Introduction: Curriculum and class
In this essay, I want to discuss subject English and the low SES-background student – the interaction, one might say, of subjectivities with the (curriculum) subject. In doing this, I will be reporting on two recent projects in low SES school communities and making a case for high-level classroom engagement being connected to a form of sustained professional development for teachers.

In 2009 – the last time reading literacy was the major domain being tested in PISA – the OECD report had this to say:

the socioeconomic background of students and schools does appear to have a powerful influence on performance (OECD, 2010, p. 13)

This is a recurring theme in PISA reports whatever the major domain being tested in any particular year and it is, of course, is one of the great understatements in educational discourse. Recently, work in Australia has focused particularly on the concentration of educational disadvantage in which the effects of individual disadvantage are multiplied when those individual disadvantages are pooled in particular schools (Erebus International 2005; Teese, 2011; Vinson et al., 2015).

Curriculum, as Bill Green reminds us, can be a ‘dividing practice’ such that ‘it produces and reproduces inequalities, differences, distinction’ (Green, 2003: 28) There is little doubt that, historically, English curriculum has been, overtly and covertly, connected with the socioeconomic status of students who study it. English, one might say, has always been about class. Key related questions, it seems to me – though I won’t be attempting to answer or even address all of them here – include:

- To what extent can certain issues in English curriculum be represented historically as issues of equity, equality and class?
- While ‘models’ can never tell a whole story, the moment of ‘Growth’, for example, did put into the professional discourse more overt attempts to develop an English ‘close to (student’s) own lives’ (Medway et al., 2014, 145). What does that mean for low SES contexts (e.g. Moll et al., 1992)?
- English more generally has been seen to do identity work, to which my opening sentence alluded. Students have opportunities to construct subjectivities – how they see themselves, how they see the world, how they want others to see them. How is that played out in schools serving low SES communities?
- What is the effect of the curricular emphasis on literacy doing in general in those schools?

I don’t want this discussion to centre on basic literacy, however, which is what we usually focus on when talking about how students from low SES communities can be let down by education (e.g., ABS, 2014). Literature, for example, is as fruitful an area for discussion in these terms as literacy is. Literature has been often claimed as part of a ‘humanising’ endeavour in English curriculum (e.g. Arnold, 1869/2009; Leavis,
Engagement, pedagogy and low-SES students

One could multiply such examples to show that (English) curriculum and issues of class are never far from each other, but I want now to discuss two recent projects which have their focus on schools in low SES communities. By not sticking only to fundamental literacy in this discussion I will be implicitly and explicitly making a case for the richest education we can give low SES students by examining issues around engagement and pedagogy and curriculum. I want to do this by making a case for engagement connected to a form of sustained professional development for teachers. There won’t be anything startlingly original in what I’m proposing. I will draw heavily on the work of other researchers before me and I want to reiterate the point with which I began, viz. the role of SES in student outcomes. That role is a given reality and I think that what Pat Thomson wrote in Schooling the Rustbelt Kids is still most clear and helpful on this issue:

It is not the case in rustbelt schools that nothing can be done, nor is it the case that everything can be done … It is a matter of making a positive difference – but rustbelt staffs cannot pretend that there is an impermeable barrier between the school and the ‘outside’ … At the same time … (t)eachers and schools must act as if every (student) can learn what matters for them to have equal life chances … Nor should realism equate with the abandonment of the imaginary of a just and caring society … (2002, pp. 182–183)

So, I’m concentrating here on what’s actually under our control while recognising the larger social drivers.

At Western Sydney University we have been running for over 15 years a research program on engagement and pedagogy in low SES schools that has been largely centred in public schools in South-Western Sydney. Our research is located within (the intersection of) eight particular student contexts. These are:

- students from multicultural communities, suburban or inner-urban
- students from impoverished housing estates
- students whose oppositional behaviour places significant physical, emotional and pedagogical pressure on the classroom
- students who need support in achieving outcomes in literacy and numeracy and across all curriculum areas
- students with high English as Additional Language (EALD) needs, increasingly from refugee backgrounds
- students of Indigenous backgrounds
- students from all cultural backgrounds who live in remote contexts
- students with special needs

There is a particular engagement/pedagogical framework we use which we call the MeE Framework, with ‘M’ referring to student motivation ‘e’ referring to classroom engagement, and ‘E’ representing an engagement to the whole project of schooling and education as a resource for one’s life in the present and future. In terms of classroom engagement and pedagogy (‘e’) – to which I will confine myself in this article – we talk of:

Classroom experiences as needing to be high cognitive, high affective, high operative (‘busyness’ is not engagement)
Classroom processes, which we call ‘Insider classroom’ processes and which specifically refer to four areas: student self-assessment; teacher feedback; a student community of reflection, and teacher inclusive conversations.

Message systems – what messages students are receiving about their: knowledge; ability; their contribution to the control of the classroom time and space; the classroom as a place where they are valued, and the classroom as an environment of discussion and reflection of their voice (knowledge, ability, control, place and voice).

Teachers for a Fair Go

One iteration of the larger research program was a project called Teachers for a Fair Go (TFG). In this project, we followed over 3 years the work of 28 teachers across NSW in Priority Schools (i.e., schools with high concentrations of students from low SES backgrounds) who were regarded by their peers as highly effective at classroom engagement. The teachers were across pre-school – Year 12, in remote, rural and metropolitan locations and across a number of secondary subject areas. We made findings in each area of the MetE Framework (see Munns et al., 2013, for full detail and analysis of the project) but I will focus here on high cognitive classroom experiences only, and those, of course, in relation to English (see Sawyer, 2014 for detailed analysis). There were seven secondary English teachers in the project, five of whom taught at least one other subject.

We found in the research that the classroom experiences these teachers undertook with their students were indeed intellectually challenging in nature (i.e., not low cognition ‘busywork’). In addition, a second key finding on high cognitive experiences in this research was on teaching and learning being the focus of sustained and ongoing classroom conversations. In English, high-level cognitive work manifested itself in a number of ways. Firstly, intellectual challenge was embedded in both curriculum content and in the nature of student thinking which was being operationalised. This is important in English, where we often tend to think of intellectual challenge mainly in terms of curriculum, particularly as ‘more challenging texts’. However, neither trivial content nor simply copying notes or doing ‘busywork’ even on what we might regard as significant content, can open up the full possibilities of high cognitive work. Pedagogy and curriculum need to work together to create intellectual challenge. The application of knowledge was significant in English and manifested itself in, for example, widespread student textual creation modelled on texts read/viewed.

Classrooms were sites of what we called a ‘culture of inquiry’. This was not about inquiry-based learning only (though there was some of that), but usually came more out of teachers’ use of questioning (in the project we referred to ‘relentless questioning’). Questioning was not IRE (Initiation-Response-Evaluation) – patterned, but used to: probe further; prompt background knowledge; revise; work towards key vocabulary and concepts and, importantly, to re-conceptualise how ideas/themes were seen/understood. One teacher, for example, had students consider a concept that arose out of a poem being studied, through a number of possible representations, with representation being the key concept. She asked:
- ‘Does anyone see this differently?’
- ‘How else could we look at this?’
- ‘How could we represent it visually? In writing?’
- ‘How else could we end this piece? What would be a highly effective way of doing it?’
- ‘How does any of this connect to (poet)’s other work? How can we bring them together?’

This teacher is highlighting the importance of the representation of a concept. This prompted student examination of others’ ideas within a (typically subject English) milieu in which a variety of responses were not only possible, but necessary, to consider. In interrogating their own ‘knowing’ with and about this new voice (the poet’s) in the classroom, students were also being reminded that this kind of work was fundamental to the way the discipline operates when it is operating well.

The effects of ‘relentless questioning’ included: leading students towards higher order thinking; creating intellectual space for student ‘voice’; having students question their own conclusions/think critically/appreciate a range of perspectives on a topic; creating a ‘risk-accepting’ culture in the classroom and, above all, creating a particular disposition towards knowledge – viz. that some (in the era of climate change deniers, a reminder that not all) knowledge is open to challenge, but all knowledge is open to interrogation (‘How did we get to that answer/view?’, ‘What if we’d done/said “X” instead of “Y”?’)

Conversations in these classrooms were mostly just that: teacher-student and student-student dialogues. In terms of class and group discussion, teachers saw
students working together as the very opposite of ‘lowering the intellectual ante’. We were reminded of Douglas Barnes’ very important work in which he showed that, ‘It is precisely the teachers who value social relationships who also value intellectual exchange’ (Barnes 1976: 145).

Just as pedagogy drove an inquiry culture, curriculum experiences also drove intellectual challenge. Students were engaged in sophisticated textual creation. The contexts, values and representations of experience of particular texts were studied, as were their appropriations into other times and places. Assessment tasks were set to draw out higher order responses. Students analysed language features and evaluated their effectiveness, and the terminology of literature and film study and visual representation were all a natural part of the classroom conversation. The ‘how’ and ‘why’ of textuality were foregrounded notions in the English classrooms.

Why is this even worth saying? Surely, high level intellectual work is what we expect in classrooms? Yet it is a simple reality that much decontextualised, low level, ‘busywork’ has consistently been shown in the research literature to be the schooling diet of low SES students. A selection of the research in Australia and internationally:

- in response to standardised testing of the sort now pervasive nationally in Australia, low SES schools are particularly susceptible to concentration on the ‘basics’. Since public perception of schools based on league tables particularly disadvantages low SES schools, the consequence is a focus on ‘performance’, rather than ‘achievement’ (Teese & Lamb, 2009)

- Teachers in low SES schools in Queensland spend more time on direct alphabetic instruction and drill of grapheme/phoneme generalisations than their middle or high SES counterparts. Far from students in poorer communities lacking ‘basic skills’, they in fact receive more work on decoding at the expense of other critical aspects of reading and literacy (Luke, 2010; Luke et al., 2010)

- Poor districts … offer stripped down drill-and-practice approaches to reading and math learning, rather than teaching for higher-order applications … critical thinking and problem-solving; collaboration … effective oral and written communication; accessing and analysing information; curiosity and imagination. The kind of curriculum that supports these qualities has typically been rationed to the most advantaged students in the United States. (Darling-Hammond, 2010, pp. 52–54)

- Haberman (1991) aptly labelled this common default position the ‘pedagogy of poverty’, and pointed to the ways that student resistance to high level cognitive work, and compliance with low level tasks, can very often lead to ‘busywork’ being seen as a key (perhaps even the only) way to managing challenging classrooms. Ironically then, what appears to be teacher control is, in reality, student control moving towards poorer outcomes. Appropriately, given the original context of this essay, Garth Boomer argued, in specifically discussing the Disadvantaged Schools Program, that ‘(in) classrooms, seemingly compliant students may be outwardly compliant but inwardly withholding their mental labour’ (Boomer, 1991/1999, p. 51).

- Obviously a discursive shift is a necessary accomplishment to any move towards a pedagogy of higher cognition – and it has not at all gone unnoticed by the students of Fair Go teachers in interviews. In the later project (Schooling for a Fair Go) discussed below in which mentored teachers were making such a pedagogical shift, younger students said to us, ‘We get to do lots of stuff and important stuff,’ ‘She tells you a lot of stuff that’s important,’ and, ‘When we do hard learning I learn more things.’ In the later years of primary school they told about being pushed into ‘harder work’ and its importance for their learning.

Darling-Hammond follows her discussion which I quoted above with a summary of research into teacher effectiveness:

- Decades of research have shown that teachers who produce high levels of learning for initially low-and higher-achieving students alike provide active learning opportunities involving student collaboration and many uses of oral and written language, connect to students’ prior knowledge and experiences, provide hands-on learning opportunities, and engage students’ higher-order thought processes, including their capacities to approach tasks strategically, hypothesise, predict, evaluate, integrate and synthesise ideas. (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 55)

- In a study of NSW Higher School Certificate results that Ayres, Dinham and I conducted in the 1990s, in which we focused on the practices of highly effective teachers in the HSC (i.e., teachers who over 6 years consistently had students who scored in the top 1% of their subject in school contexts – and this is important – in which such results were absolutely atypical) we also found that ‘a key common factor was an emphasis on having students think, solve problems and apply knowledge. Simply reporting back knowledge or practising formulae outside of the context of application was unusual. Teachers strongly saw their
role in the classroom as challenging students, rather than ‘spoon-feeding’ information (Ayres et al., 2000, n.p.).

Thus, in the Fair Go program of research we feel able to say that practices that define high levels of cognition also produce high levels of engagement. We cannot (yet) make large claims with respect to students’ assessed outcomes but if the HSC findings I’ve just quoted – along with other work on effectiveness at WSU (e.g., Sawyer et al., 2007; Munns et al., 2006) – are any guide, these practices are likely to be also highly effective with respect to student outcomes.

Practitioner research
What I haven’t said about Teachers for a Fair Go but what is actually my central point in this essay is that the teachers were co-researchers with the WSU academic team on the project. In joining after nomination and selection into the Teachers for a Fair Go project, the teachers agreed to: write about their practice on engagement (as part of the application/selection process); be the subject of a case study, but also be a co-author of the case study itself; read and respond to the case studies of other teachers on a project intranet, and take part in an intensive cross-case analysis over six days at the conclusion of all the case studies. The cross-case analysis probably demonstrates best the research work in which the teachers were involved. Over these six days, we:

• revisited the teachers’ contextual challenges and how they were being met (i.e., reviewed data)
• discussed not just the need for high teacher expectations, but what the data showed about student ‘buy-in’ to the high expectations that teachers had of them (i.e., interrogated the taken-for-granted)
• examined what high cognitive/affective/operative experiences and ‘insider classroom’ processes looked like within grades (i.e., coded and categorised and re-considered previous categorising and interrogated the MeE model’s explanatory force)
• discussed appropriate metaphors and revisited the narratives of the teacher work stories (i.e., re-conceptualised the data)
• mapped our findings against work such as Haberman’s (1995, 2005)² (i.e., mapped findings against literature)
• investigated for the first time the specific data on literacy/technology/creativity (i.e., took new ‘cuts’ through the data)
• discussed our central terminology (i.e., defined key terms)

The bracketed items in that list, define much of the work that goes on during data analysis in most research projects and I hope indicates that teachers’ roles in this research were not tokenistic.

In 2014, the Guardian ran a feature headlined ‘Teachers: Life inside the exam factory’, which chronicled the crisis of morale in the profession in the UK and the fact of teachers ‘quitting in droves’, in particular under the then regime of Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Education. One of the saddest moments in the piece was the story of a teacher in a school which Ofsted had put on special measures:

Ofsted put the school in special measures, and the fine details of her job were suddenly dictated by the borough council, via the school’s management (aka senior leadership team). (The teacher) was handed lesson plans from above, and instructed to stick to them.

“They actually said, ‘Now do this, now say that’. The basis of it was being told exactly what to do. There was a geography lesson I wanted to teach, on “Connecting yourself to the world”. I got told off, because I contacted someone in America who had the same name as me, and I got my whole class to write to her. We took photos out of the window, sent emails, and she replied. I thought it was great: she was in New York and we were in Dagenham. But I was told it wasn’t appropriate because it wasn’t what was on the lesson plan’. (Harris, 2014)

What this kind of political regime reflects and promotes is a denial of teaching as intellectual work. It stands opposite in its assumptions about teachers to the work I am describing here. Of course, contradictory discourses abound today about teaching. One discourse claims that teachers are the most influential in-school factor on student outcomes (Hattie etc), which implicitly credits teachers with particular skills, knowledges and training that drive those outcomes. On the other hand, the discourse that justifies the (often commercially produced) pre-scripted lesson sees teaching as simple information delivery that can be done by anyone.

Part of speaking back to this latter discourse can be teachers taking on a ‘researchly disposition’ (Lingard & Renshaw, 2010) in which they are re-positioned from being always the translators of research done elsewhere or the objects of research themselves to a position of active co-researchers producing knowledge, and treating research and evidence provided by others with some professional discretion. This approach to
research is one important manifestation of teacher’s work as intellectual work.

In the iteration of the Fair Go research program which followed Teachers for a Fair Go – called Schooling for a Fair Go – we went back to eight of the metropolitan TFG teachers and asked them to mentor another teacher at their school in their engaging practices through an action research framework. At the end of a first phase of mentoring, the original mentees were then to take on their own mentee at another school, while the original mentor worked with the rest of the (first) school on engaging practices. This process then went through a third phase. In all, teachers from 24 schools – 16 of them ‘new’ – were involved in this iteration of the Fair Go program. Training at the beginning of each phase of the project consisted of mentors and mentees (re-) familiarising themselves with the MeE Framework and with action research processes. Training days at the beginning of each phase also showcased the work of the previous phase (mentees in Phase 1 were introduced to the work from Teachers for a Fair Go).

Each mentor-mentee pair was further supported by a WSU academic partner and a ‘teacher-research assistant’. Mentoring consisted of:

- planning together
- observing each other teach
- team teaching
- developing expertise in action research data collection and data analysis.

The WSU academic partners were critical friends who: advised on any aspect of practitioner research; helped supply resources; visited schools; collected evaluation data, and assisted in analysing school data. The ‘teacher-research assistants’, who were a crucial link across all the projects: visited schools; conducted interviews on how projects were progressing; observed lessons; wrote case reports; collected evaluation data, and assisted in analysing school data. It was an essential principle of the project that action research was not only central, but must be collaborative – based on the view that a key component of educational change and successful schooling is focusing on ‘developing professional quality collectively’ (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 146). While the whole-school aspects of the project had varied success (sometimes determined by the ability of schools to fund whole-school professional learning in the way the overall project was able to fund the mentoring and partly subsidise the whole-school work) the one-on-one mentoring was highly successful (see Sawyer et al., 2018, for full detail and analysis of the project, including case studies of the whole-school sites that were able to make the project work well for them).

What did the teachers’ research questions look like? In one Secondary class, the Phase 1 mentee teacher regarded one class as outwardly compliant, but not fully engaged – a class of students who would particularly not partake in discussion. The teacher felt that her feedback to them might be a key ‘way in’ to addressing this issue. Thus, her beginning focus question was:

What can I do to improve the learning outcomes of students using the MeE Framework? In particular, how can feedback be used effectively?

Her contributing questions were:

- How can feedback influence students’ attitudes to learning?
- How can I develop good teaching practices about the use of feedback through collaboration and mentoring?
- How can I give critical feedback without damaging esteem?
- How can teacher feedback enable more student ‘voice’?

Note how the ‘contributing questions’ (especially the first and third) directly feed into the core identified problem in the class and how the overall focus question bundles up these contributory questions into relevant and ‘do-able’ focus for her action research.

In a lower-Primary class a Phase 2 teacher (Julia) faced issues of: wide diversity of academic levels among students; students who could not maintain focus; students with learning difficulties; resistance, and very high language and literacy needs (91% EALD). Julia had interests in IT and, after initial work with her mentor (Beth), decided that a focus for her students on thinking about how they were learning to do things might help engagement in the class. Julia’s focus questions were:

- How do we create a culture of reflection for students and increase student self-reflection?
- How is a reflective learning community of teacher, students and parents supported by operation of a web platform such as Edmodo?

Julia implemented structures for the students to use to reflect, and the class discussed and decided on individual and group responsibilities in class, such as a set of technology protocols. She then set up a class Edmodo...
site which parents were also invited to use. It meant that the parents could also help with students’ reflecting at home. She wanted the parents to become part of their children’s school-based learning, rather than focusing on their behaviour, which had been the topic of most prior conversations with parents. Student work was also published on the site and there was a portal for collaborative learning tasks. The group tasks and teacher, student and parent posts on the class website had a positive impact on student outcomes. There was a visible connection in which students felt their work was valued sufficiently to be jointly constructed with peers as well as the teacher, and to be published beyond the classroom. At the end of their Phase of the project, here is what Julia and Beth had to say in their own final reflections:

I walk into 1/2H and see a classroom full of engaged learners, using Edmodo to collaborate and encourage each other in learning. Students are talking about what they have been learning because they are looking at photos on the web platform or arcades they have made. This is a significant change to the students I met at the start of the project. They are focused, self-directed and excited to be at school. (Beth on Julia’s class)

Having someone to support me by regularly communicating and discussing ideas encouraged me to be creative and innovative in my classroom practice. Feedback on lessons and ideas allowed me to grow as a teacher … The mentoring relationship … ensured that I reflect on my own teaching practices. … The conversations that Beth and I had via email and in person about the MeE Framework helped me to have a clear understanding of how the students in my class learn and what I can implement to assist them in their learning. We continually discussed where students could go to next in regards to Edmodo and how to use it as a tool to build student voice and encourage student control. (Julia on the mentoring process)

Julia moved into the next phase of the project as an excellent mentor herself.

Among other things, what practitioner research does is allow teachers to give an account of themselves on their own terms – to resist, and speak back to, deficit framings of them and of their students. Teacher research should also be seen as moving from an individualistic mindset in relation to ‘my class/ my data’ to ‘developing more general insight and transferable knowledge about teaching and learning processes … not simply to improve practice locally, but to create a body of knowledge about learning and teaching that can inform theory and practice generally’ (Lingard & Renshaw 2010: 36). In the Fair Go program, we also believe that research should be undertaken as a social, collaborative phenomenon because developing ‘professional quality’ is most usefully done as a ‘collective’ enterprise. Collaborative professional learning as a form of teacher practice is, of course, a well established notion (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Bolam et al., 2005; Louis, 2006; Stoll & Seashore Louis, 2007), however here I am connecting this specifically with teacher-research and situating it within the specific contexts of low SES school communities. It is possible to disturb and disrupt understandings of what schooling for low SES students is about, and that ‘disruption’ can be the outcome of collaborative, collegial and communal teacher development. As Comber & Kamler have argued, low SES students are in need of ‘new energy and new intellectual work by teachers’ (Comber & Kamler, 2004, p. 308) and we see practitioner research as central to that work. Against this background, too, is Garth Boomer’s own injunction:

(All teaching should be directed towards the support of deliberate, personally owned and conducted, solution-oriented investigation. All teachers should be experts in ‘action research’ (Boomer, 1985: 125).

In fact, I would now go as far as to argue that professional development that is enacted through collaborative teacher research is a key enabling condition for successful pedagogical change in schools – and that such development needs to be strategically central to the work of schools in low SES communities. There are a number of reasons for locating engagement in low SES schools in the context of teacher research. Taking on a ‘researchly disposition’ in this work helps further enact teacher’s work as intellectual work, not as an instrumentalist acting out of the pre-scripted lesson. A second, very pragmatic, reason, is to do with something like sustainability. Immersion in a research project with the systematic collection and analysis of data that this entails is likely to create a mindset towards practice in a more profound way than ‘one-off’ in-service courses. Thirdly, it takes time to effect deep changes in schooling and a ‘researchly disposition’ is more likely, we believe, to have teachers see their work in class (even over one year) as a ‘long project’ (see Munns et al., 2013) and to tolerate the time that change can take. In addition, it should be stressed that ‘new energy’ and ‘new intellectual work’ in the first instance is not about particular programs or strategies, but, rather, about a disposition towards pedagogy and engagement that is willing to take on the kind of work that practitioner research requires, and also enables.
Next steps
When Boomer said that teachers should be taking on action research, he went on to say ‘All teachers should be experts in “action research” so that they can show students how to be “action researchers”’. He followed this with what he called the ‘bold injunction’ that ‘all students at all levels must be researchers and all teaching must be based on methods of research, if we are serious about learning. Whenever people decide to learn, they undertake research … Learning is defined as understanding in such a way that one can say it in one’s own words and be understood or do it and be effective’ (Boomer, 1985: 125).

Student research is a next logical step for schools involved in teacher research. Comber’s work here is centrally important. Her *Literacy, Place and the Pedagogies of Possibility* demonstrates the degree of sophistication of the literacies being undertaken by students in classes who do research in both the in-school world and the non-school world. The students in these contexts who are researching their own lifeworlds – investigating issues in local communities through their own collaborative research, producing field observations, conducting interviews – develop products such as oral histories, case studies, films, public presentations and research reports. Positioning students as researchers means that the school welcomes in student experiences and knowledges which it then builds on and, of course, opens opportunities for other experiences through the research itself. This is not just the kind of problem-based work where an answer already exists and solving the problem is about reaching the answer. This engages students in high level challenging work in which, importantly, they too become producers of knowledge. There are high stakes outcomes – the ante is ‘upped’ on things like student performance and students are not just going through the motions of reading and writing. They engage with real complex ideas with both teachers and people who are experts in various fields. As Comber’s work shows, as content-field-based knowledge is built, so literate repertoires are built and diversified and go well beyond any simple basic literacy.

Three key points are to be made about this work. The first is that participating as researchers significantly alters student subjectivity – from consumers to producers of knowledge. Secondly, teachers build on students’ personal experiences and cultural resources as a bridge for introducing (when and where necessary) more abstract ideas and conceptual knowledge (Comber, 2016: 65). Thirdly, scaffolded from this engagement is – again when and where necessary – the ‘learning of the cultural codes … needed for success in mainstream curriculum work’ (Hattam et al., 2009: 307)… and English, of course, offers myriad opportunities for students to become genuine researchers of worlds for much of their work.

Conclusion
Class and English are never far away from each other. Key historical moments, major curriculum developments, curricular emphases, paradigm competition and ‘models’ of English – all have been seen as having impacts that are class-related, or issuing out of class-based concerns. While ‘literacy’ is often foregrounded here, most areas of English are/have been interpreted through the lens of class. Here I have tried to see English broadly in terms of the potential richness of an English education available to students of low SES backgrounds and to make connections between curriculum, pedagogy and engagement for those students.

The projects discussed here certainly proved for me to be powerful statements about the engaging work of teachers and drew critical attention to how a ‘researchly disposition’, accompanied by purposeful mentoring and critical support, might well make a significant difference to schools and English classrooms in low SES communities. This work and the work on students-as-researchers invites us to consider that there are ways we can make informed decisions that strongly contribute to the improvement of the educational and life circumstances of these students, and, hopefully, in turn, contribute to their community’s wellbeing.

Notes
1 I am using the term ‘low SES background’ over terms such as ‘vulnerable’, ‘disadvantaged’ ‘high-poverty’ etc. The important thing in using any terminology in this context is to remember what Garth Boomer himself said: that such labels must not ‘be taken to refer to some homogeneous group with similar traits or living in similar conditions. The commonality is economic hardship.’ (Boomer, 1991/1999, p. 50).

2 Why Haberman in particular? Over many years, his work has focused on a set of classroom practices and classroom curricula that reflect the need in high poverty schools for intellectual challenge. His work contains a set of principles that we were keen to put alongside our own findings about the practices of our highly engaging teachers. What did our teachers demonstrate that could advance this specific literature on pedagogy and poverty?
3 Kemmis, in fact, argues for the importance of practice-traditions in educational research and argues that ‘(t)he ones with the greatest and most privileged access to practice as individual and social praxis are those whose praxis it is. On this view, practitioners themselves are best positioned to be educational researchers – doing practical philosophy that aims to evaluate their own individual and collective praxis in the light of tradition and in response to current and emerging conditions and circumstances ’ (2010, p. 20).

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