

## English as a site of cultural negotiation and contestation

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*ABSTRACT: We offer this piece as an essay, a dialogic, many-voiced attempt to represent the tensions and contradictions in our work and the work that goes on in London schools. Locating our work within a polyphonic, narrative-based tradition of inquiry into practice (Burgess & Hardcastle, 1991; Doecke & McClenaghan, 2011; Parr, 2010; van de Ven & Doecke, 2011), we start with two stories arising out of our work as teacher educators. These stories provide insights into the effects of standards-based reforms on the lived experiences of school pupils and their teachers in England. We argue that they show something of the ways in which these changes in schooling are profoundly reshaping social relationships and subjectivities. To chart the effects of these changes is important in our view. And yet, for all the discursive and institutional power of the standards-based reforms, they fail to provide an adequate account of the complexity of what goes on in English classrooms. The agency of teachers and learners, effaced by the dominant discourse, is continually being reasserted, continually threatening to undermine the false simplicities of the standards. Questions of identity, of how learners and teachers alike are situated – and situate themselves – in history and culture, though absent from the dominant discourse, cannot so easily be dismissed. These questions are ones that we encourage our student teachers to take seriously and to address in their writing. We include in this piece substantial extracts from the writing of one of these students: Leila's reflexive contribution speaks back to the standards-based reforms, offering a very different account of her own learning and that of her pupils. We do not pretend to offer a neat resolution to these conflicting discourses; what Leila's account provides, however, is a reason to be hopeful.*

*KEYWORDS: Standards-based reforms, teacher identity, narrative-based inquiry, culture, dialogic.*

### TWO STORIES

#### (i) What level are you? (Anne)

As tutors on an initial teacher education course, we spend much of our time in classrooms, observing our students teach and talking to them about their progress. When I scheduled my visit to Lucy's<sup>2</sup> school, she asked me if I could come into her

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<sup>1</sup> Leila Ali is a pseudonym. As a young Muslim woman at the start of her teaching career, Leila had concerns about appearing in her own name. What the standards-based reforms mean and how they threaten to constrain professional identities and practices is posed in a particularly acute way for Leila, as it is for many of our student teachers. Leila was, nevertheless, more than happy to contribute to the piece that follows.

<sup>2</sup> Students' and student teachers' names have been changed throughout to culturally appropriate pseudonyms.

Year 8 lesson and help her with an approach to writing that her school was using. She really liked this class and said she got on well with them, but was finding it difficult to know how to help them to “raise their writing levels”. The school had given her an adapted version of the Assessing Pupils’ Progress (APP), Assessment Criteria for Writing. The various Assessment Focuses pertaining to writing (AF1 to AF8) run across the top of the sheet and then down the left-hand side are the different levels, 1 to 8, with the detailed criteria for each level printed in boxes beneath the AFs. Much of the language from the original document has been made “more pupil friendly” in the words of the English department. So, for example, AF5 (“vary sentences for clarity, purpose and effect”) specifies that to be assessed at level 5, a pupil should use “a variety of sentence lengths, structures and subjects (to provide) clarity and emphasis”. On the pupils’ sheets this is worded as: “I can use simple and complex sentences in my writing to make my ideas clear.” The detail and the complexity of this grid are eye-watering.

I sit at a table with a group of four, two boys and two girls. They are all engaged in studying the APP grid and highlighting aspects of the criteria. One boy, Josh, seems particularly worried and anxious about this and asks me if I can help him. I ask him what they have been doing.

Josh: We’ve been talking about a time when we were really frightened and telling each other the story. Now we’re writing about it.

Anne: What’s your story?

Josh: Well, Miss told about when she got lost when she was little – in a shop. And that’s mine too.

Anne: When you got lost?

Josh: Yeah, and my friend said it was a really good story and he was scared too when I told it. I’ve written the first sentence. Would you like to hear it?

Anne: Yes I would.

Josh: “It happened on a Tuesday. I’ll never forget that day.” My friend said it made him want to read on so I think it’s good for the opening. Do you think so?

Anne: I do. What are you doing now... with all these charts and things?

Josh: Well I’m trying to raise my writing level.

Anne: What’s your level now?

Josh: I’m not really sure but I know it’s not very good, I know that. So I have to look at the things that get you to a higher level and try to do that in my story.

Anne: What sort of things?

Josh: Well, like using different kinds of sentences and better words – See, it says it there (*pointing to “Vocabulary choices are often adventurous and words are used for effect”*). That’s my target.

Anne: Did you try to do that in your opening bit?

Josh: I don’t think I did, did I? It’s all easy words really. I’m not sure about the bit where it says, “use complex sentences”.

And so Josh presses on, clearly committed to “raising his level” and trying to puzzle out what a target might mean in relation to his own story. He isn’t entirely comfortable with my interference, perhaps doubting that I’ve really understood the importance of the levels or the targets. He crosses out his first sentence and tries again: “It happened on a terrible Tuesday. I’ll never forget that dreadful day.” He shows it to his friend who says he prefers the first version, but when Josh asks why, his friend simply says, “I dunno – it just sounds better.”

A little while later, Josh puts his pen down and says:

- Josh: Can I ask you a question, Miss?  
 Anne: Sure.  
 Josh: What level were you when you were at school?

His question is unintentionally funny and also very troubling. I don't know how to begin to answer, but before I can think of what to say, Josh asks: "Do you think I'll always be on this level? I'm worried because some days I think I'm going backwards!"

## (ii) When satisfactory isn't satisfactory (John)

Sam, one of our student teachers, went for a job interview earlier this year. The interview, at a shiny new academy in West London, followed a familiar pattern. Those applicants who had been shortlisted were asked to teach a 30-minute lesson with a specified focus. Sam taught her lesson. She thought it had gone as well as it could have. This was, after all, her first experience of an interview for a teaching post. The pupils had responded to her well, had been interested in the materials which she had introduced to them, and had engaged with the activities she had planned. She was waiting for the next stage in the process, the formal interview, when she was summoned into a small office by a besuited, unsmiling assistant principal.

- AP: (*Snarling*) You probably know why I have called you in here.  
 Sam: Erm, no, not really.  
 AP: Well, your lesson was satisfactory and this academy does not employ satisfactory teachers. Goodbye.

## RAISING STANDARDS

These stories are manifestations of the ways in which standards-based reforms (Apple, 2001; Beyer, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Delanshere & Petrosky, 2004; Doecke, 2006; Petrosky, 2003; Pandya, 2011) seem to be regulating and defining the work of pupils and their teachers in English schools. Both pupils and teachers are positioned in the shadow of the prospect of continuous improvement – improvement that is pre-specified, calibrated, objective.

It would be tempting to attribute the assistant principal's behaviour to the malign influence of too many reality television shows, to imagine that she was modelling herself on (Sir) Alan Sugar and his treatment of aspiring entrepreneurs on *The Apprentice*. But this would be to present her as merely an eccentric, if not a very lovable one, when in fact the assistant principal is representative of a profound change in the social relations of schooling across the world. The discourse that the assistant principal inhabits is the discourse of standards and school improvement.<sup>3</sup> It is a

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<sup>3</sup> The discourse of standards and the discourse of school improvement have, to a large extent, become one. They do, however, have long and separable histories. The emphasis on standards in the UK can be traced back to Prime Minister Callaghan's speech at Ruskin College in 1976 (Jones, 1989); the school improvement movement has somewhat more diffuse origins, but had already achieved prominence in the 1980s (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis & Ecob, 1988). In recent times, the single discourse of improvement has become increasingly strident.

discourse that prides itself on its blunt disregard for social niceties, for feelings, for anyone who might be off-message or might present an obstacle to the relentless drive to raise standards.

This is (Sir) Michael Wilshaw, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, writing in the *Times Educational Supplement* – the main trade journal for teachers in the UK – in an article entitled “Only the best: no excuses”:

Being chief inspector is all about helping schools to raise standards. Ofsted's new inspection framework will support the many good and aspirational leaders in our schools.

The changes we are making to inspection this September will make education that is “good” or better, the only acceptable standard. Too many pupils go through their entire school careers in “satisfactory” schools without experiencing “good” provision. Quite simply, satisfactory is not good enough.

...

The “satisfactory” category will cease to exist. This change was supported by most of those who responded to our consultation. We will inspect more frequently those schools that “require improvement” and help them to improve. Let me emphasise that schools that “require improvement” are not in a category of concern. Nevertheless, this new designation is a signal that these schools must improve to a “good” standard within a prescribed period of time.

...

To develop a world-class education system, we have to create a no-excuses culture. We must ensure that all our children, irrespective of background, do not miss their only opportunity to receive a good education. I know I have your support in this mission. (Wilshaw, 2012)

In Ofsted's approach, schools are to be categorised on a linear scale. From this to the assistant principal's model, where individual teachers are categorised according to the same linear scale, is only a small step. And, of course, the criteria whereby individual teachers are thus judged are, primarily, the standardised assessments of the students whom they teach. The model is an internally coherent one, if nothing else. The Wilshaw version is breathtakingly simple. Schools are “good” or “outstanding” – or they are not (and if they are not, they “require improvement”). If a school is “outstanding”, the teaching is similarly “outstanding”; if a school is less than “good”, the pupils suffer from a relentless diet of less-than-good teaching. These reified judgements about a school are drawn from a series of separate abstractions, which are themselves reified judgements of individual teachers and individual lessons. Just as learners become the level that is attached to them (as is illustrated by Josh's story), so teachers become “outstanding” – or they “require improvement”.

Of course, teachers who are identified as outstanding, tend to feel better about themselves – and even to accept the validity of the label. That's why the process can be seductive for teachers, too. (If, on the other hand, someone tells you that you're merely satisfactory, that can be pretty devastating – and it is hard not to internalise this judgement.) It is predicated on a particular cause-and-effect conception of learning, of pedagogy, and an oversimplification of the relationship between teaching and learning. In this model, learning is the product of teaching, the output produced by definite, pre-specified and discernible inputs. It happens in individuals. It is linear.

It is easily measured, not only through standardised tests but also through more immediate metrics of pupil progress within a single lesson (Ofsted, 2012a, 2012b).

It is worth considering why this model is so seductive – and who has been seduced by it. For governments of a technical-rationalist bent, it provides the perfect managerial tool, since it enables the complexity of schooling to be reduced to data – solid, comfortable, numerical data – data that enable robust comparisons to be made between individual learners and groups of learners, between teachers and schools (Mansell, 2007). For if this is what learning looks like, it is entirely reasonable to represent learning as a national curriculum level: as in Josh’s story, learning to read or write becomes the same thing as attaining a level 4, so the level 4 becomes a thing in itself, and literacy levels can be ascertained by nothing more complex than totting up the number of learners who are proud possessors of a level 4.<sup>4</sup> There is a further stage to this process of reification, and it is a particularly grisly stage: the child *becomes* the level. Thus it is that teachers refer to learners along the lines of: “She’s a level 5” or “He’s a level 3” – and children talk about themselves in the same terms: “I am a 4c.” (And this is, of course, the force of Anne’s story.)

This grading system has two pernicious effects on teachers. The first is that it tends to undermine collegiality, to *produce* in reality the atomised, divided, individualist system that it purports to *describe*. It has the same corrosive effect on teacher identity as the testing regime has on learner identity. The second is that it adversely influences teaching itself. Just as high-stakes regimes for the testing of students encourage teachers to teach to the test, so too this high-stakes regime for evaluating teachers encourages teachers to teach to the “Ofsted model”, to reconfigure their practice so as to conform to their sense of what is prescribed. In such a model, learning becomes bite-sized, specified by objectives or “outcomes”, measurable within the space of a single lesson, or even a single activity within a lesson.<sup>5</sup> In the first phase of Ofsted, this was less significant. Teachers might vary their practice when the inspectors came to call, giving them the lessons that they understood they wanted to see, but would generally revert to more diverse pedagogies in the spaces in between inspections. Now, however, the problem is less Ofsted itself than “Ofsted-in-the-head”: enforced through the monitoring and observation of school management teams and consultants over more than a decade, the routines have become internalised. The danger then becomes that we all take the Ofsted model as valid, as if it told the truth about learning or teaching, as if the labels were the reality.<sup>6</sup>

The increasingly managerial standards construct teachers as isolated individuals whose work can be measured against an abstract set of performance indicators. The contexts in which teachers work and how these shape learning that is both a product

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<sup>4</sup> An analogous process is at work within initial teacher education. Institutionally, we are ranked according to the proportion of our student teachers who are judged to be “outstanding” at the end of the course.

<sup>5</sup> The implication of the new Ofsted inspection guidance (Ofsted, 2012a) and of the Ofsted evaluation schedule (Ofsted, 2012b) is that it is reasonable for inspectors to judge progress (learning) of pupils if the inspector spends 25 minutes in a lesson. What an inspector would see within such a fragment of a lesson, if observing “outstanding” teaching, is “almost all pupils ... making rapid and sustained progress” (Ofsted, 2012b, p. 12).

<sup>6</sup> An earlier version of this discussion of the influence of Ofsted appeared in Yandell (2012).

of the social relationships of the classroom and productive of new relationships and new types of agency – for both teachers and pupils – are seen as irrelevant.

## **HOW DO CULTURE AND IDENTITY INFLUENCE LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM?**

And yet the specificities and complexities of identity, of how students and teachers alike are situated, and situate themselves, in culture and history, are not so easily dismissed. Throughout the course in which we teach, we encourage our students to put themselves in the picture, to consider their histories, their subjectivities as centrally important factors in their developing teacher identities. The writing that we ask student teachers to do throughout our initial teacher education course is a way to consider their own formation as learners as well as to explore the particular context of their work and the particular learners they have met. Such an approach has proved a productive way to help students to consider how their teaching at a “local” level is situated within larger social and educational frameworks.

The writing that follows from Leila comes from the final assignment of the course, completed at the end of the academic year, after teaching practice has finished. Student teachers are encouraged to investigate an issue that has become important to their understanding of teaching and learning in English. This importance is grounded in what we have come to refer to, borrowing a phrase from Jane Miller, as “the autobiography of the question” (Miller, 1995). Students begin by telling the story of their interest in an issue; they then explore ways in which this meets a range of other “stories”, including the more public discourses of departmental curriculum decisions and government policy. But the stories that lie at the heart of this exploration are those driven by the writer’s own values and beliefs, formed over time through a lifetime’s experiences of language, community and education. Leila considers the complexity of her own identity as a young Muslim woman teaching in a London school and how this encourages a level of reflexivity with respect to the students’ own lives and interests.

### **My history: Culture, learning and identity (Leila)**

*During my primary and secondary education I belonged to a strong Arab/Moroccan/Islamic culture at home. I took part in a variety of what Gregory calls “unofficial literacy practices” (Gregory, 1996) which were strongly rooted in the oral tradition. Every day after school I attended Madrasa, where I memorised and recited verses of the Quran. My grandmother, who only speaks Arabic, would tell us stories which were told through generations. I also remember sitting on friends’ doorsteps in the cool summer evenings listening to Moroccan stories told by other children. Most stories and conversations were constructed around proverbs such as “smoother than a breeze” (أرق من النسيم) and “purer than a tear” (أصفى من الدمعة). These proverbs exposed me to the way language can be used eloquently. There was an absence of book-based and written literacy within my home culture and perhaps this affected my learning in the classroom. However, I cannot deny the literary benefits of the rich proverbial nature of the Arabic language, the rhythmic nature of the Quranic verses I memorised.*

*My home identity remained separate from my school identity. I viewed both types of schooling as separate worlds with completely different languages, cultures, identities,*

*teachers, and friendships groups. During lessons I would read a variety of books and fairy tales such as Snow White and then go home to attend Arabic school where I memorised and recited the Quran (which literally means recitation). The idea of a fairy tale is alien to Islam, since the culture of Islam is very much rooted in a sense of reality. Reading and telling stories of real events such as the Prophet's stories (for example, Jesus' miraculous birth) and reflecting and learning morals from them is very much encouraged. Thus my home and school cultural identities were not only different but also in conflict with each other. I never drew attention to certain aspects of my identity in the classroom. The fact I did not wear the hijab during my primary and secondary education and that I have fair skin meant I was never identified as an Arab or Muslim during school.*

*This completely changed when, at university, I became more religiously conscious and chose to wear the hijab and abayah. I felt liberated. I was no longer following a man-made fashion law which enslaves women, no longer could I be physically objectified or treated like a commodity by others; instead, I was following a modest dress code, ordained above the seven heavens from God. I was thus identified as a "young Muslim woman", with all the political baggage that this entailed. After 9/11 came the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: a negative spot-light was placed on Islam and with this came "outrage" about the oppression of Muslim women being forced to wear the hijab or niqab. Jack Straw, a prominent member of the last Labour government, also joined in this discourse as he claimed that the niqab is a "visible statement of separation and difference" (Straw, 2006). Suddenly I became aware of others' preconceived notions about me. I would often receive strange, angry – and sometimes sympathetic – looks and comments.*

*But this only strengthened my beliefs and religious identity because I felt my identity was under attack and I attempted to desperately hold onto it. Thus I decided to wear not only the hijab but also the abayah. I felt empowered in resisting these negative preconceived notions. As a result, I could not separate my identity from my learning and all I wanted to write about was the challenges of Muslim women's identity. Thus my undergraduate dissertation was on the notion of "self" in autobiographical conversion narratives of women living in Britain and America.*

*I have found that my identity not only influenced my learning but also impacted on my teaching. During my placement a teacher asked me if students made comments about the way I dress. This made me conscious about how identity shapes professional and student interactions and relationships and so influences learning in the classroom. Reflecting on my own bilingual and religious identity and cultural history has illuminated the complexity of students' identities and experiences in the classroom and the different impact these factors have on their learning.*

We would want to make three claims for Leila's writing in the extract above and in those that follow later in this essay. First, her writing matters as an account of her formation, of the specificity of her history and of the complexity of the sociocultural negotiations in which she is an active participant. Second, her writing matters as an activity: the process of writing is far more than the recording of the already-known, already-understood. Third, the story of Leila's formation is materially relevant to the production of an adequate account of teaching and learning, of the work that is undertaken in schools and classrooms.

The process of reification, as was argued above, transforms learning and learners into data and schools into data-rich environments. Equally important, though, is the assumption that learning is straightforwardly the product of teaching. This means that teachers, individually and collectively, can be held directly accountable for learning (the learning that is represented in those neat data-sets). The implications of this are made explicit in the recent Ofsted *Evaluation Schedule*: “The most important role of teaching is to promote learning so as to raise pupils’ achievement” (Ofsted, 2012b, p. 11). It is worth pausing to note that learning here appears, very clearly, not as an end in itself but as a means to an end: learning is for raising achievement. One might also want to ask what raising achievement is for. Is it for the benefit of the learner, the teacher, the school, the nation? Allen and Ainley (2012) have done a very good job of exposing the hollowness of the claims implicit in this attachment to “achievement”, particularly in the economic context of mass youth unemployment.

In the Ofsted model, accountability becomes nothing more than data-tracking and monitoring, equality is reduced to questions of access and social mobility. What gets missed out of this model, however, is any sense of complexity – the complexity of classrooms, the complexity of the interactions that take place within them, the complexity of any halfway adequate understanding of learning as a process. What matters here are the questions that cannot be asked within the Ofsted framework: questions about curriculum content and design, questions about students’ and teachers’ different histories, cultures, funds of knowledge, values, affiliations and aspirations. These things matter because they shape profoundly students’ sense of themselves as learners and their day-to-day experiences in the classroom, as well as shaping teachers’ relationships with their students and teachers’ ways of being in the classroom.

In the next section, also taken from Leila’s final assignment, we see her reflecting on the subjectivity of a single, school student, Reece, a boy whom she encountered during her practicum. She confronts the uncomfortable fact of Reece’s agency. She recognises the complexity of the relationship between Reece’s identity and his learning; she grapples with the complexity of his positioning in relation to schooling in general and English in particular. For us, as teacher educators, this marks an immensely significant moment in Leila’s development. The discourse of standards – the discourse that informs the two stories with which we started – is hard to resist, particularly for student teachers faced with the bewildering environment of school and their uncertain position in relation to a multiplicity of powerful discourses. Its simplicities offer a beguiling certainty, as learners are reduced to levels and the complexities of teaching are reduced to pre-specified routines and outcomes. To move beyond such certainties, as Leila does here, is to move into uncharted territory; the act of writing about Reece provides her with a means of exploring both Reece’s agency and her own.

**“Miss, I’m a bad man!” (Leila)**

*A lot of cultures need to understand...that if you oppressed us and kept us in this condition and took our language from us, we would develop a language to communicate with each other. (Professor Griff of Public Enemy, cited in Weinstein 2009, p. 42)*

*One of the classes I taught during my second placement was a mixed ability year 7 class. The students were from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds (mainly Afro-Caribbean, Somali and Arab), but most had adopted, and were unified by, an urban/street culture and identity.*

*In one lesson, within the first unit of work I had taught the class (an introduction to Shakespeare), I asked a student why he thought Shakespeare used imagery. His answer was, “Miss, I can’t answer that, I am not an English man, I am a slang man!” My students felt empowered by their urban identity, but at times it functioned as a barrier to learning, or at least to prominent aspects of the education system – such as speaking and writing in “formal English” as opposed to slang, studying the literary canon and obeying authority rather than rebelling against it.*

*The issue of how identity can influence and affect learning was highlighted by the behaviour of one my year 7 students. Reece, a mixed-race boy, would often stroll into lesson late with his Gucci hat and Superdry hoodie (clothes worn in conspicuous defiance of the school uniform rules). Although he was not overtly disruptive, getting him to finish a piece of work or meaningfully contribute to class discussions was very difficult. Often with a dazed and detached look in eyes, he remained very distant and uninterested in class activities. He took every opportunity to assert his urban/street identity, often dancing and rapping in class.*

*During the same class discussion around Shakespearean imagery, I asked Reece why he thought Shakespeare compares Juliet to the sun. His answer? “Because it is stinky.” In a subsequent lesson, asked what he thought “The Lady of Shalott” was about, he shouted “Ghost Busters!” His answers reflect his refusal to engage with the questions and the text, whilst demonstrating his desire to hold on to the contemporary culture he liked and felt comfortable in.*

*As educators we have to enable our pupils to build bridges between what they already bring to the classroom from their homes and communities and the new learning in which they are actively engaged. By doing so we afford them status as learners and underline the value of their cross-cultural skills. (Fellowes, 2001, p. 2)*

*Reece felt alienated by Shakespeare and Tennyson and his defence mechanism was to shout out unconnected, contemporary ideas and phrases. Reece’s written work depicts a similar story: his exercise book is full of unfinished work, a few words or lines at most. In a lesson around animal poetry, Reece’s written contribution was: “Let’s be clear about this I love toads I don’t know why”.*

*Later, I learned more of Reece’s difficult home background. Born in prison to a mother who was a well-known, local drug-dealer, Reece and his brother were in the midst of being taken into care. It was easy enough to construe Reece’s behaviour as a striving for attention because of the neglect he suffered at home. Education was not something he felt he could invest in, not only because he lacked encouragement at home but also because his allegiance was to a street/urban culture where dealing drugs was valued, viewed as a realistic path to economic power and success. In Framing Dropouts, Michelle Fine (1991) investigates students’ disengagement from schooling. She argues that many who drop out of school recognise the ideological nature of schooling: they see that schooling is attempting to assimilate them into a*

*particular culture – a culture that is markedly different from their own – and they are dubious about both the credibility and the desirability of the claim that schooling will automatically lead to social mobility.*

*In an attempt to engage Reece and many other students like him and bridge gaps between their two different cultures, I planned a poetry lesson based on how rap/poetry can be used as a powerful form of self-expression. The Bullock Report argues that:*

*A child's language should be accepted...To criticise a person's speech may be an attack on his self-esteem...The aim is not to alienate the child from a form of language, with which he has grown up and which serves him efficiently in the speech community of his neighbourhood. (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1975, p. 143)*

*More recently, Susan Weinstein has suggested that:*

*...too many teachers, administrators, and policy makers still believe that the ways with words of marginalized populations are simply wrong, and therefore cannot possibly hold any potential for productive incorporation into the classroom. (Weinstein, 2009, p. 46)*

*I have tried to challenge this view of rap being unproductive and “retarding” progression (McWhorter, 2003). I introduced the class to a rap by Lowkey, a social/political rapper. The rap, “I believe”, argues that young people need to change their values and not place an importance on materialism but on bettering their minds and helping society. To get my students engaged with these ideas, I presented them with two juxtaposed images: a rapper covered in diamonds, holding a gold mug next to an image of Tommie Smith and John Carlos raising their fists on the podium in the 1968 Olympics. My students discussed the differences between the images, then read “I believe” and analysed how the rapper expresses his ideas. I then got the class to write their own “I believe” poem.*

*This is Reece's rap/poem, the first piece of work he had completed in the whole academic year:*

*We need to overcome this poverty  
This racism should not be true  
I believe that we can chase our dreams  
Take a chance for our family  
Like Martin Luther King  
I have a dream  
I think this should not be true  
It should be equal for me and you  
To be able to walk down the street without people looking at me and you.  
What makes you cry makes you stronger.*

*Reece's rap/poem expresses his feelings and experiences of what it is like for a marginalised black youth living in Britain. Themes of socio-economic deprivation, racial profiling/labelling and inequality are the core ideas in his poem. The fact that Reece begins his poem with a universal pronoun “we” when discussing issues of economic deprivation, however uses the individual pronoun “I” when discussing*

*issues of racism depicts the personal nature of the issue. Furthermore, his allusion to Martin Luther King reflects his desire to connect with a shared, black racial struggle. Although much of Reece's rap/poem is about tackling poverty and racism, he ends his writing with "what makes you cry makes you stronger". The uncertain tone of this ending indicates that these issues have not been resolved – and hence he must stay strong to face them.*

*What motivated Reece to express his ideas? To complete his first piece of work? To engage during the lesson? Fundamental to Reece's ability to invest in this task was the genre. Rap is a part of his cultural identity and practice – and is usually dominated by marginalised youth expressing their disdain for and resistance to racial and socio-economic inequalities. Rap/poetry allowed Reece to write in a form he felt was fundamental to his identity. Introducing urban/street culture into the classroom allowed him to connect with the lesson activities. At the end of the lesson, Reece and some of the other students wanted to perform their rap/poems with a beat in the background. While Reece performed his work, two students started beat-boxing and the rest of the class started making encouraging comments and noises like "yeah", "sick one", "you dropped it". The classroom was transformed into an MC stage. Reece was able to gain a sense of control because he had tapped into his audience's shared experiences.*

## **LEARNER AND TEACHER IDENTITIES AND BRITISH VALUES**

In England, we have been told that the next stage of the standards-based reshaping of teaching and learning is to have three main strands. First, there is the tightening up of the inspection regime, to which we have already referred. Satisfactory, for schools and for teachers, is about to become unsatisfactory. The second strand, still at the draft stage, is the rewriting of the national curriculum. Thus far, only drafts of the primary curriculum have appeared. The emphasis, though, is quite clear. International competitiveness is to be achieved by rigorous instruction in the skill of handwriting, by an equally rigorous insistence on teaching the grammar of Standard English and by a universally mandated approach to reading instruction: systematic synthetic phonics (Department for Education [DfE], 2012). And the third strand, with statutory force from September 2012, is the imposition of a single set of standards for teachers.

We don't propose to rehearse at length here the problem with any set of standards as a way of defining the work that teachers do. It is worth noting, in passing, the fundamental assumption that defining teachers' knowledge, skills and attributes can be done without reference to context, that once a teacher has acquired these things they can then be applied, unproblematically, any time, any place – in any classroom, in any school, to any group of learners. Such an approach always entails a denial of teachers' situated knowledge and teachers' situated professional judgements – a denial of the fact that teachers' work is always work with particular groups of learners, learning about particular stuff, in particular contexts (Doecke, 2004; Moore, 2004; Yandell & Turvey, 2007; Heilbronn & Yandell, 2010).

The new *Standards* are the means whereby the Secretary of State for Education can tell teachers not only *what* to teach but also *how* to teach it. How are teachers to "demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge"? If they are teaching early

reading, it is by showing their “clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics” (DfE, 2011, pp. 6-7). Thus the national and international debates about methods of encouraging reading that have continued for decades are resolved by the stroke of a ministerial pen. No room for professional judgement here: the only important thing about learning to read is learning about grapho-phonetic correspondences.

More than this, though, the new *Standards* are to operate as an overtly ideological reconstruction of teacher professionalism. The final section, “Personal and professional conduct”, states that teachers:

...uphold public trust in the profession and maintain high standards of ethics and behaviour, within and outside school, by ...

- not undermining fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs
- ensuring that personal beliefs are not expressed in ways which exploit pupils’ vulnerability or might lead them to break the law. (DfE, 2011, p. 9)

In case there were any doubt as to what is meant by “fundamental British values”, the “Preamble” to the *Standards* provides an explanation: the phrase “is taken from the definition of extremism as articulated in the new Prevent Strategy” (DfE, 2011, p. 4). So British values are directly counterposed to extremism, while extremism is, according to the *Prevent Strategy*, the document that is referenced by the *Standards*, “vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values” (Home Department, 2011, p. 107). Such definitional circularity is not particularly enlightening; more revealing, perhaps, is the fact that the *Teachers’ Standards* takes its definition of British values from a document that was published as part of the government’s counterterrorist strategy (Home Department, 2011, p. 23), a document that declares that the most serious threat to the UK is that “from Al Qa’ida, its affiliates and like-minded organisations” (Home Department, 2011, p. 13).

What is at issue here is not, we should make clear, competing assessments of the threat posed by Al Qa’ida, nor even competing definitions of terrorism (though current government policy in this country leaves little space for the recognition that these are matters of legitimate debate). Equally, we would accept the proposition that education policy should be linked to other aspects of government policy, and that such links signal that the work of educators is located within an overarching framework of social policy. What is problematic, however, is the nature of this link, how education is thus located within the exercise of state power. Here, now, the work of teachers is presented as a contribution to the maintenance of an established order, to the rule of law. Thirteen years ago, the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, convened by the last UK government to examine the circumstances surrounding the vicious murder of a black teenager by a group of racist thugs in South London, reached the conclusion that its remit included education as well as policing and the judicial system. One of the recommendations of the Inquiry Report was:

That consideration be given to amendment of the National Curriculum aimed at valuing cultural diversity and preventing racism, in order better to reflect the needs of a diverse society. (Home Department, 1999, Chapter 47, para. 67)

This recommendation also located the work of teachers within a broader conception of social policy. The concept of respect that informed the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry was, however, somewhat different from the concept of respect that informs the new *Teachers' Standards*.

Respect for the rule of law is announced in the *Standards* as a fundamental British value. Where does that leave a history teacher's approach to the suffragette movement, say, or the anti-apartheid struggle? What of any discussion of tuition fees or the Occupy movement, of the Arab spring or Palestine? What, too, of the requirement that these standards apply as much to a teacher's life beyond the school gates as to anything that might happen in the classroom?

These provisions achieve three separable objectives. Because of the link to the *Prevent Strategy*, they are an enactment of institutionalised Islamophobia. They enforce a particular interpretation of history and a particular view of world politics, in which the stability of British values is threatened, principally by an Islamic Other. They also provide the grounds for disciplinary action against any teacher who dares to transgress the authorised version of British identity: they offer *carte blanche* to any employer who wants to indulge in a little political victimisation. But they also have a more insidious general effect, rather like that of the last Tory government's Section 28, which prohibited "the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" (Local Government Act, 1988, p. 26): they attempt to close down the dialogic space of the classroom, they try to render illicit any form of practice where learners are invited to make connections between school knowledge and the world beyond.

Urban classrooms, however, are places that tend to resist such monologic discourse. Leila, for reasons that are inseparable from her own culture and history, is particularly alert to the heteroglossia that marks the social interactions of any classroom. In the following section from her assignment, she focuses on a different class within the same school. In her account of her interactions with students, Leila explores how richly dialogic pedagogic relationships are constructed.

**“Miss, are you Sunni or Shia?” (Leila)**

*This religion began as something strange and it will return as something strange, so give glad tidings to the strangers. (Hadith, Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him))*

*Although many of my students assimilate an urban culture and identity, it would be inaccurate to claim that was the only identity practised in this very diverse London school. Identity is more complex and messy; we are never one thing, due to the fact that culture is “the level at which social groups develop distinct patterns of life, and give expressive form to their social and material life experiences” (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts, 1976, p. 10). We never practise one culture because we are all influenced by both our background and a range of life experiences.*

*Although the students were from three completely different continents (Africa, Asia and Europe) they tended to unite within a strong Muslim identity. The students would greet each other and Muslim teachers with “salam alaykum” (the Muslim greeting which means “peace be upon you”) and they would respond to each other with “wa alaykum salam”. In the Islamic teachings it is the right and duty of every Muslim to pass salams to each other and this was what the students practised. In my Year 9 class, there was a large group of Muslim boys from a range of different ethnic backgrounds. They would shout “astfiAllah” (I seek forgiveness with Allah) when one of them said something inappropriate. This year 9 class and the school as a whole established the concept of an Ummah (global community of Muslims), which creates a strong sense of brotherhood.*

*What really fascinated me was that the few non-Muslim students in the class also imitated the Islamic/Arabic dialogue. Daniel, a white boy who spent long periods of time in the isolation room for fighting and swearing at teachers, would often shout out “astfiAllah”. When I asked him if he knew what it meant, he simply shrugged his shoulders. Isaac, who was Christian and of mixed race, would also shout quite deep comments like “trapped in the dunya”. Dunya means world and has some negative connotations in Islam because it is associated with worldly pleasures and indulgence. The fact that his comment is half English and Arabic suggests that he heard this from a bilingual student and imitated his classmate’s dialogue. This reveals that non-Muslims also wanted to be part of the Ummah which Muslim students had created, as they too wanted to be part of this brotherhood.*

*In the middle of my placement I taught the class a creative writing Scheme of Work. I planned a “writing to describe” lesson and I chose to base the lesson on the powerful picture of the Afghan girl who appeared on the front cover of National Geographic. I chose this particular image because I believed the students would sympathise and engage with the girl’s powerful distraught eyes which tell the story of a war-torn country and a young girl’s suffering and strength. I had thought this lesson would engage my students because a large number of them were Muslim boys and some were from Afghanistan. When I asked the students about the image and the girl who is represented in it, I sensed a coldness and disengagement from my students; some who were usually vocal did not express themselves in this lesson. Although at the time I did not understand my students’ behaviour, on reflection I saw that I had placed my students, Muslim boys discussing a young Muslim girl’s suffering at the hands of foreign non-Muslim men with a young female Muslim teacher, in a position that was deeply uncomfortable for them. It undermined their Muslim masculine identity which promotes the idea of men being the “protectors and maintainers of women” (Quran: Surah Nisa). As Anne has insisted, the “reading and thinking that take place in the classroom are a collaborative process that involves teacher and students and cannot be isolated from the social, cultural and world experience of all of us present” (Turvey, Brady, Carpenter & Yandell, 2006, p. 58). This episode made me think again about the complex nature of identity and how introducing the students’ identity and culture within learning activities can also create barriers to learning if it is not dealt with in a culturally sensitive way.*

*The next lesson I had to plan was on “writing to persuade”. I again attempted to plan a lesson which would allow the students to engage with their religious identity which they proudly enforced in the classroom. I told students that a new law had been issued*

*by the Prime Minister, which bans head-covering such as hoodies and hijabs from any public space. I displayed a few controversial statements on the IWB and got students to stand or sit down if they agreed or disagreed with the comments. The first statement was: "Muslim women should not be allowed to wear the hijab in public because it poses a threat to society."*

*Abdul: This is promoting Islamophobia! Why are nuns allowed to wear headscarves and they are not questioned?*

*L: So you think this is excluding and attacking Muslim women?*

*Abdul: Yes! Why does one rule go for them and another for Muslim women?!*

*Tariq: Muslim women have to wear the hijab to guard their modesty! It is a protection for them and it is part of their religion, this is racist!*

*L: Do you think Muslim women can pose a threat to society because by wearing the hijab they are concealing part of their identity?*

*Daniel: Why are they going to be a threat? If they are wearing a headscarf, they are probably religious and if they are religious they are not going to harm anyone! Muslim girls are the least threat to our society; we need to focus on the real criminals.*

*Muslim boys "increasingly define themselves through their religion rather than their parental country of origin or nationality" (Archer, 2003, p. 48). I believe students engaged with this lesson because it allowed them to express their Muslim male identity by protecting Muslim girls from the "hijab ban law". This idea is also reflected in students' persuasive letters. Tariq writes: "Muslim girls wear the hijab as a form of protection, to protect them and safeguard their modesty." The fact that Tariq repeats the idea of "protection" in his written work and during the class discussion reinforces the idea that he believes Muslim girls should be protected and he views it as his Muslim male responsibility to ensure that this happens.*

*The boys' urgent adoption of a strong Muslim identity was a response to what they believed was prejudice and injustice targeted against them. As Louise Archer has argued, students' commitment to Islamic beliefs and values "is actually a response to racism that provides a way to 'fight back' against inequalities and negative stereotypes" (Archer, 2003, p. 48). The fact the students claim the law is "racist" and "promoting Islamophobia" reinforces this idea. What really interested me was Daniel's position and participation in this. His comments and written work indicate the extent to which he also adopts a Muslim masculine identity and speaks as part of the brotherhood. He writes:*

*it is despicable that you even thought of enforcing this new law...Muslims are following their way of life and are making God happy and it is becoming a thing I think there is racism involved... I am infuriated by this law and hope to see a change in the next 3 weeks.*

*Gardner and Shukur explore this idea further:*

*Islam provides a positive identity, in which solidarity can be found together with an escape from the oppressive tedium of being constantly identified in negative terms. Even more important, Islamic rhetoric not only condones fighting for one's rights and acting in collective defence of Muslim brotherhood, but explicitly encourages it. (Gardner & Shukur, 1994 as cited in Archer, 2003, p. 48)*

*I found that Muslim boys and non-Muslim boys felt empowered in this struggle and joining this resistance. Their identity very much influenced the way they perceived, interacted and responded to certain issues.*

*As a bilingual learner, I have been able to reflect on the ways in which I mediated different cultures and identities in the classroom and how this impacted on my learning. This has enabled me to think about how students endure a similar battle in the classroom and how it affects their learning and interactions. Writing this assignment has allowed me to explore the complex nature of identity; as we develop, our identity and culture are also ever evolving and our need to define ourselves becomes increasingly important. I have found that urban cultures can create barriers to learning because of how marginalised students view learning, education and canonical writers. However these barriers can be broken by introducing elements of students' identities and culture in the classroom which allow them to create bridges between their home/community and school culture. Exploring different sub-cultures and identities, I have found that Muslim boys increasingly define themselves through their religion. I believe their urgency in adopting a strong Muslim identity is a response to the prejudice and inequality targeted against them. Thus they feel empowered by creating a strong Ummah of Muslim masculine brotherhood. However, once students felt that "Muslim masculinity" is challenged, it affected their learning and interaction in the classroom. Thus it is increasingly important to deal with students' culture and identity in culturally sensitive ways to support learning. Exploring these aspects of classroom interaction has highlighted that students' cultures and identities can never be left outside of the classroom. It is a fundamental part of who the students are and it affects the way they interact, interpret, engage and ultimately learn. These issues become increasingly important in the multi-cultural English classroom where culture and learning cannot be treated as separate entities.*

## CONCLUSION

In this piece we have told stories of the damaging effects of standards-based reforms as they mediate the work of all educators. We have wanted to show how these reforms, for all their detailed layers and levels and assessment foci, have been experienced by teachers and their students as abstract and alien. At the same time, the reforms embody a set of practices that shape both public perceptions of teaching and learning and teachers' and pupils' sense of themselves. We have gestured at worrying signs of an intensification of such initiatives and particularly at the ways in which managerial standards threaten to occupy all the discursive space available. But this is not the whole story.

The primary significance of Leila's contribution, we argue, is that she shows clearly what the standards-based reforms render invisible: the complexity of classrooms and the competing forces at work in them. Anything like an adequate account of the dynamic of the classroom must attend to the histories of participants – teachers and pupils – and to those complex acts of cultural negotiation and contestation that Leila describes so well. For standards-based reformers, the agency of pupils and teachers is an inconvenient fact that is best suppressed. Leila's account reasserts the centrality of that agency. It stands as testament to the enduring truth of Doecke and McKnight's claim that:

[student teachers'] professional learning is ultimately dependent on the way they handle the ideological issues with which they are faced. Their learning is driven by their beliefs and values rather than being shaped by what – to borrow the language of professional standards – English teachers should supposedly know and do, as if the professional knowledge of English teachers can somehow be located in an ideologically neutral field, regardless of the way schooling has been fractured by market forces and competing religious beliefs and other social issues. (Doecke & McKnight, 2003, p. 305)

Leila's handling of critical and theoretical literature is an important factor in her learning and development as a teacher: it enables her to make sense of the moment-by-moment interactions of the classroom by placing them in longer-term perspectives and it enables her to position herself confidently in relation to a multiplicity of authoritative discourses (about learning and teaching, about culture and identity, about canonicity, gender, difference).

We acknowledge that Leila is positioned differently from us. She is developing a different picture of English and pedagogy from ours; we have different histories, as teachers and teacher educators. And her picture is a dynamic one, partly as a result of the specific context of each practicum school. More than that though, her experiences with students have enriched and deepened what she says about her own educational history and her learning: "I could not separate my identity from my learning." This is as true for Reece as it is for his teacher. And just as Leila presents her sense of herself as teacher and learner as "work in progress", so we would see our ideas as developing in dialogue with Leila and our other students as they negotiate their way through a range of socially and culturally specific situations and competing ideas about subject English, about learning and about professional growth.

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