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To cite this article: Haira E. Gandolfi & Martin Mills (2022): Teachers for social justice: exploring the lives and work of teachers committed to social justice in education, Oxford Review of Education, DOI: [10.1080/03054985.2022.2105314](https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2022.2105314)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2022.2105314>



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Published online: 13 Sep 2022.



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Teachers for social justice: exploring the lives and work of teachers committed to social justice in education

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on life history interviews, this paper seeks to explore the lives of a group of eight teachers, all with working experience in England, who self-identify as committed to a more socially just education system. Drawing on Levitas' *Utopia as method*, this article examines these teachers' perspectives on and practices around social justice in education, such as aiming to eradicate exclusion policies and processes, and organising with like-minded colleagues. We also explore the significant professional and emotional labour that goes into such kinds of work towards a socially just education system, and the satisfaction that comes from 'making a difference'. Their perspectives also provide insight into what a vision of socially just education might look like for those in the teaching profession.

KEYWORDS

Teachers' work; teachers' lives; social justice; utopian studies

Introduction

A special issue of the *Journal of Education Policy* in 2012 asked the question: what would a socially just education system look like? Different academics responded by drawing lessons, for example, from Finland (Reay, 2012); Sydney, Australia (Hayes, 2012); and Porto Alegre, Brazil (Gandin & Apple, 2012). More recently, UNESCO (2021) published a report where similar reflections were explored in relation to different areas of educational practice, such as pedagogy, curriculum, and the teaching profession. In the research upon which this paper is based, we posed a similar question to eight teachers in England who self-identified as actively committed to social justice, exploring, for instance, their own attempts to make the system, their schools and classrooms more socially just. Based on Lund (2003, p. 3), the participant teachers in this study could then be described as activists, finding themselves playing 'an instrumental role in addressing social justice issues in contemporary (...) society by virtue of their location in school settings'.

The study reported on here is also utopian in outlook (Levitas, 2013; Wright, 2010): in addition to exploring their past and current experiences in the educational sector, we asked these teachers concerned with social justice to 'imagine' that which does not yet exist, grounded on the presumption that moving the social justice agenda

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forward requires such a reimagining (Halpin, 2003) – or even un-thinking (Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2021) – of schooling. In asking these teachers to imagine education differently, as with Facer (2016), we were seeking to create a space for openness, hope and novelty.

Education systems, teaching profession and social justice

Our study is located in England where there is a crisis in teacher retention (Allen et al., 2017; Allen & McInerney, 2019), with many reasons given for this: work/life balance, deficit constructions of the profession in the media and by government, and lack of preparation for working with high-need students. In addition, Ball (2003) speaks of the increased surveillance of teachers and the ‘terrors of performativity’ they face in England. He suggests that teachers have to set aside any commitments they have to the moral purposes of schooling or to principles of social justice in order to meet targets, performance indicators and to avoid unwanted scrutiny from senior staff, who, of course, are also subject to similar scrutiny.

Schools are thus not only places of learning, but also workplaces where staff, unless they agree with the current regimes, can feel devalued, de-professionalised and silenced (Ball, 2003; UNESCO, 2021). In addition, while many indeed feel that their profession is not given its due respect, the experiences of teachers from marginalised backgrounds are even more negatively affected by various forms of discrimination and oppression, including racism, misogyny and homophobia (Allen et al., 2017; Tereshchenko et al., 2021).

The teachers in our study were particularly sensitive to these issues of social (in) justice, not only in relation to their own experiences in the profession, but also when considering their students’ experiences of schooling, and their purpose as teachers. While teachers often primarily decide to join the profession to make a positive contribution to the lives of young people (Bergmark et al., 2018), for many, schools have very narrow purposes which do not go beyond seeing young people as human capital, i.e. beyond the goal of maximising their ‘productivity’ (Allen et al., 2017; Ball, 2003). This view of modern schools as productivity machines and obstacles to social justice ideals is exacerbated by the growing and relentless pursuit of normalisation and differentiation fostered, for instance, by the prevalence of high-stakes examinations and concerns about rankings in national and international testing regimes (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2010; UNESCO, 2021; Wrigley, 2022).

While seeking to ensure that all students can excel at school is clearly an important aim, the question of what ‘excelling’ means within modern schooling, and the ethical implications of potential answers here, needs to be addressed (Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2021). Various pressures on schools to ‘succeed’ against narrow criteria of ‘excelling’ have had, for instance, consequences for students deemed to be risking both a school’s reputation (thereby damaging its attractiveness to high-performing students) and the learning of others, resulting in practices such as off-rolling students and an increasing rate of exclusions in English schools (McCluskey et al., 2019; Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2013). Data in England, for instance, indicate that a student is more likely to be excluded from school if they are from low socioeconomic, Gypsy/Roma/Traveller and/or Black

British backgrounds, have special needs, and/or live in the Northeast of the country (Demie, 2021). Similarly, achievement data from schools reflect these patterns (Thompson, 2019), with groups of students who are most likely to be excluded from school also being the least likely to reap the academic benefits of schooling.

For many teachers with a strong sense of social justice and of education as an ethical activity, the ways in which such outcomes from schooling appear ingrained into systemically unjust structures of the education system (Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2021) can then be overwhelming. Several teachers in this study thus found themselves questioning modern schooling – and their role within it – in a similar manner to Ball and Collet-Sabe’s (2021) recent argument: that in this modern European version of schooling based on normalisation, social justice ideals such as equality and inclusion often seem impossible.

Teachers for social justice: utopian studies

Educationalists have long been concerned about issues of social justice and schooling (Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2021; Gale & Densmore, 2000; Keddie, 2012). One notable concern was expressed by Connell (1993, p. 15), who argued social justice should not be seen as ‘an add-on but fundamental to good education’, also noting that education shapes the kind of society that we will come to live in and that we cannot have a just society without a just education system (Connell, 1993). Nevertheless, whilst social justice has been prominent in educational research, the term is contested (Gale & Densmore, 2000), with education theorists drawing on different social justice theories (e.g. Fraser, 2009; Young, 1990) to explore a range of socially just related issues in education (e.g. sexualities, class, race, gender, youth).

It is not our intent to outline a theory of justice here, as we have engaged in such discussion elsewhere (Francis et al., 2017; Mills et al., 2022; Mills & Gandolfi, 2022). But in this article, we have drawn on the work of Nancy Fraser and her theorising of relationships between economic, cultural and political justice (Fraser, 1995, 2009, 2013), albeit still acknowledging some of the limitations of her framework (Mills et al., 2022), in relation to both teachers’ and young people’s experiences of schooling. It is also important to recognise that a significant proportion of scholarship around social justice in education, based on these various theories, has outlined teachers’ and school leaders’ struggles to implement social justice and thwart social injustices in their local contexts (e.g. Keddie, 2012). Ball and Collet-Sabe (2021) link this to the impossibility of such endeavours within a modern institution that is inherently unjust. The teachers in our study had similar stories to tell, which became the starting point for our utopian project based on what these teachers thought was needed to construct a socially just education system.

Thus, a long tradition between the field of education and utopian thinking provides a platform for investigating these teachers’ perspectives on socially just education (Fielding & Moss, 2011; Halpin, 2003). While, for many, ‘utopia’ represents some form of goal that is unreachable, it can be thought about differently. In this paper, we draw on Levitas’ (2013) *Utopia as method* framework – utopia as

archaeology, ontology, and architecture – to explore what a socially just education system might look like based on the perspectives of teachers who, in diverse ways, sought to put their utopian principles into action. These ‘real utopias’ are not finished products, but as Wright (2010, p. 7) argues, help to provide ‘the core, organizing principles of alternatives to existing institutions, the principles that would guide the pragmatic trial-and-error task of institution building’. In this study, we then explore these ideas in re-imagining socially just education, aiming to contribute to recent reflections on what that would look like (e.g. Facer, 2016; UNESCO, 2021).

In Levitas’ (2013) framework (p. 153), ‘utopia as archaeology’ refers to exploring the underpinning logics that help make sense of the current moment in education systems and of how we arrived here. Neoliberal politics, for example, have been widely understood as underpinning current education policies in the Global North and critiqued for the ways in which they have washed out concerns about structural injustice in education (Connell, 2009; Gillborn, 2005). As Wrigley (2022) has argued, neo-conservative policies have also been shaping discourses around schooling in many Global North countries, such as curriculum and behaviour practices in England that aim to restore, respectively, pride in being British and conformity to authority. Thus, an archaeological approach can bring to the surface taken-for-granted discourses underpinning current practices on ‘meritocracy’, ‘competition’, and ‘differentiation’ (Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2021) – where people (and children) are assumed to be responsible for their own successes and failures – and on punishment and school exclusions in response to young people’s disengagement from schooling (Department for Education [DfE], 2020).

Complementing this ‘archaeological’ work, ‘Utopia as ontology’ refers to how one sees oneself in a current moment; that is, what the scenarios unearthed by ‘utopia as archaeology’ mean to the reality of *being* in said scenario, since ‘any discussion of the good society must contain, at least implicitly, a claim for a way of *being* that is posited as better than our current experience’ (Levitas, 2013, p. 177). Participants in our project then outlined the ways in which they attempted to *be* teachers committed to social justice and the ways in which this *being* has been adversely affected by dominant views and practices of schooling. And from this utopian strategy of exploring our current ways of *being*, then follows an exploration of ‘Utopia as architecture’: ‘a form of critique, ... [which] negates through the conjuring of alternatives that are also positive proposals (...), inviting both writer and reader to imagine themselves, as well as the world, otherwise’ (Levitas, 2013, p. 197–198). In other words, it involves an attempt to capture, in the case of the study reported on here, the ways in which these teachers (re)imagine a socially just schooling.

Through this utopian framework, Levitas (2013) then seeks to generate principles and conditions that underpin her ‘Imaginary reconstitution of society’. Employing a similar approach to our study around an ‘imaginary reconstitution of schooling’, we will also seek to sketch out what might be some principles and conditions for achieving a socially just education system based on the perspectives of these teachers from England.

Research design

Drawing on life history interviews (Goodson & Sykes, 2001), this small-scale study explored the lives and work of teachers in England concerned with issues of social justice in education. Our aim was to contribute to the fields of social justice in education and teachers' work by giving voice to those who have been actively working towards more socially just education systems, exploring the following research questions:

- How have the professional and personal trajectories of teachers committed to social justice impacted upon their critiques of the current education system? – *Utopia as archaeology*
- How have these teachers' critiques of the current system affected their being as a teacher? – *Utopia as ontology*
- What vision of socially just schooling do these teachers have? – *Utopia as architecture*

Eight teachers with current or past teaching experience in England were recruited through our links to education networks using 'snowball' sampling (Merriam, 2009) towards those who self-identified and/or were identified by others as 'having an interest in social justice'. A consistent effort was made to ensure a certain degree of diversity in relation to schools, subjects/age groups taught, and experience, as summarised in Table 1.

Since we expected our participants' views on social justice in education to relate to their various life trajectories, we chose 'life history' as the methodological strategy to ground our conversations with them, acknowledging the interactive and complex nature of people's individual and social lives. Goodson and Sykes (2001) argue that exploring deep personal experiences of a group of people through such a methodological approach can help with understanding contemporary social issues and their roots ('utopia as archaeology'), what their effects might be ('utopia as ontology'), and what alternatives we might look for around those issues to build a different future ('utopia as architecture').

Grounded in this approach, one individual interview lasting 45–60 minutes was undertaken with each participant. We did not follow a strict interview protocol, adopting instead a 'conversation with a purpose' strategy (Burgess, 1984) based on

Table 1. Participants.

Pseudonym	Subject/age-group	Experience (in education sector)	Current work
<i>Aubrey</i>	Nursery; Early Years	5–10 years (English mainstream sector)	State-funded nursery (England)
<i>Dom</i>	Science (secondary/post-secondary)	Less than 5 years (English mainstream sector)	International private school (Greece)
<i>Lydia</i>	Psychology (secondary/post-secondary)	+20 years (English mainstream sector)	State-funded secondary/post-secondary school (England)
<i>Naya</i>	Drama & English (secondary/post-secondary)	5 years (English mainstream and alternative provision sectors)	SEND private school (Spain)
<i>Nigel</i>	Religious Education (secondary/post-secondary)	5–10 years (English mainstream sector)	Founder of non-fee-paying democratic school (England)
<i>Rachel</i>	Geography (secondary/post-secondary)	Less than 5 (English mainstream sector)	Home schooling and democratic education initiatives (England)
<i>Robert</i>	Mathematics (further/trade union education)	+20 years (English mainstream and informal sectors)	Retired
<i>Terrence</i>	Classics (secondary/post-secondary)	5–10 years (English mainstream sector)	Non-fee-paying democratic school (England)

a set of general points to be explored around their experiences as students and then as teachers in the mainstream sector, and around their views for the future of that sector; we asked them about, for example:

- Their own educational experiences; views of education and social justice; etc. – *Utopia as archaeology*.
- Their attempts for (re)making the system, their schools and/or classrooms more socially just, including personal and professional challenges and rewards emerging from those attempts. – *Utopia as ontology*.
- Their perspectives and proposals on what a socially just education system would look like. – *Utopia as architecture*.

These interviews were audio-recorded through an online platform, transcribed, and pseudonymised following the appropriate ethical guidelines (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018).¹ Interviews were first individually coded through an inductive approach, i.e. with descriptive open codes about specific ideas and experiences mentioned by each participant. These inductively coded individual interviews were then cross-analysed across participants using a thematic analysis approach, looking for patterns and dissonances to develop core themes across the participant group (Merriam, 2009). In the next section, findings from these conversations are presented and discussed with reference to the 'utopia as method' framework (Levitas, 2013).

Utopia as archaeology: 'becoming' a teacher for social justice

Despite their unique life trajectories into 'becoming' teachers for social justice, participants in this study all shared the goal of making education more socially just. Through exploring their reflections about their professional and personal trajectories into teaching – and how these *impacted upon their critiques of the current education system* – we then engaged in conversations about their own experiences of social (in)justice in education and perceptions around professional development for social justice.

Experiences of social (in)justice in education

Life experiences are well-known influential factors in teachers' identities and views of education (Goodson & Sykes, 2001). So, as expected, these teachers promptly linked their purposes as educators committed to social justice with their own backgrounds. Aubrey, for instance, talked about growing up in a middle-class family but in a deeply socio-economically divided area in England, and how witnessing those experiences of inequalities were crucial to her decision of working with children from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds, first as a social worker, and then as a primary school teacher.

Lydia also talked about the impact of school experiences on her decision to become a teacher involved with anti-racist education and racial justice; but contrary to Aubrey, in Lydia's case these experiences of social injustice were her own, such as being subjected to racial violence during the 1980s. She described frightening scenes during her primary schooling trajectory (where there were only a few Black children) involving the National Front (a far-right political extremist group in the UK):

Teachers were in a big row in front of us basically protecting us until the police arrived. We had that happen a few times. I mean it was pretty horrific and that was at an early age, grown men with bats and bars trying to basically kill us and hurt us. School was awful. But in spite of all that, I kept going (Lydia).

Nigel also mentioned his own negative experiences during his primary school years, describing being bullied and feeling 'invisible' in relation to his teachers, as events that grounded his interest in becoming a different type of teacher himself: someone deeply committed to students' voices and to collective and democratic work within the school community.

These teachers thus had had their own, sometimes traumatic and often distressing, experiences of injustices in education to draw on as recipients and/or as witnesses. And while some were justifiably suspicious of schooling given those experiences, all saw education as a means of addressing injustice, including in the broader society. Even in cases of negative experiences, these teachers saw themselves as people who could occupy that schooling space and transform it into a more socially just one (Halpin, 2003). Naya, for instance, remarked on her decision to become a English and Drama teacher in the mainstream sector after years of work as a theatre practitioner and educator so that she could enact the changes she wanted to see: 'I had the feeling that if I really want to do something in school then I need to become a teacher and I need to know what it is that I'm trying to criticise'. She then saw becoming a teacher as an opportunity to make a difference in the experiences of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with language, arts, creativity, and self-expression.

Like Naya, most of our participants brought professional experiences in other areas of social action to bear on their trajectories into and within the teaching profession. Dom, for instance, highlighted how his engagement with anarchist and local community groups in Greece inspired him to become a teacher while living in England; he talked about his involvement in different 'collectives' seeking to improve people's lives around access to water and education, and how this 'inspired [him] to think about an education that will also, in a way, cultivate the idea of students learning by organising actions about the issues that they're interested in'. Robert and Terrence also talked at length about how their experiences of non-hierarchical organisations and social action prompted them to further engage with education even before they applied to an initial teacher education (ITE) programme: 'that's [the local anarchic group] what got me interested in the ideas of learning and children's rights (...) and so I decided to become a teacher' (Robert).

These teachers then recognised that the aspiration of 'making a difference' to social justice from within the mainstream system was central to their career choices. Nevertheless, the reality of officially *becoming* a teacher for social justice was less straightforward and posed several obstacles to the realisation of their original ideals.

Professional development for social justice

All the teachers in this study, from those teaching since the 1970s to those still new to the career, critiqued their engagement with questions of social justice and education in their ITE programmes and in in-school continuous professional development (CPD), remarking how opportunities to do so were generally inexistent or very superficial. Nigel, for instance, talked

about the lack of explicit reflections about social justice in his professional courses and about becoming an 'institutionalised' teacher (Biesta, 2010; Wrigley, 2022): 'I think the PGCE² was far more concerned on the immediate worries of the teachers of what should I be doing, what boxes should I be ticking and these kinds of things, than actually maybe the theoretical base'. Terrence also shared his frustration around wanting to do more on pedagogy and social justice but realising that he had not been supported to engage with those kinds of reflections throughout his ITE. While discussions about social justice and education are not new (e.g. Connell, 1993; Gale & Densmore, 2000), Mayer and Mills (2021) argue that recent performative neoliberal policies by the English government – which prioritise school and students' achievement measurement in detriment to more pastoral aspects of education and to more theoretical and reflexive work on the purposes of education – have changed the landscape of teachers' professional development and work, as exposed by these participants.

Learning about social justice and education for these teachers then happens mainly through self-study, sometimes individually, sometimes taking part in specific networks (e.g. collectives and radical publications). Lydia, for instance, engages with anti-racist networks and readings on racial justice for 'self-education' (Malcolm & Haley, 1999), a prevalent tradition within anti-racist education: 'I think what has made me become the teacher I am is just educating myself and keeping current and keeping aligned with my values (which) has been difficult but is necessary because we need to lead by example'. This 'self-education' strategy clearly becomes necessary when these teachers' values and purposes in their profession do not align with current general government policies and curriculum priorities for themselves and their students.

In Naya's case, this meant bringing her previous professional experience with critical pedagogies as a theatre practitioner to her more 'official' ITE course. She told us how that previous experience meant that she was drawn to working with 'those who are struggling more in school' through less traditional practices, such as the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (Boal, 2006). Nevertheless, 'in the [placement/internship] school and in the PGCE they kept on telling me "you're not teaching any content, you have to teach content and skill and you're not teaching any content"' (Naya). As we will explore in the following section, this mismatch between their values and practices, and the expectations from ITE educators and school colleagues outlined by Naya can have a significant impact on these teachers' professional lives and retention in the profession.

Overall, this archaeological exploration of the participant teachers' trajectories into the profession shows us that, while they have found ways of furthering their professional development to become the professionals they aspired to be, the reality of *being* that kind of teacher once within the mainstream system is still challenging. In the next section – *utopia as ontology* – we then explore their actual attempts at *being* teachers committed to social justice, including the obstacles and rewards faced when engaging with such work.

Utopia as ontology: being a teacher for social justice

From early years to further education, these teachers developed their own ways of working towards social justice in England, generally grounded in *anti-authoritarianism* and in *communal and child/youth-centred perspectives*, and in exploring *complex and*

sensitive contemporary socio-political issues in their classes. And throughout these experiences, they have been encountering both support and obstacles, which we further explore in relation to our conversations about *how these teachers' critiques of the current system affected their being as a teacher*.

Working against the grain: challenging education as an obstacle to social justice

When reflecting about their current practices around social justice, participants commented on their overall standpoint of challenging 'traditional' schooling practices, such as heavy focus on teacher-led instruction, achievement measurements and behaviour control. These teachers focused especially on outlining how establishing meaningful and ethical relationships with their students grounded in *anti-authoritarianism* and in *communal and child/youth-centred perspectives* was central to their work:

[There] was an English GCSE coursework [on spoken language] where students had to examine spoken language of anything, they could examine the language in their homes, they could examine language at workplaces, they could examine text message language back then. That was really an amazing way to start working with them. (Naya)

All teachers highlighted how establishing these kinds of relationships with their students brought them meaningful rewards to their own lives and work – i.e. to their *being* – as teachers: 'I just developed a really nice relationship with the young people. We had better conversations. We had nicer lessons. Young people who actually had never previously enjoyed my lessons or the subject started to actually get involved' (Terrence). In turn, these relationships led to the creation of important safe spaces within their classrooms, where both these teachers and their students felt confident and supported to engage with discussions and action around *complex and sensitive contemporary socio-political issues*, such as racism:

In the exam board they have to learn about social influence, so they have to understand how social influence can come about as a process of change and that that process of change can be affected by events, majority events, minority events. I got them to listen to a podcast from *The Guardian* on George Floyd and the podcast was entitled 'Will Anything Change?'.³ Then I gave them a response sheet and asked them how this links to the curriculum that they're learning, why do they think there will or won't be change? How can they use the psychological concepts that I've taught them to demonstrate they can apply that to real life examples? (Lydia)

Nevertheless, being this kind of teacher, intent on establishing meaningful and ethical relationships with their students, seems to be at odds with the current trends in mainstream education in England (and in other contexts), which have been consistently focusing on one-size-fits-all and behaviour-management strategies as flagships of 'good education' (Biesta, 2010; Connell, 2009; Wrigley, 2022). These teachers revealed that support for their work against this grain was more readily found through small networks and groups of like-minded practitioners (e.g. reading groups, community-based collectives, online platforms for sharing ideas and resources) than through official programmes and policies currently in place in England.

They described such exchanging spaces as being supportive for their social justice work, drawing on ideas and suggestions from like-minded professionals who have been resisting recent trends and advocating for social justice to be part of teachers' work. Nigel, for instance, mentioned setting up his own reading group, 'Radical Readers', 'to try and get

teachers on board with broadly post-critical theory and trying to understand, essentially, things like unconscious bias and hidden curriculum and things like that'. Lydia also talked about how her engagement with a network of other teachers working on anti-racist practices brought her not only ideas for practice, but also 'comfort': 'I get my comfort from people who look and sound like me, some white allies as well who are really down for the cause and want to make changes, but we do that outside of the school day'.

And while working against the grain is not an easy experience even with the help of like-minded networks, it is even harder when this support is 'oppositional'. This was illustrated, for instance, by Nigel's account of trying to discuss symbolic violence, hidden curriculum and unconscious bias with his colleagues and senior leadership, but then receiving back hostile responses and being told off for doing so. Lydia also recounted several experiences of racism and misogyny she faced as a Black female teacher seeking to discuss racism in her school: 'Having those usual labels of aggressive: "You're angry. Why are you so angry?" "Why are you always having to do this?" Because the work never stops. I can't take my Blackness off. I don't want to. I'm proud of who I am'. These teachers then constantly described feeling isolated in their schools: 'I just felt like people weren't supportive. (. . .) I just felt there was no one willing to stop and help me' (Lydia); 'I essentially got more and more pushed towards the peripheries' (Nigel). The inevitable question here is then what happens with these teachers' careers and wellbeing when *being* this kind of professional who pushes for more socially just educational practices in their workplaces?

Working against the grain: personal and career impacts

As highlighted by the comments above, the personal and career impacts of being a teacher for social justice cannot be overlooked. Dom, for instance, summarised his colleagues' and wider school's responses to his day-to-day work as 'stressful', 'challenging' and 'very energy demanding'. Naya, when recounting her PGCE year and then her first year as a newly qualified teacher (NQT), talked about a deep sense of 'failing' which left her 'quite shattered':

It [moving out of the mainstream sector] helped me to regain my confidence which was quite shattered from the two years of teaching in mainstream school and this sense of 'you're failing', 'you're not succeeding' and all of that. I passed my NQT all well, but there was that constant pressure. Constantly you were being threatened of not being good enough or successful enough.

In addition to these feelings of stress, shattered confidence and diminished self-worth, teachers also highlighted the professional impact of going against the grain – of being 'too radical', 'too angry', 'too disruptive' – to their professional opportunities. This can go from being side-lined by school leaders to actually being by-passed in promotion opportunities. Lydia, for instance, talked about a 'trade-off' she felt she had to make between being the kind of teacher she wanted to be and career progression:

I would say the glass ceiling is not glass. It's like corrugated iron. I will not be going up any further than I am. I know that for sure. But what I don't like is the fact that that choice is taken away from me and it's taken away from me because I choose to act and teach and be the person I am.

After more than 20 years in the mainstream sector, Robert echoed an important perception of teachers like him having to find the ‘right school’ if they want to remain doing the work they aspire to do. But what happens when teachers working towards social justice do not find their ‘right schools’ or are not, at least, ‘left alone’ by their schools? As outlined in Table 1, and alluded to by Naya just above, only two of our participant teachers are still working in the state-funded mainstream sector in England (Aubrey and Lydia, with the former currently considering leaving the profession) and, to them, frustration with the system has constantly led to significant professional dilemmas: for example, while one teacher (Robert) retired, two moved into the private sector abroad (Dom and Naya) and three went into alternative schooling (Nigel, Terrence and Rachel), despite their original goals of promoting social justice from within the state-funded mainstream sector. About that decision, Terrence mentioned: ‘I was banging my head against the wall, and the teachers who’d be around the school didn’t want to listen to what we were saying. So, I left, basically, in frustration’.

What emerges from exploring these teachers’ experiences of being educators committed to social justice in the mainstream sector is then a sense of intrinsic entanglement between their personal and professional lives: the stress and frustration, the impact on their self-worth, their feelings of isolation, etc. narrated here are all deeply linked to their current relationship with the profession they had originally chosen to pursue. As a result, it was not unexpected to see how deeply impactful personal experiences while in the profession were positioned by these teachers as central to their current and future plans for their professional trajectories (Jerrim et al., 2021). Most of them, for instance, have already made significant life decisions around their teaching careers to leave an often financially secure position because they could not achieve what first brought them into the profession: i.e. promoting social justice from within that mainstream sector. These are teachers who then found themselves – personally and professionally – realising that perhaps the ‘redemptive perspective’ that modern education can be a force for social justice is actually an ‘epistemological impossibility’ when faced with the nature of modern institutionalised schooling, as also recently argued by Ball and Collet-Sabe (2021).

Their departures from the mainstream system are then especially concerning in the context of a rising number of teachers leaving the profession across England (Allen et al., 2017); perhaps even more concerning, as shared by Allen and McInerney (2019), is that those teachers who have social justice at the centre of their work seem to be the ones departing.

Utopia as architecture: what would a socially just education system look like?

When asked the specific question above, all teachers seemed happy to be in a space where discussing their ideas was welcomed, with four core themes emerging from their visions: Child and Youth agency; Local communities and schools; Socially, racially and environmentally just curriculum; and Teachers and teachers’ work. Interestingly, they all mentioned ideas which they had already been trying to implement in their current practices, such as some of those outlined in the previous section (*Utopia as ontology*). We then argue that these teachers – who feel they have been working against the grain for years – have already been engaging in the kind of architectural work outlined by Levitas (2013): a praxis-based work that happens in their present but as part of a future-

oriented process of 'reimagining the future of education' (UNESCO, 2021), paving the way to a more socially just education. They offer us not simply unrealised ideas for a hypothetical future, but examples of 'glimmers of hope' emerging from their own concrete educational practices.

Child and youth agency

'Child and youth agency' (Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014) was enacted and mentioned by most participants as central to a socially just education system, seen as a way of countering the current trend around 'behaviour management' in English educational policies, which they deemed to be an obstacle to the flourishing of a socially just system (DfE, 2020).

To Nigel, for instance, social justice should be developed as curriculum practice not only through exploring ideas around social justice, but also grounded in pupils' active participation in their school and classroom life. Echoing Nigel, Rachel talked about how children's rights and a 'non-adultist' education can be promoted through the notions of 'communication' and 'sociocracy', something she has been engaging with for years inside and outside the mainstream sector: 'So, for me, a space which is not adultist is a space which is rooted in trust, which is rooted in equality, and in allowing for emergence. So, not necessarily having pre-determined outcomes but allowing people to find their own outcomes'.

These brief comments outline these teachers' views of a socially just education system that embraces a collective and participatory approach to 'children's and young people's agency', including their relationships with adult communities. As such, it would also involve re-thinking how adults take part in this kind of re-imagined education system, as we explore next.

Local communities and schools

Closely linked to child and youth agency, teachers talked about connections between young people, communities and schools. Several described their ideal education system as one built with and in the community, often based on the notion of 'place-based education', which aims at reclaiming educational initiatives in close connection to and for the flourishing of local community life (Gruenewald & Smith, 2014), countering the 'globalizing' and one-size-fits-all approaches to education explored earlier (Biesta, 2010; Connell, 2009):

It's very place-based education where the learning is always deeply related to the specific world around them. I also think a place-based approach gives a chance to really understand the differences amongst the different students and teachers. It really is rooted within the complexity of the borough, of the place.

As a result, a socially just educational system would not only be achieved through placing pupils at the forefront of their own schooling, but also through different relationships with their teachers, schools, and communities. As summarised by Naya above, the place of

adults in this scenario is then not diminished (e.g. teacher's 'loss of control over students'), but changed towards a more bottom-up and sideways practice involving nurturing relationships.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that most teachers here linked their proposed community-focused education to the existence of specific institutions (i.e. schools), such as alluded to by Dom: 'institutions that already exist would be, in a way, taken over by people who want to use them differently'. Although they would be 'bottom-up' and 'side-ways' kind of institutions, these teachers' visions for a more socially just education were still somehow connected to the existence of formalised sites of education. This is not to say they believed educational experiences could only happen in such sites: several of them mentioned, for instance, Illich's (1969) educational webs as inspiration for their place-based ideals. But it is interesting to see the prevalence of a certain degree of 'institutionalisation' of education among these teachers' visions, something that Ball and Collet-Sabe (2021) recently questioned as posing an impossibility for a truly socially just education. In this article, however, we pose an additional point: could these teachers' visions – and their actual practices from within schools as described in the previous section – be seen as building towards an alternative approach to educational sites which 'refuses' their usual role in 'governing individuals in a continuous, regular and permanent fashion'; that is, educational sites that are not institutions of the normalising kind (Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2021, p. 2)?

We can also raise another question about how these 'place-based' approaches with a focus on links between schools and local communities might (or not) relate to broader, and often global, struggles around social justice and solidarity. As argued by some decolonial scholars (e.g. Kerr & Andreotti, 2018), a too 'locally-focused' approach to issues of injustices in Global North countries might detract educational (and other social) endeavours from challenging more systemic types of injustices posed by longstanding capitalist structures around modern life (Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2021), which go beyond local-level initiatives in the Global North. In this scenario, we pose a follow-up reflection around these teachers' focus on local/place-based education for social justice: how would these ideals be also able to foster socially just action and solidarity among different communities, going beyond the local level?

Socially, racially and environmentally just curriculum

Some teachers in this study engaged with the question posed above about local-global justice more explicitly than others. For instance, Lydia, who has been involved with anti-racist education, mentioned the importance of epistemic justice (Spivak, 1988) and critical consciousness (Freire, 1972) to her vision of a socially just educational system: 'it's time for us to acknowledge our good and our bad in our past and actually try to develop that sort of consciousness in young people so that they are conscious, broad-minded young people with critical views'. Dom, who had been involved in environmental justice activism for years, also shared this view that education needs to connect a community's struggles with broader social and environmental issues, suggesting re-thinking the links between curriculum and social participation around wider social structures, even beyond issues relating to education.

Overall, teachers in this study agreed that this kind of work suggested by Lydia and Dom would need to encompass more engagement with ‘critical ideas’, ‘critical thinking’ and ‘open conversations’. But although they are committed to such a perspective – as also explored in the previous section on *utopia as ontology* – the views they put forward here still raise the question of how this can look as a widespread practice, instead of relying on the work of individual teachers like themselves, especially in an age of standardised teaching, assessment and accountability (Connell, 2009; Wrigley, 2022). As we explored in the previous section, these teachers did recognise this complexity – since it clearly emerges from their own experiences of being that kind of teacher themselves – identifying not only a mismatch between their views and most prevalent educational approaches (e.g. high-stakes examinations), but also the need to ‘work realistically’ to achieve their imagined socially just system. They were then aware that working towards social justice from within the mainstream system is still bound to a certain degree of state control (e.g. government funding) and, as a result, to some sort of accountability and centralisation. So here the critique of modern education systems recently put forward by Ball and Collet-Sabe (2021) comes to mind once again: should these teachers be seeking to ‘work realistically’ towards social justice, or should they be engaging with a deeper ‘refusal’, in the Foucauldian sense, of their workplaces and professions?

Teachers and teachers’ work

Participants in this study also made the case for the role teachers would have in their socially just workplaces. From relationship-building to curriculum work and criticality, the type of work teachers would develop, and their agency to do so, were prominent in our conversations and grounded in their own attempts at being that kind of teacher themselves. Nevertheless, as discussed in our previous ‘ontology’ section, increasing accountability pressures emerging from narrow perspectives on what ‘learning’ means – and, consequently, on teaching and assessment – has already had a great impact on these teachers’ own attempts at making a different system from within it. As a result, for several of them a socially just education system would need to deeply re-think teachers’ work and, more generally, the profession itself, as summarised by Lydia:

‘Of course I will do some of the other performative things. I will make sure that I have planning documents (...). But when it comes to the magic that happens in the classroom, that’s me. I own that. I won’t have that owned by somebody else’.

Terrence, like others, also recognised the links between their lack of autonomy to be a different kind of teacher and how teacher education had been re-defined in recent decades as a result of the expansion of normalising and performance-driven assessment of ‘good teaching’ (Ball, 2003; Connell, 2009). He then advocated a different type of professional standing that is ‘open to new ideas’ and to diverse educational perspectives:

‘One of the things to come out of that is the idea of just being radically open to new ideas coming along. [I think] PGCE students would find it helpful that there are alternatives out there more than anything else’.

These teachers committed to social justice then want to create educational experiences that promote both teachers' and their students' personal and social flourishing, so they can enact social justice ideals not only in their classrooms but also in their wider lives. These teachers are then asking for the freedom to be able to do so, to be able to 'refuse' who they currently have to be (Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2021). And when looking at how these teachers (re)imagine a teaching profession for a socially just education system, it is not difficult to see them as already being exactly that kind of professional: open, constantly learning, exploring democratic approaches, taking ownership of their professional practices and, more generally, engaging with social justice ideals and action.

Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, several of them have either left or are planning to leave state-funded mainstream education soon, which makes us wonder if, among the large groups of teachers leaving the profession each year, they are exactly the ones we would need to retain in the profession for an architectural work towards a more socially just education system to flourish. As a result, we suggest that the implications for social justice ideals of these teachers leaving the profession are significant and warrant further conversations about current policies in teachers' professional development, attraction and retention.

Final remarks

The teachers in this study clearly indicated the ways in which contemporary schooling can be seen as violent, harmful or damaging to students and teachers (and indeed society; Harber, 2002). In doing so, they deployed elements of social justice theorising, such as anarchism (more in Mills & Gandolfi, 2022), that often reflected particular theorists (e.g. Fraser, 1995, 2009), even without naming them. This was done in how they positioned practices and ideals around challenging, for instance: economic injustices grounded in poverty; cultural injustices shaped by racism, colonialism and misogyny; and political injustices, where people are denied a voice in key decisions impacting upon them. In all cases, they were also confronted with social justice dilemmas in their professional trajectories, such as leaving a free state-based education system for fee-paying schools in the private sector, but which provided greater freedom for them and their students (see Francis et al., 2017 for a discussion of such similar dilemmas). Further, for some of these teachers the mainstream education sector had become unsalvageable as a social justice project, as argued by Ball and Collet-Sabe (2021). Despite that, we believe that all these teachers offer us glimmers of hope around what a future socially just education system might look like.

As such, in this study they offered us some insights into another kind of education that is committed to a view of human flourishing, and to the development of young people and of their own capacities as teaching professionals. Along similar lines to UNESCO's (2021) recent document on the future of education, these teachers challenged the adultist framing of authority structures, of the curriculum, and of pedagogical relationships. They did not call for schools to be run by and for young people, but for schools to involve adults and young people in collective decision-making that facilitated young people's agency. They also did not want to see education institutions – and to practice education – separated from their local communities, but instead integrated into it and integral to their functioning. Schools in such a scenario should be concerned with making the community (and the school itself) a better place to be. As a result, schools would by

necessity, as teachers in this study have already been doing, pursue an agenda grounded in socially, culturally, racially, and environmentally just practices. As exemplified by some of these teachers' own practices, young people would need to learn to be critical thinkers who are able to explore the dominant discourses shaping the world to expose any injustices contained within their assumptive logics.

These teachers also recognised that schools are workplaces as well as places of learning, and that young people's human flourishing is dependent upon environments where teachers can develop their capacities too. As a result, they also reflected on the teaching profession – about which kind of professional is needed for a socially just education system and which kind of workplace schools would need to be. In an age of growing prescription and performativity within their profession (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2010; Wrigley, 2022), teachers in this study were constantly pushing back against these conservative forces in the 'brute reality' (Fielding & Moss, 2011) of a landscape for their profession that denies them the space to flourish. In this scenario, we might also look at these teachers as professionals trying to reclaim a side of their profession that seems to have been lost in the current trend of seeing (young) people as 'human capital' (UNESCO, 2021): a side that is concerned with social justice and human flourishing to foster better futures for young people and their communities (Connell, 1993). As asked for by Levitas (2013) when re-imagining the sociology profession, and by UNESCO (2021) when proposing a different future for the teaching profession, these teachers are then committed to (re)shaping their own professions to enable better futures for the young people with whom they work.

The utopian approach employed in this study should be therefore seen as a method of supporting the teaching profession – and the field of education more generally – in imagining and actively working towards these better futures (e.g. Facer, 2016; UNESCO, 2021). As did Levitas (2013), we suggest that utopia should not be seen simply as a goal, but as a method that can help us understand the stagnant normative and prescriptive status of teaching and education and map alternatives to challenge it. In other words, it can help us – through ongoing archaeological, ontological and architectural work – identify, understand and critique various expressions of utopian desires, and collectively construct and delineate alternatives for students, the teaching profession and education systems. We thus argue that the 'utopian knowledge' of teachers involved in this study is constructed not only on feelings or desires (as traditional understandings of 'utopia' often entail), but also on their cognitive, practical and reflexive engagement with their own profession; it is knowledge grounded in lived experiences of the tensions and possibilities of the present – both at institutional and existential levels – with a reflexive and transformative nature that links their realities with the future they have actively attempting to enact for their profession and workplaces.

We would suggest that these teachers, who have not only articulated the schooling experiences of many (young people and teachers alike) as damaging ones, but also offered up alternatives to the current system, should be seen, as many of them self-describe, as 'radical'. As Williams (1989, p. 118) would argue: 'To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing'. This knowledge from the 'radical teachers' in this study is then not only about their present, but about a 'history of the future' of their profession: about where they want to go and who they want to be (Levitas, 2013, p. 2019). As such, we see the findings and discussions developed throughout this paper not as the closure of a process (i.e. of our

small-scale project), but as the beginning of one: a hopeful proposition for reflecting on the alternatives to contemporary mainstream education, which emerges from the voices of teachers who have been already living out alternatives as part of their ‘present’ practices.

Notes

1. Ethical clearance was received from University College London, Institute of Education, UK, the original research institution where this study took place.
2. Postgraduate Certificate in Education – common ITE route in England.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2020/jun/03/death-george-floyd-will-anything-change>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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