Limits on the Possibilities of Radical Professionalism:
The Importance of a Wider Politics of Place

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Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference,
University of Manchester, 2-5 September 2009
Introduction

In *Sociology and School Knowledge*, Whitty (1985) concluded his critical review of the divisions within the ‘new’ sociology of education with the conviction that

> “interventions within education can be regarded as effectively radical only when they have the potential to be linked with similar struggles elsewhere to produce transformative effects” (p168).

He argued that those concerned with reducing educational inequality need to engage through collective political action as well as through radical action in classrooms and schools, and held out hope of the Labour Party as an agent of political change. Labour at the time contained a “significant minority” of people opposed to capitalism, a constitutional commitment (Clause IV) to the equitable distribution of the fruits of industry, and a manifesto commitment to a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people.

Much has changed in England since 1985 to limit the possibilities for radical professional professionalism both within the classroom and outside. ‘New’ Labour famously ditched Clause IV and has adopted a suite of education policies widely regarded as neoliberal, including a market for schooling and a system of school accountability based on national testing and league tables, centralisation of curriculum, de-professionalisation of teachers through a competency-based approach and ‘national strategies’, and increased regulation and inspection of schools and the teaching profession. Impacts on the practice of teaching and on teachers’ professional identities have been well documented (e.g. Ball, 2003). It could certainly be argued that even if sociology of curriculum were a major part in the education of teachers, which it is not, there is now limited room for them to develop their own curriculum and pedagogies in response.¹ As differences on education policy between

¹ Although this is beginning to change, with greater curriculum flexibility and personalised learning.
right and left parties have narrowed, scope for collective political action has been reduced at the same time as scope for individual action has also become much more constrained.

In this paper, however, I want to take a rather narrower focus and concentrate particularly on the politics of place. If anywhere there is a need for radical education professionalism, it is in disadvantaged urban communities. In this paper, I will argue that both education policy and neighbourhood renewal policy in the last decade have drawn attention to the problem of local educational engagement and attainment in such communities to an extent not seen since the 1960s. In doing so, they have opened up new opportunities for greater teacher awareness, engagement and action. However, at the same time disadvantaged neighbourhoods have increasingly been discursively positioned within policy texts and rhetoric in such a way as to make it less likely that teachers will see the need or possibility for action.

I base this argument first on evidence from interviews with teachers in four secondary schools and five primary schools in disadvantaged communities in England, and then on a review of urban and education policy under New Labour. The data from secondary school teachers was collected in 2001-2 in four schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in very different local settings – from an inner urban mixed ethnic neighbourhood to a run-down seaside town. All of the neighbourhoods were among the most disadvantaged three per cent in the country on a range of deprivation indicators (Glennerster et al. 1999). The primary school data was collected in schools in a single local authority district in the South East of England in 2005-6. These schools had rather lower deprivation levels than the secondary schools, but all served working class public housing estates, with poverty levels twice to three times the national average. In each case, teachers were asked in interviews to describe the context of the school and to identify the kinds of issues that it created, if any, for their practice. As part of the same study, we also interviewed teachers in more

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2 These schools have all been given pseudonyms which are names of trees. The schools in disadvantaged areas are known as Aspen, Beech, Cedar, Fir and Willow. Other primary schools mentioned in the study have a more mixed or more advantaged composition. The secondary schools (all disadvantaged) have been given other (non-tree) pseudonyms.

3 This study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC: RES-000-23-0784-A) under the direction of Hugh Lauder and Martin Thrupp. I draw on data collected by Ceri Brown, Amelia Hempel-Jorgensen and Frances Castle as well as myself. I am grateful to Emma Salter for her help with organising and analysing the data.
advantaged or mixed schools in the same school district, and their comments have been included where relevant for comparison.

I conclude with some remarks about the possibilities of a new politics of place and the links between academia, policy and practice in shaping it and making it meaningful.

**Teachers’ Readings Of Educational Problems In Low Income Neighbourhoods**

If we expect teachers to develop curricula and pedagogies that have the potential to transform the lives of working class pupils, and to lobby for broader educational and societal changes that could promote greater equality, a prerequisite is that they understand the economic, social and spatial processes that make education unproductive for working class students. Indeed in *Sociology and School Knowledge*, Whitty describes how his own interest in curriculum and the social construction of knowledge really developed when he came face to face with the limitations of official knowledge for his students, as a teacher in a London comprehensive.

So what do we learn from accounts of contemporary teachers in working class schools?

The first point that emerges from the interview data is that headteachers and class teachers in working class schools did observe that working class families had different orientations towards school than what the teachers considered to be ‘normal’. Three issues were commonly raised. One was the **social relations of the home** and in particular the nature of relations between adults and children. A second was **parents’ educational practices**, and a third was the nature of **parental relations with school**.

To give some examples, teachers remarked that children from working class homes seemed to spend most of their time with other children rather than with adults. Time with adults was spent doing things like watching television rather than in conversation. Children were also seen as having more freedom than teachers expected, playing unsupervised and staying up late, being exposed to and sometimes participating in adult life. They were “allowed to
play in the streets until late in the evening” (Cedar– teacher) and “ get up at 2am to watch wrestling on television” (Ivy – head). This perceived blurring of child and adult life also linked to what teachers said about parents’ educational practices. A number of quotations illustrate the teachers’ expectations that much of the parent/child relationship should be a teacher/learner one. This, it was claimed, was often lacking both in relation to formal learning, where parents did not read to children or check their homework, and informal learning, where working class parents missed opportunities to use everyday settings for instructional purposes. So, for example, the head at Beech primary school said that

“they don’t get taken to the shops to, and get involved with shopping with their parents, they might get dragged around at the back of the trolley or something like that but they’re not, parents aren’t actively engaging with their children when they go shopping so their monetary skills, all those kind of basic skills aren’t there.” (Beech – head)

On the other hand, children did get involved in shopping as part of the economic life of the household, which meant that they were engaged in rather than protected from the realities of adult life. They were, for example “readily sent to the shops to buy cigarettes by their parents or down town to exchange items” (Aspen -teacher)

In relation to the role that parents were supposed to play in relation to school, working class parents were often seen as lacking. School practices were set up on the basis that parents would help with homework, read to their children every day, and come to parents’ evenings. However headteachers commented that parents declined to participate in these kinds of ways, but did want to have a direct involvement and quick response from school over issues of welfare and discipline; bad behaviour, bullying or problems of lost uniform or equipment. Lack of educational support created a great deal of frustration on the part of staff, who felt that their own efforts were thwarted by parents, and that there was nothing further they could do to change this. This quotation from Fir primary school is a good example. Level 4 in the SATs (tests taken at the end of Year 6 is the expected level and the indicator on which school performance is judged.
“we have a SATs evening for our Year 6 parents, where we invite the parents along because they haven’t got the culture of exams, like early nights, good idea. Yeah, last year we had a lad who basically had arranged a sleep over on a Tuesday so he couldn’t get his levels, he could have got level 5 but actually got level 3, and the parents were quite distraught, so why did you do that? So in spite of us saying ‘early nights’... And we had our evening back in February and we reminded them of that, and we sent letters to say ‘Dos and Don’ts’, we also have homework clubs, we do revision booklets, we have the computers set up ... and yet you get the stupidity” (Fir-head)

The evidence from these schools is consistent with Diane Reay’s assertion that there is an ‘unacknowledged normality of the middle classes’ in education (Reay 2006: p289). It was abundantly clear that teachers were comparing the practices of working class parents to a norm, sometimes explicitly to their own parenting, and also that school learning was designed around that norm. Yet no interviewee reflected critically upon their own experience or on what the school offered, identifying it as associated with a particular (i.e. middle class) set of values and aspirations. We also conducted similar interviews in middle class schools where it was notable that, with a very few exceptions, respondents did not comment on middle class educational behaviour; the relentless organisation of middle class family life around homework, music lessons and sports clubs and extra tuition, with controlled bedtimes and social lives to maximise energy for learning and minimise the possibility of unsuitable peers (Ball 2006). These behaviours were seen as normal and unworthy of comment.

What is of most interest in this context, however, is the ways in which the teachers in working class schools accounted for the difference between ‘normal’ practice and working class educational practice.

With a few exceptions, we did not find evidence of what Ruth Levitas (1998) has described as “moral underclass discourse” (MUD), nor of the pathologising of working class families that Reay suggests is the inevitable corollary of failure to acknowledge the embeddedness of middle class norms in the education system. There were a few interviewees who
alleged that some parents “couldn’t be bothered to get up” (Cedar, head) or “spend their money on the wrong things” (Aspen, teacher), but in general their accounts were empathetic rather than judgemental or moralising. However, they most often offered individualised rather than structural accounts. For example, they explained that particular families might not prioritise education because of economic disadvantage or associated problems of family stress or emotional disturbance. There was a recognition that single parents bringing up children on low incomes could often be isolated from support if they did not have other family members in the area, and might lack confidence or efficacy as a result, and some interviewees recognised that some of the parents might themselves have come from homes where parents did not provide consistent care and discipline or a good home learning environment. The head at Fir primary, whose frustration we saw in the earlier quotation, said for example that

“we have a number of parents who do find it very difficult to become consistent because they maybe had poor role models in their development. So you have to help them.” (Fir – head)

A number of interviewees commented that parents might have had a difficult time at school themselves and therefore lack confidence or feel reluctant to engage with formal education, even though they wanted the best for their children. These comments are particularly interesting. They show empathy rather than criticism, but without exception they position the problem as an individual experience: this particular parent did not enjoy school. They show no recognition that it might have been the institution of schooling itself that caused the problem. So striking was the coincidence of so many parents having these bad individual experiences that it was remarked on sarcastically by the headteacher at Aspen primary:

“Yes, a lot of them had bad experiences at school and everybody’s been bullied apparently.” (Aspen – head)

It is interesting to contrast this account with the one reported by Tan (2009 – paper for this same BERA session) by a headteacher who had worked as part of a school-university project
using sociological research in project to explore school context as part of reflective practice for school improvement. The headteacher in Tan’s study reports that parents “felt degraded by school, actually’.

We also conducted these interviews in schools with more mixed and more advantaged intakes. Two interviewees in these schools did offer an account that came close to a description of classed educational practices (Vincent et al 2008). They described different outlooks on education from low SES families, less concerned with academic success and more concerned with personal development, well-being and flourishing.

“Generally children are from families who aren’t particularly preoccupied with educational stroke academic success. They want to know their children are happy and well-behaved, they don’t quote [league] tables at you”. (Holly (mixed) – teacher)

“I was very struck … that the parents are interested in the child, I didn’t meet anybody who only cared about their test results, nobody, in fact they were saying “what do you think of these tests? We don’t care about them”, which is quite interesting because in other schools that wouldn’t be the case, they’d be wanting to know precisely what grade they might get the year after next. So I think that does reflect on the kind of families you’ve got.” (Ivy – teacher)

These teachers appeared to recognise equal but different conceptions of childhood and education from different class perspectives, rather than to start from what working class families lacked compared with the normal middle class families. However, absent from their accounts and largely from others was recognition of the economic origins of these perspectives, and the ways in which they are being re-formulated in the current economic environment, and in particular local settings. The data from the primary and secondary school studies is somewhat contrasting in this respect.

In the primary school study very few teachers related their remarks about parental attitudes and practices to local social or economic geographies: to the characteristics of particular neighbourhoods or to structure and history of the local economy. The study was set in a
town that had expanded rapidly during the 1960s to accommodate people being moved out of London through slum clearance programmes, and who had industrial working class origins. A number of allusions were made to families who spoke ‘Cockney’. However the town did not have an industrial economy but a ‘new’ economy based on service sector industries, particularly insurance and other financial services, along with retail, warehouse and distribution. Many parents from urban industrial working class backgrounds therefore had middle class jobs in service industries, creating a particular local configuration of class. Unemployment was also very low. One teacher noted that that the wide availability (pre-recession) of low skilled jobs in the local area was a disincentive to education for children who had the intellectual ability to go onto to higher education and highly skilled work. The current structure and condition of the local labour market enabled them to follow the traditional early employment path of working class youth, although more middle class routes were also available. However, apart from this one comment, there was no acknowledgement of local economic factors in the respondents’ accounts of educational practices and attitudes in the primary school study.

In the secondary school study, these accounts were more prominent, although they did not dominate over individualised ones. One of the schools was in a town established to serve shipyard, dock and chemical industries, all of which had suffered very rapid decline or extinction. Here cultures of large-scale manual employment in specific firms were noted by teachers, as were the effects of intergenerational unemployment on family life, parents’ mental and physical health and children’s aspirations. One was very close to the City of London, where the dominant presence of top banks and law firms was seen by teachers as potentially transformative of class cultures and practices, especially in the context of international migration and a ‘melting pot’ of different nationalities and class and cultural backgrounds.

Teachers in the secondary school study also spoke more about the influence of particular neighbourhoods, giving a more contextualised account of individual behaviours than emerged from the primary school study. In the latter, hardly any teachers mentioned local physical environments, housing, facilities and amenities (such as places to play), local social relations, or local ‘structures of feeling’ - the sentimental and social meaning of particular
neighbourhoods compared to others (Thomson 2002). In the secondary study, they did so to a greater extent. For example, the rapid decline of industry in Southside Grange had led to depopulation and housing abandonment, with rows of boarded up and vandalised homes. The development of large unregulated private rented housing sector had allowed pockets of anti-social behaviour to develop as well as a thriving local drug market. Some teachers here described the impact on children of growing up in unattractive and unsafe environments, and of feeling that their area was ‘a dump’. The impact of neighbourhood characteristics and social relations on student self esteem and on parenting practice was most strongly articulated in this extended account by a classroom teacher who was also responsible for home/school liaison:

“I think you’ve got to look at the kind of mechanics that lead to people living in Southside... People don’t arrive in Southside to live there, nowadays, by choice. You don’t sort of target that and say “that’s where we want to go” and it suffers from that in that such a large area of somewhere like Southside is viewed as and used as a sink area that it kind of tarnishes the whole area... The first time that anybody like this arrives en masse to the housing authority, they think “ah how fortunate, we’ve got all those derelict houses down in Southside, lets bung some Kosovans in there”. Its the way things are, isn’t it, and the whole place kind of reflects that. A lot of the people that live there kind of feel that this is a dump and they kind of feel a bit like rejects themselves, you know. I don’t think they have anything like the kind of self esteem that somebody who’s arrived at (market town) has got, nothing like it... you’ve got to apologise for living in Southside, don’t you, whereas you wouldn’t apologise for living in Harrogate say, would you ? You wouldn’t feel embarrassed about putting it on a form for credit, would you, whereas Southside people would because that could easily be a reason for being refused...

In general, the vast majority of parents want their children to behave at school... but...I don’t think some parents are actually empowered to be able to dramatically affect their children’s behaviour. If you live in an area that is generally law abiding and where the general pressure is for everybody to tow the line and behave normally, I think your job as a parent is a lot, lot easier than if you live in an area where a measure of lawlessness is the norm... You might well be a parent who is positively oriented and wants to back the school, but your job in
doing that is harder for you than it would be if you lived somewhere else. (Southside Grange, teacher)

However, it is notable that the same teacher also engaged in normalisation of middle class educational practices and articulated very strongly the frustration of dealing with ‘non-normal’ attitudes and behaviours within the confines of the high stakes testing regime. Describing the behaviour of a parent who had supported her daughter’s claim to wear a tongue stud at school by being photographed on the front page of the local newspaper displaying her own tongue stud, he argued that:

“when we’re talking about home/school partnership, you’re quite clearly not dealing with people with same sort of values...dealing with somebody like lets say mrs x, you’re clearly not dealing with someone who views school and parental responsibility and just growing up in the same kind of way that I do. I mean ...the 37 year old women I know I have brief cases and you know, little machines like that to tape their research project on. They’re not being photographed on the front page of the gazette fighting for her daughter’s right to make a total prat of herself. .. Now if I go round to someone’s house to talk about GCSE and expectations and grades that I anticipate their daughter to get, its much easier to be able to go a talk to someone who knows what GCSE is about and what I’m talking about, than someone who’s interested in whether she’s going to get a tongue stud. (Southside Grange, teacher)

Other authors have recently written about the absence of social class from the discourse of contemporary teachers (Reay 2006, Gazeley and Dunne 2007) and about the prominence of individualised rather than structural accounts of differences between working class and middle class students and parents (Thomson et al. 2006). The data that I report here show the same tendency to submerge economic and social explanations for working class underachievement beneath accounts of individual failure or mishap. They tend to suggest that teachers in extremely disadvantaged areas and those in secondary schools (where students are closer to the labour market and independently involved in neighbourhood life) are perhaps more aware of spatial social and economic processes than those in primary schools, although a larger sample of schools and neighbourhoods would be needed to test
this hypothesis more fully. Nevertheless, even when teachers understand the processes that account for class differences in educational success, they may still normalise middle class behaviours, not just because they are middle class themselves but because schools and education systems are designed on the expectation of such behaviours. Principals and classroom teachers are engaged in an often frustrating endeavour to encourage, persuade, cajole, or discipline working class parents and pupils to ‘be normal’ or else not to succeed. Thus while much of the interpretation in this paper to date may be read as critical of teachers, I want to emphasise that this is not the intention. Criticisms of teachers from the left academics are easy to make, and ignore the day-to-day reality of teachers’ jobs as they struggle to carry out their professional work (for example, in the case above, home/school liaison) in challenging circumstances and with little external recognition. It is also important to stress that the sometimes limited sociological understandings and normalising tendencies that teachers displayed in interview did not prevent them from going beyond their core work to try to improve the lives and educational prospects of their students. Most of these schools had multiple initiatives ranging from one-to-one reading support through social skills workshops to family learning activities, to support disadvantaged children and families. However, these activities did not challenge or transform the core work of schools in radical ways. They were additional to this core work, and in many cases, the poorer schools had retreated to greater conformity – to more emphasis on basic curriculum rather than less, and more emphasis on preparing for tests rather than on creating and empowering pedagogies.

Neighbourhood Renewal, Education Policy and the Politics of Place under New Labour

It is evident from this account that spatial processes and local contextual factors are not the only ones that are being missed as teachers alight on individualised explanations for educational failures. This is not all about place. The narratives of these teachers need to be set in the context of the New Labour discourse and policy of social inclusion, described by Levitas (1998) as ‘social integrationist (discourse)’ (SID). Here employment is extolled as the route to inclusion, and education (or more accurately educational credentials) as the route
to employment. While it is the state’s role to remove barriers to inclusion that individuals may face, responsibility for getting oneself educated, employed and included lies with the individual, hence exclusion can be the fault of policy failure (not removing barriers) or individual failure, but not the fault of social or economic structures which systematically exclude. Social class itself has been largely absent from New Labour discourse. Deputy Leader Harriet Harman’s attempts to push it back on to the agenda at the 2008 Labour conference by pledging that the party wanted to tackle the class divide, rather "just provide escape routes out of poverty for a talented few" was a significant enough development for the Conservatives to suggest that it signalled and Old Labour "return to class war".4

However, within this wider politics is a specific politics of place, which I would argue needs specific attention if any more radical teacher professionalism is to be expected.

Over the last decade, the New Labour government has given more attention to the difficulties of disadvantaged neighbourhoods than any of its predecessors since the late 1960s. There has been an explicit recognition that spatial attributes and processes matter for life experiences and outcomes, and an ambitious political commitment to the idea that no-one should be disadvantaged by where they live (Social Exclusion Unit 2001). Numerous new policies and initiatives were launched between 1997 and 2001, including Sure Start (a multi-agency early years programme), neighbourhood nurseries, neighbourhood wardens, neighbourhood management, as well as the comprehensive neighbourhood regeneration programme New Deal for Communities (in 39 areas). Many of these were incorporated in 2001, into a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal marking a significant cross-government commitment to reducing spatial inequalities. Within disadvantaged areas, schools have been seen as key players in multi-agency regeneration efforts. At West-City High School for Girls (one of the secondary schools studied) for example, the headteacher had become actively involved in the activities of the New Deal for Communities.

‘Floor targets’ (minimum levels that must be achieved in all areas) for educational attainment were a specific feature of the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal,

4 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7827032.stm (downloaded 31/08/09)
while within education policy, there has also been a sustained effort to raise achievement in the poorest neighbourhoods. Initiatives have included:

- **Education Action Zones (EAZ)** - local clusters of schools that would look for innovative approaches to raising attainment, for example: adapting curriculum, varying teachers’ pay and conditions, or running family literacy schemes.
- **Excellence in Cities (EiC)**, in 1999 – a programme aimed at urban schools with funding to support learning mentors, learning support units, City Learning Centres, and provision for students identified as ‘gifted and talented’.
- **Pupil Learning Credits (PLC)**, an additional, flexible grant to secondary schools in EiC areas with 35% or more pupils on Free School Meals (FSM).
- A variety of other ring-fenced grants including ethnic minority achievement grant (EMAG) and a leadership incentive grant, many which were later mainstreamed into the School Development Grant to produce an increasingly redistributive funding system.
- **Extended schools**, in which schools provide a base for a range of support services and out-of-school activities as well as their core activities.

The emphasis on ‘closing the gap’ has also meant that even in areas which are not included in the flagship initiatives, local authorities have been encouraged to focus on raising attainment in schools in disadvantaged areas. None of the disadvantaged primary schools in our study were in areas covered by these specific initiatives, but nevertheless had attached inspectors working with them to bring their attainment closer to the average.

Given this policy context, I was initially surprised that the respondents in my studies, especially the primary school study, made so little reference to the characteristics and dynamics of particular places. However, closer examination of this current politics of place makes this seem rather unsurprising.

One issue is that although the problems of disadvantaged neighbourhoods have attracted attention, they have been positioned within policy discourses as individual and spatial problems not as structural ones: as collections of individual problems, such as worklessness,
low aspirations, and low skills, temporary failures in an otherwise functioning economic structure rather than inevitable products of unregulated global free market capitalism. Policy documents have emphasised ‘neighbourhood effects’: ‘the additional disadvantages that affect poorer people when they are concentrated in poor neighbourhoods’ (ODPM 2005: 52), highlighting that the problem is that poor people live together, not their poverty per se nor the economic re-structuring that has left some areas with insufficient secure, meaningful and well-paid work. Emphasis is given to the spatial ordering of problems, not as a manifestation of structural deficiencies, but in terms which appear to emphasise the spatial behaviour of people: ‘concentration’, ‘clustering’, ‘pockets of poverty’, ‘segregation’. The discourse of the market is also dominant. Neighbourhoods are described in relation to their utility in terms of individual outcomes (i.e. they have negative or positive effects on individuals), more so than as social or micro-economic spaces. They are seen as commodities in a market for residential location, where successful consumers should be able to choose and move in order to maximise outcomes. Successful neighbourhoods are defined by their market position: ‘in demand’, ‘attractive’, ‘popular’; unsuccessful ones as having temporarily failed as housing markets (Leather, Cole, and Ferrari 2007), or being prevented from operating as markets by the provision of state housing. Social housing itself is increasingly presented as problematic because, reportedly, it constrains tenants’ capacity to move in search of work (Hills 2007).  

One result of this is that over the last decade, funding for initiatives which primarily aimed to improve low income neighbourhoods as places to live has fizzled out, and indeed the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal is no longer in place. Instead, local authorities have been encouraged to work with private housing developers to remodel and fundamentally transform areas of low income housing into mixed communities, to eradicate poor neighbourhoods once and for all, rather than trying to improve and repeatedly patch them up. This is now the discursive context in which local professionals are expected to implement specific place-based policies (such as extended schools), and to enact their day-to-day work. In this context, it is asking a lot for professionals in any line of work to identify and work with a more structural view of the problems in low income neighbourhoods or a more sociological view of the ways in which places come to be as they are, and the ways in  

5 For a longer account of these developments, see Lupton and Tunstall 2008.
which they shape the identities and meanings of the people who live in them. We can hardly expect any more of teachers.

Indeed, in some respects, we should expect a lot less of teachers. I have already observed the wider changes that have increasingly constrained teachers’ autonomy to develop non-standard curriculum and pedagogies. In addition, it is notable that many of the education initiatives designed to reduce spatial inequalities (and listed earlier) have focused on activities within schools, and in some cases on supporting individuals within schools. Their funding has come through education budgets not neighbourhood budgets. This is not surprising. Traditionally, education departments and education professionals have seen their domain as the school, and their sphere of influence as the pedagogical interaction between teacher and students, within the context of the social relations of the school. However it is important. Although New Labour’s initiatives have been place-targeted (in that they are aimed at certain places not others), they have not necessarily been place-based, in the sense of addressing the characteristics and resources of particular areas and the particular opportunities and challenges they offer for education (Lupton 2009, forthcoming). This may be another reason for the lack of a particular neighbourhood awareness in those of our study schools which lay outside neighbourhood renewal areas.

With the school presented as a discrete sphere of activity separate from the place in which it is situated, it is easy for schools to see place-focused activities as being additional to and sometimes in tension with their core activities, if they take away resources from direct teaching and learning activities. Studies of schools considering activities specific to their local communities, such as new approaches to home school liaison or involvement in wider regeneration programmes and multi-agency work, have reported a ‘community versus accountability’ tension (Crowther et al 2003, Hancock 1998). Rather than seeing such activities as central to their educational purposes, some schools are only willing to engage in them if they can do so without any impact on what they describe as their core work. This was evident in my own data. The head of Southside Grange school was engaged in a strategy of attempting to change the social composition of the school to achieve a social mixed intake rather than a highly deprived one, and thus to drive up academic results. He declined to take any part in work with external agencies, saying that:
“I just think it’s beyond my ability physically and mentally to take any more on.. And I feel that a lot of what the government tells you to do is contradictory and if you spent your time worrying about health care and housing and everything, how is that compatible with the obsession with league tables and everything else?” (Headteacher, Southside Grange School)

The head of one of the other secondary schools in the study, the Farcliffe School, also saw a tension between place-based activities and ‘core’ activities. However, hers was a secondary modern school which had long been at the bottom of a steep hierarchy of schools in the local area; grammars, faith schools, single sex schools, religious and specialist schools. Results were historically very low. She took the view that rather than concentrate exclusively on a short term goal of raising academic results, she would invest in providing a structure, with other agencies, that could better support the wider learning and social needs of students in the future. The school had taken in the initiative in running a multi-agency conference to identify the key issues in the area and the organisations and resources available to tackle them, leading to the establishment of extended services in the school provided by other public sector agencies and voluntary organisations, and to specific initiatives to address particular local issues such as absences of older pupils to work in seasonal employment. Feeling liberated from the need to compete in the school marketplace freed her to engage in a place-based approach. The majority of schools, especially in disadvantaged areas, do not have this same sense of liberation. Many are battling for their very survival by concentrating or notching up attainment by a few percentage points. In these circumstances, branching out into place-based approaches is likely to seem a risky strategy.

In summary, whilst there has been a lot of recent attention given to poor neighbourhoods and to education within them, this has not been done in the context of a politics which points to the structural forces shaping place characteristics, nor which encourages as understanding of places as sites of economic and social relations rather than collections of individuals. Ostensibly place-based initiatives in education have been focused on individuals within places, not on places themselves, and given the wider performative
pressures on schools, have been seen in some cases as additional and superfluous rather than as integral to the education process. This is not a political context nor a policy context conducive to radical teacher professionalism in disadvantaged urban areas.

Discussion and Conclusion

I conclude from this, rather gloomily, that even if the constraints on teachers’ practice arising from the regime of centralised curriculum and high stakes testing were removed (and there have been some welcome signs of this in the last two years with a relaxation of curriculum prescription and the advent of personalised learning), there are considerable limitations to the possibility of radical interventions by teachers in low income communities. There is little prospect that teachers could devise curricula and pedagogies that are both relevant and potentially transformative unless they are able to locate the source of the problem in the structure of advanced capitalism, and its spatial manifestations, rather than in the deficits of individual families.

I certainly do not claim that the discursive positioning of low income neighbourhoods within New Labour policy is the cause of many teachers’ rather limited and individualistic analysis of educational problems in the areas they serve. Many, perhaps most, teachers even in deprived neighbourhoods are unaware of government policy towards disadvantaged neighbourhoods. They are certainly not gleaning their views directly from neighbourhood renewal policy documents. Probably a majority of all serving teachers now have served all their professional careers in the period since the Education Reform Act of 1988, which marks the beginning of the modern era of neo-liberal education policy.

Nevertheless, if we are expecting teachers to change anything, it is essential that they have access to a more structural view of the problems of disadvantaged neighbourhoods than they currently do: to a new politics of place. Unfortunately, there seems little prospect of this at the moment, either from the current government (despite Harriet Harman’s new emphasis on social class) or its likely successor. With the loss of the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, the high political profile that low income neighbourhoods have
enjoyed is already diminishing and there must now be a real danger that spending on regeneration will be a victim of new public spending constraints. At any rate, it is highly likely that responsibility for closing the gap between areas will be pushed down onto mainstream services rather than supported by additional spending programmes.

If there are grounds for optimism, perhaps they lie within the sociology of education. In recent years, this discipline has begun to take a spatial turn. Following the work of geographers Henri Lefebvre (1991), Doreen Massey (1994) and Ed Soja (1996) in particular, a number of sociologists of education have begun to explore the ways in which educational identities and meanings are developed in space (e.g. Thomson 2002, Gulson and Symes, 2007). Through this work, we can begin to see how space and spatial processes are meaningful in education, and how global, national and local forces combine to create particular place characteristics and dynamics. To give one example, Dillabough et al. (2007) describe inner urban youth in a post-industrial city becoming ‘warehoused’ in ‘demonised’ schools, as their central city area regenerates and neo-liberal education policies create a market for schooling such that their schools are abandoned by more advantaged families. The authors describe how young people attempt to reclaim meaningful symbolic territory by engaging in intra-class and racial conflicts. Complex modes of representation occur as girls (in this example) take on working-class resistance to school norms, while also resisting the traditional ‘good girl’ norms of their local communities, through a paradoxical conformity to established definitions of femininity and heterosexuality. The work shows how spatial processes at various levels help to structure what it means to be a young woman at school in this context.

Such understandings challenge the dominant view of place merely as a container of individuals and families, bringing problems that are themselves disconnected from structural influences. They build on the earlier work of Connell and colleagues (1982) (which Whitty cites in his book) in demonstrating that inter-class and intra-class relations are socially constructed in particular space/time moments. Global, national, regional and local influences combine to shape what the meaning of class, and its relationship to education in particular local settings. Within education, there is potential for drawing on these understandings in two ways, both using knowledge of particular local settings to
illuminate the structural forces at work, and thinking about how local dynamics bring about particular configurations of class (and for that matter ethnicity) which will have different educational implications. In both cases, it seems likely that such an approach could lead to more relevant and empowering curriculum and to more effective and less frustrating home-school relations than those reported by the respondents in my studies. Beyond education, the spatial turn in education sociology could also help in the development of better understandings about how places work and how public services might respond, leading to a more constructive politics of place.

Whether this is ultimately influential will depend in part on another issue Whitty raises in his 1985 book – the extent to which academic sociologists want to engage with political processes and whether there is any party that is now susceptible to these messages. To be effective in tackling educational inequalities, sociologists of education concerned with place also need to work across disciplines, with urban sociologists and geographers in particular. Their influence will also depend on whether there is any route available for academic sociology to engage with teacher education. Other work illuminating a lack of class consciousness among teachers has focused on what can be done in initial teacher education (eg Gazeley and Dunne 2007), but the work of my co-presenters in this symposium also shows what can be attempted and achieved as part of continuing professional development and with a whole-school focus. Collective political action may be difficult or unpromising at the current time, but links between sociologists and practitioners in particular settings offer some promise. As Tan reminds us in his paper, school/university partnerships which start by engaging teachers in critical reflection on their own professional practice are putting teachers on their most vulnerable ground. Starting with the development of shared understandings about what is outside the school may offer a more constructive as well as a more productive approach.

Thus, while it remains hard to be confident about the possibilities of a radical teacher professionalism in the current climate, there are perhaps some glimmers of hope. The connections between academic sociology, politics and practice remain as critical as when Whitty raised them in 1985.
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This document was added to the Education-line collection on 28 January 2010