Literacy, poverty and schooling: what matters in young people’s education?

Abstract
This paper draws upon several decades of literacy research in schools in high poverty environments to explore what matters in young people’s education. In dialogue with themes from Kevin Marjoribanks’ work, such as student aspirations, family environments, and teacher expectations, key insights are summarised. Referring to longitudinal case studies and a current ethnographic project, the interplay between literacy, poverty and schooling, and, young people’s aspirations and education outcomes is explored. While the work of educators in high poverty communities continues to be highly demanding, there are some schools and teachers making a durable positive difference to learner dispositions and literate repertoires. Teacher expectations and discursive practices are crucial in this process.

Introduction
At certain points in an academic life researchers may look back and take stock of the body of work in which they have been engaged. This may be prompted by policy, everyday life, important educational events, and ongoing research experiences. It is no coincidence I still find myself observing children and teachers in literacy lessons in a school in one of the poorest communities in northern Adelaide, South Australia. Each visit I ask myself: ‘What do I know that I can share with educators in that context?’ It is no coincidence that I am still meeting a young woman, now 21, who I first started watching when she was 4 years old and learning literacy. I am still pre-occupied by the same research question – what makes a difference to young people’s learning? Increasingly I also find myself invited to present in honour of great educational scholars who have died – for example, Garth Boomer, Carolyn Baker and Kevin Marjoribanks, the latter of whom, I feature in this paper. The process of preparing inevitably takes one back into their scholarship and I find myself in awe of what they have accomplished and the legacy they leave in their writing. Inevitably this process also tends to produce a level of critical reflexivity about professional blind-spots which it would have been good to have identified earlier! Increasingly I recognise the need, in studying complex social problems – like poverty and unequal educational outcomes – to be informed by educational research across disciplines and approaches.

Here I revisit the seemingly intractable problem of lower levels of literacy performance, as measured on standardized tests, in schools situated in high poverty contexts in Australia. As in many other developed nations, Australia now has greater gaps between the affluent and the poor in ways that particularly impact on children; increasingly rich countries have many poor people including the ‘working poor’.

We are already seeing the emergence of a divided society…. The children of the poor live a strikingly different life. Increasingly they crowd into low-income suburbs with poor-quality physical environments and public facilities, and worrying levels of crime and disturbance. They go to under-resourced schools with stressed teachers, and go home to parents distracted by worry about how to pay the latest electricity bill. (Stanley, Richardson and Prior, 2005, pp.102-103)

There is now an emerging field of study considering ‘education and poverty in affluent countries’ (Raffo, Dyson, Gunter, Hall, Jones and Kalambouka, 2010). Poverty is relative and produced. In Australia, there is now recognition of deep and persistent disadvantage across
generations (McLachlan, Gilfillan and Gordon, 2013) and we know there are connections between poverty and educational outcomes.

On international and national measures of literacy Australia’s results relate to social background, such that children of the poor are statistically likely to perform at lower levels of achievement. Yet what counts as literacy and what counts as poverty are both open to question. For example, ACER researchers David Tout and Juliette Mendelovits recently explained that apparent improvements and declines in people’s literacy levels always need interrogation.

The recent report Deep and Persistent Disadvantage in Australia (McLachlan, Gilfillan and Gordon, 2013, p.2) explains that what counts as disadvantage, or indeed poverty, is also subject to debate.

Disadvantage is a multi-dimensional concept. …Poverty, deprivation, capabilities and social exclusion are different lenses to view and measure disadvantage. …A number of researchers produce estimates of the extent of disadvantage in Australia. Each relies on contestable assumptions and thresholds.

They go on to explain that traditionally disadvantage has been ‘understood as poverty, and poverty as inadequate resources or low income’. But because income is a measure at a point in time it does not necessarily equate with ongoing disadvantage. ‘Rather it is ‘impoverished lives’ (including a lack of opportunities), rather than a lack of income alone, that really matters’. Disadvantage is cumulative (Vinson, 2007). I don’t want to detract from the no doubt important statistical debates amongst social scientists about what constitutes literacy or what constitutes poverty; clearly, building our knowledge requires such expertise. However it is perhaps equally important to note that contestable explanations nonetheless underpin policy and the certainty of government funding priorities. Ultimately these definitions, decisions and associated resources infiltrate into everyday life. In the field of literacy education, definitions activated in policy and subsequent funding impacts greatly on educators’ work (and the relative wealth of educational publishers).

My own view is that proper literacy involves operational, cultural and critical dimensions of practice (Green, 2012) – that is, that people understand how to use texts appropriately to get things done, how to make meaning and how to question the views of the world represented in texts in the interests of particular groups. However, I do not wish to make a play for any particular approach to literacy instruction here; indeed the impact of literacy wars and bandwagons has for too long distracted educators from the main game. Various governments at federal and state level and educational jurisdictions have proffered different solutions to the problem of low literacy outcomes in poor communities. I also do not intend to discuss the policy debates here (but see Alexander, 2011; Berliner, 2013; Cormack and Comber, 2013;
Lingard, 2010). Rather my task, following Kevin Marjoribanks, is to consider inclusive education contexts where everyone has the chance to excel. While Marjoribanks used ‘class’ and ‘ethclass’, my own work has been concerned with young people growing up in areas with high concentrations of poverty, which indeed now may well include the ‘working-class’, and increasingly, the ‘working poor’, where the combined family income may still result in the household being below the official poverty line.

**Biographical note: Research preoccupations**

Recent research undertaken by feminist scholars concerning class indicates that in various ways our classed histories infuse our work as researchers (Maguire, 1997; Skeggs, 1997). My own experiences growing up in a working-class area and being educated with peers who were mostly the children of post-World War Two immigrants (with their sense of hope, optimism and aspirations) underlies my research preoccupations. In other words (following Bourdieu, 1990, 1991) my childhood and education not only formed a particular kind of habitus and disposition towards education but also a particular kind of politics or ethics toward the field of education. In literacy studies a number of studies have foregrounded the importance of researcher race and culture in designing and undertaking inquiries, but accounts which take class or poverty into account are somewhat rare (Hicks, 1993; 2012). The complex relationships – real and imagined – between education and social justice lurk as a problematic in all my research designs and practices. And my own experiences with educational institutions lead me to interrogate pervasive deficit explanations for poor educational outcomes of working-class children. Here I reconsider a range of work I have conducted over three decades where in one way or another I have been trying to understand what matters in young people’s education. What makes a difference to children’s literacy learning and more broadly their educational trajectories?

The impetus for this re-visiting was the invitation to present the Kevin Marjoribanks oration at Adelaide University. Marjoribanks was Former Vice Chancellor and Head of the School of Education at Adelaide University whose research program produced a substantial body of work indicating the ‘impact that parents and other family members have on children’s educational opportunities’. As an educational psychologist and quantitative researcher, Marjoribanks tackled research questions framed in those traditions. Although in his later work he was increasingly influenced by sociological theories of class, families and education (such as those of Bernstein, Bourdieu and Lareau), seeking to understand the relationships between the institutions of the family and the school in relation to class. In particular he investigated how individual educational trajectories were affected by the family and the school. He was one of a trailblazing group who began to explore the contingency of such relationships and to go beyond class determinism.

As I explored a range of Marjoribanks’ publications, I began to reconsider my own work in the light of his key insights and those of other educational scholars working with similar theoretical tools (Bourdieu, 1990, 1991; Lareau, 1987) – ideas about cultural capital, habitus, family practices – what really counts. I begin by outlining the key premises of, and insights emerging from, Kevin Marjoribanks’ work and then consider these insights in relation to my research focusing on literacy, poverty and schooling.

**Key premises about families, student aspirations and teacher expectations**

In reading Kevin Marjoribanks’ work I came to admire a number of qualities in his scholarship, which I outline below, and I increasingly regretted the fact that I had not engaged with it more earlier, which is odd given our shared interest in education and class.
My lack of statistical literacy provides one explanation for this oversight. Consider the following:

Zero-order correlations provide, however, only a limited understanding of the covariate structure of variables. I investigated relations among ability, attitudes, and academic achievement further by plotting regression surfaces generated from hierarchical regression models. In the models, I included product terms to test or possible interaction effects and added squared terms to examine possible curvilinear relations (Marjoribanks, 1987, p.173).

This is my problem, not his, but it does illustrate why often in educational research we have been limited in learning from colleagues working on similar problems but from different paradigms. Indeed rather prophetically Marjoribanks observed in 1980:

Only when we begin to compare the findings from studies using alternative theoretical and methodological approaches will our understandings of the structure of ethclass differences in Australian children’s achievements become increasingly revealed (Marjoribanks, 1980b, p.138).

I agree. Although Marjoribanks undertook largescale quantitative studies, his work was carefully nuanced conceptually and he was interested in the complex relationships between phenomena rather than causal relationships between taken-for-granted categories. Over time he provided a range of insights that were compelling then and remain so today:

- School environment can make a difference (eg children’s perceptions of the school environment being non-punitive in combination with family factors) (Marjoribanks, 1978)
- That student achievement was affected by the quality of instruction provided by schools (following Bernstein, 1977) and children’s characteristics (Marjoribanks, 1980)
- That educational research ‘adopt a framework in which family groups are considered to be critical underlying contexts’ ((Marjoribanks, 1987, p.177)
- That a bio-ecological model of human development is needed – an understanding relationship between contexts, individual characteristics and learning settings
- Need for longitudinal research that examines the interactions between family, individual measures and children’s outcomes

My emphasis is on the words which signal connections and contexts. These relationships may seem self-evident in hindsight; however it is Marjoribanks’ caution in overstating the importance of single factors and his interest in teasing out the less obvious elements in relation with others to which I wish to draw attention here. For example, with respect to considering ‘class’ he looks not only at parental education and employment but also at the contingency of family practices:

Family educational capital can be considered to reflect the extent to which cultural capital has been activated or accessed through the development of supportive adult-child networks in families (Marjoribanks, 2005, p.652.)

Marjoribanks understood families as dynamic contexts. The designs of the interviews that Marjoribanks and his teams conducted with families were informed by his complex inquiries
of actual family practices rather than by static measures. Such a model is still evident in policy today; for instance see the recently released *Deep and Persistent Disadvantage in Australia* (McLachlan, Gilfillan and Gordon, 2013). Marjoribanks (2002, p. 160) developed across his career a Weberian informed theory of context in order to explain the interaction of a range of elements on students’ school outcomes. Over a decade ago now Marjoribanks concluded:

...[T]hat families from subordinated contexts are at a decided disadvantage in providing and accessing appropriate learning experiences for their children, in relation to the criteria set by the dominant social group.

Yet Marjoribanks insisted on the need to look at what young people situated in particular places in particular families attending particular schools made of their educational opportunities – who and what encouraged and discouraged them from high educational aspirations and attainments. This is important as it means that families, schools or students, themselves, are not absolved from responsibility. There is the constant need to look further – to neighborhood, peers, the quality of instruction, teachers’ knowledge and care, student engagement and sense of control. Typically his papers and books ended by acknowledging gaps in his work and the need to look in new ways at the problem at hand. Below I share several such insights which seem just as pertinent today.

If children are considered as active interpreters involved in the construction of their learning contexts, then it is necessary to examine the subjective understandings children have of their school situations. (Marjoribanks, 1980a, p. 590)

Adolescents’ perceptions of teachers’ educational capital, was defined positively by supportive regulative relationships, strong academic teacher orientations, imaginative academic teaching practices, and caring student-teacher interpersonal relationships (Marjoribanks, 1999, p. 49).

The nature and intellectual quality of parent-teacher interactions might be affected quite significantly by teachers’ perceptions of parents’ backgrounds (Marjoribanks, 2005, pp. 647-648, following Lareau and Shumar, 1996)

The placement of children into certain schools or in ability groups within schools … may relate as much to family background considerations as to children’s academic potential and educational capital (Marjoribanks, 2005, p.655).

The key warning here is the inherent tendency of educational institutions to reproduce patterns of privilege and disadvantage – partly through what educators assume about different students. These insights typify the kinds of challenges that emerge from his work for schools to address. I have obviously made a selection here in order to pursue a dialogue with my own research and the contemporary policy landscape.

**Literacy, poverty and schooling: Retrospective**

My own school experience of the potential of education to open up new possibilities had led me to believe that education was fundamental to moving out of poverty. As a young teacher I had held great hopes for my students to become ‘empowered’ through English literacy. I naively imagined that students would be inspired by my pedagogy and immediately take on the goals I had for them as learners. I didn’t predict high school students who couldn’t read or
those who wouldn’t read. I didn’t understand the complexity of what makes a difference to young people’s aspirations and learning. I could be responsible for the passion in my teaching, my subject knowledge, my care, communicating high expectations to my students, but I could not address quickly the learning or aspirational effects of prior (and possibly intergenerational family) alienation with schooling (Marjoribanks, 2006 ‘an ‘individual’s cognitive habitus’- defined by prior academic achievement and cognitive school-related attitudes’, p. 230). This challenging and frustrating experience as an early career teacher, wanting to liberate working class kids with literature, is what sent me back to university and into a life as an educational researcher.

Across a range of projects I have tried to look at schooling, and in particular literacy education, from the perspectives of students and teachers. My studies have largely been modest in scale, aiming for depth and immersion rather than scale and scope. There is not sufficient space to discuss each of these so in the interests of brevity I first of all summarise key findings from this body of work and then discuss key challenges of the contemporary moment in terms of educational policy, literacy and poverty.

One of the earliest pieces of research I did in classrooms investigated children’s questions and requests for help during literacy lessons. Working as a classroom ethnographer with a progressive and innovative classroom teacher, I recorded teacher and student talk focusing particularly on the interactions that were initiated by students. Without going into detail, the most concerning finding was that in this context working-class and some ESL children were able to elicit less complex help than their more affluent peers. That is, those children who most needed the academic discursive interaction with the teacher were least able to accomplish it. When they did ask questions they frequently remained at a procedural level (Comber, 1990). Indeed understanding what counts in school literacy performance can remain a puzzle until it is too late for some students (Dutro and Selland, 2012).

I began to realize that progressive inquiry approaches to literacy positioned different children in different ways. There was no one-size-fits-all empowerment model. Even where the teacher overtly espoused high expectations for all, designed an innovative curriculum, negotiated an inclusive and respectful learning environment, and, made herself available to respond to all students, there were differences in the learning interactions which actually took place. As I completed this project for my Masters degree I was already aware that I needed to employ more complex theories of language and power to understand how class made a difference to students’ learning trajectories.

My next major project, my doctoral study, also ethnographic, was concerned with the teaching and learning of literacy in a disadvantaged school in a very poor neighbourhood. This time I started with the recognition that the relationships between language, power, schooling and identity were complex and problematic. Again cutting to the short story, while there were significant exceptions, the dominant discourse I found was deficit – that is students and their families were seen as the problem. Some teachers tended to blame people for their poverty and to hold lower learning expectations for students from poor families (Comber, 1998) resulting in what has been described as the ‘pedagogy of poverty’ (Haberman, 1991). The repeated keyword in teachers’ classroom talk was ‘work’. The ideal student was self-regulated hard-working and compliant. The principal contested the dangers of deficit talk and gradually recruited staff who took a more positive view of students’ capabilities and who designed challenging and critical pedagogies. In the process the
students started to look smarter! This study began to suggest the ways in which the educational capital of teachers (following Marjoribanks) might be enhanced.

At about the same time I became convinced of the need of longitudinal studies to really understand what made a difference to different children’s literacy learning over time and embarked on 2 studies designed as ethnographic case studies to be undertaken in schools located in different places. In one the focus was connections and disconnections between language and literacy practices at home and school (Comber and Hill, 2000). In the other key aims were to:

- find out which literate practices children in socio-economically disadvantaged schools are given access to and practice in
- analyse what individual children take from classroom literacy curricula
- document and analyse assessment information from sources available in the system, including teachers, students, national and state literacy tests
- better theorise the relationship between the development of student literacies, the provision of literacy curriculum and the assessment of literacy outcomes (see Comber, Badger, Barnett, Nixon and Pitt, 2002).

These longitudinal studies indicated where, when and how student literacy learning trajectories can go awry and in Marjoribanks’ terms – how the combination of student dispositions and cognitive habitus (learning histories and approaches), teachers’ expectations, family contexts and educational capital and aspirations are part of the mix of what different young people take up from schooling at different points in their educational trajectories. For example we could see over time what different young people made of the ‘same’ classroom opportunities. In many respects both longitudinal studies suggested rich-get-richer scenarios – all too predictable. However just as importantly, both studies indicated practices that appeared to make a positive difference to student literacy and durable learner dispositions. At the time we distilled the following principles for practice (Comber, and Barnett, 2003, p.10):

- Teachers need to explicitly teach unfamiliar skills, information and discourses
- Teacher knowledge is central to the quality of teaching
- Teacher talk is a key part of the practice of teaching
- Teachers need to recognise and respond to the nature of literacy-learning tasks for children who speak more than one language
- Assessment of literacy should be diagnostic and pedagogically useful
- The curriculum must be meaningful, relevant and worthwhile
- Children need a knowledge and vocabulary about language and learning
- Interactions and communication with others is fundamental to learning
- Regular predictable activities can support children to become independent
- Enhanced school-home relationships and communication can improve children’s performance.

These findings, with strong synergies with those of Marjoribanks, hardly seem controversial. Here I want to focus on the central position of teachers’ knowledge, talk, and practices. My belief is that ambitious and complex student learning, which extends beyond the basics, is contingent on teacher learning and that this is an ongoing career-long process, best done through teachers becoming involved in research themselves. To that end many of my studies
have involved teachers as partners – teachers as researchers – in the inquiry process, addressing questions about how and what particular students are learning. I have started from the position that typically teachers are committed to enhancing the learning of all their students; however they don’t always know how to achieve this. It needs ongoing inquiry. In the process of working with teachers who are committed to making a difference to culturally diverse poor and working class young people I have gained much from the untold stories of teachers’ work, understanding how they grapple with the challenges they face; and I have witnessed firsthand the genius of educators in our schools (often invisible to educational researchers!). During the past decade I have worked on a range of projects concerned with teaching and learning literacy in schools located in poor communities where I have been struck again and again by the complexity of teachers’ work (see Table 1). I do think that it is tougher now to be a school teacher in Australia for a range of reasons; and I think it’s tougher in schools located in high poverty. I am often inspired by what some teachers accomplish even as I fear that the goals of school education are being narrowed and that the risks of reductive curriculum and pedagogy play out more dangerously in working-class and poor communities.

[Insert Table 1 here]

In these projects I have had the privilege of learning from and with classroom teachers, school leaders and students. In *Reinvigorating middle years pedagogy in ‘rustbelt’ secondary schools* I was struck between the differences in student aspirations for their futures and those held by many of their teachers. Teachers tended to underestimate students’ aspirations. The *School-to-work Literacy and Numeracy Innovation program* showed the power of teachers brokering pathways through schooling and beyond for young and previously alienated students and the flexibility of the South Australian Certificate of Education for teachers with the knowledge of how it worked. From *Mandated literacy and the reorganization of teachers’ work* we could see the risks of high-stakes testing in narrowing the curriculum in schools located in poor communities, particularly those also disadvantaged by rural poverty and distance. From *Urban renewal from inside out* we learned of the potential of children and teachers to re-imagine and re-design school spaces. This project reconceptualised literacy and invited children and their teachers to make a material difference to their school grounds by designing and helping to make a garden. To conclude this paper I illustrate some good news stories and key principles emerging from these inquiries which offer a sense of possibility and a gallery of images which suggest some powerful learning. In particular, I introduce an idea that what my colleague, Barbara Kamler and I, came to call ‘turnaround pedagogies’ (Comber and Kamler, 2005). It might be a useful heuristic for thinking about the kinds of educational capital schools need to build.

**Turnaround literacy pedagogies: Building school educational capital**

From across the projects we came to see that teacher knowledges and practices were critical and that they needed opportunities for ongoing learning about:

- How people learn in different contexts
- What constitutes literacy
- Their students, families and communities
- The kinds of cultural capital they bring to school
- How to use student funds of knowledge and discursive practices as a bridge to new academic knowledges and discourse
- Fair and effective feedback and assessment practices
Hence we designed a number of studies designed to build teachers’ knowledge of relevant subjects, pedagogies, learning contexts, and sociologies of the community. The teachers for their part need to turn around and consider:

- Theory (social justice, cultural capital, literacy as socio-cultural practice)
- Research (as a reader and as a practitioner)
- Parents (in dialogue)
- Communities and their circumstances (sociological knowledge of poverty, cultural knowledge of different groups)
- Students in different learning contexts (observing and listening)
- Examining effects of their practices on different students (what different students were able to do with a range of learning opportunities)

We have written about this work in a range of places with a view to reimagining pre-service and in-service teacher education where teachers would become educational researchers in their own right (Comber and Kamler, 2005). Such an approach enables teachers to see students differently and unleash their potential for learning.

The next generation of teachers need complex understandings – they need to be data literate, statistically proficient, but equally they need to be able to understand social justice and inclusion as more than grand theory. They need to understand how it should inform the politics of everyday life – who sits with whom? What kinds of assignments are undertaken with what kinds of consequences? Whether students can find meaning in their academic work? What kinds of citizens are schools helping to produce?

**What matters in young people’s education?**

Understandably education is seen as one of the major factors in turning around deep and persistent disadvantage. According to McLachlan, Gilfillan and Gordon (2013, p.14) ‘the evidence points to there being critical times for building capabilities for life’ including the early years, the school years and beyond compulsory schooling, and the transition between education and work. The longitudinal studies in which I have been involved confirm this. The prominence of education suggests the need for the wider community to value education and enhance the status of teaching as a profession. Increasingly we will need change-ready teachers who can build educational capital within and beyond the school and a new generation of teachers prepared to work in high poverty culturally diverse contexts. And schools such as those which Fiona Stanley and colleagues mention in the quote at the outset of this paper will need ethical, resilient and imaginative leaders who can build the kinds of reciprocal and respectful connections with their parents and wider community. My colleagues Jo Lampert and Bruce Burnett (Lampert, Burnett and Davie, 2012) have designed a national teacher education program designed to achieve just this – the National Exceptional Teachers for Disadvantaged Schools Program. In that program student teachers learn about poverty and race and how to sustain high expectations for all students’ learning.

As educators in all sectors – tertiary, secondary, primary and prior to school – we still have work to do – in establishing positive and productive educative practices with Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander communities. A recent large-scale evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities found that white teachers still typically think deficit when it comes to think about Aboriginal children and their learning capabilities (Luke et al., 2013). This results in a huge loss of capability which makes everyone poorer. Here we need to listen to Aboriginal educators and together develop new relationships, new learning based
on respect, reconciliation and settlement. The children of refugees will also need to find hope and new possibility in their schools and neighborhoods. The problem with poverty is that it is totally caught up in the politics and privileges of other people in other places. As Stanley and her colleagues (2005) point out it is all too easy to ‘turn our backs’ on particular children when poverty is elsewhere – out-of-sight – seen as someone else’s problem.

In my current work I am exploring the synergies between social geography and critical literacy. In plain language, my question is: what does it mean to think of schools as meeting and belonging places where people are thrown together (following Massey, 2005) and need to negotiate productive learning relationships? In one Queensland school, Milperra – meaning the meeting-place of brothers and sisters – teachers design English learning opportunities around the production of films about shared spaces and experiences, for example Milperra after the floods. In the western suburbs of Adelaide teachers Marg Wells and Ruth Trimboli have designed curriculum around change in the local neighborhood and school that has occurred as part of the ten year urban renewal process. Teacher Pippa Kelly in Warralong northern Western Australia is making films with the senior class to record significant happenings including their experience of Cyclone Rusty (Mills, Comber and Kelly, 2013). City-based teacher-researcher and film-maker Helen Grant has an archive of films she has produced with primary school children, including recently arrived refugee children, to represent themselves and their places – Sudan, Cooking Afghani Style, Hidden Treasures of Adelaide. Regional secondary school teacher and counselor Bruce Mules organizes a ‘scaly survivors’ program to reconnect young people with school learning through building their expertise around reptiles and their communication repertoires and hooking them into mentors in the local community. Teachers such as these help us, as education communities, imagine how to ‘get out of deficit’ (Comber and Kamler, 2004). They need permission and support to keep innovating, to keep being brave beyond the basics.

In universities, we have readily pointed out the failures of schooling and its tendency to reproduce inequities. However we have tended to ignore the hard work and sometimes genius of our school-based colleagues who are making a difference against the odds. My view is that we should start to build ‘educational capital’ collaboratively in sustainable inquiry communities. These communities should be cross-generational and cross-institutional building on the different knowledges and strengths of people at different points in their educational trajectories in different sectors.

For the past two years my colleagues and I have been out in classrooms observing and recording the excellent teaching practices of several early career teachers who are achieving excellent results in reading with their primary aged children (by any measure). We have witnessed 7 and 8 year olds making inferences and connections as they read and using this meta-language to describe their reading processes. This is being accomplished in a school in one of the poorest areas of northern Adelaide (by any measure). We need to understand how they are accomplishing what they are, the support they have been given to achieve this learning and how to keep it going. Yet, not all teachers in this school are having the same success. The school community needs to be able to learn from the teachers whose students are achieving against the odds and replicate that. And while students are doing well in early reading development, many seem reluctant to write. We need to understand the ways in which different children are assembling specific repertoires of literate practices and gauge the long term effects of their preferences, in terms of their academic learning. We need to follow these children who are having such a positive start to school learning to see what they make of their school experience and educational opportunities long-term and school makes of them.
But there are limits to what teachers and schools can do. Poverty, in rich countries such as Australia, is produced beyond the school gates and will need solutions beyond heroic teachers.

Over a year ago, I reconnected with two young people, now 22, whose literacy I have been following at school for many years (one since she was 4) and the other since he was 15. Both are living out north in the poorest suburbs of Adelaide. Both are spending all their income on rental accommodation and the basics – food, transport, phones, partners and children – their own or those of a partner. Both are working in part-time short-term contract positions in service industries. Both hope for university degrees and a better future. Both have benefitted from some excellent teaching at various stages of their educational careers; yet both have had educational struggles as well – in one case the effects of peer bullying, in the other the effects of learning difficulties early in schooling. In both cases these young people have been well educated; both are excellent citizens who demonstrate daily care for others; but staying out of poverty and increasing their opportunities long-term will take not only determination, but some good fortune, as they negotiate the transitions into adulthood and responsibilities beyond themselves.

References


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1 Marjoribanks (1980b, p.11) defined ethclass as ‘those sections of the social space created by the intersection of social class and ethnic group stratifications may be designated as an ethclass. An individual’s ethclass might be, for example, Southern Italian middle social status, Greek lower social status, or Anglo-Australian lower social status. It is not my intention to interrogate these categories here.