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**Author(s):** Tanya Ovenden-Hope and Rowena Passy

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## **Exploring school leadership in coastal schools: ‘Getting a fair deal’ for students in disadvantaged communities**

Rowena Passy<sup>a\*</sup> and Tanya Ovenden-Hope<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Plymouth Institute of Education, University of Plymouth, UK; Faculty of Education, Enterprise and Culture, Plymouth Marjon University, Plymouth, UK.

\*Room 506

Rolle Building

Plymouth University

Drake Circus

Plymouth PL4 8AA.

Email: [R.Passy@plymouth.ac.uk](mailto:R.Passy@plymouth.ac.uk)

**Biography:** Rowena Passy is a Senior Research Fellow at the Plymouth Institute of Education, Plymouth University, where she moved in 2010 from employment as a Senior Research Officer at the National Foundation for Education Research. Her PhD research focused on family values in education, and since then her academic interests have broadened to include issues such as school leadership, widening participation and teacher training, all of which form part of this research into schools in deprived coastal regions.

Twitter: @PassyRowena

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4367-6604>

**Biography:** Professor Tanya Ovenden-Hope is a committed and enthusiastic educationalist with nearly three decades of teaching, teacher education and educational leadership experience. An innovative academic, Tanya has maintained scholarly engagement in educational improvement and effectiveness throughout her career. Tanya identifies with the specific challenges for schools in remote locations, having lived and worked in Cornwall for many years and having grown up in an isolated coastal/rural community in Kent.

Twitter: @unieducator

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4400-7517>

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## **Exploring school leadership in coastal schools: ‘Getting a fair deal’ for students in disadvantaged communities**

### **Abstract**

This paper is a response to Francis et al (2017) article, which calls for ‘new ideas and constructive principles and practices for the provision of socially-just education’. We first discuss how an economic approach to education entrenches socioeconomic disadvantage and argue that, in the light of evidence that inequalities are increasing both nationally and internationally, it has become increasingly important that we understand models of social justice in schools in deprived locations. Reporting on original longitudinal research with schools in disadvantaged coastal areas in England, and drawing on Fielding and Moss’ (2011) notion of the insistent affirmation of possibility, we then discuss three dimensions of active social justice undertaken by participating school leaders. By examining practical examples of social justice, we aim to shift the debate into more positive territory, in which there can be more appreciation of the efforts and outcomes of some leaders in highly disadvantaged areas and more leaders can take heart in following their example.

**Key words:** coastal schools, educational disadvantage, active social justice.

### **Introduction**

In a relatively recent article, Francis et al (2017) seek ‘to provoke dialogue and debate’ on issues related to social justice within education (p.415). An important part of their article argues that there is a lack of clarity on what a socially just education system might look like, and the authors suggest that educational researchers need to build on empirical and philosophical research to ‘develop new ideas and constructive principles and practices for the provision of socially-just education’ (p.425). Drawing on longitudinal research undertaken 2010 – 2017 in schools in highly deprived coastal areas in England, we respond to this invitation.

Francis et al’s (2017) article calls for conceptual clarity on ‘what it is we are seeking to achieve’ (2017, p.414), and suggests that such clarity can help us to engage more effectively with policy-making that addresses inequalities in educational outcomes. We agree with this – but suggest that a complementary approach is to examine practical instances of social justice enactment within schools themselves. School leaders are unable to right entrenched inequalities within broader society on their own, but they can practice social justice within their environment and, by providing examples to the young people in their schools, can help to lay the foundations for their students to counter the injustices that they meet in ways that may yet be imagined.

At the same time we would like to draw attention to what we believe is an imbalance between critique and affirmation within different media and other sources. These can draw attention to the failures within educational systems (e.g. Dearden, 2018;

Hutchings, 2015; Pinnington, 2018) with little recognition of the effort made towards positive change. One notable feature of our interviews with leaders in schools located in deprived coastal areas was their understanding of the immediacy of their task – young people do not have the time to wait for conceptual clarity over social justice, nor for policy to become more benign, but need practical approaches in the here and now. Our aim, therefore, is to shift the social justice debate into more positive territory by exploring and demonstrating school leaders' enactments of social justice, carried out as they negotiate a path through their own moral imperative to improve young people's lives with government demands and their school's own particular situation.

In what follows, we first discuss the inadequacy of the current economic approach to education. We then describe our research methods. Next, drawing on Fielding and Moss' (2011) notion of the insistent affirmation of possibility, we discuss these leaders' active approach to social justice within their schools. We conclude with further reflections on Francis et al's (2017) article.

### **The inadequacy of an economic approach to education**

As Francis et al (2017) comment, issues related to inequities in student outcome are complex. They are also becoming increasingly important in a time in which western governments are either emerging from or – as in the UK – continuing with austerity measures that restrict funds to public services, including education. Nonetheless educational discourse continues to be underpinned, both nationally and internationally, by an economic approach to education that is linked to neoliberal policies and the influence of national and transnational educational data. This approach focuses on education as the primary means of ensuring that a nation can compete in the global marketplace, and is underpinned by human capital theory which, in turn, rests on three assumptions: education leads to higher wages so that it is in individuals' interest to engage with the process; employers will not hire incompetent staff, ensuring that engaging with education rewards individuals; employers will respond to an educated workforce by investing in new technology to capitalise on their productive potential (Lauder, 2015). Thus, at a national level, a highly skilled, knowledgeable and aspirational workforce will theoretically drive the nation's prosperity and, at an individual level, those who invest in education will theoretically be rewarded with financial security.

Lauder (2015) argues that human capital theory's attraction for policy-makers lies both in its uncomplicated policy prescription and in its consistency with capitalist ideology that all individuals can become capitalists. Its ongoing attraction, however, can be seen in the way it sits neatly alongside neoliberal ideas and policies. These rest broadly on assumptions of the efficiency of the free market in allocating resources, of the self-interested individual who makes rational decisions in optimising his or her welfare (however defined) and belief in the market's capacity to self-regulate (Olsen and Peters, 2005). 'Customer' autonomy is emphasised, opening up the possibility that

individuals can better themselves through making advantageous choices – and providing a clear link to human capital theory through the central role of education to this process of self-improvement. Just as Lauder argues that human capital theory has attraction for policy-makers, so Harvey (2007) argues that neoliberalism’s founders’ selection of the ideas of freedom (of choice) and human dignity (in making those choices) as its central tenets has a powerful appeal to all who would make their own decisions about their lives. Choice, in turn, links to the power of national so-called league tables of education; selecting a school that offers your child a ‘good’ education, in which the key metric is successful examination performance, is one of those potentially advantageous choices. Poor choices can be blamed on the individual, however limited in reality those choices may have been, while the state can claim to focus on national standards of education through reference to influential international tables such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (Grek, 2009).

There are two particular problems with this model in the twenty-first century. The first is the increasingly tenuous link between (more) education and secure employment, outlined by Brown et al (2011, p.15) who focus on what they call the ‘false promise’ of ‘the endless potential to create middle-class jobs for those who invested in education’. Standing (2015) widens the scope of this argument, and suggests that greater numbers across the globe are entering what he terms the ‘precariat’; those living in insecure employment circumstances who are ‘also the first class in history expected to ... work at a lower level than the schooling it typically acquires’ (Standing, 2015, p.vii). Although graduates continue to tend to earn more and to have higher employment activity rates (e.g. ONS, 2017), hitherto relatively stable links between work and income are fracturing in developed nations as the gig economy, the development of artificial intelligence and the prospect of technological unemployment contribute to shifting the nature of the labour market (Beckett, 2018; Healy et al, 2017a; Peters, 2017a). In response to this, some countries such as Finland, which has been trialling a form of universal basic income (Henley, 2018), are beginning to re-think the organisation of their welfare state. In the meantime, developing nations lose their comparative advantage of providing cheap labour (Healy et al, 2017b), offering the prospect of further global inequalities that, in turn, may be further entrenched by issues arising from climate change (e.g. UN, 2017). These are all issues that require imaginative and collaborative solutions; they all present challenges to education systems that tend to prioritise testing over the development of open-minded and democratically-engaged citizens (e.g. Meyer & Benavot, 2013; Peters, 2017b; Sahlberg, 2012).

The second problem with this model is that the domination of national and international ‘league tables’ encourages a self-sustaining cycle of pupil testing in which little account is taken of pupils’ socioeconomic and/or academic starting point. In this respect, England’s ‘Progress 8’ metric, which now measures the extent of students’ progress in secondary education (from 11-16), is a welcome innovation,

although it is not without problems (e.g. NUT, n/d). But aggregated test scores show nothing of the efforts any school has made to improve those scores, the types of problems they have encountered nor their successes with individual pupils, particularly those who may have multiple issues to deal with before arriving at the school gates. In this context, Power and Frandji (2010, p.388) write about the ‘cultural injustice’ of league tables, which they argue ‘compound the social injustices already experienced by disadvantaged communities ... [because they] operate in a dominant culture where educational success is narrowly defined and on terms on which they can never hope to succeed relative to other schools’. While the word ‘never’ may overstate the case – there are examples of highly successful schools in disadvantaged areas (Chapman, 2013) – the point is clear; a narrow definition of educational success, prompted and sustained by high-stakes testing, has the effect of compounding the disadvantages of the already socioeconomically disadvantaged (e.g. Clarke, 2013; Connell, 2013; Hutchings, 2015). With research showing ways in which students from deprived backgrounds pick up on messages of their perceived inadequacy (e.g. Blandford, 2017; Quinn, 2004), and evidence suggesting that social inequalities are widening at national and international levels (e.g. OECD COPE, 2017), it becomes even more important to understand the different ways in which schools in these disadvantaged regions enact social justice.

### **Research design**

This was a qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) study that had a number of overlapping elements as different sources of funding became available. It began as a project that charted the journey of one coastal school from the year in which it converted to sponsored academy status at the end of the UK Labour administration of 1997-2010. QLR is ‘increasingly understood as a sensibility and orientation rather than a specific research design’ (Thomson & Macleod, 2015, p.245), and it can generate rich and multi-layered data from ‘the telling of subjective experiences’ (Miller, 2015, p.301). The new leaders of the academy intended that it should undergo dramatic change; a longitudinal study, told through the voices of different layers of the school hierarchy and – as we were to discover – in the context of rapid policy change, would enable us to trace how these changes felt on the ground to staff and students over the seven-year course of the research. Pollard argues that such research looks ‘*at, across and through* time’ (Pollard, 2007, p.16, emphasis in original); the aim was to deepen our understanding of the process of attempting to turn round an underperforming school (see Passy & Ovenden-Hope, 2017 for an extended discussion on the research methods). The research objectives were to explore senior leadership aims and priorities within the context of current policy demands; understand how these were received and enacted by teachers; monitor the academic progress of the student cohort that entered the academy on the year of its sponsorship; and follow the educational experience of 15 students during their time at the academy from the age of 11 to either 16 or 18, depending on when they left. To that end, we visited the school each year to interview the Principal and/or Vice-Principal, our

student sample (the ‘class of 2010’) and four (different) teachers of the class of 2010, collect anonymised data on student progress and attainment, and assemble academy documentation relating to development plans and staffing structure.

At the time, the academisation programme was in its infancy and focused on schools that had been categorised as ‘National Challenge’. This initiative was established in 2008 with the aim of ensuring that, by 2011, all mainstream secondary schools in England had 30 per cent or more of their pupils achieving five or more equivalent GCSE passes at grades A\*-C, including maths and English, at the age of sixteen. At the time of the launch, it was calculated that 638 schools (21 per cent) did not reach this threshold, and an extra £400 million was promised to support these schools’ improvement (DCSF, 2008, pp.1-3). However those that failed to improve quickly could be closed and re-opened as academies or trust schools (DCSF, 2008, pp.14-16) – and the research school was one of these schools that had thus far failed to address its longstanding examination underperformance. Becoming an academy meant that the school was independent of the local authority (educational administration), was managed by a team of independent co-sponsors, and was expected to generate the type of entrepreneurial leadership that was more generally associated with private sector business (Woods et al, 2007, p.239); the expectation was that the new structure and leadership would improve examination results so that they were in line with the ‘floor levels’ demanded by policy at that time. Our suggestion to the school that this would offer an exciting opportunity for research was accepted, the university ethics committee passed our application to undertake a longitudinal study, and we began the fieldwork in the year the school became a sponsored academy.

As the research progressed, we became aware that well-funded school improvement initiatives in England were aimed largely at schools in inner city areas, and that those in coastal regions with similar levels of deprivation were neglected. We also saw that there was little research in this area, opening up an opportunity for a new and significant study that explored the range of challenges faced by these isolated schools. We therefore applied for and received two further tranches of funding to expand the research, first to three and then to six coastal academies. The criteria for participation in the study extensions were that schools should be state-funded secondary schools for students aged 11 to 16 or 18; located in coastal communities in England; have changed to sponsored academy status from National Challenge/underperforming schools during or shortly after the Labour administration; be in areas of high socioeconomic deprivation; have different sponsors; and be located in different regions of the country. For each stage of the research we renewed our application to the university ethics committee, in which we set out the principles of voluntary participation, the right to withdraw and secure data storage. We stressed that we would ensure all quotations were unattributed but, because of the relatively small sample of participating academies, we would be unable to guarantee total anonymity. In this paper, therefore, we have been careful to find a balance between offering as few

identifying characteristics of each institution as possible while giving enough information to clarify the nature and intent of the research.

In order to bring rigour and coherence to a QLR study in different academies, the second and third waves of data collection had the same objectives as the original study, but without the student dimension; the extra funding, while much welcomed, was limited and encouraged a narrowly targeted approach. We therefore examined the publicly-available data for each participating academy, interviewed the principal (or delegated representative) and a sample of four teachers, and collected relevant documentation relating to development plans and staffing structure during each school visit. Interviews with leaders and teachers in a variety of coastal academies enabled us to identify common challenges and measures taken to address those challenges, which we have reported in an earlier publication (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2015; see also Future Leaders Trust, 2015). This article, however, focuses on the data from school leaders over the seven years of the research (shown in the far right column in Table 1) in order to provide a more detailed analysis of their aims and approaches, and to illustrate their efforts in providing ‘a fair deal’ (Vice-Principal, Academy 1, 2011) for their students. In total we have drawn on 21 interviews with 13 school leaders undertaken between 2010 - 2017.

Interviews were fully transcribed and the resulting data analysed thematically, drawing on Fielding and Moss’ (2011) *Radical Education and the Common School*. These authors make a plea for ‘more critical case studies of possibility’ (2011, p.16), and possibility was woven through our leaders’ interviews, despite their detailed description of the challenges that they were facing. Fielding and Moss suggest ten characteristics of a radical democratic education (2011, p.73) which we used as a framework for data organisation and analysis; although our research participants spoke little of democracy, they spoke of innovative, pragmatic approaches to improving the life chances of their students in ways that resonated with Fielding and Moss’ ideas.

In the following sections we report on the research findings, focusing on three ways in which these leaders were active in ‘getting a fair deal’ for students. Reporting is underpinned by the radical democratic education characteristic demonstrated most often by interviewees: an ‘insistent affirmation of possibility’ (Fielding and Moss, 2011, p.73). The whole provides an illustrative account of the principles and practices of these leaders within their school communities.



**Table 1:** Research visits to participating academies

Academy	Region	Academy trust	Number of visits	Interviewees	Interviewees/number of interviews analysed for this article
1	South-west	Single then multi-academy	7	Senior leader(s), teachers, student sample each year (2010-2017)	Principal (7) Vice-Principal (3)
2	South-east	Multi-academy	2	Senior leader(s), teachers (2012 and 2014)	Chief Executive (1) Vice-Principal (1) Principal (1) Assistant Vice-Principal (1)
3	South-east	Single	2	Senior leader(s), teachers (2012 and 2014)	Executive Principal (1) Headteacher (1) Principal (1)
4	North-west	Single	1	Senior leader, teachers (2014)	Principal (1)
5	North-east	Single	1	Senior leaders, teachers (2014)	Principal (1) Vice-Principal (1)
6	South	Multi-academy	1	Senior leader, teachers (2014)	Principal (1)

**Research findings: moral purpose and ‘getting a fair deal’**

Briefly put, all interviewees were working in academies located up to five miles from the coast in areas of long-standing structural deprivation. Local populations were predominantly white working class. In some of these localities the decline of industry had not been mitigated by other economic activity, and in others geographical isolation combined with poor infrastructure precluded inward investment (see, for example, Corfe, 2017). Local economies generally relied on the care industry and/or reduced levels of tourism in comparison with the heyday of seaside towns, and were marked by short-term and low-paid jobs; this was compounded in some instances by cheap housing which encouraged local authorities to move relatively high numbers of those claiming benefits to those areas. A report by the Centre for Social Justice (2013) drew attention to the disparity between those coastal towns and cities that were flourishing and those in which low levels of employment, inadequate housing and high levels of poor health were endemic. The report’s findings of economic stagnation and widespread socioeconomic deprivation had parallels with the experiences reported by our interviewees, who reported limited employment opportunities for school leavers, that local communities had many cases of multi-generational, low or un-employment, and a wide range of social problems. Additional educational challenges included isolation from local universities and/or high-performing local schools; problems with staff recruitment and engaging students and their families with the educational process; budgetary shortfalls; a poor local reputation; and failing local primary schools. Some spoke of high pupil turbulence or high percentages of looked-after children; some were still dealing with difficulties arising from school

amalgamations when the academy was originally set up. Three schools were geographically isolated: ‘We’re right on the coastal peninsula, it is kind of one road in, one road out’ (Vice-Principal, Academy 2, 2012). Leaders also recounted the difficulty of managing the shifting priorities of national education policy (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2015). All interviewed leaders had a clear purpose that underpinned their work, summarised in the words of one interviewee:

The bottom line is we know that there are students out there that at the moment aren't getting a fair deal and that's what we're after ... For the students, it feels like you're pursuing social justice (Vice-Principal, Academy 1, 2011/12).

Another commented:

I think a good headteacher needs a very clear moral purpose. They need to be convinced that what they do changes the lives of people (Principal, Academy 6, 2014).

The theme of ‘getting a fair deal’ for students, underpinned by a clear moral purpose, was the leitmotiv in all these interviews. Most leaders spoke briefly about their own personal journey to taking up headships in challenging areas, but one spoke in some detail about the effect of his own school experience on his approach to headship:

... both of the schools I went to I should have failed but because I had some good teachers ... It was having five or six good teachers in my primary and secondary school that took the trouble. And I thought actually if it hadn't been for them, then the expectation at 16 was that I'd go on the building site ... I'm determined that we are not going to repeat those mistakes with this next generation of young people by having teachers who don't care and teachers who can't do it and teachers who feel that it's okay because it's working class kids, that they don't have to try as hard (Chief Executive, Academy 2, 2012).

This extract has echoes of Reay's ‘passionate partisanship’ that she argues is helpful in ‘ensuring a strong focus on social justice’ but can result in over-simplifying personal experience when ‘class has become such a confusing, contradictory and slippery concept’ (Reay, 2017, p.2). Reay argues that there are many kinds of working class educational experience which, while often focusing on occupation and qualifications (or lack of), are more completely understood in terms of students’ sense of confidence and entitlement to education, knowledge and information about the system and family history in relation to education; ‘while success breeds success, failure turns into more failure’ (Reay, 2017, p.180). This Chief Executive equated working on the building site with failure, and believed in a straightforward way that good teachers had changed

the course of his life; his passionate view that students should feel entitled to access an education in which they were supported by quality teaching to pass examinations at 16 – a point of view shared by all interviewees – stemmed from this experience.

The question of raising student performance through the quality of teaching, however, is complex. Students and their parents may resist the view that examination passes are the route to a secure future:

You have to go back kind of like, eight or nine generations, actual generations, before you find someone who was in employment ... You know, ‘Ooh my great, great, great, great, great, great, great granddad had a job in 1870 because he worked in so-and-so and so-and-so’. And that genuinely is the last time that some of the students which we teach, their family actually worked ... Why are you going to be concerned when your son or daughter’s teacher phones up and says they’re not achieving what they should be doing in Maths and English? (Assistant Vice-Principal, Academy 2, 2014).

Given the increasingly tenuous link between qualifications and employment, this is a perfectly reasonable response; equally, engaging with a curriculum that marginalises working class knowledge and experience can seem pointless to students (Reay, 2017, pp.63-66). In turn this raises issues relating to the appropriateness of the curriculum for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the role of teachers in ‘delivering’ the curriculum to maximise examination passes, the question of power, and the position of headteachers with regard to the Department of Education (DfE). Courtney and Gunter (2015) argue that, in the current highly centralised system, headteachers can be positioned as middle managers, and that demands from the DfE to raise students’ examination performance has led to ‘totalitarian tendencies’ in the ruthless disposal of teachers who are unwilling or unable to produce the examination goods (Courtney & Gunter, 2015, p.396). Similarly, Courtney’s (2017) research suggests that headteachers who do not conform to corporatist values and practices relating to, for instance, educational efficiency tend to get left behind, exerting further pressure to conform.

These different tensions are significant, and draw into focus the poverty of a human capital approach to education that is framed by neoliberal markets. Leader interviewees were not uncritical of either the system or of policy, in particular of new performance measures introduced in 2014 which they saw as demotivating for their students and likely to disadvantage them further in terms of achieving examination passes. Interviewees also drew our attention to the absence of targeted support for schools in their areas, demonstrating further disadvantage:

Some of the initiatives which I've been used to in city areas ... the really strong, sharply-focussed school improvement initiatives which

were spawned out of first national strategies and then the city challenges, they were conspicuous in their absence (Principal, Academy 6, 2014).

Working in areas that suffered from policy neglect, limited allocation of state resources and a shrunken labour market, all of which can have a disproportionate effect on the people living there, meant that these leaders were moved to employ an active approach to social justice that aimed at least to attempt to right the effects of some of these perceived unfairnesses. We have seen that the first dimension of getting a fair deal was offering students the kind of teaching that enabled them to pass examinations – a pragmatic position agreed by all that worked with the grain of the system while not necessarily agreeing with it. The next section explores the second and third dimensions.

### **Enactment of social justice: insistent affirmation of possibility**

In different ways, these leaders were endeavouring to create an environment in which young people could experience new challenges and opportunities so that, in the words of one interviewee

... they have the tools by which they can question how to live the rest of their lives (Principal, Academy 1, 2013).

By offering new, often challenging, experiences these schools encouraged their students to find new and different interests, to develop new skills and to engage with different people. In one school, for example, students questioned the quality of their sex education and were invited to work with a teacher to revisit the curriculum for this area. The result was that:

... it's really benefitted the Academy because the students feel that it's their subject and they designed it ... so they will go with it. So we've got one of the most unpopular subjects ... now has been transformed into the most popular one (Principal, Academy 2, 2014).

Other examples included:

We're trying to look at football, dance, theatre, cultural exchanges [with different countries], all those different things because it's something for everybody. It's trying to make sure that everybody's doing something (Principal, Academy 5, 2014).

They [students] are running extended day after-school clubs ... Just last week, a sixth former wanted to do Japanese. So he's going to teach ... We had one last year that did Manga ... And it was the most

common, most popular after-school club (Principal, Academy 3, 2014).

... the musical director of [play] in the West End ... runs our musical here. We did Bugsy [Malone] with him ... he brings the pit players up from the West End to play, so the kids in [home town] get to play with the West End band ... They're working with a West End choreographer and a West End director. But he also comes in and does it for my sixth form as well ... he talks to them about what it's like to get into the profession (Chief Executive, Academy 2, 2012).

... this year, we've set up more leader programmes so we have charity leaders, we'll have event leaders, we've got leaders, we run little shops. We've got groups of leaders all over, librarian leaders, peer mentor leaders because it's all about saying, 'Actually, you're special'. And they've got to apply to be a leader and go through an application process ... and then they do all projects across the school ... I would just like everybody to be leading on something because they're special (Principal, Academy 5, 2014).

Involving students with different types of leadership is often part of a school's approach, but the variety in this particular school, coupled with the Principal's concern that all should feel 'special', is a vivid illustration of the way in which these leaders' approach was underpinned by 'an insistent affirmation of possibility' (Fielding and Moss, 2011, p.73). For Fielding and Moss, this means 'the insistence on keeping options open, in resisting closure, on a generosity of presumption that assumes the best rather than the worst of young people' (Fielding and Moss, 2011, p.82), and interviewees were notable for their relentless efforts to find ways to engage and challenge young people so that they could build confidence in themselves, their learning processes and their decisions. This kind of approach cannot rectify structural problems, but it recognises and respects young people's agency, allowing them to grow in terms of confidence in their entitlement to education and their ability to participate, the absence of which, for Reay (2017, p.180), is one of the fundamental problems of working class education. As Francis et al (2017, p.415) comment, public education systems reproduce and legitimise inequities; these leaders fully understood this and, through their attitudes and actions were endeavouring to offer their students an education in which they had the possibility of qualifications, plus sufficient experience and information that they could explore different options, question their own status quo, be active in their decision-making and understand the nature of the choices they were making about their future. These are the tools of which the Principal above spoke; the process of widening students' experience so they had could have the tools at their disposal was the second dimension of getting a fair deal.

The third dimension related to the investment that some of these leaders made in supporting the local community area. Possibly the most notable was one school's (grant-aided) investment in a new community building, one floor of which was dedicated to support services for local people who were unable to travel to urban services from their isolated location:

The top floor is deliberately for the community ... And it's got to be self-financing because you can't spend your school money on the community, but we're confident that's going to work. But the idea is that services that people can't access [locally] can be based there ... whether it be counselling, mental health services (Principal, Academy 3, 2014)

The leader here was finding a middle way between a corporate approach and welfarism (Courtney, 2017), on the one hand having to ensure that the building pays for itself 'because you can't spend your money on the school community', and on the other offering a space for public services that were difficult to access without adequate transport. Just as importantly, the top floor was a physical manifestation of the belief leaders had in the local community and their willingness to provide practical support. Other instances of investment in the community included one academy 'lending' experienced teachers to local primary schools which were having problems with recruitment, and some of those teachers then becoming primary governors; another expanding links with local business to generate genuine work experience opportunities for students and to start mentoring schemes between employees and students within the school; and two successfully applying for grants for a full-size 3G football pitch and encouraging local community groups and clubs to use it. Developing ties with local communities by supporting primary schools, offering services, making advantageous business connections and opening up facilities for community use – the latter albeit for a fee – were practical, visible demonstrations of a long-term commitment to the locality together with a belief in the people who live there.

Not all leaders implemented these three dimensions to the same extent, partly because they had been in post for different lengths of time, and partly because schools are 'always different ... the local community, the local culture has a big say in how you run things' (Vice-Principal, Academy 5, 2014). What is appropriate for one school may not be for another, and it takes time, for example, to develop relationships, to find out areas of need and then put in place vehicles of long-term investment. Nonetheless all were actively focused around these three dimensions in their efforts to give their students a fair deal, and all were insistent about the possibility inherent within these young people's lives.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

These leaders' approach of active social justice to get a fair deal for students, in a system that is weighted against them, does not fall easily into a particular theoretical category. As others have commented, discussions on fairness quickly merge into debates on justice and equality, but fairness is not necessarily the same as equality, nor is justice always considered to be fair (Mazzoli Smith et al, 2017). In practice there were elements of all three in these leaders' approach; they wanted fairness in terms of equalising the quality of education and educational opportunity for their disadvantaged pupils and they wanted justice in terms of policy recognition of their local challenges, together with greater resources to address them. Although only one spoke of pursuing social justice, the sentiment was echoed in almost all interviews in terms of changing people's lives, and the tenor of the interviews suggests that all would agree with Reay's comment that the system currently 'feels very unfair' (Ferguson, 2017). As do Francis et al (2017, p.415), these leaders saw education as potentially emancipatory and were working in three particular ways to provide their students with what they believed would support that emancipation, operating with the grain of the system and at the same time endeavouring to widen the focus of the curriculum by offering different experiences to their students. In this sense they were a complex amalgamation of different viewpoints and values; they were adopting a welfarist approach in terms of social justice and equity (Courtney, 2017, p.1061) while embracing the idea of raising teacher quality (with all its inherent difficulties in an economic system), providing the entrepreneurial leadership of the early academy brief, and at the same time were part of/complicit in a system that eschewed the democratic oversight of local authorities. It is perhaps this 'agile' (Gillies, 2011), pragmatic approach that enabled them to work with different groups in their locality and, ultimately, to survive as leaders over the longer term (cf Courtney, 2017).

And this pragmatism is, perhaps, a way forward when thinking about principles and practices related to social justice in education. Education systems all over the world, as Francis et al (2017) point out, have entrenched positions and practices; to use the well-worn metaphor, the ship cannot be brought back to shore to be refitted and has to be mended out at sea. But this was precisely the approach of these leaders. Their principle was to do what was possible to offer students in disadvantaged areas an education that, within the limits of the system, has the potential to be emancipatory. Their practices were aimed at this through improving the quality of teaching, offering a wide range of experiences, and providing practical support in the local community, all underpinned by an 'insistent affirmation of possibility' (Fielding & Moss, 2011, p.73). While this approach does not solve the tensions that Francis et al (2017) outline in their article, it helps us to think in terms of the particular; of the individual children who are either flourishing or not within any educational system, of what they need to improve their lot in the here and now, and of ways in which this might be done. Discussing practical examples of action taken has the potential to move the debate into more positive territory, in which there can be more appreciation of the efforts and outcomes of some

leaders in highly disadvantaged areas. We hope that more leaders, wherever they are situated around the globe, can take heart in following their example; disadvantaged areas abound in all nations, and the practical solutions presented here are not country-specific. It may be that this, in turn, helps us to focus on *what a socially just education system would look like* (Francis et al, p.425, emphasis in original) and to bring ideals, theories and practices closer together.

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