

# Feeling at home in the classroom: Pedagogy, inclusion and the socio-economic background of teachers in rural schools

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A revised and extended version of this report was published in the *British Journal for Educational Studies* and can be viewed [here](#).

## Introduction

This small-scale research aimed to understand the socio-economic background of staff in six primary and secondary schools in rural England, and the extent to which they share, recognise and draw upon, their pupils' experience within the household and community. In their review, Aronson & Laughter (2016) identify multiple studies which have found that disadvantaged students learn best when they can relate, through their lived experience, to the pedagogies and curricula in use. Our research sought to counter 'deficit thinking' within the classroom (Valencia, 2010), the school and the community by adopting an 'asset-based' perspective, which recognises that although there may be material deprivation, all children have 'funds of knowledge' (Moll *et al.*, 1992; Vélez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 1992) which can be drawn on in the classroom through 'culturally relevant pedagogies' (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It has been argued that deficit thinking pathologises 'disadvantaged' and 'minority' groups by identifying students, their families and communities in terms of what they lack, when compared to middle-class norms (Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005). Although both 'funds of knowledge' and 'culturally relevant pedagogy' were first defined in the US context of low-income immigrant and black communities, "deficit thinking has dominated education policy for decades" in the UK, too. (Elliot Major & Briant, 2023, 26)

Our research focused on the life experiences of teachers (including school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants), asking whether those teachers who: i) share a similar socio-economic background with their pupils, or ii) participate in those communities by living in it and using its services, are better equipped to identify and draw on the historically accumulated knowledge of their pupils and community in the classroom.

Our research questions were:

1. To what extent do teachers share a similar socio-economic background to their pupils?
2. To what extent do teachers share a similar place of upbringing as their pupils?
3. To what extent do teachers participate in the communities of their pupils?
4. To what extent are teachers aware of their pupils' funds of knowledge?
5. To what extent do teachers draw on their pupils' funds of knowledge in their teaching? If so, how?

We hoped the research would help address key challenges relating to education and attainment in rural settings by developing a more robust understanding of the socio-economic and place-based factors of both teachers and pupils which affect the quality of teaching and learning.

## Teachers' socio-economic background

Government policy has assumed that children benefit from having teachers who share identity markers with their pupils, advocating that pupils benefit from role models of teachers of the same ethnicity or gender (Carrington and Skelton, 2003). Pupil engagement, their behaviour, teachers' empathy with pupils, how they represent the interests of pupils, and, as a result, improved attainment, are all reasons why 'matching' teachers and pupils is assumed to be a good thing. However, the evidence specifically linking teacher-pupil matching and improved attainment is lacking (Sharp and Aston, 2024). While greater diversity and inclusion in the teaching workforce has many obvious benefits for schools and society, we acknowledge that it needs to be disarticulated from "a reified focus on the singularity of gender and/or race as a central factor in determining and defining a teacher's pedagogical influence" (Rezai-Rashti and Martino, 2010, 42) and it is not our intention to repeat that error here by reifying social class. Yet we do wish to draw attention to the persistent significance of social class, from education to employment (Goldthorpe, 2016; Friedman and Laurison, 2020), mindful that "social inequalities arising from social class have never been adequately addressed within schooling" (Reay, 2006, 288) and that while social class is recognised in health and housing, classrooms are routinely presented as classless in education training and policy.

The socio-economic (i.e. class) backgrounds of *teachers* as an explanatory aspect of pedagogic practice is therefore also a neglected area of research (Keane et al. 2023). Instead, the focus is more often on the identity of the *pupil* and 'closing the gap' between black/white, boys/girls, abled/disabled, and disadvantaged children. Small-scale research which has studied the way teachers' social class influences their teaching found that, unlike teachers from middle-class backgrounds, whose social class has been normalised and rendered invisible (Hall and Jones, 2013, 418) teachers from working-class backgrounds made "constant reference to the types of homes and communities that the learners came from, and the social problems that they confronted." (Hoadley and Ensor, 2009, 880)

Although the statutory School Workforce Census collects data on teachers, their occupation and therefore current socio-economic classification (SEC) is already given, yet this does not accord with more sensitive methods of measuring social class *background* (SEB) that acknowledge the role of one's upbringing in the formation of social class identity and belonging. By contrast, the Social Mobility Commission's Cross-Industry Toolkit (2021) advocates that employers ask, 'What was the occupation of your main household earner when you were aged about 14?' and the British Social Attitudes survey (Bennet and Heath, 2023) asks, 'Do you ever think of yourself as belonging to any particular social class?'. These simple questions provide a satisfactory objective and subjective measure of social class that we have included in the present research.

## Teachers' participation in the school community

As with social class, relatively little research has focused on teachers' participation in the school community. Rezai-Rashti and Martino (2010, 53) highlight the need for teachers to be involved in the community in which their students are living and found that community involvement is "inextricably related to building pedagogical relationships that are grounded in ethical responsibility and high expectations for both students and their parents".

Funds of knowledge and culturally relevant pedagogy research situates the student within their household, community and culture. It is predominantly concerned with teachers being able to understand and relate to marginalised groups. Similarly, 'place-based education' (Yemini et al., 2023) situates learning in a context that is familiar to the students, encouraging them to "examine and respond to the needs of their communities while gaining understanding of how local institutions function and social relationships shape experiences of privileged and marginalised groups." (Flynn et al., 2009, 138) Teachers who live in the community are more likely to know about important events in the children's lives, to have local knowledge, and to draw on this in the classroom. Being members of two constituents, the community and the school, and having an insight into both, local teachers can act as a bridge between them and an advocate for closer integration. However, this may come at the cost of additional workload and a sense of responsibility to parents and pupils that can sometimes be difficult to bear. (Reed, 2009) When designing this research, our assumption was that those teachers who live local to the school are more likely to encounter their pupils and families in the community, sharing the same services, and being invested in improvements to pupils' learning but also the place they all live in.

## Research design

Our research included six schools that are part of an academy Trust in rural Lincolnshire: four primary and two secondary schools. One of the primary schools is a specialist school for children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder. The larger secondary school has a sixth form that provides students the opportunity to study A-levels, T-levels or vocational subjects, the smaller secondary school does not have a sixth form.

Quantitative data was obtained through an anonymised online questionnaire (n = 126), which draws upon existing survey instruments adapted to align with the research objectives. Through this questionnaire we collected data, based on validated questions from the Social Mobility Commission Toolkit for measuring socio-economic diversity, and the British Social Attitudes Survey to ascertain the socio-economic background of teachers (RQs 1 & 2). The questionnaire also collected data on where they grew up and where they now live (RQ2), enabling us to explore socio-economic and postcode relationships between both teacher and school pupil data, derived from existing school census data and anonymised pupil postcodes received directly from the school.

In addition, the project adopted questions from the UK Government's Community Life Survey (RQ3) to explore to what extent teachers are active participants of the community in which they work so as to understand how the lives of teachers and their pupils overlap outside of

the school. Quantitative data concerning teachers' awareness and use of pupils' funds of knowledge (RQs 4 & 5) were collected using a version of Rios-Aguilar's survey (2010) modified for the English rural context.

Following the questionnaire, qualitative data was obtained through eight semi-structured interviews to explore responses to the questionnaire with a focus on answering RQs 3,4, and 5. Interview data was analysed thematically: deductively using concepts in the established literature, and inductively to reflect the novel rural and English educational contexts.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Lincoln's ethics committee [UoL2024\_15755]. Informed consent was achieved by arranging an information meeting with the school Principals to explain the aims and purpose of the project and listen to any concerns about participation and discuss ways to alleviate them.

## Summary of findings

The questionnaire was open between February and April 2024. In total 126 responses were received from staff with varying roles within the six schools, these have been aggregated into three categories: senior leadership/management, teachers and teaching assistants/support staff. Interviews were carried out with the eight volunteers after the questionnaire was closed. A fuller discussion of all findings will be published in due course.

### To what extent do teachers share a similar socio-economic background to their pupils?

To address our first research question, we focused on staff and students from four of the schools who had provided anonymised pupil postcode data (Schools A, B, C and E). In total there were 1,883 identifiable postcodes which were used to classify which quintile of the IMD pupils lived within. The majority of pupils (54.5%) live in an IMD quintile 2 area (where quintile 1 is the most deprived) with a small proportion within quintile 1 (2.1%). This meant that 56.6% of students attending the four schools live in an area that is amongst the most 40% deprived areas of England.

We used the Social Mobility Commission's Toolkit to measure the socio-economic background of school staff. The first question from the Toolkit asks, 'What was the occupation of your main household earner when you were aged about 14?', the second question we used asks, 'If you finished school after 1980, were you eligible for free school meals at any point during your school years?'. We compared these data with pupils' IMD and FSM profile.

The proportion of students eligible for FSM at Schools A, B, C and E is 29.2%, which is above the national average of 24.6%, and higher than that of the school staff (17.5%). However, historical data for this measure are only available from 2001, when the Government began collecting pupil level information, so a direct comparison cannot be made. Using the SMC Toolkit measure for socio-economic background, 46.2% of staff were from a working-class background, which is less than the proportion of students living within IMD quintile 1 and 2 areas.

For the third measure, social class, we used questions from the British Social Attitudes survey: 'Do you ever think of yourself as belonging to any particular social class?'. Those that responded 'no' were further asked 'most people say they belong either to the middle class or the working class. If you had to make a choice, would you call yourself middle class or working class?'. We looked at the responses to those questions from staff from the four schools that we had pupil postcode data for, 64.0% chose working class and 34.2% chose middle class. Using all three measures, the majority of staff appear to come from similar socio-economic backgrounds as the pupils.

### To what extent do teachers share a similar place of upbringing as their pupils?

Again, we used the anonymised pupil postcode data to explore where pupils lived and we compared these data to where staff from the same four schools lived when they were growing up to; we used the Government's rural-urban classification for the comparison. Most pupils live in a rural area (91.2%), with over half living in a village setting. In contrast, a large proportion of staff had an urban upbringing (41.7%). Additionally, six of the members of staff grew up outside of the UK.

### To what extent do teachers participate in the communities of their pupils?

This question measured the extent that staff participate in the community in which they work, specifically within 20 minutes' walk of the school. For this research question we considered the responses from all staff. We used two questions from the Government's Community Life Survey: firstly, asking about services and amenities that staff used and secondly, asking about activities within the community that staff may have been involved in.

Overall, the most used amenity was a general or grocery store, 73.3% of staff had shopped in the area. As might be expected, the staff who live closest to the school where they work generally use the services and amenities in the community more than those that live more than five miles away. However, almost two thirds of those that live the furthest still shop in the area around their place of work (63.0%), suggesting an element of convenience. A fifth of staff had not used any of the services or amenities in the community in which they work. Staff were much less likely to have been involved in community activities in the area around the school they worked in, 84.3% had not been involved in any listed.

### To what extent are teachers aware of their pupils' funds of knowledge?

Adapting Rios-Aguilar (2010), we categorised funds of knowledge as: knowledge of a household's labour history; a household's social interactions; a household's frequent activities; a household's educational experience, and a household's composition.

Accordingly, we asked school staff: 'Thinking about the pupils in one of the classes that you teach or support: would you usually know...' (*5-point scale: never, rarely, sometimes, often, always*)

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1. What jobs your pupils' parent(s)/carer(s) do?
  2. What your pupils do outside of school in their community?

3. Whether your pupils have regular opportunities for acquiring non-academic knowledge and skills outside of school?
  4. The educational attainment of your pupils' household?
  5. The composition of your pupils' household?
  6. If your pupils have lived in another country at some point in their life?
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We combined the underlying six funds of knowledge questions into one measure. We tested internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha, our funds of knowledge measure demonstrated good reliability, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient = 0.84. For all school staff (n=118), the mean score of the funds of knowledge measure was 3.01 (SD 0.63). We calculated the mean score for the measure for each of the independent variables, e.g. age, role, socio-economic background etc. There were statistically significant differences across several groups: senior leadership staff were more likely to score the funds of knowledge measure higher, similarly, being working class was associated with a higher mean score as was working at a primary school. Interestingly, the mean score for those growing up rurally was almost the same as the mean score for those with an urban upbringing. This research found no link between staff members' place of upbringing and their awareness of pupils' funds of knowledge (RQ2).

We used hierarchical regression analysis to identify which of the independent variables had the greatest effect on awareness of pupils' funds of knowledge. We used social class, urban or rural upbringing, and community involvement (RQs 1 to 3) in addition to role and type of school as indicated by our one-way ANOVA analysis. The subject taught variable was not included in the model because of multicollinearity. For the categorical variables with more than two categories, i.e. role (senior leadership, teacher and teaching assistant) and social class (middle class, working class and no affiliation), we used dummy variables.

In our baseline model, role was entered into the regression analysis, this model explained 9% of the variation in awareness of pupils' funds of knowledge. The addition of social class to the analysis (model 2) increased the proportion of variation explained to 17%. Next, we introduced the type of school, i.e. primary or secondary (model 3), together these three variables explained 20% of the variance. The addition of the community involvement and geographical upbringing variables (models 4 and 5) did not increase the *R*-square value.

Our analysis revealed that role, social class and school type have an impact, albeit small, on staff awareness of pupils' funds of knowledge, together explaining 20.1% of the variance (model 3).

## Summary of questionnaire results

In summary, despite the problems associated with comparing different types of data to measure their social class backgrounds, we found that the majority of staff share a similar social class background as their pupils (RQ1). Not surprisingly, school staff grew up in a broader range of urban and rural settings than their pupils currently live, although over half (58%) of staff are from a similar rural and village setting as the schools they currently work in (RQ2). Again, as expected, those staff who live closest to the school (less than five miles) are more likely to use the services and amenities in the community; notably, however, a fifth

of school staff had never used the services and amenities in the school community and only 15.7% had participated in any community activities listed in the questionnaire (RQ3). The key reason for asking questions about teachers' social class and community participation was pedagogical: is there a relationship between this and their understanding of pupils' funds of knowledge? Our research shows that senior leadership staff, being working class and working at a primary school were each associated with a greater overall ability to know about their pupils' funds of knowledge. There was no link between staff members' place of upbringing, nor their community participation, and their awareness of pupils' funds of knowledge. (RQ4)

## To what extent do teachers draw on their pupils' funds of knowledge in their teaching? If so, how?

To help answer our final research question, we interviewed a primary school head teacher, primary school governor, four secondary school teachers, one secondary school teaching assistant and one primary school teaching assistant. We wanted to know how teachers draw on their pupils' experience of the household and wider communities in their teaching. We approached this by asking about interviewees' perceptions of their social class background; their relationship with the school community; the opportunities and challenges for learning about their pupils and their families' lives, and the perceived risks and benefits of developing these opportunities.

### *Perceptions of social class background*

Two of the participants have a strong sense of working-class identity and background. These participants consider their socio-economic and class backgrounds a pedagogical asset, perceiving it gives them greater insight into the lives and the challenges facing their working-class pupils. Six of the participants do not have a strong sense of social class, although they are aware of difference among pupils and the importance of equity and equality. In principle, they see the children as equals to each other and there are support structures in the school to try to ensure equity among pupils. The teaching assistants (TA) and Learning Mentors/Pastoral team are essential to this. Although the emphasis of support is on those children with identified needs (Pupil Premium, SEND), a lot of work is done to ensure that parents feel able to work with the school on the education of their child. The parent-school relationship is key, as highlighted by the interview with the head teacher who took on a new school and the supporting comments of the governor. The school governor recognised that teachers are doing "social work", beyond the classroom, and engaging with families and their challenging circumstances. The lengthy career experience of the secondary school TA, who supported the parents of current pupils, acutely demonstrates the value of knowing the parents in order to know the child.

### *Relationship with school community*

Two participants do not live near their school community or make much use of amenities in the community within which the school is situated. Six participants live in or near the school community and four have done so for most of their lives. These six feel a responsibility to it and all of the participants are aware of the challenges of rural living (e.g. transport, low-wage employment, lack of prospects) and the effect this can have on the education of children.

The head teacher and TAs have regular contact with parents and children, inside and outside the school and in the boundary of the playground and school office, though contact with parents outside of parents' evenings was less commonly reported by teachers. Most of those interviewed felt that their participation in the community beyond the school gates had benefits, for example by demonstrating their personal investment in the community to children and parents. However, it wasn't always possible to connect schools with their wider community – the primary school with SEND specialism provided education to children from a range of communities, some of considerable distance from the school.

### *Learning about pupil's lives*

Participants make formal (curriculum-relevant class discussions) and informal (chatting prior to lessons commencing) opportunities within class for pupils to share their experiences and non-school achievements. This is understood to be easier in subjects like PSHE and humanities than in core subjects, with the latter perceived to offer fewer opportunities for learning about pupil's lives. The classroom is only one space where they get to know the children and the curriculum is only one means by which they engage with the children. Playtimes, before and after school clubs, extra-curricular activities, one-to-one interventions, pastoral care and limited time scheduled into the day, also enriches their understanding of the children's families and interests. Digital communication provided by an education app was used by one of the participating schools, enabling teachers and parents to exchange messages and share photos from home. There are also local events, such as the flower festival, and seasonal services, held in the church, which parents and school staff, include the governor, attend. It raises the question of whether there is another local institution which does *so much* to bring a community together, albeit one that parents and children only temporarily participate in until the child moves on.

### *Using this knowledge in the classroom*

The head teacher and TAs seem confident that they can identify children's funds of knowledge, especially as the school year progresses and more time is spent with the children. Theories of asset-based pedagogies are primarily focused on their importance for marginalised and disadvantaged students, and it is those children who are frequently referred to by the TAs, whose job it is to support them. The head teacher also provides examples of children and their parents who are struggling with attendance or struggling to cope with life challenges and mental health issues. Some participants expressed ambivalence about knowing "too much" about the negative aspects of the lives of their pupils, recognising both the benefits of this knowledge and fearing the toll it can take on their own mental health and work-life balance.

Considering the three components of culturally relevant pedagogy, through dialogue with the pupils and their parents, the interviewees demonstrate a concern to develop students academically and nurture and support cultural competence but are not engaging in cultural critique. However, the head teacher and TAs (as "social workers") are aware and critical of the social and cultural circumstances of the children and their families. In our discussions, it is referred to in the language of "deprivation", "pupil premium", "mental health", "resilience", etc. rather than social class, but there is no suggestion that this is given attention in the classroom. If anything, these 'dark funds' (Zipin, 2009) are avoided; children are "safeguarded" against the problems they may be experiencing and there is a sense that



'feeling at home in the classroom' may not always be desirable. Sometimes life at home could be better and school is a place where attempts are continually made to make up for and even resolve problems at home.

## Conclusion

On reflection, our initial focus on the teacher-pupil relationship in the classroom was too narrow and overlooked the importance of other relationships and spaces within the school. The outward facing space of the playground and school office is an important place for parents to communicate with school staff. The role of the TAs, between the children and the teachers, which one TA referred to as "a nice place to be", allows for students to share their experiences outside the formal curriculum and develop more nurturing relationships with children. As for the curriculum, core subjects may restrict the extent that teachers can draw on their pupils' funds of knowledge, due to the amount of content that is covered, while non-core subjects are more flexible. There is also PSHE, which provides an opportunity to explore personal and social issues with the children.

As we had expected, our small-scale study has stimulated a number of thoughts that are worth pursuing on a larger scale. Social class and community participation remain key concepts that are deserving of greater attention in educational research. With this in mind, we paid careful attention to the survey design to ensure the questions were from existing validated survey instruments in order that it can be employed again by us and other researchers. As we have discussed, the survey borrows questions and classifiers from the national *Community Life Survey* to measure community participation; the *Rural Urban Classification*; Rios-Aguilar's (2010) research, which is the only quantitative study of Funds of Knowledge we are aware of; the *British Social Attitudes* survey for a subjective measure of social class; and the *Social Mobility Commissions Toolkit* for an objective measure of social class.

In the context of a current crisis in the recruitment and retention of teachers in England, we suggest that a greater awareness of socio-economic background, alongside other identity markers, may help head teachers and school governors to better understand the composition of their workforce and the experience, needs and development of their staff. Focusing on SEB with the help of the Toolkit would not detract from the importance of other identity markers but support a more wholistic and nuanced understanding of the workforce. Although we understand that schools, especially those in deprived and rural areas, may not feel they have the luxury of factoring another variable into their recruitment processes, the rationale given by the SMC to do so remains compelling and, in the long term, could result in greater staff satisfaction and retention. As such, we recommend further research into the use of the SMC Toolkit in the education sector, and the development of partnerships between researchers and schools to collect and analyse the data. We believe this is the first time the Toolkit has been incorporated into academic research and hope that it highlights the existence and potential utility of the Toolkit in the school sector, whether it is for reasons of social mobility, recruitment and retention or for pedagogical purposes.

**Final Report: 06/09/24**

This project was funded through a small grant awarded by the Society for Educational Studies and is available online [here](#).

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