they don't, they don't shout about it, they don't say I'm Pupil Premium, they want to keep it hush, hush. And sometimes they are quite embarrassed by it. Why are you getting extra books when I'm not, so they…, but the books aren't handed out in a in a public way. Just come to a room to collect the books that you are entitled to. (MFL teacher, School 5)

In School 4 some of the staff had discussed what language would be appropriate to use with students, if it was required. This teacher imagined what the reaction might be if a student found that they were described as 'disadvantaged':

If you say to a student, you're disadvantaged, do they interpret it the same way that staff are? Do they see it as, why, is there something wrong with me compared to another student?...

So, if you're saying to students from a disadvantaged area, you're disadvantaged, they're going to think well, God, no I'm not, I come from a house, I've got all my equipment and my clothes. Why are you saying, I'm disadvantaged? I'm still in a room with all the other students. (Science teacher School 4)

The effect of trying to put herself in the shoes of one of the students had caused this teacher to examine what the effects of this discourse of 'disadvantage' might be on students. The imaginary student here sees the things that she has in common with her peers, not what is different, and potentially resents the giving of this label by a teacher, which stigmatises her as 'other'. The words that this teacher put into the mouth of her imaginary student, that she is 'still in a room with all the other students' perhaps could be interpreted as expressing the feeling of the teacher, that dealing with the student in front of her at that moment was her primary concern, rather than thinking about their categorisation as 'disadvantaged' or not.

This teacher was aware of the potential stigmatising effect of labelling students, and wished to avoid this:

> *When you think like that, you think oh yeah, well, actually, we're almost labelling you as there's a problem with you, and it's not necessarily a problem with the student, it's a problem with the family and the background they've come from that classifies them as whether they're going to be an advantaged or a disadvantaged student, not there's an issue with that student.* (Science teacher School 4)

It is interesting that whilst she wishes to avoid stigmatising individual students the teacher nevertheless still falls into a position of stigmatising the students' families and background; this is where the 'problem' lies. Perhaps it is the reality of having the students there 'in the room' with her which creates a counterbalance to easy stereotyping. If families are not 'in the room', and it seemed from my discussions with teachers that families rarely did have much presence in these schools, then they could much more easily become the stigmatised 'other'.

The practice of making the books of 'disadvantaged' students easily identifiable arose as a subject in several interviews, and there were some differences evident in how happy the staff were with this practice. When asked whether students ever remarked on the use of different coloured books, and what her response would be if they did, one teacher said:

> *We make up some rubbish. We go, oh, I've run out of red ones…*
>
> *…we in no way want to make the pupils feel, you know, aware of that, because it could bring the embarrassment attached to that, which is just absolutely not productive for a good learning environment and the pupil feeling confident*. (English teacher, School 1)

In this statement the teacher noted the potential impact of pupils finding out that their books had been separated in this way, acknowledging that this would be troubling to her. It seemed that her concern was that students would be embarrassed to think that their peers or their teachers were regarding them as different in some way and that this might affect their learning and confidence. Other staff were clearer that this material and visible technology of categorisation made them feel uncomfortable. Whilst apparently accepting the identification of 'disadvantaged' students on their class registers as a helpful effect of categorisation, when this was made material in the classroom, they were less happy. Whilst the first teacher was confident that students were not aware of the practice, a teacher in another school reported something different. Her school had adopted a policy previously of using stickers to identify the books of 'disadvantaged' students, but this had 'faded away', according to the teacher, who said that:

> *a lot of students asking questions about why their books had stickers on, it felt like it could have been a bit stigmatising.* (English/Media Studies teacher, School 3)

It is interesting that there did not seem to have been a clear distinction between the implementation of the policy of colour coding books in School 3 and the change in practice, but rather it is described as 'fading away'. Similarly, the Maths teacher in School 1 explained the school policy about identifying books according to colour for the purposes of keeping the 'disadvantaged' students visible in class and when marking, but at the same time admitted that they did not follow this practice in the Maths department:

> *It's definitely been in place in the last 2-3 years. I think that's what we're looking at, and I must say we don't do it in Maths because of the nature of our books and how we have them. I know in other departments they have a book and their book lives in a*

folder. The students who are disadvantaged have different coloured kind of folders that stand out and then every other student is mixed together so maybe our disadvantaged students have yellow and everyone else has green or something, so it's very easy for the teacher to see who's who, but the students don't catch on. (Maths teacher, School 1)

Again, it seemed that while the instant visibility of students via colour coding on the electronic registers was universal, where there were other practices of visibility that were not automated in this way, there was potential for slippage from official policy led by teachers' own judgements.

'Working within an inspection framework'

One of the factors that seemed powerful in reinforcing the ways in which teachers were expected to 'see' students, was the influence of the OfSTED inspection process. One teacher reflected on the way that his school identified 'disadvantaged' students, choosing to use the term 'deprived' to describe them. In this explanation the teacher considered how the practices of seeing 'disadvantaged' students as a distinct group had developed:

I suppose from a systems point of view in school then that is how school kind of decides or identifies deprivation, and that is kind of fuelled again by inspection. So, when we get inspected, special needs books, SEN pupil books, and Pupil Premium books will be looked at, and so you know, there's a bit of working within a kind of inspection framework as well. (French teacher, School 3)

The seeing of students according to specific groups thus mirrored the categorisations of the inspection regime, indicating that it was not just teachers' professional judgement which was

being used in considering how students were grouped or taught. It would seem from this comment that even when the inspectors were not physically present, the teachers were subject to the demands of a spectral inspection regime. The teachers knew that the achievements of students falling into the specified groups of SEN/D and Pupil Premium would be scrutinised, therefore a pressure was created to think of the students in terms of these categories.



Figure 7: Does my gap look big in this?

The School 1 PP Lead described the way in which the expectation around attainment had increased for the 'disadvantaged' students:

> *Our focus has completely changed from 10 years ago. It was about the D/C border. They were the ones that we were targeting in terms of the disadvantaged to get grades 4 or 5. Now with a higher intake, especially the HPA disadvantaged students, that's the new challenge that we are facing.* (PP Lead, School 1)

It is clear from this comment that in this school the 'disadvantaged' students were not always seen as a homogenous group. They were sliced into thinner categories, such as 'HPA' (higher prior attainment), based on the need to demonstrate, for the purposes of accountability, that

they were making the 'expected' progress from prior starting points. The seeing work of teachers required them to be aware of these sub-categories of students, because enabling these students to make expected progress was the measure by which their effectiveness as teachers would be judged.

Sorting work: we know what you are

In this section I will consider the data that show that one of the types of work that teachers were undertaking was to sort out who they considered their 'disadvantaged' students to be. This sorting work was an integral part of the process of the teachers' construction of 'disadvantage', by which they worked out what 'disadvantaged' meant to them. Other categorisations of students used in school, such as gender or ethnicity, usually referred to visible differences, and therefore their constructed nature tended to remain hidden, rendering the process of categorisation itself unproblematic to teachers. In contrast, the Pupil Premium sorting involved a clearly arbitrary line being drawn between students, based on a measure of their family income. The crudeness of this measure provoked questions for teachers, as they began to consider what 'disadvantage' meant to them.

'It's almost like a line in the sand'

As discussed in the Methodology chapter, my interview questions were phrased in a deliberately open way as I was interested in finding out what ideas each teacher was bringing to the discussion of 'disadvantage'. Some of the participants asked directly in the interviews whether I wanted them to talk about the Pupil Premium students only. In answer I encouraged them to tell me about any students that they considered to be 'disadvantaged'.

The dilemmas and tensions inherent for my participants within this work of sorting soon began to become apparent. For many of the teachers, the discomfort was voiced initially as a concern about boundary issues in relation to which students were counted as 'disadvantaged'. They were being told who the relevant students were by the government, i.e. those who were eligible for Pupil Premium, and one PP Lead commented 'of course PP and disadvantaged kind of go hand in hand' (PP Lead, School 3). However, evidence from the interviews suggested that some teachers felt uneasy about the simple equation between 'disadvantage' and family income, with the use of this 'funny word' (as described by my fellow school governor) evoking a measure of confusion for some. This was exemplified by the comment of the Maths teacher in School 1 when analysing the school data on the PP students:

> *I looked through the kids' names, and it's like actually they were all really highflyers and you know sometimes you wonder why they were on the disadvantaged list. So obviously that was based on family background so it could be from years ago, but actually the way they're presenting in school, I wouldn't really identify them as a disadvantaged sort of group.* (Maths teacher, School 1)

This teacher seemed to be saying that if students were achieving highly in school, then they did not fit his mental image of 'a disadvantaged sort of group'. Whilst the identification of 'disadvantaged' students was clear and simple in government policy discourse, it was not always so in schools, even when they were following the line of 'disadvantage' meaning Pupil Premium status. Even the creation of a list of students whose family income fell below the appropriate threshold was not straightforward in practice for the schools. Not all parents claimed the free school meals to which their children were entitled, whilst other families

moved to and fro across the line of entitlement, illustrating the shifting ground on which even the apparently objective categorisation of 'Pupil Premium' was located. It troubled some teachers that students could fall into the PP grouping and, and therefore be classed as 'disadvantaged', based on out-of-date information about family income. For example, one teacher told me:

> *So it might be that parents have got very comfortable lives and jobs and are financially sound, but they might, one of them might have been made redundant, so they've accessed Universal Credit and social security and therefore they come up as PP. So, it's, you know, it's quite a crude way of measuring deprivation.* (French teacher School 3)

Similarly, another teacher told me:

> *I actually think that that's not a massively accurate representation of disadvantaged, and there's lots of students who you maybe presume <u>are</u>, because you know about their background, but they actually don't fit the Pupil Premium kind of brackets, whereas some students do fit it, but actually you can't believe they fit it because it was done on something, maybe a couple of years ago.* (P.E. teacher, School 5)

It was common for teachers to give me examples of students who presented to them as 'disadvantaged' in economic terms, but who did not qualify as such under the system. Examples offered included students who told staff that they could not afford resources such as revision books or correct school equipment such as pens or paper for homework, or articles of school uniform. There were several mentions of the arbitrary nature of the cut-off point that meant one child was classed as 'disadvantaged', whereas another, whose family earned a few more pounds, did not qualify:

I mean I think the trouble with PP is, it's almost like a line in the sand, it's you know up to this point you're PP and beyond this point you're not PP. And actually, I think that the group who are just sort of around that boundary are just as vulnerable and need just as much. (PP Lead School 4)

On the same theme, the PP Lead at School 3 described students who were 'on the cusp of being PP, but not classified as PP'. The use of the word 'cusp' here seems to illustrate well the way in which these binary categories in which students were one thing or another seemed to have become embedded into school culture but also raised concerns for some teachers.

It was interesting that so many teachers were bothered by this issue of categorisation, as the PP funding was not designed to be attached to individual students, so on one level it was immaterial on which side of that line in the sand an individual student fell. However, in practice this was a complicated area as the 'seeing' practices which were based on establishing the visibility of individual students and tracking their progress demonstrate that the resources attached to 'disadvantage' were in fact individualised in a material way. The fact that there was money available to support those identified as 'disadvantaged' in a school system in which resources are limited, may have had an effect on teachers. They were certainly concerned that the right students were identified as beneficiaries of any advantages that might come with the 'disadvantaged' status.

Are these 'the actual kids who are disadvantaged?'

In whatever way the category lines might be drawn by government around 'disadvantage' via the Pupil Premium, it appeared from my data that the urge to essentialise remained strong

amongst teachers, as they sought to identify for themselves the 'real' 'disadvantaged' students.

In School 5, the P.E. teacher ran through all the different groupings of students that were used in her school, such as PP, SEND, young carers, but concluded that these categorisations did not necessarily identify the 'actual' 'disadvantaged' students. In her view, this depended on the knowledge that teachers had of their individual students:

> *All our data is driven by that, when we look into like subsections within our data, we look into those areas…. but these are the actual kids that are disadvantaged? No, but I say that's like a known thing once you're the teacher*. (P.E. teacher, School 5)

In the interviews teachers gave different examples which suggested what their indicators of 'real' 'disadvantage' were, independent of the students' PP status. For example, the P.E. teacher saw a key indicator of 'disadvantage' as having never left the local area, quoting the example of one student:

> *She doesn't come under any category, but I know full well she's, the only time she's pretty much left XXX was when I took her on PGL* (an outdoor activity trip)*. So, all of her family are like immediately there, she knows nothing else of the world, if you like, she's got a very… I know her family life is very hard, but she doesn't fit the PP category, so I see her as disadvantaged*. (P.E. teacher, School 5)

When asked who she thought the 'disadvantaged' students in her classes were, the Geography teacher in the same school answered by describing how PP students were identified by school policy. She demonstrated initial certainty which turned into some confusion as she discussed the issue further. The PP students were made visible in registers in the same way as 'SEND and things like that', and as curriculum lead, she was sent data

'that screens them separately'. Thus far all was clear. 'Disadvantaged' was apparently a word that was not used in her school and, in her opinion, could not be defined clearly:

> *There is no definition for disadvantaged in our school, whereas we can tick a box and say you are eligible for Pupil Premium therefore you are… there must be something, whether it's in your past, 'cause sometimes it is past, isn't it? Or it's something that's happening now and that means that you are entitled to that.* (Geography teacher, School 5)

This teacher apparently did not wish to embark on her own work of sorting, but instead wanted a clear definition so that the box of PP could be ticked in clear conscience without requiring any further decision-making on her part. The PP parameters were based on something objective, 'there must be something', i.e. a measure of family income, whether this was current or in the past, and she seemed to think that this process could be trusted to ensure that sorting work was done fairly.

When prompted to consider the matter further she used the image of an imaginary Venn diagram of PP and students with SEN/D and wondered how 'disadvantaged' fitted with this. She hoped that 'all disadvantaged students would be within the circle of Pupil Premium', but if this was not the case, then that would be a concern for her. She grappled honestly with the meaning of this word 'disadvantaged' and suggested:

> *if you're disadvantaged, does that mean that you are unable to take part in the normal ways of life or the normal school systems?* (Geography teacher, School 5)

'Disadvantage' was conceptualised here potentially as being excluded from 'normality'. In her thinking aloud some interesting assumptions were revealed. She explained that they used the word 'vulnerable' in school, 'but then that might come up because of home life,

which means they probably would be Pupil Premium'. Difficulties in home life that made a student 'vulnerable' were thus associated in her mind with qualifying for PP. She thought that some students could be 'disadvantaged' because of their 'emotional vulnerability', that would make them 'unable to cope with peers or something like that' but thought that these students would be subsumed by the 'SEND' label.

The Assistant Headteacher in the same school, who was acting as the PP Lead, explained how 'by law' the school was required to have its PP strategy on its website, and that the purpose of this was 'to justify what we're actually spending that money on'. He thus appeared to view the 'disadvantaged' group via the lens of the money received for them and the school's legal responsibility to account for this. There were some interesting tensions and contradictions held within what he said:

> *In particular, within the policy, we don't tend to just pick out the PP students, we pick out all of our vulnerable students because PP, we should treat them the same as a SEND student or English as Additional Language-type student, we don't just like to single those particular students out.* (AHT/PP Lead, School 5)

He seemed to be saying that it was important to identify all vulnerable students and to ensure that any group with additional needs was not overlooked. When he talked about treating the PP students 'the same', he seemed to mean that they should be identified as equally different as various other types of student, such as those with SEN/D. He explained that the policy said that students should be known as individuals:

> *And within that policy it basically says know your students as individuals, don't just do everything the same for PP students because ultimately you could have a PP student*

that comes from the affluent area and their needs are totally different. (AHT/PP Lead, School 5)

Yet despite emphasising the need to respond to the individuality of students, he still explained the difference between students in stereotypical terms, i.e. that a PP student from an affluent area would have completely different needs to one from a poor area.

'Some disadvantaged children don't present themselves how you would expect them to'

The issue of stereotyping was brought up by several teachers. The English teacher at School 1 was very clear that she avoided stereotyping students, but nevertheless thought it was important that she knew who the 'disadvantaged' students were so that she could give them 'extra opportunity':

Should I be seeing them as different? I don't think so. I mean, you know, with behavioural issues, you get behavioural issues with disadvantaged pupils, you get behavioural issues with advantaged pupils. And you know I, I follow the guidelines to make sure that we are giving these disadvantaged pupils the extra opportunity. But I don't think that it impacts their personalities, and I think that if we're thinking this person is disadvantaged, so they're going to behave like X, Y and Z, I think that's completely wrong, so no, I don't. (English teacher School 1)

Meanwhile the R.E. teacher in School 4 suggested that 'family circumstances' unrelated to income level could produce disadvantage:

You know you can be financially well off, but if you've got a disruptive family situation, if you've got, to be extreme, domestic violence in the household, something like that, that can put you in a massive disadvantage. (R.E. teacher, School 4)

He also discussed indicators that other teachers might associate with 'disadvantage', such as weaker academic performance, but was clear in rejecting this himself as a marker of 'disadvantage'. He provided the example of a girl in his Y8 class:

I know she's disadvantaged, but she is incredibly bright and works so hard, so for me it would be, you know, like let's say, lethargy, tiredness, potentially, and presenting poorly would be kind of my indicators that that could be a disadvantaged student. (R.E. teacher, School 4)

This girl was officially 'disadvantaged' but did not match his 'indicators', his criteria of presenting behaviours, therefore she became both 'disadvantaged' and not in his eyes. This was typical of the contradictions that seemed to be involved in the 'seeing' and 'sorting' work of teachers.

Another teacher explained that there were students whose 'disadvantage' was hidden because of the way in which they presented themselves in class:

It's quite difficult really 'cause sometimes some disadvantaged children don't present themselves how you would expect them to. Yeah, just because they want to seem like they're similar to their peers and so that it doesn't always show, some pupils don't…, and it's only when you have those conversations that you realise, you know, what they're actually dealing with. (Maths teacher, School 2)

There were other interesting examples given of how teachers had experienced disruptions to their perception of their students. The Maths teacher in School 1 described a mental shift

that could happen when discussing a student with the pastoral team in school and discovering information that would make him think of them as 'disadvantaged' regardless of their PP status:

> *You find a little bit about their backgrounds, and then you kind of make that mental kind of shift in terms of what you're looking at and what your work with them is.* (Maths teacher, School 1)

The P.E. teacher in School 5 described a similar mental re-categorisation on discovering that one of her students was a young carer:

> *I didn't know she was a young carer until a couple of months back. And then my opinion on her changed…. I know that her role is quite a mature role, but PE for her is like she doesn't care about PE and then I actually think well why should she? She's got way bigger fish to fry than this.* (P.E. teacher, School 5)

What is evident here is the way in which knowledge of the student as an individual could have a significant effect on the teacher's sorting of students as 'disadvantaged'.

The citation of deficit discourses – 'I hate talking in generalisations, but…'

One of the most notable aspects of the teachers' construction of 'disadvantage' as they undertook their 'sorting' work was the way in which they often drew on deficit discourses of students and their families. An example of the characterisation of deficit was provided by the PP Lead teacher in School 3, who when asked what the greatest challenge of her role as PP lead was, replied:

> *I think the greatest challenges are the deficits that they arrive at secondary school with, and the research shows us that the biggest gap widens once they're at secondary school…* (PP Lead, School 3)

There were interesting tensions contained within this statement, as the source of the problem was firmly located in the students, i.e. the 'deficits' that they brought with them to school, although she was keen to point out later that this was through 'no fault of their own'. Yet whilst the teacher noted that secondary school was the place where the gap in attainment widened most, this did not lead her to question whether there was anything about the schooling process that might contribute to this effect. Instead, she acknowledged the gap and looked for its source in the students' homes, referencing a potential reason as the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, in which students may have experienced overcrowded and noisy homes, and inadequate access to Wi-Fi and IT equipment with which to engage with schoolwork. She also thought that 'disadvantaged' students were likely to have 'some family members who are less able themselves and not able to support their children in the lockdown learning'. Several other teachers also referred to difficulties that they thought that poorer families might have experienced during lockdown. The pandemic therefore seemed both to have reinforced deficit discourses and stimulated a corresponding sense of responsibility from some teachers to help and support these students.

A language gap

One of the primary means by which teachers sorted the 'really' 'disadvantaged' students was by the size of their vocabulary and the effects that this had on their literacy skills. The

Humanities teacher in School 1 was keen to impress on me that judgements made in school about literacy were based on research, not prejudice:

> *I've done a lot of reading about vocabulary, vocabulary gap, and that kind of language gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and how that kind of just widens and widens and widens by the time they get to secondary school, and I think you sometimes see that manifest in a classroom situation as well. And so, we sometimes have pupils who are disadvantaged that are really, really capable and very, very bright, but don't find it as easy to express themselves eloquently as perhaps a pupil who is a very similar ability, but from a non-disadvantaged background.*
>
> (Humanities teacher, School 1)

The teacher emphasised that she was not suggesting that such a student was not as intelligent as others, but that they were not able to express themselves in a way which made them successful in school. It was interesting that the teacher was clear in her personal judgement that this student was very 'capable' and 'bright' whilst at the same time implying that this is not being manifested in the classroom. The answer for her to this conundrum was to locate the problem in the limited 'vocabulary range' of students, and then for her as teacher to take on the responsibility for reducing this vocabulary gap. This teacher was trying her very hardest in this discussion not to cast negative judgements on students, yet she struggled to avoid it, caught within an educational discourse which privileges students who are able to 'express themselves eloquently' and have a large vocabulary.

‘This type of area’

It was noticeable that many of the teachers referred to the geographical areas in which their schools were located when explaining how they understood ‘disadvantage’. In some cases, teachers made assumptions about students and their families based on where they lived. For example, this teacher linked the area where students lived and the behaviours of their parents:

> *Our area, we’re taking students from XXX, which is one of the most deprived areas in the West Midlands, and we’re also taking students from XXX in the XXX area, so straight away they are disadvantaged demographically because parent engagement is incredibly limited.* (AHT/Geography teacher, School 5)

By describing the students as ‘disadvantaged demographically’ he seemed to imply a causal link between living in a certain area and having parents who did not ‘engage’. This idea of parental engagement was not elucidated any further, other than in making a simple distinction between the PP students and the other students who came from ‘a very affluent area’, so ‘of course, they've had breakfast, et cetera’ unlike PP students for whom ‘Lucozade seems to be the acceptable breakfast’.

The Spanish teacher in School 4 had developed her own ideas of what constituted ‘disadvantage’, based on a range of environmental factors, including where the students lived:

> *If the student hasn't rested well, because, I don't know, there was, they live in a neighbourhood where there was arguments last night or they live near to a pub and there was noise last night, that obviously causes them to be tired in my lessons, so*

their attention will drop massively…. it's all the environment and all the conditions that surround that student. (Spanish teacher, School 4)

The ethnic demographic of the local area was also relevant to her construction of 'disadvantage' for her students:

So, the area where we live and where the school is based, I would say 75% of the population aren't English, but the English people can be quite racist, because I have lived that on my own skin, being Spanish… I've been racistly abused in school by students in school saying go back to your own country and that's their thoughts, so these students try to hide that they do not speak English, or they are not English because of the fear of being different. (Spanish teacher, School 4)

Unlike the previous comment in which location was linked with certain types of expected behaviours of parents, this teacher was pointing to a broader structural issue of racism which would cause the students to be 'disadvantaged'.

Narrowness and constriction – 'in their own sort of little world'

Whilst many of the teachers referred to the physical geographical area in which the students lived, there were also numerous examples through the interviews of reference to the cultural and social space in which the teachers believed the students to live. These aspects of the teachers' beliefs about cultural and social space were expressed via the language they used to describe the lives of the students that they had mentally sorted as 'disadvantaged'. Most notable was the recurring use of images of smallness and constriction. The 'narrow' current existence, and projected future lives that teachers saw for their students was fundamental to the ethical desire to save them. For example, the PP Lead in School 4 used the words

'insular' and 'enclosed' to describe the local culture around the school in which he worked. He talked about his own experience as someone who had taught in different parts of the country, and he saw the area in which this school was situated as particularly marked by insularity and lack of ambition. This led to his desire to compensate for this environment, which he saw as a major contributory factor to the lack of motivation and of aspiration that he attributed to the students. He related this to the historical contingency of students going automatically from school into local employment:

> *Kids came to this school and then there was a factory at the end of the road and that's where they went. You know there was no drive, no ambition, no sort of a wider view.* (PP Lead, School 4)

He saw the environment as creating students without a 'wider view' and felt that students and parents had low expectations of the possibilities of life:

> *This is what goes on in our area, this is what you do, you know, you don't aspire to much.* (PP Lead, School 4)

The Science teacher in School 2 offered an example of the way in which she realised that she sometimes made assumptions about students' lives based on her own ideas of what 'I think of being everyday things', such as having been on an aeroplane:

> *…when they haven't even really left the little, tiny bubble of going home, coming to school, maybe going to the local shops.* (Science teacher, School 2)

In a similar vein the Humanities teacher in School 1 discussed how the students that she thought of as 'disadvantaged':

…live very much in their own sort of little world and they see the same people and they go to the same places, and they might have quite narrow experience and therefore quite narrow context (Humanities teacher, School 1).



Figure 8: The little, tiny bubble

The use of this language of smallness and constriction is informative in helping to understand how the teachers constructed their ideas of 'disadvantage' and in particular how they sorted for themselves those students who they regarded as being 'really' 'disadvantaged'. Another way in which the teachers sorted what they saw as 'disadvantage' was through their perceptions of the students' families.

Social class markers – 'I knew they were eating McDonald's every night'

In some of the accounts of parents as seen through the eyes of teachers, there seemed to be an element of judgement based on social class, with certain behaviours identified as contributing to a 'disadvantaged' status. These references to social class and correlations

with ‘disadvantage’ were not expressed directly. For example, the P.E. teacher in School 5, when discussing her relationship with a particular student said:

> *I've always looked out for her because I know her family, kind of, I've got, you just get an impression. I know, I know what's kind of…it's not <u>not</u> supportive, but it's a bit rough and ready if I can say that…. it's just really, really like quite a colourful home life.* (P.E. teacher, School 5)

The teacher seemed to be struggling, in her hesitations, to avoid direct derogatory judgements on the family, yet she also appeared to be signalling markers of social class that she was expecting me (someone that she perhaps perceived as like herself) to recognise, through the use of the phrases ‘a bit rough and ready’ and ‘a colourful home life’. Later, when discussing a previous school in which she had worked she said:

> *Maybe half the students might have come from…, well, you know, I knew they were eating McDonald's every night. They didn't have cars. The parents didn't work.* (P.E. teacher, School 5)

This was a teacher who presented as kind and concerned about her students on a personal level, but it was clear that this concern was at least partially motivated by class judgement. One of the common markers of a good parent cited by teachers was their involvement with their children’s homework, and sometimes the comments made about homework also seemed to be associated with concealed class judgements. At times a failure to support homework was attributed to a lack of understanding resulting from the parents’ own limited education. In other instances, it was attributed to a lack of time that was a result of working or having time taken up with childcare:

If you've got a single parent family or something, then maybe they're looking after younger siblings so they're tired, or they haven't got their homework because no one is checking 'cause there's other things to do in the household that means that people aren't spending the time with them. (Geography teacher, School 5)

It was interesting that this lack of time tended to be associated for many teachers with the low-income PP families, rather than with educated parents with professional jobs. The lifestyle of the educated middle-class parent, which might be equally time-poor was thus represented as normal rather than problematic.

An interesting example of an indirect reference to social class was provided by the Science teacher in School 4. She discussed working in a 'disadvantaged area' and in the process of talking about the type of student in the school and the type of area also seemed to be sorting herself as a certain 'type' of teacher who would not fit in within all schools:

I don't think I'm the type of teacher that would probably do well in a school with your higher ability student type of thing. I don't think my personality and that would match that style of teaching. (Science teacher, School 4)

In saying that she felt more comfortable in a school with students who were not 'higher ability', she seemed to be eliding living in a 'disadvantaged area' with not having high academic ability. In her reference to 'my personality *and that*' there was perhaps a suggestion that she saw schools as classed environments, in which some elements of the way in which she presented would not be acceptable. There also seemed to be an element of identification with 'disadvantaged' students here, which perhaps helped her to feel that she had useful insight into their experience.

Parenting - the good parent versus the bad parent

As is clear from previous comments, one of the most important ways in which teachers did their 'sorting' work on students was through the judgments that they made about parents. As the category of PP or 'disadvantaged' is determined by parental income, it is hardly surprising that the link with family was very strong in the minds of teachers when they considered the nature of 'disadvantage'. For many of the teachers, 'disadvantage' could be reduced largely to a perceived lack of good parenting. Whilst some teachers seemed aware of the danger of stereotyping and were at pains to point out that their notions of deficit parenting did not apply to all families that fitted into the PP category, the identification of good or bad parents nevertheless remained a primary means of sorting those students who were 'really' 'disadvantaged'.

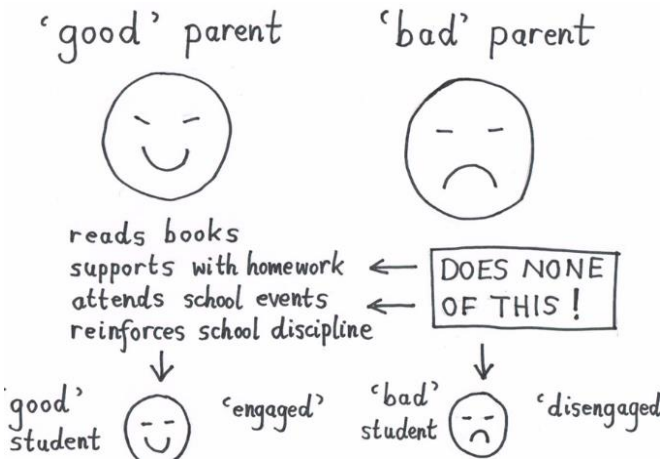


Figure 9: Good parent/bad parent

It was rare for teachers to criticise parents directly, although there were some instances, for example, the PP Lead and English teacher at School 2 who talked about students who 'haven't really been bothered with', or the Science teacher at the same school who talked

about phoning students during the day over the COVID-19 lockdown and parents saying the students were still in bed:

> *A number of students we found that they didn't have the parental support of just making sure they got out of bed in the morning, and we'd be ringing up and it'd be 2 o'clock in the afternoon. 'Oh, they're still in bed'.*
>
> *It's your job to get them out of bed!* (Science teacher, School 2)

The Maths teacher in School 1 also made comments about inadequate parenting of 'disadvantaged' students, suggesting that during the lockdown:

> *For them I suppose it's been a relatively straightforward time at home if parents aren't pushing you and getting you to do all the things. You're getting up at 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning, staying up late.* (Maths teacher, School 1)

Implied within these words was his understanding that part of the work that he did as a teacher was to maintain routine and a work ethic, and he assumed that this was lacking in these students' kind of homes.

More often, views about parenting and the construction of the good parent emerged less directly but seemed to consist of a belief that the good parent was supportive of the child, and importantly, also of the school. The good parent was well-educated, preferably to university level, promoted the importance of gaining qualifications and provided their child with 'educational' experiences. The effects of not being well-educated was expressed by these two teachers from School 2:

> *Because as we know, when it comes to Pupil Premium, disadvantaged, the background, it might not have as high an aspiration as those say that have got two*

working parents, that have got parents that might have been to university or might be in well-paying jobs or whichever. (English teacher, School 2)

and

I don't like to clump everybody in the same groove, but there are a lot of pupils I find who are of lower income who their parents haven't had, who maybe haven't engaged in their education particularly much and then they're not able to help with that. (Science teacher, School 2)

A good parent was supportive of the school in its endeavours and showed this in their person by attending parents' evenings and answering all communications from school. They also showed agreement with the school by reinforcing what it was trying to achieve with their children by ensuring that the students attended school on time, wearing the correct uniform, and completed their homework. These markers of acquiescence to the institution of the school were the things that teachers seemed to be referring to when they talked about parents who did or did not 'value education', which I discuss further below.

There were other markers which were more nebulous, but nevertheless existed and contributed to the notion of the good parent, against which the lacking parent could be compared. For example, the good parent provided their child with a range of cultural experiences which enabled the student to be successful in school, which will be discussed later in reference to 'cultural capital'.

The Spanish teacher at School 4 felt strongly that an important factor in determining who was 'disadvantaged' was parental support, but that this was not linked to economic status:

I believe that someone who's disadvantaged could be someone that you know might have all the money in the world, and they will have lovely food at home, but parents

pay no attention to them, and so I believe that they are disadvantaged because they have no support whatsoever at home… so *for me disadvantaged can mean multiple things, not just necessarily economically, you know, just parenting support.* (Spanish teacher, School 4)

The English teacher at School 1 was also resistant to the idea of sorting students as disadvantaged based on their family income:

Now to me, I look at why has that thing been put on the register? Why is there a yes underneath Pupil Premium for those pupils? And it's just because parents have got less income. That doesn't mean parents care less. That doesn't mean parents have spent less time educating the pupils. Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't. (English teacher School 1)

But whilst this teacher was explicitly rejecting a narrative of deficit parenting based on family income, and potentially social class, she nevertheless acknowledged that the support that parents provided to their children was important to their success in schooling. Many of the teachers were sympathetic towards the students and their families and the difficult circumstances in which they found themselves, referring to issues of material poverty such as overcrowding or lack of money to pay for essential items. For example, the MFL teacher in School 5 pointed out that many parents of PP students were doing their best to give their children the opportunities offered via school trips. Where parents were asked to only make the financial contribution that they were able to, some wanted to pay more and needed to be reassured that this was not necessary:

I've had to say if that's going to put you in a fix, then just do that one amount. Oh no, let's see if I can, and then they will say, you know, I'm sorry but we just can't manage

it this month, but we'll try and add a little bit more next month and it's like just give a smaller amount and then you know you don't have to worry about it, so the parents do want to contribute, but it's just circumstances, isn't it? (MFL teacher, School 5)

The barriers that existed in families were acknowledged by others, for example, the P.E. teacher in School 5 who was aware that encouraging talented students to attend sports clubs outside school hours was not as simple as it might appear:

'Come along to the club' to someone who's got to get two buses home or get the train or got to look after their little sister or whatever it is, they can't come to the club. (P.E. teacher, School 5)

Similarly, the Science teacher in School 2 acknowledged that there were often financial barriers to parents in providing their children with what were considered to be educational experiences:

A lot of pupils haven't been out into the countryside. They don't have the money to go on holiday, so they don't go and see things that you just assume that they will have seen. (Science teacher, School 2)

Although in these comments the teachers were not blaming the parents, nevertheless the clear message that was conveyed was that these students were unlucky in deviating from a notional ideal family.

Giving the wrong messages – not valuing education – parents as obstructors

Whilst there were various characterisations of parents which cited their *inadequacy* to support the schooling system, for example by being poorly educated themselves or having

insufficient time or money to help their children, the truly 'bad' parent that emerged from the teachers' accounts was the one who had the wrong *attitude* towards schooling. These were the parents who did not 'engage' with school and who were seen to not value the importance of school. For example, the French teacher in School 3 saw an important aspect of his work as fighting against the influence of such parents. He gave the example of parents who:

> *…feel that, for instance, a school trip, you know, if my child doesn't want to go, then they don't have to. (*French teacher, School 3)

His view was that it was these students who went on to attend poorly and underachieve in later years in school, explaining:

> *And my feeling, my gut feeling, is that that is because parents allow them to disengage from school when things get a bit difficult. And that is not necessarily Pupil Premium students, that doesn't identify that.* (French teacher, School 3)

He was providing his own definition here of what constituted 'disadvantage', which, although it was not based on economic status, nevertheless relied on a binary of the good/bad parent. In common with most of the other teachers interviewed, this teacher was keen to point out that not all parents were the same. What he seemed to be saying was that there were some parents who behaved in the way expected by the schooling process and modelled this behaviour to their children, and thus they and their children achieved a status of acceptability. In the minds of some teachers, it seemed, that when good parents had done their part in creating the good student, then those students were viewed as not *really* 'disadvantaged'. This was also evident in what the PP Lead in School 1 said:

> *The ones that are struggling are the ones where parents are not very engaged, not very supportive of the school, won't attend parents' evening, some of the big events. That is our biggest challenge for the disadvantaged at the moment. However, there are the ones that are disadvantaged but are engaged, where the parents are very supportive - they do well and are successful.* (PP Lead, School 1)

There were several ways in which teachers felt that some parents subverted the messages of schooling, such as not making their children attend, or not making them do their homework, or by telling their children that schooling was not important. The Maths teacher in School 1 talked about how he needed to 'break that link from the student and the parents' by which parents reassured their children that they themselves had not done well in Maths at school and thus embodied for their children an example which did not mirror the aspirational model which teachers wanted students to adopt. The PP Lead and English teacher in School 2 described conversations with his students where he felt that this lack of educational aspiration was evident:

> *It's not uncommon to hear in the classroom, it's sort of thrown at you, 'well my dad, my uncle, he's got no GCSEs and he's a plumber.' You know you hear that all the time and I'm like, different world these days lads, you can't just…we need GCSEs for everything, unfortunately.* (PP Lead and English teacher, School 2)

It was not clear from this account whether the fathers and uncles were telling the students that GCSEs do not matter, or the students were inferring this themselves, but the teacher certainly saw it as part of his work to implant firmly a model of academic qualifications as the route to success in life.

Cultural capital vs an empty bank

Another important way in which teachers seemed to engage in 'sorting' work that differentiated those students who were truly 'disadvantaged' from the rest, was in identifying those who lacked 'cultural capital'. The discourse of cultural capital was one that teachers often seemed comfortable to adopt as a means of talking about some of the deficits that they identified in their students, and at times it seemed that it might be being used as a more acceptable proxy for reference to social class. Often the teachers felt that the students had missed out on experiences that would have given them the 'cultural capital' that they lacked. This led some of them to express a moral compulsion, sometimes referencing social justice, to fill the gaps apparent to them in some of the 'disadvantaged' students. They explained that possession of the required kind of cultural capital was necessary to ease the students' passage through the schooling process, to enable access to certain curriculum content, and therefore to promote academic success. For example, the PP Lead and English teacher in School 2 described what he saw going on in the classroom in this way:

> *[The students] have a bank of cultural knowledge that they can draw on in lessons, and [for] some of our kids it's empty.*



Figure 10: An empty bank

This deficit construction provided a clear justification for that teacher to step in and try to fill some of the gaps.

> *If they haven't got a wide idea of the cultural capital of things that are going on in the world, then they are very limited. If they don't read very often, when they come to do their imaginative write about a time when you were scared, they won't come up with a really good idea because they won't have the imagination because of the cultural capital….so the lack of cultural capital and the lack of vocabulary are two things that definitely do inhibit success.* (PP Lead and English teacher, School 2)

The impact of not having suitable educational experiences was explained as creating barriers within certain curriculum subjects, for example the Humanities teacher who described the effect of having visited castles on the students' understanding of History:

> *We teach them about the Normans building castles. Well, you know, some of our most advantaged students have been to castles, they go. So, when I talk about the position you might put a castle in, they know that you will build it on the top of a hill. Whereas for some of our other, you know, for disadvantaged students, some of them will have only seen a castle in a TV show or in a film and not really got the bigger picture.* (Humanities teacher, School 1)

The lack of opportunities to travel beyond the local area as a definer of 'disadvantage' was echoed by many of the teachers. The Spanish teacher in School 4 explained her sense of the disadvantage that some students experienced by not having the opportunity to build cultural capital through travel:

> *But our students don't go on holidays… the chances of them learning about, for example, what is in the Spanish omelette and going to the country and trying it,*

they're very low…They're very hard up, so they don't actually have the experience of it, if it's not because we take them to there. (Spanish teacher, School 4)

Many of the teachers prefaced their identification of a deficit of cultural capital in their students with variations on the phrase 'I don't want to generalise, but...' For example, the R.E. teacher in School 4 talked about the gap in knowledge between 'disadvantaged' students and their peers in relation to current affairs, such as the war in Ukraine, and attributed this to lack of access to the news by not owning a smartphone (material poverty), or maybe parents who did not encourage them to watch the news (cultural poverty). He said he did not want to generalise, but usually 'disadvantaged' students had not had as much opportunity to 'experience the world and experience society'. He cited taking a group of students to London, several of whom had never been there before, and one of whom had never been on a train. As with several of the other teachers, he described those things as: 'what a lot of us would take for granted as just life, just general life experience' (R.E. teacher, School 4). In the use of the word 'us', he reinforced the sorting of disadvantaged students into 'them' and 'us', whilst justifying his work (which I will explore in the Saving work section) to save students from culturally barren lives.

'Your cultural knowledge isn't the same as my cultural knowledge'

Whilst many of the staff seemed comfortable with the characterisation of their relationship with students as one in which they provided cultural capital and the students received it as a deposit for their bank, a couple of teachers were clearly uncomfortable with this, as they wondered aloud why one type of cultural capital was privileged in the schooling process above another. For example:

> *…let's say we've got a disadvantaged student here, typically at XXX that would be, you know, a Pakistani boy. He's not arrived in school with no cultural knowledge, it's just we're kind of saying that your cultural knowledge isn't the same as my cultural knowledge and somehow yours is less valuable than mine because it isn't included in what we study on the syllabus, …You've never been to see a Shakespeare play, but you have spent an awful lot of time in mosque, and we're saying that that cultural experience is far more valuable than the other, and I just find it a bit elitist.* (English/Media Studies teacher, School 3)

This teacher recognised the pragmatic value to the students of providing certain types of cultural capital but was troubled by the assumptions that were embedded within the choice of one kind of experience over another:

> *I think that, you know, it is going to be helpful for that child to have been to see a Shakespeare play for them to succeed in this world that they live in, so I do think, you know, there's some value in it, I just don't really like the kind of value judgement that seems to hide in the phrase. Maybe I'm oversensitive.* (English/Media Studies teacher, School 3)

There was clearly thus a range of responses in terms of how comfortable the teachers felt about their positioning in respect of reproducing the dominant discourse of 'cultural capital' found in schools.

Making them disadvantaged

Whilst within their 'sorting' work most of the teachers focused on the 'disadvantage' that certain students brought with them into the school environment, not all the teachers framed

'disadvantage' as wholly situated within the students. Instead, a few acknowledged that there were aspects of the school system that contributed potentially to the 'disadvantage' experienced by the students. Some of them noted ways they felt that the school might create 'disadvantage' for its students by its practices:

> *If we're encouraging students to buy a revision guide to support their learning outside of the lesson, and they can't buy one, then that's almost for us a barrier, and that's making them disadvantaged because they're lacking some resource that's going to help them with their GCSEs over a student who can have that resource.* (Science teacher, School 4)

The P.E. teacher in School 5 discussed the issue of correct uniform for her subject and acknowledged how this could create an unnecessary barrier for students from poorer families:

> *…they lose one sock and actually, that's quite a big deal if they have spent £12 buying a pair of socks for a kid. (P.E. teacher, School 5)*

In a similar vein, the Spanish teacher in School 4 recognised that that using a digital platform for homework could disadvantage poorer students whose families could not afford Wi-Fi:

> *So, when we put homework, if it's like a platform that requires Wi-Fi, obviously some students are not going to be able to access that, so that's going to make them disadvantaged as well.* (Spanish teacher, School 4)

The experience of teaching students remotely during the COVID-19 lockdown had made many teachers aware of the different levels of access to technology that students experienced. While the Maths teacher in School 1 was confident that 'the school did an amazing job' in providing every student who needed it with a laptop, others were much less

convinced about the equity of experience for everyone. The Maths teacher in School 2 described realising that some students did not have internet access at home as a 'real eye opener for me':

> *…you just automatically take for granted that households have Wi-Fi and they don't, they just don't…. Pupils were using 3Gs, or, you know going standing outside someone's house to use their Wi-Fi.* (Maths teacher, School 2)

Another teacher also identified the way in which the school tried to adapt to the 'disadvantage' of its students as having the paradoxical effect of reinforcing it:

> *Our school organises trips, but they don't tend to organise that many trips because we know that our students won't be able to afford it, so that's obviously a disadvantage for learning.* (Spanish teacher, School 4)

The same teacher also discussed a newly arrived Chinese student who had limited English language proficiency. In her opinion, there was not enough support provided for this student, and this made him 'disadvantaged'. She described the student as 'stuck in the Hub, in the Success Centre, because he's not able to access mainstream lessons.' The idea of being 'stuck in the Success Centre' was an example of a deep contradiction embedded in everyday school practice. Rather than leading to success, the nature of the special provision for this student was judged by the teacher to be a place in which he was 'stuck' and unable to access the learning that he needed.

Saving work: we know what you need

In the previous sections of this chapter, I have shown how teachers constructed ideas of 'disadvantage' via 'seeing' and 'sorting' work. In this section I will explore the 'saving' work

that the teachers in my study attributed to themselves based on their construction of 'disadvantage'. The notion of teacher as saviour holds a well-established place in British culture, reinforced by films and implicit in advertisements for teachers claiming, for example, that 'Nobody forgets a good teacher', 'Be the teacher they remember', or 'Every lesson shapes a life'. The idea of saving through transformation ran throughout my interview data. This narrative was underpinned and justified by the deficit characterisation of students and their families presented in the previous sections of this chapter. I will explore in the presentation of data in this section the effects that this had in terms of the positioning of the teacher as saviour and the student as one in need of salvation. In the following section on 'changing' work I will look specifically at the mechanisms of transformation enacted by the teachers.

In discussing their responses to 'disadvantaged' students, the teachers often presented themselves as driven by an imperative which hovered somewhere between the professional and the moral. Their role within the performative schooling system required certain types of behaviours from them that prioritised maximum academic achievement from the students. This was a taken-for-granted notion that could be aligned with their professional role. After all, what teacher would not want their students to perform as well as possible in the examinations which would, at least partially, determine their life chances? Yet it seemed that the responsibility to 'save' students also held individual personal and moral implications beyond the professional for these teachers, as they sought to do what they considered the right thing in relation to their students.



Figure 11: Saviour teacher

In the comments that teachers made about the lives of students, there often seemed to be an assumption that students needed a means of escape from their current environment, which school could provide, thus enabling students to 'leave to achieve'. In making this judgement, these teachers had constructed a relationship of power for themselves in relation to their students, whether consciously or not, in which they could signpost the escape route for students. As I listened to teachers, it seemed at times that they saw their relationships with 'disadvantaged students' like a live version of snakes and ladders, in which they as teachers stood holding the foot of the ladders, inviting the students to climb them, whilst wary all the time of the snakes lying in wait. In the findings below there are a number of examples where teachers talked about the 'ladders' of opportunity that their schools offered to students, such as providing additional tutoring, school trips and career advice, alongside everything else within the school curriculum. But in opposition to this were the 'snakes' of non-aspirational environments in which schooling was not valued, opportunities for additional support were rejected, and 'enrichment' opportunities were ignored.

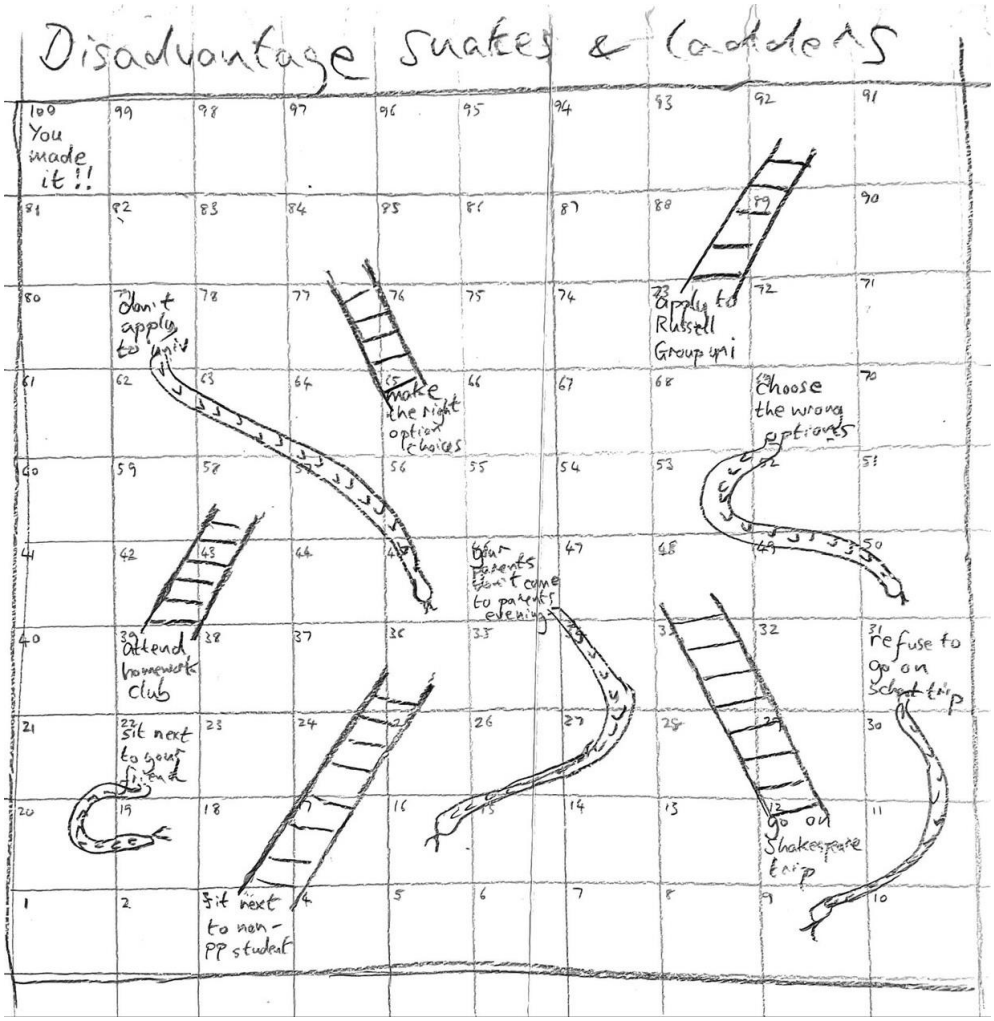


Figure 12: Disadvantage snakes and ladders

Pathways to escape

In response to his perception of 'disadvantage', the PP Lead in School 4 spoke proudly of having created a 'medicine pathway' into the 6th form for students aspiring to be doctors. In fact, the PP Leads that I spoke to all used the vocabulary of creating 'pathways' for students as part of their 'saving' work. Whilst this is not unusual terminology in schools, it is interesting to note its alignment with a prophetic messianic vision of teachers beating a path through the wilderness along which students could escape. Within the school institution this defined escape route could be visualised as including a series of important border points,

such as reaching the grade 4/5 GCSE pass, or the 7+ point for higher attainers. The PP Lead in School 1 talked about the importance of showing the students what was 'out there' for them, also using the language of 'pathways' and combined this with a commitment to give the students 'the belief that they are worth it'. The school was presented as an institution that could offer a hopeful journey in which 'nobody is left behind.'

'PP first' – the (moral) imperative to put these students first

Teachers in all the schools described variations on a policy that was usually described as 'PP-first' which established a particular relationship between the 'disadvantaged' students and their teachers. As discussed in the 'seeing work' section, a variety of methods had been put in place in all the schools which meant that the PP/'disadvantaged' students were treated differently in some ways from their peers. These methods required the constant visibility of PP students through their highlighting on class registers and seating plans and included practices such as asking these students questions first and marking their books first. The PP Leads – those with specific strategic responsibility for the 'disadvantaged' group in school – all highlighted these practices and explained them in ways that seemed to be both morally and pragmatically driven. These were the individuals whose professional job it was to ensure that the PP/'disadvantaged' group remained constantly visible and thus ensured that the school was accountable to outside authorities, particularly OfSTED, whose inspectors would be measuring the size of the school's attainment 'gap' and pronouncing judgement on it. Whilst the spectre of OfSTED may have been a powerful motivator, all the PP Lead teachers that I spoke to appeared also to have taken on a personal moral mission to save in relation to their students.

For example, when the PP Lead in School 4 talked about his aims in the role, he emphasised that the most important part of his work was in leading the school ethos around setting high expectations. He felt strongly that the school had a responsibility to provide what would not be available to students from their home environments. This taking of responsibility seemed to be grounded in something beyond a desire to shift the school up the local league tables, and he linked it to his mission to show the students a pathway out of the insularity of their local community. In the PP Lead role, he saw his work as making sure that other teachers shared his commitment to this endeavour. He had led a 'PP first' strategy in the school and said that in every bit of training 'we always bring it back to disadvantaged students.' When marking student work, he urged the other teachers to:

> *…try to get the PP students on top of your pile, because when you're freshest you give them your best.* (PP Lead, School 4)

The moral imperative contained within this statement was that these students deserved the teacher's *best* efforts, not simply a competent professional job, and he went on to say that staff development always focused around 'making sure that those disadvantaged students are getting the best that we can give them.'

The influence of this policy was reflected by the R.E. teacher in the same school who talked about the PP-first policy in terms of marking, and reinforced the idea that staff had a special obligation towards these particular students. The policy was explained as a way of ensuring that these students 'get the best of you', invoking again a sense of giving of the self, integral to the idea of saving, but he had some doubts:

> *I don't know how I feel necessarily about that one, because that suggests that the ones at the bottom don't deserve the best, and every child, every child does matter.*

> *But yeah, for me it's about giving every child the same opportunity.* (R.E. teacher, School 4)

The uncertainty that he voiced came from following the policy through to its logical conclusion; if some students were prioritised, then some others must surely be deemed less important. This was clearly not a comfortable idea for this teacher.

'Give them a bit of you' – teacher as sacrifice

For some teachers, their sense of professional identity seemed to require an element of giving of themselves. The language that they used reflected this. There were several examples of teachers who felt that they gave more of themselves to this group of students than others. The R.E. teacher in School 4 explained that he felt a distinct draw to teaching in a 'disadvantaged area' and viewed this aspect of his job very positively, saying:

> *I love it. I love the kids. I love the atmosphere. I mean, believe me, there's times when I've thought I don't want to be here anymore, but they don't happen often. You know, I've always been passionate about working in disadvantaged areas*. (R.E. teacher, School 4)

He did not explain explicitly his reasons for feeling like this, but invoked a school ethos in which the teachers were asked, in relation to 'disadvantaged' students, to 'give them a bit of you, a bit more of you'. This metaphor of personal sacrifice, of the giving of the body, contained distinct resonances of a Christian theology of salvation through sacrifice. The teacher described the policy on 'disadvantaged' students as being 'drip fed' through every lesson, so that it had become part of the culture of the school. It seemed that the ethic of saving responsibility had thus soaked into the ethos of the school and that the subject

position of saviour teacher was one into which staff could slip effortlessly. The other teachers interviewed in this school all seemed to share a similar motivation, to offer the students the opportunities that they identified as lacking in the students' lives.

For example, when asked at the end of her interview if she had anything else to add, the Spanish teacher at School 4 talked at some length about what she was trying to do for the students, claiming 'I think I will never change the kind of a school that I work in'. She compared it to the 'posh' private school in which she had taught in Spain, where she did not feel the same sense of mission to open the eyes of the students to the opportunities that were available to them in life. By way of example, she described how she had tried to engage the students in her subject by making a video of her hometown in Spain:

> *And last term for example, I went to Spain, and I took pictures of where I live in Spain, where my parents live in Spain, the food that I eat with my friends and you could possibly say, oh, you're exposing your life… Some teachers might not be comfortable doing that, I'm not saying everyone has to do it, but those two minutes that I composed a video…the kids absolutely loved it. 'Oh Miss, I'd love to go there'. I was like, yeah, that's achievable, …So if that's putting certain thoughts of I actually want to go abroad, for me, I'm doing my job, because I'm widening, I'm widening their horizons. I'm thinking yeah, Blackpool is not the end of the world, you can actually go to Spain, so I'm doing something. (*Spanish teacher, School 4)

In 'exposing' her personal life in this way the teacher was giving a bit of herself to her students, and in return she was getting the reward of feeling that she had achieved her mission of widening their horizons, of making them see that the world extended beyond Blackpool to Spain.

In a similar way, the Maths teacher in School 2 invoked her own life as a child to explain her commitment to the 'disadvantaged' students. She described sharing some of her personal experience of coming from a 'disadvantaged' background with her students. This teacher wanted her students to identify with her, with the purpose of showing them that they could be as successful as she had been in the academic sphere. In this she seemed to be presenting herself as embodying both the result of, and the route to, schooling as escape.

'Going above and beyond'

In the language that they used to discuss their roles, there were other indications of the saving role that some of the teachers seemed to assign to themselves. For example, they would sometimes talk about doing something for their students that went beyond the normal limits of their job role. Sometimes this involved providing a resource from their own money, e.g. a revision guide, or more often it was about giving the students additional time and energy, including extra tutoring sessions after school. The PP Lead in School 4 described supporting families financially when they needed equipment or uniform for school, saying 'we go out of our way' to help. Part of this giving of attention was mandated in school policy towards 'disadvantaged' students, but there were also several references by teachers in different schools to 'going above and beyond', again referencing the sacrificial nature of the relationship. For example, one of the teachers talked about giving up her time to provide tutoring for students after school. Her representation of this activity was as a sacrifice of her time, although she was also of course being paid to take on this professional role. Her positioning of the students as in need of saving created her own role as saviour.

The overlap between the teachers' professional role and their personal feelings was interesting. For some, the element of self-giving seemed to be part of their professional identity. Most did not express this in a resentful way; instead, they were eager to point out what they and their colleagues were doing to help students who they perceived as needing extra help. For example, the two PP Leads in School 1 explained, 'as a staff body I think we are very passionate at this school about taking everybody forward' and later, 'staff definitely go above and beyond in providing support for students.' The mission of 'taking everyone forward' was presented as a critical responsibility. Both teachers clearly felt proud of what the school was achieving in relation to its 'disadvantaged' students, and felt this was worthy of recognition, yet also characterised this as just part of their job:

> *As teachers we just do what we do on the daily basis. We don't think it's anything outstanding, well, it is outstanding, but we don't see ourselves as, oh, that's brilliant, that's outstanding, etc. etc., we just see it as that's what we do here. And I think that has rubbed off on most pupils and parents.* (DT teacher/PP Lead, School 1)

The speaker here was acknowledging the hard work of the staff, but pointing out that this was subsumed under the umbrella of doing their job – 'that's what we do here'. There was an implication that being 'outstanding' was what was required, and credit was being claimed for the effects of the teachers' saving behaviour as it had 'rubbed off' on students and parents. There is an interesting paradox contained in the idea of a job that *requires* the worker to go above and beyond their job description. It certainly implies an assumption of moral responsibility that goes beyond the professional sphere.

‘It feels like you’re wading’ - the psychological toll of saving work

Not all teachers accepted the saviour role in such a personal sense. Some of them clearly agreed that the students needed saving from their backgrounds, but they were more focused on blaming the parents for their failure to provide the optimal learning environment than considering their own role. Several teachers demonstrated some conflict in their feelings about the saviour role that they had assigned to themselves. Whilst their sacrifice was usually presented as willingly offered, a necessary corollary to the saviour role, sometimes a note of discord could be heard when this perceived sacrifice was apparently not appreciated. Sometimes the teachers expressed opinions about the psychological toll of their work. For example, the English teacher at School 2 described his feelings in this way:

> *It feels like you're wading and sometimes it might feel like you are trying all you can to try and get this this pupil onside, but it's not fruitful, and you can try all the efforts you can. You can try the nice approach. You can try the firm approach. You can try any approach and it still might not work…*
>
> *And a few times I ended up saying to some pupils, ‘Why does it feel like I care about this education, more about your education than you do?’* (English teacher, School 2)

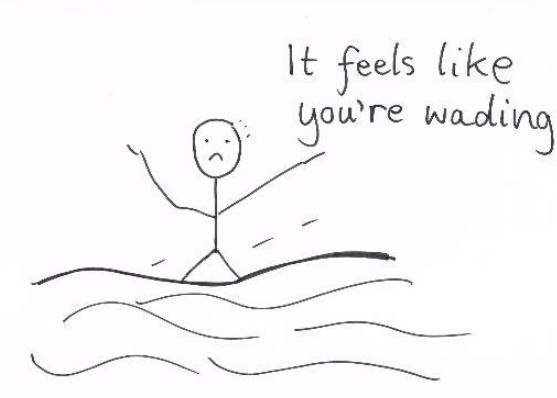


Figure 13: It feels like you're wading

Although this sense of frustration sometimes related to students, it was more often expressed in relation to parents, who became the scapegoats for failing to play the part expected from them by school staff, i.e. of encouraging the efforts of the school and specifically the teachers. Whilst schools could construct the role of the 'good parent', they were not able to enforce it. The frustration felt by the Science teacher in School 2 was evident here, where the sacrifice that she was making in giving extra lessons after school was rejected by a parent:

> *…or if you're not going to support them with coming back for extra lessons that we're coming back for. Because, you know, it doesn't happen often, but just last week I had a parent saying no, I don't want them to come back because they don't enjoy the subject, so why am I going to make them do more? And the idea is to support them and to help them.* (Science teacher, School 2)

A different type of psychological toll was expressed by the English/Media Studies teacher at School 3 as she described the work that she had to do in managing relationships between 'disadvantaged' students and their peers. She talked about a responsibility to manage the gap in experience between students, to be sensitive and not make students feel uncomfortable, for example, by asking them where they went in the school holidays or what they had done:

> *I'll have a child in my class who's done nothing but play video games all Easter holidays and then I'll have a child that's been to their second home in France for two weeks in the same room. And you know, your job really is to protect both of them in the conversation you have, because it could be uncomfortable for everybody, if you*

see what I mean. It's quite tricky really, the difference in life experience that that means, you know. (English/Media studies teacher, School 3)

Whilst this teacher was trying to show empathy in this response, she was still caught within a deficit discourse in which two weeks spent in France was self-evidently more valuable than playing video games. Perhaps there was no personal judgement in this statement, but she certainly recognised which activity had more currency in the school system and her 'saving' work was complicated by the perceived need to 'protect' the students. In the same school the French teacher raised the challenge of working with a very diverse group of pupils in terms of social background, from the children of professionals living in 'million-pound houses' to 'some of the most deprived children in the country'. He wondered how:

you address issues of social justice or any of our kind of PSHE topics and how you teach children to get along with one another and actually have meaningful friendships….If you were to come into school and look in the canteen, you would see that students don't mix outside of their kind of social class, ethnic group.' (French teacher, School 3)

We're all in this together – a shared mission

A notable aspect in the accounts of teachers from across all five of the schools was a sense of solidarity with their colleagues in respect of what they were trying to do for their 'disadvantaged' students. There was also some evidence of pride in their schools and a sense that their setting was doing a very good job for its students. For example, when the DT teacher in School 1 told me 'We are very positive school which leads everything through positivity', the example that he gave was:

We're very inclusive as well, so things like Design Technology we don't charge for projects like other schools, so everything in our school every child has access to. Doesn't matter whether you can afford it or not, what sort of label you've got, its education for everybody…. And I think that that's something that not all schools do, and I think it works really well for us. (DT teacher/PP Lead, School 1)

The English teacher/PP Lead in School 2 also talked about the pride of the staff in the work that they did in transforming their students:

So for us I think we take pride in the fact that we do take a lot of kids from quite low, firstly, Key Stage 2 starting points, but secondly, also with the environments that are around them and we get them to a place where they leave school where they can, they can… they're functioning adults firstly, but also have some certificates that allow them to take the next jump into education. (English teacher and PP Lead, School 2)

This pride was shared by the Maths teacher in the same school who told me:

Every member of staff here is passionate about their subject. You know it's quite difficult to get a job here. You have to be passionate. You have to be an expert in your subject, and I think when you are taught by experts it sort of brushes off on the kids a little bit and so that really helps, I think, to inspire them. (Maths teacher, School 2)

This sense of solidarity within the staff was perhaps related to the perceived added difficulty of working with these kinds of 'disadvantaged' students. As evidenced in their comments on the psychological toll of their work, some teachers felt that they were doing more than their job as teachers should necessarily require of them. The emotional toll of worrying more

about these students and having to keep that mindful eye on them constituted work that was perhaps easier to accept when seen as contributing to a larger school-wide effort. The English/Media Studies teacher in School 3 described how over the COVID-19 lockdown she had crowdfunded a project to enable the school to buy every PP student a book and send it to them:

> *And that wasn't in a policy, but that was, you know, when I thought about who needs to access the books in the library, that's the kind of first thing to consider, and I guess that's kind of, I don't know, part of the fibre of the school.* (English/Media Studies teacher, School 3)

It is interesting that this teacher did not identify her decision to do the crowdfunding as a personal choice but linked it into the ethos of the whole school, describing her action as typical of the 'fibre of the school'. She saw her work in implementing school policy in respect of 'disadvantaged' students as being part of the school 'culture and ethos'. She described herself as 'not really a person that kind of remembers things like policies', so she presented her actions as part of an ethical stance that she thought was embedded within the school, rather than done to conform with a set of external requirements. This ethos was described as coming 'from the top' and was exemplified by the headteacher who, when told about the school play, asked how many of the performers were 'disadvantaged':

> *I couldn't tell you if it's written into any policy, but I think it's more important that it's kind of felt in the culture and that's harder to achieve and it's got to come from the top. It's got to come from the SLT constantly asking questions about how you're prioritising and how it feels to be a Pupil Premium student in your class.*
> (English/Media Studies teacher, School 3)

Language and literacy – 'it can get us places'

One specific element of the teachers' self-attributed saving work related to the deficits that they identified in the students' language and literacy practices. The deficit here was attributed primarily to the influence of homes which did not encourage reading, and this was an environment that teachers felt justified in saving students from. For example:

> *I know that there's a strong correlation between low levels of reading and disadvantaged students. I know that through the kind of reports that I have to look at and the students that I target.* (English/Media Studies teacher, School 3)

It was important to this teacher that the deficit that was identified was evidenced, so that she felt justified in undertaking her saving work. She told me that the school did a survey of students to find out how many books they had in their houses, and discovered:

> *…there was a massive correlation between children saying less than ten books and being Pupil Premium and children who were not on free school meals, saying hundreds, thousands. There was a huge kind of gap we discovered.* (English/Media Studies teacher, School 3)

Other teachers produced similar comments about 'weak' and 'narrow' vocabulary, as described in the 'Sorting work' section of this chapter, which justified their saving work. The PP Lead and English teacher in School 2 talked specifically about his attempts to engage the students in the study of English:

> *And then I tell them other things, how English can benefit them. It's not, you know, it's not just a qualification we're getting here. We're able to impress people in the real world with our words, and we can get respect for that, and it can get us places.* (PP Lead and English teacher, School 2)

The teacher's saving work here was focused on highlighting the role of language in getting the students to a different place, maybe geographically, but also, most crucially, socially. This would be a place in which they could gain the respect from others that people like them were not necessarily accorded.

Saving them from themselves

Many of the teachers saw themselves as having a saving role in helping the students to think of themselves differently, to have more confidence, and to see that educational success and high-status jobs were available to them. They wanted to stop the students from sorting themselves into failure in the way that their family members or peer group might do and saw the need to break the link with non-aspirational parents. There is an area of overlap here with the 'sorting' work of the teachers in deciding who was and was not 'disadvantaged', but the emphasis here is on the way in which the teachers felt that they were the ones that held the knowledge to save the students from adopting a negative non-aspirational subject position for themselves.

The French teacher in School 3 made some very interesting observations about how he saw students as involved in negative identification of themselves:

> *So, I think that some students feel that they are, they just don't do their work, it's like that's their kind of role in school, they are just naughty. They're part of the naughty group and they just misbehave.* (French teacher, School 3)

This teacher seemed to see part of his saving work as stopping the students sorting themselves in this way. He gave an example of a student new to the school to whom he had spoken the previous day:

> *I said, you know, sometimes you're kind of trying to joke with people and you cross the line, I said, and if you fall into the trap of letting other people think that you're that sort of person, eventually you'll almost kind of force yourself into being that person. And I think students can kind of shoebox themselves quite easily.* (French teacher, School 3)

Within this account it is clear how the teacher was seeking, from his place of superior knowledge, to save the student from the effects of falling in with the wrong crowd, which in his terms was expressed as 'being that person'. The teacher also reflected on the racial dimension to this issue that he perceived in his school, saying that he thought that it was harder for the students to break out of the 'naughty' role when they belonged to a visible minority group. He described a recent incident in which all the students had arrived late to his class:

> *Because everyone was late, I said, 'What's gone on in school? Was there a hold up in the corridor?' And the boy I asked was a black boy. So, he came into class, it was just him and another boy and he said, 'oh, I don't know why we're late', and I said, 'I'm not going to give you detention, I'm just wondering.' And then he said to his friend who came in after him, who was a Pakistani boy, 'Oh, do you know why everyone is late?' As he's asking that, all of the girls come in. And he said to his friend, 'If we're here before the white girls, we can't be late. If we have arrived earlier than the white girls we've got to be early as well.'* (French teacher, School 3)

The teacher highlighted here the fact that the boys were positioning themselves in a binary opposition to the white girls, as male and black. When they were denied their accustomed position of being in the wrong (late, naughty), compared with the white girls, they were in an

impossible situation, which could only be expressed by denying reality – they must be early. This incident had bothered the teacher, who told me: 'I was thinking about it, I couldn't get to sleep that night, it just was playing on my mind.' The teacher told me this story as an example of the difficulty of trying to do the work that he wanted to do - of stopping these students from sorting themselves into failure - whilst he was entangled within the discourses of racialised identity.

He went on to describe occasions when he had tried to talk about issues of race and identity with his classes, but where students had not been willing to engage in the way in which he wanted:

> *They could not talk about going to Pakistan and visiting their family in a mature or sensible way at all. They were coming out with, uhm, you know, that one of them said, oh, you know everyone's got goats in Pakistan, or there were 25 people in a taxi. And they were in hysterics.* (French teacher, School 3)

He was concerned with trying to do the right thing here, to 'promote equality and diversity', as he described it, and was hurt and disappointed that the students resisted meeting him on his terms. It seemed that he wanted the students to ignore his position as their white teacher, and to speak openly with him. However, he also showed insight into the complexities of the saviour role in what he had just described:

> *And so when you do activities in school that… try to promote equality or perhaps combat stereotypes of any group, any minority in school, you have to be so careful because if you over pitch it, or you pitch it in the wrong way, or you don't really prep students into, you know, sharing their own views and their own experiences, then they*

can almost fall back on the very thing you're trying to combat. (French teacher, School 3)

Changing work: we know how to give you what you need

Whilst these types of saving work spoke to the motivations of teachers and the way in which they positioned themselves in relation to their students, I also identified a closely interlinked but slightly different type of work which was to do with the teachers' understandings of the methods and mechanisms which they used to enact this saving work. I have called this 'changing' work. Whilst some of these approaches focused on how school practice might change, for example by changing elements of the curriculum, others were more focused on how the students might be changed, for example, by the development of aspirational attitudes which would make them more acceptable to the schooling system and thus help make their 'disadvantage' disappear.

Giving students material resources such as equipment, books and school uniform, free breakfast, and paying for trips, was one way in which the teachers believed the desired change could happen. There were elements of structural poverty, however, that remained beyond their influence such as housing and employment of parents, and teachers understood that this was not something that they could alter. The main area where teachers thought they could potentially influence students was in the complex 'muddy middle' area of teaching, which involved changing students' minds through the process of education. Whilst all education is about change, it seemed from the teachers' accounts that they regarded the 'disadvantaged' students as needing to be changed more than the others. How to do this

was their dilemma. They were motivated by an idea of fairness that seemed to require them to treat everyone the same so as not to make students feel different, and yet they understood from their practice that doing the same for everyone would not necessarily achieve the desired transformative result. There were various ways in which the teachers tried to negotiate this equality/equity tension. They used the language of 'balancing out' and 'levelling up' when reflecting on how they could offer additional educational opportunities to students. They also discussed the comparative benefits of 'PP first' policies or 'high quality teaching and learning for all' as an approach.

Following the guidance?

Whilst a 'PP first' policy approach was mentioned by teachers in all five of the schools, and clearly influenced practice, there had been a move away from this as an official approach in one of the schools. The PP Lead in School 3 explained this to me:

> *When I first arrived at this school, the PP lead at the time was influenced by the research that was saying, how are we going to kind of top up the deficits? How are we going to compensate for the inadequacy of society that unfortunately pupils are born into for no fault of their own… Whereas the latest research in education is really saying it's about high-quality teaching and learning for all. And actually, if you've got the high-quality teaching and learning for all, then that catches the PP students within that.* (PP Lead, School 3)

Encapsulated here was the dilemma of how schools could transform the sometimes unpromising material of the 'disadvantaged' students into successful achievers, and it seemed that for this teacher the 'latest research' had provided an appealingly simple answer,

i.e. ‘high-quality teaching and learning for all’. The latest government-approved research - DfE and EEF reports - had been fed into the school PP strategy to create a ‘bespoke’ school plan:

> *So, our intent has really been informed by latest research and the strategy has been created as a result of our intention, and we're now in the implementation stage of it. But we are constantly then reviewing the impact of that as well.* (PP Lead, School 3)

The teacher’s language here of ‘intent’, ‘implementation’ and ‘impact’ came straight from OfSTED policy documents (OfSTED, 2018) and demonstrated how this particular discourse was soaked into her professional practice and shaped the way in which she conceptualised the ‘problem’ of ‘disadvantage’. When asked about her aims as a lead teacher for ‘disadvantaged’ students in her school, she replied by using two metaphors. First, she talked about ‘building a bridge’ between the advantaged and the ‘disadvantaged’, and secondly, she described the need to ‘level up the playing field’ for the students. She also referred to a well-known image of children watching a baseball game, which is often used to illustrate the difference between the concepts of equality and equity, and used this to produce another metaphor, that of ‘removing the fence’, so that all students had equal access to learning. The teacher seemed to be accepting, in principle at least, that equity for students needed to involve some changes to school practice as well as changes to students.

It was interesting to consider how the mantra of ‘high-quality teaching and learning for all’ differed from previous practice in this school. The teacher explained how the school had continued with the use of ‘things that have worked well for us in the past’, which included separate intervention groups in Maths and English for ‘disadvantaged’ students, aimed at erasing the gap in achievement between them and their peers. There seemed a potential

contradiction here between the rhetoric of policy and the reality of practice. She described the practice of 'rounds' of intervention for 'disadvantaged' students which were reproduced until 'you would get to the point where hopefully it's levelled up and then the student starts to emerge'. It would seem that it was at this point, when the student 'emerged', like a butterfly from a chrysalis, that the school regarded itself as successful in its 'changing' work.

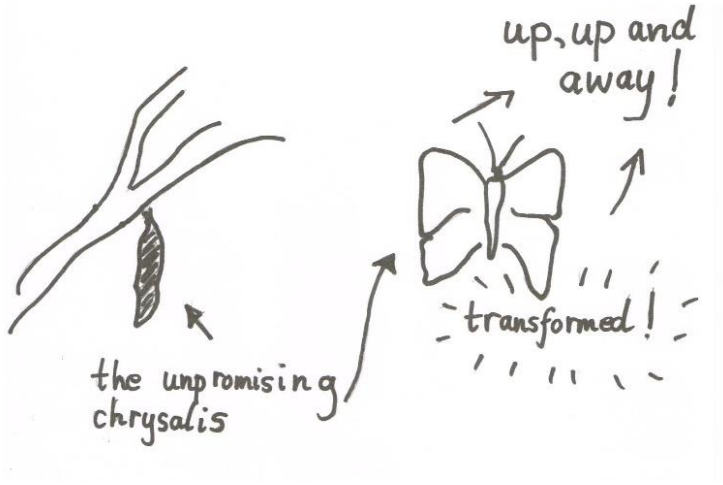


Figure 14: Transformation

High quality teaching and learning did therefore still apparently depend on systems of categorisations of groups of students who received different treatment from the majority of their peers, highlighting the dilemma of same or different treatment.

Other teachers also grappled with this idea of what approaches they should take to enact the desired process of change for students. One very simple tangible way in which some teachers responded to the material 'disadvantage' of their students was in providing pens for them when needed. This provision of pens seemed symbolic of how teachers recognised that they could do something positive for students and that they could make a decision that deviated from official policy because of their recognition of the need of students:

And generally, you know, we've got quite a tough line on equipment as everyone does, but I will literally reach into my pocket and pull a pen out and just give one over……For some students actually getting the equipment isn't the case of just going into a shop and grabbing it the next day. It needs to wait till the weekend or until there's a bit of money free. (Maths Support teacher, School 3)

Similarly, the MFL teacher at School 5 identified the decisions that she made in response to students as being different from her usual policy of dealing with the students 'more or less the same':

…and for certain kids they might say, oh, I haven't got a pen today so I will give them a pen and other kids who you know that should have their pens, I'll say well, you need to find your own pen. So, I suppose that way that's slightly different, that I'll be a little bit more lenient with them, but otherwise I tend to deal with them more or less the same. (MFL teacher, School 5)

'Plugging the gaps' and 'balancing it out'

The two metaphors of 'plugging the gaps' and 'balancing it out' used by one teacher summarised the approaches to changing work, which included the changing of students both by filling gaps in knowledge and experience and by providing opportunities and resources to which they might not otherwise have access. The English teacher in School 1 summarised the work that she felt that teachers needed to do in response to their 'disadvantaged' students:

…the key is in the word disadvantaged, so we feel that if they're in the disadvantaged category, they need the extra opportunity, so we're giving them the advantage to close the gap. (English teacher, School 1)

Another teacher summed up the approach that she took as doing the same as she would for any student, but it being more important for the 'disadvantaged' students:

I suppose adaptations, I think I would always… It's more I always do this, but I think it's more important when you're aware of the kind of high levels of disadvantaged students in the group. (Humanities teacher, School 1)

In common with other teachers, she stressed the importance of modelling answers. Perhaps model answers were a means of producing model students.

In terms of support within the classroom, the English/Media Studies teacher at School 3 gave an example of a practical strategy that she used to pre-empt difficulties that students might have in understanding a text because of their limited vocabulary and cultural knowledge:

...let's say it's a piece of writing that said, you know The Globe, and I might just write 'a really famous old theatre in London', and they don't have to put their hands up and ask, which can be a bit humiliating perhaps. (English/Media Studies teacher, School 3)

Similarly, the Humanities teacher in School 1 described how she increased access to the text used in a lesson for 'disadvantaged' students:

I've tried to make sure that I always give a complex text, but… I've also given a simplified version of that text so that they can read both and therefore kind of improve their understanding that way and that's something that's quite subtle that you can do that…other people don't necessarily notice. Instead of kind of making a big

song and dance of it, they can just subtly look themselves and it also gives them a bit of control over what they need to do. (Humanities teacher, School 1)

These adaptations were examples of the additional work that these teachers were willing to do for the benefit of 'disadvantaged' students to facilitate their change through education. Whilst they could be seen simply as demonstrations of appropriate professional practice by teachers, they also showed the empathy of the teachers as they tried to ensure that the 'disadvantaged' students did not feel singled out from their peers.

The teachers used an interesting range of metaphors to describe the 'changing' work in which they saw themselves engaged in relation to their students. One English teacher explained:

And so for me, I think it's about getting the kids on the same page as where they need to be, which is my page, so to speak. (English teacher/PP Lead, School 2)



Figure 15: Welcome to my page

He was clear that there was one path to success for the students and that was via his changing work, an echo again of messianic thinking. The image of the shared page was an interesting one as used by an English teacher, suggesting a shared source of authority, power

and knowledge, but also hinting at the approved texts of the school curriculum, which would be their route to academic success.

The Humanities teacher in School 1 explained teaching in Geography and History as a process of 'pinning' more information onto an existing overview or narrative about the world, and therefore she felt the imperative to 'plug the gaps' that some 'disadvantaged' students would have:

> *I talked before about the kind of cultural capital lacking sometimes, and I think the extracurricular activities and trips is our way of balancing that out a bit more*.
>
> (Humanities teacher, School 1)

A similar kind of thinking was reflected in the words of the English/Media Studies teacher in School 3, who was most explicit of all the staff that I spoke to about the ethical dimension of the work that she saw herself as undertaking:

> *The idea of getting out and seeing things and doing things and theatre visits and all of those types of things, I think, you know, it's a moral obligation to ensure Pupil Premium children are going to those things.* (English/Media Studies teacher, School 3)

It was unclear in this statement whether this teacher's feeling of moral obligation was focused on giving the 'disadvantaged' students an equal opportunity to bank the cultural capital relevant to the passing of exams, which would provide them with a foothold on the job/career ladder, or whether she felt that there was an intrinsic value and purpose in these activities. In either case, she clearly identified the school's responsibility to provide the conditions for change for the students. One of the interesting aspects of providing these missing opportunities was the way schools tried to codify their approach. It was mentioned by several teachers from different schools that 50% of places on trips and in clubs were

supposed to go to the 'disadvantaged'. No justification was offered for this 50% figure; perhaps it was just easy to remember and seemed 'equal'.

Believing in the power of individual relationships

When asked to reflect on how they responded to their 'disadvantaged' students many of the teachers spoke about the importance that they placed on the quality of the relationships that they had developed with individual students, and they clearly thought these relationships were central to the effectiveness of their changing work. The English teacher in School 2 described it in this way:

> *…it does come down to that engagement, so I'll always be on the door to start the lesson when they're coming in, I'll always have a conversation with them. Oh, and I'll try and find out about them because say there's a lad, he's not interested in school, but he's interested in football? I'll always ask him a question about football.* (English teacher, School 2)

For the Maths Support teacher in School 3 it was the relative freedom that he had as a support teacher to interact with students in a less formal way which gave him a special relationship with students that he could use for their benefit:

> *I think students perhaps find me a lot less formal than teaching staff, and obviously teachers have to be that way, but I think that because of that, I've kind of got more of a kind of pastoral oversight in that sense…..And very often they'll feel quite happy to actually come out and say what it is, whereas perhaps with a teacher they may become more or less defensive.* (Maths Support teacher, School 3)

The Spanish teacher in School 4 explained her school's 'handle with care' policy, where staff were made aware of students who were having a 'rough time', for example where a family member had gone missing, or had drug problems. She explained how knowing this about students enabled her to respond better when students were angry and aggressive. So, for example, she would have a chat with them outside the classroom, rather than confront them about their behaviour:

> *…you take them outside and say, 'what's up mate, are you OK?' 'Sorry Miss I'm a bit angry today', and they'll straightaway apologise because they know that they have done something that you don't deserve.* (Spanish teacher, School 4)

She seemed to be describing an interaction with a level of reciprocity and respect, where she saw their individual situation and responded to it individually, and they responded to this in kind.

Because you're worth it – 'giving' them confidence

The designation of 'disadvantaged' meant that the teachers were always in a relationship to those students in which they felt more powerful, where they had something to offer that could reduce the 'disadvantage' of the students. Feelings of low self-worth or lack of confidence were frequently ascribed to the students by their teachers. One example that was typical was the Science teacher in School 2 who explained her approach:

> *I know the students, they don't, they don't get that praise, praising them for when they have done things right and just encouraging them, building up their confidence.* (Science teacher, School 2)

The English teacher in School 2 also talked about how he tried to build relationships with the 'disadvantaged' students that would make them 'feel valid in terms of the class'. It is impossible to know whether this was an accurate representation of how the students felt, but it provided an important justification for the teachers' changing work of 'giving' students confidence and a feeling of value, and the teacher's position as the giver was centred.

The English teacher in School 2 identified the lack of 'resilience' of 'disadvantaged' students:

> *...we know that when it comes to especially disadvantaged or Pupil Premium pupils that they are more likely to give up when something seems more difficult, so they don't seem to have that resilience over say somebody that's non-Pupil Premium*.
>
> (English teacher, School 2)

This issue of lack of resilience was also picked up by the AHT/PP Lead in School 5. One of the things offered by his school to 'disadvantaged' students was sessions commissioned from a private company to work with the students on 'motivation, aspiration and also very basic study skills'. The company used was called 'Resilient Me', reflecting the idea that students needed to do work on themselves. The school would give them this opportunity, but self-work was required by students. The key to success for these students was 'engaging with' what the school had to offer and developing the right kinds of attitude:

> *I think with PP students, it's about aspiration. It's about trying to, you know, elevate themselves, 'cause these students are actually bright students, but they need to start engaging with, you know, the help that we're offering to them.*
>
> (AHT/PP Lead, School 5)

While acknowledging that some of the students were 'bright' he was clear that the only way in which they would be able to achieve success in the world was by conforming to the

pathways to help offered by school. This kind of 'changing' work by teachers was considered by many to be especially important where parents had not accepted their assigned role as reinforcers of school messages. In such cases the work of teachers was to try to change the attitudes that had been passed on to their children:

> *…we don't aspire to be doctors, we don't aspire to be lawyers, we don't… There isn't that aspiration within our students.* (PP Lead, School 4)

The PP Lead in School 3 discussed how they used external businesses such as Price Waterhouse Cooper and Ernst and Young to offer opportunities to students that could be transformative to them, enabling them to see themselves differently. It was the official 'disadvantaged' status of these students which enabled this to happen as they met the criteria for the social mobility programmes of the companies. The teacher described the steps towards change that were being made visible to students:

> *They will talk to the students about future employment opportunities that the pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds wouldn't necessarily have heard of or may not feel that they can access. And as a result of that, the next step on from that is they actually invite them into their offices to go and have a look around, and actually, it's kind of saying to the pupils, you can do this and this is, this could be for you if you wanted it.* (PP Lead, School 3)

The D.T. teacher/PP Lead in School 1 talked about getting the students to 'buy into' the 'XXX's (name of school) way', which he defined as 'leading through positivity'. He thought that the school might be the only source of positivity in the students' lives:

> *…and I think that helps to bring them forward and bring them on board. When they're on board they can do amazing things*. (D.T. teacher/PP Lead, School 1)

Whilst teachers shared a belief in the importance of engaging students with this process of change, some like the one quoted above were full of hope in the capacity of their students to be changed, whilst others were more cynical. This Maths teacher seemed to suggest that students were fixed in their 'types' and unlikely to be open to transformation:

> *You could probably look down your register even before the remote learning started, and you could literally put a tick or a cross against students who were going to be online or not. Again, I think it's very much based on the student.* (Maths teacher, School 1)

Although this teacher spent most of the interview talking about his view that the most important factor in student success was the high expectations of teachers, it seemed in this comment that he was perhaps creating some mental limits to the responsibility that he felt for changing the students.

Getting them where they should be

In terms of changing the students, the primary means that all the teachers focused on was enabling them to get good results in their GCSE exams at school. This was the teachers' professional responsibility. As the D.T. teacher in School 1 told me:

> *And our results for disadvantaged are very, very good, especially at Key Stage 4. The majority of disadvantaged get at least 1 or 2 grades higher than the target, so we're obviously doing something right.* (D.T. teacher School 1)

He was clear that the teachers were doing 'something right', i.e. something effective, to enable the students to get good results, and this was unproblematic for him. Their role was to help the students achieve the best grades in their GCSE exams, and part of this included

identifying the 'essential knowledge' needed by the students to facilitate this outcome. For example, the English teacher in School 1 justified targeting the 'disadvantaged' students for the public speaking club by saying this gave them the opportunity to do a 'really successful speaking and listening piece' for their GCSE English, illustrating an approach that seemed primarily instrumental.

The PP Lead in School 3 told me that the work of the school was to implement the 'school priorities', claiming that these were not just about academic progress, but also about the social and emotional well-being of students. She explained that the ways in which responsibilities to 'disadvantaged' students were aligned to school priorities were constantly made clear to staff on school training days. To ensure the success of this important work, to which the school leadership was committed, the school year was divided into four cycles, and every fifth week of the cycle:

> *…the senior team have a plan, and we basically crawl all over the school, pastorally and academically. (*PP Lead, School 3)

In this rather startling image of the senior leadership team 'crawling all over' the school, there was a reflection of the accountability regime within which the 'changing' work of the school operated, with the effects of this regime passed on to the staff and the students through this process of internal inspection. Whilst the image used may provoke negative images of surveillance, this teacher described it with pride, presumably thinking that it demonstrated the school leadership team's rigorous professional standards which included a commitment to the pastoral wellbeing of students.

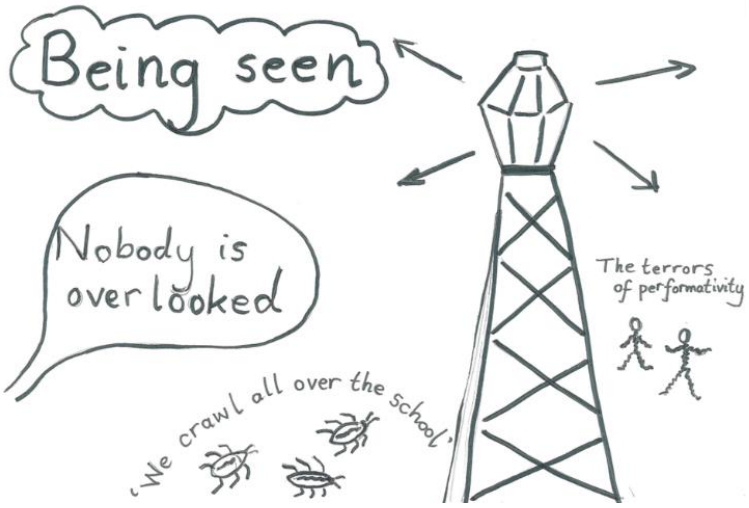


Figure 16: Conditions for change

Dressing for success

One of the simpler means by which some teachers felt the 'disadvantaged' students could be changed for the better was by teachers playing their part in ensuring students wore correct school uniform. The Music teacher at School 2 commented on the importance of insisting on this. Clearly school uniform held an important symbolic role for him; it was there for the purpose of smoothing out difference and helping students have the correct mental attitude to their studies and should therefore be enforced:

> *I think there is a correlation between those that are in full uniform, fully dressed, and those that are focused in lessons and those that sometimes do actually achieve a stronger outcome as well… For me, there's that mentality of if you're wearing uniform, you're feeling smart and therefore you act accordingly within the lesson.*
>
> (Music teacher, School 2)

In his eyes, feeling smart led to acting smart. He noted a responsibility for himself, and an implied one for other staff, to make sure that the uniform policy was enforced:

And I do see that within my lessons, where it could be a link to how they are, let's say, encouraged to enter the classroom and where uniform is noted, perhaps commented on and or encouraged to, let's say, smarten oneself up. But equally I do see that then being their attitude within the lesson. (Music teacher, School 2)

Other teachers also noted a relationship between not having the correct uniform and how this could contribute to students developing the wrong attitudes to school:

That's something else that can be problematic, 'cause then they just don't feel part of the same group and it causes problems at school. (English teacher/PP Lead, School 2)

Meanwhile, the PP Lead School 4 highlighted a relationship between uniform and attendance:

If there's issues with uniform and shoes and those sort of things, we'll make sure that we go out of our way to make sure they've got the right sort of equipment and uniform because we were finding that that was often a thing, you know, the blazer's ripped or something happened to the shoes, so we need a couple of days off while we go and sort that out, because they didn't want to be in school, not looking the part. (PP Lead, School 4)

This school had identified supporting families by providing uniform for those who could not afford it as part of a holistic picture of helping their students feel included in school, of 'looking the part' as well as bolstering the all-important attendance numbers for the school. These comments show a variety of perceptions of school uniform and its relevance in relation to 'disadvantaged' students. Some saw the enforcement of school uniform as supporting the students by helping them conform and avoid trouble, but also as a marker of symbolic belonging to the school, being the same as their peers. But there was also a

recognition from some teachers that it could potentially cause a barrier, particularly for students from families of limited means. Some reported dealing with this by turning a blind eye to uniform infringements, whilst others chose to enforce policy as a method of ultimately supporting students by erasing visible differences with their peers and facilitating the process of change.

Seating for success

The practice of seating students in particular arrangements in the classroom based on their 'disadvantaged' status was another mechanism by which some teachers hoped to achieve change, potentially encouraging the targeted students along the road from 'bad', disengaged student to 'good' student. The seating of students was explained in terms of the perceived benefits that students would gain from this carefully planned mixing. This was usually expressed by the teachers as giving students the opportunity to 'learn from each other' but seemed in most cases to be conceptualised as a one-way process. The 'disadvantaged' students would benefit from the greater knowledge and experience of their non-'disadvantaged' peers. There seemed to be a hope and indeed an expectation that something beneficial would 'rub off' on the 'disadvantaged' students:

> *So that's the first thing straight away, you get the information and seat them so that they're in the best possible position to, you know, thrive in the lessons rather than just get through.* (English teacher and PP Lead, School 2)

When asked to clarify what he meant by 'best possible position', this teacher explained it like this:

I mean, according to scientific studies, PP pupils will do better if they sit next to someone who isn't PP. And boys will do better if they sit next to someone that isn't a boy..., because we take the skills from the boys which is generation of ideas and then sort of let the girls refine them a little bit and say which ones are more important and that's just a generalisation, but has been proven in research that we follow in our school, as a policy across the school. (English teacher and PP Lead, School 2)

The school therefore followed a strict policy of sitting PP next to non-PP students and girls next to boys. Although the comments about gender were not directly relevant to the discussion of 'disadvantage', they did show a willingness to generalise about categories of students, and also to justify this through 'research' that then became embedded into school policy as a mechanism by which the changing work of the teachers could be carried out.

For the PP Lead in School 4 the planned use of seating positions was an important aspect of quality assurance in his role of ensuring the best possible outcomes for the 'disadvantaged' group:

One of the questions I always ask my subject leaders to bring up is why is the class seated like this? And I want a conversation about PP students. Where are they and can you see evidence that they have been seated for a reason where they are? … is the seating plan PP- or disadvantaged-savvy? (PP Lead, School 4)

When asked to explain a little more about what he meant by 'disadvantaged-savvy', he answered:

I'm looking for you know little Johnny who's PP, he's sat next to Trevor, OK, what's the purpose? Why have you placed him there? And I don't want to just hear because Johnny's, you know, badly behaved, and I want to hear about what is the purpose

behind that. Is it about aspiration? Is it about, you know, sitting them next to someone who's got that aspirational view? Is it someone sitting next to someone who's got empathy, understanding? (PP Lead, School 4)

Here was evidence that for this teacher, the qualities that were looked for in the neighbouring non-'disadvantaged' student were either aspiration, or empathy and understanding. It can be inferred that these were the things that this teacher thought that the 'disadvantaged' student would need from others. On a relational level the student would require someone who was responsive to his emotional needs, as he presented now, but also someone to act as a model for him, so that he could change and become a different person through the effects of aspiration. This teacher seemed to be suggesting a role for the student peer similar to that of the teachers, so the non- 'disadvantaged' peer was being positioned as an important actor in the schooling process and recruited into the process of transformation. The same teacher explained:

My seating plan is very clearly aimed at making sure my PP students are the best supported. So, if I have to make compromises with my seating plan, it won't be a PP student that's compromised. (PP Lead, School 4)

It was interesting that again there was a moral commitment that if he could not set up the seating plan exactly as he would wish, he would make sure that it was not the 'disadvantaged' students who would suffer. The teacher here seemed to be accepting that compromise might have to happen, but he was using the power that he had to decide in favour of the 'disadvantaged' students over the others.

Even though the teachers were trying to support their students through their seating plans, it was noticeable that they did not mention how they thought the students might feel about

the way that the seating had been organised. Perhaps it did not occur to them to consider the students' point of view because what was uppermost in their minds was their own professional responsibility to maximise academic success, and the seating plan was a means for achieving this.

Despite the importance that the PP Lead in School 4 placed on where students sat, the R.E. teacher explained that there was no set seating plan policy in the school, rather, it was open to teachers to 'design it how you see fit for your class', suggesting that the PP Lead's understanding of the seating plan policy was not understood or acted on in the same way by all staff. The R.E teacher described a lesson on Malcolm X in which he had designed the groups in a way that took in 'disadvantaged' status:

> *I gave students an opportunity to write down some questions to discuss with people around them, and I actually specified groups and partners for them to be in and I moved the class around with the intention that everyone, you know, you might, you'd have someone who was disadvantaged maybe with someone who wasn't and then have that experience from each other.* (R.E. teacher, School 4)

This teacher was unusual in describing the particular insights that he had found that 'disadvantaged' students in his lessons could share with their peers:

> *We have a topic on human rights and social justice, and we do a lot around the unequal distribution of wealth and what it's like to be exploited… we look at things like payday loans and that sort of thing and when you look at the financial side of disadvantage, absolutely some of these students may have parents that have been or are in debt and… they might be aware of the fact that their parents struggle*

> *financially to provide for them, and that can absolutely impact them.* (R.E. teacher, School 4)

Another teacher discussed the placement of students in the classroom in terms of their physical proximity to her as the teacher:

> *Where have I positioned them? Who are they next to? Are they in a place that I can go over to quite easily without having to distract other students or push past other students?* (Science teacher, School 4)

Making sure that they were sitting in places in the classroom where she could reach them easily was a vital part of the responsibility that she placed on herself in respect of these students. For this teacher, the relationship with herself was of primary importance and she knew that this seating plan would enable her to check their understanding and provide extra support one-to-one without making it obvious. Many of the other teachers talked about this same kind of unobtrusive one-to-one support, but she was the only one who discussed the seating of students in this fashion. She described it as keeping a 'mindful eye' on the students, so in her eyes it was this benign form of 'seeing' work that was enabling her to enact her 'saving' and 'changing' work, demonstrating how these different kinds of teacher work often overlapped in practice.

Curating the curriculum

Whist some of the responses to 'disadvantaged' students focused on how they could be changed to match the demands of the curriculum better, there was also recognition of the potential to change the curriculum to match the needs of the students. The French teacher at School 3 acknowledged how unappealing the curriculum was to a lot of his students: 'So,

one of the problems that we have in French is a lot of the content that we cover is quite boring to them.' He also talked about the negative perception that many of the Muslim students (who were disproportionately represented in the 'disadvantaged' group) had of France, which conflicted with his efforts to make them want to expand their horizons and travel abroad. He was aware that he was working against the students' perception of France as a racist country, where these students would not be welcome:

> *...this comes out when we start talking about the French trip. They, lots of the girls, say if I go to France I can't wear my hijab, France is trying to ban Muslims.* (French teacher, School 3)

There was tension here for the teacher in promoting 'his' subject, and an experience that he saw as valuable for the students, whilst recognising that the curriculum was not neutral; that their experience would not be the same as his and could not be offered as an uncomplicated beneficial part of a change process for them. This teacher also described his own process of transformation from thinking that learning a language was about learning the vocabulary and the grammar. He recounted how he had planned a unit of work based on sociolinguistics, which discussed, for example, dialects and accents:

> *…and you saw then with French removed and the content being more engaging and students being able to talk more about the languages they speak at home, you've got some really nice and interesting discussions from them. And I think it's the most engaged I've seen some of our most disadvantaged pupils.* (French teacher, School 3)

He said that this scheme of work had coincided with the students choosing their GCSE options, and several students who did not like French previously had chosen it as an option

to study at GCSE. Several forms of transformation had happened here, to the teacher, to the curriculum, and to the students.

The same teacher referred to other types of curriculum change, motivated by trying to give students who did not enjoy the language learning very much, 'something to hold onto', including learning about different French-speaking countries and French history. One of the strategies was to teach the students a bit of French slang:

> *Often that will be French words that have come from Arabic or French Arab slang, just so that they feel like actually, this is something that speaks to me a little bit. (*French teacher, School 3)

He saw how this could interest students in new ways, but also raised an issue of managing the feelings of students. For example, he talked about the difficulties of correcting the language of North African native French-speaking students and telling them that they had to write in their exams in standard French. The teacher felt torn between contradictory imperatives here of ensuring that they produced the form of work that would be recognised by the exam board, whilst trying to do what he perceived as the ethical work of showing recognition and value for the diverse cultural experience of the students. At the same time, he was trying to encourage students to like and choose his subject, which was classed as part of the EBacc and would contribute positively to league table ratings.

The English/Media Studies teacher in School 3 also saw how the curriculum could be used to empower students, highlighting the shift in power which occurred in the classroom when they were studying video games in Media Studies:

> *What's quite nice is that gaming is part of the spec and that is really nice 'cause a lot of all types of children from all backgrounds have experience of that and actually,*

they're better, you know, they're experts, so they know way more than I do about that stuff, so there are areas that are more empowering. (English/Media Studies teacher, School 3)

She talked about how much of the curriculum was prescribed and how this limited what could be offered:

I guess, you know with English it's just about empowering children to feel like their experience is valid, so finding texts to use in the classroom that are relevant, relatable and that speak to their kind of experience and so I think…. We have to study certain set texts, so by the time we get to GCSE, we're kind of pretty narrow in what we can look at, so we are doing Shakespeare, we are doing J.B. Priestley and Charles Dickens, and all of these kind of white men. (English/Media Studies teacher, School 3)

It was interesting that here she was describing what was offered at school as being narrow, in contrast with the discourse which represented the problem as being the small and narrow experience of the students. Where there was more freedom for the teachers in Key Stage 3, she described the efforts that the school had made to offer 'a more diverse representation, and that connects with disadvantaged children.' The same teacher discussed how she was able to use the actions of a famous footballer to promote reading to her students:

…when Marcus Rashford did his brilliant tweets and he set up his book club, and that's worth its weight in gold because he comes from a disadvantaged background himself, so he, you know, he's authentic, he's the real deal and kids can see themselves in him and the fact that he says reading's cool, is worth a million times more than me saying reading's cool. (English/Media Studies teacher, School 3)

The teacher saw the potential here of co-opting the perceived 'authenticity' of this individual to support her changing work through encouraging reading.

Another English teacher, in School 1 also discussed the limitations of a prescriptive curriculum in terms of changing content:

> *At Key Stage 4, it's very much this is what's on the exam, so this is what they've got to learn. But at Key Stage 3 we have a lot more flexibility…, so we know what skills they need to hit at GCSE, but how are we going to get them there? And it's up to us as a department to choose the right texts and the right skills and the right methods to make sure that every pupil is going to learn to the best of their ability all the skill set that he needs.* (English teacher, School 1)

The benefits of the flexibility around curriculum content were expressed here as a means of acquiring the 'skills they need to hit at GCSE', again apparently demonstrating the instrumental nature of the choices made in the context of an exam-driven educational system. Later in the interview the same teacher also discussed the power that she had to select texts that would build 'character' and 'cultural capital', suggesting that these concepts formed part of the discourse of her school and were part of the changing work that she wanted to do:

> *…at Key Stage 3 in English we do have that extra flexibility, so we're also able to choose the texts and design the schemes of work to build not just exam skills, but life skills. So, we're building their character, we're building their cultural capital, these kind of really valuable things.* (English teacher, School 1)

The D.T. teacher/PP Lead at School 2 discussed the importance of curriculum for 'disadvantaged' students in terms of offering them 'alternative pathways' which were driven

both by what the students wanted, but also by what the teachers felt would provide them with the best chance of success. Within his comments there was a tacit admission that the current provision in school did not necessarily engage all students:

> *I look after the trainee teachers as well, so I get to go into the English, Maths, Science, History, Geography lessons and see the way that pupils are taught. For some of our disadvantaged, they will struggle with that sort of thing.* (D.T. teacher/PP Lead, School 1)

The teacher did not specify what he meant by 'that sort of thing', but offered examples of curriculum adaptations which were 'based around the students…not about what's best for the school', mentioning a range of technical and vocational courses that were offered. This was contrasted with other schools who were 'pushing this EBacc…and we felt that's wrong for some of these disadvantaged students that are not highly academic'. He also mentioned using the case study of a highly successful locally based clothing brand in his lessons and considered this to have contributed to the increased interest of 'disadvantaged' students in going on to study graphic design in college. This teacher was clearly proud of the range of options offered in his school:

> *…so there's courses to suit all types of learners. What we do is encourage and support them in the option process to make sure they're selecting the right option for that student and hopefully with career advice and support we're able to tailor the option system, so they actually have a pathway and a goal to get into college.* (D.T. teacher/PP Lead)

The interactions with students are presented as supportive, based on the staff knowing best and being able to make sure that the students make the 'right' choices.

It was apparent throughout the interviews that one of the factors that influenced how teachers thought about the 'disadvantaged' group was the relative balance of numbers in the whole school population. Several teachers felt that it was a good thing that a high proportion of their students were designated in this way because this meant that finding the right approach to their needs naturally became part of everyday classroom practice. The Science teacher in School 4 felt that the number of 'disadvantaged' students in the school, approaching half of the school population, was 'changing the balance for us', so that they could not think in terms of extra support and extra trips and extra enrichment, but instead they had to adopt an approach which encompassed all students. This was echoed by the PP Lead in the same school who talked about changes to teaching and learning practices which were 'grassroots stuff for everybody', indicating perhaps a counter force to the 'seeing' practices that focused on identifying a distinct group of students.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented data that illustrate how the participants in this study constructed their notions of 'disadvantage' and how this construction seemed to inform their responses to students that they considered to be 'disadvantaged'. I have sorted the data into types of 'work' in which I considered teachers to be engaged. In the following Discussion chapter, I will argue that the effect of this 'seeing', 'sorting', 'saving' and 'changing' work, was often to position teachers as holders of knowledge in relation to their 'disadvantaged' students. I will consider how the insights of Levinas and Derrida can be used to illuminate the effects of this knowledge discourse and how it could potentially be disrupted.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

Trying to do the right thing – everyday decision-making as ethical work



Figure 17: Trying to do the right thing

In this chapter I will analyse the 'seeing', 'sorting', 'saving', and 'changing' work described in the previous chapter as forms of 'ethical work' performed by teachers. I have used the thinking of Levinas and Derrida to discuss the attempts of the teachers in this study to 'do the right thing' in their interactions with 'disadvantaged' students, in an attempt to achieve more equitable outcomes for their students. Whether or not the teachers referenced this work explicitly as social justice work, they frequently used the language of equity and opportunity to explain their responses to students. My data show, in the descriptions of everyday classroom practice, that these teachers were frequently engaged in decision-making about how to respond to the 'disadvantaged' students in their classes, whether this was a trivial on-the-spot response such as choosing to provide a pen without question to a 'disadvantaged' student, or more deliberate planning involving changes to curriculum. Whilst

this decision-making was often quotidian in its nature and sometimes implicit rather than explicit, I will argue that it nevertheless constituted important ethical work which had an impact on the teachers and deserves recognition.

Derrida's idea of undecidability as a place of justice is helpful in unpicking the ethical work that I see teachers doing here as I argue that uncertainty is a powerful generative space for responding ethically. My data show some thoughtful decision-making in contexts where there are many different pressures on teachers. These pressures come from the standards agenda, the prescribed nature of the curriculum, and from policies adopted by schools and passed on in a blanket fashion to staff. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the teachers think carefully about how to navigate these pressures and find a path that is acceptable to themselves and that enables them to feel that they are doing the right thing for their students. However, the teachers do not always feel that they get this balance right or are allowed to make the choices that they would wish to.

Much of the ethical work to be found in the teachers' accounts pivots around them wrestling with dilemmas of sameness and difference and what their response to this should be. My analysis is rooted in the concern that I bring from my professional practice about how ideas of 'inclusive practice' are performed in schools. Understandings of educational inclusion have been widely debated for many years. The apparently contradictory phrases used about 'disadvantaged' students that occurred in different forms throughout my interviews (sometimes by the same individual): 'I treat them all the same' and 'I treat them all differently/as individuals' seemed typical of the contradictions and confusions that surround this area. These phrases indicated to me a well-meaning inclusive intent, but also pointed to the tensions that can arise in trying to put intention into practice. It seemed clear from my

data that the teachers in my study were constantly, although not consciously, navigating and negotiating their way around the issue of the responsibility that they felt they owed to their 'disadvantaged' students. In one of the fundamental dilemmas of inclusive educational practice, they were trying to work out the nature of their responsibility: whether they owed the same responsibility to all their students, and, if so, what its limits might be. In the next section I will explain how I have used some of the thinking of Levinas and Derrida to explore this dilemma of responsibility.

A model of teachers' ethical engagement

Using Säfström: The 'safe side of knowledge'

Levinas's philosophy is compelling in this context because, in the words of Zhao (2016, p.325), it gives educational theorists 'the conceptual tools to resist dominance and to rethink educational theory and practice in ways radically different from modern Western conventions.' Engagement with Levinas's thinking troubles the idea of what can be known about others and how this apparent knowledge can and should be acted upon by individuals; it causes a profound questioning of the nature of the relationship between teacher and student. In an article written in 2003, Carl Anders Säfström uses the thinking of Levinas to critique what he characterises as the traditional Enlightenment conception of education as a process of developing others as rational beings, arguing that in such a scheme, students are 'treated as objects of knowledge that reinforce the teacher's ego' (Säfström, 2003, p.19). Levinas's radical idea of 'absolute alterity', which demands that the 'Other' can never be fully known, problematises this objectifying relation between teacher and student and thus offers

a means to critique the types of 'knowing' that the teachers in my study were using in their seeing, sorting, saving, and changing work.

In his discussion, Säfström coins a resonant phrase, 'the safe side of knowledge', to characterise a conceptual space of certainty into which teachers are typically inculcated by the schooling system. Säfström argues that from the start of their teacher education, teachers are encouraged to think of themselves as autonomous holders of knowledge about, and on behalf of, their students:

> *Educating teachers, then, can end up being motivated by the reduction of anxieties through knowledge of the why, what, how, and to whom one teaches. To be a teacher is often understood as being on the safe side of knowledge* (Säfström, 2003, p.22).

This resonates with my data that show the existence of a set of powerful discourses that encourage teachers to form judgements about students, often linked to social class, such as lack of aspiration or lack of cultural capital. It is these discourses which justify their efforts to change the students for the better, thus turning the 'bad student' into the 'good student' in the ways explored by researchers such as Youdell (2006) and Kulz (2017). The construction, from my data, of the teacher role as holder of knowledge and agent of change can be summarised in a series of statements: we know who you are; we know what you are; we know what you need; and we know how to give it to you. I contend that the seeing, sorting, saving, and changing work that I identified all contributed to the construction of this 'knowledge' about 'disadvantaged' students.

Therefore, I have adopted Säfström's image of the 'safe side of knowledge' as central to a spatial metaphor that I am using to interpret my data. In this metaphorical model I see teachers being pushed by the powerful discourses surrounding 'disadvantage' behind a

containing wall that is reinforced by closed ideas about the nature of this group of 'disadvantaged' students, what they bring to the educational process, and how they can best be supported. In this analysis I will identify the discourses of 'disadvantage' found within my data as forces which push inwards on the thinking of teachers, forming a pressure that creates and constantly reinforces this containing wall around the space of knowledge of who and what these 'disadvantaged' students are and what they need. Below I include a couple of examples of my thinking in progress as I developed this idea.

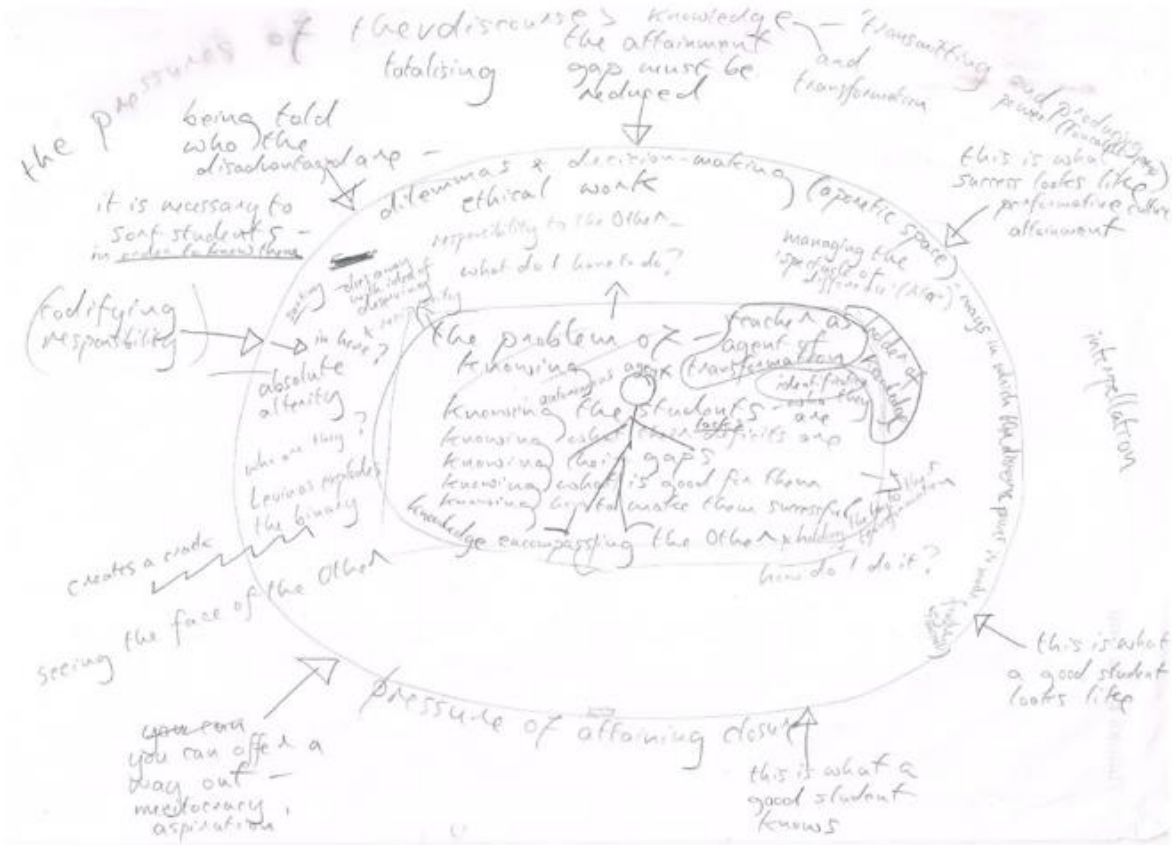


Figure 18: Developing a model (1)

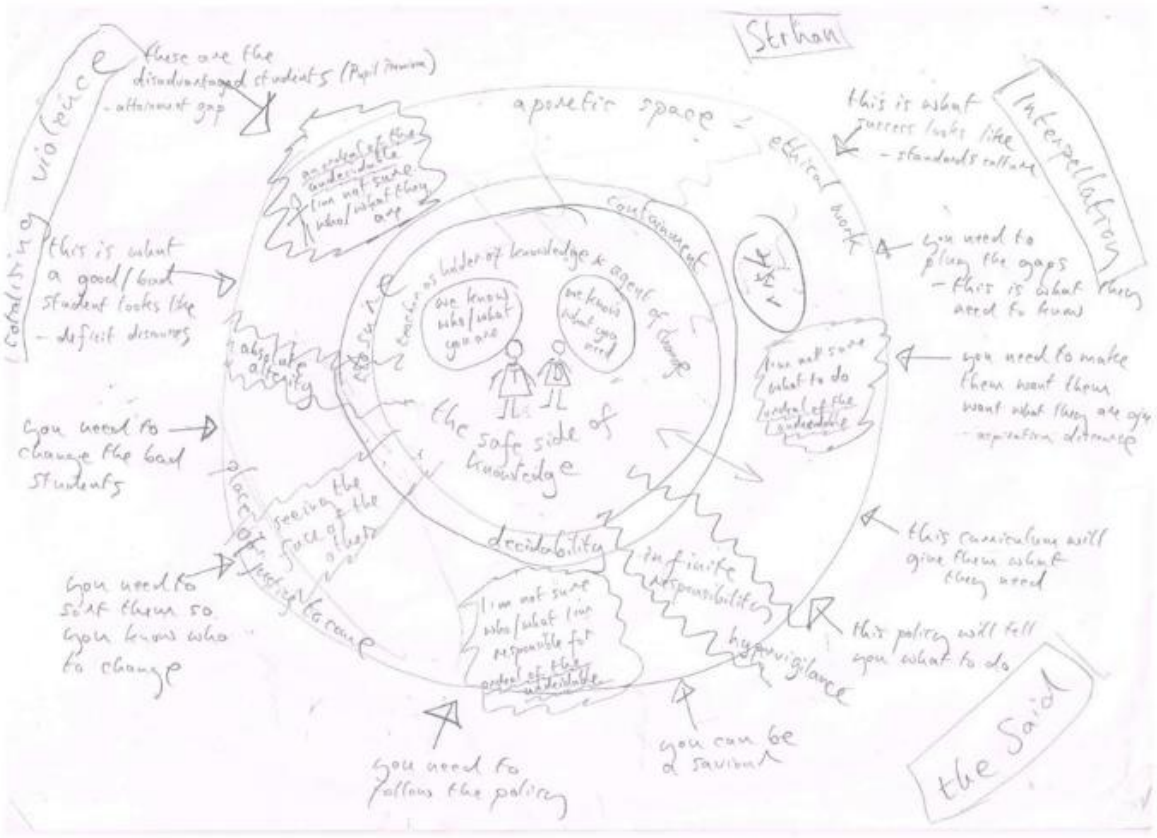


Figure 19: Developing a model (2)

However, I will also consider how the ideas of Levinas can be used to understand some of the challenges to the 'safe side of knowledge' which can also be found in my data. Although the discourses of 'disadvantage' which position teachers as holders of knowledge about the students and unproblematic agents of change in the lives of the students are strong, there is also evidence within the data that not all teachers sit comfortably within this safe space of knowledge. Instead, some teachers, in their responses to 'disadvantaged' students, engage in ethical work as they move away from the safe side of knowledge. I use this image of movement to represent the push and pull forces that I have found in my data, which were expressed by teachers in feelings of conflict and tension within their seeing, sorting, saving, and changing work. I see moments of disruption to the smooth surface of discourses that

constituted knowledge, which were caused by the teachers' reflections on individual encounters and relationships in the classroom. It is here that the philosophy of Levinas can illuminate the potentially radical effects of human encounters that challenge the discourses of 'disadvantage' that have been incorporated into the taken for granted contemporary 'grammar of schooling' (Tyack and Tobin, 1994, p.454) that shapes much of the experience of 'disadvantaged' students in school. I have chosen to work with Derrida's description of the 'aporia' to conceptualise this push and pull experience of ethical response as movement across an 'aporetic space'.

Movements in aporetic space

Derrida's concept of aporetic spaces as a place from which justice can grow provides a potential means of making sense of these data in which teachers found themselves conflicted and subject to forces pulling in different directions. When teachers questioned the programmatic approaches to ethical behaviour criticised by both Derrida and Levinas (Edgoose, 2001, p.120), for example in marking the books of the PP students first, they assumed an additional responsibility that I characterise as ethical work. In this discussion I will consider how the teachers could be seen to assume this responsibility whilst being challenged by the impossible demands it makes.

Using Derrida's language of 'hesitations', Edgoose (2001, p.131) maintains that:

> *Moments of hesitation riddle our educational experiences, and yet they are all-too-often invisible to our critical studies of the classroom.*

With reference to my model based on Säfström's idea of the safe side of knowledge, I have identified some of these hesitations as places where teachers pushed back against the

prevailing forces of more powerful discourses. Each of these hesitations could thus work potentially as a counterbalance to the forces of containment and closure. Where teachers hesitated, I interpret this as them entering a riskier ethical space, which I am referring to as an aporetic space, again using the language of Derrida to characterise a state in which the teachers are aware of the 'double contradictory imperatives' (Allan, 2008, p.81) that are part of their everyday classroom lives.

This is a space where the normalised discourses of 'disadvantage' become open to challenge, but in which there is also no easy route to a different way of thinking and behaving. Here the teachers find themselves caught in a situation in which it is not clear what is the 'right' thing to do in respect of their 'disadvantaged' students. These aporetic spaces were frequently characterised in their accounts by individual interactions with students, and these interactions are susceptible to Levinas's insights into the nature of ethical relationships. There may have existed a policy which told teachers how to behave in a given situation, but they were not always confident that this was right according to their own conscience. By their engagement with these hesitations, I interpret teachers as undergoing 'ordeals of the undecidable' (Derrida, 1990, p.963) and thus undertaking ethical work. Allan (2008, p.81) argues that it is this experience of being stuck and conflicted that paradoxically can produce the 'hyper-awareness' necessary for teachers to understand their implication in exclusionary practices, and that can turn them away from easy answers that attempt to smooth over the surface of genuine ethical dilemmas.

The hesitations that I include were not necessarily cases where teachers expressly described feelings of active resistance to a specific powerful discourse. I have also included examples where teachers described feeling thrown off their usual way of thinking, where they

experienced the discomfort and doubt identified by Burbules (2000, p.173) in his definition of the aporia, in which they begin to wonder 'What do I do?', 'What do I say?', 'What's wrong with me?' I have used ideas from Levinas to help to analyse these hesitations and to show ways in which his philosophy of 'absolute alterity' and 'infinite responsibility to the Other' can be used to provide insight into the movements that teachers made to and fro across this aporetic space.

For Edgoose, thinking with Levinas and Derrida, the way to justice in the classroom 'can only come through the loss of understanding and fluency' which must be experienced by teachers as they consider alternatives to the taken-for-granted discourses in which they operate (Edgoose, 2001, p.132). This loss of understanding can be seen in the teachers' hesitations. I see the forays out from the safe side of knowledge into this aporetic no-man's land as movements towards a place of 'justice to come', which may be momentary or more sustained, but are characterised by being works in progress in the spirit of Beckett: 'I must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on' (Beckett, 2010, p.134). But before considering these movements into aporetic space, it is relevant to consider the ways in which the work of seeing, sorting, saving, and changing was instrumental in shoring up the safe side of knowledge in the schools which participated in this study.

Constructing the safe side of knowledge using seeing, sorting, saving, and changing work

We know who you are

The most obvious and ubiquitous of the seeing practices, which had the reinforcing effect of saying 'we know who you are', was the highlighting of PP/'disadvantaged' students on each class register that needed to be completed at the start of each session. This had the effect that even if an individual teacher did not find this helpful or in line with their own understanding of what 'disadvantaged' meant, they were constantly encouraged to think about these students as a group and to act in line with this knowledge, thus becoming subjects of this policy. In some of the schools this seeing practice was reinforced by seating plan policies that specified where 'disadvantaged' students should sit in relation to their peers, again limiting the agency of teachers. The implementation of 'PP first' policies in some schools in respect of marking books or asking questions also identified the 'disadvantaged' students as different from their peers. Whilst these seeing practices were implemented by schools at a macro policy level and were therefore part of everyday practice for the teachers in this study, not all of them accepted unthinkingly the classification that aligned Pupil Premium status with 'disadvantage'. They felt from their experience that the socio-economic status of families was not an infallible predictor of attainment in the school system or the presentation of students in the classroom, therefore this classification system could be problematic at the level of individual students. However, the way the Pupil Premium system operated in their schools meant that the existence of a group that was 'other' to a notional norm was constantly reinforced.

We know what you are

Some of the teachers chose to resolve this dilemma by doubling down on identified deficits in the students. They seized on these aspects and constructed a group identity around that, thereby engaging in their own form of sorting of students into the 'disadvantaged' category. Recurrent themes in the teachers' definitions of 'disadvantage' were deficit discourses of poor parenting, restricted life experience, lack of cultural capital and lack of aspiration. Reference to social class, the 'zombie stalking English schools' (Reay, 2006, p.288), whilst usually implicit rather than explicit, could be detected in responses that referred to 'this sort of area', the restricted vocabulary of students, and a perceived lack of value for education and the work of schools by parents. The 'sad work' of deficit discourses identified by Bernstein (1970) and a host of other educational sociologists since (e.g. Dudley-Marling, 2015; Reay, 2017; Cushing, 2023), could thus be seen to still be in action. The sorting work activated by these deficit discourses, although rehearsed to different degrees by different teachers, was nevertheless a powerful force which again pushed teachers towards that 'safe side of knowledge' in which they felt they understood the 'problem' which a specified group of students constituted in school, leading them to conclude 'we know what you are'. Borrowing Bacchi's (2009) formulation for analysis of discourse, 'What is the problem represented to be?', it was clear that the problem of 'disadvantage' for many teachers meant the deficits that they associated with low social class. Thus, the teachers were operating within an official discourse of 'disadvantage' within which was nested their own discourse of deficiency, both of which contributed to their sense of knowledge of their students.

We know what you need and how to give it to you

Whilst the seeing and sorting work was the means by which teachers exercised their knowledge of who and what students were, the saving and changing work identified in the data spoke to the ideas that 'we know what you need' and 'we know how to give it to you'. The teachers that participated in the study expressed an implicit confidence that they knew what success looked like within their schooling system and conversely what constituted failure. In line with the findings of many previous studies (e.g. Ball *et al.*, 2012b; Gustaffson *et al.*, 2015; Perryman *et al.*, 2018; Huilla, 2020; Gewirz *et al.*, 2021), the importance of achievement in public examinations was the taken-for-granted background against which 'disadvantage' was discussed. To be able to classify students according to this measure of success, i.e. performance in line with GCSE examination criteria, constituted a form of knowledge about them that reinforced teachers' subject position as holders of knowledge in relation to their students. Thus, by understanding what factors enabled success in the system, the teachers formed their ideas of what constituted 'disadvantage' and consequently what they needed to do to save and change their students. This study presents evidence that teachers perceived their professional and, in some cases, moral, responsibility as facilitating the success of their 'disadvantaged' students by leveraging this knowledge effectively. The discourses of attainment and aspiration were powerful within schools, reflected in the desire of teachers to get students 'on the same page', to fill their bank of cultural capital and to show the students pathways to success that they did not realise existed or were open to them. Once positioned comfortably on the safe side of knowledge of how to do this, it seemed to be taken for granted most of the time by teachers that they

could operate as benign agents of change in the lives of their students through their saving work.

An interesting ethical tension became evident where teachers wanted something for students that the students did not necessarily seem to want for themselves. The teachers did not usually talk about this directly, but it arose when they expressed how they felt in certain situations, e.g. when students did not want to attend optional school trips or tutoring sessions. The frustration of teachers was evident towards parents who were seen as enabling students to stay 'disadvantaged' like they were, rather than be changed by the schooling process. The teachers here seemed to have adopted a position for themselves as substituting for parents who could not be trusted to do the right thing for their children. Unless they were to give up on the students and accept the status quo in which injustice was embodied in the 'attainment gap', then they must accept this responsibility of knowing better than parents.

The challenges of Levinas to the safe side of knowledge: opening up some cracks

In the following section I will consider how the insights of Levinas into interpersonal ethical relationships can open up some cracks in the types of knowledge described above and I will discuss how these cracks interact with three aporia that I have identified as being experienced by the teachers in formulating their responses to 'disadvantaged' students.

Aporia 1: Should the teachers treat their 'disadvantaged' students as the same or different to their peers?

As I began working on my PhD, I had to give a presentation on the subject matter of my study. I chose to do this in the form of a series of cartoon-like pictures that summed up my research as it appeared to me at that time. The first picture showed two groups of pupils standing either side of a chasm, labelled 'the gap', and indicating the difference in attainment of pupils classed as 'disadvantaged', i.e. eligible for Pupil Premium, and the rest of their peers.

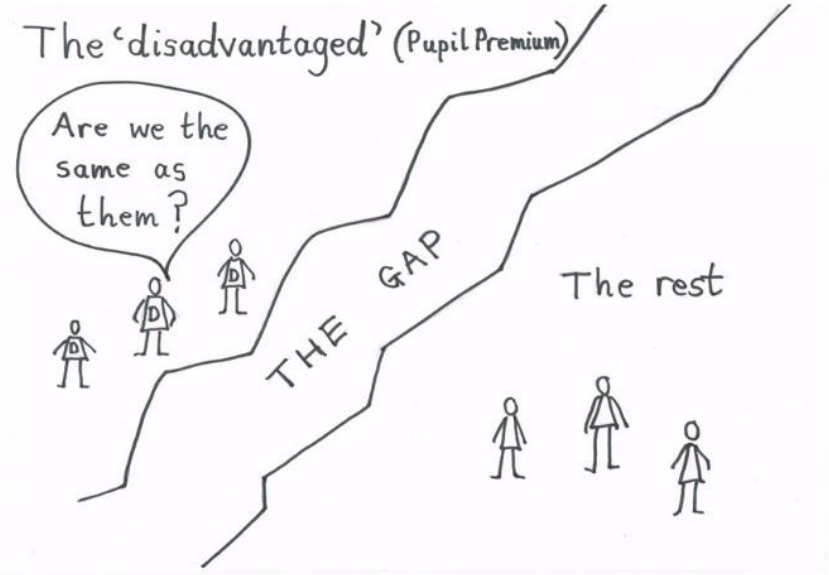


Figure 20: The same or different?

The 'disadvantaged' students are identified via a D symbol on their shirts, resonant for me of both Hawthorne's scarlet letter, and the 'D for dunce' cap familiar from depictions of Victorian school rooms. Looking back on this image, I see a glimpse of the tension at the heart of my research. Although in my picture I put the question 'Are we the same as them?'

into the mouth of a student, this particular type of categorisation exercised by schools, of being 'disadvantaged', is not one of which students themselves are usually aware. However, it was the question that underlay all my conversations with my teacher participants: are these students different to their peers, and if so, in what ways? A contradictory double imperative, of seeing and responding to students as both same and different to their peers, was part of a struggle to 'do the right thing' which characterised the professional lives of the teachers to whom I spoke. This dilemma of dealing with difference troubled the teachers in this study and thinking with Levinas offered me a useful way of analysing the issue.

Absolute alterity

The most obvious way in which Levinas can potentially challenge the 'safe side of knowledge' and open up an aporetic space is through his philosophy of 'absolute alterity'. To know another person is impossible, according to Levinas, who replaces the idea of knowledge of others with a requirement to recognise the 'absolute alterity' of the Other. On the face of it, this contradicts the thinking of teachers in this study who repeatedly emphasised the importance of 'knowing' their students as fundamental to doing the right thing for them. Levinas's thinking on this subject was defined by his experience of the Holocaust. He argued that if the Western ethical tradition, which understood ethical action as an autonomous self making rational decisions, could end in the Holocaust, then it could not be trusted as a basis for ethics, and therefore the nature of the ethical relation between individuals needed to be reconsidered (Edgoose, 2001, p.121). Levinas regarded this misreading of the nature of human ethical interaction as arising from philosophical ideas based inappropriately on a natural science model in which a human could interact in the world as if in relation to

physical objects (Edgoose, 2001, p.121). Such a model led to the treatment of others as objects in relation to one's own subjectivity, like 'furnishings' that could be moved at will unless opposed by a stronger will (Levinas, 1969, p.131). Zhao (2016, p.323) explains how, in response to the horrors of totalitarianism experienced in World War 2, Levinas sought an alternative philosophy of ethical response to others, a philosophy of difference, which would not fall into a totalitarian mode of thinking which essentialised identity in a 'logic of the same':

> *While totalitarianism is the movement of reducing the other to the same either by eliminating or by absorbing the other, the philosophy of difference attempts to show the very irreducibility of otherness and the very impossibility of total sameness and presence* (Zhao, 2016, p.323).

Levinas asserted that people are not knowable to each other, but rather that the Other is 'unassimilable' (Todd, 2003b, p.9). In explaining the meaning of being 'unassimilable' Todd highlights the fact that Levinas's definition of the Other is different to that commonly found in discussions of ethics and social justice:

> It does not simply mean a sociological 'Other' who is marginalized or maligned, nor does it simply signify another person who, as a subject, resembles myself. Simply put, for Levinas 'the Other is what I myself am not' (Todd, 2003b, p.29).

In explanation of this point, Todd emphasises that any connections that individuals feel that they have with others through shared experiences or empathy, are irrelevant and misleading as they redirect the focus from the Other to the self:

> *What is important to attend to, of course, in this responsibility for the other, is the alterity of the person for whom one signifies. On a simple level this means refraining*

> *from reading or interpreting students' responses as all of a kind, as purely symptomatic of themes we can pull from our arsenal of knowledge, as though the meaning we exercise upon them is all there is to the story* (Todd, 2003a, p.41).

Levinas's explanation of the foundational ethical relationship with the Other is thus a long way removed from the usual humanist responses of kindness, compassion and empathy that might be expected of a teacher. The complex nature of this relation is described by Strhan (2007, p.127) as the 'troubling nature of the confrontation with the other that Levinas emphasizes'.

It was notable that many of the teachers in this study did express feelings of sympathy or empathy with students. Sympathy came in the form of comments about the difficulties that students experienced as a result of their material poverty. The teachers referred to things such as the students' lack of access to books, school equipment, WiFi, or space to work at home. As the timing of the interviews coincided with the re-opening of schools following the COVID-19 lockdowns, many of the teachers mentioned how this circumstance had 'opened their eyes' to the difficulty of their students' lives, and they felt pity for these individuals whose lives were so different from their own families. They also expressed sympathy with students who had not had the opportunity to go on holiday or lacked support from parents who were too busy to spend time with them.

However, the limits of sympathy were evident when the teachers described parents who did not value education and support the endeavours of the school, for example, those who did not attend parents' evenings or who did not take up the opportunities offered for additional tutoring. This provoked evident frustration for example in the Science teacher in School 2 who criticised the parent who refused to send their child back for extra tutoring after school

because the child did not enjoy the subject, so they did not want them to do more. The teacher was offering support and felt this was being thrown back in her face. Again, the limits of sympathy can be felt in the comment of the English teacher in School 2 who described himself as feeling like he was 'wading' in his work with students and that he had ended up asking some students why he felt like he cared more about their education than they did. Whilst sympathy can be a motivator for teachers to do their best for students for whom they feel sorry, what Levinas's philosophy highlights is how it ceases to be able to inform an ethical response when the teacher does not feel sympathy for a student.

The Maths teacher in School 2 expressly referred to feelings of *empathy* when she talked of coming from a 'disadvantaged' background herself and thought that this made students look at her differently. Similarly, the English teacher and PP Lead in School 2, when discussing the difficulty that his students had in producing appropriate content when asked to write a newspaper article, talked about himself as a role model to the poor white working-class boys that seemed to be the primary object of his concern. He thought that these students were influenced by the fact he was recognisably like them yet liked reading and writing. It seemed that he was trying to use this perceived sameness of the students to himself to change them (for their own good) into a form which was more acceptable to the schooling system, which he represented. It could be said that in his approach the teacher seems to be regarding the students like the movable 'furnishings' described by Levinas (Levinas, 1969, p.131). For Levinas, to suggest that the Other can be known by reference to one's own feelings is to fail to recognise the true nature of the relationship between humans, which he summarised as 'The Other is what I myself am not' (Levinas, 1987, p.83). In the context of the teacher/student relationship, a failure by the teacher to recognise the ultimately

unknowable difference of every student would constitute a case of the ego of the teacher subsuming the student. In each of these cases, the teachers were assuming knowledge of the students based on their own experiences and thus, according to Levinas's thinking, reducing the students to subjects of their own egos.

In the words of Todd (2003b, p.15):

> *To follow Levinas, when I think I know, when I think I understand the Other, I am exercising my knowledge over the Other, shrouding the Other in my own totality. The Other becomes an object of my comprehension, my world, my narrative, reducing the Other to me.*

It seems, following Levinas, that sympathy or empathy with students, desirable qualities though they may be in teachers, do not in themselves enable challenge to the powerful discourses that keep teachers on the safe side of knowledge. This radical interpretation of the relation to other people presents a new way of looking at the dilemma of sameness and difference with which the teachers in my study were struggling. It suggests the need for a model of inclusive practice in education which shifts the focus from thinking in terms of vulnerable and marginalised groups to the primacy of every individual teacher's relationship with every individual student. The difference is subtle but important and whilst it may sound simple in theory, it seemed evident in the findings that it was far from easy to achieve in practice. The pressures of a performative culture of monitoring and tracking in the name of accountability encouraged the teachers to see the students in groups and to respond to them according to their grouping, thus positioning the teachers on the safe side of knowledge. In Levinas's terms, this tendency to categorise individuals amounts to 'totalising violence'.

Totalising violence and seeing the face of the Other

Levinas dedicated '*Otherwise than Being'* to the memory of victims of the Holocaust closest to him as well as to 'The millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism' (Levinas, 1991). This dedication is emblematic of the fact that although Levinas's thinking often seems complex and abstruse, it nevertheless is concerned with the everyday manifestation of how humans relate to each other and the impact of this in society, making it highly applicable to an educational context. Levinas's conception of the nature of human relationships is fundamentally unsettling to the grouping of students which is integral to schooling practices in which students are constantly 'seen' and 'sorted' according to a range of categorisations such as gender, ethnicity, ability, and 'disadvantaged' status. These seeing and sorting practices are part of the taken for granted 'grammar of schooling' currently visible in secondary schools in England. This grammar of schooling makes the separation into PP ('disadvantaged') and non-PP (advantaged, non-disadvantaged, normal?) part of a naturalised practice in schools. The philosophy of 'absolute alterity' presents a challenge to a policy such as Pupil Premium, despite its apparently admirable aim of promoting social justice in education through the allocation of additional resources to a group identified specifically by their lack of resources. Elliot Major and Briant (2023, p.32), aware of the negative associations of the term 'disadvantaged', make a case for the replacement of this term with 'under-resourced', and the logic of providing additional resources to a group identified as under-resourced is clear. And yet, inevitable to the funding of special provision for students from low-income families is the categorisation of such students into a group, thus exemplifying the aporia of responding to sameness and difference experienced by teachers.

In his earlier work in Totality and Infinity (1969) Levinas explained the ethical relationship with others using the metaphor of seeing 'the face of the Other'. The image of the human face is used here to stand as a representation of the individuality and difference summarised as 'absolute alterity' (Egea-Kuehne, 2008, p.29). In the words of Levinas, 'the relation to the face is straight away ethical' (Levinas, 1985, p.87), so that the encounter with the face of the Other 'constitutes a call out of oneself into conscience and an awareness of the Other' (Egea-Kuehne, 2008, p.33). It is this 'being-for-the-Other' which can 'stop the anonymous and senseless rumbling of being' (Levinas, 1985, p.52) and thus constitutes a truly ethical relationship.

Any practice which renders students as part of a homogenous group is antithetical to the recognition of absolute alterity through seeing the face of the Other and can be characterised as a form of 'totalising' discourse, which can have the effect of enacting totalising violence on individuals. Totalising discourses can easily become established in 'saving' and 'changing' work which tries to set a template for how to support individuals, e.g. via a mandated seating plan policy, which cannot by its nature be a response to the individual. Equally a rigid curriculum is in danger of failing to respond to the needs of the individual, by 'thematising' (Todd, 2003b, p.41) what is provided for students.

Some of the teachers in this study did seem to be aware of the dangers of totalising violence in their descriptions of their seeing, sorting, saving, and changing work. The metaphor of recognition of the face resonates with the responses of teachers to their 'disadvantaged' students in which they described incidents in which they were aware of seeing the students in a new way. This recognition of the 'face of the Other' caused a disruption to some of the totalising discourses in which they routinely operated and connects to the concept of 'hyper-

awareness' necessary to the process of inclusion. Examples can be found in the data of complex layers of uneasiness in the teachers' responses to what was going on in their schools and I have discussed these using Edgoose's language of 'hesitations' (Edgoose, 2001, p.129), which he in turn adopts from Derrida. I suggest that these hesitations can be visualised as creating cracks in the containing walls of knowledge.

Hesitations in seeing work

Some teachers were uncomfortable with making the books of 'disadvantaged' students identifiable in some way, e.g. by colour. They understood the reason for this practice, which was to assist them in identifying the books that they needed to mark first according to the 'PP-first' school policy. It was intended to benefit the students, but the teachers' uneasiness about this practice in several of the schools seemed to signal awareness of potential unintended consequences. Some of them expressed concern about students finding out that they were being categorised in this way, but the reason for their concern was not clear. Was it that they did not want students to feel different from their peers or because they knew that the word 'disadvantaged' carried negative associations? Was it because they knew that the purpose of the identification of books was to aid the policy of marking these first and they did not believe that it was right to prioritise some students over others, or was it that they were happy to prioritise, but they did not think that the PP categorisation identified the 'really' 'disadvantaged' students? Whatever their reasons, the hesitations voiced by teachers pushed them out into an uncertain aporetic space in which they questioned what their response should be to their 'disadvantaged' students. Within this uncertain space they had to make a practical decision about whether or not to demarcate books in their classroom.

For the teacher who worried about it being a stigmatising practice, it had led to her decision not to implement this practice in her classroom.

The R.E. teacher in School 4 was evidently grappling with the effects of totalising practices in respect of sameness and difference when he described his unease with the PP-first book marking policy. He suggested that this conflicted with his belief that every student should be given the same opportunity, that 'every child does matter' and that prioritising one above another did not sit comfortably with him. There is clearly a conflict here which locates the teacher in an aporetic space in which every child must matter and be given the same opportunity, but seemingly some mattered more than others. He tries to smooth over the discomfort by falling back on the language of equal opportunity, but this does not resolve the dilemma. Whilst the tagline of 'every child matters' has accumulated a range of potentially distracting associations with specific educational policies, the reference that he makes to it nevertheless sums up the aporia in which this teacher finds himself. He is stating his individual value system which appears here to be in conflict with a totalising seeing and sorting process which will determine the way he behaves. In the voicing of the dilemma, but without reaching any conclusion, other than a desire to give something that was needed to every child, the teacher reveals his ethical engagement and his sense of responsibility to the Other. According to Levinas's philosophy of human relationships, these kinds of totalising discourses in which action is determined according to group categorisations become impossible once one recognises the true nature of an ethical relationship to the 'Other'.

Hesitations in sorting work

Examples of hesitations in the work of sorting were evident when teachers expressed a realisation that the way that they had mentally sorted students was mistaken. For example, where the Maths teacher in School 2 talks about how some 'disadvantaged' students did not present themselves as she expected. The totalising discourse of 'disadvantage' which she has previously accepted has been disrupted by the effects of a conversation with an individual, in which she begins to see the individuality of the student, 'the face of the Other'. A similar point was made by the Maths teacher in School 1 about feeling differently towards some students when he found out more about their backgrounds. His comment contains interesting layers in which different moments of possibility are held. There is undoubtedly a moment described which the teacher acknowledges as affecting him, creating a 'mental shift', where he has perhaps seen 'the face of the Other' and potentially accepts the limitless nature of his responsibility. But equally, this moment could be interpreted simply as the teacher realising that he needs to slot the student into a different box than he had at first assumed in order to deal with them. There is an interesting difference in how the two teachers here express what has happened in the encounter with the student. The teacher in School 2 talks about realising 'what *they're* actually dealing with', whereas the teacher in School 1 centres himself and explains that the conversation makes him shift 'in terms of what *you're* looking at'. As Todd says, if we are to enter into the kind of ethical relationship outlined by Levinas, we must refrain from 'reading or interpreting students' responses as all of a kind' in order to respond to them as instances of 'themes we can pull from our arsenal of knowledge' (Todd, 2003a, p.41).

The ambiguity of some of the moments of hesitation that arose in my interviews was present in one of the most interesting and complex accounts produced by my participants. This was the incident described by the French teacher in School 3 in which he found himself mentally wrongfooted by how the black boys in his class positioned themselves in relation to the white girls. One of the boys had expressed the thought that he could not be late if he had arrived before the white girls. What was particularly interesting about this account was the way in which the teacher described its effect on him as playing on his mind and making him unable to sleep. Here was a challenge to the safe side of knowledge; the teacher was discombobulated. He thought that he knew these boys well and talks about the good relationship that he thinks that he has with them, unlike some of the other teachers. But somehow the ground has now shifted, and he realises that his knowledge of his students is not as good as he thought it was. The teacher has left the safe side of knowledge and has entered a space of uncertainty in which he is being forced to confront the absolute alterity of the student who said this to him. He realises that they do not occupy the same mental space about where they stand in relation to each other and so potentially not about other things too. The teacher had sorted the student in his own way, and has perhaps felt comfortable with his categorisation, but this has now been exploded by the student's revelation of how he categorises himself. He needs to decide how to act in relation to this student. The way in which the teacher expresses his feelings illustrates well the emotional experience of entering an aporetic space, demonstrating the complexity of the experience of undecidability. The teacher feels unclear and conflicted as he wrestles in an aporetic space with how he should respond to the perceived difference of this student. It seems that encounters with the face

of the Other have the potential to challenge the safe side of knowledge in terms of knowing who the 'disadvantaged' students are and how the teachers should respond to their needs.

Aporia 2: Should the teachers follow the Pupil Premium policy in respect of these students, or make their own decisions about how to respond to them?

There was undoubtedly an expectation on teachers to behave in certain ways in order to follow official policy, e.g. 'PP first'. Whilst many of them showed an awareness that such approaches were blunt instruments, they also accepted a professional responsibility to follow policy. Struggling with how to respond to these conflicting demands in the context of individuals pushed them out of the safe space of the knowledge of what students needed and how to give it to them and into aporetic space. There were several examples where the teachers engaged with such ethical choices in small ways. Whilst they did not refer to explicit resistance to specific policies, there were examples in their accounts of deliberate slippages and fuzziness in application. Whilst one teacher discussed the importance of policing school uniform for the students' own good as part of convincing them that complying with school rules was their route to success, other teachers deliberately chose not to make a fuss about incorrect uniform for 'disadvantaged' students. Many of the teachers mentioned the strict policies that their schools exercised about having the correct equipment but gave examples of where they had given a pen to a 'disadvantaged' student who had arrived without one, rather than follow the correct school policy in this situation.

The Saying and the Said; the primacy of the ethical relation

In the ethical world of Levinas, there can be no reliance on rules and regulations to tell one how to do the right thing; this will always rely on the recognition of and response to every individual Other. Levinas explores this idea through the image of 'the Saying' and 'the Said', in which the Said is understood as language used as a piece of contained information which is passed to a recipient. The Said is an attempt to achieve 'universality, solidity and closure' in which the recipient understands what is being said in the way intended by the person speaking (Edgoose, 2001, p.122). However, in the contingencies of actual encounters this does not happen and so 'in the failure of that striving, 'the Saying' is revealed' (Edgoose, 2001, p.122). Edgoose explains what he calls the 'ethical power of the Saying' by giving the example of the order to shoot given to a soldier by his superior. Here the linguistic exchange has had the element of personal encounter removed from it and thus the Saying is destroyed by the Said. The effect is to make the killing of another human being justifiable; thus, the failure to acknowledge the Saying leads to an evil result. Although the consequences of a masking of the Saying by the Said within schools does not have such drastic consequences, nevertheless the requirement to follow the Said of a given policy or curriculum rather than their own conscience does potentially create ethical dilemmas for teachers which could potentially lead them into an aporetic space. Edgoose reminds us of Foucault's insight that schools were developed in parallel with the structures of the military and tells us that 'the dream of professional ethics is to standardize responses to difficult situations' so that any particular decision can be justified by showing that another professional would have acted in the same way (Edgoose, 2001, p.125). The obligatory Pupil Premium strategies of schools

and their chosen policies such as 'PP first' can be conceptualised as aiming to standardise teacher responses to specific students.

In a discussion of the place of ethics in education, Todd (2003b, p.143) considers the competing pressures that teachers experience in obeying institutional rules, contending that 'Teachers are more than institutional agents, and ethical conduct is irreducible to rule-bound behaviour.' She quotes Zygmunt Bauman (1993) as analysing the way in which moral responsibility becomes 'floated' when a personal decision is avoided in favour of the application of an institutional rule, and 'we console ourselves, and not without reason, when we find the task that we have been asked to perform morally suspect or unpalatable' (Bauman, 1993, p.19).

It appeared that some teachers were happy to be told via the Pupil Premium policy who the 'disadvantaged' students were so that they could help them, and thus have their seeing work facilitating saving and changing work. The English teacher in School 1 followed the logic of the system in which she worked, saying that if she did not know who the students were she would not be able to do targeted questioning. Whilst this made sense in its own terms, it seemed to be an example of the teacher accepting a totalising practice which removed from her the burden of decision-making about how to support learning through questioning. Yet within the interview the same teacher pushed back against the dangers of totalising discourses saying that to suggest that because a student was 'disadvantaged' they would behave in a certain way was 'wrong'. She appeared in this comment to think that she was immune to negative effects of categorisation yet was also involved in a practice which took away her decision-making and surrendered it to a standardising policy, thus 'floating' her moral responsibility. Such 'floating' of moral responsibility is antithetical to Levinas's idea of

the ethical relationship and is relevant to consider in interpreting the nature of the teachers' responses to their students.



Figure 21: Follow the map?

The call into responsibility to the Other

According to Levinas, rather than being founded on an autonomous decision of how to behave in a given situation, the ethical relationship exists prior to any particular encounter, and it is in the experience of each encounter that the unlimited responsibility of every human to every other human has the potential to be recognised. The implication of this call into responsibility is that it demands a constant vigilance in order to maintain an awareness of the Other and to accept that 'one is unavoidably responsible for this other' (Egea-Kuehne, 2008, p.30). Zhao explains how she sees Levinas's work as very applicable to what is happening in the process of education, in which individuals are being confronted with the Other and called into responsibility for it:

> *Teaching and learning are about encountering the new and strange, about being interrupted and called into responsibility to the Other* (Zhao, 2016, p.324).

However, whilst the hesitations described previously point to some evidence of teachers experiencing these moments of individual encounter, these occur within the context of some totalising 'seeing' practices in place in schools. Edgoose argues that the traditional structural systems by which schools operate only pay attention to:

> *the universality of the said and the geometrical order of interactions – through timetables, class space, and hierarchies – that fails to notice that educational interactions are literally an interface – a face-to-face* (Edgoose, 2001, p.126).

The official 'Pupil Premium strategy' documents that each school in the study had on its website, and which provided the rationale for at least some of the institutional policies in place often expressly referred to opportunity and equity, for example:

'Our ultimate goal is that no child is left behind socially or academically because of disadvantage.' (School 2)

'The intent of our Pupil Premium strategy is to provide equity for all pupils.' (School 3)

'We want to focus on how disadvantage impacts our students' learning and what we can do to offset this.' (School 5)

These written policies expressed an institutional intent in relation to these students, but to follow Levinas would be to hold that institutional policies cannot be the means of achieving justice and that equity cannot be legislated for. Todd maintains that policies are about treating everyone the same, which is not necessarily equitably, and concludes that an institutional rule cannot 'bear or adequately reflect the full burden of our personal responsibility to the other person' (Todd, 2003b, p.145). A question is therefore posed for teachers as to how they 'live well within this apparent aporia' (Todd, 2003b, p.145). The ethical relationship with the Other can only ever rely on the individual encounter, which is

facilitated by a 'mindfulness' to the singularity of the Other (Todd, 2003b, p.145). Although many teachers expressed an intuitive sense of the importance of the individual encounter with students, they entered an uncertain aporetic space as they tried to reconcile this with the 'geometrical order of interactions' described by Edgoose, which were built into the school system through colour-coded groups, seating plans and marking policies.

An unavoidable obligation without limits

Levinas's philosophy says that an ethical relationship relies on individual decisions being made in the context of each encounter, which is 'haunted' by the responsibility implicit in the encounter with the Other. The responsibility that arises from interaction with somebody else can never achieve closure in the way that we can experience in relation with inanimate objects that we can simply throw away (Edgoose, 2001, p.123). Whilst we may choose to ignore the 'haunting voices of responsibility that linger from our interactive lives' (Edgoose, 2001, p.126), this does not remove the 'unavoidable obligation that we may choose to disregard, but from which we cannot escape' (Todd, 2003b, p.141). In Levinas's own words: 'The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and for everyone' (Levinas, 1991, p.114). This haunting sense of responsibility in encounters with 'disadvantaged' students is conveyed in the words of the R.E. teacher in School 4 who expresses a need to give the students 'a bit of you, a bit more of you'.

A fundamental aspect of Levinas's conception of responsibility is that it does not matter how the other person responds in any encounter, because the responsibility is not created by the relationship, but is only recognised by it. The responsibility is prior to the relationship and according to Levinas is an asymmetrical relationship: 'I am responsible for the Other without

waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it' (Levinas, 1985, p.98). This dispenses with the idea of what is *deserved* in a relationship and is fundamentally challenging to a more usual conception of relationship as reciprocal in nature. The expectation of reciprocity in the form of 'engagement' and gratitude was visible in the accounts of several of the teachers as they revealed both their explicit and implicit expectations of students and their families. For example, the parents who are cited as failing to attend school events such as sports days or parents' evenings or to support with homework or to encourage their children to attend extra tutoring sessions. Such examples illustrate a more usual conception of the type of reciprocal responsibility which might be expected within a school context.

It is not perhaps immediately apparent how Levinas's ideas about a responsible ethical relationship can be applied to teachers. It could be argued that such a conceptualisation of an ethical relationship demands an impossible level of responsibility from teachers. The idea of an infinite responsibility is a challenge to a school system which relies on the 'Said' of professional limitations to responsibility via policies which determine the shape and limits of responsibility to students. Logstrup, a contemporary of Levinas, describes the relationship of responsibility between humans as 'the unfillable demand' (Logstrup, 1956, cited by Critchley, 2007, p.49). I suggest that what this might look like in an educational context is a constant openness to the needs of infinitely different individual others, which cannot be anticipated and responded to according to a mandated policy.

Moving away from the safe side of knowledge brings with it an experience of risk by accepting responsibility for the Other from a position of vulnerability. In the words of Levinas, there is a 'fine risk to be run' (Levinas, 1991, p.120) in accepting this position of vulnerability. But it is acceptance of this risk which determines the ethical nature of the

relation between teacher and student. The uncertainty of an encounter with the Other is founded in 'the very unforeseeableness of this reaction' (Levinas, 1979, p.199), and it is this risk which militates against the forces of closure. As Edgoose says:

> *When one does not know how one's students will react, the inescapable uncertainly of one's reception highlights one's vulnerability and responsibility* (Edgoose, 2001, p.123).

Hesitations in saving work

An example of the 'risky uncovering of oneself' described by Levinas as part of the ethical encounter (Levinas, 1991, p.48) is offered by the Spanish teacher who describes making a video of her home for her students and understands that this might seem too exposing to her colleagues, but she feels that it is justified by the response of the students. She has deliberately vacated the space of superiority in which she is the one who is always the knower in the relationship with students and has made herself a little vulnerable.

In a different 'hesitation' the P.E. teacher in School 5 described one of her Y11 students disclosing that she had just experienced a miscarriage. At a personal, psychological level the teacher feels quite overwhelmed by being the recipient of this information, which the student has not shared with her own mother, but understands that she cannot refuse the relationship that has been created by this interaction. In this moment the teacher experiences an encounter with the Other for which there is no template. Clearly the responsibility that she feels is not one that can easily be explained in terms of a professional role. Whilst there are rules and policies that she can follow in respect of this kind of

disclosure, it seemed here that these were not able to give the teacher what she needed or wanted in terms of understanding how she should respond to the student in the right way. Whilst a professional role cannot require an infinite level of responsibility from teachers, there is an argument that justice demands it. It chimes with the challenge of providing an educational experience which is inclusive of all students, a challenge which teachers are constantly presented with and inevitably fail at but, in some cases, continue to try to achieve. Whilst Levinas demands a 'moral perfectionism' (Putnam, 2008, p.59), his thinking is nevertheless applicable to the most ordinary of classroom interactions in which teachers are trying to fulfil the 'unfillable demand' of ensuring that all students have access to the education that they need. Levinas did not claim to have the answer to all ethical dilemmas, but founded his approach on a belief in the possibilities inherent within human interactions:

> *I do not know how to draw the solution to insoluble problems….I have no idea other than the idea of the idea that one should have….I have the idea of a possibility in which the impossible may be sleeping* (Levinas, 1999, p.89).

This links with Derrida's idea of 'justice to come' which relies on a faith in a change that is not yet realised. This is reflected in the challenge to try to realise fully inclusive education, which is always deferred, with each attempt to realise it failing but leading to the next attempt. It is the acceptance of responsibility for the individual in front of the teacher and the hope for a better future combined which enables the repetition of this process. An acceptance by individual teachers of the need to provide for all students, regardless of their categorisation in the school system, in a way which may be unknown or at least unfamiliar to them, pushes them out from the safe side of knowledge into a riskier space which can potentially offer hope for those who are in any way marginalised.

Aporia 3: Should the teachers try to change students to fit the curriculum, or should they try to learn from what students bring to the classroom?

This third aporia arises in relation to the degree of certainty that the teachers felt in how they sought to provide what they thought their students needed from the schooling process. Certain types of cultural experiences and knowledge were regarded as necessary to the success of schooling and led to many of the teachers taking on the saving and changing role of 'plugging the gaps' in the lives of the 'disadvantaged' students, helping them to climb the ladders available and avoid the snakes that might lie in wait for them. However, despite strong deficit discourses about students, set against a background of similarly powerful discourses of aspiration and meritocracy leading to educational success, some teachers did hesitate in accepting an unproblematised subject position as a teacher who could save students by forcing them into the mould suggested by the prescribed curriculum. The aporia here of contradictory double imperatives is, on the one hand, teachers wanting to use curriculum content that they think is more likely to engage and clarify understanding for the students, but at the same time knowing that their students need to study and understand the prescribed curriculum content that will enable them to do well in their GCSE exams, as this will be the conventional route to success in the world. While some teachers were content to follow the Said of the standardised curriculum, some seemed to find themselves in the 'space of tension' that Todd identifies between their institutionally defined role in respect of students and their personal responses (Todd, 2003b, p.31). Again, the implications

of Levinas's conception of an ethical relationship can be seen to challenge the certainties of knowledge about how teachers should respond to their 'disadvantaged' students.

Biesta argues that Levinas offers a way of approaching students for teachers who 'want to be more than agents of socialization' (Biesta, 2008, p.207), although he also acknowledges that this is a large assumption to make about teachers' intentions and that it may depend 'if the systematic conditions under which they work make it possible' (Biesta, 2008, p.208).

In discussion of Levinas's philosophy of radical openness to others, Biesta conceptualises an ethical educational approach which does not conceive of areas of the curriculum as 'bodies of knowledge and skills which have to be transferred into the minds and bodies of our students' (Biesta, 2008, p.208). Instead, he suggests approaching the curriculum in an 'empty handed' way as:

> *areas, practices and traditions which set particular challenges for particular students, which ask the question 'where do you stand?' in many different ways* (Biesta, 2008, p.208).

This is a risky approach which goes hand in hand with a belief in the absolute alterity of others and therefore a belief that the student is not just a recipient of the teacher's greater knowledge but can, as Levinas puts it, 'bring me more than I contain' (Levinas, 1969, p.61). Yet the experience of the teachers in my study is far removed from such an approach, tasked as they are with delivering a curriculum which will enable their 'disadvantaged' students to be filled with the correct content which will enable them to close the gap with their peers, in the style of Freire's 'banking' model of learning (Freire, 1968). I suggest that the approach described by most teachers is often quite the opposite of what Biesta argues for in what he calls a 'pedagogy of empty hands' (Biesta, 2008, p.207). Rather than positioning themselves

in a risky openness to what students can bring, the response to the construction of 'disadvantage' is a pedagogy of full hands. The saving and changing discourses of schooling position the teacher as a benevolent well-wisher thrusting an armload of useful items onto a bemused recipient with the admonition 'take these, you'll need them'.

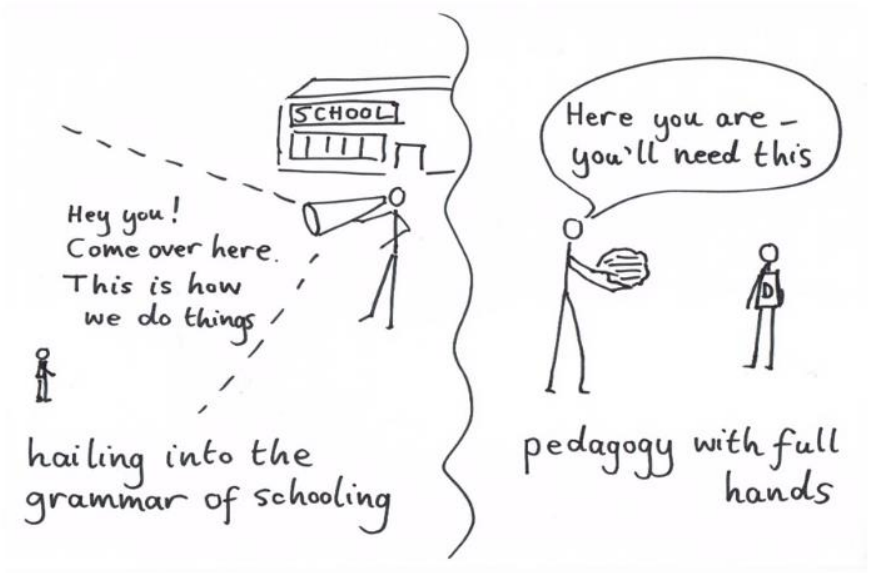


Figure 22: We do it like this

Where they did try to resist the totalising discourse of a standardised curriculum that implies 'we know what you need and how to give it to you', the teachers also, however, ran the risk of falling back into their own personal totalising discourses of students, i.e. we know you come from a certain kind of background, therefore this content will be appropriate for you. There is perhaps a hint of students trying to resist such a totalising discourse when the French teacher in School 3 describes trying to encourage the students to discuss issues of race with him in a lesson and they disrupt this by being 'silly'. Perhaps they are resisting being subsumed by the ego of the teacher and becoming objects of his knowledge.

Hesitations in saving and changing

There certainly were instances in which teachers moved into aporetic space by questioning the content of the curriculum or the expected approach to delivery and discussed how they attempted to curate their subject content to respond better to their students. For example, there was the D.T. teacher who acknowledged that the modes of teaching used most in his school did not suit all the students. He described how he tried to use local case studies that would catch the attention of the 'disadvantaged' students. An English teacher talked about trying to find texts to use that spoke to her students' experience, rather than using 'all of these kind of white men'. The P.E. teacher was conflicted by the requirement of her professional role to force the students to get changed in front of their peers and to participate in sports activities which they did not enjoy. The teacher explained that this went against everything that she understood about the psychology of encouraging participation in sport, but this was what her role demanded of her. The personal and the professional were in tension here, nicely summed up in her words: 'do I even agree with my job anymore?' The teacher's ethical engagement here seems to have initiated a kind of momentary existential crisis in which she questions the potential totalising violence of the schooling system. The teachers were engaged in ethical work as they examined embedded approaches about what the students needed in order to change them from the bad/'disadvantaged' student to the good student who has transcended their 'disadvantage'. Whilst the work of education is by its nature about the process of change, some of the teachers were undertaking ethical work in thinking for themselves about the assumptions built into the current schooling system about how and to what extent some 'disadvantaged' students were seen as needing to change more than their non-'disadvantaged' peers.

CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have explored the construction of and response to 'disadvantaged' students by the teachers in the five schools which participated in my research. I have considered how what happened in these schools in respect of these students might advance or restrict the development of social justice and equity for the students. The study has been limited to exploring the perceptions of teachers, and whilst very small in scale it nevertheless offers some new insights. By adopting a different angle from the research in this field that takes 'disadvantage' as an unproblematic category and moves on immediately to remedial action, I have raised questions about the way that 'disadvantaged' students are perceived by and treated by their teachers. The views of teachers specifically about what they understand 'disadvantage' to be have not been researched before and this study gave subject teachers and leaders of the schools' Pupil Premium strategies the opportunity to share their opinions. In this way it has provided some understanding of how they navigate the matrix of 'moral obligation, pastoral care, efficiency and attainment outcomes' described by Craske (2018, p.527). Several of the subject teachers said at the end of the interviews that they had appreciated this opportunity to think about this subject more deeply than previously, and it had made them reflect on their practice. To provoke reflection in teachers was one of the aims of my research, so this was pleasing to hear.

In my Findings and Discussion chapters, I have made a case for why the use of the language of 'disadvantage' can potentially be problematic because of its contributory effect to how teachers think about their students and their families. I have suggested how some of the powerful discourses that I found to be in operation act to reinforce a containing wall of knowledge which encourages teachers to assume that they understand the students and

know what is best for them based on their categorisation as 'disadvantaged'. I argue that this positions teachers on the 'safe side of knowledge' in respect of the 'disadvantaged' students and that this is not a position which enables the changes that are needed to create a more just and equitable schooling system. As an alternative, I have suggested that when teachers come out from behind the wall of the safe side of knowledge into an uncertain aporetic space and respond in an open and receptive way to what their students bring to the classroom, then a more equitable community can begin to be established. Whilst acknowledging that what teachers can do in schools is only a small part of a much larger picture of structural factors which have effects on 'disadvantaged' students, what happens in the classroom is nevertheless important, in the simplest terms because this is where students spend much of every day. I contend, based on what I found in my study, that there is potential for teachers to cultivate ethical relationships which are rooted in respect for the absolute alterity of every individual, and that a belief in the power of such relationships is more productive of equity than blanket policies which reinforce totalising notions of difference.

The enduring nature of deficit discourses of social class

Asking these secondary school teachers to explain their understanding of what 'disadvantage' means to them has generated novel data and this contributes a new strand to research which has interrogated teachers' perceptions of their students based on their social class (e.g. Willis, 1977; Gazeley and Dunne, 2005; Reay, 2006; 2017; Francis and Mills, 2012; Lupton and Thrupp, 2013; Kulz, 2017). The angle that I have taken has enabled me to consider how the relatively new designation of students as 'PP' or 'disadvantaged' has

brought issues of social class back into focus, although not explicitly. A sense of something hiding in plain sight was with me from the beginning of this study. Early on, as I began listening to what teachers were saying to me in the interviews, I found this old children's rhyme going round in my head:

Last night I saw upon the stair,

A little man who wasn't there,

He wasn't there again today,

Oh, how I wish he'd go away.

Like the little man on the stair the rhyme was persistent, and I continued to reflect on why this was. My conclusion was that it was resonant for several reasons. It seemed to speak to the issue of visibility of 'disadvantaged' students to their teachers, but also the unease of teachers about the accuracy of this categorisation and the purpose it served. The systems constructed around the category of 'disadvantage' reinforced both the existence of this problematic group and the need to try to make the 'disadvantaged' go away by closing the attainment gap. In these ways the rhyme spoke to the issue of 'disadvantage', however, at the same time it also seemed to be relevant to the way in which social class was implicated in the data from teachers. The man on the stair who was both seen and unseen was reminiscent of Reay's 'zombie stalking English schools' (Reay, 2006, p.288). Social class judgements seemed to be alive and well amongst at least some of the teachers interviewed, as they described the ways in which parents failed to live up to the teachers' ideas of the 'normal' ways to behave. These findings reflected judgements about social class found in previous studies in which middle-class norms were taken as desirable in the English schooling system (Francis and Mills, 2012; Dudley-Marling, 2015; Jones, 2019). The behaviours

identified were those that have been long associated with perceptions of social class, i.e. working-class parents who do not 'value' academic education, who do not involve themselves in school activities, who do not support their children with their homework, and who do not encourage aspiration (Lupton and Thrupp, 2013; Benner *et al.*, 2016; Shain, 2016; Thompson *et al.*, 2016). Whilst most of the teachers in this study were keen to point out that not all the parents of those officially designated 'disadvantaged' were deficient in the ways identified, the negative characterisation of some families reinforced how the lines of acceptability of good and bad parenting were drawn in relation to education. It seems therefore that students who were regarded as 'really' 'disadvantaged' by their teachers were those who were tainted by the perceived beliefs and behaviours of their parents.

These findings are not new in themselves but add to a continued discourse that justifies the need for the 'compensatory education' identified by Bernstein in 1970 and now perpetuated by strategies in relation to 'disadvantaged' students which are framed in terms of their deficits. What this study has indicated that is new is that such ideas associated with social class have continued to have an influence in these schools, but rather than being spoken about directly have entered the conversation in a hidden fashion in the form of strategies to address 'disadvantage'. The apparent acceptability of such judgements within school discourse was evident to me in the way that although derogatory judgements were voiced in a veiled and coded fashion, the teachers often seemed to be appealing to me as a fellow educational professional positioned with them on the safe side of knowledge about what 'these kinds of people' were like. The significance of this finding, other than adding a small piece of additional evidence of the enduring strength of the classed nature of the English schooling system and the normalisation of middle-class families, is that it shows how the

term ‘disadvantaged’ is often now being used as a proxy for lower social class by teachers. Whilst it can be argued that ‘disadvantaged’ is not synonymous with ‘working-class’ and that it is simply an objective term which describes the family income of a student, this study shows that ‘disadvantaged’ status is in fact often associated in the minds of teachers with social class. It is a matter of concern if using this term ‘disadvantaged’ gives teachers a kind of permission to talk about families in an ‘othering’ fashion which they might think twice about if the language available was ‘working-class’. If teachers feel themselves to be superior to the families of the students in their schools, then a barrier is created in the struggle for social justice.

In considering the attitudes to parents revealed in this study, it is also noteworthy that the nature of the relationship that the teachers in my study envisaged with their parent body appeared to be purely instrumental. This may have been the result of the questions that I asked, which did not specifically ask them to comment on parents’ relationship with school. However, it did seem that teachers thought of parents only in so far as they were facilitators or obstructors of the school’s mission. If parents were judged in this instrumental fashion, then it seems inevitable that their ‘disadvantaged’ children would experience the effects of this judgement in how teachers regarded them, i.e. as disadvantaged by their parents.

My conclusion is that it was this positioning of some families as either unwilling or incapable of doing what was needed for their children which pushed teachers into taking on a saviour role towards their ‘disadvantaged’ students. Even though the teachers expressed both sympathy and empathy at times towards these students, the perceived inability of the parents to give their children what was needed to help them escape from the kind of lives that the parents had, led the teachers to feel that it was their role to change the students.

In the same way that the perceived deficits in parenting contributed to the teachers' sense of responsibility in relation to their students, the perceived deficits of 'disadvantaged' students themselves in terms of limited language, educational life experiences and cultural capital also motivated the teachers in their saving and changing work. Again, the ways that teachers envisaged the lives of the students that they regarded as 'disadvantaged' demonstrated a number of assumptions and stereotypes in place. In this construction of 'disadvantage' the experience of students that did not fit the teachers' notions of normality and desirability was classified as a 'lack' which enabled teachers to feel that they knew what the students needed and how to give it to them. These findings add to the literature which argues that notions of 'cultural capital' are often classed and that the gap in life experience between many teachers and their students can be problematic (Youdell, 2011; Thompson *et al.*, 2016; White and Murray, 2016; Thomson and Hall, 2022; Bates and Connolly, 2024; Stopforth and Gayle, 2024). The way in which judgements related to social class have morphed into the discussion and practices of 'disadvantage' is made visible in this research. The justification of the need to change certain students more than others was the background against which policies were created which determined the practices of 'disadvantage' which I found to be in place in these schools.

The practices of 'disadvantage'

Tyack and Tobin quote Dewey's argument, made in 1902, that:

> *it was easy to dismiss the way schools are organized "as something comparatively external and indifferent to educational purposes and ideals," but in fact "the manner*

in which the machinery of instruction bears upon the child. . .really controls the whole system" (1994, p.454).

My data show that a raft of systematic practices that contribute to the 'machinery of instruction' has grown up in schools, associated with the group of students identified as 'disadvantaged', although it should be noted that these practices were not applied consistently across all the schools in the study. I have argued that the practices that were seen have developed in interaction with the environment of schooling in which teachers find themselves working and that they influenced both the construction of 'disadvantage' and the teachers' response to it. It was clear that the officially designated 'disadvantaged' group was highly visible to teachers in all the schools in the study through the deliberate practices of the schools through colour-coding, etc. The visibility thus created was reinforced by practices such as asking these students questions first and marking their work first. The discovery of such practices of visibility in relation to 'disadvantaged' students adds an additional layer of evidence to existing research which has explored the effects in the school environment of a culture of surveillance through constant monitoring and tracking of student progress and attainment (Bottery and Wright, 2000; Ball, 2003; Ball *et al.*, 2012a; Gustaffson *et al.*, 2015; Best, 2017; Perryman *et al.*, 2018; Huilla, 2020; Gewirz *et al.*, 2021).

The effects of working within a performative schooling system appeared within the data, not as the chief focus of teachers' accounts, but rather as a taken-for-granted low background hum. The primacy of GCSE attainment was present in most of the conversations, reflecting the strength of the discourse of 'closing the gap' between 'disadvantaged' students and their peers. Foucault's panopticism (1984) leading to individuals governing themselves could be seen at work in these schools, most explicitly in the words of the teacher who explained that

they were always 'working within a kind of inspection framework'. Maximising academic achievement at GCSE for their 'disadvantaged' students was a clear motivator for the teachers. Therefore, the visibility of this group of students was in the main considered a good thing by teachers because it helped them to monitor the progress and attainment of these students closely, with the aim of giving them the best support possible. This illustrated how the discourse of 'disadvantage' was incorporated smoothly into the machine of the performative system that reproduced the status quo. The teachers appeared to have internalised the messages that they were delivering to students, whether explicitly or implicitly, that they knew what was best for students and how to give it to them.

Trying to do their best

Ball's comment on the nature of schools is useful here:

> *…schools, like other institutions, may be inherently contradictory. They may be productive and oppressive, liberating and inefficient, purposeful and unfair.* (Ball, 1997, p.321).

These characteristics were evident in the classrooms described to me. Many of the teachers in this study seemed to accept the discourses of social mobility and aspiration that are embedded into the education system (Bloodworth, 2106; Hanley, 2016; Zhao, 2016; Exley, 2019; Weiss, 2019). They believed that the schooling process was the path to success in life for 'disadvantaged' students. They had themselves been hailed into the grammar of schooling and felt a responsibility to do the same for their students, to 'get them on the same page, which is my page', as explained by one of the teachers. Believing in the system made it possible for them to continue doing their jobs, despite the challenges described in

previous studies (Grenville-Cleave and Bonniwell, 2012; Gu and Day, 2013; Perryman and Calvert, 2020; Sims and Jerrim, 2020), although a couple hinted that sometimes they questioned it, with one teacher suggesting that some students could become 'collateral damage' in the schooling system.

However, this study has also shown that teachers do try to exercise the limited agency that they feel to respond to their students in a way that feels more just and equitable to them. Tyack and Tobin make an interesting comment in relation to their discussion of the grammar of schooling, arguing that change can and does happen, although not always in line with the blueprint provided:

> *Reformers believe that their innovations will change schools, but it is important to recognize that schools change reforms. Over and over again teachers have selectively implemented and altered reforms* (Tyack and Tobin, 1994, p.478).

The attempts by some teachers to adapt the curriculum or qualification pathways were examples of the ways in which practice in schools can be both 'productive and oppressive' in the way described by Ball above. It was productive in encouraging teachers to be thoughtful and creative in their pedagogical practice but could also potentially be oppressive if grounded in the assumption that 'disadvantaged' students would necessarily need a certain type of curriculum or qualification, as discussed in relation to vocational education earlier (Atkins, 2010; Tomlinson, 2013; Allen, 2014). It should be noted that there was a tendency in my study for teachers to equate 'disadvantaged' status with a less academic orientation, and it is important that this discourse is not perpetuated by teachers. Policy makers and teachers need to be reminded that any attempts to develop a stronger and higher status vocational qualification route need to be aimed at all students, rather than the 'disadvantaged'. It is

here that Levinas's call to avoid totalising violence becomes firmly grounded in everyday practice. Teachers cannot know their students by their 'disadvantaged' designation, but they can begin to know them through their personal interactions, and this is what should lead their responses to delivering the curriculum in their own classrooms.

Engagement in ethical work – the contribution of theory to this study

Although this study indicates the existence of practices that reinforced teachers' position on the safe side of knowledge in relation to their 'disadvantaged' students, there were also some signs of cracks in the certainty of whether all the practices of 'disadvantage' in their schools were necessarily right. In this way this study challenges the narrative that suggests that teachers are without agency, and simply act out the demands of a neoliberal state. The implications of the treatment of these 'disadvantaged' students as 'other' links into a vast body of existing research around responses to students who are 'othered' in schools on the basis, for example, of their class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disabled status. My specific contribution in this study is my use of the philosophical insights of Derrida and Levinas to explore the complexity of teachers' ethical work as they responded to the cracks and hesitations in their knowledge of 'disadvantaged' students. The use of these philosophical ideas is applicable more widely to thinking about how teachers can develop inclusive practices in relation to any students identified as different to their peers.

In this study I have used the 'plugging in' approach suggested by Jackson and Mazzei (2012) to decentre both theory and data and see what can be generated thereby and to find a way of thinking about the issue of 'disadvantage' in schools beyond the purely descriptive. In doing so I have developed Säfström's concept of the 'safe side of knowledge' to theorise

what was happening in these school settings. Using the idea of the aporia has enabled me to think deeply about the ways in which these teachers expressed their experience of the tensions that arose for them in trying to do the right thing in their interactions with their 'disadvantaged' students within an environment in which their agency is limited. There is little discussion of these ethical aspects of responding to 'disadvantaged' students in existing research, so this study goes a little way to filling that gap and to highlighting the fact that this is additional unseen work which teachers are doing that deserves recognition.

Applying the model of teachers moving in and out of aporetic space enabled me to understand the situations in which teachers hesitated as 'ordeals of the undecidable' (Derrida, 1990, p.963) which are unavoidable once the decision is made to move beyond the containing walls of the safe side of knowledge. My study has built on previous work discussing aporia in educational practice (Edgoose, 2001; Allan, 2008; Attard, *et al.*, 2016), applying the theory to a novel set of data and has shown how this can be a fruitful way of considering what is happening for teachers in practice. It is of significance that my data showed that the decision-making of teachers was not of a lofty or theoretical nature but founded in the reality of classroom life and therefore provides concrete examples applicable to the discussion of 'disadvantage' in schools. The teachers' decision making was often in the context of a school-wide policy that told them what the correct course of action was. Following Derrida's thinking enabled me to see how mandating policies for 'disadvantaged' students in the name of social justice and 'closing the gap' can be read as an attempt to create a 'calculable process' (Derrida, 1990, p.963) which removes a level of ethical responsibility from teachers which is not productive of the most just outcomes.

Whilst policies in respect of 'disadvantaged' students were no doubt created with the best of intentions, I argue that the apparatus of 'disadvantage' produced in these schools creates a pressure towards closure and containment in which knowledge replaces the 'hyper awareness' which is necessary to work towards justice and equity. I have attempted in this work to disrupt the 'theory/practice binary' (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013, p.449) that seems to me be unhelpful in educational scholarship.

This study adds to a limited body of work, such as that completed by Todd (2003) which has applied the philosophy of Levinas to empirical data from school practice. Some strands of Levinas's philosophy have been used in this study to help cast light on the nature of the response of teachers to their students. There is little doubt based on the responses of the teachers in this study that they cared about their 'disadvantaged' students and wanted to do the right thing for them. What using Levinas enabled me to do was to problematise the relationship of responsibility between teacher and student and show how potentially complex and demanding this relationship was, but also how some teachers were in practice accepting the limitless responsibility of working towards inclusive practice.

Many teachers would automatically claim that they think of each student as an individual, but my data show that this bland statement requires deeper interrogation. Levinas's thinking applied to the data demonstrates how the repetition of stereotypes and assumptions about students and their families is a rejection of the absolute alterity of the individual and a form of totalising violence. Explaining this behaviour as such highlights the damage that can be done when teachers allow themselves to be drawn into such discourses which militate against a more just and equitable schooling system.

However, Levinas's thinking does not only pose a challenge to discriminatory attitudes, but also challenges the apparatus of 'disadvantage' in which certain students are identified as different to their peers and therefore treated in a different way. The justification of the practices of 'disadvantage' is that these students need something extra to help to close the attainment gap, but Levinas's dissection of the nature of individual responsibility offers an argument that policies at a group level, the triumph of the Said over the Saying, cannot provide the unique response and openness to another individual which is the basis of an ethical response. This may well be an unintended consequence of the Pupil Premium strategy in schools and should be considered by those with responsibility for its implementation.

So, what next?

As Biesta reminds us:

> *the very thing which does not follow from reading Levinas is a clear educational program which simply needs to be implemented by well-trained educators* (Biesta, 2004, p.207).

However, there are implications relevant to future practice in schools which can be drawn from this study. I am in agreement with Francis *et al.*(2017) that there is little to be gained from critiques of education which cannot offer any hope for the future. As has been pointed out elsewhere, critics of the capacity of a poststructural analysis to promote change can be challenged with Foucault's own words:

> *My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something*

> *to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to hyper- and pessimistic activism. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger* (Foucault, 1984, p.343).

In discussing the implications of my study, I have identified that the main danger to the creation of ethical relationships in schools is the encouragement of teachers to stay on the safe side of knowledge in relation to their students. Therefore, I have framed the implications of my study in terms of potential means to challenge the four types of knowledge that I saw being rehearsed and reinforced in the schools in my study in relation to their 'disadvantaged' students: we know who you are, we know what you are, we know what you need, and we know how to give it to you. Several of the following ideas are related to what happens in programmes associated with teacher education as this is a field in which I currently work.

Challenges to 'we know who and what you are'

- Consider the use of the 'disadvantaged' terminology. The negative associations of this word are not a good place to start when thinking about best practice in respect of a group of students. The use of a more neutral term such as 'PP-eligible' students would be preferable in my view if it is necessary to track these students as a group. I am not so naïve as to think that changing terminology automatically changes thinking, and I understand that words acquire new meanings and associations in use, e.g. the way in which 'special' has become associated with intellectual disability and is sometimes used in patronising or derogatory way towards individuals, however, 'disadvantaged' already has known negative associations, so to dispense with the

term would be helpful. It would be positive if OfSTED would stop modelling this terminology to schools.

- There is a good case to be made for identifying progress/attainment at a high-level data level in light of the long history of under-attainment of students of low socio-economic status. However, this does not justify the use of blanket practices that mirror high-level tracking in classroom practice.
- It is incumbent on those involved in teacher education programmes to resist 'othering' discourses of difference while at the same time recognising the experiences of individual students. As Gorski concludes (2016, p.379) there is a need for 'equity literacy', in order to understand the structural reasons for the underachievement of some students rather than to rely on deficit narratives where those who work hard will achieve, however, it is also important that such structural narratives do not end up reinforcing ideas about groups of students which can lead to totalising discourses.
- Negative stereotyping of students of students and families on the basis of social class needs to be challenged in the same way that assumptions about gender or race have been. A few years ago, the idea of decolonising the curriculum would have been unfamiliar to many, despite the best efforts of researchers and activists, but it is slowly beginning to gain some traction within a mainstream discourse, demonstrating that shifts in thinking and practice can happen.
- Opportunities need to be taken in initial teacher education programmes to allow teachers to explore issues of how social class interacts with the schooling system through an examination of the research in this area. To break the relative silence

around issues of class would encourage new teachers to reflect on their own assumptions around class and on their own experiences. Whilst there is some discussion of the experience of working-class teachers in the academic literature, more open discussion of classed identities in professional training would be helpful in addressing the stigma that some teachers can potentially feel, as well as combatting stereotypes and assumptions about the students in school and their families. Giving new teachers the opportunity to reflect on their own personal characteristics such as class alongside other issues such as ethnicity and disabled status in the context of developing a professional identity can seem potentially awkward and sensitive, but there is potential to offer a 'safe but critically questioning space within ITE' (Jones, 2019, p.608) and without this opportunity, thinking can get stuck. There is always a danger that such discussions can become an opportunity to rehearse totalising deficit discourses, but this is a risk that needs to be run if an attempt is to be made to move teachers away from the attitude that they know who and what their students are.

- Such a discussion could also be an opportunity to critique the discourse that assumes that the current schooling system in England operates as part of an unproblematic system of social mobility, i.e. the problem of 'putatively meritocratic societies' (von Stumm et al, 2022, p.2). It would be useful to encourage teachers to think about their place in reproducing this discourse, although to do so would perhaps have to be an act of stealth in the context of the Initial Teacher Training Early Career Framework core curriculum's 'learn that' and 'learn how to' statements.
- Another opportunity when working with educators is to encourage them to consider the effects of language that is used in their settings and to develop awareness of how

careless talk can reinforce deficit characterisations of students. In my own practice I have developed a module for teaching assistants studying part-time on a Foundation degree in Learning and Teaching entitled the Social and Cultural Dimensions of Difference and Diversity. In this module we explore how the 'protected characteristics' of the Equality Act (2010) and also socio-economic status interact with teaching and learning practices. In one assignment I have asked the students to critique the Pupil Premium strategy document in the schools in which they work, with a particular focus on the language used in the document in an attempt to encourage them to think more carefully about how language interacts with practice.

Challenges to 'we know what you need and how to give it to you'

- Within initial teacher education programmes there is an opportunity to encourage teachers to have the confidence to use their personal and professional judgement to adapt their lessons to the students in front of them, without making assumptions about those students or trying to find a rule that tells them what to do. Making one's way through the aporia of undecidability is by its nature a constantly recurring process, for as soon as a rule is created it becomes potentially a 'programmable application' (Derrida, 1990, p.961) and thus ceases to be just. This is the dilemma for the teacher trying to work towards 'social justice' in their practice, that justice cannot be legislated for. The message needs to be communicated by all working with teachers that there are no short cuts to inclusive practice and that an ethical relationship is founded on truly seeing the face of the Other as an individual and responding to the needs of that individual.

- It seems that part of a reconsideration of the assumption that teachers always know what students need and how to give it to them will involve thinking about families in a different way. There is a need to consider how schools can develop more positive and less instrumental relationships with their parents where the experience and expertise of families is valued. To hope for such a radical change from the status quo perhaps seems unrealistic, but it would be useful at least for teachers to ask themselves whether positioning themselves as exclusive holders of knowledge is a helpful way of interacting with the parents that they regard as lacking in interest or capacity.
- It would be encouraging to see more schools championing quality options in education beyond the standard GCSE pathways. I am aware of the pitfalls of suggesting this in a discussion of 'disadvantaged' students, as the assumption might be that it is they who need this because they are not able to achieve well in academic subjects, which is the opposite of the message that needs to be communicated. However, there is a need for a broader vision of possible ways to be successful to be presented to students. Clearly schools cannot enact such a cultural shift on their own, but if the institutions of education do not even begin to engage with the options that are available to them, then there is little hope of change in the rest of society.
- The concept of the aporia has been an interesting one to explore with teachers in practice. I have used this in discussions with SENCos, who whilst initially bemused at the mention of a French philosopher, immediately recognised how the idea of the aporia spoke to the daily reality with which they struggled, e.g. the requirements to raise standards and to include all, to teach all children together but to personalise

learning, to design a stimulating but low-stimulus classroom environment. These teachers understand the desirability of both imperatives, but struggle in the face of such aporia to decide what to do and how to do it practically. Even to have these dilemmas acknowledged and a space given to talk about them seemed to be helpful, rather than being closed down with something that is presented as a solution.

How I have changed

The idea of change through education has been central in this thesis and of course I have not been immune from this process. During the PhD I have encountered whole new fields of literature far outside my professional comfort zone of working with children with literacy difficulties. My knowledge of how research can be done has expanded as I have worked to understand how to use approaches which are not based purely on descriptive evaluations of practice. As described in the Methodology chapter, it took me some time to understand that what I was attempting to articulate was reflected in some of the theories of poststructuralism. In particular, my attraction towards tension and contradiction needed a theoretical home that could help me make sense of what the teachers were saying to me, without having to resolve these tensions in a tidy way. As an English A Level student I had been hooked by Keats' description of 'negative capability', of 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Keats, 1817). A PhD without reason or fact would be a poor thing, but the potentially generative power of sitting with uncertainty encouraged me when I felt unanchored and low in confidence and encouraged me to continue wrestling with the ideas that ultimately helped me make sense of what I had heard. Engaging with theory in a way that was new for me has given me the

opportunity to move into a space beyond my own safe side of knowledge and to come to a deeper understanding, which I hope illuminates the experiences articulated by the teachers in this study in a faithful and more profound way.

Future directions for research

A larger study that could take time to work in schools in a more ethnographic fashion could generate different sources of data that would add to what teachers told me, particularly in respect of how teachers were adapting their lesson content or mode of delivery in respect of 'disadvantaged' students. When I have discussed my research with others, I have often been asked how students regard their 'disadvantaged' status. It would indeed be interesting to find out what the students thought about how Pupil Premium funding was being used in school and why. This would be ethically sensitive, but it opens up an interesting question of what it is appropriate for students to know about their designations in schools. In most schools the students are not officially aware of their 'disadvantaged' status, but there were a few instances cited by teachers of them finding out inadvertently, e.g. through the provision of free resources. One of the schools that I know (not included in this research) has experimented with having a form in Year 10 and Year 11 made up exclusively of 'disadvantaged' students. This is categorisation taken to an extreme degree but done with the intention of being transparent with the students about what they are doing and why, and it would be interesting to explore the responses of students to their categorisation.

In considering the implications of my study I have thought about what its relevance would be if the Pupil Premium funding was removed by government. If this were the case, would the practices of 'disadvantage' that I have discussed here continue in schools and would the

language of ‘disadvantage’ persist? The word ‘disadvantaged’ might continue to be used, but with even greater variance in meaning than I have found here. Regardless of official designations, teachers made their own judgements about what constituted ‘disadvantage’, and the associations with social class seemed firmly embedded, so there seems no reason to think that this would not continue.

Problematising teachers’ construction of and response to their ‘disadvantaged’ students cannot have a direct influence on reducing the attainment gap. However, listening to the noise around ‘disadvantage’ has helped to illuminate what is currently going on in schools, specifically the nature of teachers’ responses to their students. I hope that this study goes some way towards giving teachers credit for the ethical work that they do as part of their everyday practice. For whilst I have identified some unthinking assumptions and attitudes amongst the teachers in my study, I also found them to be trying to do the right thing for their students, and this must surely be a good place to start in the quest for social justice.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Participant information and consent leaflet

Participant information leaflet

Title of study: An exploration of the construction and performance of 'disadvantage' by teachers in English secondary schools

The study

There is a persistent gap in attainment in English secondary schools between those students classed as 'disadvantaged' (i.e. qualifying for the Pupil Premium), and their peers. This study will focus on these students in school. Through talking to school staff and analysing school documentation such as Pupil Premium policies, I will try to understand how staff understand ('construct') the ways in which these students are disadvantaged, and how this understanding affects how they respond to these students (the 'performance'). The purpose of the research is to better understand the reasons for the attainment gap and to explore ways in which schools can contribute to the reduction of inequality through an improvement of outcomes for their 'disadvantaged' students.

Your participation

The study will include interviews with teachers from a range of subject areas: Science, Maths, English, Humanities and Art/Performing Arts in a number of schools, and also staff with responsibility for Pupil Premium. You have been invited to participate as you are a member of one of these groups.

Your participation will involve an interview with me to discuss your views and practice, conducted via Zoom, at a time and setting of your convenience. It is anticipated that the interviews will last no longer than one hour. The interview will be recorded via Zoom, with an additional recording device being used as backup. The interview will be transcribed, and a copy sent to you to check that it is an accurate record of the meeting. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you will be free to withdraw from the study, and withdraw all or part of your data, up to two months after the time the transcription is provided to you.

Confidentiality/anonymity and data security

Your individual data, and the identity of your school, will be treated confidentially and will be anonymised in the writing of the thesis. I will be the only person who has access to this data, which will be analysed for the purpose of answering the research questions. The interview data will be stored on a password protected laptop.

Results of the study

The study will be written up in my PhD thesis. The results may be shared further in e.g. conference presentations or written publications. Participants will be offered a summary of the results of the study.

Contact details

Please contact me if you require further clarification on any issue.

Una Lodge, PhD in Education, School of Education, University of Birmingham

My supervisor is Professor Julie Allan, School of Education, University of Birmingham

Consent Form

An exploration of the construction and performance of 'disadvantage' by teachers in English secondary schools

Fair Processing Statement

This information is being collected as part of a research project concerned with secondary school teachers' understanding of and response to their 'disadvantaged' students by Una Lodge, a PhD student in the School of Education in the University of Birmingham. The information which you supply and that which may be collected as part of the research project will be entered into a filing system or database and will only be accessed by authorised personnel involved in the project. The information will be retained by the University of Birmingham in its Research Data Archive for 10 years. and will only be used for the purpose of research, and statistical and audit purposes. By supplying this information, you are consenting to the University storing your information for the purposes stated above. The information will be processed by the University of Birmingham in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 2018. No identifiable personal data will be published.

Statements of understanding/consent

- I confirm that I have read and understand the participant information leaflet for this study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions if necessary and have had these answered satisfactorily.

- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my data up to two months after the transcription is shared with me, without giving any reason. If I withdraw my data will be removed from the study and will be destroyed.

- I understand that my personal data will be processed for the purposes detailed above, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018.

- Based upon the above, I agree to take part in this study.

Name of participant……

Date…….. Signature……..

Name of researcher/ individual obtaining consent…….. ……

Date…… Signature……

Appendix 2 – Initial email to headteacher

Dear xxx,

I am just following up the email that xxx sent on my behalf last week. I appreciate that this is a busy time of year, at the end of a dreadful 18 months for you in schools, but was hoping that I could make contact before the end of term.

I am undertaking my PhD studies in the School of Education at the University of Birmingham, and am interested in interviewing your Pupil Premium lead teacher and five other subject teachers at your school about their response to your 'disadvantaged' students and about how you are trying to close the attainment gap.

I know that this is a topic of great importance to schools, particularly now, and it would be extremely helpful if your school would be willing to participate in this research. The interviews would be via Zoom at a time convenient to the teachers. I would also use the Pupil Premium strategy document published on your school website in my analysis. I am attaching an information and consent leaflet about my research, which explains the study and what participation would involve in more detail, and provides assurances re: confidentiality.

I would be very grateful if you would give consent for me to approach your staff members to ask for participation in the research. I would hope to arrange the details of the project via your PP Lead. If you would like to discuss this in more detail, then please don't hesitate to contact me either by email or phone (xxx). If you are willing for me to approach your PP Lead, I would appreciate it if you could provide me with a contact email for them.

With best wishes,

Una Lodge

Appendix 3 - Email to PP Lead in school

Dear xx,

I have been given your contact details by your headteacher. I am undertaking my PhD studies in the School of Education at the University of Birmingham, and am interested in interviewing yourself and some other teachers at your school about your response to your disadvantaged students and how you are trying to close the attainment gap. I have received permission from your headteacher to approach staff members.

I know that the attainment of disadvantaged students is a topic of great importance to schools, particularly at the present time, and it would be great if you would be interested in participating in this research. I am attaching the information and consent leaflet about my research, which explains the study and what participation would involve in more detail.

If you would be willing to consider getting involved, then please let me know and we can arrange a further conversation.

With best wishes,

Una Lodge