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# **‘To What Extent Can Headteachers be Held to Account in the Practice of Social Justice Leadership?’**

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## **Abstract**

Internationally, leadership for social justice is gaining prominence as a global travelling theme. This article draws from the Scottish contribution to the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) social justice strand and presents a case study of a relatively small education system similar in size to that of New Zealand, to explore one system’s policy expectations and the practice realities of headteachers (principals) seeking to address issues around social justice. Scottish policy rhetoric places responsibility with headteachers to ensure socially just practices within their schools. However, those headteachers are working in schools located within unjust local, national and international contexts. The article explores briefly the emerging theoretical analyses of social justice and leadership. It then identifies the policy expectations, including those within the revised professional standards for headteachers in Scotland. The main focus is on the headteachers’ perspectives of factors that help and hinder their practice of leadership for social justice. Macro systems-level data is used to contextualise equity and outcomes issues that headteachers are working to address. In the analysis of the dislocation between policy and reality, the article asks, ‘to what extent can headteachers be held to account in the practice of social justice leadership?’

**Keywords:** leadership, values, social justice, professional standards

## **Introduction**

Scotland is a small country with ambitious plans for creating a socially just nation (Scottish Executive, 1999). In that regard, education is positioned in the policy rhetoric as making a significant contribution, traditionally perceived as the great leveller for all young people prepared to work hard in order to succeed. Historically, both the teaching profession (Munn, Stead, MacLeod, Brown, Cowie, McCluskey, Pirrie & Scott, 2004; Paterson, 2003a) and the quality of Scottish education have been held in high regard, valued by the electorate and by politicians, supportive of a school system that in the main is non selective and without charge (Lingard & Ozga, 2007; Paterson, 2003b). Within this public endorsement though, there is a

concern about the key purposes of the curriculum, more specifically, the nature of comprehensive education and how the curriculum could better meet the needs of all pupils. As such, since 2002, the main government educational priority has been the development of a new national 3-18 *Curriculum for Excellence*.

Despite its pride in both an education system independent of the rest of the UK and its wider political devolution, Scotland has not been altogether removed from the effects of globalisation. Indeed, Scotland has faced its own policy development tensions, swept along with the trend of “micro-economic measurement systems” (Power, 2004, p. 767) including audits and performance measures/targets, and subsequent second-order measures. The impact of global influence is “mediated by the nature of the educational system and the social and political interests that maintain it” (Lauder, Brown, Dillabough & Halsey, 2006, p. 45). It continues to safeguard its free access to a quality public comprehensive education system but perhaps has not sufficiently questioned its ability to address significant social justice issues. Crucially, the background a child brings to school still very much determines their ability to engage with the educational opportunities made available to them, as well as the extent to which they are deemed to have been successful by society in the value ascribed to their particular educational achievements, and what they are able to do with the outputs of their engagement with the education system. Despite the resources invested, education does not deliver on its promise of socially just outcomes (Davis, Hill, Tisdall, Cairns & McCausland, 2014).

Scotland highlights many of the tensions encountered when seeking to address the global travelling theme of leadership for social justice. Its policy rhetoric places responsibility squarely with headteachers to ensure socially just practices within their schools. However, those headteachers are often working within significant constraints in schools located within unjust local, national and international contexts. This article explores one system’s policy expectations versus the practice realities of headteachers seeking to address issues around social justice. The article draws from one subset of the data constituting the Scottish contribution to the ISLDN social justice strand, data specific to headteachers’ perspectives of factors that help and hinder their practice of leadership for social justice.

Specifically, this article explores briefly the emerging theoretical analyses of social justice and leadership. It then identifies the macro policy context and expectations. The research methods are set out before presenting Scottish data from the ISLDN project related to the factors that headteachers see as helping and hindering their practice of leadership for social justice. The dislocation between policy and reality is explored in order to discuss, ‘to what extent can headteachers be held to account in the practice of social justice leadership?’.

## Emerging Issues

Transnationally, increasing emphasis has been placed on both leadership and social justice within educational theory, policy and practice (Blackmore, 2009; Bogotch, 2008). However, the terms ‘leadership’ and ‘social justice’ both suffer from lack of clarity in their usage. Although, arguably, there is now greater understanding of the leadership processes which have an organisational impact (Dimmock, 2012) the term leadership is problematic (see Torrance & Humes, 2014). There is little consensus of precisely what leadership is, how important it is, or how/if it can be developed (Connolly, Connolly & James, 2000). There is still weak empirical evidence of “the extent and nature of school leadership effects” (Bush, 2008, p. 7). Similarly, the concept of social justice is “inherently problematic” in nature (Barnett & Stevenson, forthcoming, p. 11). The term is often used imprecisely, reflecting a “broad range of philosophical and political traditions” (ibid.). Similarly, Davis *et al.* (2014, p. 7) acknowledge that whilst a substantial body of work exists in this area, “social justice has diverse, complex and dynamic meanings” and there is a lack of consensus of how it might be realized in society (Bogotch, 2008). Compounding this, social justice has suffered from undertheorising in education (Gewirtz, 1998). Not surprisingly, little is yet known of the factors that help and hinder the efforts of social justice leaders within and across different countries but some ideas are beginning to emerge.

In striving to embed the policy rhetoric of social justice values in school leadership practices, school leaders may experience tensions through conflicting priorities and accountabilities making it difficult to provide, and to be seen to provide, effective leadership, whilst adhering to a personal and professional commitment to social justice (Ryan, 2010; Theoharris, 2010). School leaders may also “perpetuate oppressive school practices”, feeling under pressure to maintain the status quo, reproducing rather than challenging inequalities within society (Boske, 2014, p. 289). Headteachers who do strive to make their schools more socially just still inherit their school contexts, located within a wider education system that reproduces inequalities (Gairín & Rodriguez-Gómez, 2014, p. 819). Bogotch and Shields (2014, p. 2) express:

*Good people, hardworking people, and well-intentioned people committed to improving schools find themselves in frustrating positions where the only pathways they can see are too often ones prescribed and scripted by others, where educators are not free to create policies and programs which meet the needs of children and communities.*

Headteachers have a central and public role in challenging barriers to lead change for social justice and in that regard, “holding difficult conversations has to be facilitated, nurtured, and sustained within schools” (Bogotch & Shields, 2014, p. 10). In order to address issues of social justice, Davis *et al.* (2014, p. 9) promote placing rights, recognition and respect at the heart, as well as developing collaborative relationships that take proper account of children and young peoples’ views. However, there are significant challenges to confronting established school practices, especially if “the biggest barrier to social justice is how people have learned to think” (Slater, Potter, Torres & Briceno, 2014, p. 110). Marshall and Anderson (2009, p. 9) highlight the risks of engaging in activism around issues of social justice and equality, related to:

*the informal rules, the hierarchies and patriarchies embedded in education professions, the tacit agreements about avoiding uncomfortable issues, the constraints presented by cultural traditions that define proper behavior and guard against upsetting influences by ‘outsiders’.*

Despite the significant and numerous challenges, social justice leaders maintain their motivation dependent on “the interaction of the political culture and their individual beliefs and values” (Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2014, p. 901). Such motivation is fuelled, for example, “in seeing that high expectations for all students, in spite of their backgrounds, leads to success” (Norberg, Arlestig & Angelle, 2014, p. 104). While much responsibility rests on the headteacher, their work is set in a particular context that can bring other challenges.

### **The Macro Policy Context of the Case Study Headteachers in Scotland**

The headteachers participating in the Scottish case studies are working within a distinctive educational and cultural context particularly at a point when educational leadership undergoes a reconceptualisation and social justice is presented as a core professional value of the teaching profession. Like many other countries, Scotland has developed a set of “national values” as promoted in Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Gillies, 2006, p. 32). This has formed part of a historic development since the mid nineteenth century where, through successive periods, Scotland has experienced waves of immigration with different ethnic and faith groups settling, particularly in urban centers. The relatively small size of Scotland, and the relative autonomy many of its national bodies enjoy, might suggest policy change in response to shifting needs would be comparatively straightforward. However, in the main, policymaking happens within relatively bounded systems with government retaining power, controlling networks of influence as well as legislation and funding (Humes, 2003; Rhodes, 1997). Regardless of the constraints, many in the field of education welcomed Scottish

devolution. Social justice has formed a cornerstone of the Scottish Parliament. In 1999, the then First Minister, Donald Dewar, published *Social Justice... A Scotland Where Everyone Matters*. This marked the start of a consistent thread in public policy in a devolved Scotland, spanning different administrations. A clear legislative framework was developed which complemented wider UK legislation such as the Equality Act 2010, as well as both a public/civic discourse and educational discourse around values, evident in efforts to improve Scottish education. Over many years, the school inspectorate quality assurance documents and national curriculum guidelines have made specific reference to issues of equality and inclusion.

Despite policy rhetoric, the *Christie Commission* (2011), in connecting equity, power, rights and social justice, identified that public services had much to do to ensure better outcomes and make the principles of human rights a reality for many people living in Scotland (Davis *et al.*, 2014, p. 5). Indeed, Davis *et al.* (*ibid.*, p. 2) surface a number of inequalities still affecting Scotland's children, arguing:

*the recent Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 promotes an aspirational notion of wellbeing at the expense of broader and more politically hard edged concepts such as rights and social justice. The Act does not address the wider political context of wellbeing such as children's status in society, adult arbitrary use of power, unequal distribution of resources and fair access to legal representation.*

As with many other countries, Scotland has witnessed significant changes to the role of the headteacher aligned to a shift towards the devolved governance of schools. The headteacher role became the preoccupation of those charged with strategically targeting school improvement efforts constituting, “a major national policy priority of governments” (Davidson, Forde, Gronn, MacBeath, Martin and McMahon, 2008, p. 68). Headteachers are now held accountable for the leadership of the school. As part of those policy expectations, a set of core Professional Values and Personal Commitment including a detailed articulation of social justice for education is made explicit within the revised *Standard for Headship* (GTCS, 2012a), covering aspects such as rights, diversity and sustainability. In this way, headteachers become drivers for societal change, working with teachers to address issues that limit the educational and life opportunities of pupils. Such policy positioning promotes democratic values residing at the heart of Scottish society. While discussion of professional values has been a core element of headship preparation programmes (Forde, 2014), there is now a question about how social justice is not only understood by leaders (Bogotch, 2008) but also drawn upon to shape practice in schools (Ryan, 2010).

Despite the espoused rhetoric there has been limited research conducted around the practice of social justice leadership within the Scottish education context. Moreover, limited attention has been paid to the barriers and challenges facing leaders committed to locating social justice leadership values in school practices (Angelle, Morrison & Stevenson, forthcoming; Stevenson, 2007).

## **Method**

The data was generated through use of the research methods developed by the ‘Social Justice Leadership’ strand of the BELMAS-UCEA International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) (see Angelle *et al.*, forthcoming; Barnett and Stevenson, forthcoming). The work of the ISLDN research project has drawn from Cribb and Gewirtz (2005) as a starting point for understanding social justice and Lee’s (2010) micro-political toolkit which highlights the significance of organisational context. Cribb and Gewirtz recognise that social justice can take multiple forms, that different approaches can be both inconsistent and conflicting, and that competing perspectives can create problems and tensions. They argue that the practice of social justice is both complex and challenging, necessitating political action. Lee’s framework highlights issues arising from goal diversity, along with subsequent compromise and accommodation within schools as complex organisations.

ISLDN colleagues originally developed a framework within which individual cases of school leadership could be situated and factors identified to help illuminate the context within which school leaders work. That framework drew on previous work by Dimmock, Stevenson, Bignold, Shah, and Middlewood (2005), locating schools in a local (micro) context within the national (macro) context. More recently, the ISLDN project developed that framework further, to explore the school leader (micro) factors, school (meso) context factors and country-wide (macro) context factors.

The ISLDN project has been guided by two overarching issues: how school leaders ‘make sense’ and then ‘do’ social justice. The Scottish case studies reported look at the third ISLDN research question: *What factors help and hinder the work of social justice leaders?* Here, headteachers were asked to identify the factors that they felt helped and hindered their work as social justice leaders. Two headteachers were interviewed using the ISLDN interview protocol, a framework of questions and sub questions structured to elicit both closed and open items. Several questions were designed and used to facilitate longer, narrative accounts. Each set of

interview data was repeatedly trawled through to identify emerging themes, common to both case studies. The two headteachers were in contrasting school contexts: Hamish (pseudonym), the headteacher of an urban secondary school; Morag (pseudonym), the headteacher of a rural infant school. They had a range of experience both in the number of years of experience as headteachers and the different schools they had worked.

## **Research Findings**

Both Morag and Hamish identified a number of factors that helped and hindered their practice of leadership for social justice. Key themes emerging from the interview data are presented to exemplify those factors from the headteachers' perspectives, structured under the micro (individual), meso (school and local authority) and macro (national) levels within which their practice was situated.

### *Micro level factors that helped the headteachers lead for social justice*

As an experienced headteacher in her fourth headship, Morag had developed confidence in herself and her role. As a social justice leader, she was comfortable with being generally regarded as “a bit different” and even “contrary”, perceiving her role in part as “bringing whacky ideas to the team to see what we can do about it”. She took comfort in knowing what was important to her school and what was only important to local and central government. Part of Morag's confidence stemmed from being well informed. She prioritised accessing research and wider thinking, finding this helpful in sustaining and expanding her perspective and practice, affirming her desire to challenge injustice. She had completed a postgraduate diploma in school leadership and management (Scottish Qualification for Headship). She regarded having and maintaining contact with friends with the same values and priorities as nourishing for her as a social justice leader. Similarly, building up and accessing networks in the different dimensions of social justice was key.

Hamish, although in his first headship, was also confident in his social justice convictions. Similarly, he too gained confidence from being well informed and valued professional learning linked to his leadership. In the earlier years of his teaching career he had completed a Postgraduate Diploma with a specific focus on social justice from a policy perspective “and what we were trying to do as teachers”. He had developed the ability to: “articulate what we mean by social justice and start to pull apart some of the behaviours... You know, it's one thing to say that we're socially just and then you reflect on what we actually do in schools and start to challenge that”. Whilst working in a special educational unit, and then



in a mainstream secondary school as deputy headteacher, Hamish completed a postgraduate diploma in school leadership and management (Scottish Qualification for Headship). He reflected that this had been pivotal to his professional development: “you’re constantly reflecting on your behaviours, your dispositions, your attitudes about issues to do with social justice”. He had enhanced his confidence with engaging with the literature that affirmed his values and perspectives on education, finding this process to be “really powerful”.

*Meso level factors that helped the headteachers lead for social justice*

Morag highlighted that having a sufficiently high proportion of staff supportive and committed to social justice practices was helpful in sustaining her work as a social justice leader. She believed in being collegial and inclusive in her leadership approach and this required a willingness from staff to engage with her in the leadership of the school. In this way, she was able to be “less planned and more spontaneous” and was “able to make more unconventional decisions” than headteachers with a more top-down approach who focused on “keeping it controlled” in order to “meet expectations and demands”.

Hamish also recognised the need for a sufficiently high proportion of staff supportive and committed to socially just teaching/leadership practices. He saw this as beginning with initial teacher education:

*probationers [preservice teachers] coming in with just a sort of a higher level of awareness about social justice that’s obviously come through engagement with the new Standards, through even engagement with the four capacities [from Curriculum for Excellence] ...has certainly helped... you get to a tipping point where people are absolutely singing from the same song sheet.*

Morag identified specific priorities supportive at local authority level: the focus on the early years including the *Equally Well* initiative, as well as community drivers and cluster school initiatives. Such initiatives were becoming increasingly focused on local solutions for local issues ‘taking time to investigate and think in a different way’. Hamish also identified specific priorities supportive at local authority level, linked to national initiatives such as *Getting it Right for Every Child* and *Curriculum for Excellence*. Since the contraction of centralised services both headteachers observed there was less local government management of headteachers and schools. Morag felt it was becoming easier to mediate, subvert and resist policy mandates, suggesting “keep your head down and just get on with it; do the things you have to do and don’t worry about the rest”.

*Macro level factors that helped the headteachers lead for social justice*

Morag identified a range of priorities supportive at national level: *Curriculum for Excellence* (which she felt was “moving on a bit ... So I think that’s exciting. And I will use that. I will totally use that and go with that and be accountable”), the *Getting it Right for Every Child* agenda, the focus on the early years and the more recent *Raising Attainment For All 8-18* agenda. She recognised an increasing drive behind such national initiatives as the ‘closing the gap’ agenda to reduce the impact of poverty. Morag explained that when social justice was regarded as a national priority, she felt supported in pushing the boundaries of established practice and challenging social injustice. That was not always the case, however, and using social justice legislation such as the Equality Act, was also found to be supportive. Morag identified the recent embedding of social justice in the values underpinning the revised professional Standards for Scottish teachers as a significant macro level support:

*They make it more than it’s just my thing. ... So it’s not just me, it’s out there, the Scottish Government think that it’s important and you need to be knowing about it because actually, it’s now your professional responsibility to know about it and to engage in it. So, for me, that just gives you the mandate. It gives you the credibility. It gives status to social justice ... But this way, it’s a new way of making it important. Maybe there will always be a new way of making it important in Scotland.*

Morag appreciated the opportunity she now had to revisit and explicitly highlight with staff social justice concepts and implications for practice: “The fact that it’s in the Standards does give you that mandate. It means people need to know and they want to know... so it’s exercising people ... so you know, let’s use it.”

Hamish recognised that the Scottish Government had emphasised a social inclusion agenda that represented “a recurring theme” that had been “permanently around” over the past fifteen years. He identified two key national policy themes focused on closing the gap between the most and least advantaged young people: firstly, the *Getting it Right for Every Child* agenda which set out to “make sure that every single child’s needs are being met in a holistic way in schools in Scotland”; and secondly, *Curriculum for Excellence* with its focus on outcomes, “and the sorts of young people we want to produce in our school system and actually producing young people that have socially just attitudes clearly [forming] a major part of the curriculum”.

Hamish also highlighted that when policy themes were aligned to his social justice leadership, it was helpful to his practice in that, “the messages from on high, the big messages from government, the big messages from local government, the stuff in the Standards, what schools spend their money on in terms of what local authorities spend their money on in terms of training staff” all helped with taking forward a social justice agenda. Such alignment was

supportive: “You’re not spending time justifying your approach or arguing your case because the case has been made. So what you’re doing, is providing training, providing opportunities to staff to share their practice as opposed to dealing with change that people might not necessarily believe in.”

The antithesis of the factors that ‘help’ represent the factors that ‘hinder’ the work of social justice leaders. Both headteachers identified a number of challenges or barriers which influenced their ability to lead for social justice within their schools.

#### *Micro level factors that hindered the headteachers leadership for social justice*

As highlighted earlier, the importance of professional learning and keeping well informed was a key part of how these leaders continued to sustain their engagement with addressing issues associated with social justice. This was not altogether easy and finding access to current and contextually relevant information was challenging. Morag highlighted her frustration at the lack of access to academic journals since completing her postgraduate diploma. She voiced her disappointment that the University had changed to online journals since she had previously been able to “sneak into the library to read the journals”. It would appear that structures at the micro level influenced the headteachers ability to engage with research-informed and contextually located resources to support their work for social justice in their schools.

#### *Meso level factors that hindered the headteachers leadership for social justice*

Within the school context, Morag regarded having staff with a limited worldview as extremely inhibiting of the practice of social justice leaders. This resulted in “prejudice that works at a subtle level”. More specifically, she felt that curriculum pressures could inhibit social justice leadership. Hamish recognised “capacity” within the school in relation to teacher capability as a major constriction to socially justice teaching practice:

*The big thing that we have to change is pedagogy. Learning and teaching is simply not good enough. ... Teachers often then blame the kids and actually, it’s not the kids, it’s the quality of teaching, the quality of learning in the class.*

Despite the time and effort put into supporting staff to enhance their practice, and the quality of learning experience of the pupils, Hamish was frustrated when in some cases “nothing’s changed”. When that was the case, he thought it was vital for him to have “the resilience not to let it go” in his efforts to shift existing practice and disrupt established culture.

Hamish recognised that: “The attainment won’t move until we marry really really high quality inclusive, authentic positive relationships with a high level of challenge that comes from high expectations and quality pedagogy. And getting that is going to take a while. It’s not going to happen overnight.” One of the factors hindering a faster pace of change was the “unprecedented amounts of change in terms of implementing Curriculum for Excellence.” Other cultural factors which hindered his work as a social justice leader included a “lingering homophobia in very working class communities” and a “poverty of expectation within quite a large number of the families with which we work”. In relation to the latter: “So when you end up having a meeting with parents and you try to talk their child up and they’re talking their child down... I find it very dispiriting.”

Morag highlighted a perceived divide between elected Council members and local education officials, identifying examples of high profile decisions made by local education officials that had been overturned by Councillors. In that regard, she reflected on the political nature of social justice leadership:

*My role in that is quite tricky ... So that’s the political dimension, working with all these interested parties not overtly but understanding what’s going on ... so you’ve really got to be politically astute, political with a small p.*

Morag lamented that local authority education departments were ever shrinking with fewer people able to do less. She felt disappointed that the local authority was “oblivious” to social justice, perceiving the “county culture [as] an obstacle” making it feel like she was “trudging through treacle” compared to “the multiculturalism of the city”, which had an energy about it that she really missed. This had a negative impact on her work: “It’s bloody hard work.... You have to keep your connections. You have to keep connected to people who believe it’s important and to networks and to movements”.

Hamish surfaced an inherent contradiction in the Scottish education system that had particular resonance within his local authority:

*we still have schools set up certainly in [his Local Authority], set up competing for pupils and in that marketization of schools, you’re going to get winners and losers and if you want social justice, you can’t have a system that has winners and losers because you want everybody to be a winner.*

He was critical of the Local Authority’s rhetoric, specific to the city’s unique context where over 20% of secondary pupils were thought to be privately educated:

*the Authority have made it very very clear that they’re focused on the lowest performing 20%. For some of my colleagues, and to myself to an extent as well, taking your eye off*

*the other youngsters is perhaps not necessarily a wise thing to do because it allows the private sector to point their finger and say that the state sector is only concerned about youngsters who are from disadvantaged backgrounds which is not the case. The big thing for me is that we make sure that every single youngster who walks through our door has an educational experience that allows them to achieve everything they can possibly [achieve] from their starting point, whatever that may be.*

Hamish also surfaced the political dimensions of leadership for social justice. In relation to getting additional resources for the school in order to enhance provision for pupils, raise aspirations and a sense of pride in the community, he reflected that he regularly played politics but would not compromise either his values or his job: “I try to get as many, as much resourcing and as much staffing as I can possibly extract from the authority, argue vociferously”. In situations where his values and education policies conflicted, Hamish felt he had a mediating role. He gave examples such as, “the issues with management restructuring, budget cuts, things like how the poorest paid employees in schools are treated, ... cutting librarians...”. He felt it was the responsibility of headteachers to “make your voice heard ... put your voice on the table”. However, Hamish recognised that, as an individual, there was a limit to the power of his individual voice and the real power came from the collective voice. In addition, there were policy decisions that were “forced through” regardless of the individual or collective voice of headteachers, such as the recent management restructuring across all the local authority secondary schools, “because there was a budget necessity for it so there was a lot of acrimony, lots of conflict”.

#### *Macro level factors that hindered the headteachers leadership for social justice*

Morag regarded that national and local government initiatives were “going in waves”. She saw her role as recognising the important initiatives that “fit with our vision”, capable of making a sustained difference, using them and embedding them into practice. Legislation remained but given time, the rest passed by. She was also concerned that the focus in the national inspection process by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education, had narrowed to prioritising curriculum, learning and teaching, and assessment, rather than the previous wider holistic view that had been marginalised. She perceived this as a narrowing of education, reducing learning and teaching to “a technical level”. When her values and mandated education policies conflicted, she felt it important to adapt policy to make it work for the school: “making it work in the right way”, “so it’s not the pure thing”. She also recognised that at times she had to comply as an

employee of the education authority: “dissonance is part of the price for the great job that you have”.

Hamish highlighted a national tension and dilemma for social justice leadership as being, “a notion within our culture of there being good kids and bad kids” which as a premise he considered “nonsense”, whilst recognising the difficulty in supporting all pupils:

*How do we ...make sure these young people make the most of their education but at the same time, don't impact the progress of others? ... If you don't do that ... then what you're left with is schools essentially as sorting centres and you have these young people whose behaviour is seen as bad and they are excluded or put to another classroom and they then are given low grade work and what then happens is the impact for society is you've got an educational underclass. You know, if every school does that, then what you've got is increased crime, you've got a system that actually sets up future social disadvantage so you get a self-perpetuating system... but if you're looking for a socially just society, then it has to start in school.*

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Social justice leadership is inherently a political process. Both headteachers were engaged in challenging injustice, mediating, negotiating and selecting courses of action. Both recognised the power and authority they had as headteachers to change things and to empower others. For Morag, hers was “the best job”. Now on her fourth headship, she had come to appreciate the impact she was able to have, actively choosing to remain a headteacher despite encouragement to apply for other higher status roles: “that is what drives me... Initiatives come and go but the work that you do with people ... then that's powerful and that's what it's all about. It's not powerful because I get power – other people get power”.

Both headteachers perceived themselves as activists within their professional roles, championing social justice, changing mindsets, school culture and practice. Despite at times being at odds with the views of others, they were confident in their social justice leadership, informed and secure, values led and values driven. They understood the need for resilience and the need to focus their efforts. Hamish recognised that not all social justice issues could be challenged with the same energy at the same time, prioritising the largest group of pupils in his school “massively” affected “from a poverty of expectation”. He expressed, “I'm quite comfortable with that in the sense that you can only do what you can do given the resources and capacity that you have.”

Similarly, the efforts of each headteacher were bounded by the meso school context and local authority governance arrangements, as well as by the macro national context. The policy positioning of ‘social justice’ within the revised professional standards (GTCS, 2012a)

was viewed as supportive in their efforts, providing a mandate to focus the individual and collective efforts of staff. Both of the headteachers experienced the meso layer to be challenging when it came to practicing leadership for social justice. Within the school they focused their energies on challenging the attitudes and practices of staff, as well as of parents and pupils. Within their respective local authority, each headteacher raised specific challenges. Morag found the insular nature of a rural context a stark contrast to her previous experience of leadership in city schools. She also felt that social justice was not well understood or advocated for by peers or local authority officers. Hamish found the competitive private schooling system and the school catchment arrangements in his urban local authority inherently unjust, leading to a poverty of expectation in relation to a large number of pupils in his school and to biased competition between schools.

Although the power, authority and influence each headteacher felt they had to exert their leadership for social justice was a significant motivator, it was to a large extent constrained to the micro layer in relation to working with individuals, rather than at the level of system change. As their focus moved through the meso layer and into the macro layer, each headteacher was able to exert less and less influence in their social justice leadership. Concomitantly, macro and meso factors had a profound effect on the challenges faced by pupils and, in turn, by staff and each headteacher. Hamish provided a very good example of such constraints and when asked to consider a potential contradiction between the social justice commitment of headteachers and the power he thought they had with the previously referred to competition that the local authority system sets up between schools within the city and the catchment divides, he reflected, “most headteachers, the people I speak to anyway, would accept changing the catchment areas in [name of City] to make them more comprehensive”:

*To be fair, it's not that they accept it. It's that they don't have any choice. ... I honestly think that because it would require a change in legislation, ... I think their view is that it's political, it's never going to happen, so why waste their energy? I think that's the view. ... It is one of these things that people know that it's not going to change because there's no political will to change it ... It's not going to change because the people who are powerful, the people who vote would never vote for that. So it's not going to change. ... The policy discourse is aligned, it's all there, it's aligned but what's not aligned is that parental right to choose and political will to actually have proper comprehensive schools in the city ... [ironically] with a socially just Parliament ...'*

Thus, whilst individual headteachers can exercise a values based commitment to social justice in their own practice, and in developing the practice of the schools they lead, the extent

of their influence is constrained by the meso and macro levels of the school system and of society as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

Scotland, despite its distinctiveness, has been very much affected by a “globalization effect” on education policy (Dale, 1999, p. 5). Both policy borrowing and policy learning have been evident through “convergence”, “diffusion” and the active process of meaning-making or “learning” in public policy to inform contemporary ideas of governance (Freeman, 2006, p. 367). Understanding of this is important, in exploring the nature of social justice in education and the role of headteachers in leading for social justice. From this case study, if the expectations contained within the revised Standards are to move beyond the aspirational to impact on practice, significant emphasis will need to be placed at all levels of the education system to support the development of both understandings and practice in leadership for social justice. Only then will those aspirations become a reality, fulfilling their potential to reinvigorate the teaching profession to enhance opportunities for pupils. The economic and social disparity between the advantaged and disadvantaged in Scotland, suggests that the public discourse around social justice is part of Scottish mythology. Much still needs to be done in order for Scotland to claim that it represents a socially just society. A national focus on social justice as an underpinning value, could act as an enabler to effect systemic, cultural and professional change. Headteachers leading for social justice need societal and system-wide support in order for their influence to have maximum effect. Only then can headteachers be held to account in the practice of social justice leadership.

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