Chapter 10

Setting Aside Settings: On the Contradictory Dynamics of “Flat Earth,” “Ordinalization,” and “Cold Spot” Education Governing Projects

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Place Matters

Place matters, and for schools located in the neighborhoods of towns and cities, place not only holds meanings for individuals, but also shapes their experiences of school and education trajectories (Massey, 1994). Individuals variously describe schools as “rough,” “good,” or “posh”—all social attributes that link school places to the social worlds they create. They draw on memories of days past, or teachers who scared, challenged, or looked out for them, to justify their success or lack of it. Yet experiences of school are mediated by structural and social differences. This is because places themselves are shaped by unequal patterns of resource distribution, and particularly so when the possessors of capital and class make strategic use of geographical variation and inequality to secure their own interests. The topographies of place and space are also organized in such a way that they exude politics (Massey, 1994). And this matters for schools. Good schools in expensive neighborhoods are not just an expression of class power; they are spaces where classes advance strategies and negotiate borders so as to secure particular kinds of educational experiences and futures (Ball, 2002).

The relationship between place and the state is also important, for the state has a territorial view of space and its boundaries (Elden, 2013). Its “citizens”—those who claim rights and protections in exchange for ceding some sovereignty to the state—are in turn subjects of the state and the objects of governing. And governing is a political and dynamic process for the state, as it advances ideological projects, seeks legitimacy to rule, and engages in the ongoing management of crisis tendencies in capitalist development (Harvey, 2006).

Schools are important here, for it is through education that the state produces workers and future citizens, fostering their loyalty to the state and society through

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imagined communities of the nation (Anderson, 1983). Here the state must manage tensions arising from contradictions in the “social contract”—between the rights of the universal subject and the production of structural differences (Dale & Robertson, 2009). The ideological work of the state—through concepts and strategies such as meritocracy, social mobility, school choice, responsibility, and entrepreneurialism—are just some of the ways the state, ideologically and materially, manages the governing of education, including its contradictions.

In this chapter, I aim to explore these structures, strategies, and relations through an analysis of the spatial nature of socioeconomic differences between schools in England, UK. I do so in the context of significant movement (or rescaling) of education governance activity upward to organizations like the OECD, and at a moment of visible and growing social inequalities within countries like England. In the Foreword to the Social Mobility Commission’s *State of the Nation 2017 Report*, Commission Chairman, Alan Milburn, observed of the UK:

The chances of someone from a disadvantaged background getting on in life are closely linked to where they grow up and choose to make a life for themselves. It has been commonplace in recent years to think of this geographical divide in terms of a north/south divide. The Social Mobility Index paints a more complex picture than that. There is a stark social mobility postcode lottery in our country today. (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a, p. IV)

The devolution to regions (especially Scotland and Wales), the promotion of education markets and choice, the shift from government to governance, the rise of transnational education governance especially through the OECD, the loss of governing powers for many of England’s 324 local education authorities, and cuts in funding to social welfare sectors since the 2008 financial crisis have generated new governing challenges alongside spatial inequalities for schools and learners.

A new lexicon has emerged to describe structural inequalities in England. Places with good schools, vibrant labor markets, and positive health indicators are called “hot spots” (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a, 2017b). “Cold spots” are the opposite: a mix of low student attainment scores, weak labor markets, inadequate housing and poor health indicators. New kinds of geographic inequalities now also cut across old ones as the nature of school composition changes. These, in turn, translate into different education trajectories, even amongst the disadvantaged. For example, 50% of disadvantaged students who reside in a well-heeled borough of London (in this case Kensington and Chelsea) are likely to make it to university, whilst only 10% of disadvantaged students in former industrial towns, like Barnsley, find their way to university (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a, 2017b, p. IV).

The consequences are politically important in that such divides not only produce new kinds of disadvantage, but also reproduce old forms of social and political power. As Dorling (2014, p. 2) argues:

It is geography that reveals just how divided we have become as a society in this country. There are places from which it appears almost impossible to succeed educationally and others where it seems very hard to fail. On any given day, a fifth of children in Britain qualify for free school meals. Just one in 100 of those children get to go to either Oxford or Cambridge University. Four private schools and one highly selective state sixth-form

college send more children to Oxbridge than do 2,000 other secondary schools. The most prestigious 100 schools secure 30% of all Oxbridge places. And 84 of them are private schools.

If settings matter for schools, how is it that these characteristics of places and the dynamics that shape them are rendered barely visible in the state’s accounts of, and interventions in, education in England? And in the face of deepening structural inequalities, how do the state and its shadow sovereigns legitimately govern sectors like education, where education inequalities amplify existing social and economic inequalities? What political work do national league tables of schools’ performance and international rankings of student attainment do so as to generate alternative narratives of what accounts for differences? And how is social justice through education parsed so as to manage these legitimization deficits?

In this chapter I argue that a particular politics of state spatial power is at play, and that the national state and shadow sovereigns manage questions of authority and legitimacy through the use of ideologies (e.g., school effectiveness, social mobility), devices (such as rankings and league tables), and explanations of cause (such as aspiration gaps), with which one can rearticulate the problem of difference, not as structurally caused, but as a failure of individual effort, expectations, and aspirations.

Seeing like a State, Spatiality, and Regimes of Sight

It was James C. Scott (1998) who coined the term “seeing like a state.” Scott’s contribution was to argue that the power to see and make visible particular kinds of entities in the landscape was key to modern statecraft. For the state, this means bringing into view subjects using simplifying devices, such as standardization and rationalizing. Visible subjects are then made *legible* and the object of governing. However, these simplifications are like “abridged maps”: They do not represent actual activity in settings but, rather, those activities that interest the official observer (Scott, 1998, p. 3). In the case of the state, the subject is likely to be a potential taxpayer, a defender of the state’s territory, or an enforcer of the state’s rules (see also Bartl, Papilloud, & Terracher-Lipinski, 2019, p. 15). I can add here those it deems its “citizens” with rights, such as to education, which in turn shapes the state-citizen social contract (Dale & Robertson, 2009; Sassen, 2006). It follows that seeing like a state means flattening the topography of absolute space, and specificities of place, as it engages in territorial governing. Schools are variously “dots” on a map; a numbered “entry” in a ledger; or lumped into a category as an archetypal kind (e.g., in England, an academy school, independent school, grant maintained school, or free school).

The state’s authority to govern is dependent on securing legitimacy from its citizens. However, as Ferguson and Gupta (2002) also argue, a cultural politics of authority is also at work. “States are not simply functional bureaucratic apparatuses, but powerful sites of symbolic and cultural reproduction, which are themselves always culturally represented and understood in particular ways” (Ferguson &

Gupta, 2002, p. 981). They ask: "...How is it that people come to experience the state as an entity that has certain spatial characteristics and properties?" Ferguson and Gupta (2002) argue that the modern western state is imagined and materialized through discourses of verticality and encompassment.

Verticality comprises the pervasive idea of the state as "above" civil society, community and family, and of state planning and action being inherently top-down. Community, by way of contrast, is below, closer to "the ground" and authentic. Encompassment constitutes the ever-widening circles—from the local, to the nation, and system of nation states—through which those below are contained. Taken together, the image of vertical encompassment enables the state to sit above an "on-the-ground society," and in so doing project a powerful image of itself as superior, politically and cognitively, and thus effective and authoritative. This kind of spatial imaginary naturalizes state power in relation to those it governs, and its legitimacy is secured through verticality—as, simply, the way things are.

Researchers can utilize the idea of vertical encompassment to gain insights into how international organizations—such as shadow sovereigns—secure degrees of legitimacy for governing sectors over which they have no constitutional authority or hard regulatory power. Indeed, education is constitutionally a national and subnational responsibility. Yet over the past 20 years, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, in particular, has dramatically increased the range of programs aimed at coordinating national education systems. Initiatives like PISA have also been extended to include many non-OECD countries. PISA, which was launched in 2000, is a large-scale assessment tool used every 3 years to rank countries' performances on mathematics, science, and literacy. More recently, the OECD has added a global competence framework to PISA. In 2008, it launched a parallel assessment of teachers—the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS). TALIS operates on a 5-year reporting cycle. Both PISA and TALIS are aimed at improving learning and teaching in those countries they cover.

In monitoring a country's education system or systems, the OECD argues that it was ceded authority to act as an inter-governmental think-tank (Woodward, 2009). By this, the OECD means it has been given powers to act on behalf of the various national governments who authorize, resource, and legitimate its projects and programs. In so doing, it has the capacity to frame and shape national and sub-national education systems. Whilst this is true for OECD member countries where education is nationally governed, in many OECD countries it is not the national state who holds constitutional responsibility for education, but rather subnational states who are not represented (e.g., Germany, Chile, Australia, Canada, and the United States of America). The OECD's PISA also enrolls many more countries than those who are OECD members. How does it legitimate itself in these cases?

The OECD provides itself with a degree of legitimacy through vertical encompassment, as it can reference the authority the member country has bestowed on it. However, it needs more than this in education, especially when it governs non-member countries, and because its mission as a think-tank is to promote economic cooperation and the development of capitalist markets. Other forms of power and authority make up for this lack of regulatory power and the limits of vertical

encompassment: the use of data and statistics, and the OECD’s claim to objective expertise (Tröhler, 2014).

Data on populations, and the use of statistics, are well known to states via their census and statistics departments and are an important governing tool of societies and particular populations. The state has an interest in the reliable enumeration of people and things, as it needs to manage those in its territory (and those it wanted to manage out) for the purposes of taxation, security, military service, health, human development, and so on. And as Jasanoff (2017, p. 1) notes: “[I]f you can count something, you can also account for it.” Data can be used to point to, and make visible, particular objects/subjects in the landscape. The accumulation of data points, however, must be given a meaning—“as standing for a classifiable, coherent phenomenon in the world” (Jasanoff 2017, p. 2). This information “...must then be actionable, that is, it must show something actual, and something that begs to be investigated, explained or solved” (ibid). Quantities of data, and processes of quantification, tend to flatten reality and nuance in an effort to make things comparable—an issue I return to.

Claims to expertise can be legitimated in different ways. I have found Jasanoff’s (2017, p. 3) work on regimes of sight particularly useful here to think about questions of legitimation. A regime of sight has its own politics, standpoints, political claims, legitimating discourses, and set of practices. For example, think-tanks offer expert advice based on “reason” and imply their advice is inclusive of all populations, despite the fact that, in reality, they have both interests and ideological alignments. The politics of their regime of sight is as “a view from everywhere.” Scientists, by way of contrast, legitimate their expertise as located outside politics. They claim objectivity as a result of their science being peer reviewed. The politics of this regime of sight is as “a view from no-where.” There are several ways in which this seems to happen for the OECD’s education programs. As a think-tank for the developed world, its view is one from everywhere in that it claims forms of expertise based on reason, inclusion, and representation. The OECD also commissions work and takes advice from leading scientists to shape the content of its programs. In this sense, the OECD claims legitimacy for its programs via experts who sit outside of politics and whose expertise is presented as objective. When linked to vertical encompassment (above), and data and numbers as objective facts, a combination of regimes of sight—from above, nowhere, and everywhere—enables the OECD to reach down into national territorial spaces to make selective features of education systems visible and actionable.

Ideologies, Devices, and Politics

So far, I have argued that statecraft involves indicating and making visible selective aspects of social life. However, how one represents the world of people and things, and their relations to each other, also matters and has effects. Researchers may use a range of devices here, but these are not just mere devices. Different devices make

certain kinds of representations possible. Devices, powered by data, are epistemic objects, and as such are imbricated with ideology intended to shape consciousness and desire (Robertson & Sorensen, 2018).

A good example can be found in Quinn Slobodian's *Globalists* (2018). He shows how the idea of a world economy came into focus as a response to the Great Depression in the 1930s, and in the search for a global economic solution (Slobodian, 2018, p. 56). One of the more infamous statistical representations was called the Kindleberger Spiral—a circular graph to track the decline in volume of world trade. Slobodian (2018, p. 59) describes this as “barometer vision”: a means of measuring the pulse of the world economy and, by doing so, seeking to make visible the laws related to the sequence of economic fluctuations. If one could “see” the economy correctly, he argued, one could prevent future depressions. Over time, scholars have come to take for granted that such representations are a way of “seeing” economic activity. In short, they have come to see as legitimate a particular mode of representation, as if the data and the object were one and the same thing—in this case, the economy and representation of the business cycle.

Representations emerge out of classificatory judgements where “we learn to split, lump together, and assign things and people, including ourselves, to categorical schemas passed on to us” (Fourcade, 2016, p. 175). These categories gain their identifications and authority as a result of being “collectively crafted, sustained, and enforced” (ibid) in ways that take on meaning and stamps of approval. In participating, we are bound to each other.

Fourcade identifies three kinds of classificatory judgements: nominal, cardinal, and ordinal. Nominal scales of measurement are oriented to “essence” as a result of lumping things together (e.g., top performing countries in science; working class). Cardinal scales of measurement and judgements are tied to practices of collecting and accumulating (Fourcade, 2016, p. 177), such as the number of teachers without a teaching qualification (leading to concerns over teacher quality). Ordinal scales of measurement are used to refer to a specified position in a series of things, and the sense in which it is ordered—as in top to bottom, best to worst, more improved to least improved, and so on. These positions are often vertically represented, but they can also be horizontally presented. Vertically represented ordinal judgements typically operate according to a polarity of up and down positions (1–100) of relative ranks (no matter the size of difference either between or across ranks), and are used to imply different judgements and valuations (e.g., well above average to below average).

Modern ordinal judgements tend toward numerical commensuration. In so doing, researchers present them as an objective process of quantification, for example, the top 5 or 10, or 25 countries on the OECD's PISA or TALIS lists of rankings, or the top 50 secondary schools in England at Level 4. Thus, they use comparison and competition to drive learning and improvement in education systems. Elsewhere, I have called this vertically presented ordinal system “vertical vision” (Robertson, 2018). Ordinal systems have their own spatial dynamics. This is because only one entity can occupy one space at a time—although in some cases entities differ only

very marginally. Small differences are amplified, and large differences are scaled back.

Ordinal rankings are also epistemic devices that have inscribed onto their surfaces the spatial politics of the rules of the game being played (in the case of school league tables and PISA, competition for position) and the solution to be actioned (school and system improvement). In England, school effectiveness research has strongly influenced the education policymakers working on solutions. The same applies to the OECD. This epistemic standpoint can be found in the various OECD reports on what makes a good (or quality) school. As I show later in an analysis of England’s spatial and social inequalities, the school effectiveness literature has been roundly critiqued for focusing on the internal dynamics of schools, rather than offering a relational account linking the internal to the external. Focusing on the internal dynamics, such as school leaders or clarity of mission, places the full onus on the organization—the teachers in the school—to take responsibility for the students’ learning. Similarly, the vertical organization of space sets up relations between schools, countries, and regions that trigger a race to the top, kept in place by learning how to get ahead from those above. Regular cycles of data collection and data presentation add a temporal rhythm to this dynamic.

Whilst difference is important, this is a new kind (as in 1, 2, 3...), where the standardizing of difference imposes a new kind of rationality on a country’s education system. This is “standardization not as simple equivalence, but as inequality structured through the form of equivalence” (Mongia, 2007, p. 410). Standardization, as a technique of educational governance, reduces the “volume” of inequality between institutions, suggesting that the race is broadly one amongst equals. Yet as I will show in the following section on inequalities in England, this is far from the case. Many different kinds of schools exist, with different missions, levels of resources, governance structures, modes of accountability, and levels of achievement.

Lumpy Spaces: Spatial and Educational Inequalities in England

Despite the bleaching out of the differences that matter, lived spaces are real, material, and for many, increasingly precarious (Sassen, 2014; Streeck, 2014). There is considerable evidence that socioeconomic and educational inequalities have increased in many OECD countries, especially since the 2008 financial crisis. Streeck charts the shift from a tax state to the debt state, with the state moving the burden of education and social welfare to families, whilst thinning the social safety net.

As early as 2008, the authors of an OECD report—“Growing Unequal? Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries”—flagged rising income inequalities and poverty across a range of OECD countries. Figures for the UK lay well above the OECD average for much of the 1980s and 1990s, but then a reversal set in.

Income inequality fell between 2000 and 2005, a shift that can be attributed to Blair's election in 1997 and Labour Party policy to invest in the social welfare sector. The number of children living in poverty fell from 14% to 10% between the mid-1990s and 2005. Despite this, child poverty rates remained above the levels recorded in the mid-80s (7–8%) and mid-70s (5%) (see OECD, 2008). Nevertheless, the gap between the rich and the poor was still greater in the UK than in three-quarters of OECD countries.

Despite the overall increase in income inequalities across OECD countries,¹ many of whom had embraced neoliberal policies, the OECD was insistent its member countries embrace, rather than retreat from, greater integration into the global world order. The OECD argued what was needed were more adequate statistical infrastructures to monitor changes in poverty and income inequality over time (OECD, 2008, p. 3).

In 2011, the OECD returned to the issue of growing global inequalities in "Divided We Stand" (OECD, 2011). Here, it registered an increase in inequalities in the UK from 2008 onward.

Barely months after the 2008 financial crisis, Sir Michael Marmot was appointed to head England's Commission on Equity and Health Inequalities (Marmot, 2010). The Commission's task was to propose a set of strategies to address the social determinants of health inequalities—two of which were deemed to be related to education. The 2010 Marmot Report made for a sobering read. The lower one's social status, the worse one's health, wellbeing, and life expectancy. Those living in the poorest neighborhoods, on average, died 7 years earlier than those living in the richest. Importantly, the Commission found similar patterns across education level, occupation, and housing conditions (Marmot, 2010, p. 12). Such social and economic conditions, the Report's authors noted, were neither a matter of chance nor bad behavior. Rather, they were caused by social and economic inequalities that shape the nature of child development and learners' levels of achievement.

The widening of these divisions by 2017 led Alan Milburn, (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a) Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, to declare that Britain was a deeply divided nation. Milburn presented the following statistics to show the widening gap's scale and significance: Between 1997 and 2017, (i) the bottom fifth of households saw their incomes increase by just over £10 per week compared to over £300 per week for the top fifth; (ii) the wealthiest 10% of households owned 45% of all household wealth; (iii) in 1998, the highest earners were paid 47 times more than the lowest—by 2015, this gap was 128 times; (iv) in the capital, London, almost two-thirds of workers were university graduates, compared to one third in the Northeast; and (v) a new generational divide had now emerged where poverty had been halved amongst pensioners, whilst many workers were on zero hours contracts or sufficiently low rates of pay to qualify for benefits (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a, pp. 4–5). This was the new working poor. In the

¹Although Wade and Birdsall (2002) point out that globally inequality was falling largely as a result of the rise in China's wealth.

Foreword to a second report also published in 2017 by the Social Mobility Commission (2017b), its Chairman, Alan Milburn, wrote:

In Britain today we face profound questions about the country’s future ... The public mood is sour, sometimes angry. Whole tracts of Britain feel left behind. Whole communities free the benefit of globalisation have passed them by ... The growing sense that we have become an us-and-them society is deeply corrosive. (Social Mobility Commission, 2017b, p. 1)

In 2020, the Institute of Health Equity published “The Marmot Review Ten Years On.” A decade of austerity policies (Blyth, 2013) dubbed “the punitive turn” in England, presented by policymakers as an inevitable response to the financial crisis, resulted in a bigger gap between those who live in well-off neighborhoods versus those who do not. Over this period, government spending on social welfare declined as a percentage of GDP, including education, public order and safety, housing, and community amenities (Marmot, Allen, Boyce, Goldblatt, & Morrison, 2020, p. 9). And it is not just financial cuts overall, but how and where they have fallen, which has impacted most on inequalities. The most depressed areas—especially in the north of England—have had the greatest reduction in per person spending, including in education, whilst those in England’s most deprived neighborhoods show increased levels of poorer attainment as well as school exclusions.

The authors of an Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) study (Gill, Quilter-Pinner, & Swift, 2017) show that those permanently excluded from school are four times more likely to have grown up in poverty, seven times more likely to have a special educational need, and ten times more likely to suffer mental health problems. It was in these areas of deepening disadvantage, the “left behind communities” (Sensier & Devine, 2017), that the decisive vote to leave the European Union was won in December 2019.

In its “State of the Nation 2017” report, the Social Mobility Commission (2017a) focused specifically on what it named the “place-based divide” in England. In their report, they show that classic “north/south” spatial divide arguments do not hold. To begin, disadvantaged students in London do better than pupils in any other region, despite the fact that London has the highest levels of childhood deprivation. “Almost three quarters of the best local authority areas in the top 10% are in London, which performs well in both primary and secondary education. Twelve of the best places are in inner London where 26% of secondary students are on free school meals compared with the national rate of 13%” (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a, p. 43). Researchers present its diverse school population, along with better resourcing and qualified (as opposed to unqualified) teachers, as explanations for this difference. They typify London as a social mobility “hot spot.”

By way of contrast, some rural, coastal, and former urban manufacturing areas perform badly (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a, p. 43). Researchers call these social mobility “cold spots.” They house local authorities and schools making up the bottom 10% of performers on the social mobility index (made up of 16 indicators). Substantially fewer disadvantaged students on free school meals go on to secondary schools rated “good” or “outstanding,” compared with a slightly better rate for such students in these areas able to access good or outstanding primary schools (p. 45).

In all of these places, whether as former manufacturing urban areas blighted with structural unemployment, or coastal areas with an aging population, along with socioeconomic deprivation and intergenerational unemployment, the context impinges on families and the school. These areas find it difficult to recruit, and retain, qualified teachers; aspirations are low amongst students; and there are lower levels of funding and investment in the schools and the region. Unsurprisingly, “13% of disadvantaged students in former industrial areas and 14% in remote rural cold spots progress to university compared with 27% in hot spots” (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a, p. V). The report’s authors conclude by arguing policy interventions should be given to Regional School Commissioners, new funds should be targeted at these areas aimed at boosting local innovation, and schools in marginal places might form education partnerships across regions to boost expertise (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a, p. 53).

Yet the turn to social mobility as a means of resolving socioeconomic inequalities, epitomized by the establishment of the Social Mobility Commission in 2010, is problematic. Social mobility sounds progressive, but is used to appeal to individuals and their aspirations to leave place and community behind. Attainment gaps are parsed as aspiration gaps. When social mobility is coupled to the ideology of meritocracy—where talent and effort expended on education is rewarded with a better job than one’s parents’ work—it becomes difficult to see the structural determinants of social inequalities (Littler, 2017).

Multi-Scalar Governing and the Recalibration of Difference

I began this chapter by asking how the national state and OECD govern the education system in the context of growing social inequalities and legitimation deficits. I also asked about the political work that producers of devices like league tables and rankings do so as to transform structural differences into differences to be attributed to the individual’s and nation’s capacity to learn, aspire, and be socially mobile. In this section, I examine how the OECD “sees” the English education system and what it makes legible, before moving on to look at how the national state also “sees” education objects/institutions and those who are located in these spaces as subjects.

Seeing England’s Education System: The OECD

I begin with a focus on the OECD’s flagship initiative—PISA, and specifically their PISA 2018 Report on England (Sizmur et al., 2019), in order to compare its account with other accounts presented above on the state of education in England, and in particular what one might learn from it so as to make better policy. PISA is described as:

... the study of educational achievement organized by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). PISA is conducted every 3 years; it assesses the abilities of pupils aged 15 in reading, mathematics and science. Pupils are assessed on their competence to address real-life challenges, and each round of PISA focuses on one of the three main areas—reading in 2018. (Sizmur et al., 2019, p. 14)

PISA’s “purpose” is clear: to produce statistical data that “enables a government to benchmark education policy and performance, to make evidence-based decisions, and to learn from one another” (Sizmur et al., 2019, p. 14). Learning from one another means taking note of where England is in relation to the 79 other participating countries. These countries are diverse—culturally, politically, and economically—and the tested schools range in location from a city in China (Beijing) to countries in quite different stages of development (cf., Albania, Canada, Morocco, Japan, Vietnam, and Saudi Arabia).

The English state looks out at the local education authorities, networks of providers, and schools. Standing above the English state is the OECD, looking out at the world and bringing England into a relationship of equivalence with the 79 others who make up the PISA countries. Sub-national country-level differences disappear, whilst the topographies of countries are now re-represented by a graduated palette of colored worth. Complex social life in schools is managed using vertical vision, as numerical data points on a vertically-organized ordinal table to represent a country’s performance in mathematics, science, and literacy. Worth (as better or worse) is calculated by and calibrated via an average, in this case the OECD average for member countries.

Nevertheless, assessors declare that some socioeconomic and cultural differences matter. In Chap. 3 of the PISA 2018 Report on England (Sizmur et al., 2019), the authors present pupil background characteristics and reading scores, the latter being the main focus for the 2018 Report. They report socioeconomic background as the ESCS Index (economic, social, and cultural status), which they base on student responses to questions about their parent’s backgrounds, levels of education, and possessions in the home—a rudimentary and contested conception of social class as stratification, rather than class as domination and exploitation (Skeggs, 2015, p. 206). The assessors set the index to a mean of 0 across OECD countries, with a standard deviation of 1. England’s mean score on the ESCS Index was +0.28, meaning that pupils on average have a higher socioeconomic status than the average across OECD countries (p. 58). This representation is at odds with the OECD’s data on income inequality and poverty, where the UK is well above the OECD average and rising, suggesting that different sources of data or different modes of representation are used for frequently political purposes.

The report’s authors show a gap in attainment between high ESCS Index pupils versus low ESCS Index pupils for England. More advantaged students in England achieved higher reading scores than their less advantaged peers (Sizmur et al., 2019, p. 59). England’s national measure of disadvantage is free school meals (FSM). For this report, the authors matched the English PISA sample to the school census database, where 11% were eligible for FSM and 89% were ineligible. Those eligible for FSM score below those ineligible, and this difference is statistically significant.

What the authors do not reveal, but is known from the “Report on Social Mobility” (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a, 2017b), is that this does not hold for all geographic spaces. Students enrolled in London schools receiving FSM are not only likely to perform much better than FSM and non-FSM students in other geographies of England, but as I noted at the start of this chapter, some 50% of disadvantaged students in London (many receiving FSM) find their way to university.

A second sociocultural dimension is ethnicity—with nominal categories such as “mixed,” “other,” “Asian,” and “Black.” Again, the PISA data is complemented by a matched England school census data base for ethnicity of participating students (Sizmur et al., 2019, pp. 64–65). The Report’s authors reveal that mixed and white pupils achieve, on average, higher mean readings scores on PISA 2018 than pupils from other ethnic groups. Mixed and white pupils significantly outperform Asian and Black pupils. Yet, as this is neither linked to socioeconomic status nor to the geographic location of the school, the authors overlook the poor attainment levels of geographically specific working-class white students in the urban industrial areas, as well as in rural and coastal areas.

Seeing England’s Schools: The National State

Despite the significance of the spatial and social inequalities shaping the quality of schooling in England, the national state routinely overlooks these inequalities’ importance in its policy interventions. This is not a new problem. Beginning in the 1970s, sociologists pointed to the neglect of context (Ball, 1981; Halsey, 1972; Willis, 1977). In this section, I explore what the English state chooses to make visible, what aspects become the objects of policy intervention, and its “treatments” and “repair” strategies and ideologies. Sociologists like Lupton (2004, 2005), Thrupp (with Thrupp & Lupton, 2006), and Braun, Ball, Maguire and Hoskins (2011) have highlighted this selectivity, arguing that education policymakers must, as a matter of social justice, take seriously the wider structural dynamics that shape school contexts: “Even the same kinds of schools can be different” (Braun et al., 2011, p. 587).

As Thrupp and Lupton (2006, p. 308) observe, it is not just a matter of looking at schools as different from each other with regard to their *internal* organization—such as a school’s leadership, its management, or the nature of its pedagogy. Instead, they show that it is the *external* contexts that particularly matter. The external characteristics of the school’s context that majorly impact the school can include pupil intake characteristics (such as social class, ethnicity, special needs students, refugee populations), the school’s area characteristics (rural, urban, city, industrial), and how it is governed more broadly (local education authority, market position compared to surrounding schools, private).

Drawing on detailed work on schools in New Zealand, Thrupp (1999) shows that socioeconomic composition affects a school’s processes in numerous ways. It can boost academic performance in middle- and upper-class settings and drag performance down in low socioeconomic settings. Lupton (2004, 2005) builds on Thrupp’s

work to show that even in “ostensibly similar SES schools there are other contextual differences which may cumulatively make a difference to school processes and student achievement” (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006, p. 309). In short, different kinds of difference matter differently!

Whilst disadvantaged contexts impact schools’ organization and processes, their effects can also differ significantly from one area to another (Lupton, 2004, p. III). Lupton’s (2004, p. 6) study of four disadvantaged schools in very deprived neighborhoods (top 3% most deprived wards in the country) is worth elaborating upon here, for she provides the kind of empirical evidence that illuminates how and why, for example, the social mobility hot and cold spots discussed above exist in the same geographic spaces. Lupton nuances the relationship between context and disadvantage. All four schools had: (i) a proportion of students receiving free school meals (a proxy for deprivation) that was twice the national average; (ii) a higher than average number of students with special needs; and (iii) lower than average prior attainment (as reported in OFSTED inspection reports). Two schools had a majority of pupils whose main language was not English. Yet these differences, she notes, are not reflected in the standard indicators of disadvantage.

Lupton shows that poverty matters, and whilst school managers respond to challenges within their schools arising from SES differences, small numerous additional tasks accumulate in such a way that additional burdens are placed on the teachers and the school. Lupton shows that additional learning needs require relevant resources (especially for ethnic minorities) that teachers either make or acquire. Material poverty amongst families means that the school and not the family must pay for enrichment activities, stretching school resources. All four schools had a number of students who were emotionally disturbed and disruptive in classrooms, so that managing this took a great deal of teacher and school time. Moreover, students with poor attendance profiles made it difficult for teachers to take each day for granted.

A key finding is that there were important differences between each of the four schools. “One poor area was not the same as another” (Lupton, 2004, p. 12); different social and economic characteristics work out differently. Some students from non-English speaking backgrounds had additional burdens placed on them at home that limited their capacity to engage properly. However, they still aspired to do well. Other students from dysfunctional home lives had emotional needs that caused considerable disruption at school. Some white working-class families had negative attitudes to learning, whilst some ethnic families (e.g., Asian) were pro-school. Free school meals (FSM), a proxy for disadvantage, did not always translate into poor student attainment. In different combinations, these differences resulted in more or less favorable contexts for learning. As Lupton notes: “some high FSM, high ethnic minority areas may actually offer more favourable environments for schooling than white, lower FSM areas. Simple poverty and ethnicity measures are not sufficient and may even be misleading” (Lupton, 2004, p. 34). Although it does not hold for all social groups, some first-generation learners are often quite highly motivated and can overcome the limitations of current social class location tied to occupation.

Despite these schools' complexities of difference and their spatial politics, they nevertheless become invisible in school league tables that represent student and school attainment in England. School league tables are produced annually out of large-scale assessments made at particular stages of schooling (Key Stage 2—Year 4; Key Stage 4—Year 10). These tables' producers promise to provide “choosing” families evidence on the quality of the school. They also promise to provide the school with data on its own quality, which in turn leads to school improvement. However, as an indicator of performance and quality, statistics experts are clear that “institutional and subsystems comparisons must be contextualized, principally by making adjustments for student status and achievements on entry to the education system” (Goldstein & Spiegelhalter, 1996, p. 388).

In response to criticisms regarding the crudeness of league table indicators, the UK's Department for Education introduced adjusted (value-added) comparisons between schools and value-added measures (VAM) to capture and judge whether a school had enhanced its students' performances between entry and exit. Yet as Goldstein and Spiegelhalter (1996, p. 388) point out

... such an aim, although worthy and an improvement on unadjusted 'raw' league tables, is generally unrealizable; adjusted league tables inherit many of the deficiencies of the unadjusted ones and an appreciation of well-established statistical principles of uncertainty measurement needs to inform public debate.

Obscuring the differences that matter, whilst projecting an air of certainty through the seeming objectivity of numbers, closes down the need for public debate.

Like the OECD's PISA results, league tables are also subjected to ordinal classificatory principles to both rank schools (1, 2, 3, and so on) and attribute value—“above average,” “average,” and “below average.” Their vertical arrangement sets up a new moral economy—orchestrated through vertical vision—whose category-making principles produce a new kind of stratified difference: of those who aspire to move up, and those who are anxious not to lose height. As the title of Epseland and Sauder's (2017) book describe them, league tables and rankings are “engines of anxiety” powered along by an emotional economy in such a way as to obscure the role of the state in the reproduction of inequalities.

Sightlines of Social Justice

At one level, PISA provides very little of relevance to English education policymakers concerned with intervening in schools and their communities with robust evidence. By failing to work with policy tools that make visible and actionable structural, spatial socioeconomic and cultural differences, PISA data is almost worthless. At another level, however, PISA is a tool for positioning the English education system's performance in relation to other OECD countries, and in doing so, structures global inequalities into relations of assumed equivalence between countries in a world system (Mongia, 2007). This is Thomas Friedman's (2005)

“flat earth” and “level playing field,” pitched by the OECD as important for human capital formation and economic development.

In this sense, national league tables of schools’ performance and international rankings of student attainment help generate alternative narratives of difference that researchers should attend to. This imposes a new economy of worth and value onto education—one that brings social justice more into line with principles of market justice rather than social justice (Streeck, 2014). Streeck describes market justice as

... the distribution of the output of production according to the market evaluation of individual performance, expressed in relative prices; the yardstick for remuneration according to market justice is marginal productivity; the market value of the last unit of output under competitive conditions. (Streeck, 2014, p. 58)

A PISA score is precisely that: a unit of output under competitive conditions.

League tables and rankings, set alongside discourses of social mobility, reinforce the methodological individualism of political liberalism. In so doing, they place the onus for success on both the individual and the school’s internal dynamics. By “setting aside settings”—whether at the level of the individual or the school—the national state and the shadow state (OECD) systematically obscure knowledge about the underlying structures and their relations. The use of data and the mobilization of vertical vision work to further distract attention from the contexts that matter, for whom, and how.

In a recent paper, Jonathon Mijs (2019) pointed to the paradox of growing inequality: Across a range of countries, high levels of income inequality and belief in meritocracy seem to go hand in hand. One could assume that the reality of increasing inequalities might be accompanied by popular concerns and legitimation shortfalls, something that I have been concerned with in this paper. Mijs (2019, p. 2) muses over what explanations researchers might consider. One might be lack of information: Lack of knowledge generates lack of concern. A second might be that an unequal society make individuals more tolerant of inequalities. However, in the paper Mijs offers a different explanation. Drawing on the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), with its data-sets covering 23 countries over a 25 year period, Mijs shows that respondents in high inequality countries have come to believe that success in terms of high incomes is not structural but the outcome of a fair, meritocratic process where societal success simply reflects their talent, ambition, and hard work. Low inequality societies believe the opposite. In short, a new kind of common sense has been brokered. With my analysis of the contemporary English education system, I suggest that the ways in which governance instruments are mobilized all but obscure structural inequalities in the state’s policy interventions. The ramping up of individualism (choice), of competition (rankings), and the amelioration of discursive interventions (social mobility) all contribute to an articulation between meritocracy and inequality.

So, what is to be done? What are the social justice issues and sightlines here? One might begin with Streeck’s conception of social justice as opposed to market justice above. He argues that a social justice perspective is

... determined by cultural norms and is based on status rather than contract. It follows collective ideas of fairness, correctness and reciprocity, concedes demands for a minimum livelihood irrespective of economic performance or productivity, and recognizes, civil and human rights to such things as health, social security, participation in the life of the community, employment protection and trade unionism. (Streeck, 2014, p. 58)

Thrupp and Lupton (cf., Lupton, 2004, 2005; Thrupp & Lupton, 2006) call for education policies that are contextualized if they are to improve schools is implicitly a social justice perspective. They argue against the one-size-fits-all policies typical of the school effectiveness and school improvement research literatures that England's Department for Education and the OECD favor. As they say, generic discussions necessarily create accounts that are not *just too neutral*, but also too naïve. Those operating on such assumptions perpetuate unequal schooling and unequal outcomes by prioritizing what they value into epistemic objects, and by rendering those things that really matter invisible, and thus unimportant.

The ongoing costs for disadvantaged socioeconomic groups will remain high unless one challenges such governance of education frameworks, not least because this early set of experiences now sets the course for ongoing and accumulating limitations that structure a student's trajectory through education and into the labor market. Britton, Dearden, Shepherd and Vignoles (2016) show that the subject the student studies, at what kind of university, in what region, with what kind of student background (ethnicity, parental occupation, deprivation, and school type), and with what grades all significantly shape future income.

Final Conclusions

I began by arguing that the social nature of place matters for schools. As settings, they are not simply inert backdrops against which education activity happens. Schools are shaped by, and shape, the social-economic, cultural, political, and technological processes and relations in place. Schools are lived spaces of meaning, or to use Massey's words, they are "particular envelopes of time/space" (1994, p. 5). Yet these meanings are not just discursively negotiated; they also emerge out of the socio-materiality of places, as well as being shaped by wider governance projects and processes.

I have elsewhere argued that

...the structures, processes and practices of education governance frameworks matter, because they shape the form, pattern and scope of education policies and practices, the opportunities they provide, and the outcomes they enable. Education governance frameworks, therefore, both intrinsically and necessarily, have social justice implications in that they structure, and are 'strategically selective' (Jessop, 2005) of, some interests, life chances and social trajectories over others. (Robertson & Dale, 2013, p. 427)

With deepening structural social inequalities, the challenge for both the national state and shadow sovereigns like the OECD is how to legitimately govern education when it is so deeply implicated in reproducing place-based inequalities and social

difference. The state’s interests rooted in its dependence on capital accumulation, the contingent alignments of the economic elites with the political elites, and its function as a legitimator of capital have been laid bare. As Dale (1982) has argued, the contradictions for the capitalist state mean holding accumulation, legitimation, and social cohesion together in a contradictory unity.

A more serious engagement with, and recognition of, school contexts by policy-makers at multiple scales (sub-national/national and supra-national) is thus a social justice issue. However, this would mean challenging the state to “see” and account for structural injustices, and to be held account for them. Given that state’s top-down view tends to overlook the differences that matter, strengthening teachers as professionals and bringing policy decision-making closer to communities might offer more differentiated responses to an improvement problem requiring diversity, variability, and flexibility (Harris & Chapman, 2004, p. 420).

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