TAKING SCHOOL CONTEXTS MORE SERIOUSLY: THE SOCIAL JUSTICE CHALLENGE

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ABSTRACT: Research is increasingly highlighting the influence of school contexts on school processes and student achievement. This article reviews a range of social justice rationales for taking school contexts into better account, and highlights the challenges contextualisation currently poses for practice and for policy. It notes important constraints on contextualised practice and limited developments in contextualising policy. There is now increasing concern to recognise and understand context in school effectiveness and school improvement research but such research needs to consider school context much more, in order to provide a stronger underpinning for contextualised policy and practice. School composition research is potentially most insightful because it addresses the issue most directly. Nevertheless future large-scale studies in this area need to overcome a number of limitations within the existing literature.

Keywords: educational research, school context, school performance

1. INTRODUCTION

Although it is a truism that schools differ, some ways in which they do so are more prominent in academic and policy debate than others. In particular, there is usually much more discussion of variation in features of schools' internal organisation and practice (e.g. aspects of leadership, management or pedagogy) than of the different external contexts which could partly account for them. The latter include differences in pupil intake characteristics (class, ethnicity, turbulence, proportion of pupils from refugee families or with special needs) and school and area characteristics (urban/rural location, LEA policies, market position compared to surrounding schools).

In spite of this imbalance, the imperative to take schools' highly distinctive contexts seriously has long been a social justice theme in
education. For instance, it was manifested in *Savage Inequalities* (Kozol, 1991) which documented the vast disparities in resources between inner-city and suburban schools in the USA. This concern with resources has continued but arguments around context have also developed a new twist related to the key policy ‘drivers’ of our time (e.g., Kozol, 2005 on ‘No Child Left Behind’). Hence when Nick Davies wrote about ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ UK schools (Davies, 2000), it was to illustrate how their vastly different contexts impacted on their ability to respond to current ‘policy technologies’ (Ball, 2003) – the market, managerialism and performativity.

The impact of school contexts has also been the subject of two detailed studies undertaken by the authors of this article. Thrupp’s (1999) research explored the impact of the socio-economic status (SES) composition of school intakes on school processes in four New Zealand secondary schools. It illustrated how higher SES schools had less pressured guidance and discipline systems, with higher levels of student compliance and fewer very difficult guidance or discipline cases. Their senior management teams had fewer student, staff, marketing, and fund-raising problems, and more time to devote to planning and to monitoring performance. Day-to-day routines were more efficient and more easily accomplished. When it came to classroom instruction, the students in the higher SES schools were taught in teaching classes that were generally more compliant and more able to cope with difficult work. They used more demanding texts and other teaching resources and their teachers were more qualified and more motivated. Higher SES schools were also able to support more academic school programmes and a wider range of extracurricular activities. Thrupp (1999) concluded that SES composition affects school processes in numerous ways which would cumulatively boost the academic performance of schools in middle-class settings and drag it down in low socio-economic settings.

Lupton (2004, 2005) has extended Thrupp’s analysis by illustrating that even amongst ostensibly similar SES schools there are other contextual differences which may cumulatively make a considerable difference to school processes and student achievement. Her study of four high poverty schools in England demonstrates the nuances of local context. It considers pupil characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, refugee status, looked after children, and special educational needs), area characteristics (e.g., urban/rural, labour market structure and history, housing market) and school characteristics (e.g., market position compared to surrounding schools, LEA admissions policies, school type and history). The analysis shows how one low SES school cannot be assumed to face the same contextual challenges as
another. For example, one poor inner urban school with a rapidly growing, predominantly Pakistani population and operating within a weakly differentiated and collaborative school market reported few behavioural challenges, high levels of parental support and pupil aspiration, and little need to divert management time into marketing activities or management of falling rolls. Another school, in a declined seaside town with a selective and highly differentiated school system, reported low pupil esteem and aspirations, difficulties in securing parental support, high levels of pupil turbulence arising from temporary housing and a large children’s home population, as well as extreme difficulties in teacher recruitment and retention because the school was regarded as being the ‘bottom of the pile’ in the local area. Arguing that ‘organizational impacts on schools in different kinds of disadvantaged areas can be significantly different’ (Lupton, 2004, p. 22), the study raises questions about the adequacy of socio-economic indicators used to describe school context, and about the suggestion that differences in student achievement between schools in similarly poor settings can be wholly ascribed to internal school characteristics.

These studies together provide a significant challenge to the conventional school effectiveness and improvement premise that for the most part it is the internal organisation of schools rather than their context which ‘makes the difference’. Instead they suggest that many factors identified by school effectiveness and improvement research as contributing to student achievement will be hard to replicate because while they may be school-based, they may nevertheless not be school-caused. This argument builds on previous quantitative and qualitative research (Anyon, 1981; Brown et al., 1996; Gerwitz, 1998; Ho and Willms, 1996; Lauder et al., 1999; Metz, 1990; Pong, 1998; Robertson and Symons, 1996; Thomson, 2002) and the research base in this area is currently being extended though the HARPS project, a large ESRC-funded study of Hampshire primary schools where the authors and colleagues are studying schools across the socio-economic spectrum and also looking at numerous other elements of context.

In this article we draw on the above studies and other work to present an interrelated set of arguments for taking school contexts more seriously. We begin by reviewing a range of social justice rationales for taking school contexts into better account, and highlighting the challenges contextualisation currently poses for practice and for policy. We note important constraints on contextualised practice and limited developments in contextualising policy. In relation to both of these, we argue the need for research to consider school
context much more, in order to provide a stronger underpinning for contextualised policy and practice. In the latter part of the paper, therefore, we discuss how educational research is dealing with issues of context. We look at school effectiveness research, school improvement research, and research which is directly concerned with the impact of school intakes on school processes and student achievement, which we call school composition research. School effectiveness and school improvement research is now increasingly concerned to take context seriously. School composition research is potentially especially insightful because it addresses the issue most directly. Nevertheless future large scale studies in this area need to overcome a number of limitations within the existing literature.

2. WHY CONTEXTUALISE?

There are multiple social justice arguments for taking school contexts more seriously. Perhaps most important is to develop less ‘neutral’ discourse on schooling that give greater recognition to the importance of social injustices in reproducing educational inequalities. From this position, a more serious recognition of context could give rise to fairer evaluation of school performance, a fairer distribution of resources, and the provision of more appropriate advice and support to schools in less favourable contexts. All of these, we argue, would enable better responses to the needs of marginalised school populations.

Thinking less Neutrally about School Performance

It is remarkable, although politically and practically understandable, that by 2006 so much educational literature continues to take a generic perspective on schools, discussing them as if they were much the same and downplaying their distinctiveness. The problem is especially acute in the various problem-solving literatures on school change, management, effectiveness and improvement (see Thrupp and Willmott, 2003). As Slee and Weiner (1998) have commented about school effectiveness research, such literatures ‘bleach context from their analytic frame’. They chime with the ‘one size fits all’ assumptions of New Public Management (NPM) theory, that social change can be engineered through organisational change and through more efficient, market-oriented public service delivery which is informed by best practice, driven by incentives and targets, and closely scrutinised and monitored. What is sought is the right prescription for ‘delivering’ education, with ‘underperformance’ in
terms of pupil outcomes being accounted for by deviance from
good organisational management and practice.

Wherever discussion of context raises social complexity and
inequality, NPM assumptions are revealed as simplistic. Everyone
acknowledges that effective management and teaching in one
context is not the same as effective management and teaching in
another. However, by failing to highlight the differences and
inequalities between them, generic discussions create accounts which
are too ‘neutral’ and politically ‘naïve’ and which fail to allow for
contextualised policy responses that might better meet the needs of
schools. By treating all schools as being the same and thus capable
of achieving the same, they render unimportant, perhaps even invis-
ible, the social and economic inequalities that really prevent some
students from doing as well as others. As a result they help to per-
petuate unequal schooling and unequal outcomes.

The discourses and ensuing policies and practices of the Office
for Standards in Education (Ofsted, the English school inspectorate)
illustrate this problem. Ofsted inspects schools according to a stand-
ard framework. Its judgements are publicly available and intended to
influence school choice. They may also trigger externally imposed
school improvement measures or, eventually, the closure of a school.
That its judgements are a fair reflection of school quality is thus crit-
ical. In our view Ofsted should take account of context in making its
judgements, not only on grounds of fairness to staff and pupils and
transparency to parents, but because failing to do so perpetuates the
perception among the public and educational policymakers that
effective schools can surmount the problems posed by economic and
social inequalities and produce more equitable outcomes. However,
for Ofsted, the guardian of school quality, taking context seriously
has been seen as making excuses for schools that could do better.

Under the former head of Ofsted, Chris Woodhead, social and
economic inequalities went deliberately unrecognised. Woodhead
refused to adopt a better contextual indicator on the grounds that
‘it is essential that Ofsted does nothing to encourage the use of
pupils’ backgrounds as an excuse for poor performance’ (Woodhead
letter to the Times Educational Supplement, 1 March 1996). Ofsted’s
perspective has changed under its current head, David Bell, whose
annual reports and speeches show considerable recognition of
contextual constraints on schools in their attempts to raise student
achievement. For instance, in 2003 Bell argued that, ‘There remain
some groups of pupils and some schools for whom raising standards
remains an almost intractable challenge’ (Ofsted, 2003a, p. 3). In a
speech to the Fabian Society, Bell (2003) went on to note:
that low SES schools are marked by disconnection, recruitment problems and high turnover of pupils and that ‘Where factors like these are present, and compound one another, schools are fragile places’.
• the need for ‘caution against unrealistic expectations about how quickly deep change can be effected’, there being ‘no new magic recipe’ for dealing with low attaining schools. ‘The brutal fact of the matter is that the difficulties that some schools face have been around for many years and successive governments, national and local, have not conclusively dealt with them.’ And
• ‘that there is absolutely no place for demonising those schools and those – adults and children – who work in them. This is not about a “blame culture”, castigating insensitively those who are tackling formidable challenges with resolution and commitment’.

Putting some of this thinking into its methodology, Ofsted’s instruction to lead inspectors since 2003 has been to shape inspection to reflect the main features of schools (Ofsted, 2003b). There has been an increased emphasis on context in the PANDA (School Performance and Assessment Report), a pre-inspection document giving background information about the school and its performance. Inspectors are now advised not to use the PANDA data inflexibly but rather to ‘consider the PANDA report in the light of schools’ circumstances, drawing on other available information as appropriate’ (Ofsted, 2004, p. 2). Similarly there has been new recognition in the inspection framework that the indicator used to measure school-level deprivation, the number of pupils eligible for a Free School Meal (FSM) may, though readily available, not be a fair reflection of social context. Inspectors should use their discretion (Ofsted, 2003c, p. 39). The new framework also puts new emphasis on ‘the effect of any particular aids or barriers to raising achievement, either within the school or externally’ (Ofsted, 2003c, p. 127).

Such directions should lead to fairer evaluations of the practice of schools coping with the most challenging circumstances, and open the way for the recognition that, if it is not all the school’s fault that disadvantaged students do not do well, other measures beyond school practice will be necessary to equalise attainment. However, the exemplary schools discourse, the idea that all schools could replicate the example of the best, is remarkably persistent. For instance in response to research by the second author which illustrated that most schools in special measures were in deprived areas and questioned whether Ofsted inspections took account of the depressing effect of poverty on the effectiveness of school processes (see Lupton, 2004), an Ofsted spokesperson said:
Deprivation must not be an excuse for unsatisfactory provision. Subsequent reports on schools that have been through special measures show just what can be done even in the most difficult circumstances. (TES, 2002)

Similarly, despite its concern with context, Bell’s Fabian Society speech notes ‘no room for an excuse culture’ which he describes as ‘a patronising or indulgent approach which condones low expectations or overstates the intractability of the external pressures’. ‘Exemplary schools’ are still vital to Ofsted’s thinking:

[There are] higher-attaining disadvantaged urban schools which are better led and managed and more effective ... Explanation of the success of these schools is well documented by Ofsted and others. Essentially what makes the difference, as our publication Improving City Schools said a couple of years ago, is ‘the clarity, intensity and persistence of the schools’ work and the rigour with which it is scrutinised. At best, all the energy of the school serves the same end, raising standards’. (Bell, 2003)

In the light of this, it is unsurprising that steps towards more contextualised policy responses from the New Labour government have been relatively limited. The government was elected first in 1997, then again in 2001 and 2005. Its first term policies did direct more money towards schools in poor neighbourhoods, first through Education Action Zones and then through Excellence in Cities (EiC), which provided additional resources for learning mentors, learning support centres and out-of-school hours activities. In some EiC areas, schools also received ‘Pupil Learning Credits’ (PLC) to provide extra resources and learning opportunities for pupils from low income homes. Both EiC and PLC were positively evaluated (Kendall et al., 2005; McNally, 2005) However, in this period, the government’s approach to school improvement remained explicitly decontextualised, for instance in strategies like ‘naming and shaming’ schools with the lowest attainment, ‘floor targets’ of student achievement to be reached by every school regardless of situation, and the ‘Fresh Start Initiative’, which led to rapid closure and replacement of so-called failing schools in disadvantaged areas. Second and third term policies have continued to redistribute funding and have begun to demonstrate an increasing recognition of context in school improvement policy as well. Notable initiatives include ‘Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances’ (SFCC), a programme of research and support for disadvantaged schools, and the ‘London Challenge’, providing for tailor-made support strategies for schools in some of the capital city’s most disadvantaged areas.
Taking School Contexts More Seriously

However, even these initiatives, while more supportive in nature, are still founded on the belief that quality differences between schools are primarily the responsibility of schools themselves, and can therefore be tackled by initiatives at the school level. For instance, in launching ‘Schools in Challenging Circumstances’, the government set out an analysis of the problem that was still dominated by references to the poor practice of heads and teachers (DfES, 2001, p. 49) and the need for ‘access to good practice and advice’ (p. 50) and support to schools to ‘turn themselves around’ (p. 51). While appearing to recognise the additional challenges for staff in disadvantaged areas, it persisted with a managerialist agenda and managerialist solutions such as better management, better training and better monitoring (Lupton, 2005). One of us has argued elsewhere that, framed by this discourse, the government’s policies towards schools in disadvantaged areas represent ‘inching forward’ rather than a substantial shift towards a more contextualised and more effective school improvement policy (Lupton, 2004).

Fairer Distribution of Resources

What would a more contextualised school improvement policy look like? At its heart would be a fairer distribution of resources to allow for the different organisational designs required in different school contexts. Schools in disadvantaged areas are more generously funded than schools elsewhere, not just through additional grants, which have a history stretching back to the Educational Priority Areas of the late 1960s, but through mainstream funding. Nevertheless, resources in the low SES schools researched by the authors were clearly insufficient to meet some of the additional needs that they faced (Lupton, 2004; Thrupp, 1999). Attempts by teachers and managers to respond to their local context often led to trade-offs between equally valuable activities. For example, dealing with welfare issues or behaviour may detract from preparing lessons or planning new initiatives. It is clear that disadvantaged contexts generate additional time implications, both for mainstream teaching staff and in particular for senior staff.

In Lupton’s ‘Middle Row High School’, for example, one deputy head estimated that she spent between half a day and one day per week on attendance issues, including managing the home/school liaison worker, administering the rewards system, and liaising with the LEA’s education welfare officer over extreme cases. Logic would suggest that at the very least, this level of senior management commitment must mean that other tasks have to be carried out after...
school hours, creating additional pressure on staff. There was a particular issue in providing effective education for the minority of pupils who found it difficult to cope with school and had extreme behavioural problems and/or non-attendance. Lupton (2004) found that because of their legal obligations, and because they were simply not equipped to provide the intensive and flexible support these pupils needed, schools’ efforts were directed into getting these pupils to come to school, attend lessons and learn the National Curriculum. However, many teachers felt that school, the nature of the curriculum, and the environment of academic pressure were part of the problem, and that alternatives might work better: smaller groups or individual tuition in less formal settings, and curricular options that valued other skills and qualities. Existing funding regimes, combined with performative pressures, left little room for creative curricula or pedagogies. In sum, our qualitative work suggests the need for funding for smaller teaching groups, more teachers in the classroom, more non-contact time for front-line staff, a higher ratio of managers to staff, and substantially more investment in learning support, language teaching, pupil welfare or parental liaison roles.

There has been some recent progress towards a fairer distribution of resources. A new school funding formula agreed in 2003 increased the level of funding to schools in disadvantaged areas, and new resources made available in 2006 for greater personalisation of learning have also been allocated partly on the basis of deprivation. However, there is still room for considerable improvement in resources. The 2003 settlement, by the government’s own admission, only covered half of the unmet need identified by the consultants who researched the development of the funding formula (http://www.dfes.gov.uk/efsg/docs/THENEWFUNDINGSYSTEMTechnicalnote.doc), and a recent review by the Department for Education and Skills and the Treasury found that varying systems for the distribution of funds to schools by local education authorities led to wide variations in funding between schools with similar levels of deprivation. The review found that additional expenditure had a positive impact on attainment, but that deprivation funding was not accurately and consistently targeted towards schools in deprived areas and that its impact was not being maximised (DfES and HMT, 2005). Thus there is still work to be done to ensure that the extra resources needed are consistently provided as part of the core funding of schools.

A key issue, of course, is that funding needs will differ according to different local contexts. The sophistication of neighbourhood level socio-economic indicators is increasing fast, and there would be much to be gained from the development of a more nuanced set of
indicators for school context, possibly combining pupil level and area factors. The better and more differentiated funding that would result would reflect the fact that the unpredictability of the school day in some schools is, in a sense, entirely predictable given their contexts.

More Appropriate Advice and Support to Schools in Less Favourable Contexts

Contextualised models of practice are also needed. It is clear that deliberate adaptations are made by teachers and school leaders in order to deal with the social, political and market contexts of their schools. In the first author’s study of high and low SES schools there were dramatic differences in pedagogical and management approaches in order to respond to the very different intakes of the schools (Thrupp, 1999). Yet even in the second author’s study of the more subtle differences between high poverty schools, adaptations extended to almost every aspect of organisation: lesson lengths, class sizes, ability groupings, additional learning support, behaviour and attendance management, pastoral care, extra-curricular activities and so on (Lupton, 2004).

Does this mean that there can be no models of practice to follow because examined in detail, each school’s context, and thus its practice, must be wholly individual? We think not. Most plausibly, common practices are probably adopted in schools with certain clusters of common contextual characteristics, giving a middle ground between wholly generic versions of ‘good practice’ and wholly individualised ones. However, since school improvement research and policy has been so generic in its approach, these contextualised examples are not to the fore. It is hard to work out which practices would be most appropriate in schools of different composition. Research into the effectiveness of strategies for the design and use of learning support units or the deployment of external agencies, for example, are in their infancy. Even more ‘mainstream’ and contested issues of practice call for more sophisticated research taking account of different contexts.

An example would be pupil grouping. Since research shows that mixed ability groups tend to benefit lower attaining pupils both socially and educationally (Hallam, 2002), one could argue that mixed ability teaching is the right grouping strategy for a school with a large number of low attaining pupils. On the other hand, since pupils themselves report that the benefit of setting is that the most disruptive pupils are all removed into bottom sets, leaving others to learn...
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(Ireson and Hallam, 2001), one could equally argue that (on educational attainment grounds) setting is a better strategy for a school with the same poverty levels as the first school but which attracts some pupils with above average prior attainment, but also has a small minority of pupils with extremely disturbed behaviour. Of course there are other arguments one might make about the merits or otherwise of pupil grouping, or differentiated curriculum, on social justice grounds. The examples are used here simply to illustrate that if research provides insufficiently differentiated information about good practice in different contexts, it may be difficult for school teachers and leaders to make the right decisions that would enhance effectiveness in specific areas of school practice. A better understanding of context would allow those providing policy and advice to schools to design interventions which have a better chance of fitting and therefore succeeding within the school environments they are intended for and therefore improving students’ life-chances.

Better Recognition for Marginalised School Populations

In arguing for a contextualised approach on social justice grounds, we are well aware that contextualisation, misused, can be antithetical to social justice. There is a fine line between highlighting the constraints imposed by poverty, social class, immigrant or refugee status, learning difficulties, residential transience or the experience of being in care so that schools can be equipped and teachers trained to deal with them better, and allowing them to become the excuse for low expectations and inequitable provision based on race, class or gender stereotypes. Low expectations and unchallenging work were evident in all the schools we studied (Lupton, 2005; Thrupp, 1999). Their damning consequences, within the environment of high stakes testing and the ‘A–C economy’, have been powerfully noted elsewhere (Gillborn and Youdell, 2000). For teachers dealing with students’ whose home circumstances and background present barriers to their educational progress, the tension between wanting to take account of these circumstances, and wanting to ignore them, is very real. They are reflected for instance in one inner-London teacher’s concerns, conveyed during Lupton’s research study, about having to be ‘hard’ and ‘cruel’:

When I first started teaching 10 years ago I think I would have thought ‘oh no the poor little children’ … It doesn’t matter what your home background is. You can’t use that as an excuse to not access your education. You say it to them and it sounds really hard
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... you know, ‘I’m sorry that your mum made you go to the post office to get her money so you couldn’t come to school, but unless somebody gets organised, you are not going to have access to your timetable and you’re not going to be doing any work and what are you going to end up with at the end of Year 11? It sounds so cruel [but] what I’ve learned teaching in these kinds of areas is that it’s not an excuse and you don’t say ‘poor little child’. You say ‘yes, its tough, its hard, I want to support you and the best way to support you is that you leave here with 5 A–C passes so you can do what you want.’

However, generic discussions that neutralise the characteristics of the students are also unhelpful. Effectively, these discussions adopt a default position that schools are populated by students who are of average prior attainment, speakers and readers of English, keen or at least compliant with the goals of their schools, ready to learn and emotionally, socially, financially and physically equipped to do so – perhaps also white and middle class. From this position, if the students do not progress, we can assume a failure of school practice. However, failing to recognise the ‘messy detail’ of the reality of school populations, in order to concentrate on school practice, effectively screens out the needs of students who are from working class, minority or indigenous group backgrounds or who have particular learning needs of one sort or another. It makes it less likely that school funding or organisation or pedagogic practice will be geared towards their needs, and more likely that they will be treated as deficient, failing, and not worthy of support in a system geared to the needs of ‘typical’ or ‘normal’ students. Providing there is vigilance against taking up a deficit perspective, the dangers of treating school context neutrally are greater than the dangers of drawing attention to pupil differences.

3. CONTEXTUALISING RESEARCH

To better underpin arguments for contextualised policy and practice, there is a continuing challenge for research to take better account of school contexts. Here we discuss this challenge in relation to school effectiveness research, school improvement research and school composition research. There is increasing concern to recognise and understand context in school effectiveness and school improvement research but also much room for further development. Meanwhile, school composition research has always been directly concerned with the effects of school context but, if it is to generate more useful
insights, future large scale studies in this area need to overcome a number of limitations within the existing literature.

School Effectiveness Research (SER)

Caught up in insisting that ‘schools can make a difference’, SER (and not just its large scale studies) has long been insufficiently searching about context. School and teacher effects have tended to be regarded as independent of context. At best, prior attainment has been used as a proxy for context, an approach that, although perhaps driven by data difficulties, reflects a certain disregard for detail and lack of concern with explanatory theory. Low prior attainment is no doubt well correlated with disadvantage, but its use as the only contextual indicator prevent us from understanding which aspects of a disadvantaged context make a difference, and from understanding the extent to which low attainment per se makes a difference to school effectiveness and to student outcomes, and the extent to which specific contextual factors make an additional contribution.

Unwillingness to delve into variations in context means that variations in school practice come to be seen to the most powerful explanations for differential performance. An example is provided by a Welsh case study of a ‘more effective’ low SES school called ‘Trelent’ where the students achieved higher mean scores in comprehension, maths, computation and applied maths than at Hillcrest, a less effective high SES school (Reynolds et al., 2002). Stringfield, a U.S. school effectiveness researcher, has drawn on this study to support the argument that schooling can overcome the effects of social inequality:

In the British component of the International School Effectiveness Research Programme (Reynolds et al., in press), students at a very high poverty school repeatedly out achieved students in middle class British schools in the same district. ... Similarly well documented examples of high poverty schools producing achievements that are tested and retested and found to be above the national average abound from Weber (1971) to today. Whole schools of children in high poverty situations have repeatedly demonstrated the ability to achieve at levels above those of their more-affluent peers. (Stringfield, 2002, p. 19)

Nevertheless, this claim is unconvincing because in Reynolds and colleagues’ study the nature of the pupil intake is not clear and there is insufficient concern with the likely longitudinal effects of context. First, the pupils ‘come from a mainly ethnic Asian background or are from low SES white families’ (p. 230). The ‘mainly ethnic Asian

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background’ of the students raises the distinct possibility that these are immigrant families from middle-class backgrounds in their countries of origin, even if they are not well-off in UK terms. Second, we are told that the annual Free School Meals (FSM) entitlement for Trelent school is consistently at or above the 30 per cent level. This is not really a ‘very high poverty’ school as argued by Stringfield, certainly there are schools with much higher FSM levels as well as the problem, now widely acknowledged, of how much FSM really measures SES anyway. A better test of what is possible would be if the students at Trelent were nearly all from clearly working-class backgrounds over several generations as was the case for Ford Junction, a ‘less effective’ low SES school in the study which had pupils from ‘an almost universally white low SES background, mainly from the surrounding state-built housing estates’ and with FSM consistently above 50 per cent (Reynolds et al., 2002, p. 231). Third, these are primary schools and the value-added was only measured at the end of Year 1 at age six or seven. Because context can be expected to have a cumulative impact throughout school careers, it is a very different thing to argue for powerful school effects at age seven compared to secondary schools, by which time students have had many years experiencing more or less favourable school contexts.

Given these kinds of problems, it is not surprising that there have been contextual criticisms of SER (Lauder et al., 1998; Thrupp, 1999, 2001). SER has generally tried to counter these criticisms (Reynolds and Teddlie, 2001; Stringfield, 2002; Teddlie and Reynolds, 2001) but some recent SER work is beginning to recognise them. A review by Luyten and colleagues (2005), while sympathetic to SER, also recognises the concerns of its critics and argues for change, for instance:

In addition to explaining the relationship between features of school processes and school performance, studies should place more emphasis on the influence of non-educational factors in the school context (e.g., neighbourhood, family, peer group) on schooling processes and on student achievement. More insight is needed ... into why and how the school context interacts with school performance and with processes at both the classroom and the school level. (p. 259)

And:

In our opinion, SER should also pay much closer attention to factors outside the educational system that influence learning (such as the family and peer group). Even though almost every SER study confirms the limited influence of school factors and the

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substantial impact of family background on learning, the latter relation is hardly ever investigated thoroughly. ... In practice such insight could facilitate the exploration of a great number of complex issues, including how to determine the extent to which the demands that are placed on schools are realistic (pp. 269–270)

Here, and in other areas they discuss, Luyten and colleagues seem to be genuinely trying to move the SER literature on. Their arguments may not entirely satisfy SER’s contextual critics (who might argue for instance that, by and large, SER has ignored the effects of school context) but nevertheless they seem to signal the potential for a significant shift in the SER literature.

School Improvement Research (SIR)

School improvement is another area undertaking contextual self-examination in recent years. Noting that some researchers have argued that it is more difficult for schools serving disadvantaged areas to make progress on many of the traditional indicators, Gray (2001, p. 19) concluded that ‘more evidence on this issue is needed’. The most widely published SIR to take up this contextual challenge has been that of Alma Harris and colleagues (Harris, 2002; Harris and Chapman, 2002; Harris et al., 2003; Harris and Chapman, 2004; Harris et al., 2005) which has responded to the government’s concern with SFCC noted earlier. At first this research appeared not to represent a significant advance. For instance, it stressed the importance of a number of general findings not far removed from the kinds of ‘factors’ approach traditionally used in school effectiveness studies: vision and values, distributed leadership, investing in staff development, relationships, and community building (Harris, 2002). The same study also suffered from the problem that the specific contexts of the ten schools involved were not adequately identified. They were all DfES categorised as SFCC but it is important to note that schools can be thus identified either on socio-economic grounds (35 per cent or more of students receiving free school meals) or on performance grounds (school achieving 25 per cent or less 5 A*-C GCSEs). Furthermore the selection was intended ‘to ensure the schools represented a wide range of contexts and were geographically spread’.

Nevertheless, Harris and colleagues’ more recent work in this area has been stressing the significance of context-specificity much more. For instance Harris and Chapman (2004, p. 429) argue that:
As the long term patterning of educational inequality looks set to remain, to rely on standard or standardised approaches to school improvement that combine accountability, pressure and blame to force improved performance would seem unwise. In schools in difficult contexts, this is more likely to exacerbate the problem rather than solve it. Instead the evidence would suggest that more locally owned and developed improvement strategies are needed that appreciate school context, best match prevailing conditions and build the internal capacity for development within the school. If the goal of raising performance in schools in difficulty is to be achieved, school improvement approaches that neglect to address the inherent diversity and variability across and within schools in the same broad category will be destined to fail.

Harris and Chapman note other recent calls for context-specificity and it does seem to be featuring on the SIR agenda now. Yet Harris and Chapman’s own approach in their 2004 article does not actually further this agenda. Rather they provide a typology of different kinds of schools in difficulty along continuums from individualised to collaborative teacher culture and from internal to external accountability. Schools with collaborative cultures and internal accountability are seen to have high capacity for improvement, those with individualised teaching cultures and strong external accountability measures are seen to be immobile. In other words, Harris and Chapman (2004) are more concerned with the internal culture and organisation of schools in a conventional SIR sense than with exploring the extent to which schools can reasonably build internal ‘capacity’ in the face of particular kinds and combinations of wider contextual factors.

Two lessons might be drawn from this. The first is that like SER, contextualisation in terms of external factors remains largely an aspiration for SIR. It is not yet clear how and to what extent it will become a reality. The second is that the notion of context and contextualised research could be taken to mean different things to different constituencies and like many other educational terms be subject to having their depth and critical intent stripped out in less than searching analyses.

School Composition Research (SCR)

Detailed qualitative work, such as that of the authors mentioned earlier, explores the impact of context on school processes. While the findings of such research are plausible, they are likely to be more
influential if supported by evidence from large scale quantitative studies of compositional (school intake) and neighbourhood effects. These studies address the issue of school context directly and have the greatest potential for influence at a policy level. However, quantitative studies to date offer a conflicting picture, with some indicating strong effects and others not (Thrupp et al., 2002), and with some offering competing explanations for compositional effects apart from school effects (Nash, 2003). This has recently led Gorard (2006) to argue that compositional effects are so much at the limits of our detectability, likely to be small relative to the amount of ‘noise’ in the system, and require such sophisticated statistical modelling, as to be possibly not worth exploring. However the problem with Gorard’s argument is that while he starts by making some well-founded points, it quickly degenerates into a quite untenable attack on statistics. In particular, Gorard blames statistics rather than the failure of social sciences in producing testable theories of importance.

We believe the way forward is not to abandon the search for compositional effects but to carry out better statistical research. A review of quantitative research in this area undertaken by the first author and colleagues has illustrated important conceptual and methodological inadequacies in the way school compositional effects have been previously modelled (Thrupp et al., 2002). Although there is no space to rehearse the issues here, this review strongly suggests that better large-scale studies of compositional effects could provide more conclusive findings. In particular school composition research needs to:

- be multi-disciplinary in nature and incorporate qualitative study of school process as well as large scale quantitative analysis, thus enabling it to capture school organisation and curriculum effects and to shed light on the direction of causal relationships;
- incorporate multiple measures of school composition;
- enable analysis of group and class composition as well as composition at the school level;
- take a longitudinal approach;
- incorporate broader contextual variables such as neighbourhood characteristics and school market position;
- include and analyse different types of school and different models of composition, for example, schools with larger numbers of moderately poor pupils compared with schools with smaller numbers of moderately poor pupils (based on Thrupp et al., 2002, p. 488).

The authors’ most recent research in this area, the HARPS project, is attempting to follow this agenda as far as possible with children
passing through Years 3 and 4 (ages 7 and 8) in Hampshire primary schools. Quantitative analysis is underway using pupil and school-level composition data for the children at all 306 full primary and junior schools in Hampshire (n = 11,793). This analysis uses standard measures of composition (FSM and attainment) but data also include age, gender, ethnicity, special educational and neighbourhood characteristics, and permit identification and analysis of pupils who move schools. A second element of the project moves beyond the limitations of existing social class indicators by analysing data on student backgrounds (parental education, employment, ethnicity and class-related family practices), which we painstakingly collected from the parents of an astonishing 84 per cent of children in 46 schools in the Basingstoke and Deane area of the county (n = 2,014, Brown et al., 2005). A third element incorporates ethnographic research in twelve of these sub-sample schools, examining composition and processes in relation to teaching groups and classes as well as schools.

The research design of the HARPS project is intended to address the requirements of better research on compositional effects listed above, as well as provide more substantial qualitative evidence than has been available up to now. It is, however, focused only on primary schools, and is located in a relatively affluent and racially homogeneous (white) area of the country. Similar approaches are needed in the secondary sector, in major urban locations, and over longer time periods.

4. Conclusion

In this article we have argued for a greater concern with context in practice, policy and research as a means of moving towards greater social justice in education. We have argued that research has a central role to play in bringing about change towards more contextualised policy and practice and have noted important shifts in the traditionally decontextualised areas of school effectiveness and school improvement research, although we have argued that if we look at the detail of what is being said about context in these fields, there is still a considerable way to go. Meanwhile school composition research should be capable of generating particular insights in this area because of its direct concern with context, but it will only achieve this if greater conceptual and methodological sophistication is applied. The challenge is to give up the false security of generic or too simple models and approaches and develop a sound evidence base for a more socially just schooling system.
5. Notes

1 This has also been helped by the availability of Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) data, which holds attainment and background data for every pupil, throughout their school career, and newly available data from the 2001 Census of Population.

2 Nash (2003) poses the existence of within-SES group school selection effects as a competing explanation for compositional effects. This is an interesting hypothesis but not one which precludes compositional effects: it is presumably possible that both kinds of effects are present to a greater or lesser degree.

3 ‘Hampshire Research with Primary Schools’. This is the ESRC project ‘Primary school composition and student progress’, RES-000-23-0784. The project started in October 2004 and runs to March 2007.

6. References


DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND SKILLS (DfES) and HER MAJESTY’S TREASURY (2005) *Child Poverty: Fair Funding for Schools: a review of the ways in which Local Authorities fund schools to meet costs arising from social deprivation among their pupils*. http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=9404


TAKING SCHOOL CONTEXTS MORE SERIOUSLY


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