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Researching Teacher Practice: Social justice dispositions revealed in activity

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Abstract

This chapter reports on a recent project researching the practice of teachers, particularly the pedagogies they employ within advantaged and disadvantaged Australian secondary schools. We were interested in the extent to which their practice (or activity) might be considered socially just and, more specifically, what informed it. Given the research literature often observes a disconnect between what teachers believe (e.g. about social justice issues) and what they do (which can appear contradictory to their beliefs), our intention was to identify rhythms and patterns within data that suggest a disposition to practice in certain ways. Contributing to our understanding, we enlisted the teachers themselves in interpreting the rhythms and patterns in their practice and thus in naming their social justice dispositions (Bourdieu 1990). Aware that these dispositions are largely unconscious, we engaged teachers through 'provocative' research techniques designed to unsettle their practiced account of their practice and raise the previously unconsidered to the level of consciousness. Our analysis was guided by cultural-historic activity theory (CHAT), specifically Engeström's notion of human activity as a system, which provided a systematic way to identify and understand the rhythms and patterns in teachers' pedagogies. For the purposes of this chapter, two conclusions can be drawn. First, there is potential for research on practice to have a pedagogical dimension for researchers and the researched; in our case, in collectively realising more socially just future practice. Second, research on practice is invariably about understanding more that just practice; in our case, it was also about what informs that practice. Our argument is that the ontology of practice (what it is) includes more than just the empirical, so that its epistemology (how it is known) needs to also accommodate the typically unseen or unnoticed.

Introduction

In this chapter we outline our approach to researching the practice of teachers (particularly their pedagogies), for the purpose of understanding their social justice dispositions (SJDs). Through the course of the chapter we take up ontological and epistemological questions relating to the existence of dispositions, their relationship with practice, the possibility of researching them and how this might be done. In short, we regard dispositions as knowable through researching practice.

Our starting point for thinking about these things is Bourdieu's conception of 'the habitus'. Bourdieu describes the habitus as an individual's internalised system of 'durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize *practices*' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53; emphasis added). We surmise that what can be said of the habitus can also be said of its constituent dispositions, albeit as part of a system: that dispositions are internalised (i.e. principles that are not or are no longer consciously contemplated) and that they inform practice. Our particular interest in the habitus and its dispositions is in their usefulness for explaining the dissonance often evident between stated beliefs and evidentiary practice, especially as it relates to the intent of teachers in contrast to the outcomes of teaching and the production of more socially just outcomes for school students. Consider, for example, a teacher's stated belief in gender equality, who then displays practices that are nevertheless biased towards the maintenance of patriarchy (Sadker & Sadker, 1995). We theorise that SJDs as constituent elements of the habitus—lying below the level of consciousness and operating between belief and practice—generate particular orientations that result in certain enactments of socially just actions.[1]

In rendering dispositions knowable through research, it is important to distinguish between action and practice. On practice itself, Bourdieu is not singularly definitive (Warde 2004). Broadly, he describes it as purposeful and meaningful: a 'more or less coherent entity formed around a particular *activity*' (Warde, 2004, p. 6; emphasis added). Thus the habitus (and its constitutive dispositions) produces recurring actions revealed in *rhythms* and *patterns* of behaviour, in the enduring tendencies, inclinations and leanings evident in an individual's actions over time (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). In this sense practice is neither a 'single action' nor 'discontinuous and extraordinary actions' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 31), but a collection of ongoing actions characterised by a unifying coherence—an activity.

As noted above, our research was directed at understanding teachers' SJDs, revealed in the subtle repetitions in teachers' behaviour evidenced as actions with a unifying coherence that reoccur over periods of time. We sought to identify this coherence or systems of teacher activity (their practice) to understand their SJDs. In doing this we were guided by cultural-historic activity theory (CHAT), specifically Engeström's (1987) notion of human activity as a system. CHAT provides an analytical framework to systematically document how actions emerge from social-cultural, historical-political and material conditions within which actors are situated, to produce recognisable patterns of activity; in this case, the activity of teaching. It is this account of activity that provides the wherewithal to recognise the unifying coherence in teachers' actions and to 'read' the SJDs evident from this coherence. Activity, conceived as a system, also provides an explanatory framework to further elucidate how and why systemic conditions (broadly analogous to Bourdieu's concept of 'field') interact with actors and their habitus/dispositions to produce certain actions rather than others. In Bourdieu's terms, they illuminate the secondary pedagogical work of institutions in reshaping the habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; also see below). Following Boudieu's account of social structures in which the habitus interacts with a field, we reason that dispositions' influence on practice is dependent on the context within which the actor is situated (e.g. in socially, economically, educationally advantaged or disadvantaged contexts).

Our research thus focused on 10 principals and 16 teachers in 10 Australian secondary schools located at the extremes of advantage and disadvantage. Our judgement is that advantage and disadvantage are relational concepts, so that understanding disadvantage is never complete without a complementary understanding of advantage and *vice versa*. The distinction we make in our study between advantage/disadvantage offers a contextual frame for understanding SJDs in how they are expressed in relation to different sites for practice. Student standardised assessment results (derived from the National Assessment Plan – Literacy and Numeracy; i.e. NAPLAN) published on the Australian Government's *MySchool* website (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2010) were used as a proxy for determining educational advantage and disadvantage. The use of these advantage/disadvantage categories is justified by the alignment between students' academic achievements and the socio-economic backgrounds of their schools: that is, in Australia, students from advantaged schools tend towards high academic achievement and students from disadvantaged schools tend towards low academic achievement (Teese, 2011).

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[1] See Gale and Densmore (2000) for a range of these social justice orientations.

As further background to the chapter, we begin with a theoretical account of disposition (drawing on Bourdieu) and then of activity theory (drawing on Engeström); the latter providing a systematic understanding of teacher practice from which to then 'read' the former. While one orientation is sociological and the other socio-psychological, we nevertheless see them as complementary with similar Marxist antecedents (Livingstone & Sawchuk, 2000; Williams, 2012). The remainder of the chapter is devoted to how these two interests came together in the methodology we employed to generate data to 'read' dispositions in practice/activity.

We conclude the chapter speculating that researching practice is never simply about investigating the nature of practice in isolation, as an object of analysis in its own right, but is always about what the account of practice tells us about something else; illustrative of the dialectic relationship between ontology and epistemology (also see Gale 2018). We also note that when participants are called on to contribute understanding of what their practice means, researching practice also provides opportunities for them to consider practice alternatives, to transform their practice through the practice of research.

Social justice dispositions

The term 'disposition' is used in the field of education in a range of ways, especially within contemporary professional teaching literature on teacher development and school leadership. For example, the US National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) defines disposition as the 'professional attitudes, values and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues and communities' (Conderman & Walker, 2015; Englehart et al., 2012; Vaughn, 2012; Wadlington & Wadlington, 2011). Thus informed, dispositions have been approached as a largely psychological construct that can be measured, assessed and evaluated to determine teacher aptitude and potential. This understanding of disposition implies a *conscious* understanding of one's 'teacher self': a deliberate stance one should adopt and a commitment to ideal forms of practice based on beliefs, values and attitudes that reflect a pre-defined, agreed notion of what constitutes good teaching behaviours.

In ontological contrast, our understanding of disposition, grounded in the work of Bourdieu (1977; 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), is sociological in orientation and emphasises the potential for and importance of 'un-thoughtness' in actions. As noted above, a Bourdieuian orientation understands dispositions as the tendencies, inclinations and leanings that provide un-thought or pre-thought guidance for social practices (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For Bourdieu, practice is thus understood as an outward expression of the internal habitus and, by extension, of the dispositions that comprise it. As with the habitus, dispositions are thus revealed in action (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Further, rather than being either a single action in isolation—or even a series of disconnected and unrelated actions—the habitus is expressed in an ongoing series of related actions, with practice being recognisable as a coordinated domain of activity (e.g. ‘legal practice’, ‘medical practice’, etc.).

Collections of actions that make up what is recognisable as *teachers being teachers* thus offer our work a concrete instantiation of teaching practice: *teachers doing teaching*. It is in the emphases and repetitions of teachers’ actions from which their teaching dispositions (their operating-generating system for teaching) can be distilled. Extrapolating from this, we theorise teachers’ SJDs to be evident in the un-thought or pre-thought yet enduring, recurring and repetitious patterns of social interactions that play out in teachers’ engagement with students in practice, in terms of what they sense as being socially just, equitable or fair. In our Australian Research Council funded project (acknowledgment below), and in contrast to notions of disposition prevalent in North America, we advance SJDs as an analytic category for researching practice, identifying how educational dis/advantage is enacted through teachers’ work through a focus on the un-thought inclinations that play out as teachers engage with students.

As noted earlier in relation to the habitus, dispositions are similarly understood in relation to ‘field’: the system of social relationships within which actors are positioned. Understanding SJDs therefore means paying attention to teachers’ sites of practice, to distil meanings for their actions within larger sociocultural contexts (e.g. whether teachers work within advantaged or disadvantaged sites of practice). Different sites for teacher practice can be expected to produce a spectrum of SJDs (e.g. different forms of ‘activist’ dispositions; see Mills, Gale et al. 2019).

The practice of teachers

In identifying this spectrum, we were guided by cultural-historic activity theory (CHAT). With particular interest in Engeström’s (1987) notion of an activity system, we found CHAT useful for providing a systematic framework to account for the interplay between actors and their contexts when identifying recognisable forms or patterns of activity or practice. It is this account of practice—as a system of activity—which affords a methodical analysis of teachers’ SJDs deduced from teacher actions.

Engeström’s theory of activity emerges from Vygotsky’s (1978, 1987) thesis that humans do not act on the world directly but through artefacts to mediate (and subsequently re-mediate, and transform) their relationships with others and the world around them. Vygotsky’s dialectical materialist perspective on human development has been expanded by others (e.g. see Shawchuk this collection) to account for the wider context within which individual mediation takes place. As Leontiev suggests, ‘the human individual’s activity is a system of social relations. It does not exist without those social relations’ (1981, pp. 46-47). Engeström (1987, p. 41) conceives of this set of social and cultural relations as an holistic unit of analysis in his notion of ‘activity system’. Within these systems, cultural-historic activity theory aims to make practice visible by identifying how agentic *subjects* (in our case, teachers) engage with *tools* (i.e. resources, both material and cultural/symbolic) to mediate their relationship with an *object* to which their attention is directed (e.g. student learning). Importantly, this production of observable instantiations of evidentiary practice is relative to the situated conditions that emerge from the *community*, the *rules* and *expectations* regulating the norms of that activity, and the *division of labour* (Engeström 1987).

This latter element, the 'division of labour'—including the vertical and horizontal distribution of power, rights and responsibilities within activity (Turner & Turner 2001)—parallels Bourdieu's argument that pedagogic work (PW) as a practice, is legitimated by pedagogic authority (PAu) (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990). Comprised of pedagogic actions (PA), PW is distinguishable by its affect if not intent on shaping and reshaping the habitus, inculcating the 'cultural arbitrary' (dispositions accepted as the dominant, normative position) to reproduce existing social structures. Bourdieu's use of PW is thus highly specific; related to forming and re-forming the habitus and typically involving the practice of one acting on the habitus of another, although not exclusively (see Rowlands & Gale 2017). Bourdieu also distinguishes between two forms of pedagogic work: Primary PW is the formative work 'accomplished in the earliest years of life' (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990, p. 43), 'without any antecedent' (p. 42), and is primarily the influence of home and family. Secondary PW (see Sriprakash, Proctor, & Hu 2016) is aimed at reforming or reshaping the habitus, in sites of practice such as schools but also within and by other social institutions.

While our research was located in schools and classrooms as sites of practice, the intention was not to identify the affects of teacher practice on reshaping the habitus of students. Instead, our focus was on teachers and their pedagogy, irrespective of whether it was directly or indirectly concerned with reshaping the habitus of students (i.e. secondary PW) or on achieving other ends, such as curricula objectives (if indeed it is possible to separate out habitus (re)formation from other pedagogical intentions). More particularly, we sought to identify the habitus (specifically the SJDs) of teachers, evident through their practice. We also recognised that schools and classrooms had the capacity to do secondary PW on the habitus of teachers, including the reshaping of their SJDs. In part, we saw this as related to the PAu or legitimacy that certain kinds of teacher pedagogy were afforded in different sites of practice (by principals/ head teachers but also others who occupied positions of power or authority). By attending to a whole-of-school power dynamic, CHAT enabled an understanding of how the division of labour within individual teacher activity systems might also be shaped through the influence of school leadership.

In this sense, we understood activity as a sociocultural practice and thus as the resultant combination of various social and cultural elements (i.e. rules, tools, etc.) coming together with pre-existing and unique 'histories'. Since these histories continue to influence, shape and alter the nature of activity as it unfolds, any analysis of concrete, observable activity as it exists now, in the present, is understood in relation to its origins (i.e. what Vygotsky referred to as the 'genetic method'). Of course, embedded in this account are a number of onto-epistemological assumptions: that the reality of practice is observable; that the rules and tools of practice can be known; that they constitute an underlying reality that can be accessed through observation.

Take a simple example of a teacher (the subject) engaging students' attention (his or her object) through interactive whiteboards (a tool). This activity has its genesis in and continues to be bound by cultural-historical influences that include societal expectations of schools to embrace new technology, material conditions that allow (or deny) access to technologies, and even the teacher's own personal history (as the subject of that system) which has enabled (or hindered) his or her capacity to work with new technologies as a way to facilitate student engagement.

This is where—in ontological terms—SJDs become significant. Activity is not defined solely by structures or context and nor does it simply lie with individual agency, divorced from the conditions under which subjects come to make 'choices' on how to best respond to the systems that they encounter. Rather, SJDs are the basis from which subjects make sense of their systems in ways that are the most subtle of influences—again, tendencies, inclinations and leanings—resulting in *un*-thought guidance to respond in a manner the subject perceives to be socially just. We therefore locate SJDs as being within the *subject* rather than conceiving of dispositions as another mediatory tool operating within the system. This is of course similar to Bourdieu's ontology, that the habitus and its constituent dispositions are the embodiment of the norms of the field. Conceptually, this helps to further clarify the distinction we noted earlier between SJDs and beliefs (i.e. constructs or psychological *tools* that the subject 'names' as the basis for their action). Located within the subject, SJDs differ from manifest consciousness or thoughtfulness; labels claimed by subjects to 'name' beliefs. This also helps to explain why, irrespective of declared beliefs, subjects have the potential to act, at times, in contradiction. It is at the deeper level of disposition within the subject, rather than named or claimed beliefs (as a mediatory construct), from which concrete instances of actual, observable activity emerge and which we might otherwise struggle to provide explanatory accounts for practice on the basis of belief systems alone.

By employing the analytic of CHAT, we reasoned that a systematic account of practice would help to advance knowledge of the impact of SJDs on teachers' work. Understanding SJDs means including the teacher as individual but also going beyond to also consider how their dispositions interact with the field, or particular activity systems with the field, given their sociocultural positioning. Conceiving of teacher practice as a system of activity helps generate an account of how observable instantiations of practice, unfolding in the present, emerge from certain cultural-historical conditions (social, material and political) within which the subject is positioned as an agent.

Therein lies the core ontological assumption motiving our research—that dispositions exist—and the related epistemological assumption, that they can be known and even transformed through the conscientization of this knowledge. These ontological and epistemological assumptions result in a number of methodological challenges. For example: How can dispositions be researched if they sit below the level of consciousness, somewhere between belief and action? How can teachers be prompted to speak their habitus? What counts as 'data' when engaging in research of this kind? What methodological techniques will enable researchers to access/identify teachers' dispositions in ways that neither attempt to speak for them, nor take their accounts of practice at face value (cf Taylor, 1985)? What is the impact of this methodological approach on transforming the same practices being studied as the primary object of research? We address these challenges in the second half of this chapter, with particular attention to the methodological techniques used to provoke participants' capacities to consciously name their otherwise unconscious dispositions that guide their actions.

Provoking teachers to speak their dispositions

Operating in the unconscious realm between belief and practice, dispositions are difficult to research using conventional research techniques such as interviews (which focus on what is said) or observations (what is done). With dispositions residing at the level of the unconscious, asking our teacher-participants for accounts of their inclinations, tendencies and leanings through interview or written journals is epistemologically misguided. By definition, teachers are not able to reveal principles that are not consciously contemplated. Similarly, documenting what is observed misplaces an emphasis on product over process, again failing to capture the essence of how dispositions function: as principles that influence how observable behaviours come to be. One way we sought to resolve this challenge was through the use of techniques that provoked or unsettled our participants from their usual patterns of speaking about their practice. That is, while we were conscious of not taking teachers' accounts at face value, we were also commited to the idea that they had the capacity to name their dispositions, given the opportunity. After Bourdieu (1990), we reasoned that the latter required a 'consciousness awakening' made possible through provocations that require participants to reflect on and search internally for explanations for their actions in which those dispositions are manifest. Key to this was the adaptation of stimulated recall interview techniques, augmented with attention to scaffolded provocation, and the goal of raising participants' consciousness so they could gradually note and self-identify their otherwise un-thought (and un-spoken) SJDs that guided their practice.

With its origins in cognitive psychology, conventional stimulated recall techniques aim to generate 'think aloud' commentaries of decision-making processes that participants can recall while viewing video excerpts of themselves carrying out a task 'in action' (Nunan, 1992). To increase what these empiricists call 'data validity', protocols insist on providing as few cues as possible other than the video itself as stimulus to prompt a participant response. For example, if a participant states that they cannot or do not remember their thought processes in reponse to a particular excerpt, 'accept the comment and move on … do not ask any other questions' (Barkaoui, 2016, p. 83; Gass & Mackay, 2000). Although this technique has been influential across the social sciences (e.g., Calderhead, 1981; Dempsey, 2010; Lyle, 2003), stimulated recall data has long been criticised for the extent to which it provides an accurate account of the internal cognitive processes that took place at the time of the recording (Wilcox & Trudel, 1998, in Lyle, 2003). Lyle (2003, p. 865), for example, cautions of 'the possibility that individuals are creating "explanations" about the links between prompted actions and intentions'.

Yet this apparent weakness (from an positivist perspective) offered us a strength from a critical-constructivist perspective. Stimulated recalls enabled a way into understanding what our teachers—as the subject of the research—perceived for themselves as being most relevant in *their* reading of and response to the space that they occupied, as the key informant within each of their contexts. If their account of practice was (re)constructed in ways that emphasised (or omitted) one narrative over another—deliberately or otherwise—this made it no less valuable or meaningful as data. Indeed, from a critical perspective, the assumption that there can be only one 'true' objective account of any social event is problematic. Rather, we saw stimulated recall as providing a scaffold for teacher-participants to 'talk through' their teaching practice, precisely because it enabled *their* own account of their actions to be foregrounded, as the subject (i.e. actor) of that activity being researched.

Further, in contrast to conventional stimulated recall protocols (which would typically 'move on' to the next cue if participants were unable to provide an explanation in response to a particular video cue) we deliberately sought to provoke or unsettle participants to speak to the stimulus we selected as cues. The basis for these selections is elaborated below, but our aim was to scaffold participants to persist with reflecting on and searching for explanations to these otherwise 'unexplainable' actions. Since dispositions operate between conscious thought and subsequent actions, we reasoned that if we could identify contradictions between what participants 'say' is socially just practice, with what they then 'do' when observed in the classroom or what they say they do, this would provide a starting point to then explore the dispositions that influenced their practice.

Taking this provocative or stimulated approach, in **Stage 1** of the research we engaged principals/head teachers in semi-structured interviews aimed at *stimulated consciousness awakening*: 'conversations with a purpose' (Dexter, 1970: 136) to uncover the Pedagogic Authority (PAu) informing teachers' (socially just) practice. In speaking with those with power to 'authorise' the actions deemed 'legitimate' within each teacher's setting, our aim was to identify two interrelated levels of PAu: the *deferral* of authority (i.e. what sources of authority informed the school's commitments to social justice) and the *conferral* of authority (i.e. how the school's commitments to social justice were conveyed to and instilled in teachers). We asked questions such as: How would you describe the school's approach to social justice? Which school documents or websites best reflect this approach to social justice? How do they do this? What does this approach mean for the activities (programs, special events, etc.) of the school? What does the school do because of this approach?

While we sought official accounts from principals/head-teachers, we were also interested to unmask contradictions and inconsistencies in these accounts in order to discern how the deferral and conferral of authority for social justice worked in practice. Thus, in our conversations with the 10 principals/head-teachers in our study, we employed a tactic of reflecting back to principals/head-teachers what they said to us in conversation, in ways that juxtaposed what appeared to us as potentially contradictory or inconsistent aspects of their dialogue. In particular, we were concerned to juxtapose stated beliefs and actions, offering as little assessment as possible beyond our juxtaposition as a way of encouraging them to reflect and comment. Through this juxtaposition of stated beliefs and actions, we sought to provoke participants into speaking their dispositions.

In **Stage 2**, we employed a *stimulated recall* technique again to provoke teachers into raising to consciousness the previously unthought principles guiding their practice. We video-recorded the lessons of 16 teachers (three lessons each, over three days usually within the same week, drawn from any subject area but preferably not directly focused on social justice issues) and at the end of each lesson entered into conversation with the teachers, using excerpts from the video as stimulus for the conversation (approximately three clips per conversation). The video excerpts—between 1 and 3 minutes each in length—were selected by the researchers on the basis that on face value they represented practices that were either informed by or antithetical to social justice. At the end of each excerpt, we invited the teachers to comment on what they saw and to talk about what they were thinking at the time.

Our intention in using stimulated recall as a device for generating research data was to elicit 'the logic of practical knowledge' (Bourdieu, 1990) rather than normative accounts of the issue in question. The video clips provided participants with a way to revisit the thinking behind what they were doing at a particular time and place, rather than to fall into rehearsed accounts of practice. This enabled us to 'summon up' unspoken or unconscious rationales for action so that these could be examined. At the same time, our conversations became authentic pedagogical encounters for our participants. Often these encounters also provoked wider ranging discussion about social justice ideals, goals and needs.

It was important in this stage that participants never felt belittled by this technique, as if our intent was to merely 'catch them out', showing up inconsistencies between what they had claimed was important to them in relation to social justice, with actions that seemed contradictory. Indeed, we also found—and used—excerpts that reflected congruence between stated beliefs and observered actions. These were also important evidence of the dispositions informing their work. However, being able to speak to those actions at a deeper, more reflective level beyond their initial account of simply 'why they think' those excerpts represented their sense of being the right, just and fair thing 'to do', was enhanced, in our view, having also struggled with reflections on contradictions evident within the same lesson. Thus, rather than a tone of judgement, a broader shared discussion emerged—guided by the interviewer—on the *social interactions* and *social arrangements* characterising what it means 'to teach' in that particular setting, particularly with regard to the emphases and repetitions that became evident in the teacher's account of their activity. We did not offer the teachers our own assessment of their practices, and often found that their comments changed our own views.

Stage 3 of the research involved a second round of semi-structured interviews with our teacher participants, but with responses stimulated on this occasion by viewing video segments of the practice of *other* teacher participants in our research. Each teacher viewed between 4 and 12 clips of Stage 2 data, depending on the time available for the conversation and the length of their response to each clip. In the course of the viewing we invited teachers to note anything they saw as 'interesting', to explain what they would do if they were in the place of the teacher in the video and whether they could imagine themselves engaged in similar practice. Most teachers also offered their views on the practical and ethical merits of the practice they saw. Our interest was less in the substance of these evaluations of other teachers' practice and more in what these judements revealed about the disposition of the teacher with whom we were conversing. Our intention was to *stimulate critique*, that is, 'both criticism and reasoned reflection' (Dant, 2003, p. 7) but with the purpose of revealing what informed this critique so that this could become part of the dialogue. As with Stage 2, we deliberately selected video excerpts that we expected might provoke a response, juxtaposed with what we knew of the teacher's own context and practice; that is, to provoke an evaluation of themselves.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we offer two observations about (our) research on practice.

Most of our conversations with principals/head-teachers and teachers about their practice were purposefully unsettling, including techniques designed to produce an element of discomfort (Gale & Molla, 2017). Indeed, we sought to be deliberately provocative, eliciting views from our participants that might be at odds with their stated commitments or beliefs, to uncover the dispositions that informed their actions. Often these encounters also provoked wider ranging discussion about social justice ideals, goals and needs. In this way, through the use of these provocative techniques, our conversations became authentic pedagogical encounters for our participants, many of whom were able to engage in further shared conversations about what this might mean for socially just practice in the future.

We think this is probably unique to research on practice—not just our research but research on practice more generally—particularly when practitioners are actively involved in interpreting the practice. This is even more the case when the research techniques are deliberately designed to call practice into question, in order to identify the dispositions informing them. By default, we were engaged not just in researching practice but also in creating opportunities for that practice to change. This was made possible through the notion of activity systems, which helped to identify opportunities for interruption, resolution and, by extension, concrete, practical change. Indeed, activity as system was developed by Engeström not merely as an object for research but as a mediatory tool to transform existing conditions to result in different outcomes (Engeström, 2000; 2005). The representation of activity offered by Engeström articulates these points of tension within and between systems to understand how and why contradictions arise and, most crucially, what possibilities might exist to alleviate, resolve or remove them in the hope of alternative 'preferred futures' (e.g. Pennycook, 2001, p. 8; Roth, 2004; Sen, 2009).

Because we understood practice to be more than just what was empirically observable and because of the provocative techniques we employed to research practice—because we wanted to identify the dispositions informing practice—our own research practice provided us with a powerful way of working pedagogically with our teacher-participants to consider alternative, more ideal forms of future practice.

A second observation, which is actually *a priori* to the first, is that it is important for researchers to take a clear position on the nature of practice (ontology) in order to know what counts as evidence of practice (epistemology) and to devise techniques for generating that evidence. Stephen Ball (1993, p. 10) has similarly observed about policy that 'much rests on the meaning or possible meanings that we give to policy; it affects how we research and how we interpret what we find'. In our case, we understand practice as not simply evident in repetitive actions but also informed by the habitus and dispositions. Indeed, our research of practice was motivated by a desire to uncover the SJDs that inform teachers' practice given the often disconnect between social justice belief and practice. More generally, we would suggest that researching practice is never simply about investigating the nature of practice in isolation, but also about understanding what practice tells us about something else.

As noted above, understanding dispositions as residing at the level of the unconscious but revealed in practice, called for devising research techniques that would uncover or raise dispositions to the level of consciousness. More generally we might say that the creation of new knowledge of practice depends on new ways of working with data and innovations in research method. In our research, this included both new ways of approaching how data can be *read*, to attend to the unspoken guidance operating between what is said and done, and new techniques to *generate* accounts of dispositions by practitioners themselves. Our involvement of teachers in this way in generating data was not simply out of respect. It was also and more centrally because of our epistemological position that, under the right conditions, teachers were well placed to contribute knowledge of these dispositions.

In sum, research on practice: (1) as a practice, can provide opportunities for more than just research, indeed for changed practice in the context of the research; and (2) is invariably about more than just practice, testing its ontological and epistemological boundaries or at least an exclusive focus on practice as a site for research.

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