

## Social justice work as activism: The work of education professionals in England and Jamaica

Paul Miller, Nola P. Hill-Berry, Kadia Hylton-Fraser, Shernette Powell

**Abstract:** *“Social justice” is perhaps the most used word among educators in developed countries, and over the past decade, social justice work can be seen through, mostly government led initiatives and campaigns, aimed at promoting social inclusion, tolerance, respect, and reducing poverty, racism, class barriers, etc. Despite much talk about social justice, it is often unclear in any practical terms what is meant by ‘doing social justice’, hence the aim of this study to understand what it means for education professionals to foreground social justice in their work. This qualitative phenomenological study of education professionals in England and Jamaica (two university lecturers, a principal, and a secondary school teacher) sheds light on how educators in different educational contexts and national education systems conceptualise and undertake social justice work in their daily job roles. The guiding question was, “How do different education professionals do social justice work?” Despite national, cultural, institutional and role differences, education professionals conceived social justice as ‘doing right by others’, and working collaboratively was found to be key to successfully making changes and bringing about improvements. Furthermore, participants approached social justice work through pedagogic activism, emancipatory activism and regulatory activism.*

**Key words:** social justice, England, Jamaica, regulatory, pedagogic, emancipatory, activism

### Introduction

The idea of social justice is as hard to be against as it is to deny, and education professionals, in England and Jamaica, encounter and navigate a range of challenges in their everyday practice as teachers, school leaders and educationalists on a daily basis. Some struggle to meet the basic needs of learners due to limited resources buoyed by ongoing cuts to budgets. Others struggle to create environments where each student, regardless of race/ ethnicity, class, religion, creed, feels equally welcomed. The diverse needs of students, as well as diverse populations of students, do not make the task of education professionals any easier, and as a result, it is not difficult to imagine how the needs of some students may be ignored.

Arrangements for education and schooling in both England and Jamaica are changing, not only in policy terms, but also as a response to migration, globalisation and events of the global and national economic environments. Whereas England’s education policy is, “Every child matters”, and whereas Jamaica’s education policy is “Every child can learn, every child must learn”, these are no more than statements of intent if funding is not available to support policy ambitions and agendas, the aspirations of learners, and the expectations placed on schools by governments, families and students alike. Similarly, if school leaders and education professionals at all levels do not put systems in place to ensure the achievement of these ambitions, then the school’s role in national and social transformation could be undermined.

Education professionals can hinder or enhance the effectiveness of their institution to support and meet the needs of students. The literature documents practices by teachers and school leaders in successfully supporting the achievement and attainment of all students as well as democratising educational environments (Theoharis, 2008). Being able to ‘push back’ against practices and events in the socio-economic and political environments that do not promote equity for all students in terms of their opportunities and outcomes is the work of social justice leadership. Furthermore, the policy environment can also restrict or emancipate social justice work at the institutional level. As Schleicher (2014) notes, “promoting excellence, equity and inclusion are key aims for education” (p.11), and as articulated by the OECD (2016, p. 270),

Equity in education is a matter of design and concerted policy efforts. Achieving greater equity in education is not only a social justice imperative, it is also a way to use resources more effectively,

increase the supply of skills that fuel economic growth, and promote social cohesion. As such, equity should be one of the key objectives in any strategy to improve an education system.

The guiding question for this study was, “How do different education professionals do social justice work?” Based on the findings from the study, we argue that social justice leadership is an activist form of leadership that seeks to transform educational environments into more equitable spaces where all who study and work in them can thrive, even when, on the surface, the odds do not always appear to support this.

### **Educational context in England**

The Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills oversee education in England, in conjunction with local authorities (LAs). The education system is divided into early years (ages 3–4), primary education (ages 4–11), secondary education (ages 11–18) and tertiary education (ages 18+). Education is free to students in the public education system until they reach university. Full-time education is compulsory for all children aged between 5 and 16. State-provided schooling and sixth-form education is paid for by taxes. From 1998 to the present, there have been six main types of maintained school in England: community schools, foundation and trust schools, voluntary-aided schools, voluntary-controlled schools, academies and free schools.

There are approximately 24,281 state-funded schools in England: 3,446 state secondary schools and 16,884 state primary schools. In January 2017, there were just over 8 million pupils attending state-funded primary schools, state-funded secondary schools, special schools and pupil referral units, representing an increase of just under 110,000 pupils, or 1.3%, since 2016. The total number of pupils has grown every year since 2009 and there are now 577,000 more pupils in schools than at that point. In January 2017, for all schools types, 14.0% of pupils were eligible for and claiming free schools meals. Entitlement to free school meals is determined by the receipt of income-related benefits. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic origins has been rising steadily since 2006. In primary schools, 32.1% of pupils are of minority ethnic origins, an increase from 31.4% in January 2016. Minority ethnic pupils made up 66.3% of the increase in pupil numbers in primary schools between 2016 and 2017. In secondary schools, 29.1% of pupils are of minority ethnic origins, an increase from 27.9% in 2016 (DfE, 2017).

There are approximately 451,000 teachers in the state sector in England, including 24,281 principals. Of the total number of teachers, 86.5% (or 395,564) are White-British. There are approximately 3.8% (or 17,377) teachers from ‘Other White’ background, whilst White-Irish (1.7% or 7,774), Indian (1.8% or 8,231), Pakistani (1.0% or 4,513) and Black Caribbean (1.0% or 4,513) are the next largest groups of teachers (DfE, 2017b). Of the approximately 20,000 qualified teachers from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) heritage, approximately 1,200 are in leadership positions, of which just about 277 are principals, representing 1.1% of the total number of principals.

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) suggest that there are approximately 1,829,200 UK-domiciled students in higher education. Of this number, the ethnicity of 33,290 is unknown. Of the 1,795,910 whose ethnicity is known, approximately 21% (or 377,225) are of BAME heritage (HESA, 2016). Higher education in England is cost bearing and all students can apply for a tuition loan from Student Finance England, although the application for a Maintenance Grant is linked to household income.

### **Educational context in Jamaica**

Education in Jamaica is administered primarily by the Ministry of Education (MoE) through its head office and six regional offices. There are just under 1,200 state-funded schools: 206 state-funded secondary schools and technical high schools, and 973 pre-primary, primary, all-age and junior high schools. In 2016, there were approximately 850,000 students in publicly funded early childhood, primary and secondary schools. There are approximately 25,000 teachers in the state-funded sector, including just under 1,200 principals (Ministry of Education, 2016).

Formal education is provided mainly by the government, solely or in partnership with churches and trusts. Private schools also provide formal education. As stipulated in the 1980 Education Act, the education system consists of four levels: early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary. There is a cost-sharing mechanism in place in Jamaica to fund education, which is not free to students. Students from low-income households can receive free meals and a travel grant from the state funded Programme for Advancement through Health and Education (PATH). PATH was established in 2001 and provides cash transfers to poor families who are subject to eligibility requirements. Higher education is cost bearing and students from low-income households can apply to the Students' Loan Bureau for a loan to fund their studies. There is currently no nationally agreed mechanism for counting and disaggregating the numbers of students studying at the country's higher education institutions by age, gender, ethnicity, programmes of study, domicile, etc.

### **Social justice**

Social justice is a contested term and concept. Furman and Shields (2003) argue, "Defining social justice is very difficult since it is not a specific structure to be reified, defined, reduced, observed and replicated" (p. 1358). Notwithstanding this, social justice, according to Vogel (2011) is the "full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs, including an equitable distribution of resources where all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure, self-determining, interdependent" (p. 71). This, enacted through a "sense of their own agency and social responsibility toward and with others and the society as a whole" (Bell, 2007, p. 3). Accordingly, social justice can be viewed as a principle and a guide to organising how humans live and treat one another as members of a community or a society (Rebore, 2001).

### **Social justice leadership**

The literature does not provide a single definition of social justice leadership. However, a common thread among definitions and conceptualisations is that it has to do with leaders using their power to create equity. Bogotch (2000) asserts, "Social justice, just like education, is a deliberate intervention that requires the moral use of power" (p. 2). Theoharis (2007, p. 223) characterise school social justice leaders as individuals who:

... advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions.... Addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools... students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), and other students traditionally separated in schools are also necessitated by this definition.

Social justice leaders actively try to right wrongs inflicted on marginalised groups, as well as use their position to create safe spaces and opportunities that promote equity between individuals and groups. Thus, social justice leadership is activist both in its intent and its approach, and social justice leaders understand the material, economic and social differences between different groups. It is with this understanding that they focus on creating equity-based opportunities for all. Social justice leaders move beyond equality debates to equity debates, but setting out to change systems, processes and structures to better respond to the needs of students (Dantley & Tillman, 2006). Education professionals with this orientation are activist leaders who work to create justice in schools for all who study and work in them, and social justice leaders interpret their role as not one which is limited to being a teacher or leader, but also one of activism, working towards student empowerment and equity for all.

### **The study**

This phenomenological study of social justice work among education professionals located in England and Jamaica was undertaken over 10 months from April 2016 to February 2017. The guiding question for the study was, "How do **different** education professionals in **different** education contexts do social justice

work?” Our intention in asking this broad question was to understand (i) how different education professionals understand and enact social justice work, and (ii) how different education professionals located in different socio-political and cultural contexts enact social justice work. There were four sub-questions as follows:

(1) What does social justice mean to you? This question was aimed at gaining insights into how education professionals interpret the concept of social justice.

(2) How do you do social justice work in your work context? This was aimed at locating examples and accounts of practice, in order to build an understanding of how education professionals enact social justice work in their everyday practice.

(3) What impact does your work as a social justice leader/ practitioner have on your organisation as a whole and/ or individuals within your organisation? The aim of this question was to ascertain the likely impact of the practices enacted by different education professionals in their work roles and work context.

(4) In what ways can you improve your practice as a social justice leader/ practitioner? What support do you need and how can this supported be obtained? The aim of this reflective question was to ascertain resource needs of education professionals to (successfully) widen and deepen their work as social justice leaders/ practitioners.

### ***Participants***

There were four participants in this study: one located in England and three located in Jamaica. All four participants are members of the Institute for Educational Administration & Leadership-Jamaica (IEAL-J), who collaborated on a project which was presented at the UCEA Conference in November 2017 in Denver, Colorado, on the topic “How do different education professionals do social justice work? Preliminary findings from a two-country study”. This paper is the output of this collaboration. There were three females and one male. Participants enact social justice work/ leadership in very different contexts, and as a result have very different understandings of social justice, as well as very different orientations towards social justice work. For example, two participants work in universities, one in Jamaica and one in England; and two work in schools, one a primary school principal and the other a teacher in a secondary school. Furthermore, participants worked in a mix of rural, urban and semi-urban areas.

### ***Analytical approach***

This paper draws on a combined descriptive and phenomenological research methodology. Descriptive research aims to provide a detailed and accurate picture of a particular situation (Neuman, 2006) – in this case, education professionals in two contexts. A phenomenological approach was also used with the aim of providing detailed accounts of events and experiences from the viewpoint of participants, since phenomenology studies structures of consciousness from an individual’s point of view. Together, these approaches allowed participants to speak with an uninterrupted voice (Etherington, 2004). As the aims of the study were to understand how different education professionals in different education contexts understand and do social justice work, each participant responded to the same questions. However, each question was treated as a separate unit of analysis, and responses were analysed separately, after which these were aggregated to identify common or discordant themes across the entire data-set. Furthermore, our research carries moral and political connections to real world problems by connecting how participants embody and enact social justice work in their daily work lives. The quotations presented from interviews with participants are therefore to illustrate and enable our analysis of discourses and ‘events’ in the socio-political and cultural contexts.

### ***Findings***

As discussed earlier, each question was considered a unit of analysis in its own right. Consequently, findings are arranged to reflect the themes associated with each question posed to participants. As also

discussed, questions posed to participants were not to assess how they perceive others undertook social justice work, but rather to ascertain how they (i) understood and (ii) enacted social justice in their work contexts.

### ***Understanding social justice***

The first question was: “What does social justice mean to you?” Responses from participants underscored the difficulty in defining the term social justice, and participants provided several suggestions about what they conceive social justice to mean. For example, all four conceived of social justice in very different terms, although a common denominator was ‘doing right by others’.

As an approach to leadership, the school principal noted:

Social justice for me is how I execute my functions as a manager. It is how I delegate, coordinate and organise the responsibilities in my institution. It is how I treat all staff whether they are Ancillary, Auxiliary or my Academic Staff. It is the cornerstone that underpins staff morale. Social justice orchestrates a playing field that seeks the best for all (Primary Principal, Jamaica).

As an approach to classroom practices, the school teacher noted:

I understand social justice to mean the practice of inclusion at all levels and of all peoples. That means, regardless of socio-economic status, background, race, religion or gender, all my students are equal and must be treated as such. Furthermore, they must be given every opportunity to become the best version of themselves through the process of being educated (Secondary teacher, Jamaica).

As an approach to challenging organisational structures and practices, one university lecturer noted:

Social justice means respecting the rights of individuals, demonstrating equity and distributing resources, privileges, and opportunities among the members of society/community and in the setting in which I operate. It is about fighting for the rights and reasonable interests of my students, my colleagues and myself (University lecturer, Jamaica).

And as an approach to resource allocation and equal treatment, another university lecturer noted:

Social justice means equity and fair treatment in how resources are allocated, how workloads are designed, how individuals and groups are treated - in particular, those from minoritised backgrounds/ communities (University lecturer, England).

### ***Doing social justice work***

The second question was: “How do you do social justice work in your work context?” Participants provided several suggestions and examples based on institutional context as well as based on their position and job role within their organisations. Although there were noticeable differences in how participants enacted social justice work in their institutional context, a singular and consistent element was the “activist” orientation attached to their roles - as evidenced by the active verbs used to describe their actions. For example:

- I **use** the University’s rules, policies and regulations whilst being flexible and empathetic and supportive to students and colleagues (University lecturer, Jamaica);
- I ensure students are not short-changed by **delivering** on the University’s obligations to them and by **following** through with what was agreed upon enrolment (University lecturer, Jamaica);
- I consider students’ interests and **create** opportunities for them to navigate their way through their education with certain processes that others may make difficult (Secondary teacher, Jamaica);
- I **lobby** for the students and colleagues by making representation on their behalf to different committees. For example, arranging for make-do tests for students who missed the scheduled in-

course exams due to pressing situations, and making referrals and recommendations on their behalf. I **do** my job without partiality (University lecturer, Jamaica);

- I **advise** students and colleagues, and I **work** with them to identify strategies to better maximise their time and resources; and I **suggest** ways they could behave, in certain situations, in order to be more likely to get outcomes that are beneficial (Primary Principal, Jamaica);
- I **raise** concerns of inequity with school leaders and I challenge practices that foster or encourage mistreatment of others (University lecturer, England).

Participants also supported these comments with examples of how they do social justice work in their work context.

As noted by the school teacher:

The Ministry of Education's guiding policy "Every child can learn, every child must learn" is grounded in the principles of social justice, therefore teachers within the education system are expected to uphold this standard throughout their practice... As a teacher of Spanish, I am uniquely placed to ensure that students understand and appreciate that at different times they will be interacting with individuals from different cultures and backgrounds. And, it is my responsibility to prepare them for their place in a global society (Secondary teacher, Jamaica).

As also noted by the principal:

All levels of staff are given equal treatment to show how important they are to the institution. Hence, I show respect to the grounds man, cleaner, security guards, etc., for them to understand that they are as important to the organisation as the teachers or auxiliary staff. A leader exercising social justice is one that shows inclusion (Primary Principal, Jamaica).

Acknowledging the myriad complexities within and outside the classroom, the principal also noted:

Students are taught to be social justice advocates. They are encouraged not to stigmatise and isolate students who are less fortunate and who may have a disability. There is a deliberate effort to encourage equity, respect and understanding within and outside the classroom environment. I make the effort to give voice to all students, and I fight for my students in cases where I feel they have been wronged (Primary Principal, Jamaica).

### ***Impact of social justice work***

The third question was: "What impact does your practice as a social justice leader/practitioner have on your organisation as a whole and/or (b) individuals within your organisation?" Participants provided examples of primarily qualitative measures used to assess the impact of their work.

As provided by the principal:

I have held meetings with all staff to get them to understand and remind them of their importance to the effective running of the institution. Academic staff now show up on time for work; they now submit lesson plans on time; they now show greater care and concern for each other as colleagues, which in turn generates a higher level of trust and respect; and they are showing greater levels of professionalism and accountability than before. In addition, Ancillary and Auxiliary staff are showing a level of enthusiasm towards their work that was not there before (Primary Principal, Jamaica).

Continuing, she also noted how her encounter with staff and students has contributed to her personal learning:

[M]y staff and students have taught me lessons about my role as a leader, and as a result, I have been forced to be more reflective before and after my encounters with them to ensure that I have not been unfair in any way... (Primary Principal, Jamaica).

The secondary school teacher provided examples of where she has felt her approach to social justice has had an impact on her colleagues:

I would want to believe that I have had an impact on my colleagues through the examples I have set from interacting with my students. I challenge them to be better and not to make blind assumptions about students. I have experienced first-hand how relationships within my department improved because of a deliberate effort on my part to be fair in dispensing my role and showing consideration for the Head of Department in the dispensing of her own. As a result, she became a better version of herself, as did I (Secondary teacher, Jamaica).

The Jamaican university lecturer provided examples of how she felt her approach to social justice work had impacted students:

My practice also impacts my students as I demonstrate equity in distributing resources and privileges; and I fight for the rights and reasonable interests of individuals - particularly my students - to ensure they are not short-changed. For example, when students fail marginally and my colleagues re-mark and re-mark with the aim of finding a mark or two to "save" those students, I insist that I am not getting involved in such a practice because it is unfair.... I insist that if such re-marking will be done for a few students, it should be done for all students. In the few instances where I have faced such a dilemma, I have provided the entire class or group with an opportunity to resubmit their work, thereby giving everyone the opportunity to score higher (University lecturer, Jamaica).

### ***Widening and deepening social justice work***

The final question was: "In what ways can you improve your practice as a social justice leader/practitioner?" "What support do you need and how can this support be obtained/ provided?" Participants discussed different ways they felt they could improve social justice work in their institutions, and they also identified specific tools they could use to enhance and improve their practice. Working with others was a significant finding among participants.

The Jamaican primary principal and the university lecturer in England both provided lists of personal commitments to deepening social justice work in their contexts:

In improving social justice leadership, I will seek to more effectively model emotional intelligence towards all levels of staff. I will ensure that appropriate programmes are put in place from the Guidance Department to help staff and students. I will also ensure that all levels of staff are provided with training and developmental workshops to build them professionally, intellectually and emotionally. I will model social justice practices that teachers can emulate. I will ensure that appropriate parenting workshops are provided to parents to build their self-esteem, which will in turn help to build the self-esteem of their children (Primary Principal, Jamaica).

I will continue to speak out against race/ ethnic inequality issues in education and in our educational institutions. But to stand a chance of having an impact, I will have to work much more collaboratively with other colleagues - White and non-White, to get the message across that race/ethnic inequality is wrong and is impeding the progress of not just individuals and schools, but also of society. Perhaps then, school leaders and governors will commit to taking responsibility for implementing interventions at institutional levels (University lecturer, England).

The secondary school teacher identified interventions she felt could be used to deepen and widen social justice work for her and her students:

[P]rofessional development workshops that address certain aspects of social justice in a targeted way would help me to improve my practice as a social justice leader. Moreover, sessions in which students are given a voice to safely and responsibly air their concerns, challenges and ideas

would lead to a greater focus on social justice by virtue of certain practices maintained by the school as well as the policies that are implemented (Secondary teacher, Jamaica).

The Jamaican university lecturer noted:

I can improve my practice as a social justice practitioner by engaging my colleagues more in related discussions that could make us more aware of social injustices within our work environment. This could allow us to turn away from injustice and act in the best interest of those we serve - our students.

She however noted she would need support from colleagues and students:

Improving social justice work will need the support from all my colleagues. This support is their commitment to impartially doing their jobs and to appropriately represent our students at the various meetings and committees. I will also need the support of students in terms of their compliance with the University's regulations and guidelines; and I will need their understanding and patience as we work through issues in seeking to serve their needs and best interests (University lecturer, Jamaica).

## **Discussion**

From the interview evidence provided, two main themes 'doing right by others' and 'fighting' for the rights and for what's due. In 'fighting' for rights and/or in trying to 'do right by others' education professionals embarked on three inter-related approaches to social justice work, described herein as pedagogic activism, emancipatory activism and regulatory activism. We discuss these approaches below, whilst also examining the two broad themes that emerged from the data.

### ***Pedagogic activism***

As all four participants are directly involved in teaching, it is perhaps understandable that a significant part of their work should be taken up with seeking better outcomes for students. We see evidence of education professionals devising programmes and activities to support the learning of students, and linking their actions to national policy agendas, for example, "Every Child Can Learn, Every Child Must Learn". Furthermore, we see evidence of education professionals challenging and supporting other education professionals to use their perceived status as "kings" and "queens" to represent and safeguard the interests of students, and to help students negotiate and navigate complex systems and processes. These findings extend research by Suskie (2000) which found that education professionals should draw on the tools at their disposal, including collaborating with others involved in practices and strategies for improving their work practices. Since education is a primary gateway to socio-economic well-being (Schleicher, 2014), decisions taken by education professionals, to upskill and up-build students, and to provide them with essential skills and knowledge for their flourish in society, are arguably consistent with overarching aims of education. As the Jamaican teacher of Spanish noted, she was not preparing her students to pass a test, but for their effective functioning in the global world. In connecting the individual with the institutional, national and global contexts, education professionals are trying to provide students with quality education that equips them for their independent flourishing in society, and that governments and families will also have a return on their investments in their education.

Although Jamaica was once colonised by England, and although Jamaica's educational landscape is heavily influenced by England's education landscape, both countries are very different socially, culturally, economically and politically. These differences did not feature in our analysis, as we didn't consider them in our questions. However, what was clear between participants in both countries was their commitment to using their position and status to provide students with a qualitatively different learning experience (Miller, 2016).

There is no doubt, there are multiple factors that may impact students' ability to thrive at school. However, education professionals were clear that their pedagogic practices, and that of their colleagues,



should not be held up as one of those factors. Consequently, there was a consciousness and a mindfulness among education professionals that sought to challenge classroom and other practices which could be interpreted as having the potential to be detrimental to students.

### ***Regulatory activism***

The education professionals in the study were invested in ‘fighting’ for their students and for improvements in their experiences. However, their fight often included (i) using institutional and national policies to ameliorate perceived injustices and inconsistent practices and (ii) seeking to address inconsistencies within existing policy obligations. For example, in using the wide ambit of institutional policies to create change for students, or working around those policies, education professionals demonstrated that working flexibly, creatively within existing regulatory frameworks, instead of outside or against such frameworks, could lead to better outcomes for students, and could protect all concerned. This position is perhaps best understood by a statement made by former Jamaican Prime Minister, P.J. Patterson<sup>1</sup> (personal statement) who suggested, "The law is not a shackle to enslave; it is a tool of social engineering", a view also supported by Riley (2000) who described successful leaders as "... rule breakers ... willing to change in response to new circumstances" (p. 47).

In addition, as provided by Miller (2016), policies exist to safeguard, to protect and to reassure. That is, policies exist to provide accountability *to* and demand accountability *from*. Education professionals in the study suggested they acted in ways that provided accountability *to* students, their families and their institutions, and that they demanded regulatory activism *from* others where their actions could have left them open to unintended interpretations. For example, in challenging pedagogic and assessment practices that appeared to advantage some, and not all students, they were trying to reduce the risk of misunderstandings and accusations emerging, as well as trying to achieve consistency in how relevant policies were understood and applied. This position acknowledges the complexity of decision-making for those working in education, and underlines the fact that doing social justice work, and to make a difference in doing social justice is hugely problematic, since the application of policies "...should be directed with impartiality, fairness and justice..." (Falk, Hampton, Hodgkinson, Parker & Rorris, 1993, p. 2). Furthermore, as provided by Miller (2016), education professionals are increasingly "called upon to carefully balance intuition against logic; the intrinsic against the external; the legal against the moral; the natural against the supernatural – in order to negotiate and secure best outcomes for all who study and work in their schools" (p.16).

### ***Emancipatory activism***

From the interview data, a clear pattern of emancipatory activism has emerged, where education professionals either committed themselves to change several personal agendas and/or provided examples of impacts their work has had in bringing about change. As noted by Picower (2012), those who are committed to social justice, will work within their institutions to banish oppression in any of its forms, and to create opportunities for all students to be enfranchised. From the interview data, we have seen evidence of education professionals, taking the leadership in challenging practices that reify inequity, as well as instituting programmes and policies to enfranchise and empower staff and students.

---

<sup>1</sup> In 1998, speaking subsequent to the historic qualification match against Mexico in which the Jamaican football team—the Reggae Boyz—qualified for the World Cup in France, then Prime Minister P.J. Patterson declared the next day a public National Holiday. Faced with immense criticisms, Mr Patterson, a lawyer, responded by saying, ‘The law is not a shackle but a tool of social engineering.’ Since then, mostly the first half of Mr Patterson’s statement has been popularized by/in the press.

### Standing up for students

In responding to the impact that their practice as a social justice leader/practitioner has on their organisations and individuals, one university lecturer was quite focused about fighting for the rights and reasonable interests of her students, in particular, regarding the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities to students. She also emphasised that engaging with colleagues in discussions about social injustices with a view to addressing practices and behaviours which promote and reify such behaviours was important. The commitment of education professionals to talk with other colleagues, to lobby for students and to seek changes to institutional systems is congruent with Dantley and Tillman's (2006) postulation that engaging in equity debates are avenues through which we can generate meaningful ideas of changes that can be implemented to better serve our students' needs. The Primary Principal commented that she fights for her students in terms of getting more (good) teachers in front of her (mostly) disadvantaged students, as well as creating a climate of respect and tolerance at school where no student, regardless of household income and/or disability is stigmatised. Arguably, the work of this school leader is itself an exercise in social justice.

The plethora of commitments and examples of what they will change or how they have created change are important in their own right, and they highlight that individual and collective effort that is measured and undertaken to 'do right by others' can dismantle "marginalizing conditions" (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223) that limit and hinder human flourishing. Commitment from education professionals however must be constant and auto-renewing, underpinned by a collective and individual energy that is deliberate and purposeful, and that pursues the rights, well-being, and interests of their students (Bogotch, 2000) in ways that advance and sustain these rights and interests.

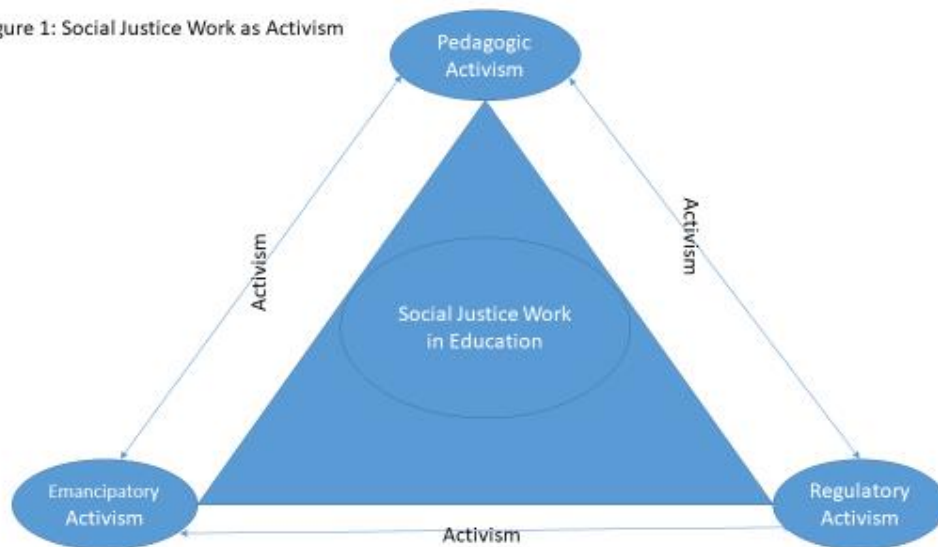
### Challenging unfair practices.

The Primary Principal noted that, despite their best intentions, education professionals can and sometimes do find themselves, unwittingly, supporting or being complicit with various "isms". This highlights the personal nature of social justice as a concept, and the importance and need for collective vigilance in doing social justice work. That is, in as much as political savvy and sophistication may be needed to enact and implement social justice work, it also requires constant self and collegial checking in order to meet the accountability bar.

Education professionals, irrespective of what country they are located or in what type of institution they practice, have a duty of care to those they serve and lead. In discharging this duty, they must use the power associated with their position and status, as "kings" and "queens", to do all they can to transform statements of intents into embedded practice (Miller & Callender, 2019). Discharging these duties in ways that are carefully planned will enable them to widen and deepen their social justice work in ways that secure and safeguard, and in ways that are more likely to yield a positive return on investment for all concerned. Social justice is about equity, and devising schemes and strategies that reduce or eliminate unfair practices in education is a social justice imperative (OECD, 2016).

We present our conceptual model below, which summarises the three activist approaches adopted by education professionals in the study.

Figure 1: Social Justice Work as Activism



From the interview data, we make the claim that social justice work is “activism”. That is, social justice work is active and not passive, it is oriented towards positive change and its intents, processes and actions are not geared towards advantaging one group over another but they are geared towards delivering equity for all.

### Conclusions

Social justice is not passive; rather, it is active, seeking not only to disrupt and to challenge, but also to break down and to build up. Social justice work therefore requires concerted and purposeful effort on the part of education professionals, whatever their position and/or status, and irrespective of the country in which they are located. The paper offers a framework that helps us understand how education professionals in England and Jamaica undertake and assess their work in social justice in their institutional contexts. As one examines how education professionals in England and Jamaica approach social justice work, it is to be noted that each country has its own set of challenges, for example, in England: race inequality, and in Jamaica, poverty and deprivation. These issues were not considered crucial to our analysis since this was not a study of nations but a study of individuals and their practice. Nevertheless, a common denominator was the participants’ willingness to ‘do right by others’ and to challenge processes and policies in order to achieve change.

We note that education professionals doing social justice work demonstrate that social justice is leadership by modelling, by developing others, and by displaying versatility and creativity in promoting a climate of fairness, inclusion and excellence for all. Acknowledging this fact in the context of social justice work is important to educational institutions, in England and Jamaica, and elsewhere across the world. Nevertheless, and despite the myriad challenges associated with national and school contexts, education professionals engaged in pedagogic, emancipatory and regulatory activism in seeking to dismantle poor processes and practices and in trying to implement more spaces for all who study and work in their educational institutions.

### Implications

A number of implications have emerged from this study. However, for the sake of space, we present four which we believe are the main ones. Each is linked to one of the four questions posed to participants:

Q1. Differences in how participants conceptualise social justice is a factor of their (i) position/ status within their educational institution, and (ii) gender, and/or (iii) country context. Further in-depth research that invites participants to directly reflect on whether or in what ways their understanding of social justice is a factor of their (i) job role and (ii) gender and (iii) country context could be potentially illuminating.

Q2. The ability of education professionals to have the widest or broadest possible impact in terms of their social justice work is **partly** related to their job role and/or status within their educational institution. Further in-depth research that invites participants to directly reflect on the extent to which their job role and/or status hinders and/or facilitates their doing social justice work context could be potentially enlightening.

Q3. This research, and much of the research on social justice in education adopts a qualitative methodology. Education professionals were asked to comment on the impact of their work, and what was provided were qualitative accounts and examples. Further in-depth research that uses a quantitative measure to assess or evaluate potential impact may be beneficial.

Q4. Although it is well understood that our understanding and conceptualisation of social justice is deeply personal, it was found that collaborative working was key to successfully undertaking social justice work. Further in-depth research on the potential tensions arising between individual conceptions compared with collective enactment of social justice could be potentially illuminating.

## References

- Bell, L. A. (2007). *Theoretical Foundations for Social Justice Education*. Oxford, UK: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Bogotch, I. E. (2000). Educational Leadership and Social Justice: Theory into Practice, paper presented at the University Council for Educational Administration conference, Albuquerque, NM.
- Dantley, M. E. & Tillman, L. C. (2006). Social justice and moral transformative leadership. In C. Marshall., M. Oliva. (Eds.), *Leadership for social justice: Making revolutions in education*, pp. 16- 30. NY: Pearson.
- Department for Education (DfE) 2017. Schools, pupils and their characteristics. Retrieved from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/650547/SFR28\\_2017\\_Main\\_Text.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/650547/SFR28_2017_Main_Text.pdf)
- Department for Education (DfE) 2017b. School workforce in England. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/school-workforce-in-england-november-2017>
- Etherington, K. (2004). *Becoming a reflective researcher*. London: Jessica Kingsley
- Falk, J., Hampton, G.R., Hodgkinson, A.T., Parker, K. & Rorris, A. (1993). *Social Equity and the Urban Environment: Report to the Commonwealth Environment Protection Agency*. Canberra: Commonwealth Environment Protection Authority, Commonwealth Government Printer.
- Furman, G. C. & Shields, C. M. (2003, April). *How Can Educational Leaders Promote and Support Social Justice and Democratic Community in Schools*. Paper Presented at Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association conference, Chicago.
- Higher Education Statistics Agency (2016). Students- Statistical First Release 224. Available at: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/stats> (accessed 10 January 2019).
- Miller, P. (2016). *Exploring School Leadership in England and the Caribbean: New Insights from a Comparative Approach*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Miller, P. & Callender, C. (Eds) (2019). *Race, Education and Educational Leadership in England: An Integrated Analysis*. London: Bloomsbury.

- Ministry of Education (MoE)(2016). Education Statistics 2015–2016: Annual statistical review of the education sector. Kingston, Jamaica: Planning and Development Division, MoE.
- Neuman, W. L. (2006). *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. 6th ed. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- OECD. (2016). *PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education*, OECD Publishing, Paris.
- Picower, B. (2012). Teacher Activism: Enacting a Vision for Social Justice, *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 45(4), 561-574.
- Rebore, R. W. (2001). *The Ethics of Educational Leadership*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Riley, K. A. (2000). Leadership, learning and systematic reform. *Journal of Educational Change*, 1(1), 29-55.
- Schleicher, A. (2014). *Equity, excellence and inclusiveness in education: Policy lessons from around the world, Background report for the 2014 International Summit of the Teaching Profession*. Paris, France: OECD
- Suskie, L. (2000). May 2000 AAHE Bulletin (American Association for Higher Education) *Adventures in Assessment*, Volume 14 (Spring 2002), SABES/World Education, Boston, MA.
- Theoharis, G. (2007). Social Justice Educational Leaders and Resistance: Toward a Theory of Social Justice Leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(2), 221-258
- Theoharis, G. (2008). Woven in Deeply: Identity and Leadership of Urban Social Justice Principals, *Education and Urban Society*, 41(1), 3–25.
- Vogel, L. R. (2011). Enacting social justice: Perceptions of educational leaders, *Administrative Issues Journal: Education, Practice, Research*, 1(2), 69–82.

#### Author Details

Paul Miller, School of Education, University of Greenwich, [P.W.Miller@greenwich.ac.uk](mailto:P.W.Miller@greenwich.ac.uk)

Nola P. Hill-Berry, College of Health Sciences, University of Technology, Jamaica and Institute for Educational Administration & Leadership – Jamaica [NHill-Berry@utech.edu.jm](mailto:NHill-Berry@utech.edu.jm)

Kadia Hylton-Fraser, Institute for Educational Administration & Leadership – Jamaica, [asabiendasf@gmail.com](mailto:asabiendasf@gmail.com)

Shernette Powell, Institute for Educational Administration & Leadership – Jamaica, [ljsheerjamayne@yahoo.com](mailto:ljsheerjamayne@yahoo.com)