Researching educational disadvantage: Concepts emerging from working in/ with an Australian school

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Abstract

This is a conceptual paper arising from, and grounded in, research with a government funded primary school serving high poverty communities in Queensland, Australia. It is one response to the last ten years of participatory research work led by the three authors of this paper (the school principal and two academics). In this paper, we write about three concepts that have emerged out of our joint work: 1. *communities-in-formation*, 2. *emerging equalities*, 3. *material participation.* We discuss how and why we have undertaken this kind of partnership and conceptual research and offer some suggestions for others who are interested in undertaking similar work.

Keywords

equality; poverty; community; concepts; material

Introduction

This is a conceptual paper arising from, and grounded in, research with a government funded primary school serving high poverty communities in Queensland, Australia. It is one response to the last ten years of participatory research work led by the three authors of this paper (the school principal and two academics)[i]. In this paper, we write about some concepts that have emerged out of our joint work. The research work explicitly rejects deficit framings of students and communities living in situations of poverty, and of schools and their workers who serve them (see Smyth & Wrigley, 2013). Our task has been to work together, not to improve the school, nor the teachers, but to make small research steps in acting against entrenched poverty. We have done this by creating situations in which we can work together- understanding that if there is to be change it will likely be dealing with the complexity of the intimate relations between research, knowledge, schooling and educational disadvantage. This paper arises from within the complexity of these relations and so is quite limited in its scope- by necessity- slowing down any attempt to reach finalised conclusions or solutions. Instead we attempt to detail some conceptual work that may aid others in working together to create situations where these complex relations can be further explored.

Our research partnership work commenced ten years ago when one of the academics responded to a state Education Department request to work with a cluster of 12 schools in a high poverty, culturally and linguistically diverse urban area struggling to improve student literacy attainment in national standardised tests[ii]. A three year industry and Australian government funded research project was developed to collectively design pedagogic interventions at the level of school clusters, schools and classrooms to make a difference in

student literacy attainment (Singh, Märtsin & Glasswell, 2013, 2015; Singh & Glasswell, 2013; 2016; Glasswell, Singh & McNaughton, 2016). Most design-based research approaches involve an iterative process of intervening in school and classroom practices by teachers and researchers working together to develop approaches to understanding problems, prototyping pedagogical solutions to these and then testing them out to see how well they 'work' (see Anderson & Shattuck, 2012).The first three-year design-based research project was followed by another three year research project that aimed to develop collective designs of school pedagogic frameworks and enactments of these into classroom practices, again to make a difference in student literacy attainment (Singh, Heimans & Glasswell, 2014; Singh, Pini, Glasswell, 2018). In both projects conducted over a period of six years, we (two academics and school principal) became increasingly aware that we were using terms, such as 'pedagogy', but the meanings attached to these terms varied significantly. Consequently, we designed a small research project where we experimented with thinking through the meaning of some key terms used in educational research. We started first with a collective reading of an educational philosophy book, Biesta's (2014) *The Beautiful Risk of Education*. Why did we choose this book? In a sense, probably, it is more accurate to say that the book chose us. How? There was a moment in a research interview where one of us (the school principal) said that his thinking about data had changed. He suggested that the data in some ways had become beautiful; that there was a beauty to working with some of the data that the school produced where it was used to feed into thinking about pedagogy- not for the production of accounts about the school's results, but for nourishing the conversations among professional teachers in their deliberations about making wise judgements- balancing out the daily choices that have to be made in working in the midst of the complex purposes of schooling in a school serving a high poverty community. This is when one of the researchers suggested the

possibility of reading the philosophical book in order to engage further with considering together the beautiful risk of education (as Biesta, 2014) puts it. The principal loved the idea.

So, stories of mourning about data, grieving over data, the terror of data, were evident in the discussions emerging from the first research partnership project. However, in the second project, the stories shifted to talk about beautiful data, beautiful children, beautiful communities. But. What is beautiful here, really- in the midst of poverty and in the midst of the desiccated datafic(a)tion of schooling that reduces all activity to the visibilised valorisation of the 'countable' (what can be counted counts)? One thing is that thinking about the beauty of schooling and research is that it offers us some collective relief from the relentlessness of the demand to become accountable on the one hand, and on the other the demand to 'do good'- it takes us on a different tangent that neither ties in easily with a productivist, nor a morally pure purview (see Heimans & Biesta, 2020). Collectively we wondered about this shift in framing data as an object of terror and grief to one of beauty. Then, we talked together about the concepts associated with data such as learning, testing, performance, ability, improvement. What did these concepts mean to members of the research partnership? Did they have common meanings? Could we consider reframing the meanings and would such reframing change practices?

One way to think about these questions was, as we have said, to read a philosophy book together that dealt with the beauty, but also the purposes of education, creativity in education, and the presupposition and verification of equality (connected to the writing of Jacques Rancière (see Rancière, 1991 for example)). From Rancière's work we explored the question about who has a 'part' in deciding what to do and why in a research partnership (and then in education and research more generally). The question forces us to consider, for example,

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along one tangent, how much 'say' teachers have in deciding about what the purposes of education are, and where and how this say may take effect. Big questions that are beyond our scope here. But we also wondered, following Rancière, about, then, how to put into effect the understanding that in any given 'configuration of sense', so what is 'say-able', 'hear-able', 'think-able', there are those whose only part in this configuration is none. This is what Rancière calls the 'part of the no part' (Rancière, 2010). We come back to this later in our paper, but this is a key motif that has helped our thinking as it causes us to always consider where this part/ no part line is and how it puts what 'sense' is into action.

These were complex ideas and concepts to grapple with and yet here was a cohort of teachers and school leaders (eight in total) who were prepared to engage in this conceptual work. Collectively, we began to wonder about how this kind of work was 'slowing down' the research process- both temporally and with respect to assumptions about the meanings of key educational ideas and how they are put into practice . We pondered, "What if we didn't rush in to collectively designing pedagogic frameworks and interventions, but rather slowed down the research process to think through the meaning of key concepts and the performative work that these concepts do in schools?"

This article has arisen from an iterative process of reading and discussion between the researchers and school staff and then individual writing by the three of us, over the last two years- making written responses to some of the reading and discussion work we had done. The data generation process for the project then involved individual writing, sharing this writing, discussions about the writing and how it might be used in staff meeting discussions, underpin school policies and frame school talk and therefore everyday practices.

In this paper we have sought to synthesise and of course summarise this work, in order, we hope, to offer something tangible and perhaps interesting to others. We don't aim to present research findings here nor concrete outcomes. Instead we suggest some concepts that are emerging out of this work.

In the main body of the article, we introduce three concepts:1. *communities-in-formation*, 2. *emerging equalities*, 3. *material participation.* In this section we link the concept work to 'scenes' where we try to show where and how the concepts formed. We use the notion of scenes as a metaphor to depict the evolution of the research partnership work. Firstly, we can think about scenes as segments of a play or performance, so scene one, two, three, four and so on. Secondly, we can think about scenes where performances are staged or acted out, so we can think about the what and how of performances. So the short descriptive pieces in this paper help us to 'stage' the concepts- offering a way into the 'magic of the scenes' (Rothe, 2019) that long-term partnership research occasionally offers up- scenes that 'force one to act' – and in this case some of our action has been to try to think conceptually about this work and try to write down our thinking here.

The Concepts

Communities-in-formation

Scene One. In a huge hall, built with funding distributed by the Australian Federal Labor government under the Education Revolution initiative, parents, children and teachers gather to view the annual school art exhibition.

The hall is one of the buildings in a primary school (government funded) serving a high poverty, culturally and linguistically diverse community in South-East Queensland, Australia. In this

scene there is a student (year 1) with her mother at the annual school art exhibition that is being held in the school hall. There is a massive ceiling fan circulating warm air around the hall in the hot summer afternoon. This is the second year the exhibition has run and the teaching staff who set up the exhibition are excited. It seems so much 'better' than last year- all the classes have been involved- all the teachers have joined in. Cross-curricula connections have been made to history and geography and to first nation's knowledge practices.

It is 3:30pm after school on a weekday. There is 'diversity' in action here, it seems. Students of Indigenous, Pacifica, Anglo-Celtic, European, African and Asian ethnic and cultural identities mingle in this space, and the artwork proudly depicts aspects of these various students' experiences. The hall feels warm, not just from the heat of summer, but from an intensity of emotions. A feeling of pride and belonging is strong here.

The student, Marie, is excitedly pulling her mum's arm, encouraging her to look at her artwork - a fantastic paper mâché bird painted in bright colours. Marie is visibly proud wanting her mum to see her efforts. She has her uniform on. Mum looks young. Timid. Maybe wary. They move on looking at the other art. Another young student takes his father to look at his work. Dad asks the teacher, "Can I buy this?" "No, no you get to keep it after the exhibition- your son will bring his artwork home" replies the teacher.

Some people have arrived at the school directly from work. They are still dressed in the bright yellow and orange tradie or hard yakka work clothes. Others wear head scarves or khimars, saris, jeans and T-Shirts, summer dresses, or smart casual clothing. Some bodies are large, muscular, adorned with tattoos, others slim, and small. People move from one class's pieces of art to the next, marvelling at the artistry with its accompanying titles and stories. Phrases

*such as: **We Walk Together**; and **In Diversity There is Beauty and Strength**, unite the different artworks. The black, yellow and red colours of the Indigenous flag are cut out in cellophane paper and attached to the windows of the Hall – so that the light is filtered through these colours and shapes. Prints of young children's hands and feet are stamped across many of the large posters claiming this space for the young, their bodies, their imaginations, their futures.*

Some parents are operating the 'sausage sizzle', some teachers are collecting donations for a local charity, and there is a lot of good banter and laughter.

The young student, Marie, looks coyly from under her eyelids and across the room at the school principal. She asks her mother something. Mum seems to say 'yes', and slowly the girl walks over. She says, "Thank you. We are going now. See you tomorrow". They shake hands, the small girl and the principal- with Mum looking on from a distance. A teacher nearby sees this and tears up (is she too far away to hear exactly what was said?). She says, to no one in particular, "This is what it is all about". There is a family history here, of a mother who was excluded from this very school, of a child who lives with her grandmother because her mother struggles with parenting responsibilities. Three generations have a connection to the school space, buildings, objects and people. And the school staff have made a commitment to stay the distance – many have worked here for ten years or more. They talk of listening to and holding onto the stories of caregivers and children with care, patience and respect. And it is this listening and containing work that brings the people back into these buildings and creates the warmth of place. The researchers are partially witness to this work; to listen, hold onto, contain and curate the stories.

Collectively we have rethought the concept of 'community'. The art exhibition gave us a glimpse into 'community in action'. Oftentimes 'community' is used as a descriptive container for grouping people by geography or a presumed ethnic similarity; for example, the 'West End' or 'Sudanese' community. From a governing, or policy point of view, a group can then be identifiable and has, or acquires, common characteristics that can then be assumed when deciding which (policy) action to take, or not, in view of those attributes. In such groupings it seems that 'problems are to be managed, or made more efficient, within a framework of things everybody can agree are good for us all' (Aiken 2017, p. 2386) (though not always good for the identified group). These groupings can also have negative effects on people when policy is created around assumed shared characteristics.

The other common use of the concept of community is when it is contrasted with 'school' for example, and in this sense, it is rarely used unfavourably (Williams, 1983). This putative 'community' is that aggregation of people that a school serves. School on one side and 'the' community on the other. In education, both schools and their communities can be the targets of policy attention when parents/ carers become interesting to policymakers as vehicles for supporting the work of schools, for example, in reading programs that rely on parental/ carer work.

Based on our work over the last ten years and the experiences we had in/ of the art exhibition we want to argue for thinking about conceptualising *community-in-formation.* As such this conceptual work might support the possibility of communities (who are not labelled by others and whose characteristics, positive or negative, cannot be easily assumed) that are hitherto unforeseen as always being in the process of coming into existence. This is based on an understanding of a 'commonality that is provisional, negotiated and in the process of

becoming: who are we? what do we want? how can we get it?' (Aiken 2017, p. 2386). That is, there are no presupposed 'communities' (though ideas such as 'the West End community' do exercise a deal of power in the narratives that people use to live their lives and to justify actions). To help us think about this 'community in formation' we have drawn on Biesta's (2004) writing about what he calls 'rational communities' and 'communities of those with nothing in common' (CTNC). Rational communities (RC) are groups of people who share conceptual resources- usually in order to carry out a profession, for example doctors or teachers. RCs are powerful and important because they allow the expression of expertise and specialised knowledge. In RCs, *what* is said is important not *who* is saying it. A CTNC (Biesta, 2004) on the other hand can help to elucidate when and where it is necessary to speak 'outside' RCs. In this case it does not matter exactly what is said, but the fact that something is being said, and that it is a particular person who is doing the 'saying'. CTNCs arise in 'limit' situations; for example, in the presence of someone who is dying who is a friend (when it matters that *you* are there and saying *something*). In a RC the speaker is, in a sense, replaceable by another person who can speak with the authority that a rational community gives to them. For us these conceptions of community help one to enter into situations with some analytical resources where the concept of community is mobilised (to be prepared to reject/ rewrite any labels and pre-given assumptions about who and what is 'in' and how) ; but also, and more importantly, with a 'forward' or future orientation, to think about how to create new solidarities with others—albeit fragile, nascent and emerging ones. These kinds of solidarities form when people work together on joint projects.

The example of the art exhibition we have used above is perhaps the beginning of a 'joint project' where a RC of what makes an 'art exhibition' is helpful in 'setting up' situations where parents and care givers can feel welcomed to the school- invited in. The young student

interacting with her principal, with Mum watching on, is perhaps an example of a limit situation. What was said is not important, but the fact of its saying, by that particular student, is crucial.

Emerging Equalities

Scene Two. A school that ten years ago was widely perceived as under threat of closure. Performance on national literacy and numeracy tests was in the 'red' or well below the national average. Families were abandoning the school, moving to a newer school up the road. Some teachers refused to work here, others left, finding the demands of the workplace difficult. This is a school where there continue to be difficult interactions with police, welfare workers, and health government officials. A place where people live out the effects of systemic inequality every day. But … now the school is performing at the national average in standardised testing, and the student population has doubled in size. People, teachers, students, care-givers want to stay here now.

Through discussions with the research team, the principal and school staff have come into contact with Rancière's writing about the 'presupposition of equality'. This presupposition is quite counter-intuitive to current 'equity' policy regimes that propose equality as a target to be arrived at in the future (so long as everyone does as we are told- as good citizen-consumers (Newman & Clarke, 2009)). From a practical point of view, of course, material disadvantage, poverty, and social deprivation exist and there has to be more work undertaken urgently to change that. There is no dispute. But also, day to day, we imagine our students and their caregivers, in spite of their circumstances as being 'equal'. Their circumstances are fragile and fraught. Inter-generational poverty takes a toll on people's lives, bodies, and minds. Many students are in need of specialist learning support and care. It is easy to 'see' deficit. But the school staff and leadership team do not categorise students by their deficits. They make use of

specialist resources, psychologists, health workers, special needs teachers, and so forth. They provide breakfasts for students – the staffroom is always filled with loaves of bread, milk, and fruit. Shoes, hats, and other clothing items are made available to students in need. Funds are raised for students to attend school excursions and camps. And at the same time, the school staff refuse to label and categorise the students by drawing on some deficit label. Rather, they recognise the ways in which these students have coped with, adapted to, and survived the traumas of poverty. They recognise the forms of intelligence required to thrive in these circumstances. This is where Rancière's ideas about the presupposition of equality has been useful to researchers and school staff. It has allowed us to 'hold the opinion' of equality and to see what happens next as a result.

Inequality is endemic; globally, the rich 1% control 90% of the wealth. Usually, in research projects about poverty and education, the concern, rightly, is with overcoming poverty, or with working to disrupt, challenge or make a difference to inequality. Often, it is also about recognising and including people and empowering them. Laudable aims. '[S]ocial inclusion is about giving recognition to and empowering local people to take charge of the educational project for their own needs' (Raffo & Gunter 2008, p. 405). We have begun to wonder though about the problems associated with inclusion and empowerment when perhaps there can be an underlying assumption of deficit with respect to those who are to be empowered. In our research partnerships, we have worked at trying to put these assumptions on their heads. Following (Rancière, 2010), we have tried to enact working together on the presupposition of the equality of intelligence. What this means is that inclusion and empowerment are not just goals but they evolve as, and in, 'process'. What this has meant is that researchers have to put their ideas about who might be empowered (to do what exactly?) and/ or included (in what exactly?) and why at risk and open to the objections about what

'we' are doing from research participants. An emergent 'we' has to form that is always precarious and open in, and to the situations that arise in our work together. This fragile 'we-ness' has helped us collectively to challenge the idea that there are those who have a part to play in deciding what to do about and in schooling and education and those who have no part in such matters. As a consequence, 'we' have worked together to develop and test out methodologies that ask: "How can those with no part, take one?" This has posed challenges for our research, because this is an open question that will have no one single answer at any given time or place. Presupposing equality means that metaphysical foundations can become open to investigation—that there are moments that open for dissensus—for disagreements about relations that structure the bases on which any given 'we' might disagree. Who has the power to decide? Whose questions are ruled out as inadmissible? Who has a part in saying what comes next? These questions remain open and potentially in dispute.

> 'Disagreement' and 'dissensus' do not imply that politics is a struggle between camps; they imply that it is a struggle about what politics is, a struggle that is waged about such original issues as 'where are we?', 'who are we?', 'what makes us a we?', and 'what do we see and what can we say about it that makes us a we, having a world in common?' (Rancière 2009, p. 116)

Biesta (2010, pp. 56-57) notes that the

> ingenuity of Rancière's work lies first and foremost in the fact that he is able to show that what is carried out under and in the name of equality, democracy, and emancipation often results in its opposite in that it reproduces inequality and keeps people in their place. What matters, therefore, is not *that* we are committed to

equality, democracy, and emancipation, but *how* we are committed to these concepts and *how* we express and articulate this commitment.

Biesta's point is important. Again, we offer no 'this is how to do it' answer to the 'hows' that Biesta proposes. Instead, realising that we are of course complicit in reproducing inequality, we work outwards from this, tentatively exploring how to work well together in meaningful (and so slow ways). The point also connects to a broader discussion (raised by Rancière especially with respect to Bourdieu's work) about the role of, particularly sociological, research in presupposing inequality and producing knowledge 'about' inequality which has limited efficacy in changing things. The 'unequal', it is presupposed, may not (yet) know enough- so a sociologist is required to help explain to 'them' about the various dimensions and dynamics of their circumstances.

Further to this, it is easy to maintain a rhetorical commitment to equality, democracy and emancipation. In fact, conservative and right-wing political movements (and to some extent the more liberal/ progressive side of the spectrum) have become adept at articulating new policy approaches to equity that at the same time enact austerity measures. Clearly there is a split between the articulation and the enactment of commitments here. The challenge for researchers and educators is to work within these policy frames and to find ways to presuppose equality in the present moment (not as a rhetorical goal to be realised at some distant later date); to act on the basis of the opinion of equality of all; to ensure that those people whose only part is to have none are able to take one. For example, with respect to education, teachers are increasingly taking the part of the 'no part'- they are increasingly marginalised in debates about what the purposes and contents of education should be- as their work becomes more and more standardised and governed by (politicised) bureaucrats whose

expertise lies outside the field of education. How is it that teachers can take a part again in questions about the purposes of education, for example- about defining what/ who makes sense in education, where and when? A similar question might be asked of/ for students whose lives are affected by situations of poverty: how might they take a part in constituting the 'sense' of education when clearly the promises that education holds for transformation are often not brought to fruition. Is there are part for students living in poverty in making educational sense? What is that part?

Material participation

Scene Three. There is a small boy. He is diagnosed with some type of disorder, such as attention deficit, hyperactive disorder. He cannot sit still in a classroom. It does not make sense to keep him there. So, the school principal has given him an old bicycle to play with and to work on. It turns out he knows a great deal about bicycles. He loves them. The feeling of freedom. He can fix them. Make them work.

The bicycle idea has arisen from a practice in the school; when students are sent to the school office, they do not go there to be punished, but instead they spend time defusing the feelings of meltdown, falling apart, or eruption that have been triggered. These feelings, responses, bodily actions are understood as children reacting to and coping with traumatic events associated with poverty. In the office there are objects that students can create things with- a hand drill, a 3D printer, a musical instrument. The idea is that repetitive movement or activity by a child in the presence of adult care givers might calm things down and open up spaces for a new way of being. Time is crucial here. Time to wait for things to calm down and for everyone to feel that they are OK.

The boy, against the school rules, gets to ride the bike he has fixed up in the bush at the back of the school.

The principal buys some more bikes and the small boy puts them together- makes them ridable. There is a sense here that this might become something more. Could the bush behind the school have some tracks that the students could ride on? Could they work on this together? Might some parents/ caregivers come in and do some work on bikes and tracks with the teachers and students?

The final concept we discuss here responds more closely to the 'how' question that Biesta brings to the fore. Actually, putting commitments into practice is what counts- especially when so many people are alienated from the 'system'. What we see in this vignette, is perhaps an example of an egalitarian (presupposing equality) 'politics of knowledge production' (Blencowe, Brigstocke, & Noorani 2015, p. 399). This kind of knowledge politics seems to revolve around the role that materials have in instigating and facilitating participation, as opposed to approaches that derive from deliberation and consensus 'being constituted primarily by linguistic, deliberative or abstract communicative processes…' (Blencowe et al. 2015, p. 399). These materials are what might be called 'thirds' that change and morph as the participation around, and with, them unfolds. The point is that they offer brief fragments of temporal, spatial and conceptual respite from the categories and roles that are normalised (and which often pathologize students who have been diagnosed) in the everyday governance that emerges and is named as 'schooling'. From out of this space-time-concept-splinter practical/conceptual tension arises. Who/ what/ where/ how a student or teacher is, is put into question. A different story about 'who can do what' might unfold. And if so, new narratives that support change can take shape and generate a slightly altered sense

of what is think-able, see-able, hearable- of what 'makes sense'. The task is to design and implement 'action' on the one hand, and processes to generate, curate and disseminate the stories of the process on the other**.**

It is not possible, or necessary to spell out in advance what forms this material participation might take, nor the ways in which the stories that emerge from such work might evolve and be told. This is because such forms are unforeseeable from outside the concrete, and one might add, emergent, situations in which they must arise. 'Material participation' concerns

> developing capacity: creating freedom to develop through things, momentums, ideas, people coming together and joining forces… critically and constructively engaged in the production of new subjects, which means recognizing and affirming the encounters, material investments, associations, attachments and solidarities (becoming solid) that this involves. (Blencowe et al. 2015, p. 401)

This participation arises between, and is constituted in (for example), 'direct encounters between …texts, calculations, facts, matter, physical processes, poetry or stories''(Blencowe et al. 2015, p. 405). What is important is that the stage is set for 'creating spaces, providing materials, building confidence, and not explaining things or directing outcomes… It is about holding things open rather than prescribing possible pathways of understanding or action' (Blencowe et al. 2015, p. 405). These 'thirds' allow for the verification of equality; they facilitate this process. A 'third thing' 'allows a new relationship to be created in the moment of its enactment, with meaning being open to negotiation' (Fryer, 2015, p. 333). In the process, it can 'carry the promise of a new sensible world' (Rancière, 2009a, p. 101). The 'third thing' reminds all the participants, that, despite being put in our 'place', we 'can

already speak' (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 154)—that '[T]he capacity for intelligence is already there, it is evident in human behaviour such as the learning of language' (Rancière, 1991, p. 13). This is to remind us also about " the deep 'funds of knowledge' embedded in all communities, however disadvantaged they are made by contemporary economics and public policy" (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013, p. x). In this case 'third things' 'work' with the concepts of equality and community, embodying these into 'action'. They are designed to deepen and strengthen the visceral, corporeal funds of knowledge infrastructures (Karasti, Millerand, Hine, & Bowker 2016) around the school and approach the overarching intractability of poverty obliquely (Kay, 2011). They aim to leave their mark in deepened connectivity between people, in obligations that leave all those involved knowing that they belong—not to the pre-existing school or already named community—but to something that flowers in the process (Wals & Peters, 2018).

Discussion

What we have tried to do here is to outline some of the thinking work that we have undertaken in a research partnership. We hope that these notes about the work might be useful for others who are trying to put into action partnership research that seeks to make a difference 'on the ground' but is not driven by the 'fix it'/ improvement agenda that blames schools and teachers for broader systemic failings of which they (and researchers of course) are (just?) a part. We think that the current over-standardisation of teaching work (via large scale assessment, curriculum and standards approaches) will not necessarily lead to better outcomes for children living in poverty. We do not claim that the process we have outlined in this paper is 'the answer' in any concrete sense to the broader problems of poverty. Though, as our work has iterated over time, we think that slowed down, ground up research partnerships do enable collective work which challenges some of the pre-given places, roles

and capacities of research and schooling, and that such challenging work may support change on the ground. The change that we have witnessed, participated in, and contributed to has been phenomenal over the past decade. Not only has the school regularly met the national benchmarks in standardised test results, but students have engaged in a wide variety of critical, creative projects. In addition, the student enrolment numbers at the school have doubled, and the teaching workforce has remained stable, professionally committed to making a difference, and actively engaged in research projects.

If we try to think through what has become important in the process of doing this research there are some further points we might make. One is that it is necessary to make the stories, the testimonies, of and with, those whose only part is to have none (see Rancière, 2009) in the constitution of the 'sense' of education, to take one. Of course we have not necessarily accomplished this here- taking only small steps toward that end to date. Such work as might develop for us in the future could run along two dimensions. The first is to enable these stories to be told and the second is to ensure that these stories are not ignored, nor 'misunderstood' either locally or as they are recontextualised 'upwards' to become policy sense. This is where the formulation of concepts might become important because one of the components of epistemic injustice is that concepts are produced by and in the interests of those who hold power, the power to arrange the conceptual landscape in their own interests. Currently, concepts such as standardised testing, data evidence, classroom ready teachers, literacy and numeracy attainment, learning gains, school improvement dominant the talk of education. As evidenced in our first research project, we are committed to helping students disadvantaged by poverty meet literacy attainment targets. But we want more for these students and the communities in which they reside.

Thinking through the meaning of these concepts, the work that they do, and reformulating concepts to think about the purposes of education, and the presupposition of equality also do powerful work. The point is that routinely, what disrupts 'sense' is suppressed, ignored, sidelined. In our project, one tipping point was around the sense of data. The talk of 'beautiful' data, 'beautiful' children in a place where talk had been around the terror of data, mourning over data, grieving over data, was significant. But why was this a tipping point? In this project, at that time, it became a moment in the discussions between the academics and school leaders where the sense around data, schooling and research was disrupted. Our task as researchers and educators, then perhaps, is to identify, open up and make sense of these fragile and fleeting moments.

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[i] The participatory research projects included: 1. investigating with teachers and schools the

development and impact of innovative literacy teaching strategies to improve literacy

teaching and literacy outcomes for students (Australian Research Council Linkage

(LP0990585): *Smart Education Partnerships: Testing a Research Collaboration Model to*

Build Literacy Innovations in Low Socio-Economic Schools), 2. investigating co-design,

participatory research and educational practices in so-called disadvantaged schools

(Australian Research Council Discovery Project: *Learning for Teaching in Disadvantaged Schools* (DP160102784), 3. Investigating the relations between the purposes of education and poverty in participatory research projects with school leaders and teachers (University Funded Project*: The 'beautiful risk of education' in high poverty communities: Experimenting constructively with connecting educational purposes, schooling and 'disadvantage'*).

ii The first project commenced in 2009 shortly after Australia introduced national standardised tests in numeracy and literacy. The results of these tests were publicly tabled on the MySchool website and reported in newspapers. Schools, predominantly those in high poverty communities, were publicly reported as 'failing' to meet the benchmark standards in literacy attainment. In the popular press, school leaders and teachers were often blamed for poor educational results.