

# **The impact of adopting a research orientation towards use of the Pupil Premium Grant in preparing beginning teachers in England to understand and work effectively with young people living in poverty**

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The introduction in England of the Pupil Premium Grant (PPG) provided a stimulus to ensure that beginning teachers understand the nature of poverty and critically examine strategies used by schools seeking to overcome the barriers to academic achievement that it presents. This article explores the effects of asking student-teachers within a well-established initial teacher education partnership to adopt a research orientation towards the use of PPG funding. It focuses on the student-teachers' experiences and developing thinking as they engaged in small-scale investigative projects and on the perspectives of their school-based teacher educators (professional tutors). Whole-course evaluation data suggests that most projects operated successfully, with the student-teachers encouraged to ask critical questions about current practices, drawing on different kinds of evidence. Three case-studies illustrate the diversity of approaches adopted towards the project, reflecting the views of individual professional tutors and the complex interplay between the competing motives of different participants.

**Keywords:** Pupil Premium Grant; poverty; economically disadvantaged; pre-service teacher education; teacher educators; student-teachers

## **Introduction**

The strength of the relationship between pupils' socio-economic status and their educational outcomes has long been a matter of concern in education, with increasing attention focused on raising the attainment of the most disadvantaged pupils. The strong correlation between economic disadvantage and low educational outcomes is well established (e.g. ESRC 2011; Hills et al. 2010; Horgan 2007; Raffo et al. 2009). Researchers and commentators have highlighted the impact that socio-economic disadvantage can have on young people's life chances (Buras 2014; Gorski and Landsman 2014; Payne 2005). Gorski (2012) and Dudley-

Marling and Lucas (2009) have argued that popular stereotypes of people living in poverty affect both individual preconceptions and policy. The resultant deficit model is used to direct blame onto the perceived shortcomings of the poor, rather than on structural inequalities in the educational system, and can lead to stereotypical views about pupils and their families (Rank, Yoon and Hirschl 2003). With such views widely accepted by teachers and teacher educators (Ullucci and Howard 2015), it is unsurprising that recent UK research (Thompson, McNicholl and Menter 2016) suggests that this deficit model is also accepted by many beginning teachers. Since beginning teachers' pre-existing beliefs are known to shape their experience and professional learning (Pajares 1992; Richardson 1996; Wideen, Mayer-Smith and Moon 1998), there is a strong social justice imperative for ITE programmes to address student-teachers' understanding of, and attitudes towards, people living in poverty (Cochran-Smith 2004; Darling-Hammond and Bransford 2007; Zeichner 2009).

In England, the Pupil Premium Grant (PPG), introduced by the Coalition Government in 2011 (DFE 2015), has provided a new opportunity to examine some of these issues. The grant comprises additional payments made to schools, which in 2014-15 (the year in which the research was conducted) ranged from £300 for each child from a family in the armed services, to £935 for secondary-age and £1300 for primary-age pupils eligible for Free School Meals (at any point in the last six years) and £1900 for children in local authority care or adopted from care (DFE 2014). Specific consideration of how schools use this funding can act as a focus for beginning teachers' explorations of the impact of poverty on young people's learning and attainment. As responsibility for teacher education in the UK is increasingly passed to schools (DFE 2011), it is particularly important to understand how school staff conceive of the issues and how they encourage beginning teachers to respond to them.

The aim of our research was to explore the effects of an intervention that prompted student-teachers, within an established PGCE programme, to examine the relationship between young people's socio-economic status and their attainment and to explore school practices intended to remove the barriers to learning often created by poverty. The intervention, jointly designed by the university and its partnership schools, required all student-teachers to undertake a small-scale collaborative research project within their second placement school, investigating use of PPG funding in any way that they and the school's professional tutor (the teacher

responsible for co-ordinating their learning within their placement school) chose. In researching the operation and outcomes of this project we had two objectives:

1. To explore the ways in which poverty and its effects were presented to the student-teachers in school, including the kinds of research aims and methods advocated in relation to this issue, and the kinds of outcome and evaluative perspectives encouraged; and
2. To explore student-teachers' responses to issues of poverty and the opinions they expressed in reflecting on their investigations about the most effective ways of overcoming socio-economic barriers to pupils' learning.

Using three case-studies as exemplars we begin by exploring the perspectives of the professional tutors: both their own conceptions of poverty and its impact on pupils' learning and their decisions about the most appropriate kinds of research for student-teachers to conduct within the particular school context. We then focus on the perspectives of the student-teachers, examining their responses to the particular project in which they were engaged in light of their prior knowledge and experience.

Our research framework is informed by a socio-cultural analysis of the situated social and cultural interaction between the student-teachers and their professional tutors, as well as of the impact of the university-initiated project. Beginning teachers face a multi-layered social situation of development (Vygotsky 1987) that involves a complex interplay between individual, social and institutional histories. In the context of the school/university partnerships, there are multiple object motives in play (Edwards 2010) for each participant. The student-teachers need to learn to teach effectively and to demonstrate achievement of the teachers' standards within their particular school context, while simultaneously responding to the project's emphasis on the relationship between poverty and educational attainment. The professional tutors are concerned not only with the student-teachers' learning but also with the school's reputation and current development priorities. In some institutional and personal contexts these motives align, but this is not always the case. A case-study approach allows us to examine these complex intersecting social situations of development, identifying how they influence the preparation of student-teachers to teach young people from impoverished backgrounds.

### *Conceptions of professional learning*

One of the many challenges inherent in ITE is the need not only to develop beginning teachers' classroom competence but also to situate their developing knowledge and understanding in a wider context. The ITE curriculum needs to be 'oriented around the intellectual and practical tasks of teaching and the contexts of teachers' work' (Feiman-Nemser 2001, 1048), with an acknowledgment that we need to understand more about the role that such contextual factors play in teacher education programmes more generally (Grossman and McDonald 2008). This task becomes more complex if we expect beginning teachers to learn how to engage critically with policy initiatives about which there may be little, or no, established research – even more so in the context of performative systems that make it particularly difficult to raise critical questions about practices and their underlying assumptions. Existing theories of teachers' professional learning do not necessarily address fully the question of how to promote learning about aspects of practice which are in the early stages of development, nor the way in which experienced teachers can learn 'through their engagement with novices' in cases where 'part of the process of legitimate peripheral participation for many novices is to help other workers to learn' (Fuller et al. 2005, 64).

McIntyre, Hagger and Burn (1994), aware of the risks of restricting beginning teachers' learning to the practices of the particular school in which they are placed, advocate an approach that encourages beginners to question the rationales for these practices, leading to a critical examination of the alternatives. The success of such an approach depends, however, on sustained engagement with the issue in question through a carefully planned programme that operates within an agreed framework. Borko's (2004) model of a 'professional learning system', based on what she refers to as 'a situative perspective', identifies the key elements of such a system as:

- The professional development program;
- The teachers, who are the learners in the system;
- The facilitator, who guides teachers as they construct new knowledge and practices;  
and
- The context in which the professional development occurs (2004, 4).

Within such a system it is important not only to acknowledge the need for a sustained and integrated approach to learning but also to recognise the influence of beginners' individual preconceptions about what it is they need or expect to learn and the kinds of learning they believe to be of value (Hobson et al. 2006; Younger et al. 2004; Hammerness et al. 2005) as well as their particular orientations towards learning from experience (Hagger et al. 2008).

### ***The Pupil Premium Grant***

Relatively little research into the use of PPG funding had been published before the student-teachers were invited to carry out their investigative projects. The studies then available included one government-commissioned evaluation (Carpenter et al. 2013) and annual reports from the government inspectorate (Ofsted 2012, 2013, 2014), all obviously premised on the assumption that appropriate educational interventions could indeed overcome social inequalities. These reports identified that the PPG was commonly used to provide increased staffing (both teachers and teaching assistants) and to support the participation of disadvantaged children in extra-curricular activities. While the most recent Ofsted report claimed that the 'pupil premium was making a positive difference in many schools' (2014, 9, para. 5), it also identified poor leadership and ineffective use of performance data as the key problems in schools judged to require improvement in this area. The implicit emphasis is thus on blaming schools rather than acknowledging the social realities of poverty. Carpenter et al. (2013) highlight a number of tensions in schools' use of the PPG, not least 'between what they believed they were expected to do by external authorities, and what they understood to be in the best interests of their pupils' (99) and discuss the need for schools to draw on both local contextual knowledge, as well as externally validated evidence, to inform their decision making. In the absence of a substantial body of research into the effectiveness of the use of the PPG, many schools were drawing, essentially uncritically, on the Education Endowment Foundation/Sutton Trust Toolkit (Higgins et al. 2014) which offered a research synthesis of a range of interventions, evaluating each of them in relation to effect size, degree of confidence in the evidence and cost. Little attention tended to be paid to the ways in which the Toolkit's exclusive reliance on quantitative evidence (drawn from randomised control trials and large scale experiments) might have constrained the kinds of insight that it could provide.

### **Research design**

We adopted a mixed-methods design for the research, allowing us to examine the experiences and views of the participants in a range of different contexts and on different scales. In order to explore the professional tutors' perspectives and choices about the project within their distinctive school settings and to examine the student-teachers' developing thinking *in relation to* their experiences within those particular contexts, detailed case studies were conducted within six partnership schools. Each involved an interview with the professional tutor, participant observation of the student-teachers' presentations in school (or examination of the material presented where attendance was not possible) and individual interviews with three of the student-teachers.

The case-study schools were chosen to include three in large urban areas and three in predominately rural areas, each with differing proportions of pupils eligible for PPG funding. While we confined our selection to those schools with experienced professional tutors, we ensured representation of a range of views in terms of the professional tutors' level of enthusiasm for the investigative project and included student-teachers from across all subject disciplines within the PGCE programme.

The final element of the research, which allows us to contextualise each of the case-studies and gives some indication of their typicality, was a series of questions asked of all student-teachers (within their whole-course evaluation) about their experience of the investigative project and their perceptions of its value to them. Permission to use their responses to these questions as research data was given by 140 student-teachers, representing 84% of those who completed the PGCE programme. Likert-scale responses (in addition to more open reflections) allowed for some quantitative analysis of their perspectives which is used to frame the three case-studies that are presented below.

Most of the methods of data collection had been trialled the previous year when the project was implemented as a pilot study in a number of partnership schools. An inductive, iterative approach was developed with two of the researchers initially working together on the pilot data, generating codes that were compared and successively refined to elaborate the key themes in relation to the participants' views of the impact of poverty on educational outcomes, their perceptions of PPG as a policy response and their reflections on different kinds of intervention that might operate on different scales (school, the classroom and the individual). These themes were reviewed and refined by the research team as they were applied to the case-study data, which included the professional tutors' perspectives, with new

themes added to encompass their conceptions of the student-teachers' professional learning. In reporting the findings, each case-study is presented separately, making it possible to examine the different kinds of interplay that shaped outcomes: the interaction, for example, between the professional tutors' views of the substantive issues and their conceptions of beginning teachers' professional learning; between the professional tutors' understanding of the impact of poverty and the student-teachers' developing ideas; and between the student-teachers' very diverse existing ideas of poverty as an issue of social justice and their developing thinking as they engaged with different sources of evidence.

## **Findings**

### ***Questionnaire data***

In presenting our findings we report first on analysis of the data from the whole-course evaluation (see Table 1), noting the proportion of student-teachers who were actually given the opportunity to carry out an investigative project, the value that they attributed to it and any specific concerns that were raised about it. Detailed accounts of the operation of the projects in three different schools are then provided by the case studies.

*[Insert Table 1 near here]*

The questionnaire data presented in Table 1 reveals that over 90% of the 140 respondents had the opportunity to carry out the PPG investigation in their second placement school and that most regarded it as a valuable learning experience (74%). Most claimed that it had enabled them to develop a better understanding of both the PPG and the government policy underpinning it, as well as of the ways in which individual schools were using the funding and any difficulties associated with it.

When asked to provide further details, many of the student-teachers were positive about the experience, although three kinds of concern were also raised. The first related to presentation of their findings in the school, with some student-teachers disappointed that they had not been asked to report to members of the senior leadership team or others with direct responsibility for PPG policy:

*We were not given the opportunity to report our findings to senior colleagues within the school, merely the other student-teachers and our professional tutor.*

[Science student-teacher, School 1]

It seemed important to many student-teachers that the school should affirm their work and they particularly valued the project where this was the case:

*Our school definitely used us to try and fix the problem of a Pupil Premium black hole. They were aware that last year's project had highlighted their lack of provision for PP and had recently hired someone to be in charge of provision but had yet to do anything else. Our presentations seemed to have had an immediate effect as the school has now hired heads of PP for each key stage and seems to be planning more interventions and provision.*

[English student-teacher, School 17]

Second, where student-teachers felt that they were working on the project in isolation from the rest of the school they were generally less happy than others about conducting an investigation. There were also tensions about the degree of independence entrusted to them. In some cases there was resentment that the school had sought to influence the nature of the project too directly or had intervened inappropriately (for example, by framing the questions that the student-teachers should ask). It was sometimes implied that the school had not really encouraged investigative approaches that might have prompted closer critical examination of its policy and practice.

Third, in several cases it had been difficult for professional tutors to achieve an appropriate balance between giving the student-teachers sufficient guidance and preserving the scope for them to act autonomously. Nearly a sixth of student-teachers commented on the need either for more structure or for better communication (between the university and the school or within the school itself), as summarised in the following observation:

*The project was valuable; however, I feel that there could have been a greater communication between S2 schools and the university department. The rules and rubric for the project were not always reflected by our professional tutor, which caused a general air of confusion with the student-teachers.*

[English student-teacher, School 25]

Only a small proportion (2%) of the student-teachers felt that the project had detracted from the need to focus on their classroom teaching. Overall, the most positive comments came from those who found it valuable in terms of their own learning *and* of demonstrable use to the school:

*We were given a clear structure and something the school wished for us to investigate, making it far more purposeful and a worthwhile task.*

[Science student-teacher, School 4]

### ***Case-study 1: Church Green Academy***

Church Green, a Church of England converter academy, with just over 1000 pupils, is situated in a small market town serving an essentially rural catchment area. In 2013-14 the school received PPG funding of approximately £90,000 for 112 eligible pupils. The school's website reported that the largest items of expenditure were related to teaching assistants engaged in various one-to-one and small group initiatives in relation to literacy and maths, and to the work of an attendance officer. Funding was also used for holiday revision courses and a late bus service, allowing pupils to attend after-school revision sessions. A strong emphasis was also placed on ensuring access to trips and to the whole-school extra-curricular enrichment programme.

The professional tutor, Frances, takes it for granted that poverty creates many different barriers to learning, but treats it as axiomatic that young people eligible for PPG funding do not represent a single group with shared characteristics. Their individual circumstances have to be understood and appropriately addressed. While many needs are material ones, such as a lack of food or clean clothing, to which the school provides a very practical response, Frances also notes high levels of isolation within the school's rural catchment area. She seems particularly aware of the various kinds of neglect from which some young people suffer and of their need to build trusting relationships. While she is concerned about the school's limited contact with some parents, her focus is always on what the school could do to improve those relationships; building bridges, rather than identifying 'failings' in what parents or carers are offering.

Having been expressly prohibited by the headteacher from undertaking the investigative project the previous year, Frances embraced it enthusiastically (under a new headteacher) in

2015. She chose to involve all nine of the student-teachers on placement in the school (including two from a different ITE partnership), presenting them with three different group projects, identified in collaboration with the teacher to whom specific responsibility for Year 11 PPG pupils had recently been assigned:

1. A Year 6-7 transition project involving visits and conversations with key staff in three feeder primary schools to investigate their use of PPG funding, particularly to support Year 6 pupils preparing to move to Church Green.
2. A small-scale intervention undertaken by the student-teachers with designated Year 8 pupils, withdrawn from their weekly Personal, Social, Citizenship and Health Education lesson. The student-teachers were asked to focus particularly on developing pupils' meta-cognition.
3. An investigation of 'best practice' in two nearby city schools, one of which had received a DFE award for the quality of its PPG provision. The student-teachers were expected to visit both schools and 'to go well beyond the information available on their websites' in seeking to understand the effectiveness of their policies.

Frances met a different group each week to support their work. She ensured that the student-teachers' presentations were attended by the deputy head, an assistant head and the special needs coordinator (SENCO), and was thrilled that the deputy head stayed behind to discuss how they might act on particular recommendations relating to nurture groups. Although the headteacher could not attend, he read the student-teachers' presentations and subsequently met with them, specifically to invite them to 'talk through their findings in additional meetings with the staff'.

The student-teachers' response, as expressed within the whole-course evaluation, was almost universally positive. The only uncertainty, expressed by one of them, related to the scope to 'discuss the issues with relevant school staff' (perhaps reflecting the fact that two of the projects were examining practices elsewhere). While all agreed that the project had been valuable to their learning, they were even more emphatic about its value to the school.

Two of the three student-teachers interviewed claimed to have been well informed *before* their PGCE about how poverty can impact on young people's educational outcomes. Anna, training to teach Modern Foreign Languages, cited her reading of Sutton Trust research reports, while Izzy, a historian, recounted personal experience mentoring individuals who had no space at home to work or limited experience of positive relationships with adults. Miriam,

who taught geography, described her conversations with Year 6 teachers as a ‘revelation’, alerting her both to the challenges that certain young people face and also to the difference that particular strategies could make. While the student-teachers who led the Year 8 intervention – a series of cookery sessions designed to enhance pupils’ experiences of competency, belonging, usefulness and potency – spoke passionately in light of their experience and interviews with the pupils involved, they also made repeated reference to research they had read, as did the group investigating pupils’ experience of primary-secondary transition.

Frances expressed some regret about asking one group simply to report on practice elsewhere, suspecting that this option had allowed them to avoid personal engagement. However, Izzy, who admitted to taking that option precisely because she was cynical about what could be learned through the direct intervention, was not only won over by her peers’ experiences, but also profoundly impressed by what the teachers elsewhere had shared with her. The teachers’ arguments were based on different kinds of evidence: both individual anecdotes demonstrating the impact of appropriately targeted support and research evidence (gradually being confirmed in the schools’ experience), highlighting the influence of particular approaches within mainstream teaching. While all the student-teachers felt that they had offered specific and valued advice to the school, they also identified key ideas to take forward themselves, particularly relating to the value of detailed knowledge about each of the individuals within their own classes.

### ***Case-study 2: Hilltop Academy***

Hilltop, another converter academy with just over 1,000 pupils, is similarly located in a rural market town, and received approximately £150, 000 for 136 eligible pupils in 2014-15. The school’s website reported that their grant was used in a number of different ways, including provision of one-to-one or small group support, private tutors, subject-specific resources, extra-curricular opportunities and expenses for volunteer mentors.

While Grace, the professional tutor, acknowledges that some pupils eligible for PPG funding have difficult home circumstances or face additional caring responsibilities which make it difficult to focus on school work, she essentially attributes the ‘huge link’ between pupils’ socio-economic background and academic achievement to parental attitudes: ‘I think the parental value and importance of education isn’t there, or as strong as it might be in other

families'. She cites the case of individual PPG pupils who seem well provided for – 'they've got Sky TV and he's got iPads' – suggesting that the real problems derive from low aspirations and poor parenting: It is a 'poverty of relationships' that she believes exerts the most powerful influence on young people's motivation. Grace is essentially pessimistic about what can be done for young people 'by the time they get to us'. In pointing to high levels of trial and error in use of PPG funding nationally and acknowledging that the school's own approaches have not been effectively evaluated, she questions whether 'throwing money at the problem is necessarily the best way to deal with it'.

In setting up the investigative project for the three student-teachers undertaking their second placement in the school, Grace was particularly concerned not to create further work for her colleagues. She therefore provided quite tight direction, asking the student-teachers to 'audit' the school's current use of its funding before exploring evidence of provision elsewhere in order to offer the school further specific recommendations. She hoped that this would benefit both the school and the student-teachers and she ensured that members of the senior leadership team attended the presentation of their findings.

The project was implemented very much as Grace had intended. The student-teachers drew mainly on the EEF/Sutton Trust Toolkit (Higgins et al. 2014) although they also referred to practices in their first placement schools. After evaluating Hilltop's current provision in light of the Toolkit's research summaries, they proposed other 'low-cost/high impact' strategies of potential benefit.

Data from the whole-course evaluation suggest that the student-teachers valued the project highly, particularly the opportunity to discuss their findings with each other. Doubts were only expressed in response to two of the questions, with one student-teacher 'uncertain' whether the programme had helped in understanding issues associated with the implementation of the PPG in the school, and another unsure as to whether it had been valuable to discuss the issues with relevant staff in the school.

In reflecting in interview on the barriers to learning that PPG pupils may encounter, the student-teachers at Hilltop all noted the overlap between PPG pupils and those identified as having some kind of special educational need. Their explanations of this link tended to focus less on the impact of material deprivation (although they acknowledged this), and more on early cultural deprivation – a 'lack of opportunity for reading or talking or socialising' and on pupils' emotional and relational needs. When the student-teachers referred to a lack of

parental support for their children's schooling, it is notable that they sought to *explain* such attitudes, suggesting, for example, that they might derive from a perception that the school system had previously 'failed' them.

All the student-teachers claimed that the project influenced their thinking and practice, although this was refracted in different ways through their prior experiences. John, a scientist, admitted that he 'hadn't really encountered poverty' before embarking on the PGCE and had been surprised by how prevalent it is. He suggested that the project had increased his awareness of the need to address literacy barriers, reducing the amount of reading and writing that he sets and providing writing scaffolds or scope for pupils to use laptops (although he stressed that this would be his response to *all* pupils with such difficulties). Sally, teaching MFL, was prompted to review her own educational experience in light of the differences in pupil engagement and motivation that she had seen between different sets. The project highlighted the importance of understanding the particular personal circumstances of each individual within her class, enabling her to appreciate their emotional and relational needs. Evan, an RE student-teacher, who had lived for some time in disadvantaged communities in South America, arrived with strong views about the impact of poverty, arguing that it is 'not just a concept that involves money' but has to be understood in wider societal and political terms. Engagement with the project confirmed his conviction that data alone are insufficient to address the issues, which require personal commitment. Indeed, while he had originally seen the PPG as a means of addressing disadvantage at school level (by securing access to key resources), he came to recognise that it required his engagement with pupils at an individual level: 'No two pupils are the same so each one has to be transformed in a different way'.

### ***Case-study 3: Midway City School***

Midway City School, another converter academy, is located within an ethnically diverse and rapidly growing city. The school is similarly diverse in terms of pupils' ethnicity and socio-economic background. Of almost 1400 pupils on roll, nearly 400 qualify for PPG (generating an income of £406,264). The school website reported that PPG funds were used to help with the cost of uniforms, trips and other educational essentials. One-to-one tuition was provided with a specialist Education Inclusion Tutor along with some pastoral support for

disadvantaged pupils and their families. The report also cited use of 'evidence -informed' group interventions (with reference to the EEF/Sutton Trust Toolkit).

The professional tutor, James, explicitly endorses views expressed in *The Spirit Level* (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009) that 'there are all types of symptoms of an unequal society' and suggests that poverty may give rise to a range of pupil characteristics: 'lack of resilience; lack of self-esteem; a reluctance to try anything so they don't engage in learning'. James links problems of parental security and upbringing with social disadvantage and is keen not to subscribe to a deficit model. It is the 'hidden' barriers that schools struggle most to overcome, such as pupils' self-selection – their decisions that 'this is not for me'. Tackling such barriers requires determination and commitment: 'You've got to engage. There is no short term fix. You've got to have long-term goals to address poverty and lack of stable upbringing.' James thinks that Midway recognises the importance of the issue, but acknowledges that it is struggling, like other city schools, to make a difference for PPG pupils. He urges a more proactive approach – 'We have to engage students with the way we view things as well as be reactive' – and regards staff training as 'a key issue'.

James' distinctive approach to the investigative project was intended to help the student-teachers reflect on their own attitudes and to avoid a 'tick-box' mentality that simply required them to identify existing knowledge within the school about disadvantage or how the funding was spent. Rather than focus exclusively on PPG pupils, he also asked the nine student-teachers involved in the project to investigate the experiences of pupils from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (BME) and those with English as an additional language (EAL). Their task was to interview pupils in each category about their experiences in school in order to create a series of short videos (using the pupils' voices but not their images) to help future student-teachers and new staff prepare for the diversity that they would encounter at Midway. In the task briefing James explained that 'we all have preconceived ideas about different groups [that] need continual challenging' and expressed the hope that the videos would 'provoke deeper thought in all staff about the needs and school experience of our students'.

James sought explicit permission from the headteacher to undertake the project in this way and she was involved, along with the deputy head, SENCO and subject mentors in selecting pupils for interview and in ensuring that the videos were sensitively made. James recognised the student-teachers' anxieties that their project was different from investigations elsewhere, but thought that it helped to promote significant changes in some of their views. He suggested

that its strength lay in 'trying to put things into context' and that it had worked well to provoke 'self-awareness and self-reflection', though he would try to take that further in future years.

The student-teachers' anxieties about the unorthodox nature of their project were clearly reflected in their responses to the whole-course evaluation. More than two thirds of them claimed that the project had not helped to develop their understanding of PPG funding or knowledge of how it was used in school. While they presented their work (the videos they had created), few thought that it had contributed to the school's own understanding of specific issues associated with the PPG. In responding to questions about the value of being able to discuss issues with each other and with relevant school staff, opinions were more evenly balanced. Overall, while about a third of the student-teachers gave positive responses about how much they and the school had learned, a third gave negative responses to all questions and the remainder were positive about some aspects while clearly recognising that their task did not fit the brief followed in other schools.

The three student-teachers who were interviewed clearly recognised the link between poverty and educational attainment. David, a mathematician, attributed this to the influence of a wide range of factors, specifically citing material resources and educational experiences within the family. Sam, who acknowledged that his view of 'what it means to be disadvantaged' turned out to be 'inaccurate', stressed the importance both of checking the data and of looking beyond the classroom. Jane, the only one of the three who had specifically worked with pupils eligible for PPG funding, was most insistent that while some degree of generalisation inevitably occurs, any serious attempt to close the gap has to be 'about individual provision' responsive to individual needs.

Jane reported that her group was extremely positive about the nature and value of their interactions with the PPG pupils. While they had approached the task with particular assumptions, such as the idea that PPG pupils 'were often tired or struggled with homework', they quickly realised that being identified as eligible for PPG is inevitably somewhat 'arbitrary' and that you simply 'can't pigeon-hole'. While they saw a 'wide range of need', the key messages that they took away were about good teachers who 'listen, help and don't get annoyed' and the pupils' appreciation of routine, stability and strong, sustained relationships.

However, the student-teachers who had focused on the experience of BME or EAL pupils were somewhat aggrieved that they had not found out more about the use of the PPG funding,

complaining as David did, that ‘we were never given the information about the interventions’.

## **Discussion**

In seeking to interpret these findings our attention is focused on three themes of particular significance in the context of school-based (and increasingly ‘school-led’) initial teacher education. One of the main challenges of locating ITE predominantly in school is that of ensuring that alongside opportunities to learn from current practices, beginners are also given the chance and the resources with which to examine those practices critically. Another is the extent of variation in the experience of any cohort of student-teachers even within the structures provided by a jointly planned programme. We therefore focus on the extent to which schools were prepared to promote a research orientation and thus to permit critical examination of their own practices; the ways in which the institutional histories of the individual schools and the distinctive perspectives and personal agendas of the professional tutors interacted with those of individual student-teachers to shape their learning experiences; and on the nature of the project’s impact given this complex interplay between the object-motives of different participants.

### ***The scope to adopt a research orientation***

As these case-studies reveal, there was considerable variation in the nature of the projects undertaken by the student-teachers and in their complex social situations of development. However, both the individual cases and the whole-course evaluation data suggest that the project was effectively implemented in the vast majority of schools, enabling the students-teachers to engage – albeit in different ways – with issues of poverty and its relationship to young people’s educational experiences and outcomes. The fact that some student-teachers were *not* given the opportunity to carry out an investigation, hints at the range of constraints that professional tutors faced and at the challenges for schools inherent in encouraging beginners to adopt such an open and potentially critical orientation towards a high-profile and rapidly evolving aspect of professional practice. Permission was only given at Church Green after the arrival of a new headteacher, prepared to acknowledge that the school could be doing better, who therefore welcomed insights from elsewhere. Grace at Hilltop deliberately

sought to contain the project, anxious that it might generate difficult questions that the school was ill-equipped to address. It is difficult to know how far Grace's reported anxieties about over-loading other staff may simply have served to justify the restricted investigation that she proposed, but it is true that all professional tutors were constrained by the time that other teachers could give to the project and by their willingness to respond to the student-teachers' questions. Given these contextual factors, the project's success owed much to the gradual way in which it was introduced, with an initial year of piloting and examples from that work made available to all the professional tutors to illustrate the kind of possibilities open to them.

The lack of prescription about the project's design was also crucial in allowing professional tutors to shape and contain it in ways that they thought would be acceptable within their specific context (McIntyre, Hagger and Burn, 1994). Such flexibility, however, also proved unsettling as student-teachers compared their experiences across schools and the extent of the student-teachers' anxiety at Midway City, and serves to demonstrate just how powerful the performative agenda remained, at least partially undermining the most radical attempt to encourage the student-teachers to focus on the lived experiences and perspectives of young people themselves.

### ***Competing object motives and the complex interplay of personal and institutional histories***

Contrasts across the schools highlight the complex interaction between different players within the partnership, shaped in part by different conceptions of teachers' professional learning and by the different object motives (Vygotsky 1987; Edwards 2010) towards which their actions were oriented. They thus confirm Hodkinson and Hodkinson's (2005) findings about the interplay between individual teachers' dispositions towards their own learning and the school cultures in which they are working. Not only does each affect the other and in turn affect teacher learning 'but national policy and organisational regulatory practices' – such as the PPG funding and schools' accountability for it – 'operate as an overlying third determinant of that learning' (2005, 120).

In some cases, participants' object motives were well aligned, as at Church Green where the professional tutor's conviction that the student-teachers would learn most productively through tightly focused, detailed investigative work with teachers and pupils supported her ambitions (and those of the new headteacher) for the school to learn as much as possible from

effective practices elsewhere. In other cases, as at Hilltop, the tensions were more evident, although the project was still productive because of the in-built enquiry process. Grace, who was sceptical both about the extent and influence of poverty on young people's learning and about the capacity of secondary schools to impact on pupils' established trajectories, seemed more concerned to minimise the demands on other staff than to promote particular kinds of student-teacher learning. Nonetheless, the relatively simple processes of investigating the school's use of the funds and comparing their choice of strategies with the claims of published research summaries about cost-effectiveness and impact (a comparison that they reported to members of the senior leadership team) provided sufficient scope and stimulus for the student-teachers to engage with the realities of some young people's experience.

While James' commitment at Midway City to helping student-teachers engage with those realities was undoubtedly profound, his assumptions about the most effective way of doing so clashed with the student-teachers' expectations about what and how they should be learning. This clash prompted most of them to question the value of the project, despite the range of things that they reported learning from it. James' determination that they should hear the pupils' voices rather than focus on official expectations or school policies here conflicted with their concerns as student-teachers to demonstrate mastery of the knowledge they believed was expected of them.

### ***The impact of the project and its interaction with other sources of learning***

In every case, the project *designs* were shaped by the professional tutors' views of poverty and by their conceptions of beginning teachers' professional learning. The *outcomes* of each project, however, were never simply shaped by those views since the process of enquiry built into the investigation gave the student-teachers access to other perspectives, including those of the pupils. The student-teachers' prior experiences (within the PGCE and before joining the programme) also shaped the attitudes with which they responded to the new information and ideas that they encountered. Thus while the student-teachers at Hilltop did echo some of the professional tutor's concerns about unhelpful parental attitudes, they sought to understand how those attitudes might have arisen and draw on their prior experience to explain how material deprivation can destroy young people's confidence. Frances may have deliberately steered some of the student-teachers to report on the role of nurture groups, that she already knew featured prominently in the primary schools to which she sent them; but those who

investigated secondary school practices elsewhere returned fully persuaded of the importance of particular in-class teaching strategies.

While some student-teachers were already well informed about the material and psychological effects of poverty on young people, others were surprised by what they encountered, regarding their new insights as a real ‘revelation’. They applied this idea of revelation not just to what they learned about the effects of poverty, but also to insights into particular practices that could make a profound difference for individual pupils. In all cases, even where the original design of the project seemed to direct them towards data *about* young people, rather than towards the young people themselves, the student-teachers all reflected on what they had learned about the needs and experiences of particular individuals and on the importance of that knowledge. Even where their professional tutors had articulated pessimistic or sceptical views, the student-teachers expressed a more positive and carefully nuanced understanding. All of them claimed that what they now understood, even if not entirely new to them, would impact on their classroom practice – claims that it is obviously important to investigate in future research.

In some cases the development of more nuanced views and the emphasis on individuals’ experiences was derived from student-teachers’ conversations with pupils. The importance of this direct experience was stressed by some of the most enthusiastic professional tutors, like Frances and James. It is interesting to note, however, that the student-teachers also claimed to have been powerfully influenced by more indirect insights, such as those that Izzy gained from the work of her peers and from tightly focused conversations with experienced teachers, referring in detail to individual children and tailored forms of support.

Engagement with particular issues through the project also prompted many student-teachers to turn to the research literature with renewed interest, supporting McIntyre’s (2005) claim that enquiry-based approaches enhance teachers’ engagement with existing research. While this source was obviously built into those projects that steered student-teachers (often uncritically) towards the EEF/Sutton Trust Toolkit (Higgins et al. 2014), several student-teachers engaged in other projects, most notably at Church Green, drew explicitly on reading encountered within their curriculum programme or undertaken for earlier professional development assignments. It is likely that the student-teachers’ interest in research reflected the need to defend their claims and recommendations to members of the school’s senior

leadership team, but it also appeared to be driven by genuine interest in the options presented to them and the evidence advanced in their support.

## **Conclusion**

The research reported here reaffirms the importance of the distributed expertise (Edwards 2010) that student-teachers encounter in school/university partnerships. Student-teachers are engaged in a multi-layered social situation of development within the specific social and cultural contexts of both their placement schools and their university environment. From a socio-cultural theoretical perspective, the findings reported here suggest that if ITE programmes are to engage meaningfully with wider issues of social justice, then more attention needs to be paid within such programmes to the conflicting object motives of professional tutors, beginning teachers and mentors and to the mediating role of individual, social and institutional histories and experiences. The findings also confirm that in areas of educational complexity, such as working with pupils living in poverty, contextualised intervention may be needed to disrupt previously held professional assumptions and positions. The flexibility of the project and its phased introduction, carefully negotiated with the professional tutors, were essential in encouraging the schools to permit the student-teachers to adopt a research orientation: an orientation that prompted them to engage with young people's lived experiences and made it possible to articulate critiques of existing practice. The status of the investigation was also crucial in convincing the student-teachers of its value, prompting them to invest seriously in the work. It was in those schools where the student-teachers believed that the project was of genuine value to the staff and senior leadership that they claimed to have learned most from it themselves. While it may seem counter-intuitive for schools to entrust learning about a new and important initiative to the most junior members of the profession, investing that responsibility in beginners and demonstrating a commitment to their own continued professional learning by listening to the 'expert' knowledge that those beginners then develop serves as a powerful tool for professional learning for all those involved.



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*Table I: Summary of questionnaire data*

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
The PDP programme in school helped me to understand the nature of the Pupil Premium	25%	42%	19%	11%	4%	0%
The programme in school helped me to understand the way in which my S2 school was implementing various aspects of the Pupil Premium	18%	50%	15%	13%	4%	0%
The programme in school helped me to understand better the issues (including any difficulties) around the implementation of the Pupil Premium in my S2 school	21%	47%	13%	14%	4%	0%
We, as a group, had the opportunity to carry out our own investigations related to the Pupil Premium in our S2 school	40%	51%	4%	3%	3%	0%
We had the opportunity to present our findings to colleagues in the S2 school	46%	38%	4%	8%	4%	0%
I think that the Pupil Premium work carried out by the student-teachers in my S2 school made a contribution to the school's knowledge and understanding of the issues.	22%	31%	23%	12%	12%	0%
I found it valuable to learn more about the current government policy	31%	39%	11%	2%	2%	14%
I found it valuable to learn more about the school's policy and practices	28%	50%	12%	1%	3%	6%
I found it valuable to discuss the issues with relevant school staff	31%	44%	9%	6%	2%	9%
I found it valuable to carry out my (or our) own investigations in the school	28%	46%	10%	8%	4%	5%