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**Title:** Turning around coast-based schools: an interpretive narrative analysis of a report on school reform in English coastal communities.

**Key words:** notorious seaside resorts, school improvement, metro-centric agendas, coast-based schools

### **Abstract**

An interpretive narrative inquiry approach is adopted to shed light on the improvement agendas applied in a specific set of coastal schools. The unifying thread between the focal cases is that they had been designated as failures and made notorious through association with their communities' tainted reputations. These schools feature in a report published by the Future Leaders Trust (2015), which is used as the resource for this paper. The taken for granted deficit discourses implicit in the accounts of how these schools were reformed are relied upon by the school leaders and other stakeholders to justify why they needed to be turned around. These assumptions that come to the fore through analysis, demonstrate that the socioeconomic contexts found in the jaded English coastal communities are not engaged with. Importing approaches that draw on communities' resistance to relegation could, potentially, build positive discourses that lead to communities reclaiming educational opportunities in such schools, one clear example being that of Countesthorpe in Leicestershire, UK, in the 1970s.

### **Introduction**

Communities located outside of metropolitan cities are often viewed as far removed from today's increasingly urbanised lifestyle that connotes modernity and progress. The spotlight has come to rest on rural and coastal locations, as these are spatially different from the metropolis (Atkin, 2003; Corbett & White, 2014). In this paper, the focus is on the latter location, even though the two share similarities in terms of spatial and educational challenges. Consideration of coastal communities' schools as providing poor educational opportunities initially appears inconsistent with collective nostalgia for British seaside resorts as exotic, if somewhat occasionally seedy, happy holiday playgrounds (Walton, 2000). That is, the reality on the ground aligns closely with reports of notorious socioeconomically depressed seaside resorts (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2019a; Burn-Murdoch, 2017). Some have become 'nationally renowned and denigrated', with many of their residents being reviled (Wacquant, Salter & Pereira, 2014, p. 1273) for being associated with these profoundly left behind places, which are imagined as being different, isolated and entirely disconnected from mainstream society.

The paper is structured as follows. To set the background to the coast-based schools that are the focus for reform under the Future Leaders Trust's (FLT) initiative, a seaside scholarship framework is employed. This assists in identifying and explaining specific socioeconomic factors associated with

jaded coast-based locations in England. The nature of the communities in which some schools are located, specifically, those presented in the source report (FLT, 2015), is clarified. To draw out how improvement strategies are applied in these failing coastal schools, I present a critique of school effectiveness and the school improvement agendas in relation to spatially diverse locations. Next, the report produced in 2015 by the education charity the Future Leaders Trust is introduced. The report is subjected to interpretive narrative analyses, with three initial strands identified from the school leaders' accounts of their mission to reform their schools: aspirational values, no space for poor performance and excellence in teaching and learning. By interrogating these, the taken for granted metro-centric views regarding the left behind, isolated coast-based communities and their blemished schools, are unveiled. Using excerpts from the report, I discuss the assumptions and common sense views behind the drive to reform them. This extends to the school staff and community members being expected to adopt certain values as these are deemed to be in their best educational interests. Finally, drawing on the idea of attachment, the relations fostered within the school and those between the school and the community are proposed as avenues to explore in order to develop endogenously created possibilities for educational futures.

### **Seaside scholarship and notorious seaside towns**

Seaside scholarship (Ward, 2015) is helpful for this current analysis because it focusses attention on the coast as a specific spatial case: problematising the conventional categorisation of places as either being urban or rural. By taking this perspective, I pay attention to the interwoven factors that merge together in the particular setting of the seaside resort, namely, 'geography... together with the environment in which people live (place oriented factors) and the social ecology of seaside resorts (people oriented factors)' (Agarwal, Steven, Essex, Page & Mowforth, 2018, p. 444). Even though the coast is considered as the focal setting, similar to rural locations, it is not entirely disconnected from cities. As explained by Corbett and White (2014, p.2) in relation to the rural, all places, not only the city, are subject to the influence of the 'mainstreams of capitals', with contemporary global developments mediated in different ways across localities. The demise of the British seaside holiday since the 1970s is a profound change that has impacted on many resorts and the rapid expansion of international tourism under mass consumerism exemplifies how shifts at the global as well as national levels have had consequences for many traditional resorts (Agarwal, 2005; Urry, 1996). To date, establishing replacement opportunities that encourage regeneration in jaded English coastal resorts has met with limited success in terms of benefitting endogenous communities. This is arguably due to somewhat half-hearted central government investment agendas and poor infrastructure provision in these remote regions (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2019b; Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2018; Browne, 2010).

The term seaside resort specifically refers to the leisure-based heritage of some coastal towns. This differentiates these settlements from others that are estuarine, industrial and/or maritime in nature. The seaside towns that are of concern in this paper typically have:

*'specialist tourist infrastructure (promenades, piers, parks, etc.), holiday accommodation (hotels, boarding houses, caravan sites) and ...a distinctive resort character that is often reflected in the built environment ...they have all to a greater or lesser extent faced challenges arising from the changing structure of the UK holiday trade'. (Beatty, Fothergill & Wilson, 2008, p. 11)*

Understanding the incidence of social deprivation in seaside communities has emerged as a fundamental strand of seaside scholarship. The UK government concluded that 'coastal towns account for a disproportionately high percentage of England's deprived areas' (Communities and Local Government, 2007, p. 8), thus recognising the challenging state of affairs. Similarly, in a more recent report, 'The Future of Seaside Towns' (House of Lords, 2019), the government confirmed that despite regeneration schemes across the country the socioeconomic deprivation that they had identified a decade earlier continued to blight seaside resorts. Issues, such as an inadequate housing stock accommodating transient populations, low levels of occupational skills, as well as seasonal and highly insecure employment opportunities have become endemic in some resorts.

As an illustration of this situation, Bloodworth (2018) narrated a moving eye-witness account of life for some of Blackpool's most deprived residents. He described how districts in the town have spiralled into dereliction as large guesthouses have been converted to accommodate benefit claimants, both families and single people. As in many other seaside resorts, it has proved cheaper to bus people to Blackpool for temporary accommodation than to maintain them in rented property in prosperous towns and cities (Ward, 2015). These tenants have scant social and cultural capital and are often experiencing mental and physical ill-health when they arrive in a resort. There is little chance of their ever leaving by availing themselves of opportunities for regular employment due to the hollowing out of the seasonal trade that was once the mainstay of local employment. The social infrastructure (health care services, housing and shelter advice, careers and job seeking support) that could perhaps have assisted, are under resourced and incapable of meeting the overwhelming demands placed on them (O'Connor, 2017).

In contrast to Bloodworth's engagement with authentic lived experiences, other commentators have condemned the residents of socioeconomically depressed resorts for their moral turpitude. For example, the Centre for Social Justice (2013, p. 33) denigrated communities in Rhyl, Blackpool, Clacton-on-Sea, Margate and Great Yarmouth, by explaining how these resorts' marginal situation could be attributed to 'poverty attracting poverty'. Likewise, some media channels exude a corrosive message compounding this negative reputation through programmes such as 'Benefits by the Sea' (Spungoldtv, n.d.) and 'The Mighty Redcar' (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2018). This tainted image is underscored by searing social commentary, such as that revealed in Weston-super-Mare's hosting of Dismaland: 'Banksy's family theme park unsuitable for small children' (The Guardian, 2015). The media coverage of seaside resorts feeds populist and political discourses in which their residents have become 'widely shunned, feared and condemned' (Salter, 2017, p. 113). In effect, they have become subject to territorial stigma, a form of disgrace that sticks to individuals associated with certain towns or districts (Wacquant, Salter & Pereira, 2014). These places have a profoundly negative image and are generally considered to be degenerate.

To probe the nexus of geography, people and place in relation to explaining the social deprivation that is experienced in some English resorts, analyses of population and school data sets have revealed certain patterns. For the most disadvantaged left behind resorts, dimensions of social deprivation accrue in certain districts, often impacting simultaneously across multiple neighbouring zones (Beatty, Fothergill, & Gore, 2014; Jakes, 2015). Demonstrating the interconnectedness of profound and multiple deprivation, Agarwal et al. (2018, p. 447) identified typical clusters at the district level: the neighbourhood containing people surviving on the poorest incomes being grouped as 'unemployed, with low incomes and social disadvantages'. These particular neighbourhoods' residents were typically characterised as being: Job Seekers Allowance claimants, the long-term and/or youth unemployed, engaged in routine and/or low skilled work requiring few qualifications and without access to their own transport. Regarding these neighbourhoods' children, high

proportions of them were found to be in lone-parent and out-of-work families whilst also living in overcrowded accommodation that lacked essential facilities. Moreover, the educational outcomes for such children, formally identified as those in receipt of free school meals (FSM), have been found to be weaker for coast-based FSM pupils than those living elsewhere in the country (Thomson, 2015, 2019).

The high incidence of social deprivation in certain resorts adversely impacts on schools operating in these communities. Schools face a range of complex challenges in terms of their staffing as well as interactions with families and pupils, which relate to: school isolation, failing local primaries, difficulties with engaging students and their families, poor student behaviour, the poor quality of teaching and learning as well as problems with the recruitment of the right teachers (House of Lords, 2019; Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2015, 2019). The quality of teaching, as measured by schools employing teachers with appropriate qualifications in the subjects they deliver, has been associated with the continuing attainment gap between rich and poor pupils at the national level (Allen, Mian & Sims, 2016). Moreover, as has been pointed out, there is a greater proportion of appropriately qualified teachers working with disadvantaged pupils in London, as compared with elsewhere, especially in poor coastal districts (Sibieta, 2018). Regarding educational outcomes, the transition of pupils after their schooling has prompted considerable debate, whereby the career pathways of coast-based young people appear to be considerably more problematic than many of those of their urban counterparts (Reid & Westergaard, 2017; Shepherd & Hooley, 2016).

The negative impact of coastal school isolation and the associated inaccessibility of cultural assets, e.g. colleges, businesses and the creative industries, that could offer opportunities for enriching school experiences (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018), have been put forward to explain the variance in pupil progression to higher education. Moreover, the inadequacy of younger pupils' aspirations and their families who appear to be disengaged regarding advancing children's life chances through gaining higher level qualifications, has been cited by some as being an underlying reason for deficit transition pathways (Bridge Group, 2019). However, denigration of certain young people's pathways, for example, those in transition from school to seeking employment in coast-based communities, serves to stigmatise them in terms of achieving little self-improvement. Further, under this deficit perspective it appears that failure to embrace appropriate notions of aspiration is the main impediment to fulfilling their potential through attending further/higher education and hence, social mobility (Spohrer, Stahl & Bowers-Brown, 2018).

With respect to careers advice and employment, difficult choices often arise in coastal schools, whereby young people have to decide whether to leave to seek future employment and/or education in a conurbation, or alternatively stay within their home community. The expectation that young people should attend higher education remains understood as the common sense destination for the best pupils (Bridge Group, 2019). For those on the coast, they often have to move away from their community in order to access such opportunities: they undergo 'geographic disembedding to become 'successful' ' (Wenham, 2020, p. 48). This taken for granted notion that urban elites know what is best for young people's futures, apparently goes unchallenged and is assumed to be as valid for coast-based pupils as it is for those growing up in vastly different contexts such as in the metropole.

### **Coast-based schools: school effectiveness and school improvement (SESI) agendas**

Schools that fail to perform to national standards across England find themselves subjected to interventions that are broadly in keeping with a school effectiveness (SE) and school improvement (SI) ideology, termed collectively SESI (Wrigley, 2013). Over the last four decades, proponents of the various elements of SESI have promulgated the view that low educational attainment can be turned around by 'fixing' each failing school. That is, senior school managers are encouraged to follow normative solutions, for example, performance management of staff by strong leaders, to deliver significant school improvements. For these schools with many leaders following one size fits all solutions, invariably, there has been isomorphic transformation of institutions (Allen & Sims, 2018). That is, diverse localised school cultures are erased as uniform organisational systems and a singular management vision are rolled out. Of concern regarding coast-based schools is the lack of recognition of these communities' distinctiveness and that the proposed solutions being generated in other contexts (i.e. urban schools) are applied without consideration of this phenomenon.

From an SESI perspective, poor social mobility and high levels of social deprivation, such as those discussed above in relation to some resorts, can be resolved by tackling challenges from within schools. By applying a range of corrective management procedures, leaders defeat the unacceptable poor levels of educational performance, recalibrate aspirations and simultaneously, enhance the life chances of young people. By following this line of argument, much of the SESI agenda is undermined by its protagonists' misguided assumption that a school can be removed from its surrounding external influences (Angus, 2009; Smyth, Wrigley & McInerney, 2018). Application of an SESI perspective to reform educational failings in socioeconomically depressed resorts potentially overlooks the severity of the social, health as well as educational challenges that some schools' pupils are facing. To start to resolve these complex issues of social injustice that coalesce in schools a long term perspective on schooling, one that reaches across multiple strands of stakeholders to engage community representatives, educational experts and policy makers, is necessary. Such a strategy aligns with calls to replace the dominance of exogenous agenda setting with approaches that foreground endogenous agendas and transform rather than simply reinforce current societal inequalities in specific disadvantaged places (Angus, 2012; Kerr, Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2016). The report (FLT, 2015) that is analysed for this paper documents how a selected cluster of failing coastal communities' schools were the focus of an external, top down, mission to reform them. Moreover, as is elicited through my analysis, the territorial stigma signified by epithets, such as 'left behind' and 'isolated', potentially create a powerful motive underpinning the desire to bring improvement to the communities and their schools by metropolitan policymakers and elites: these coastal schools presented ripe targets for fixing. Put simply, the fervid reform of these failing schools is arguably fuelled by their spoiled identity, with their being 'judged in terms of a deficit discourse (dominated by the desire to make them like us), rather than a diversity discourse (recognition and value of difference)' (Atkin, 2003, p. 515).

In the following sections, I examine the pursuit of improvement in the coast-based schools by the FLT's appointed new school leaders, as reported on in the source publication. Deployment of this report as secondary data is a novel way to explore this issue in regard to how the new leadership introduced measures with the clear intent of turning them around. The justification for using the report 'Combatting Isolation' (FLT, 2015) as the basis for my study is that following an extensive literature search, to the best of my knowledge, to date, it remains the only publication that presents an account of English coast-based schools undergoing this process, i.e. being turned around. In this report the FLT emerges as just one organisation amongst many committed to delivering a metropolitan government endorsed approach to educational reform.

### **The Future Leaders Trust report: ‘Combatting Isolation’**

The report, which I subjected to interpretive analysis, is just thirteen pages in length. Its main title is: ‘GREAT LEADERS MAKE GREAT SCHOOLS GREAT SCHOOLS CHANGE LIVES’, with the subtitle: ‘COMBATTING ISOLATION Why coastal schools are failing and how head teachers are turning them around’ (original emphasis) (FLT, 2015). In brief, the main content comprises first person reports by the leaders of six schools/school clusters in socioeconomically depressed coastal sites. The purpose of issuing the report is clarified as follows: ‘creating networks for school leaders to share good practice is one of the surest ways to drive school improvement more quickly, and this report is one way that we are doing so’ (FLT, 2015, p. 2). The leaders’ accounts of working in their allocated coastal community are supported with evidence taken from a research paper (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, 2015), together with an introduction and summary written by the Trust’s director. The report’s named first author is the FLT, a former educational charity that focussed on school leadership, with endorsement by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL), a former executive agency of the Department of Education. Two additional organisations cooperated on the publication: the Ark educational charity and the Schools Students and Teachers network (SSAT), a limited company that promoted innovation and collaboration between schools. This collection of nongovernmental stakeholders sponsoring this publication points to their strong investment in SESI initiatives. Moreover, their listing alongside the NCTL underlines the Department for Education’s strong championing of these organisations’ ways of approaching schools that are deemed not to be performing up to expectations.

The school leaders featured in the report have graduated from the FLT’s training programme entitled Talented Leaders and are members of its Headship Institute: a peer network. These leaders are described as being ‘motivated to take up new roles in the schools that need them the most’ (FLT, 2015, p. 12). Further, it is explained that they all began their careers in urban schools and subsequently relocated for a minimum of three years to coastal placements, where they were expected to carry out the strategies they had developed through the FLT training and to deploy a small FLT grant. The initial reading of the report reveals that the appointees, by implementing exemplar strategies of good practice such as: introducing an aspirational vision, replacing many existing teachers and instigating performance management, were delivering on the mission to turn around the hitherto failing schools.

### **An interpretive narrative analysis of ‘Combatting Isolation’ (FLT, 2015)**

Interpretive narrative inquiry is used to probe the meanings in narratives related by people in a specific context. It is a technique suited to ‘analyzing highly uncertain and complex policy issues whose truth value cannot be ascertained’ (Roe, 1989, p. 251). It was deemed an appropriate methodology for uncovering the taken for granted understanding underpinning the strategies for school improvements implemented in the focal coastal communities and reported by the FLT (2015). While the publication contains accounts for six sites, I have focussed on just four cases. On reviewing the report I found that very similar information was narrated by all the leaders regarding their schools and it was deemed unnecessary to report all these cases. The three perspectives regarding narrative analysis with their associated theoretical positions, as identified by Dodge, Ospia and Foldy (2005), were adopted for the current study. Used in combination these serve as a theoretical guide as well as a methodological framework through which a textual source can be reinterpreted to ascertain underpinning beliefs. The first two of these perspectives privilege people’s interpretations of their immediate experience and drawing on these, my aim was to understand the focal

phenomenon of school reform from the standpoint of the school leaders' interpretations. That is, first, under the lens of narrative as language, it is assumed that people communicate and create meanings that are important to them. Second, when using the lens of narrative as a way of knowing, it is argued that people think and come to make sense of the world through both telling and being on the receiving end of stories. In my reading of the accounts I initially set out to identify the experiences as related by the first person chroniclers (the leaders) about their schools. Subsequently, I identified through further close reading some common issues that the leaders addressed. These were the challenges that they understood as needing to be overcome, in order to improve their schools. Evidence from the report is presented in the table (Table 1) and briefly summarised as three strands of leaders' narratives: aspirational values, no space for poor performance and excellence in teaching and learning.

The third view of narrative is that it is a metaphor. That is, it can be treated as symbolic of social structures underpinning the context. In effect, it captures 'deeper meanings about the social order' and researchers seeking to reinterpret narrative as metaphor look for the 'taken for granted' structures (Dodge, Ospia & Foldy, 2005, p. 293/4). Iterative reading of the text allowed me to unveil some of the underlying, taken for granted knowledge determining the approach taken towards the extant teaching staff, families and the communities in the coastal locations. The dimensions of the deficit discourse that are woven through the accounts and shed light on the stance taken towards the targeted schools and their communities are subsequently discussed.

School	School leader's account of their actions regarding teaching staff	Problems and how leaders resolve them when turning around schools
S 1	<p>When I moved to .., I knew I had to work to address the low expectations and complacency. Shifting the beliefs of the staff and of parents.</p> <p>I ensured staff were aware of the latest research.... on growth mind set.</p> <p>My staff briefing focuses on the colleagues who have best demonstrated our core values that week. We celebrate publicly.</p>	<p>A new head teacher addresses poor expectations.</p> <p>Aspirational core values are introduced for staff, students and families to live and work by.</p> <p>Research is a way to develop staff.</p> <p>Group think can be introduced to celebrate the commitment of staff.</p>
S 3	<p>I spent that (first) term supporting teachers to understand the importance of improving the quality of teaching and learning, and the implications of continued poor performance. As a result, a number of teachers left.</p> <p>We faced an exceptionally challenging recruitment task.</p> <p>We needed to communicate the character of the school and the challenges we face – as well as the opportunities we have – to get the right people applying.</p> <p>We have established a new school culture based on values, We focus the children</p>	<p>Poor performers must be identified and helped to exit.</p> <p>New staff are needed and should be recruited.</p> <p>Teaching and learning are the primary focus of all teachers.</p> <p>The 'right' people have to be recruited for the school to progress.</p> <p>The culture is built on positive values i.e. aspiration and achievement.</p>



	and our wider community on what they can – and should – achieve.	
S 4	<p>We show the children and the wider community that people care and want them to succeed.</p> <p>Transformed the quality of teaching and learning.</p> <p>We faced an exceptionally challenging recruitment task.</p> <p>Reputation as a good employer grows, so recruitment has become that much easier.</p> <p>Teachers and middle leaders now take ownership of their own professional development.</p>	<p>Leaders have to work with the wider community to share positive aspirational mind sets.</p> <p>Leaders raise the quality of teaching and learning.</p> <p>The poor reputation of the school can be a barrier to recruiting suitable staff.</p>
S 6	<p>I arrived at the school in 2013 My first challenge was to improve the quality of teaching and learning</p> <p>A clear commitment from the leadership team to tackle underperformance at all levels</p> <p>We have a community hub and it's a key element of engagement. We have built our reputation through effective outreach work with vulnerable families, by keeping the academy doors open every day from 6.30am to 10pm, and by funding and supporting community-based initiatives.</p> <p>Half-termly monitoring programme for all staff..... their individual action plans. They are observed and then take part in a conversation with their observer.....</p> <p>Staff not making sufficient progress....are given extra support.... 'drop-in' sessions to help teachers develop their practice.</p> <p>A Research and Development room where staff have timetabled sessions to discuss the latest educational research.</p> <p>Outcomes for disadvantaged students increased by 20 percentage points.</p> <p>Staff turnover in the last two years has been higher than I had hoped.</p> <p>Our reputation has grown rapidly, enabling us to attract high quality staff.</p>	<p>The new leader improves teaching and learning by eradicating any poor performance amongst teachers.</p> <p>The leadership has to ensure that staff take responsibility for improving their teaching. The senior leadership facilitates.</p> <p>Engagement through providing a centre and supporting initiatives for working with the vulnerable members of the community. Seeking to involve a wide section of the community.</p> <p>The issue of staff turnover can hinder progress.</p> <p>Improving the school's reputation is key to moving forward e.g. in terms of recruitment.</p> <p>The effectiveness of the leader's actions are evidenced in standardised measures of pupil outcomes e.g. Ofsted reporting.</p>

**Table 1:** Initial analyses recorded from four of the six school sites contained in 'Combatting isolation' (FLT, 2015)

*Leaders' narrative strand: aspirational values*

Excerpts from the data, as presented above, demonstrate that a central element of improvement is the introduction of a positive culture and set of aspirational school values. Core values instigated by the new leaders aimed to replace the existing ones, which were invariably rejected on the grounds that these only created negativity. Regardless of relevance and coherence with the immediate contexts, the views of families embedded in the local communities were deemed unacceptable, being interpreted as often pre-judging their own children as victims: heading towards dead-end jobs and unfulfilled lives. An aspirational vision inculcating novel positive futures was generated by the school leaders, which was to be adopted by the staff, pupils, families and community members. The newly created values required full commitment from teachers and the hitherto seemingly disengaged families. By following this pathway, they all apparently became convinced of the benefits of engaging in schooling and how this would lead to better futures: those futures deemed worthwhile by the leaders.

*Leaders' narrative strand: no space for poor performance*

In the schools, the senior and middle leaders managed all other staff through a hierarchical structure. Managers had to monitor closely the teachers' classroom performance and adherence to each school's aspirational values in order to make progress towards improvement. Leaders naturally took responsibility for strategic decisions regarding appointing teachers who they felt were right for their school. At the same time, they were obliged to dismiss those who were considered inadequate in some aspects of performance. Recruiting new teachers could be challenging, but as school reputations improved, the leaders anticipated that new staff would want to join up. A range of standardised performance measures, such as those showing improved pupil results, served to validate the performance of the leadership in terms of compliance with national standards and enhanced school reputation.

*Leaders' narrative strand: excellence in teaching and learning*

The focus on teaching and learning was sharpened when leaders removed other distractions, such as pastoral roles from the teaching staff, with teachers being expected to devote themselves solely to teaching. They were tasked with delivering lessons that were quality assured by senior staff whose duty it was to carry out regular lesson observations and staff reviews. Research-based information was provided and once access had been set up, staff were expected to draw on up to date theory and practice in their teaching, as deemed appropriate by the leaders. Teachers received regular instruction on changing practice from the senior members of staff so as to guarantee that lessons were effective and hence, learning outcomes, as scrutinised by audit measures, were enhanced.

**What is taken for granted when turning around these focal coast-based schools?**

Interrogation of the accounts put forward by the school leaders, which in turn were curated by the FLT, points to one dominant common sense view: good quality teaching makes the difference when turning around schools. Arguably, the fostering of the ubiquitous culture of aspirational values alongside the management of performance reported by the leaders, were both employed to serve the goal of improved teaching in the classroom. With good teaching, it is assumed that the outcomes for pupils get better and the reputation of the school, likewise, improves. Providing appropriate

teaching and learning opportunities for pupils, including those subject to challenging circumstances, is without doubt, a noble cause. However, my examination of the assumptions underpinning the strategies deployed in these schools demonstrates the disconnect between the rolling out of a one size fits all improvement agenda and the social and educational contexts of these English coastal communities.

From the perspective of seaside scholarship, the factors of spatial remoteness, shifts in employment in the leisure and tourism sector and little effective inward investment for social and industrial regeneration, have shaped the formation of the socioeconomic conditions for families living in certain left behind coastal towns. Some school leaders acknowledged that they needed to involve their local community. One leader claimed to have achieved engagement with the most vulnerable in the locality by using the school premises as a community 'hub' (S6). The school leadership also sponsored local activities (S6) but the types of 'community-based initiatives' judged worthy of support by the senior management/leadership remain unspecified.

With respect to the community, leaders noted its failings: 'We focus on the children and our wider community on what they can – and should – achieve' (S2). This acknowledgment that it was necessary to work to enrich the local community's mind set comes from a cohort of school leaders who have previously gained experience and developed their talent for leadership in urban schools. In cities, within socioeconomically depressed areas, the nexus of geography, people and place exerts significantly different influences on people's conventional ways of life to those found on the coast. In fact, the implication that the coastal communities should be persuaded towards an apparently metro-centric outlook by the leaders telling its residents what they should aim to achieve, shows a profoundly pejorative understanding of their socioeconomic context and sense of community. Underpinning this perspective appears to be a deeply held taken for granted belief that coastal communities are deficient and wayward, rather than different and thus, in urgent need of reforming. Over and above this, the FLT report positioned the leaders as well equipped to help them, as these outsiders were deemed to be able to, first, turn things around in the schools and subsequently, in the wider communities.

As described above, the strategies used by the leaders to improve the schools are held up as exemplars of 'good practice' (FLT, 2015, p. 2). The assertion that the management techniques applied to teaching would, undoubtedly, be effective is legitimised by the FLT, as well as by the high status organisations that backed the report (the NCTL, the Ark and the SSAT). Despite this endorsement, whether and the extent to which elements of this good practice are likely to prove to be effective is unproven. Moreover, their application without evidence of considerable modifications, just because they are what work in other locations, is not questioned for coastal schools. The capability to gauge what is appropriate is questionable because the leaders are appointed on the basis of their urban-based track records, rather than any coast-based educational experiences. Regarding the schools documented in this FLT report, no medium or long term outcomes of the leaders' interventions are reported. The snapshot given for each case does not attempt to provide evidence of enduring impact, positive or negative, of any changes brought about in the schools or in the communities as a whole. Given the depth and breadth of the mission that the leaders set out to achieve, the FLT requirement that they stay for just three years as a minimum requirement before moving on, demonstrates unrealistic short termism.

Integral to the dominant notion that good quality teaching must be established and become the norm, two strategies concerning the teachers were adopted: staff development and staff recruitment. Regarding the former, the leaders reported that they ensured that the teachers proactively developed their classroom skills by: immersing themselves in new improved ways

through reading cutting edge research, receiving coaching from senior staff to extend their practice and participating in ongoing observations and performance monitoring so as not to let standards slip back: 'Half-termly monitoring programme for all staff' (S6); and 'Teachers and middle leaders now take ownership of their own professional development' (S4). Simply put, the rationale the leaders espoused is that by continuously developing teachers through instructing them in how to deliver more effective practices, high impact teaching and hence, improved learning outcomes can be guaranteed for all pupils.

When putting this strategy into action, the leaders demonstrated that they were managing staff as a human resource with the knowledge, skills and aptitudes that fitted the mission to bring these coastal schools into line with national standards. Given the driving passion of leaders to reach compliance with benchmarked indicators of success, these leaders were likely to import only those policies and practices that had been 'tried and tested' elsewhere and shown to achieve impact: 'Outcomes for disadvantaged students increased by 20 percentage points' (S6) and those strategies that improved the status of their school: 'Our reputation has grown rapidly...' (S6). This reliance on judging improvement against prescribed standards underlines the expectations regarding what the staff had to demonstrate. With no recognition of the differences in the contingencies of the pupils embedded in their surrounding communities, the staff under these zealous leaders were, in effect, left in the position of 'delivering an urban curriculum' (Atkin, 2003, p. 516) as each school rapidly underwent reform.

The other strand of improvement that leaders pursued was to dismiss those existing teachers deemed to be performing inadequately: 'A clear commitment from the leadership team to tackle underperformance at all levels' (S6). Whilst it is indisputable that teachers failing to deliver should not be allowed to continue in the profession, performance can be effective in various ways in delivering pupil progress that may well not resonate with the dominant narrative in the school. One leader explained why some staff left the school: '...the implications [to staff] of continued poor performance. As a result, a number of teachers left' (S3). Whilst leaving could be put down to an individual's poor capability, it can often be the last choice of teachers who find themselves unable to work under a particular management regime. Such a rejection of the incoming management is likely when the teacher's personal orientation towards their work is at odds with that of the new leadership (Courtney & Gunter, 2015).

Decisions to let go existing staff offered opportunities to recruit replacements who demonstrated a good fit with the newly emerging school, not only in terms of policies on the teaching being delivered, but also conformity with the vision, i.e. the aspirational set of values: 'My staff briefing focuses on the colleagues who have best demonstrated our core values that week' (S1). These values are pursued by leaders as an integral element in their mission to change school cultures (Wrigley, 2013). The leaders anticipated that the hitherto complacent pupils, their families and teachers would espouse their vision that introduced positive future orientated values: 'I knew I had to work to address the low expectations and complacency. Shifting the beliefs of the staff and of parents' (S1).

As discussed above, even though the leaders offered attractive messages of aspirational hope for the future, in the face of the realities of living on the coast, these messages created complex dilemmas for those teachers and families who were embedded in the local community. The seasonal stream of temporary visitors to a resort town can foster the permanent residents' sense of place and attachment to their locality (Canosa, Graham & Wilson, 2018). Arguably, school staff who are themselves established permanent residents are aware of the gruelling socioeconomic conditions within the locality. Consequently, they may be challenged when seeking effective ways to fulfil their

responsibilities towards their pupils (Passy and Ovenden-Hope 2019). That is, these teachers have to deal with fact of there being scant coast-based opportunities for skilled employment or higher education for their pupils while willing them to have successful futures and yet, being acutely aware of their reluctance to be mobile, as explained above (Wenham, 2020). Hence, the common sense understanding that the successful are those young people who move on to better lives (i.e. outside of left behind places) is divisive and does not recognise nor value the community. As previously reported by Passy and Ovenden-Hope (2019, p. 3) regarding senior management teams, those staff working in coastal schools are often left in the unenviable position of navigating ‘a path through their own moral imperative to improve young people’s lives, with government demands and their school’s own particular situation’. The leaders’ accounts in the FLT report demonstrate that they were failing to seek alternative understandings that drew upon the insights of local families and teachers about what fulfilled lives and careers in the coastal settings might be for all their young people. To the contrary, these local voices, having been dismissed for being negative, typically aligned with complacency and parochialism, are subsumed in the leaders’ visions of boundless future possibilities for all.

From the accounts, it emerges that the leaders expected to replace classroom teachers and middle managers as they turned around their schools, anticipating some disruption would be caused by this: ‘staff turnover in the last two years has been higher than I had hoped’ (S3). To replace those who left, one leader noted that they had attracted suitable staff by being open about the negative and positive aspects of the school: ‘the challenges we face – as well as the opportunities we have – to get the right people applying’ (S3). The poor achievement record of the pupil cohorts combined with the apparent faults of the previous school leadership, no doubt contributed to these. Moreover, it is clear that the focal schools had been known to be failing and had gained poor reputations amongst other education professionals, before the FLT made its intervention to install new leaders. However, the comment that one leader had encountered unexpectedly high staff turnover, could be acknowledgement of the failure to retain some new staff, thus indicating that there were untenable working conditions for numbers of teachers under the new leader. When one leader commented: ‘We faced an exceptionally challenging recruitment task’ (S4), it remains difficult to determine the exact causes that led to high levels of staff churn. This was most likely due to a combination of factors, some associated with the coastal location and others regarding the working conditions within the school. The former potentially stemmed from experienced applicants being unwilling to uproot themselves and relocate to work in remote schools, particularly those tarnished with negative reputations and the low proportion of local people sufficiently well qualified to be employed as teachers (Walton & Browne, 2010). The latter could be put down to the rejection by established as well as newly appointed teachers of the demanding and stressful conditions created under the new leadership (Allen & Sims, 2018).

To summarise, my aim in carrying out an interpretive narrative analysis on the accounts contained in the FLT (2015) report was to unveil a number of taken for granted assumptions and dominant societal views (Dodge, Ospia & Foldy, 2005) in relation to the focal coastal schools. This analysis has made explicit the deficit discourses used to disparage the coastal communities, while at the same time promoting a metro-centric mission intent on ‘fixing’ the inadequacies in these schools. Moreover, tensions have been revealed between improvement strategies that served the interests of leaders and educational elites and any approaches that could potentially be generated in order to serve a community-led agenda. Put simply, no evidence was found in the narratives that validated local understandings of education and young people’s futures: there was no evidence to show that the FLT, or the school leaders, engaged meaningfully with deep rooted community issues. In short, the tainted reputations sticking to the schools and their communities operated as a controlling

societal rationale that supported the FLT's call to action to bring these schools into line with the apparently metro-centric taken for granted view on what good schools should be and how this status is achieved. This strengthened the dominant common sense position that, for tackling education in jaded English coastal communities, the solution involves despatching talent from the city out to the remote coast to fix the problem.

In previous scholarship, the vilification of communities and the denigration of their interests has been extensively recorded in relation to spatially distinct areas, specifically, certain inner city districts that have been cast as notorious by mainstream elites. In these places, residents have rejected the territorial stigma ascribed to them by adopting collective strategies, such as fostering a strong sense of place and celebrating the cultures and unique environments that they live in. Similarly, residents' construction of a shared purpose and the celebration of difference by the community, have facilitated resistance to notoriety and societal condemnation (Salter, 2017; Wacquant, Slater & Pereira, 2014). In this paper, my analysis has demonstrated that stigma is currently accorded to some coastal communities, which, although likely to be experiencing its effects in diverse ways, similarly require endogenously inspired action. When this is instigated in relation to schools, this will not only serve their young people well, but also generate a positive resistance against the taken for granted assumptions about education that have emerged as the main imposter in my analysis of the FLT report (2015).

### **Closing remarks: is there an alternative way forward?**

To bring this analysis to a close, it is worth reflecting briefly on the subtitle of the FLT (2015) report: 'Combatting Isolation'. For some, isolation may be a term that sums up the focal schools' challenges, thereby naively and superficially blaming spatial difference when accounting for their left behindness with respect to mainstream contemporary education. However, as discussed above in relation to coast-based communities, rather than single out the notion of isolation, that of attachment has emerged as a critical issue. Notably, the improvements rolled out in the focal schools (FLT, 2015) have been found to be devoid of any purposeful sense of attachment to their coast-based communities.

A proposed alternative focus for locally inspired actions on schooling in the coastal settings is to foster attachment: to be addressed 'in terms of the school as community and its relationship with wider communities' (Wrigley, 2003, p. 177). Specifically, the nature of school attachment can be explored in terms of the condition of school-community relations. Kerr, Dyson and Gallannaugh (2016) proposed that these are evaluated with respect to two dimensions, first 'power and control', i.e. in terms of relations tending towards meeting endogenous agendas that serve the community or exogenously determined ones, and second, social stance, i.e. the maintenance of relations that are underpinned by actions that confirm or contrary-wise, disrupt existing societal arrangements, thereby adversely structuring the focal community's socioeconomic situation. This theoretical heuristic is not for practical implementation on a case by case basis. However, it serves to shed light on schools that have sought attachment, that is, where the institution was purposefully constructed as a place to which the community could belong and significantly, the school itself was closely tied to the wider social and economic landscape (Simon, 1977).

While it is impossible to wind back the clock to the 1970s, and arguably not desirable given the huge political and structural shifts in society during the last 50 years, community focussed education flourished in the era following Circular 10/65 (Department of Education and Science, 1965). The

coalescence of comprehensive localised schooling, the aegis of progressive locally elected education committees, forward looking teaching staff and powerful directors of education working in particular administrations, gave rise to experimental community colleges that offered what was seemingly rich school-community relations. Under this particular combination of events and people, one such college, specifically that in Countesthorpe, Leicestershire, was established that was arguably, an attractive space for the local community, in terms of its internal collective democratic organisation. At the same time, it served the needs of local people ranging from teenage years upwards and many neighbourhood families by drawing on the expertise of local industries and higher education institutions. During the creation of this community college the multiple parties involved recognised that they needed to respond to the complex interconnectedness of the locality's challenges in a manner that was well informed and collective (Simon, 1977).

To take the first dimension of attachment, the school as a community (Wrigley, 2003), Simon noted that in Countesthorpe Community College, 'the community function {was} built in to the comprehensive idea as a natural cohesive development' (1977, p. 19). As a foil to the abovementioned leaders' narrative strands elicited from the report by FLT (2015), it is enlightening to recall some examples of operations that fostered collectivity. For instance, the school was run by a consensus, with all members of staff (junior and senior) having an equal voice alongside the students in the 'constant ongoing discussion of new approaches and optimal organisational forms' (Simon, 1977, p. 22). The teaching involved teams of staff covering multiple activities that were focussed on a discovery approach to learning, with no streaming by ability and with the learners following individual timetables. As a comprehensive school, all young people from the surrounding catchment area attended without the influence of parental choice and teacher-learner relations were founded on the promotion of the autonomous individual.

Regarding the second dimension of attachment, that of the commitment of the school to the surrounding setting (Wrigley, 2003), no single school could have directly successfully challenged the deindustrialisation in Britain which was experiencing the global economic shocks of the 1970s. Similarly, in the context of the jaded coastal communities explored in this paper, the school can only be one of many stakeholders that co-create comprehensive local regeneration in the face of the socioeconomic hollowing out of traditional English seaside resorts. However, significantly, in the case of Countesthorpe responsiveness to the immediate community came through an explicit focus on providing all through education, from teenage years to adulthood. This was the route taken to address residents' needs, providing skills for employment in local industry as well as offering welfare and cultural support to families to develop their social capital. Moreover, the school maintained close ties with the local university's faculty of education, which supported staff teams in advancing pedagogy of a form that encouraged these diverse community groups to participate.

To sum up, this historic example of the establishment of Countesthorpe Community College offers multiple points of contrast with the narrative account presented by the FLT (2015) regarding how present day, taken for granted views were enacted and apparently removed the schools from enjoying close ties with their coast-based communities. Whilst avoiding any sense of golden ageism in recalling the 1970s, at the centre of the community college endeavour was the commitment to the flourishing of all individual learners, be they involved in 'youth, adult educational and recreational activities, as well as school[ing]', within the one campus (Simon, 1977, p. 18). This fundamental moral stance is absent from the leaders' narratives (FLT, 2015) about turning around the schools that they commanded. In place of moral purpose, an atomistic view of teaching and learning, reduced to units of accountability, seems to have emerged as their compass when ensuring that the wayward coast-based schools were brought into line with national standards and

performance criteria. Furthermore, the promotion of aspirational values and a positive school reputation, so cherished but in reality containing nothing substantial, appear to have become the ultimate goal of the FLT trained leaders' work. Regardless of decades passing, clear thinking about educational purpose as expressed by the Countesthorpe Community College's Moot, still speaks to us from the past. Present day leaders on a mission to fix schools, particularly those in socioeconomically depressed communities, would do well to hear it.

*'it is with these aims in mind, the maximum achievement of each individual's potential and, increasingly as he (sic) grows up, each individual's taking the responsibility for that achievement, that Countesthorpe developed its form'. (The Moot, 1977, p. 29)*

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