

Mediating ‘authorised’ pedagogies in high poverty classrooms: navigating policy and practice in an era of neoliberal and neoconservative educational reform

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Abstract

In a neoliberal era of education, there has been a shift of policy focus to performativity and evidence-based practice, coupled with neoconservative ideology of a more traditional knowledge-led curriculum. The resultant, extant education policy context has received criticism due to its teach to test culture, the concomitant narrowing of curriculum and the highly prescribed, scrutinised and ‘authorised’ pedagogic practices prevalent in schools. The paper draws on empirical qualitative data from three modern foreign languages (MFL) secondary school teachers in high poverty contexts in the North West of England. The study examines how these teachers describe their pedagogical practice within the confines of the current policy landscape and how they respond to curriculum and assessment requirements. The paper concludes that, despite the limiting effects of the prescriptive approaches in the current educational system, there are opportunities for teachers to promote unauthorised pedagogies in their classrooms that respond to their specific contexts. However, it acknowledges a shift in teachers’ professional identity and questions the current discourses associated with teachers’ professional knowledge. In response to this, I call for better recognition of the politicised and antidemocratic nature of current

education policy and for us to equip teachers to become public intellectuals with the professional confidence to act for social change by reclaiming pedagogic discourses and practices that benefit pupils living in poverty.

Key Words: *policy; performativity, pedagogies, curriculum, assessment,*

Introduction

There has been a redefinition of teachers' work in recent years from the post-war Keynesian 'licenced autonomy' (Dale, 1981; Ozga 1999) to the modern day, heavily scrutinised and homogenous practices. These practices have emerged in the wake of the prolific number of educational reforms of the modern era that are entrenched in the interconnected policy technologies of market, managerialism and performativity (Ball, 2003).

This paper looks specifically at how teachers in high-poverty contexts navigate through the pressures of performativity and expectations to adhere to homogenous, valid or, what Hayes and Comber (2018) term 'authorised' practices that 'position teachers as needing to do it [teaching] 'the right way'' (p.394). It explores how the extant education landscape, as a result of the education reform package, shapes professional freedoms, decision -making and pedagogic identity in contemporary classrooms.

The achievement gap and the technology of 'What Works'

In England, like other countries globally, current practices to overcome educational inequality assume a positivist methodology (Hammersley, 2001; Biesta, 2007). Drawn from a deficit discourse, children living in poverty are considered to be an analogous collection of underperforming pupils that are required to work harder and be better taught to overcome the educational

‘achievement gap’ in order to achieve economic success as adults. By ‘achievement gap’, I refer to the disparity in educational outcomes between pupils in receipt Free School Meals (the current proxy indicator for economic disadvantage in England) and their more affluent peers.

A key arm in the fight to eliminate the gap in England are evidence-informed ‘toolkits’ based on systematic reviews and random controlled trials that are generated by organisations such as the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). Hewn from the school improvement tradition, and therefore based on cost as well as effectiveness for schools, EEF toolkits espouse specific learning approaches and interventions generated from evidence-based practice. This ‘what works’ approach, heavily endorsed by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and the Department for Education offers evidence in response to the general questions of what works in education at the expense of more challenging, complex and contextualised questions of Why? Where? How? For whom?’ these practices work (Pampaka *et al.*, 2016).

As a top-down methodology, it also serves to diminish the status and value of teachers as professionals, as they are no longer encouraged to rely on their own judgement or knowledge to meet the complex needs of their students. Rather, they acquiesce to the hierarchical and externally referenced judgements of effective teaching within the culture of ‘deliverology’ (Barber *et al.*, 2010), the pathway of pressure to deliver improved ‘performances’ through the education system at every level (Ball *et al.*, 2012a). For an individual teacher, the performance measure being educational outcomes associated with pupil progress data.

However, the impact on educational outcomes for pupils in low socio-economic communities in England has not been positive. The achievement gap at

GCSE¹ has been widening rather than narrowing; the Education Policy Institute indicated in 2019 that it would take 562 years to close, and their 2020 report concludes:

This year the data suggests an even more extreme conclusion: the gap is not closing. Over the last five years, our headline measure of the gap at secondary level has not changed. If this were to continue, the gap would never close (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2020, p. 11)

Despite the constraints of the current policy initiatives that distil pedagogic discourse into a homogenised version of classroom practice based on de-contextualised 'what works' evidence, this paper uses testimonies based on interviews with three Modern Foreign Language (MFL) teachers to illustrate the social and lived experiences of those teaching within the extant policy landscape in high-poverty secondary schools. The research draws on what Ballet *al.* (2012b) suggest is a need to move beyond traditional policy implementation literature to gain a fuller, better understanding of how teachers in high-poverty contexts navigate the current assessment and curricula policy arena with its high level of prescribed pedagogy. The narration of teachers' pedagogic experiences seeks to illuminate the messiness of 'policy activity' that links texts to practice and, in so doing, provides a voice for those who often lie outside the formal machinery of official policymaking (Ozga, 1999, p113). It also questions notions of teacher agency by understanding it, in a Foucauldian way, to be situated in an arena whereby power, identity, subjectivity, and freedom are interwoven to shape each other (Foucault, 1982). It acknowledges the threat to freedom through self-normalising practice that refers to our willingness to accept limitations and internalise them into 'common sense' approaches.

Second, linked to Foucault's thinking and following Ball (2003), it explores how teachers are controlled by new types of governance- first, through the policy technology of performativity within the neoliberal education reforms and second, through the neoconservative ideology of duty over freedom that shapes the values and identity associated with teaching and being a teacher in a high-poverty context.

The next section outlines in more detail the ideological underpinnings situated within recent, key education curriculum reforms that, in conjunction with the rise of performativity and evidence-based ('what works') practice, have significantly shaped 'authorised' or legitimate pedagogic approaches and identities of the teacher actors in which this research is situated.

Educational reform in England: the coalescence of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies

England's recent educational reforms have been built on neoliberal discourses of achievement through individual effort, hard work and merit whilst promising to raise standards and offer pupils opportunities for social mobility. These reforms are heavily focused on accountability and performativity at all levels in education: school, teacher and pupil (Ballet *et al.*, 2012b and Polesel *et al.*, 2014). Across many education systems worldwide, including England, high-stakes testing has been an integral part of policy design to increase accountability through a focus on standardised test scores that are performance indicators for schools and teachers (Au, 2008; Au, 2011; Lingard *et al.*, 2017; Chitpin 2021). This focus on testing and the proliferation of data associated with evidencing pupil progress has also increased public scrutiny on schools and intensified a market-controlled system that is highly competitive (McNeil 2000; Orfield and Wald 2000). Yet there is an interesting juxtaposition between a market-led system of education born out of neoliberal ideology, with an emphasis on

performativity and economic outcomes, and the appearance in recent years of educational policy with an increasing prominence of social ideology. As Apple (2006) outlines:

in the so-called developed political economies, many of the rightist policies now taking centre stage in education and nearly everything else embody a tension between a neoliberal emphasis on 'market values' on the one hand and a neoconservative attachment to 'traditional values' on the other (p.21).

The suite of reforms in education in England under Coalition/Conservative governments since 2010 reflects this blend of neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies. As Secretary of State for Education between 2010 and 2013, Michael Gove had a clear vision of what a successful education system should look like and was committed to eradicating previous Labour governments' reforms, accusing them (and teachers) of promulgating Marxist thinking that betrayed poor children through a lack of rigour or ambition in curriculum and assessment policies:

The fight against the Enemies of Promise is a fight for our children's future. It's a fight against ideology, ignorance and poverty of aspiration, a struggle to make opportunity more equal for all our children (Gove, 2013, np)

New curriculum approaches including a change in the GCSE that, 'after years of drift, decline and dumbing down' (Gove, 2012 n.p.), offered academic rigour through linear, examination (rather than coursework) focused assessment intended to compete with high-ranking education systems world-wide. Gove removed the emphasis on vocational learning, in favour of a 'knowledge-led' or academic curriculum (Young, 2014). This included introducing the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) in 2011, a suite of preferred or 'facilitating' subjects for entrance into the United Kingdom's top-rated universities. The EBacc policy

exemplifies the coalescence of the twin ideologies of neoliberalism and neo-conservatism as it functions as an additional performance indicator linked to schools' GCSE outcomes. It was intended to encourage the uptake of certain traditional subjects, such as MFL that had seen a decline in previous years. Indeed, the value of language learning in the modern era is a dichotomy. Primarily, it has articulated by successive British governments as a way to access opportunities in the job market, whilst its curriculum and assessment orientate towards developing certain, valued, capitals and dispositions associated with, and favoured by, the middle classes.

Cultural Capital as powerful knowledge

Indeed, Hirsch *et al.* (1988) have heavily influenced post-2010 curriculum development through their discourse on the benefits of providing a knowledge-rich curriculum as a way of overcoming social injustice through social mobility. By giving access to powerful knowledge, Hirsch *et al.* argue, poor pupils can better themselves as they gain an understanding of the cultural capital and shared knowledge society relies on and can aspire to professional (rather than working class) jobs. In England, Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) introduced the notion of 'cultural capital' and 'knowledge' into its inspection framework of 2019 as 'essential knowledge to be educated citizens'(n.p). The specific attention on 'knowledge' and 'cultural capital' cited in the current education policies is problematic. Arguably, the thin and overly simplistic version of the term 'cultural capital' does not encompass the multi-layered and qualitative dimensions of Bourdieu's (1984, 1990) conceptual tools in their entirety that examine the complex construction of societal inequalities through the analysis of power. Cultural capital in current educational policy is abstracted from other, powerful determinants that constitute the regulation of power and social order including, *inter alia*, 'habitus' (trained and lasting dispositions or 'rules of the game').

It therefore does not take into consideration the elusive and intangible nature of what Skeggs (1997) refers to as 'the affective aspects of inequality' (p. 10) or Thomson (2002) calls the 'virtual schoolbag' (p.1) that denotes the micro-interactional processes whereby individuals' strategic use of specific competences, dispositions and knowledge advantage certain pupils over others (see also Lareau and Weininger 2003). The focus on specific capital based on high culture reinforces the discourses of 'fixing' children living in poverty by re-socialising them into middle class versions of themselves to fulfil the social mobility agenda of 'breaking the link between a person's background and where they get to in life' (Greening, 2017 n.p). At the same time, it serves to structure forms of consciousness and knowledge within the classroom (Bernstein, 1996) by promoting specific pupil identities and cultures to the detriment of less favoured groups. Therefore, certain pupils are at risk of being alienated from the curriculum through a lack of representation (Valenzuela, 1999; Au, 2008).

Repertoires of practice

The emergence of knowledge-rich curriculum and test-focused teaching practices also identifies a concomitant narrowing of pedagogic repertoires, particularly in high poverty areas. In these classrooms, activities are less likely to be student-centred, as teacher-led pedagogies, are favoured to ensure pupils keep up with the content and knowledge required by the test (Au, 2007; Haberman, 2010; Lupton and Hempel- Jorgenson, 2012; Hempel-Jorgenson, 2015). Lingard reported in 2007 that the impact of policy and performativity on pedagogies in England has led to a reductive form of teaching 'in what we might call pedagogies of the same, rather than pedagogies of difference' (p. 248). In the modern era, repertoires of practice have further narrowed through the emergence of school policies that include 'non-negotiables'- evidenced-based classroom techniques that are expected to be included in all lessons.

Teachers' quotidian work is scrutinised (and evaluated) to favour, for example, cognitive science teaching principles that promote direct instruction and retrieval practice (testing) (Rosenshine, 2012, p.12), no matter the context of the lesson.

Bernstein's (2003) conceptualisation of opposing pedagogic modalities seeks to explain why specific classroom practices with a focus on testing and teacher-led lessons are particularly detrimental to pupils living in high poverty contexts. The focus on scrutinising performance and grading against an external product or criteria, e.g. test or examination, with an emphasis on the pace and sequencing of learning, strong regulatory rules and diminished discursive rules, are all characteristics of visible pedagogies. This focus on the didactic transmission of specific knowledge and skills, termed 'pedagogy of poverty' by Haberman (2010), was identified as the prevalent pedagogic offer in urban classrooms serving poor pupils. Within this educational arena, progress is seen only through a narrow lens of performance against the external product and relies on passive compliance from pupils rather than actively engaging with and celebrating the acquisition of skills and competences. The resultant pedagogy has a damaging effect on attainment, engagement and self-esteem for those who are not able to meet the requirements of the curriculum or comply with strict regulatory rules of behaviour.

Methodology and methods

My research examines how teachers in high-poverty contexts navigate the pressures of performativity and educational policies that promote homogenous valid or 'authorised' practices. Using my academic skills and professional knowledge as a secondary classroom teacher for over twenty years, I adopt a methodology termed 'critical scholarship' (Apple, 2016 p. 505). I therefore

harness my expertise from both theoretical and practical perspectives to critically analyse the relational links between education, political ideologies and wider societal values in order to explicate the way that educational practice, professional identities and discourses are shaped in the current era.

However, rather than engaging solely in a critical analysis of limited and limiting practice or 'pedagogy of poverty' (Haberman, 2010), I follow Comber and Hayes's research tradition that interprets the 'positive analysis and documentation of pedagogy ... contextually situated in particular places of poverty over time' (Comber, 2016, p.396). Instead of focusing on a deficit narrative of teaching in high-poverty areas, their research exemplifies and analyses what is termed 'productive pedagogies' (Hayes *et al.*, 2006, p.1), uncommon practices that move away from common scripted, homogenised or 'authorised approaches' (Comber, 2006, p.61.) and are successful in shaping young people's learning.

Using data created through respectful and critical dialogue, I harness the experiences of those within the educational system that are often left out of the policy making process (Mahony and Hextall, 2000; Ballet *et al.*, 2012b; Pampaka *et al.*, 2016) to illuminate the work of teachers in high poverty contexts that will enrich (and potentially disrupt) the current education discourse.

The study was carried out adhering to the BERA (2018) ethical guidelines and ethical approval was granted from my institution's ethics committee.

The research from which this paper is drawn took place in three different schools in the North West of England as part of my doctoral studies. Three teacher participants were purposively selected (from a pool of school-based mentors within my institution's initial teacher training partnership) based on two requisites, namely that they were specialist languages teachers and currently

teaching in high-poverty contexts in urban communities in North West England. My criterion for ‘high-poverty’ was based on the percentage of free school meals pupils (FSM) within their specific schools, a widely used proxy for disadvantage. The current national average is 20.8% (Gov.uk, 2021). I selected teachers with different experiences in teaching including length of service, schools taught prior to their current position and current position in school in order to add a dimension of biography and context to the research. The table below briefly outlines their context, including the levels of poverty in their schools defined by FSM, and some information about their experience. Throughout this paper all respondents’ data is anonymised using pseudonyms for people and places.

Research instrument: Interviews

The three interviews were conducted and digitally recorded after gaining ethical clearance and obtaining full permission from participants in their schools between December 2018 and February 2019. The choice of interview as a method provided a co-constructed social encounter that presented insights into perceptions, opinions and how the participants make sense of the world around them. It also offered a voice to those who are at the centre of educational policy *in situ* and therefore could articulate the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 2006).

	Carmel	Helen	Madeleine
Biographic details	Teacher of German and French for 28 years in a variety of contexts including areas of high poverty.	Teacher of French and Spanish for five years in one school in an area of high poverty.	Teacher of French and Spanish for eight years in one school in an area of high poverty.
Current school Details	Girls' academy in an area of economic disadvantage. 996 girls on roll/ 40% FSM/82.5% EAL	Co-educational academy in an area of <u>economic</u> disadvantage 1283 on roll/ 42.9% FSM/5.9% EAL	Co-educational academy in an area of <u>economic</u> disadvantage 735 on roll/ 47.9% FSM/26% EAL
Current role	Teacher of German and lead for German in the faculty.	Teacher of French and head of department	Teacher of Spanish and French and head of department

Table 1: Profiles of participants (pseudonyms used)²

Data were collected through three interviews using an interview guide approach that provided liberty to discuss and probe specific responses. The outline therefore afforded comprehensiveness of discussion and a systematic data collection that was subsequently analysed (Patton, 1980). The first part of the interview focused on an artefact of teaching, for example, a teaching resource or pupil's exercise book that served as an initial discussion point for the participants to offer a representation of them as a teacher. This device served to generate an understanding of what Luke *et al.* (2000) termed a 'pedagogical repertoire' (p.3) that identifies and encompasses the set of classroom practices adopted by a teacher and also provided data that illuminated how they identified as a professional.

For the remainder of the interviews, questions were asked based on key themes identified in the literature and particularly focusing on policy with an emphasis on data, evidence-based practice and the teach to test culture as well curriculum content, including its sequencing and the teaching of target language culture. These questions were intended to generate data that reflected pedagogic

practices in light of the current policy context and enabled the participants to articulate how their teaching is shaped.

Analysis of the data was iterative and initially *emic*; taking meaning from participants who have interpreted their world by providing narrations of their pedagogic repertoires and associated underlying motivations, values as well as their individual perceptions of constraints shaping decision-making in their professional practices and identities (Berry, 1969). I particularly wanted to examine if teachers might feel locked into ‘authorised’ pedagogies with a particular focus on the evidence-based or ‘what works’ agenda. To achieve this goal (and engaging in Apple’s critical scholarship), I used my expert knowledge of teaching to access, collate and code *emic* concepts, words, phrases, and descriptions within the discursive repertoires of MFL teachers in high poverty contexts in order to illuminate them through their worldview. The data were subsequently analysed through the observer’s *etic* lens (as an academic) to trace patterns of concepts and behaviours that have been drawn and interpreted from wider research and literature, particularly focusing on educational inequality, explored in earlier sections of this paper.

Whilst acknowledging that my interpretation of the data cannot be neutral, I aimed in my data analysis to focus on the positive aspects of practice that could be highlighted from the discussions with the participants. The interviews, having been recorded, were subsequently transcribed in full by me and participants were asked to validate the data at this stage.

I also recognise that the transcriptions are abstracted from time and space; they do not capture the dynamic, fluid dimensions of a social setting (Mishler, 1991 p.260) nor do they acknowledge the predetermined nature of questions compiled in advance by the researcher. However, I would contest that through

the researcher's own reflexivity, a faithful written record of the interviews plus validity checks, reliability and validity were addressed before the analysis and writing up of the research findings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983).

The following sections are divided into the broad themes discussed within the interview and provide a narrative of the interviews capturing the participants' practices and a rationale for their pedagogic repertoires alongside my findings and discussion.

Research findings and discussion Artefacts of practice: a 'teach to test' culture and 'evidence-based' pedagogic repertoires

When asked to provide an artefact of practice that represented them as a teacher, all three participants chose to discuss resources from their key stage 4³ practice (i.e. only GCSE classes) to exemplify their teaching. This, in itself was striking as, when asked what informed this decision, all responded that they thought it was what they were 'expected to do' when discussing policy and assessment.

Two out of three artefacts relied heavily on pupil memorisation techniques and reflected, according to both teachers, a typical approach to the start of the lesson at key stage 4. Helen's PowerPoint slides focused heavily on what she referred to as 'vocabulary retrieval', activities that usually involved pupils working in silence, recalling decontextualized language in order to help them prepare for the spontaneous elements of the final examination in speaking and writing and ensure that esoteric vocabulary is understood in reading and listening papers.

Helen's rationale for this practice was that memorisation was 'the name of the game' since GCSE had become even more memory reliant, following its reform to linear examinations in speaking and writing. Helen suggested that the whole school's 'non-negotiable' practices were heavily influenced by cognitive science techniques. Despite expressing reservations about pupils engaging with tests first thing in a lesson, she was reassured as 'I know they don't like it but

it's scientific isn't it and something that the EEF [Education Endowment Fund] promote, so it *should* work' (Helen).

Carmel adopted a similar approach to her teaching of key stage 4:

We started off with keywords test - this is a set of emergency verbs, ten verbs, that in the event of a mental breakdown they have them in their long-term memory...They know them inside and out, back to front - the average score out of a possible 48 is 46, so they will know those verbs, whatever arises!

Carmel also reiterated the emphasis on testing 'we have to test, whatever happens, because the data is king and we have to have it dropped[collection of school data to monitor pupil progress]'. Later in the interview, she also stated:

this is really drilling for the test and whatever we think or don't think about drilling for tests, this is an equity issue. For these children, the way to get out of poverty, is by passing exams. (Carmel)

Carmel and Helen's discussion about their artefacts evidence a shift in educational language towards pedagogies that capture the culture of accountability and audit through testing (Au, 2011) whilst demonstrating a dilemma in judgement that Biesta (2017) refers to as the distortion from 'professional knowledge to evidence-based practice' (p.322). This distortion is based on the idea that real professional action is no longer based on singular insights or subjective opinions but on the secure scientific knowledge derived from 'what works' (p.322). It also speaks to Foucault's (1982) view of self-normalising practice as both teachers have accepted what have become 'common sense' approaches to teaching that do not question or challenge the current educational hegemony. In so doing, teachers' sense of agency is diminished and a new identity emerges, characterised by a professional

compliance, which embraces new values associated with neoliberalism (Hall and McGinity, 2015). Indeed, Carmel's suggestion that 'teaching to test' also connects to notions of social justice for her disadvantaged pupils as a way to overcome poverty, reiterates this shift in pedagogic identity as a result of government policy. It offers insights into the contemporary epistemological approach to education as, at one level, she identifies educational success with meritocracy and social mobility. Yet, as later seen in the interview, she recognises the entrenched obstacles within the curriculum and assessment processes, particularly focusing on Hirsch's rich knowledge and Bourdieu's thinking tools that disbar her pupils from enjoying, as well as, achieving in modern languages.

Conversely, Madeleine's discussion about her artefact was not test-related, *per se*, but factored in activities that facilitated revisiting language (including verbs and high frequency language) at regular intervals through a unique system of colour-coded sentence building from year 8 onwards. However, Madeleine then explained that these activities had been introduced, in part, to fulfil expectations around evidencing progress in the 'data drop' that was required by her Senior Leadership Team every six weeks, particularly as there was little curriculum time (only have two lessons per week in key stage 3). Timetabling for core subjects such as English, mathematics and science had been prioritised to take place each morning whilst foundation subjects (like modern languages) only occur in the afternoon. Madeleine was also concerned about being test-ready in key stage 4 when pupils are required to understand rubrics of the examination and to write spontaneously. The department had therefore introduced GCSE testing activities as early as possible in order to overcome the perceived challenges of the new specification and key stage 3 was abridged to two years to facilitate the 'step up to the real world of GCSE' (Madeleine).

The artefacts proved insightful as, not only did it help articulate the type of teacher the participants identified as being, but these preliminary discussions also highlighted the initial discourse around ‘authorised’ pedagogic practice. Indeed, much of the discussion around the artefacts appeared to suggest that policy (both nationally and within school) has a direct impact on pedagogic practice. The artefact discussions echoed opinions that are cited about high-stakes testing that first, regulate the form that content knowledge takes in the classroom (Bernstein, 1996; Au, 2008), and second, that the pressure to perform at key stage 4 cascades down and impacts on key stage 3 teaching curriculum time and methodology.

Curriculum sequencing; implications for high-poverty classrooms and professional judgements

The discussion about curriculum sequencing and schemes of work reflected the impact of policy on pedagogic practice in terms of data and assessment requirements.

All three teachers identified challenges to sequencing and pace of the schemes of work at key stage 3: Carmel declared them as ‘not fit for purpose’, Helen described them as ‘flawed’ on the basis of the reliance on topic-based approaches (such as ‘holidays’, the ‘environment’ or ‘future careers’) due to vocabulary and grammar-heavy curricula. Indeed, all participants were required to submit data to Senior Leadership Teams to monitor pupil progress at regular intervals without consideration for where pupils are in the scheme of work and were provided few opportunities to revisit or consolidate grammar and vocabulary within their longer term planning. She explained ‘because we do six weeks on ‘Paris’ and then test and then forget it [the vocabulary and grammar] then six weeks on food and then test and then forget it’. (Helen)

The three participants recognised what Bernstein (2003) described as the damaging effect of visible, non-discursive pedagogies on their pupils that are teacher (rather than) pupil-led due to their emphasis on testing and grading and meeting the requirements of a fast-paced curriculum. However, the conversation also indicated differing levels of professional response to these issues. Helen demonstrated little enthusiasm for departing from the schemes of work and textbooks that are used in the department but acknowledged that the GCSE content is dry and does not encourage taking modern languages to A level⁴.

Madeleine's responses demonstrated the least adherence to prescriptive planning. When asked about planning, she suggested that her self-authored schemes of work needed adapting to meet her pupils' learning needs and therefore the unit planning, delivery, testing cycle did not always abide by the school's rigid data drop schedule. Once again, the authorised element of pedagogies was highlighted as Madeleine implied some guilt for not 'playing by the rules' and justified her practice when asked about the amount of centralised planning by saying 'Not as much as it should be. I never had 'this is what lesson week one is' – I can't do that – I think this made me a better teacher'. She concluded that this approach has evolved over years in order to develop flexibility:

as it's [flexibility] so important as you will lose them with rigidity in language teaching. I used to follow the modules when I first started teaching but not now... If it's too rigid, there is no magic (Madeleine)

She narrated pedagogic practice that emphasised spontaneity and having fun with language as well as linguistic development in what she acknowledged is a

high stakes test environment. Describing typical practices that did not focus on a test but allowed pupils to enjoy the lessons, she said:

It has to be fun – they never know what is going to happen, but we negotiate the tasks together– we might get them out of their chairs, acting, doing something because so much of the time is sitting in the classroom.(Madeleine)

Madeleine's account of planning and implementation tells us much about her pedagogic identity as a teacher beyond that of a technician who just implements pre-specified routines (Leaton Gray, 2007). It harnesses an understanding of the contextually specific (and often ephemeral) nature of school classrooms. Rather than seeking other's professional knowledge through strategies from evidence-based research, she relies on her own highly specialised skills or practical knowledge (*phronesis*) to respond to the immediate situation and her pupils in that classroom. This, she suggested 'is the only way my kids can 'get' what languages is about as they can live it, speak it and have fun with it' and asserted that was why her relationships were so strong with her pupils and GCSE numbers high. This uptake bucks the trend of schools in low socio-economic contexts reported in the National Association of Language Advisers' (NALA) 2020 survey. It is, perhaps, a hopeful message that a pupil-focused and supportive classroom environment opens up to more productive and democratic pedagogies that engage marginalised pupils. However, what is also significant is the apparent tussle in Madeleine's pedagogic and professional identity. Whilst recognising the effectiveness of her pedagogic approach for her pupils, she is not prepared to overtly question the hierarchical order of knowledge that is established within her professional context. In essence, she clearly attributes her success to her own skills and, whilst confident to engage with less 'authorised pedagogies', she believes that she is subverting the system as she recognises the tension between 'freedom' and 'duty' within her role as a teacher.

Cultural Capital in the MFL curriculum; implications for pupils living in poverty

All three teachers recognised other aspects of how the current GCSE curriculum and assessment requirements shaped their pedagogic practices. In particular, there was a commonality in the language amongst participants to describe how frustrated and compromised they felt with the requirement for students to describe themselves, their family, home and their lives in general in the speaking and writing examinations. Carmel suggested that the examination was 'so middle class, so many questions [writing or speaking] are set about going out to dine in a restaurant. We don't do that in Longshaw!'

Indeed, identifying as coming from a working-class background herself, Carmel felt great empathy as she remembered being asked about *her* home, holidays, and family outings at school in *her* German lessons (my emphasis). She recounts 'It was all the interrogation stuff that was nobody's business, and I was embarrassed, it nearly made me not want to do languages. A level isn't like that'.

These were sentiments echoed by Helen and Madeleine who also identified pupils' resistance to articulate their home lives in front of their peers. All three participants admitted that their only recourse is to encourage young people to lie about their lives or introduce fantasy contexts into their pedagogic practices in order to help overcome embarrassment. As Helen said:

I think it is ridiculous to get the children to write about homes that they don't live in so that they can introduce different tenses, all about areas in the neighbourhood which have no relevance to them, it doesn't connect with their experiences.

Findings from the National Association of Language Advisors' report (2020) on socio-economic deprivation in the United Kingdom mirror the sentiments of the

participants. Respondents from the national survey highlighted issues with the ‘cultural capital’ that students were expected to know and also made allusion to the more complex interplay and power struggle within social practice of Bourdieu’s *habitus*. Like Helen and Carmel, respondents in the survey also highlighted the problematic nature and deeply affective aspect of narrating activities (such as holidays or meals out in restaurants) that they had never experienced. As Valenzuela (1999) emphasises, by asking pupils to create a middle-class version of their lives, they are forced to rely on legitimate dispositions or cultural knowledge required that lies outside their identities whilst concomitantly devaluing their own cultural assets, including home languages and cultural experiences as they are not represented or valued within the curriculum.

This can create a barrier to engagement for poor pupils as there is disconnect between required knowledge and their own lived and cultural experiences. Consequently, learning a language can seem pointless and have no real-life relevance.

Cultural knowledge and motivation in high-poverty classrooms

The final section of the interviews explored how target language culture is taught in lessons. This aspect of pedagogic practice was introduced into the interview as it had the potential to exemplify clearly the interplay between policy and practice and to reveal to what extent participants were receivers and agents of policy (Ballet *al.*, 2012b). This was particularly pertinent since there was a significant shift of emphasis in policy in 2014 in England, whereby the school’s curriculum was required to focus on the acquisition of cultural knowledge through the reading of literary texts to expand pupils’ understanding of the target language culture (Department for Education, 2014).

Literature on motivation in language learning often refers to the need for the inclusion of target language culture to engage learners in foreign languages. Dornyei and Csizer (2005) claim that language learners are more likely to be engaged because they recognise a medium (or real-life purpose) to interact with other ethnolinguistic communities and the interethnic contact influences their levels of motivation as they develop a better understanding of other cultures and want to learn more about them. All participants in their interviews acknowledged the importance of pedagogy associated with teaching target language culture but recognized the narrow scope of the national curriculum requirements leading to questions about the regulation of knowledge and, ultimately, consciousness within the current policy landscape in modern foreign languages. This concern was articulated through discussion about the supposition within policy documentation that authentic texts should focus on classic literature that privilege only specific (middle class) versions of cultural capital and therefore, as Valenzuela (1999) suggests, are substracted from the curriculum as it has no relevance to pupils' lives. Also, there was disquiet over the term 'culture' (in the singular rather than plural) thus referring to a homogenous group of French, Spanish or German speakers rather than recognising rich, diverse cultures and ethnicities within these target language groups.

However, there was variation in their responses relating to the level of engagement with culture, particularly within the perceived parameters of the current policy context. Helen had engaged in the teaching of authentic texts with some success and suggested that some of her lessons were 'loosely themed' on cultural aspects of French life but were generally focused on practising skills for GCSE. At key stage 3, references to culture were included in lessons via anecdotes from her living abroad. She conceded that much of GCSE content did not connect to pupils' experiences, as very few go to France on holiday and do not broaden their understanding of francophone cultures. She explained:

It probably put some off doing it at A Level and there is so much we could be doing culturally because having said that they love it. I took some kids on a taster day to Cambridge, an undergrad taster because they want to do A Level. They did a French poem (in English) and we did about a painter. I just feel they don't get that experience of A Level at GCSE at all. I wonder why there isn't much cultural stuff in the syllabus. (Helen)

Unlike Helen, Madeleine's pedagogic practice had culture embedded throughout both key stages, as she believed that it creates enthusiasm for the subject and functions to develop wider knowledge of other cultures and tangible learning experiences that make sense of the world for young people, particularly those from the disadvantaged backgrounds with fewer opportunities to travel. She spoke passionately about her role as a teacher of French and Spanish as a conduit into other worlds, cultures, and traditions for young people, particularly as she had travelled and lived in countries including Peru, Spain and France. Although she said that she did use authentic texts, much of our discussion that included culture referenced her in lessons talking about current affairs or historical events in class for example, '*les gilets jaunes*' movement in France and the navigational routes of Christopher Columbus. She recounted one lesson 'and they love it, and it's all in English. We had a whole lesson on the channel tunnel because kids thought that you'd be able to see the fish through the walls-like Blue Planet [aquarium]'

Carmel's approach to culture was substantially boosted by the inclusion of a foreign language assistant (FLA). The school finances a FLA position through pupil premium funding that normally require her to develop speaking skills with small groups. However, Carmel used her FLA for activities in key stage 3 and 4 that focus heavily on cultural dimensions. Like Madeleine, she felt that her role as a modern languages teacher is to develop intercultural understanding to

motivate pupils: therefore, she encouraged her FLA to teach whole class activities focusing on German culture as well as linguistic components. Her teaching culture was also intended 'to feel that the language is alive'. She routinely uses '*Tagesschau*', a German news website to develop her pupils' vocabulary and grammar but it also serves to widen their cultural awareness:

because for our children they don't know what's going on, because of their journey, because of their background, and their pre-occupation with having to pass exams their cultural reference points are limited- the website has a double benefit, it gives them that. (Carmel)

The conversation on the cultural dimension of teaching did reveal a difference in translation of policy from all three participants. Madeleine and Carmel identified that cultural knowledge was intrinsic to their teaching, no matter what the policy guidelines. Both demonstrated high levels of autonomy in their teaching of culture and Madeleine, in particular, reflected a spontaneous approach to her lessons that did not feel prescriptive or preordained by schemes of work. Both Madeleine and Carmel appeared confident to use their professional knowledge of how to engage pupils by motivating pedagogies, pedagogies which Hayes *et al.* (2006) term 'productive' as they connect students to the real-world contexts through cultural insights. However, Helen, whilst acknowledging that this dimension would benefit her pupils, appeared less able to remove herself from the script of her schemes of work, or as Cochran-Smith describes (1991) as 'teaching against the grain' by moving beyond standardised and regulated policy practices.

Conclusions

The choice of interview (over other methods, such as observation) arguably confines all the data in the research into an abstracted form of pedagogic practice. It channels both the interviewer and participant into interpretations of the preferred practice to make meaning of the experience rather than real-world messiness of day-to-day pedagogy. However, the interview process gleaned some interesting insights within the specific iteration of policy translation in the specific case study's contexts.

All three participants reported that the current policy context had significant bearing on their day-to-day practice in the classroom. This became very apparent from the outset of the interviews. Indeed, from the discussion around artefacts and broader narrative of curriculum design all three teachers demonstrated that they were conscious of the need to develop linguistic competency over time through revisiting key linguistic features and vocabulary. However, with the current demands of data management and scrutiny of performance, the teachers appeared to be forced to translate current curriculum and assessment requirements into knowledge content specifically required for the test and were aware of their schools' preoccupation with data capture. Initially, all of the teachers framed their pedagogic approaches around these requirements rather than a broader, holistic interpretation of language learning as a humanistic liberal enterprise. Their discussions around artefacts echoed many of the concerns about the narrowing of the curriculum that Ofsted has publicised and the standardisation of practice or 'pedagogies of indifference' (Lingard, 2007). Indeed, it could be argued that educational policy has championed and normalised performativity in terms of testing and attainment for so long, this would be the inevitable 'common sense' approach for most teachers when discussing their practice.

All three teachers also expressed anxiety about teaching modern languages in schools in disadvantaged areas as they felt that the curriculum privileged specific knowledge that is more accessible to the middle classes and has little relevance to their children in their contexts. This included particular requirements to talk and write about themselves and also included culturally loaded vocabulary and concepts that alienated pupils. Again, this aspect of pedagogy 'as a cultural relay and what it relays' (Bernstein, 2003, p. 63) including the transmission of particular knowledge and power resonates with my participants' concerns. However, as the conversations developed, there was evidence that, despite having the same policies in curriculum and assessment, the teachers' practices differed significantly. Through these different enactments of policy, there was evidence of contextualised and responsive pedagogies reflected in their practice. Helen appeared to be the least confident in moving away from the prescriptive scripts surrounding examination and curriculum requirements. She discussed aspects of her pedagogic practice that she did not feel satisfactory but was unwilling or unable to change. Leaton Gray (2007, p.197) suggests that the need to conform to curricular frameworks is due to the lack of professional autonomy and confidence in alternative approaches within the sterile and limited model of state education in the UK.

However, both Madeleine and Carmel demonstrated that they had characterised or personalised their pedagogic practices in a way that, at times seemed to move beyond the confines of a highly prescriptive environment required for national performance data, beyond internal constraints of timetabling and in spite of attitudes to language learning in school. Their navigation of the policy arena provided glimpses of teaching beyond 'authorised pedagogies' and reflected some autonomy to choose specific pedagogic practices to meet the specific needs of their pupils and their contexts. In Madeleine's narrative, this was evidenced by her inclusion of pedagogies that, according to pupils were the only

lessons where ‘we learn something else in’. She seemed to be consciously moving away from the ‘learning to teach by numbers approach’ criticised by Cochran-Smith (1991). A pedagogy that is prepared to be brave, accountable and responsible for her role, no matter how small, in overcoming inequitable learning experiences for her pupils in spite of the guilt associated with deviating from ‘authorised pedagogies’. Madeleine did not articulate any purpose to her work as political but focused heavily instead on the trust, ambition and relationships that she had with her pupils. Conversely, Carmel articulated notions of social justice yet did not question the education system nor seek to change it. Her professional identity is based on neoliberal values, perhaps as a reflection of her pupils’ own understanding of the purpose of education as a means to become economically viable citizens. Leaton Gray (2007) would also argue that this is due, in part, to teachers having a natural tendency to subordinate towards the state and be compliant of hierarchy. This propensity has been exacerbated in recent years by the professional status being undermined through the submission to external control and moderation. Leaton Gray argues that this loss of autonomy has made teachers ‘semi-professionals’ as:

In this sense they have moved away from the idea of a professional obligation towards society, and professional closure on the body of knowledge that provides the basis for their work (Weber, 1978). This has been replaced with knowledge of the controlling systems that administer education via the state, as a proxy for professional knowledge (p.196)

The reasons for the differing perceptions of autonomy and agency could also be attributed to how biographies, experiences and values shape the ability to translate and personalise policy. Ballet *al.*(2012b) suggest there is more policy compliance amongst teachers new to the profession and this could be part of

why Helen felt less confident than the other participants to adapt her practice. Conversely, Madeleine and Carmel revealed throughout the interview how their experiences (both in and outside the classroom) had influenced their ability and desire to adopt specific pedagogies. Comber (2016) refers to this as a 'body of work' that is accumulated across a career: 'teachers assemble educational and cultural capital over time as well as rich discursive repertoires which they operationalise in various sites of their pedagogical work' (p.409). Pampaka *et al.* (2016) emphasise the need to recognise that although the evidence-based, top-down 'what works' agenda assumes all agency is in the hands of policy or the programme and should be 'teacher-proof', by exploring variation, we can capture the true complexities of teaching and learning and provide agency for teachers to mediate these complexities. In so doing, we will provide a much wider and deeper knowledge base of professional practice within current policy definitions.

Importantly though, we also should illuminate the true nature of how antidemocratic ideologies shape, regulate and normalise the pedagogic discourses and identities of teachers. By conforming, as 'teacher subjects' to policies, we assume a neutral position towards the ideologies underpinning their design. For this to change, we must recognise and articulate the politicised nature of education and equip teachers to be public intellectuals that act for democracy and social change with power (and imagination) by reclaiming pedagogic discourses and practices that are shaped in response to the different histories, knowledge and experiences within their specific contexts.

Notes

¹ General Certificate of Secondary Education- Qualifications taken at sixteen at the end of secondary education in England

²All three participants teach in similar schools in terms of social economic status (SES), however, two schools have high levels of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) and, whilst this had no bearing on the selection of teachers, it affected some of the data from the interviews and therefore EAL related information is included in the table.

³ Academic years for students from fourteen to sixteen in England

⁴ Qualifications taken at eighteen in England

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