To what extent can a Multi-Academy Trust support its senior leaders to use practices to improve their schools that contribute to social justice agendas?

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To what extent can a Multi-Academy Trust support its senior leaders to use practices to improve their schools that contribute to social justice agendas?

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Dedication

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To my own teachers for holding a mirror to my world, painting a picture of new lands and building me a bridge from one place to the other

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore whether Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) can provide opportunities for their staff to develop collaborative and dialogical approaches to school improvement that reflect more socially-just relationships and in doing so, 'prefigure' (Fielding and Moss 2011: 147) more democratic practice as well as subvert and challenge the very narratives of privatisation that gave rise to the Academies Policy (2014) in the first place. The research uses critical realism (CR) as a methodological approach to enable the exploration of the conditions that give rise to educational practice (Bhaskar 1975) and asses to what extent these conditions enable or constrain these collaborative approaches. To this end it undertakes focus groups and semi-structured interviews to collect data on the attitudes, values and practices of a group of 19 of the Trust senior leaders and uses thematic analysis to examine and report on the extent to which the participants' educational purpose addresses social justice agendas and translate into their school improvement practice. The original contribution of this research lies in a number of areas: it explores the processes and practice of a unique school improvement tool that the participating MAT has designed to build a dialogical improvement culture; it suggests preferred school improvement practices for social justice; it considers the potential of a Multi-Academy Trust as a site for such practice; and it relates democratic and dialogical practices directly to school improvement practices. This research takes a critical[1] approach to education policy. It argues that neoliberal agendas, where the predominant purpose of school is to develop the skills that young people can later exchange for work in the job market (Sellar and Zipin 2018), have appropriated the approaches and practices to improving schools in England that have built up since the 1970s (Fielding 1997). This appropriation has included the subversion of approaches to forms of shared, distributed or collaborative leadership and team-work so that they are used as technologies to reinforce the instrumental purposes of neoliberalism (Misfud 2017). Its findings and conclusion demonstrate that, even in a neoliberal context where senior leaders are impacted by instrumental approaches, and taking into account the inconsistencies and tensions this creates, school improvement processes provide an opportunity for subversion when they are predicated on approaches that undermine and replace neoliberal social arrangements.

[1] In the thesis, 'critical approach' refers to the range of theoretical approaches that are critical of policies or positions which deny that social inequality has its foundations in forms of unequal social arrangements.

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Introduction to the research

"Therefore bohoueth a ful long spoon That shal ete with a feend."

(The Squire's Tale, Canterbury Tales, Chaucer).

This thesis investigates the school improvement practices of the senior leaders of a Multi-Academy Trust and considers the extent to which these improvement practices contribute to social justice agendas by building democratic cultures within school leadership teams. The thesis presents the findings of research from 19 of 22 senior leaders of the Goodall Schools Trust[2] over a two-year period. During this time I held three focus groups with the senior Trust leaders to: enable them to influence the direction of the study by agreeing areas of interest for discussion that could also address the research aims; explore their understanding of their educational purposes and consider what these told me about their attitudes and solutions to issues of social inequality; highlight any areas that I might wish to pursue further in the semi-structured interviews to address the research aims. Semi-structured interviews took place with 16 of the original 19 participants because three had left the Trust by the completion of the focus groups. Questions in the semi-structured interviews focused on participant experiences of leadership, leadership cultures and school improvement practices so that I could examine how purposes translated into practice.

For the purposes of the research, 'senior leader' has been defined as any employee in the following role: Head, Head of School, Executive Head, Executive team member (from the central education team). Where participants refer to senior leaders in their schools they mean colleagues on their senior leadership teams, all of whom are qualified or unqualified teachers. Because of the specific focus in the research on school leadership practice and teams, I have not included members of the Goodall Schools Trust Board or local governors in the project although they would also be considered 'senior leaders' by the Trust itself.

[2] The research uses a pseudonym to provide anonymity

The research site is a medium-sized Multi-Academy Trust defined by the Department for Education as a MAT with more than eight schools. These schools are located across six Local Authority Council areas in England's south-east and the Midlands. At the time of this study, it comprised 13 schools, three secondary and 10 primary, with 6,890 students and 1,235 staff. School Ofsted grades are available in appendix one. Participants were recruited from the senior leadership of the Trust and 19 of the Trust's 22 senior leaders took part in the project. Every participant had been or was currently a senior leader on a school leadership team. This includes the Chief Executive Officer of the Trust and members of her supporting Executive Team.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief overview of the research project followed by an overview of the thesis as a whole. The chapter begins with a description of neoliberalism as the context for schools and school improvement and describes how privatisation has affected the development of the school system in England. It then explores the possibility of whether, in this context, school improvement practice can contribute to social justice agendas by adopting democratic ideas. Next the chapter outlines the research question and the project aims before summarising the methodology that underpins the project and the research design. Finally, it outlines the structure of the thesis and indicates what will be covered in each chapter.

Context

The following section gives a brief summary of the critical literature that relates to neoliberalism as the context for current education policy in England, the Academies Policy as an extension of this context, and how approaches to school improvement can be used to reinforce or subvert this context.

1.1.1 Neoliberalism and the privatisation of education

Gilbert (2016) argues that neoliberalism is the predominant discursive formation of our times. In constant search of profit and the capital that will serve this profit, it uses the narratives of market and consumer and the technologies of competition to further its purposes. The role of the state has changed so that the measures it previously adopted to roll back any interference with the growth of arenas for profit, have been replaced by policy and regulation that actively promote the market, market approaches and privatisation (Ball 1998). This notion of market is believed to best reflect the acquisitive

inclinations of humanity and lead to an aggregation of individual successes that will drive economic expansion (Sellar and Zipin 2018). In this way, social inequality is reduced.

Foucault (1975) argues that our identities are made in, of, and from discourse. In neoliberalism commercial narratives shape and unite individuals in pursuit of market goals to encourage entrepreneurial behaviour (Hammersley-Fletcher and Qualter 2009). Here each individual internalises responsibility for her own contribution so that individual success and failure are located in each person (De Lissovoy 2018).

This re-creation of identity is overlaid with an ideological self-effacement so that neoliberalism is presented as a common sense and politically neutral response to crises (Ball 2013). This self-effacement has replaced the idea that there is no viable alternative to the market as the organising force with the belief there is no imaginable alternative. The concept ‘neoliberalism' describes the behaviours and beliefs that stem from this position as well as the social arrangements that give rise to it (Gilbert 2016).

Neoliberal implications for education begin with a change of purpose so that schools are now expected to prepare young people, viewed as human capital, for the work-place (Hammersley-Fletcher 2015) . Marketisation finds logical expression in the technologies used to promote this purpose so that narratives borrowed from the commercial sector - accountability, autonomy, competition and collaboration - translate into the polices that underpin education in England. The identity of the student, teacher and school leader are re-shaped by these purposes so that they become united in common pursuit (Ball 2013). Privatisation and competition have found expression in the development of many different types of school with different purposes and governance arrangements (Courtney 2015). This development has led to what Bartlett and Le Grand (1993: 13) call a ‘quasi market’ where responsibility for public goods is removed from the hands of elected officials and given instead to interest groups and private organisations. The Academies Act of 2010 is viewed by the current administration as an important component in the move to and development of this differentiated school market place (Glatter 2021).

The narrowing of school purpose has led to an associated narrowing of what is valued and what is measured in school provision so that exam results are seen as the best measure of the success of students, teachers and school leaders (Lupton and Hayes 2021).

Currently a centralised system of hyper-accountability serves to police schools in this regard and simultaneously works to suggest coherence in what has become a fractured school system (Glatter 2021).

Ball (1998) argues that school improvement, the policies and processes used to improve student outcomes, arose in tandem with neoliberal purposes as a technology to reinforce them. Thrupp (2001) argues that collaborative alternatives were developed but became appropriated in the pursuit of a narrow set of success measures. Wilkins (2021) describes the current government policy to school improvement, the 'school self-improving system' (SSIS) (DfE 2010), as an extension of the ideology that responsibility for success or failure lies with the individual. Glatter (2021) agues it stems from a desire to centralise control of the system. Responsibility for school improvement now rests with individual and groups of schools and Academy schools and Multi-Academy Trusts are viewed as a key component in this system, with identified Trusts taking on the role of improvement in local networks. Glatter (2021).

1.1.2 School improvement and democratic practice

Apple (2001) argues that identity is plastic and Ball (2013) that this is precisely why powerful narratives and discourses are needed to constantly persuade the public that neoliberalism is the best and most natural way to organise social relations. This plasticity offers opportunities for subversion and interruption as well as hope that it is possible to develop alternative ways of acting and being. Apple (2001) argues that in the education context, any attempt to build alternatives must begin with a critical analysis of the current context, and offer professionals, in an ongoing process, places and times when they can contest education purpose. Fundamentally, any successful challenge to neoliberal education must frame such contestation so that human flourishing and the common good are inextricably linked. Biesta (2007) argues that this contestation of purpose also contributes to a much-needed rejuvenation of the definitions of democracy used both generally in wider society and specifically in the education context because they have narrowed in tandem with neoliberal purposes. He argues that these definitions have lead to voter apathy and reduced political agendas to promises to deliver against individual desires which serve to further reinforce the notion of the acquisitive individual. Fielding and Moss (2011) argue that schools can be places where democracy is reclaimed. Schools are not just places where young people are prepared to take their place in society

in the future. They are part of society in the present. Therefore, they are places where the social arrangements that comprise their organisation can either reproduce or offer an alternative to the social arrangements of wider society. Fielding and Moss argue that in this way schools can model and prefigure fairer social arrangements and therefore, contribute to building social justice.

Fielding and Moss (2011) also present a range of practices that they argue are indicative of democratic school cultures, like a sharing of decision-making and a willingness to subvert hierarchy, and invite others to add to this list. Lupton and Hayes (2021) argue that this task of suggesting practice that might subvert neoliberal agendas in schools is more pressing now for the social justice agenda than at any time in recent history. They suggest that narrowed education purposes reduce provision so that disadvantaged students who are most in need of what school can offer are worst affected by this trajectory. Fielding and Moss's (2011) range of practices, which includes a description of the dialogical, can be extended to all of the relationships, policies and processes of school organisation and so can also logically be applied to the relationships, policies and practices for improving those same schools.

It is within this context and critique of school education policy that this research is set. The following section adds further context, and transparency, to this research by providing relevant information on my role and experience within the MAT structure.

1.1.3 The researcher in context

In 2011 I co-founded a Multi-Academy Trust to build a different vision of education albeit on a very small scale (appendix two). It intended to give unusual provision to some of those students who currently go without because of the instrumentalist narrowing of curriculum that worst affects those in most need of its breadth (appendix three). Furthermore it aimed to support young people to find and take their future places in the world in the context of the common good. Our intention was to only work with schools in the most socially deprived areas and use an approach to school improvement designed and proven over a 20 year period by my co-founder (appendix four). We had subsequently used the approach, that uses a set of collaborative processes, to recover a long-term failing secondary school in London and a large council school improvement

service in England. We also used it to restructure a large Local Authority Education Department.

Since we were accepted as a potential Multi-Academy Trust the Founders, the Board and senior staff of the Executive Team have endeavoured to empower and enable our staff to take control of the vision and resource for their school and accordingly we have tried to see them as whole people and involve them in decision-making. We have commissioned critical academics to work with them to achieve this and now I have undertaken my own PhD study to hear and understand our progress and what we need to do differently in the future. Of course this is part of a story and my interpretation of that part of a story, and I accept that others will see it differently. What follows are the experiences, and my interpretation of the experiences, of some of those with whom we are on this journey: the senior leaders of the Trust. Their contribution to this study has challenged my perspectives, made me question some of what we have done so far, and given me, and the Executive Team and Board, much to think about. The findings reinforce my belief that although we are a long way from where we might want to be , or think we are at the Goodall Schools Trust, things can be different. I hope that other school leaders, Multi-Academy Trusts and policy makers can build on our insights and benefit from our learning.

Gunter and McGinity (2014) argue that the Academies Policy has reduced democratic representation in the English school system. Although I agree with this position, I also agree with Lupton and Hayes (2021) when they entreat those professionals who want educational transformation to enter the fray and engage with the 'messy compromise 'of the current policy context (2021: 9). Apple (2006a) has consistently and cogently outlined what happens when proponents of critically-informed change cannot put aside their ideological disagreements. Their conflict leaves a gap for those who are willing to overlook their differences for a common purpose and to date this approach has proved successful for proponents of neoliberal perspectives and those who adhere to the philosophical perspectives that underpin them. I appreciate the criticisms levelled against the Academies Policy but I began this research believing that without action, no transformation is possible (Freire 1972, 2020, 2021). I have realized in pursuing this study that critical analysis is a vital component of change and that without it we only have

activism which struggles to evolve or protect itself when it meets with forces that oppose it (Freire 1968, 1992, 1996, Apple 2006b).

It is from this viewpoint and experience the following research aims were developed.

The research aims

The primary purpose of this research is to explore the extent to which a Multi-Academy Trust can serve as a space where school leaders are able to develop school improvement practices that might contribute to social justice agendas by adopting democratic approaches that do not currently exist within the school system.

To fulfil this purpose the following four aims were identified to:

1. Identify the educational purposes of the senior leaders of the Goodall Schools Trust

2. Examine the extent to which these educational purposes address social justice agendas

3. Explore the extent to which the Goodall Schools Trust senior leaders' practices for improving their schools accurately reflect their educational purposes

4. Consider the influences on these improvement practices and the extent to which these influences enable or constrain the enactment of the senior leaders' purposes

These four aims will be supported by the following methodological approach.

The research methodology

I chose critical realism as a 'philosophical under-labourer' for the project (Archer 2012:14) because of its benefits to research, its relevance to the research question in particular and its flexibility to support a range of research designs (Archer 2012). Its epistemological relativism and ontological realism give primacy to an external reality that sits apart from the subject. This makes research worthwhile because something can be

known and learned, however imperfectly, about reality (Maxwell 2012a). Although imperfect, value judgements about the relative efficacy or verisimilitude of an interpretation can be made pertaining as they do to a world that is not dependent on human perception of it (Bhaskar 2014). Secondly, critical realism's description of a multi-lateral ontology allows a critical analysis of what we observe empirically as well as what has the potential to be. Crucially it also allows exploration of the generative mechanisms that give rise to these two. This has particular value where research is attempting to uncover and challenge unequal power relations and the sources of injustice because critical realism acknowledges the forces that underpin social arrangements (Shipway 2010). Thirdly, the research aims include the need to explore professional practice and how it is supported or constrained. Margaret Archer's theory of morphogenesis provides a description of how human agency is enabled or limited by social and cultural conditions (Archer 2000). She describes how social conditions, which precede the individual, have to in turn be instantiated in the individual to exist at all. In this way each individual has the potential power to reproduce or transform current social conditions. Her description of constraining or enabling forces explains why some social conditions can be changed and others not and why some individuals overcome their social situations and others cannot. Fourthly, critical realism serves as a philosophical under-labourer by providing a framework for dismantling practices and discourses rather than being committed to specific theoretical perspectives (Maxwell 2012a). In this way it can be used alongside other theoretical perspectives and with the research tools for data collection and analysis that best meet the research aims and objectives in the ways detailed in Chapter three.

The following section summarises the research design.

The research design

Three key considerations informed my research design. First, the need to meet the aims and objectives of the research, which required me to collect participants 'experiences and practices to provide the rich data needed to answer the research questions. Second, a design that mitigated my position as researcher and co-founder of the Multi-Academy Trust chosen as the research site. Third, a desire to find an approach that enabled the content and process of the research to contribute to addressing issues of social injustice in and of themselves. These considerations led me to choose a qualitative research approach. Qualitative approaches are the most effective for collecting full descriptions of

participant experiences, because they see objectivity as a barrier to the connection that the researcher needs with participants and seek to remove it (Lincoln and Guba 2011). When subjectivity is reflexive, it can help the researcher to mitigate her position of power as the researcher (Hogan et al 2009). This same reflexivity has the potential to mitigate my position as Founder of the Trust and former employer of some of the participants. Finally qualitative approaches offer opportunities for the co-creation of tools and for participants to influence the direction of research (Lincoln and Guba 2011). These contribute to epistemic agency that can positively impact participants 'confidence in their own abilities to make a difference to young people's lives (Griffiths 1998). I also wanted to seek an interactive research design as a qualitative approach given that it more accurately reflects the epistemological relativity and constructionist stance of Critical realism outlined in Chapter Three (Maxwell 2012b).

I began the research with focus groups because this form of data collection has similarities to training and joint activity which are familiar to Trust senior leaders. Furthermore, focus groups enable participants to talk and work together, in relating their experiences sought by the research. The participants' familiarity and comfort in a group setting was important to me in creating a safe space for them and also served to mitigate my own position. Participants have a potential degree of 'safety in numbers' in a group setting where there is only one facilitator[3]. This had the potential to be true given the participants' familiarity with each other. Focus groups also allowed the use of projective techniques (Colucci 2007), activities aimed at approaching difficult subjects obliquely so that emotions and values might be explored more safely. Focus groups also reflect the constructivist belief that knowledge is constructed with others and that in this process identities shift and are negotiated (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2018). This supported the research process in contributing to knowledge creation about i) the purposes of education, ii) practices to improve schools and iii) the extent to which either of these might contribute to social justice agendas. It was also important to me that I used the focus groups to encourage critical reflection by participants so research participation might contribute to the social justice agenda. To this end I supported some of the activity with academic articles from critical academics (Griffiths 1998). Finally, I chose focus groups in the belief that they would successfully generate themes to carry the research

[3] Further explanation of how I ensured participant safety given my role as Founder and former employer is included in the ethics section on page x.

forward. Although I chose the research topic, it was important to me that the participants played some part in identifying themes for further discussion.

I chose semi-structured interviews for the second part of the data collection with individuals because such interviews have the potential to explore the social reality and perspectives of individual participants (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). They also allowed the flexibility for me to pursue some discussions on an individual basis as they pertained to the research topic (Smith and Elger 2014). I was keen to mitigate my position as researcher and co-founder of the Trust at every point possible and semi-structured interviews also give the participants a degree of control over their responses. I reinforced this control by giving participants sight of the questions before we began. Although this may have given them opportunity to form narratives that were less spontaneous, I decided to take this risk and counterbalanced this by including questions about specific practice alongside more generic questions about their own practices and attitudes. I also gave participants control over the time and location of the interview (Smith and Elger 2014).

I chose thematic analysis to interrogate my collected data because it has a theoretical flexibility that allows analysis at each of the critical realist levels of ontology (Wheeldon and Faubert 2009). I chose Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach over Astride-Stirling's (2001) because I felt it provided a clearer framework for me as a novice researcher. It also encouraged transparency about decision-making as part of the analysis and in this way served to position me as the researcher in relation to the material and contribute to mitigating my position as researcher and co-founder of the participating Trust (Clarke and Braun 2018).

All of the tools for data collection and analysis were chosen because they avoid any strict adherence to one philosophical or theoretical standpoint and therefore, allowed a retroductive analysis of the research findings. Retroduction provides an interactive approach to data, moving between new knowledge and interpretation, and in doing so avoids the dichotomy between a priori and a posteriori understandings (Maxwell 2012b). Although it is difficult to generalise, in broad terms inductive approaches, like grounded theory or discourse analysis, expect the data to reveal new knowledge and run the risk of overlooking subjective interpretation (Clarke and Braun 2018). Deductive or post-

structuralist approaches encourage interpretation of the data through a theoretical lens and risk overlooking the discovery of new knowledge (Clarke and Braun 2018). Retroductive approaches are also consistent with Critical realism as a methodological approach to the study because rather than provide or promote a single theoretical view point for interpretation they enhance analysis by providing a framework to understand reality more fully (Clarke and Braun 2018).

The next section outlines the limitations of scope for the project.

Limitations of scope

It is not the intention of this research to explore notions of quality or whether the MAT's approach to school improvement works. A high level summary of school outcomes is provided in appendix one.

The research does not address those policies by consecutive governments that take a structural approach to improving the school system rather than an approach that uses in school processes. However, Chapter Two outlines where these policies fit within the broader policy context.

Schools make a contribution to social justice agendas either by reproducing existing social inequalities or challenging and subverting them via the organisation of the school, pedagogical approaches and the purpose and content of the curriculum. The scope of this research focusses specifically on the contribution of school improvement practices amongst school senior leadership teams and how these might contribute to social justice agendas.

This research foregrounds the place of democracy in the delivery of social justice agendas and offers a thick definition that encompasses participative and agnostic approaches. It uses a composite definition of social justice (Fielding and Moss 2011) described in detail in Chapter Two. It draws on Wright's view (2010) that given its structural nature and varied and dynamic consequences, new injustice will be disclosed through historic social activity. The definition I use also acknowledges Lumby and Coleman's (2016) argument that we operate in the temporal reality of neoliberalism and so Nancy Fraser's (2005)

‘affirmative measures’ to address social inequality will be needed even as ‘transformative approaches’ are preferred. For example, the narratives of compensation where students might be supported to ‘catch up ’to compete with their privileged counterparts, might sit side by side with discourses of transformation that prepare young people to challenge the social arrangements that led to their own disadvantage in the first place.

Contribution to the field

The research is unique in a number of ways. Firstly, critical academics complain that critical research fails to suggest or recommend practices that might be preferred in the pursuit of social justice agendas in schools (Fielding 2000, Francis and Mills 2012, Apple 2015, Francis et al 2017, Lupton and Hayes 2021). Furthermore, school improvement has not been considered as a the potential place for such practices beyond leadership and team leadership. This project includes the consideration of a specific school improvement tool designed for collaborative school improvement and used by the senior leaders of the Goodall Schools Trust.

Secondly, although there is a growing body of critical research concerning England’s policy on Multi-Academy Trusts this research project addresses an unconsidered subject. Areas of study include the policy’s contribution to the privatisation of education in England; governance and what it means for non-state actors to control the provision of a public service; the role of Academies in the diversification of the school system and the contribution this might make to local inequalities; Academy impact on admissions, local hierarchies and networks for the provision of school-to-school services; the effect of Academies on school, local and national student outcomes (Gunter and McGinity 2014, Courtney 2015, Greaney and Higham 2018, Glatter 2021, Wilkins 2021). Equally there is a vast body of critical academic research on how leadership and team-work can contribute to social justice agendas in schools. Nevertheless there is no research on the potential of a Multi-Academy Trust to be a site for the development and consideration of socially just school improvement practices that serve to challenge and subvert the very neoliberal agenda that many critical academics argue (Gunter and McGinity 2014) gave rise to the Academies Policy in the first place.

I will now provide a brief summary of the content of each chapter in the thesis.

Overview of the thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters (including this introduction) subdivided into sections.

Chapter Two presents a critical review of the literature as it pertains to the thesis title. It argues that neoliberalism is the predominant discursive formation of our times, extending the metaphor and material reality of market into the private and public sphere. It describes how the supporting narrative of privatisation has found expression in the education sector in the Academies Policy. Chapter Two problematises definitions of social justice and examines the place of concepts of democracy in addressing social justice agendas in education. Finally it provides a critical overview of approaches to improving schools over the last five decades and outlines what practices might comprise democratic school improvement with a focus on dialogical practices.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological assumptions underpinning the research design. It explains why critical realism has been chosen for the project with specific reference to those areas of particular relevance to the research, including ontological realism and epistemological relativism. Then it offers a definition of agency which is necessary when considering the extent to which participants are constrained or enabled in turning their education purposes into practice. Next it suggests some of the implications of critical realism for research methods. Finally the chapter outlines why Foucault's understanding of power has been adopted as a conceptual framework for the research, the relevant points of contact between his definition and critical realist thought and why it was felt relevant to the research aims to extend the theoretical framework in this way.

Chapter Four describes the research project, research site and the approaches to the data collection and analysis. It outlines the objectives of the research and explains why a qualitative approach is the most appropriate for these objectives. It goes on to describe the Goodall Schools Trust, the Multi-Academy Trust that is the site of the research, co-founded by the researcher. The chapter then explains why focus groups and semi-structured interviews were chosen to collect data and thematic analysis for data analysis. Given the researcher's prior role in the research site, it also deals with the researcher's positionality in detail.

Chapter Five presents the findings of this research. It offers a critical reflection on the themes highlighted in the analysis that are directly relevant to the research question and its aims. This chapter comprises four sections each covering one key finding. Section one covers issues of educational purpose and the extent to which participants see education as contributing to social justice agendas. Section two explores the working context for the participants. Sections three and four consider participant practices, and their underlying cultures, that contribute to school improvement. These sections have been divided into practices that pertain more to school leadership and practices that pertain more to school leadership teams. This is an analytic dichotomy only, created to help manage the data.

Chapter Six completes the thesis with a discussion of the research findings and a consideration of the research aims. It answers the question posed by the research title by considering each of the research aims in turn. Then it makes a number of recommendations based on what has been learned from the data making clear the contribution the research makes to the field. Finally it suggests areas for further research.

This introduction has provided some context to the research and in relation to the research project. It has suggested that this research fills a gap in existing school improvement practice and therefore, makes an original contribution to knowledge. It has given an overview of the thesis structure and content. I will now provide an overview of the critical literature that relates to the research area.

2

Chapter two: Critical literature review

Introduction

This study is premised upon the belief that schools play an important role in upholding or challenging dominant narratives and ideologies. Therefore, they have the potential to challenge understandings of what schools are for and build alternative social arrangements. The study argues that the purpose of education is to support children and young people to flourish individually and to learn to live good lives together. This twin mission is fundamentally and inextricably linked (Dewey 1939, Fielding 2007a, Wright 2010, Fielding 2012, Fielding and Moss 2011, Griffiths 2012, Apple 2015, Lumby 2019, Hargreaves 2019). In this way education is concerned with the fundamental human journey 'to become '(Freire 1968). The creation of identity, central in answering questions of personhood, is maintained by narrative (Giddens 2020, De Lissovoy 2014, Sellar and Zipin 2018). Schools play a key role in either reproducing or challenging the hegemony within which children and young people become adults (Hammersley-Fletcher 2009, Lupton 2012, Ball 2013, Lumby and Coleman 2016). Any challenge begins with a critical consideration of how the predominant discursive formation of our times, neoliberalism, shapes our policy and practice (Apple 2001, Fielding and Moss 2011, Ball 2013, De Lissovoy 2014, 2018). It explores the ways educational practice can better contribute to social justice. Apple (2001) challenges us to begin by questioning our dominant education institutions and to include those who benefit least from them in a critical dialogue. He argues that analysis must encompass a consideration of the debates that currently dominate education. These include what constitutes legitimate knowledge, what education is for and who decides and how. These debates reveal competing visions of power relations, what constitutes a just society and, by extension, what it means to be human. A range of critical academics have called for renewed understandings of democracy to be given a central place in this analysis, given its direct relevance to the how and why of human becoming and its place in education. (Dewey 1939, Arendt 1958, Biesta 2007, Fielding and Moss 2011, Fielding 2012, Hammerlsey-Fletcher et al 2018, Sant 2020). Some critical academics have also argued that the critical scholar is in danger of being dismissed as irrelevant because too much education research seems unable or

unwilling to offer preferred practices in the search for social justice (Francis et al 2012, Apple 2015, Francis et al 2017). Freire (1968, 1992, 1996) consistently argued that critical dialogue is not enough. He argued that reflection and action, the constitutive elements of dialogue, combine to create praxis. These two must operate in constant interaction: action without reflection becomes the ideologically driven and objectifying activism that is ultimately disenabling (Freire 1996). Critical analysis without action becomes equally ideologically driven, falling in on itself as it fails to bring about meaningful change, because transformation requires action (Freire 1996).

This critical literature review comprises an exploration of neoliberalism and its effect on the maintained school sector in England. This is followed by an examination of how privatisation as a key neoliberal technology has found expression in the English Academies policy[4]. It then problematises and defines concepts of social justice and locates the place of democracy in addressing social justice agendas. Finally, it traces the development of approaches to improving schools in England and explores some potentials and options for more democratic practices.

Neoliberalism and the marketisation of schooling

This section describes neoliberalism as the current, predominant discursive formation of our times. Within neoliberalism, the market as metaphor and material reality shape our personal and social spheres in pursuit of ever new arenas to make profit. This pursuit is underpinned by commercial behaviours and business practices as well as the narratives of competition and choice (Apple 2006a, Ball 2013, Gilbert 2013, De Lissovoy 2018) and extends into the public sector (Hindmoor 2018). Critical analysis has highlighted that neoliberalism is fraught with complex contradictions that create a complicated context for the definition of social inequality and solutions to social injustice (Biebricher 2018).

Capitalism, always in need of new sources of profit, responds to crises by identifying and creating arenas for new markets (Connell et al 2009). Biesta (2019) describes how these arenas have changed historically beginning with the identification of space as a source of profit with the development of colonialism, on to time as a source of profit as seen in the stock exchange. Neoliberalism is the description and enactment of the most recent arena

[4] The Academies policy is a generic term that refers to the Academies Act 2010 and any subsequent regulation to enable it.

for profit, our subjectivities, where the purpose of personhood is to contribute to economic well-being and expansion (Connell 2009). Detailed definitions and explications of the composition and reproduction of neoliberalism are varied and inconsistent (Ball 2012, Ball 2013, Gilbert 2013, Spohrer et al 2017) and some advocates dispute it is anything more than a theoretical attempt to differentiate advanced capitalism from its predecessor (Gilbert 2013). Critical academics argue that it must be addressed historically and materially given its propensity to further social inequalities (Apple 2001). They agree that it is based around a certain imagination of the market and accompanying commodification as the best and increasingly only way to organise social relations (Ball 2012, Spohrer et al 2017). Sometimes seemingly incoherent and contradictory practices have coalesced to ensure the penetration of market as metaphor and material reality into every aspect of our lives (Ball 2012, Fielding and Moss 2011, Sellar and Zipin 2018). A critical understanding of neoliberalism extends beyond a description of it simple market fundamentalism and analyses the co-joining of a range of ethical and political stands. Neo-conservatism, nationalism and religious fundamentalism have coalesced to create a set of complex conditions for markets to function in all spheres of private and public life (Apple 2006a, Biebricher 2018, Brown 2019). Ball (2012) reminds us that at the material level all social life is economised, and social relations become opportunities for profit-making. Apple (2006a) states that new alliances and power blocs form nationally and internationally. Ball (2012) also reminds us that neoliberalism operates at the discursive level, where Foucauldian analysis can illuminate the ways it operates to create and re-create our subjectivities so that they are in keeping with the new materiality. A new discursive formation contributes to the shaping of our desires and emotions, affecting our very becoming and identity-creation (De Lissovoy 2014, Sellar and Zipin 2018). Both the material conditions and ideological narratives of neoliberalism are underpinned by the emergence of technologies which aim to create the hegemony needed to ensure their maintenance and reproduction (Gilbert 2013, Brown 2019). These include a re-defined role for government and policy (Gilbert 2013, Hammersley-Fletcher 2009) which leads to a change of role for the State (Ball 2013). At one time considered an interfering force that had to be rolled back to allow the individual and the market freedom, the State has become a positive actor, as it takes responsibility for creating the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for the operation of markets (Ball 2012, 2013). In turn, this transforms the role and, consequently, the identity of the individual in relation to the State, from citizen to consumer.

Underpinning the market as metaphor and material reality are a range of assumptions which suggest that greed, acquisitiveness and self-interest are fundamental to, and primary in, the human condition (Ball 1998). Therefore, neoliberal agendas and those who promote them, aim to encourage particular types of competitive, commercial and entrepreneurial behaviour in citizens to support the idea of the market as the chief organising force (Connell et al 2009, Mein and Sandler 2009, Hammersley-Fletcher 2009). Social justice agendas are addressed when competition and individual success and wealth combine to drive economic progress. Proponents and advocates believe that business attributes will distribute public resources more effectively and fairly, provide creative solutions to problems, and organise public service activity so that it is effective, high quality and accountable to the public (Hammersley-Fletcher 2009, Tooley 2001). Key in the promotion of this approach is the dismantling of any definition of democracy that promotes the common good, replacing it with a concern for individualistic goals and desires (Connel et al 2009, Biesta 2007, Brown 2019). Participation in debate about issues of material concern to the community is replaced with retail choice. Nevertheless, Apple (2001) and Ball (2013) argue that the ideologies and narratives that claim that markets best organise and describe economic and social life are 'conative 'rather than 'denotive, ' that is, they describe a wished-for state rather than a reality. If this were not the case then neoliberal narratives and technologies would not be needed to constitute the social reality they claim to reflect. Furthermore, the language of competition and markets is presented as natural and neutral in tone, suggesting that public life is governed by effort and reward, and that those who argue against this approach are arguing that hard work should not be rewarded with merit (Apple 2001). Marketised responses to problems of quality and efficiency are presented as common-sense solutions, often preceded by the definition of crises that justify them (Apple 2015).

Critical academics see the extension of market models into the public and private spheres more generally, and into public services and the education sector more specifically, as a tendential development of the desire to privatise and bring new sources of profit to the market (Apple 2001, 2011). Ball (2005, 2012) has argued against a simple contingent relationship between ideological perspectives and policy creation and its enactment in the education sector in England. Nevertheless, he believes that neoliberalism has found consistent expression in UK public policy stemming back to the Thatcher government. Her

government deregulated markets and sold national assets because Margaret Thatcher believed they would bring about the investment needed for wealth creation. A range of critical academics argue that Callaghan's Ruskin College speech in 1976 opened the way for the marketisation of the education sector. In particular, he described a school system in crisis: expensive; unconnected to the needs of industry and the economy; shaped by those who delivered it rather than the public that paid for it (Apple 2001, Ball 2008, Hindmoor 2018). Apple (2001) describes how the neoliberal discursive techniques that are used more widely, like the appeal to common sense, have subsequently been used to persuade the public that market logic will address these issues.

This development, intensified and overlaid with complexity and contradiction over the past fifty years has defined and redefined the purposes of education until the predominant narrative has reduced education to what Fielding (2000) calls 'schooling. ' Here any concern with human flourishing or the common good has been replaced with a preoccupation with developing young people to exchange their skills and knowledge in the job market (Apple 2015). Schools make a major contribution to reducing social inequality through social mobility, rewarding effort with the good exam outcomes that translate into the individual successes. These, in turn, aggregate to fuel economic development (Reay 2016). A neoliberal description of the purpose of education and the expectation that education professionals will adopt market technologies to promote it creates a context of strain and tension for critical academics. Although it is impossible to reduce the broad range of critical approaches to simplistic notions of educational purpose and practice, critical academics argue that if schools are to address social justice agendas, they must be spaces for alternative identities and ways of being together (Apple 2015) where children and young people can interact justly and effectively with each other and their environment (Fielding and Moss 2011). They must also be places where there is a fundamental philosophical understanding that individual flourishing and community success are inextricably linked (Fielding 2001, Apple 2015). This conflict of purpose between neoliberal and critical purposes of education creates the working context for the educational professional and results in further layers of contradictions and conflict. Purpose effects descriptions of how schools should be improved and what processes might be used to do this. Purpose also affects the very notion of what it means to improve because it defines quality or what constitutes a good enough school.

Privatisation and the Academies policy

The previous section described how neoliberalism has redefined educational purpose and practice. Education is expected to make a major contribution to economic productivity, and equality of educational outcome is seen as the solution to social inequality (Apple 2001, Ball 2008, Hindmoor 2018). In the following section the Academies policy is described as a tendential development of the privatisation that accompanies neoliberal marketisation of public services (Greaney and Higham 2018). For those working in an Academy, the context adds additional layer of complexity when considering what constitutes social inequality and how it might be addressed through school practices.

Privatisation is a key component of neoliberal discourse and policy (Ball 2012, West 2013, Apple 2015, Reay 2016, Spohrer et al 2018). It reflects the ideological belief that quality and efficiency are best secured by the innovation and competition that occur when market precepts and processes are applied to public services and consumers are offered choice (Ball 2012, Apple 2015, Greaney and Higham 2018, Glatter 2021). In the education sector, privatisation is represented by what Bartlet and Le Grand(1993) call a 'quasi market,' where non-state actors control education in not-for-profit arenas and where education is redefined as a consumer service (Hammerlsey-Fletcher et al 2020). The 1988 Education Reform Act heralded the change in the way public services were delivered when pupil formula funding underpinned the local management of schools and gave schools the option of separating themselves from Local Authority control (Glennerster 1991). This quasi market has been extended by consecutive education policies until the responsibility for the majority of provision in the English school system has been transferred from public bodies like locally elected councillors and their officers to private, unelected interest groups that receive public funding for new forms of schools (West 2013, Ball 2012, Apple 2015, Greaney and Higham 2018). In this way private bodies become the holders of public assets and responsible for delivering public goods (Ball 2012, Fielding 2012, West 2013, Apple 2015).

Ball and Youdel (2007: 8) differentiate between 'endogenous privatisation', where business practices and techniques are adopted by the public sector in the belief that this will make it more effective, and 'exogenous privatisation 'where public services are opened up as actual sources of profit making for the private sector. Many critical

academics argue that Academies and multi-academy trusts represent endogenous privatisation (Greaney and Higham 2018, Hammersley-Fletcher et al 2020).

Defined as publically funded independent schools, Academies were established as autonomous bodies with control of their staff pay and conditions, curriculum and school organisation, operating outside of local authority control and funded and managed directly by central government (Glatter 2012,Department for Education website 2018). Wilkins (2012) outlines their development, starting with the 2002 Education Act, where they were presented by the Labour government as the solution to long-term underperformance of schools and were usually located in geographical areas of complex social need. Although the policy was used to invest money directly into long-term failing schools, it also adopted the language of the Independent School sector, with the establishment of self-governing Boards independent of local councils and controlled by philanthropic bodies or business leaders rather than public representatives (Glatter 2012).

Accompanied by the discourse of choice, their introduction coincided with the publication of information about Ofsted grades and test and exam results so that, theoretically, families could make decisions about where they sent their children. This recast schools as commodities and families as consumers and created a culture of school competition (Ball 2013 , Wilkins 2012). This was underpinned by a new public accountability which mobilised a range of stakeholders around the same marketised agendas (Greaney and Higham 2018).

In 2010, the programme was expanded by the coalition government to enable any school to convert to Academy status. Wilkins (2012: 2) calls the Academies policy “a neoliberal or advanced liberal approach to education reform” because it advocates business approaches to solve social issues. These business models and the concept of the market place are being constantly extended. The 2022 Academies Benchmark Report by Kreston Global summarises annual Academy finance and governance information. The most recent report invites Multi Academy Trusts to ensure they stay effective by using trading subsidiaries to sell educational materials, land or property. They add that the sale of back office functions like IT and finance to schools outside their Trust can subsidise their core funding as operational costs rise and staff recruitment remains difficult and expensive.

Furthermore, Wilkins (2020) argues that Academies transform education as a public good for all citizens to a private commodity for the benefit of the individual. Hammersley-Fletcher (2015), and Ball and Youdell (2007) describe how the human capital approach to public services extends into education, preparing students to take their place in the economy and developing in them the skills and attributes that will make them more productive. Glatter (2009) and Wilkins (2012) argue that academies serve to undermine democracy, circumventing local accountability by answering to their sponsor and Board. Ball and Youdell (2007) argue that the policy replaces the struggle over values, which is a key component of democratic practice with the common- sense narratives that accompany profit making. For Ball and Youdell (2007), moves to privatise education pose ethical dilemmas and social justice questions for families, who have to choose schools for their children, and for the schools themselves, which are driven to select pupils who will deliver the outcomes they hope will help them to sustain or improve their market position.

Greany and Higham (2018) describe how academies have become part of the school self - improving system narrative that has dominated school improvement rhetoric since 2010, where schools work in networks to improve the system. They add that the associated dominant discourse of collaboration is disingenuous when referring to academy chains as they are one legal entity with centralised control and, therefore, not a network or partnership in the sense that policy claims. Furthermore, the autonomy and self-governance that are supposed to lead to the creative solutions and partnership work that raise standards does not exist, and is experienced by academies as loss of support in a context of increased pressure to perform against externally set targets (Greaney and Higham 2018). Glatter (2009) and Greaney and Higham (2018) argue that the autonomy of academies has to be interpreted in the context of increased upward accountability to central government, and other bodies like the Regional Schools Commissioner. Full academisation for all schools that remain under Local Authority control remains an objective for the government. In a speech to the Confederation of School Trusts on 28th April 2021, Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for education, called for increased momentum on the journey to make all schools part of a family within a strong Multi Academy Trust.

Many critical academics disagree with the Academy policy for reasons outlined in more detail in section 2.5.1 arguing that it represents the valourisation of market forces favoured by neoliberalism and simultaneously threatens local democracy (Gunter 2011, Courtney 2015, Wilkins 2020). This creates a difficult context for the exploration of socially just practice. Nevertheless, Academies have also been cited as places where it is possible to develop approaches to education that resist the overall move to reduce education to instrumental schooling Glatter (2020).

Social justice and democracy in education

The purpose of this section is to outline the issues that need to be considered to arrive at a critical definition of social justice. The description of neoliberalism in section 1.2 has made clear that market preferences and understandings currently shape policy. These understandings extend to definitions of social inequality and solutions to injustice. Any critical analysis comes in this context and includes an exposition of neoliberal definitions of social justice.

Definitions of social injustice and preferred solutions have long ceased to be the purview of the critical scholar or the political left. Furthermore, academics, policy makers and educationalists across the spectrum are united in their belief that improved educational outcomes, however these are formulated, have the potential to reduce social inequality (Connell et al 2012). However, conflicting and conflicted underlying philosophies translate these beliefs very differently into policy and practice (Apple 2015).

In advanced neoliberalism, social justice agendas are managed through the marketisation of public life with the neutral and effective distribution and redistribution of resources (Hammersley-Fletcher 2009), and the reward of effort and the positioning of public services to support individuals to realise their full potential (Sellar and Zipin 2018). In this way, individual productivity is maximised, wealth is increased and subsequent economic growth ensured. The dominant purpose of education has become to produce human capital for global knowledge economies (Sellar and Zipin 2018). Furthermore, these purposes shape identities. The performativity agendas of the quasi market place,

centralised and internalised, prompt students and teachers to realise their human capital potential, developing the skills and attributes that make them fit for economic need (Apple 2015, Ball 2017). Spohrer et al (2017) argue that concept of the relation of exchange predominant in the classical liberal world has been superceded by the emergence of a calculating self. Individuals maximise their human capital in pursuit of a chosen future. In the education sphere, this move is reinforced by discourses that make the individual the locus and agent of social change and improvement (Spohrer et al 2017). Schools become the sites of the creation of individual identities predicated on an appreciation of ourselves as human capital (De Lissovoy 2014, Spohrer et al 2017, Sellar and Zipin 2018). Furthermore, as crises and developments emerge in neoliberalism, the search for limitless human capital extends into the affective realm and creates new agendas for curriculum, pedagogy and school organisation (Sellar and Zipin 2018) and for leadership practices to lead and improve our schools (Fielding 2001).

Neoliberal motifs of social mobility and meritocracy underpin the notion of human capital, where hard work is rewarded with success in the job market. Reay (2012a, 2012b) arguing that the claims of social mobility are false, describes how its definitions have been distorted and exaggerated by the constant re-designation of job role without any attendant improvement in terms and conditions. Sellar and Zipin (2018)argues that the result of the link between reward and effort allows enough movement between social classes to maintain the mirage. Furthermore, the universality of meritocracy is illogical as, by definition, meritocracy can only work if it is not universal: it is intrinsically elitist as it can only be reached by some. Most importantly, it does nothing to challenge the very hierarchical structures that reinforce economic and social inequality (Reay 2012, Sellar and Zipin (2018).

Neoliberal understandings of inequality and the potential of school in addressing it overlook or even deny the importance of context. Lupton and Thrupp (2013) suggest this might be from a fear that a focus on those issues particular to a school might be used as an excuse for low student outcomes, or because they reveal or represent sites that demand transformation and contradict current policy.

Critical analysis offers the opportunity for a definition of social justice that is composite in description and understanding. The post-structuralist tradition suggests that injustice is materially enacted but that it is also discursive and so changes across place and time. This requires an ongoing consideration of what constitutes inequality (Brown et al 2013). Fraser's (1985) composite definition comprises cultural and political inequality alongside material maldistribution but she acknowledges additional sites of disclosure over time. Just as injustice is practiced, transmitted and exercised historically, so is the struggle for equality a material process (Fraser 2008). Mills (2015) add a fourth field when they include the affective realm as a discrete area of consideration, where care as a public good has implications for our understanding of educational inequality (Mills et al 2015). Sellar and Zipin (2018) argue that neoliberalism has extended into the affective arena in search of capital to exploit. It is therefore, helpful to consider how affective relations might constitute work in their own right. They should be treated, not as social derivatives subordinate to economic political or cultural relations, but as separate productive, material relations that demand resource and energy for their initiation and sustenance and that constitute people emotionally, physically and socially (Lynch 2007, Cantillon and Lynch 2017). What is more, these relations, are fundamental to the human condition, human becoming and human flourishing and so are directly relevant to the purpose of education (Mills et al 2015). They serve as a representation of the reality of human interdependency (Mills et al 2015). Mills et al state it is the job of school to use their structures and processes to demonstrate to young people that they care about them. This is particularly important where young people need support in sustaining their engagement with education because it appears irrelevant to them. This may be the case when it refuses to acknowledge their culture, values or knowledge and fails to use these to transition young people to the formal knowledges that bring success in exams and the workplace. Dress codes, timetables, curricula and learning approaches are all potential sites of alienation for students who do not fit the stereotype of the perfect student, compliant and listening (Reay 2008, Mills et al 2015, Reay 2013). Mills et al's (2015) argument also challenges the idea that all disengaged students benefit from vocational courses that should avoid academic rigour (Mills et al 2015). Once we accept that the above are sites for potential inequality they also become sites for possible solutions where a combination of affirmative and transformative approaches bring about social change.

For the critical scholar the origins of social injustice are structural in nature with varied and dynamic consequences, disclosed as they are through historic social activity (Fraser 1985). However, critical approaches to addressing inequality are complex and academics do not agree on the what constitutes a critical solution. Fraser describes transformative approaches that seek to question, deconstruct and restructure the underlying generative frameworks that create unequal social arrangements (Fraser 1985). Neoliberal descriptions of the origins, consequences and solutions to social inequality are what Fraser describes as affirmative in tone and content in that they focus on correcting the inequitable outcomes of social arrangements (Fraser 1985). In education these include closing gaps, levelling up and, after the recent pandemic, catching up (Reay 2020). Wright (2010) argues that the technologies of neoliberalism are so advanced and complex that the critical practitioner may need to build the cultural conditions for transformative approaches before they can be enacted and this might require affirmative measures in the meantime. This argument is strengthened by Lumby (2012) and Lumby and Coleman (2016) who argue for a use of affirmative methods whilst foregrounding transformative approaches because of the ways we are constrained by and have to operate within neoliberal discourses even as we attempt to subvert and challenge them (Lumby 2012, Lumby and Coleman 2016). In this context the suitability of affirmative approaches can be measured by the extent to which they can prefigure transformative cultures and create the conditions for them (Wright 2010). In schools this has particular relevance for educational offer, or student provision where the idea of what constitutes an education has been significantly narrowed in pursuit of successful exam performance (Fielding 2001, Ball 2012, Apple 2012, Fielding and Moss 2011, Lupton 2021). A disregard for school contexts means the more socially challenged a school, the more narrowed the educational offer when resources and energy are focused on the exam prize (Lupton 2001, Fielding and Moss 2011, Lupton 2021). In this way, the very children and students who would gain most from school provision, values, and processes, that build social and cultural capital, are least likely to be in a school where they might benefit from them (Lupton 2001, Lupton and Thrupp 2013, Lupton 2021).

The relationship between affirmative and transformative approaches is overlaid with issues of professional identity for the critical practitioner. The constant framing and reframing of the identity of the education professional in a neoliberal context creates tensions for individuals and schools who try to resist educational motivations and

purposes they do not agree with (Sellar and Zipin 2018, De Lissovoy 2018, Hammersley-Fletcher 2018). Identity formation is such that teachers and leaders find themselves measuring their professional practice against the very benchmarks they disagree with (Spohrer et al 2018). The context is further complicated for the critical practitioner because for over 40 years neoliberal policy has been presented as the common sense response to failure. Within this the privatisation of all public services is the only solution (Apple 2015, Ball 2017). This makes it difficult for teachers and leaders to find a language to describe their contexts and their attempts to build alternative practices (Fielding and Moss 2011).

Braun et al (2011) argue that a consideration of school contexts can develop a richer understanding of the origins of inequality and, therefore, a more developed view of potential solutions. For the critical academic they are also more reflective of a reality where all policies are enacted in material conditions and set against existing cultures and priorities (Braun et al 2011). Describing a range of contextual indicators, from internal staff and leadership attitudes and capacities to external pressures of budget and accountability can give a richer insight into injustice origins and identify common characteristics that can be typified and resourced (Braun et al 2011, Thrupp et al 2013). In this way understanding school context, or school composition, enhances rather than inhibits improvements at a local level (Thrupp et al 2013) and can highlight policy failures and inform change (Braun et al 2011).

The consequences of disaggregating theory from practice in critical approaches has long been explicated (Freire 1968, Apple 2015), but a resurgent concern argues that critical approaches have become increasingly preoccupied with the deconstruction of the origins of inequality and less keen to proffer reconstructed alternatives (Francis 2017, Apple 2015). This leaves a vacuum that new allegiances on the right have exploited (Francis and Mills 2012, Apple 2015, Francis 2017). Therefore, critical approaches to social justice must begin with an unfailing optimism that things can be better (Fielding and Moss 2011, Lumby and Coleman 2016). What is more, they must provide the opportunities for educational professionals to constantly revisit purpose, where human flourishing in the context of the common good reframes and reclaims our professional purpose and identity. Issues of human becoming have been shunned in the new performativity agenda

but are key to deciding what education is for and should look like (Fielding 2007, Apple 2015). Schools can and do reflect society (Singer 2003). An acknowledgement of this is implicit, even in the critical arguments that schools simply reproduce social inequality (Francis et al 2012, Reay 2012). Schools prepare young people for a future post school, but they are a constituent component of society in the present for the students and adults who comprise the learning community and for the multiple stakeholders who interact with them. To this extent they not only prefigure society but can model alternatives in the present (Fielding 2004, Griffiths 2012, Apple 2015). Where schools have value in the present, education is intrinsically relevant to the human project and so the material, affective, cultural and political experiences and opportunities for everyone connected to the school setting are important (Griffiths 2012, Lumby and Coleman 2016, Reay 2016). For the future, collective advancement takes precedence over the aggregation of individual capital exchanges in the economy and schools are "premised on the maxim that good education is the democratic right of all rather than a prize to be fought over (Reay 2016: 328). Education becomes a cornerstone, along with properly paid work, of a dignified life and happiness does not require that we rise socially (Brown 2013).

Finally, critical academics have argued for the importance of democracy in education and its centrality to social justice agendas in schools but they have also argued that we need to redefine the definitions and the ways it is used in education and in society more widely (Dewey 1939, Biesta 2007, Fielding 2012a, Fielding and Moss 2011, Hammersley-Fletcher et al 2018, Sant 2020). Our understandings and uses of democracy have narrowed in tandem with our definitions of education purpose (Biesta 2019). In pursuit of neoliberal agendas, education has been reduced to securing high outcome performance, as measured nationally and increasingly internationally, so that individual students can successfully exchange their qualifications in the employment market for national economies to benefit (Biesta 2019). In service of the same agendas, democracy is seen as a contributor to wealth creation and, like education, it promotes understandings of personhood that celebrate greed and acquisitiveness (Biesta 2019). Biesta (2007) has traced the public's waning interest in procedural or deliberative democracy, the notion of representation via free and fair elections, as it struggles to respond to the problems of the modern world and serves the interests of elites (Biesta 2007). De Groot (2014) argues that democracy as a political system, as in its processes, norms and arrangements, needs revitalising by the very democratic culture that creates the conditions for its operation

and which it seeks to affect (De Groot et al 2014). Reay (2016) argues that democracy has been side-lined from the mainstream education debate, taken over by concerns with global competitiveness and a belief that economic growth is the answer to social inequality (Hammerlsey-Fletcher et al 2018, Reay 2016). Where it does have a role in policy, concerns are limited to social cohesion, citizenship as compliance and voter participation (De Groot et al 2014). Sant argues for the link of democracy to and for education for a number of reasons. First, because a socially just education system must be premised on the maxim that a good education, where individual flourishing and the concern for the common good go hand in hand, is a basic democratic right (Reay 2006) Second, because if we accept that schools have a contribution to make to social justice agendas (Apple 2006, Ball 2013, Reay 2016), citizenship and democracy can undermine the neoliberal project in a range of ways given their intrinsic relevance to and connection with education (Biesta 2007, Apple 2018, Ball 2013, Fielding 2011, Sant 2020). Third, because democratic practice in education? can build a social reality that offers an alternative to neoliberal social arrangement underscored by a more equitable distribution of power.

Broader or thicker understandings are key to shaping opportunities for practices in schools that might offer alternative understandings and purposes of democracy, citizenship and, education (Fielding and Moss 2011, De Groot et al 2014, Sant 2020). These understandings define democracy as a way of living together and activity where communities find solutions to shared problems. In this way they underpin the opening premise of this thesis, that human flourishing and the common good are connected. We can only understand ourselves as individuals and democratically inclined individuals by being a member of a community where collective problems are debated and resolved for the common good (Dewey 1939, Hargreaves 1982, Fielding and Moss 2011). Fielding and Moss (2011) argue for participative, deep or radical definitions that make democracy a mind-set, an attitude to how we live and work together, instantiated in their explication of dialogical practices and supported by building the climates and cultures that give rise to and allow such practices (Fielding and Moss 2011, De Groot et al 2014). With their potential to create epistemic and existential agency, these participative approaches also address issues of distribution, viewing democratic engagement as an intrinsic not an earned right and concerned as they are with inclusion in all its forms (Biesta 2007, Fielding and Moss 2011). Furthermore, their problematisation of the concept of

democracy exposes the way it interacts with power to expose networks and interest groups that use it for its own end (Fielding and Moss 2011). Approaches that consider democracy a way of living and working together are contested because democracy is created in its very debate and enactment. Practice stemming from these definitions of democracy becomes a key tool in addressing social justice agendas in schools. It places democracy at the heart of attempts to build alternatives in the present and pre-figure more socially just future practice (Fielding and Moss 2011, Fielding 2012). Hammersley-Fletcher et al (2018) argues that agnostic understandings also enhance our use of democracy. Agonistic understandings are influenced by post-structuralist and constructivist philosophies where meaning is made in communities and genuine learning has unpredictable outcomes (Hammersley-Fletcher et al 2018). Biesta (2007) argues that it is a space to develop agency and Sant (2020) that it values a plurality of voices because it recognises disagreement and conflict. Participative definitions provide opportunities to subvert and challenge hegemonies and build cultures of consent (Fielding and Moss 2011). Agonistic approaches value conflict and difference of opinion (Sant et al 2021). They extend beyond the participative because they use structured opportunities for disagreement that allow for consent but 'recognise a plurality of voices' (Hammerlsey-Fletcher et al 2018: 7). A summary of the discussion so far would be helpful here.

Improving schools in a neoliberal context

This following section offers an explanation of what is meant by 'improving schools 'in this research so that the analysis of the findings can explore participant school improvement practices. An understanding of what it means to improve a school requires a critical understanding of the range of strategies, approaches and policies that have been developed over time. It is also necessary to understand the capacity and potential of these approaches to contribute to social justice agendas by using practices that could be called democratic (see s.2.4 above), but it is also important to consider the potential for these practices in the Academies context. The following description focusses specifically on those approaches to improving the quality of education employed by school leadership teams within a single or group of schools. It precludes a consideration of the structural changes that English policy makers have made to the school system to improve educational quality.

2.1.1 School Effectiveness and School Improvement

There is contestation about the origins and purposes of, and relationships between, the early approaches to improving schools which began to emerge from the early 1970s (Woods and Brighouse 2013). Reynolds argues that they developed in reaction to the predominant explanations of educational inequality of the time (Reynolds 2006). On the one hand, psychological models focused on those attributes of learners that it was believed most affected success. Referred to as the 'student dowry', 'attributes included: personality traits; family support; prior attainment; measurable, fixed intelligence (Sammons 1999, Harris and Bennet 2001) On the other hand, sociological models stemming largely from Marxist traditions identified school as a tool of social reproduction that reinforced unequal social relationships and unable to affect social change in any positive way (Reynolds 2006). For critical academics these early approaches to improving schools were the direct result of the neoliberalisation of schooling where the new managerial discourses of leadership and performativity were employed in the pursuit of market agendas and privatisation (Apple 2001, Ball 2003).

Two approaches developed, School Effectiveness[5] and School Improvement, that quickly became indiscernible but it is possible to identify some common themes that differentiated them (Hopkins 1990, Hargreaves 1991, Stoll and Myers 1998, Reynolds 2006).

Research- or evidence-based School Effectiveness highlighted variability in student outcomes across comparable settings. A flourishing of school-based research projects tried to identify the characteristics of effective schools as they presented themselves in elements of the organisation like school leadership, vision, learning environment, relationships, pedagogy, subject knowledge, student tracking, and engagement student outcomes (Hopkins 1990, Hargreaves 1991, Stoll and Myers 1998, Reynolds 2006). In the landmark publication 'Fifteen Thousand Hours', Rutter (1982) analysed a broad range of school characteristics over several years and tied them to pupil success. Equally influential was 'The School Effect: A study of Multi Racial Comprehensives, 'where Smith and Tomlinson (1990) argued that the school setting was responsible for up to 25% of variability between comparable students and schools.

[5] School Effectiveness (SE) and School Effectiveness Research (SER) were often used interchangeably.

Process based, School Improvement developed in response to School Effectiveness and focused specifically on improvement practices (Fielding 1997). School Effectiveness claimed to focus on what observers might see in the classroom and across the school, at a single moment in time. School Improvement argued for a focus on activities and strategies that might bring about improvements over time and lead to better outcomes (Fielding 1997, Reynolds 2006). Furthermore, they expressed an interest in the kinds of cultures and contexts that might best give rise to such practices (Fielding 1997). Initiatives and projects flourished that developed key school processes like school-based reviews, student engagement, staff training, development planning and work with external partners (Hopkins 1990).

Hargreaves (2001) argues for an additional layer of differentiation between School Effectiveness and School Improvement where School Effectiveness is the work done by a school leader to achieve good outcomes and School Improvement is the culture and capacity building that allows these outcomes to become embedded. In practice, School Effectiveness and School Improvement approaches borrowed from each other and overlapped so that even their respective names were often seen in combination (Bennet and Harris 2001, Reynolds 2006, Woods and Brighouse 2013). While their relative purposes and their successes are debated, what is agreed is that key movements and initiatives quickly synergised and became indiscernible from each other so that terms like effectiveness, effectiveness research, and improvement, used simultaneously and even synonymously (Sammons 1999, Reynolds 2006, Brighouse and Woods 2013).

Thrupp (2001) argues that early proponents of these new approaches to improving schools saw themselves as optimistic agents who believed that schools can change young people and in doing so change society. The critical concern with these approaches is their refusal, from the outset, to problematise what constitutes an effective education (Fielding 1997, Thrupp 2001). The proponents of these approaches were keen that these approaches were adopted officially, so that they could become widespread. Therefore, practitioners refused to acknowledge an epistemological position or that notions of effectiveness are discursively constructed (Fielding 1997). In this way proponents colluded with and promoted the taken for granted presumptions of neoliberal policies where the good school is characterised by market priorities and served by performativity

measures (Fielding 1997, Gewirtz 1998). Questions of what constitutes quality were ignored (Gewirtz 1998). Furthermore, Hopkins (1990) argues that questions about whose interests are served by research recommendations were ignored. Ultimately, the concepts of school improvement and effectiveness closed down debate and contestation about the purpose of schooling (Fielding 1997).

A narrowing of school purpose was accompanied by narrowing measures of success which were reinforced by the introduction of market competition into the school system (Gewirtz 1998). This encouraged School Effectiveness and School Improvement to provide simply recognisable characteristics and practices that could be transferred and replicated quickly and easily between settings (Fielding 1997, Gewirtz 1998). Schools, anxious not to be cast as failing, engaged with the re-defined purpose of schooling and initiatives to achieve it (Fielding 1997). Stakeholder reinforcement of and concern with these narrow outcomes added additional pressure on schools to conform (Ball 1998, Gewirtz 1998).

These recognisable characteristics became conflated with the cultures and practices needed for achieving them (Sammons 1999). These characteristics and an exaggerated belief in the ability of schools to affect educational outcomes resulted in a rejection of and then a denial that structure inequality played any part (Gewirtz 1998). This lead to a belief that the only acceptable explanation for student failure in schools was poor teaching and leadership (Hargreaves 1980, Thrupp 1988, Fielding 1997) which, in a context of school competition, reinforced the growing culture of blame and division where, “if only teachers could get a proper professional grip on themselves, then schools could reduce inequality, provide unlimited opportunity and reverse the declining national economic competitiveness for which they are largely responsible. “ (Fielding 1997: 13). Success or failure became the responsibility of individual student, teacher and school leader (Fielding 1997, Ball 2003, Hammersley- Fletcher 2009).

2.1.2 Official School Improvement and technologies of performativity

The marketization of education in England has been accelerated by subsequent governments (Glatter 2012). Gradual but deliberate changes in policy, culminating in the introduction of the national curriculum and the development of school subject leadership meant that by the late 1990s education policy in England was dominated by neoliberal policy and its enactment, where schooling is directly tied to economic growth and

international competition (Fielding 2004, Thrupp 2006, Ball 2013). Reay (2012a, 2012b) argues that the new Labour government of 1997 significantly increased the funding available to schools that served the most disadvantaged students through a whole range of initiatives including city challenge, literacy and numeracy strategies and education zones. However, it retained the conviction that increased student outcomes were the solution to educational inequality and that in turn this would lead to a more prepared workforce. The accompanying belief that increased aspirations and exam success would contribute significantly to the reduction of social inequality more broadly maintained and deepened the trajectory to narrowness in school purpose and provision (Reay 2012a, 2012b). To drive up student standards, policy used the evidence base of School Effectiveness and the practices of School Improvement, including models of shared leadership and collaborative team working, to create Official School Improvement (Ball 2005, Connell et al 2009, Gunter 2013).

These developments came within the broader context of wide scale public sector reform which saw an increased adoption of competition and privatisation as solutions to perceived inefficiency. These were accompanied by a whole-scale culturing and training of staff in improvement technologies hitherto associated with industry and now labelled as New Public Management, (Gewirtz 2000, Connell et al 2009). Emulating the private sector, leadership was seen as key in the articulation and delivery of the technologies that would bring about greater efficiencies (Connell et al 2009).

The manager was seen as the central figure in public sector reform and its marketisation. Known as the New Managerialism, leadership models and narratives designed to engineer these changes were underpinned by nationally driven professional development (Gewirtz 2000, Ball and Youdel 2007). Initiatives to improve schools reflected these developments so that all improvement approaches came to reflect business models, de-contextualise practice, ignore local and structural explanations of social inequality, and make universal claims about what works (Glatter 2009). All approaches to school improvement become de-politicised, reflecting the development across all public life, even though any practice that includes the assignment of resource is political by definition (Apple 2011). Policy makers identified middle and senior school leaders as instrumental in raising student standards for this agenda and so new school roles and structures emerged supported by national programmes for school leadership alongside

increased accountability and regulation (Hammerlsey-Fletcher 2009). Performativity, the technologies of measurement which describe the judgements, targets, and comparisons linked to the successful adoption of pre-determined packages of knowledge or skills, supported this trajectory (Ball 2013). These technologies, underpinned by surveillance, monitoring, audit cultures, rewards and incentives, served to increasingly control professional performance by providing the language and practices that shape professional identities and goals (Strain 2009, Hammersley-Fletcher 2015). In this way, performativity changes the focus of education, redefines professional roles and relationships, and replaces cultures of commitment with discourses of contract (Strain 2009). Furthermore, these changes, and the performativity agendas they promote, create anxiety, tensions and ethical conflicts for the educator where personal motivations and values conflict with those of performativity and its end goals (Ball 2013, Hammersley-Fletcher 2015).

Identity is multiple and plastic, hence the need for complex narratives and technologies to shape, embed and reproduce performativity (Strain 2009). Strain differentiates between 'performance 'which aims to shape the educational professional into a technician whose job, devoid of creativity, is to deliver pre-determined knowledge and 'performativity, 'the loci of choice and creation where professionals can subvert and mediate technologies and create new practices (Strain 2009). Hammersley-Fletcher (2015) describes one such locus in her research on how English headteachers employ a range of techniques to navigate increasing accountability practices. They work to protect their versions of 'good 'education in the face of neoliberal demands that they prioritise the contribution education makes to the economy in an increasingly regulated context. (Hammersley-Fletcher 2009).

Privatisation, performativity and regulation became overlaid with new structural solutions to educational inequality that created a complex landscape, difficult to navigate (Hammerlsey-Fletcher 2009). Glatter (2021) describes how the tendency to privatise was also expressed in new structural solutions to student underachievement. The Academies policy of 2000, outlined in detail in section two, allowed individual schools or groups of schools operating as a Multi-Academy Trust to operate as charities independent from their Local Authority under a direct funding agreement with central government (2012). For Glatter (2012) this valourisation of independence narratives was a tendential

development of English education resulting from an insistent preference for Independent Schooling amongst policy makers. Gewirtz (2001) argues that Blair's education policy focused on those specific attributes of Independent Education that it believed made them more successful, namely their governance, responsiveness to family requests and successful branding, and focused on ways to bring publicly funded schools. What is more, Gerwitz (2001) argues this move was part of a wider government strategy to address social inequality by promoting middle class values to make everyone middle class and thus eradicating the working classes all together.

2.1.3 Competition, accountability and the School Self-Improving system

Belief in the superiority of marketised approaches to school improvement in England, coupled with the insistent admiration of the Independent Education sector, continued to be apparent in education policy under the Coalition government of 2010, the Conservative government of 2016 and the current Conservative government elected in 2019 (Glatter 2021). The common-sense idea that schooling exists to increase economic productivity also continues, but it is now described as the main source of this productivity and exam outcomes are still seen as the clearest indication of its success (Baxter and Floyd 2019, Wilkins 2020). As the neoliberalisation of schooling has developed in complexity, policy has intensified competition and collaboration, and overlaid it with the rhetoric of autonomy and accountability, two pairings popular in the commercial sector (Wilkins 2020). Wilkins (2020) also argues that policy makers believe that these specific market approaches must be used to shape the methods for improving services as they will most effectively close the achievement gap in education (Wilkins 2020). Furthermore, Glatter (2009) also argues that these values are accompanied in policy by an ideological commitment to transfer public service expenditure to the private sector which it believes can more successfully deliver these approaches. This also gives the misleading impression that public service expenditure has been cut substantially in a move that addresses the anxieties of the right about the expensive top down improvement approaches of previous governments, whilst simultaneously serving to reduce the power of Local Authorities over education (Glatter 2021). Notions of competition and collaboration, independence and autonomy, and an intensification of privatisation have been brought together in the concept of the School Self-Improving System. Hargreaves argues that the 2010 policy that introduces this concept (DfE 2010 para 7.4) claims that it is not governments who should

improve the system but schools themselves (Hargreaves 2014). Hadfield and Ainscow (2018) argue that the policy sees strengthened collaborative links between schools in the competitive quasi market as the way to provide the mutual support and challenge that will lead to improved outcomes for students. Claeyes (2014) et al argue that the policy has been influenced by the success of the London and City challenges in reducing the attainment gap between Free School Meals and non-Free School Meals students, and so it believes that local solutions are best for localised issues in, what the policy claims is, a more cost effective way.

Glatter (2021) argues that in current policy, competition is served by an intensification of diversification and privatisation which are seen as key levers in the success of the School Self-Improving System and come together in the rapid acceleration of the Academies policy and the new policy of Free Schools, schools established by local community and parent interest groups free of Local Authority control (Glatter 2021). The current intensification of this trend has resulted in 11 types of school in England with different purposes and governance structures (Courtney 2015). Furthermore, the current government has stated its aim that every locally maintained school should transfer to independent academy status (Baxter and Floyd 2019). This heterogeneity, increasingly complex and unconnected, has led to a school system that is not just diverse but fractured (Glatter 2021.) Yet social inequality has increased as the school sector has diversified (Glatter 2021). There is little evidence that competition has improved outcomes for Free School Meals students and school-to-school variation is excessive (Baxter and Floyd 2019, Glatter 2021, Wilkins 2020, Lupton and Hayes 2021). This is because diversification in school type has created local status hierarchies so that some are influential, well networked and able to attract excellent staff, while others become isolated and struggle to recruit. This creates a local community of winners and losers (Greaney and Higham 2018). In this context, collaboration happens only when leaders consider it no threat to their status and ability to get or stay ahead of others and any previous trust between school leaders has been eradicated as they compete for staff and students. Heads fight for survival or seek advantage in a local market place (Rayner, et al 2018). Any co-operation is complex and unstable because it is also self-seeking (Boyask 2018). Excellent teaching and leadership continue across these networks and some leaders, including of Academies, have found creative ways to navigate this diversity and retain integrity of purpose, but distributional equity is undermined by a system

framework that is inherently unfair and can never provide solutions to social inequality (Glatter 2021). What is more, the system encourages a focus on the survival of individual schools within a competitive network even at the expense of the individual student so that curricula are amended to attract preferred students and those that threaten school success are removed from the school roll (Glatter 2021). There is also evidence that the more diverse a local or national school system, the more segregated the wider community becomes (Godard 2013, Ainscow 2016, Glatter 2021).

This hierarchy of status is overlaid with the arbitrary award of funding for school improvement. Multi Academy Trusts are expected to become local providers of school improvement alongside new centrally funded school improvement delivery arms like the teaching schools and hubs and local and national leaders of education (Greaney and Higham 2018). Policy describes how, in a context of competition, they will collaborate and build local partnerships to improve mini-systems (DfE 2012, Glatter 2021). A disparate school system is further complicated by a lack of advice on how schools might manage the conflicting requirements to co-operate while simultaneously competing to improve their schools (Hargreaves 2014, Hadfield and Ainscow 2018, Glatter 2021. Glatter (2021) points out that there has been no accompanying guidance on how collaborations might work in this context to improve outcomes for students. Furthermore, there is an absence of guidance on how schools with different governance structures, i.e. Local Authority maintained schools; stand-alone Academies; Free Schools; Multi-Academy Trusts; might collaborate across a local area and work with the Local Authority which still retains responsibility for the commissioning of new school places (Greaney and Higham 2018, Glatter 2021). This lack of clarity about the dynamics, cultures and structures needed to shape and support a School Self Improving System has led to contradiction and incoherence in the English school system (Hargreaves 2014).

Current government policy sees increased school autonomy in combination with competition and collaboration as successfully driving the Self Improving System (Wilkins 2020). In practice the rhetoric of autonomy and independence operate within the growing centralisation of every aspect of education policy which in turn defines and determine its exercise (Glatter 2012, 2021, Wilkins 2021). Glatter (2021) argues that the real purpose of independence narratives are to encourage schools to separate themselves from the perceived hierarchical bureaucracy of Local Authorities and any

resultant autonomy is actually operational. Wilkins (2020) argues that newly acquired, independent, autonomous powers are intended to be exercised in the delivery of the strategies, policies and purposes laid down by central government which mandates the forms of evaluation by which this delivery shall be judged. Virtually devoid of scrutiny, accountability bodies like Ofsted and the Educational and Skills Funding agency, are used to drive this centralised agenda which is now overseen by Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs). Created in 2014, these roles, covering England in nine regions, are directly responsible to the Secretary for State for Education for every school in England (www.gov.uk). Furthermore, Regional Schools Commissioners make decisions, in private, about the structure and re-brokering of academy schools with little or no parliamentary oversight (West and Wolfe 2020, Wilkins 2020) which Glatter (2021) argues has led to England having a school system more centralised than at any time since 1939. What is more, any actual devolution of power from central to local has seen a transition from Local Authorities to non-state actors i.e. the charities, businesses and interest groups that now run half of England's schools via Multi Academy Trusts and Free Schools (Glatter 2012, 2020; Wilkins 2020).

Glatter (2021) and Wilkins (2021) argue that current policy includes an excessive approach to accountability to provide a sense of coherence a fractured school system. All responsibility for improvement has been devolved to schools and Multi Academy Trusts but all power is held centrally, and this has resulted in the development of an excessive, heightened, high-risk, hierarchical hyper-accountability to which all types of school are now subject. This approach intends to secure centrally directed mandates and elides independence and responsibility (DfE 2010, Wilkins 2020). It is believed that consistency is achieved via a set of standardised performance indicators, chosen for ease of measurement rather than educational relevance and which are decontextualised and largely detached from processes of improvement, further extending and intensifying previous trends in this direction (Glatter 2012, Baxter 2019, Wilkins 2020). These performance measures are used to police the system, not improve or develop it and failure can lead to speedy and definitive intervention (Glatter 2021, Wilkins 2020). But equally they create a context for arbitrary and un-professional exercises of power more broadly. While good accountability works to promote educational aims, this hyper-accountability leads to distorted and hierarchical governance disconnected from the broader purposes of education (Glatter 2012). Furthermore, it promotes reductive school

leadership styles that, rather than increase the autonomy of Heads, limit their professional decision-making and judgement (Glatter 2012, Baxter 2019, Wilkins 2020). And its attempts to develop the practices, instincts and values of the private sector in leaders at a cultural level to bring about school improvement create ethical tensions for many professionals (Wilkins 2020).

Democratic school improvement

Approaches to improving schools have been widely appropriated by marketisation and its associated narratives and technologies in pursuit of neoliberal agendas and, therefore, they reflect neoliberal beliefs about the purpose of education (Stoll and Myers 1998, Gunter et al 2013, Glatter 2021). It is this connection between means and end that also allows social justice agendas to be served by a different approach (Fielding 2012a, 2012b, Apple 2018, 2019). A range of critical academics has consistently invited us to engage in a process of contestation and debate to devise and proffer alternative practices for improving schools that are benchmarked against different definitions of what constitutes quality and purpose (Fielding 1997, Hammersley-Fletcher 2009, Sellar and Zipin 2018, Apple 2019, Sant 2020, Wilkins 2021). They eschew the social efficiency focus on education that has gained ascendency over the last 50 years, where the value of education is how it prepares young people for the job market (Fielding 2012a, Apple 2019). Education should serve the purpose of giving children and young people opportunities to flourish (Freire 1968, 1992, Reay 2012b, Apple 2015, Francis et al 2017, Lupton and Hayes 2021). When this flourishing also gives young people the skills to develop a critical understanding of their world it also serves the common good. It provides a culture that develops their sense of agency to make changes, and in this way education has a direct part to play in the achievement of a more just society (Stoll and Myers 1998, Apple 01, 06b, Fielding 07a, 12b, Lupton and Hayes 2021). The necessity to devise school practices that serve this purpose is seen as more vital at this time than at any point in recent history (Lupton and Hayes 2021). Sant (2020) argues for the connection between democracy and social justice in schools.

Fielding and Moss (2011) have sought to describe specific approaches to practice that are indicative of democratic school cultures. Central to these approaches is a visiting, revisiting, and consideration of educational purpose, locally and nationally (Lupton and

Hayes 2021). When these approaches to practice are applied to school improvement practice, school improvement has the potential to contribute to the building of democracy (Fielding 2012).

School leadership is seen as a key lever in school effectiveness and school improvement (Hallinger and Heck 2010, Lumby 2019). In their review of international literature covering 1980-1995 on the contribution of the Head to school effectiveness, Halinger and Heck (1996) argue that while her impact has been overstated by improvement movements, headship does make a small, but meaningful and significant contribution to the effectiveness of schools. Furthermore, they argue that 'transformational 'approaches have the most impact. Here, school leaders articulate vision and mission, build relationships, make meaning, foster good relationships and communication, and build co-operative and collaborative cultures. They also argue that because the notion of headship is an evolving construct, normative notions of school leadership are often linked to a neoliberal agenda. The reality of leadership is that roles and identities are flexible and can change rapidly (Halinger and Heck 1996). It is therefore, possible to link this type of transformational leadership to democratic practice where it articulates a broader purpose of schooling (Hallinger and Heck 1996, 2010, Fielding and Moss 2011, Hargreaves 2019). Some critical academics go further and argue that school leadership approaches can be developed in ways that build specifically democratic practices that prefigure better models of democracy in wider society (Hopkins 1990, Fielding and Moss 2011, Misfud 2017, Lumby 2019). These entail leaders making a clear link to broader educational purposes, enabling contestation and debate, and building collaborative and reflective cultures that enable shared power and decision-making (Harris 2014). These cultures do not entail the removal of formal team leadership (Vuori 2019) because teams and networks need leaders (Joplin and Crandall 2006). Watson (2013) argues that it is only the formal team leader who can ensure that a commitment to participation and collaboration is preserved. Joplin and Crandwell (2006) argue that that team sharing requires the leader to focus on how to arrange and facilitate partnership and collaboration.

Fielding and Moss (2011) outline three other areas that contribute to the building of democratic cultures. The first is opportunities to engage in issues of relevance to teachers and leaders. The second is a more fluid and flexible approach to team roles. The third is the type of relationships that underpin teamwork.

Collier and Estaban (2000) argue that democratic cultures provide the opportunities for regular shared debate about significant issues that lead to joint decision-making and action. Fielding and Moss (2011) call these opportunities 'radical structures and spaces,' (Fielding and Moss 2011: 74) which provide opportunities to unsettle the patterns and dispositions of presumption that happen within schools. The aim here is to broaden the perspectives and opportunities of members of the community and included here is a permanent unease with hierarchy and a desire to develop approaches that transcend boundaries and invite new ways of working. Fielding and Moss (2011) argue for a permanent and regular participatory democracy that includes spaces for the formal and informal engagement of a range of participants with a particular focus on those that might not normally get heard. Collier and Esteban (2000) argue that this can be ensured by the provision of regular opportunities for constructive conflict to enable mutual influencing and bargaining. Hammersley-Fletcher et al (2018) argue that the way to ensure a plurality of voices is to adopt an understanding of democracy as agonistic so that practice includes opportunities for debate. The constructive disagreement that ensues from these agonistic opportunities mitigates against the risk of 'group thinking' (Fielding and Moss 2011: 74) and values differing opinions.

Bush (2012) argues that a more flexible approach to team roles better reflects the reality of how team work happens because in actuality activity draws on the combined experiences of the team. Gronn (2000) argues that it is their interactions and connection that combine to bring about changes. Fielding and Moss (2011) use Unger's (1998) description of 'role defiance' and 'role jumbling' to define 'radical roles' (Fielding and Moss 2011: 75). Radical roles are exploratory and fluid. Fielding and Moss (2011) also argue for' transparent structures that encourage ways of working that transcend boundaries and invite new combinations and possibilities '(Fielding and Moss, 2011: 74). A genuine collegiality sees exchanges between members of the school community as potential sources of mutual learning, and not just in an instrumental technical sense but in a wider educational sense. Using the engagement of students in student voice as an example they outline a six-stage trajectory of increasing democratic engagement. At its most developed this engagement includes students as knowledge-creators and co-designers in pursuit of the common good. This trajectory aims to address the potential for an increased democratic engagement in the relationship between students and teachers

where there is an unequal power distribution. For this reason it is possible to extrapolate from it for other contexts where there is unequal authority like that between the leader of a team and the team members (Fielding and Moss 2011).

Collier and Esteban (2000), Hartley (2007) and Fielding and Moss (2011) argue that democratic practice requires a reconsideration of relationships. Fielding and Moss (2011) argue that 'radical relationships,' (Fielding and Moss 2011: 79) are less restricted, more exploratory and more openly informed by genuine care and concern. They describe these more unusual relationships as 'restless encounter, 'where we re-see each other as persons not just role occupants (Fielding and Moss 2011: 79). This engenders a greater joy in each other and a greater sense of potential and possibility. Care and knowledge of persons are not used for instrumental purposes. Rather human flourishing is ultimately bound up with our relations with others. We can't properly flourish and learn without them (Fielding and Moss 2011).

Dialogical practice has a particular place in democratic relationships (Collier and Esteban 2000, Fielding and Moss 2011, Misfud 2017). Misfud (2017) argues that dialogical activity is a democratic act in itself as it encourages epistemic agency and the construction of legitimate knowledge. Freire (1992) argues that dialogical activity has the potential to contribute to the civic life of a school and the common good and to undermine oppressive projects which depend on keeping subject and object apart. Fielding and Moss (2011) argue for a 'permanent provisionality '(Fielding and Moss 2011: 79) where opportunities for on-going and continuing dialogue with follow up or feedback are frequent and embedded. These opportunities are extended to all members of the team or community so that they are neither exotic nor elitist. Dialogical practice becomes the way communities live and learn together. Fielding and Moss (2011) argue that meanings are made together and there is openness to new ideas. Woodet al (2004) argues that shared models of leadership are not about relinquishing control of the team and Harris (2014) that the leader needs to retain formal authority to protect the overall direction and culture of the team. However Fielding and Moss (2011) argue that this formal control is accompanied by a willingness to be surprised so that the leader does not insist on control over the final result. Collier and Esteban (2000) and Harris (2014) argue that dialogical activity arranges discussion in a way that resists the cohesive and homogenising tendencies of power to close down debate. Reflexivity helps the leader or gatekeeper of

dialogical activity reflect other own position and manage the power relations within the group (Collier and Esteban 2000, Fielding and Moss 2011, Lumby 2019, Hargreaves 2019). Fielding and Moss (2011) suggest that team facilitators avoid the impulse to control information, re-describe what is said to match to a predetermined outcome, and to be open to criticism and question. In the final count, dialogical activity must link to activity that tackles real issues of concern so that the dialogical practice finds material expression and link to the common good (Fielding and Moss 2011).

Conclusion

This literature review summarises the current research as it relates to the title of this thesis. In this conclusion I will make clear where this project addresses a current gap in that research and what the project intends to add to the field.

Proponents of neoliberal ideologies, which currently dominate our cultural, political and material landscapes, argue that the purpose of schooling is to prepare young people for the workplace (Clark 2020). These proponents believe that the aggregation of individual successes, measured in a school by exam performance, will lead to economic growth and reduce social inequality (Reay 2016). These ideologies are accompanied by technologies that bring about their purposes and aim to persuade the public that they are the only sensible and useful approach to how we run and improve our school system (Glatter 2021). Simultaneously these technologies reflect the very commercial sectors they seek to serve and so in their enactment reinforce the cultures they seek to build (Sellar and Zipin 2018). These cultures are defined by a set of human characteristic that underpin the neoliberal definition of personhood where excessive individualism, acquisitiveness and self-serving greed are key motivators (Gilbert 2013).

Neoliberalism rejects and denies any analysis of social inequality that is structural in nature (Apple 2015) so that where social inequality persists, neoliberal approaches to addressing it focus on what Fraser (1989) calls affirmative measures. These measures comprise compensatory activities that support individuals to catch up with their more privileged counter-parts and compete on a level playing field for work, rather than to recognize and address structural or systemic issues of unequal power, privilege and access. In schools this is characterised by narratives of catch up and closing the gaps (Reay 2020).

For Gunter et al (2013) the Academies Policy in England is a logical extension of neoliberal ideology because it represents an overall move to privatise the education system. When this happens schools are removed from local democratic accountability and the provision of public goods is transferred from the public to the private sector. This makes Academies unlikely or impossible places for the development of democratic and socially just practice (Wilkins 2021).

Apple (2015) reminds us that neoliberalism uses such powerful technologies because the solutions its social inequality are not neutral or common sense as it would have the public believe. Narratives and the identities they support are plastic (Giddens 2020). In addition, Apple (2019) agues that schools play a central part in reproducing or transforming narratives for adults and children which is why there has been such fierce debate over the decades about what schools do and why. Hargreaves (2019) argues that schools have the potential to challenge existing unfair social arrangements by preparing young people to challenge inequality. Fielding and Moss (2011) argue that in addition schools can build alternative social arrangements based on a fairer distribution of power.

Misfud (2017) demonstrates how school leadership can contribute to building these alternative arrangements by replacing models of the hero or charismatic head with distributed or shared approaches that use the conjoint experience of leaders and better reflect the reality of how leadership works. Harris (2014) describes how collaborative or shared approaches to team work can contribute to these alternative arrangements where teams work in mutual respect bound by a common purpose. Collier and Estaban (2000) argue that dialogical practice characterises shared approaches to working and Fielding and Moss (2011) have suggested a range of practices, to which the invite others to add, that are indicative of the dialogical practice. For Fielding and Moss (2011) when these dialogical practices are combined with opportunities for professionals to contest educational purpose, and participative definitions of democracy they can create a democratic school. Finally Wilkins (2021) argues that there are example of where Academies and Multi Academy Trusts have addressed social, cultural and ethical inequalities in their schools while simultaneously addressing narrow performance goals.

The literature tells us that neoliberalism dominates our context and has appropriated many of the approaches to improving schools based on shared and dialogical models of leadership and team (Gunter 2013). This has led many critical academics to refrain from suggesting preferred approaches that might provide a challenge to neoliberal assumptions, purposes and practices (Lupton and Hayes 2021). The literature shows that there are spaces for interruption and subversion and some academics have described ways to do this (Apple 2019). The Academies policy, which is viewed as fundamentally neoliberal by some critical academics, is not seen as a natural or even possible locus for alternatives that might subvert and challenge the very neoliberal context that gave rise to it (Wilkins 2021).

In this context this research will address one under considered area and two new areas of research. Firstly it will explore the extent to which democratic and dialogical descriptions of practice can be applied to school improvement. The literature review demonstrates that there have been repeated attempts to outline approaches where shared leadership and team practices contribute to democratic cultures. Nevertheless, critical academics have been unsuccessful in maintaining an ongoing response to neoliberal practice where they combine an ongoing identification of places of interruption with suggestions or recommendations for preferred practices (Apple 2020). This research intends to identify one such space of interruption and explore the success of preferred practices. Secondly, this exploration will also involve the consideration of a unique school improvement process that has been designed to support collaborative school improvement. Thirdly, it will consider a MAT as a place of interruption and preferred practices and in doing so contribute to the research field on Academies. Lastly the combination of these elements is also unique.

3

Chapter three: Methodology

Introduction

Chapter two, Critical Literature Review, explored the effect of neoliberalism on England's maintained school sector and clarified how the concept of social justice in the research title would be defined. It also traced the development of approaches to improving England's schools over the last 50 years.

Research activity is underpinned by assumptions about reality and the human subject's knowledge of it (Maxwell 2012a). The following chapter outlines what these assumptions are for the researcher so that they can be made clear in the rationale for the tools chosen for the collection and analysis of data. An explication of the philosophical position of the researcher also contributes to the important task of reflexivity so that the reader might make an assessment about the veracity or applicability of the research findings (Maxwell 2012a). In addition, objective five of the research aims to examine the extent to which senior Leaders of the Goodall Schools Trust feel enabled or constrained in their educational purpose, This demands a consideration of human agency and the potential for social transformation. A definition of structure and agency comes in the context of a philosophical position on reality and its existence and our ability to perceive it. Whilst relevant to all social research, these definitions carry double weight for education research when the objectives are linked to questions about the purpose of schools and educational practice (Griffiths 1998). Finally, research that hopes to adopt a critical stance to address issues of social inequality requires a detailed understanding of the nature and operation of power (Griffiths 1998, Maxwell 2012b). Such an understanding will also necessarily be underpinned by assumptions about ontology and epistemology (Maxwell 2012a).

Reality and knowledge

This research will adopt a broadly critical realist approach. As with any philosophical position, there is a range of views and debate about a definitive or specific description of

what constitutes critical realism (Maxwell 2012a). In fact, by its own definition, it refutes the idealism that would make this a simple task and reduce reality to discourse (or practice), and so we would expect to see tensions between the different perspectives of what comprises the critical realist programme as it continues to evolve (Al Amoudi and Al amoudi and willmott 2011). Nevertheless, there is a degree of agreement that proponents share a set of basic tenets (Shipway 2010, Maxwell 2012a). Outlined below are those tenets without which the stance cannot be understood and those of specific relevance to research, educational research and the aims of this project. However, to be understood fully, critical realism should be appreciated in its totality. Any criticisms levelled at specific aspects of it can only carry weight if seen in the full context.

It is neither possible to capture the nuances of various philosophical traditions in a short space nor possible to avoid the problems raised by setting up binary positions (Maxwell 2012a). Nevertheless, the proponents of critical realism argue that their approach is an attempt to navigate the predominant competing perceptions of reality and epistemology (Maxwell 2012a, Scott 2013). On the one hand, the naturalistic realism of empiricism and positivism reduces reality to those things that can be seen and measured. At its logical conclusion, nothing exists that cannot be scientifically proven (Scott 2013). On the other hand, post-modern and post-structural approaches argue for the importance of the subjective, hermeneutics and the mediation of all reality through human perception (Scott 2013). At its logical conclusion, nothing exists beyond what the subject senses. Proponents of critical realism argue that attempts to combine these two do not deal with their inherent contradiction and merely succeed in conflating them (Bhaskar 2014).

Proponents of critical realism describe it as a ‘philosophical under-labourer’. That is, rather than detail a philosophical position it offers a systematic approach to the critical analysis of events, perceptions, attitudes and the properties that give rise to them (Bhaskar 1975a). They also argue that this gives critical realism the flexibility to work alongside a range of research approaches (Maxwell 2012a). Critical realism combines ontological realism with epistemological relativism (Shipway 2010). In addition, by stratifying and differentiating levels of reality, truth, and rationality, it provides a framework for differentiating between competing perceptions or representations of reality. In this way, imperfect but valid value judgements can be made about the relative efficacy or value of a given stance or theory (Shipway 2010) and this is important for

research because although we can never know reality perfectly, mediated as it is by the human subject, we can improve our knowledge of it (Shipway 2010). This is vital if we are to use educational research to inform the ways schools might address issues of social inequality (Griffiths 1998, Maxwell 2012).

A fundamental basis of critical realism is ontological realism, which argues for a world that sits apart from human perception of it. What is more, ontology has primacy over epistemology, as knowing is dependent on being (Bhaskar 2014). The world does not exist because we know it but our knowledge is shaped a particular way because the world exists. The link between realism and ontology is inexorable (Archer 2013, Bhaskar 2014). Bhaskar (1975b) uses the working of society to demonstrate this point. Human activity in society is dependent on the ontological existence of reality outside and preceding any individual. He uses the example of language. As we learn to speak we acquire a means of communication that precedes us and exists apart from us. But the social reality of language only exists because of human activity and could not exist without it. Humans can affect that reality, but more often adapt to it and transmit it. It is because we reproduce it, and sometimes transform it, that we can talk about the emancipatory project (Archer 2013, Scott 2013, Bhaskar 2014). In a rejection of positivism, where real objects and perceptions of them or theories about them are collapsed into one reality, critical realism argues for a stratification that places both objects and perceptions and theories about them into the realm of scientific and social scientific investigation (Bhaskar 2014). It also argues for a third tier of reality, that exists separately from both objective happenings and our perception (or not) of them, and which contains the structures and mechanism that trigger or create objective happenings. Critical realism describes the 'empirical 'which is our human experience of events and actions, or what happens. The 'actual 'contains both our empirical experiences plus the actual objective activities whether we experience them or not. The third level of reality, the 'real', contains not just actual events and our empirical perceptions of them, but the underlying ideological and cultural structures and mechanisms, which exist independently of events, but are responsible for generating them (Bhaskar 2014). A critical realist approach to research allows the uncovering of these mechanisms and an exploration of their interactions (Bhaskar 1975a).

Whilst ontology is comparatively unchanging and exists despite human knowledge or perception of it, epistemology is relative (Bhaskar 2014). All knowledge, theories, ideas and perceptions are mediated and created by the mind. Humility should be exercised in the pursuit and creation of knowledge (Bhaskar 2014). Truths exist but the specific cultural context of statements and beliefs means they are always fallible (Bhaskar 2014). Furthermore, the 'epistemic fallacy' warns against conflating what exists with what we know about it, thus confusing ontology and epistemology (Nunez 2013), and against rejecting epistemologies or knowledge as real. For the proponents of critical realism, theories and explanations are as real as the objects they seek to explain or describe and are inextricably linked to them (Scott 2013, Bhaskar 2014).

A realist ontology is necessary for any engagement with the world but knowledge of this world is relative to time, space and peoples (Bhaskar 2014). However, epistemic relativism does not posit that any one version of reality has equal validity with any other (Scott 2013). Bhaskar (2014) argues that it allows discrimination between opposing theories, providing it has been proven that the theories pertain to the same reality, and others agree (Shipway 2010, Walsh and Evans 2014). There is a range of critical realist frameworks for making decisions about the validity of an explanation. These include judgements predicated on the actual realisation of activity based on our expectations, and judgements influenced by where we can observe consistency across comparable contexts (Rutzou 2017). These frameworks mean that research can provide data and findings that improve our understanding of our experiences at the level of the actual and the forces that give rise to them at the level of the real (Parra 2018).

Structure and agency

The description of the relationship between ontology and epistemology, where the former is foregrounded but inextricably linked to the latter, can be extended to that between structure and agency (Archer 2000). The primary purpose of this research is to explore the extent to which a Multi Academy Trust can serve as a space where school leaders are able to develop school improvement practices that might contribute to social justice agendas. Therefore, a definition of structure and agency and an explication of the dynamic between them is directly relevant. Archer (2000) argues that the concept of structure is key to understanding the ways that professionals are constrained and enabled and Apple (2019) argues that it is the central component in a critical

understanding of social inequality (Apple 2019). The concept of agency is directly relevant to human emancipation (Shipway 2010) and a belief that ordinary people can mount a challenge to unequal social arrangements (Fielding and Moss 2011).

Two types of argument seek to address the relationship between structure and agency so that we can explain how we are sometimes constrained by forces beyond our control and at others we are able to transcend even challenging circumstances. These arguments tend to either reify structural arguments on the one hand or foreground the voluntarism of human agency on the other. Critical realist definitions of structure and agency come in the context of this broader philosophical debate (Archer 2003). Archer et al (2013) simplify the debate to locate the contribution of critical realism.

Within the Cartesian tradition, where mind and body can be equally re-presented as the objective-subjective or the structure-agency duality (Archer et al., 2013), there are two camps of argument. Where there is a philosophical division of structure and agency, one or the other must dominate when pressure is brought to bear on the logic of the perspective. Furthermore, the predominance of one or the other shapes the way the relationship between the two is envisioned (Archer 2003). At one idealised extreme, where agency has the ultimate upper hand, the social world becomes an aggregation of the sum total of individual human efforts. This perspective is useful in defending the autonomy of human activity, and avoiding an overly deterministic view that might logically eradicate human agency all together (Archer 2003). However, its assumption that social processes are identical in kind to individual ones, and nothing more than an expression of human activity, does not acknowledge the power of those forces beyond the individual (Archer 2003, Al-Amoudi and Al amoudi and willmott 2011). At the other end of the spectrum, social or cultural structures and processes predominate in the dualism. There is a clearer understanding of how pressures and opportunities outside of the individual shape choice and life experiences, and there is also the reification of social structure, 'treating it as a "thing" above-and-beyond" agency' (Al-Amoudi and Al amoudi and willmott 2011: 7) with overly deterministic powers.

Both perspectives describe social processes in ways that suggest solutions to social challenges, but neither of them, nor a combination, can offer full enough explanations or description of exactly how they operate relatively (Parra 2018). This point can be

underscored by Parra's (2018) research using imminent critique to demonstrate successive education policy failure in Colombia. Having first demonstrated that, despite fiscal investment and policy innovations, Colombian education had failed to produce better student outcomes over time, Parra outlined what he calls mainstream and non-mainstream approaches to explaining why this is the case. He showed that mainstream descriptions centre around identifying coefficients between resource-based inputs, like quality of teaching and length of school day, and student outcomes. Evident here is the underlying philosophical belief that education policy that redistributes resources can support individuals to overcome constraints in their social contexts. Non-mainstream arguments highlight the omissions in mainstream perspectives given the obvious link between social background and educational success that is clearly evident once individual student scores are correlated to family income. Para (2018) does not exhaust these omissions, his main purpose is rather to show how each argument lacks an internal logic. However, he does highlight how mainstream arguments make no space for the consideration of the effect of global policies and developments on Colombian policy, the relationship of school failure to Colombian historical class configurations, and the historic segregation of the school system. Evident in the non-mainstream perspective is a belief in the power of social and cultural processes to affect individual student achievement.

The contributions and gaps of each approach are obvious to Parra (2018). The mainstream explanation protects the endeavour of the individual and can account for how some students overcome the limitations of background, but cannot explain the insistent correlation between family income and educational achievement. The non-mainstream account recognises the effect of external cultural and social forces on student outcomes but cannot explain why some individuals can transcend context while others are unable to. This case study exemplifies the structure/agency debate. Furthermore, to claim that a simple combination of the two could provide a full explanation is unsatisfactory for Parra (2018). He agrees with proponents of critical realism who argue that such an approach fails to acknowledge and describe the relationship between the forces of agency and of structure, even as the acceptance of such a dualism necessitates such a relationship (Parra 2018).

Archer (2000) argues that some approaches try to transcend the Cartesian dualism to define structure and agency and avoid the predominance of one over the other. She

describes how these approaches replace dualism with an ontologically inseparable structure and agency, homologous and identical in kind. The essential sameness of each means neither could dominate the other, and any reification of structural conditions becomes inconsistent. Furthermore, any exploration of their relationship becomes redundant. The challenge for critics of these standpoints is that the conflation of the realities of agency and structure into one ontology without any irreducible differences and, therefore, any independent power to affect the other, calls into question the very notion of their existence (Archer 1995, 2000, 2003; Willmott 2002; Bhaskar 2014).

It is against this backdrop that critical realism makes its contribution. Archer (2000) argues that critical realism is not alone in arguing that social systems are human constitutions and do not operate in a mechanistic fashion or that individuals do not possess total autonomy of action. She argues that, nevertheless, critical realism makes a unique contribution when it describes the relationship (or methodology) of structure and agency and the ontology and relative and related occurrences on which this methodology is based. Each of these, methodology, ontology and occurrences, have relevance for research design and relate to the specific choice of tools of this project (Willmott 2002).

Structure and agency are connected through the stratified ontology of critical realism (Archer 2000). Persons and structures both possess properties and powers at the real level but the power of structures can only be activated in, and become efficacious through, people. Structural forces emerge from the level of the real and affect individuals at the level of the actual where practice is then contained or enabled (Archer 1995, 2000, 2003, 2007). Archer (2000) avoids any conflation between structure and agency with the introduction of time. She (2000) explains that whilst structures are the result of human agency and can only be enacted in the real and empirical worlds through human agency, they predate any individual. Without this obvious insertion into the description of how structure and agency work in relation to each other, we are left with a causal simultaneity that is illogical to the critical realist (Archer 2003). For Archer, it is because of this temporal priority that we can say structure conditions agency. This conditioning is not the determinism of extreme structuralism; structural forces do not only find expression in the individual - to talk of them without the notion of an agent is meaningless—but they are also mediated by the individual in a fashion that means they are either adopted or amended (Archer 2003). A cycle, or rather sets of connected cycles, exist to connect

structure and agency: structural conditioning (the emergent forces activated by the human project) penetrate the world of the agent in a process of social interaction where they are mediated and feed into future structural activity (activity that comprises either change or acceptance) (Archer 2003). This process highlights the possibilities of creating transformational change in the education setting (Archer 1995, 2000, Willmott 2002, Archer 2003). Ultimately, critical realism presents an analytical, but not philosophical, dualism. Both agency and structure possess the causal autonomy that makes sense of their power to affect each other, however, as separate emergent powers actualised in the empirical world, they can be the objects of social research (Willmott 2002).

Critical realism in education research

Critical realism has been applied successfully to debates in education but it has not been applied as widely as other methodological perspectives (Brown et al 2013). This is specifically the case in relation to school improvement and school effectiveness (Brown 2015). Framed simplistically and broadly, applications of critical realism to the educational context have focused on either applying the theoretical concepts of critical realism to existing debates in areas like curriculum (Poulshock 2011, Brown 2015), or have been used as a methodological approach (Willmott 2002, Brant and Panjwari 2015, Parra 2018). Both theoretical and practical applications demonstrate benefits for this research.

Poulshock (2011) uses critical realism to uncover how a lack of an underpinning philosophy at the level of the real can create tensions and contradictions in practice and decision making. The use of a stratified ontology reveals these contradictions. Priestly (2011) uses Archer's description of agency to explain why sometimes policy and practice initiatives are adopted and other times they fail to take hold. Walsh (2013) argues that the critical realist implications for research methods are multiple. A definition of layered reality invites a more sophisticated understanding of behaviour. Like constructionism, it posits that knowledge is value-laden and constructed in knowledge communities. Therefore, it also allows for the uncovering and challenge of unequal power arrangements as the sources of injustice and can be used with projects that use research to take a critical approach to social inequality. Walsh (2013) also argues that critical realism frameworks for truth mean that research findings can at least be considered for application to other contexts.

Critical realism and power relations

To address the fourth aim of this research, that is, to examine the extent to which the senior leaders of the Goodall Schools Trust feel enabled or constrained in their education purposes, it is necessary to proffer a description of power and power relations. Critical realism describes power relations as emergent properties that constrain and enable both individual and social agency (Archer 2000). The critical perspectives outlined in Chapter Two suggest that the research might also benefit from a more detailed understanding of the nature and operation of power, its origins and practice (Apple 2006a, Ball 2013). The definition of power applied in the research is congruent with the meta-theory of critical realism at least in those areas that are fundamental to the research. Al-Amoudi (2001) argues that despite using a different vocabulary, the meta theory implicit in the work of Foucault does just this (Al-Amoudi 2007). Al-Moudi says that Foucault outlines a stratified reality, recognises ontological realism and commits to epistemological relativism. This gives rise to a belief in the fundamental objectivity of a reality that can be uncovered in open systems, albeit incompletely, given as it is to mediation by the human subject. This makes research worthwhile. Although the human subject is created and constrained by social structures, both are instantiated in her person and interactions, and therefore, she is her revocable and agential (Al-Amoudi 2007, Hardy 2019). Foucault's very description of power and its place within his meta-theory evidences the points of contact between critical realism and his description of power (Ball 2017).

For Foucault power is not a rare commodity to be seized but comprises the fundamental relations between all people at all times where the actions of one modify the range of actions of the other and so on reciprocally (Ball 2013, 2017). Foucault's description of the layered operations of power, mirror critical realism's stratified ontology. At the level of the real, he describes the 'dispositifs', the discursive formations that create the conditions for specific relations of power and dominance to emerge. At the level of the actual, the strategies and apparatus of power are formed, replicated and challenged when and if they emerge from the real. Here the components of power: discourses, institutions and laws combine and coalesce. At the level of the empirical, agents are shaped by, enact and undermine the tactics and technologies of power locally and imminently whether they are conscious of them or not. These layers of power formation

are irreducible to each other and, therefore, are conceptually separate but mutually connected in the actuality of their creation and operation (Al-Amoudi 2007, Hardy 2019).

Ball (2013) argues that Foucault was specific in his insistence that archaeology and genealogy were not theoretical perspectives but practices. This means that any attempt to identify a meta-theory is open to interpretation (Hardy 2019). Despite there being disagreement over specific definitions of these separate processes and how they interact, Hardy (2019) argues they begin with an analysis of our current context then work to strand out the specific and various components of power apparatus. For him, archaeology is the unearthing of past cultures and discourses, including those that are unconscious. This includes an important acknowledgement of the relationship between the material and the discursive where each make the other possible and can affect change in the other (Hardy 2019). Hardy (2019) argues that the purpose of geneology is to uncover the materiality of power relations underlying human interactions, physical spaces and the subjects' responses. In the application of these processes, social relations can be revealed at the levels of the real and actual and, therefore, complete the purpose of this work for Foucault, namely to create a new present (Al-Amoudi 2007, Hardy 2019). Hardy argues that archeology and genealogy also reflect the retroductive approach of the critical realist methodology, and realist research more generally, as they move between what emerges as new knowledge and how this knowledge is subject to the interpretational lens of prior theory. Al-Amoudi (2019) argues that archeology and genealogy comprise analytical processes that develop a deeper and greater understanding of the technologies, strategies and components that collaborate to give dominant groups the power to shape and focus our immanent actions and resources. They also describe how these components influence the environments within which these can operate and be reproduced so that we can take countervailing action . In this way they reflect the critical realist understandings of layered ontology, structure and agency.

Al-Amoudi (2007) argues that Foucault's detailed descriptions of the relationship of power to knowledge is directly relevant to ideas of human agency and the capacity of research. Power and knowledge are materially connected because all knowledge is produced within power relations, and new knowledge can affect power relations in turn (Al Amoudi 2007). In this way, the production of knowledge becomes a claim for power, the power to claim truth and direct resources (Ball 2013, Ball 2017, Al-Amoudi 2007,

Hardy 2019). Furthermore, knowledge has the power to create meaning and purpose. When it is instantiated in the person of the human subject, it affects our individual and collective purposes and meaning as well as the creation of our subjectivity as human beings (Ball 2013, 2017).

This definition is important for the field of public services in general and education in particular, where knowledge is the target of social regulation (Foucault and Rabinow 1997). Its control is fundamental for State operation and is regulated in accordance with the aims of that State. Foucault divides history into analytical epochs so that the significant differences in the trajectories of State power at given times can be tracked. He outlines the importance of the State expert in our current epoch and the expert's role in directing, controlling, administering and judging knowledge. This understanding is directly relevant to the description of neoliberalism outlined in chapter two. It is also relevant to an analysis of the aims of this research that need to explore the place of power in enabling and constraining Senior Leaders at the Goodall Schools Trust, as well as the part played by structural inequality in issues of social justice.

Foucault's understanding of power is also directly relevant to the place agency plays in this research. This social relation of power is not always, or only, one of domination and control but equally has the potential to liberate and empower. It is as necessary for productive activity as it is present in the repressive (Ball 2013, Ball 2017, Al-Amoudi 2007, Hardy 2019). This claim flows from Foucault's understanding of freedom and constraint. He shares the logic of critical realist proponents that while freedom and constraint are conceptually different they must of necessity be materially connected. Just as constraint is only enabled by free actions, so free actions only make sense within some form of constraint (Hardy 2019).

For Archer (2003), culture is connected to the material world via logic and creates the structural conditions which inform the actions of social agents. We have seen how her temporal sequencing of the interaction between human agents and these conditions gives rise to an understanding of their relationship and replaces the binary of structure and agency seen in structural and post-structural meta-theories (Archer 1995). Therefore, we see how both social reproduction and social transformation are possible (Archer 1995, Hardy 2019). Foucault's concept of discourse corresponds closely to Archer's idea of

culture. Its separation from the human subject and its independent operation mirror Archer's meta-theory and further suggests a belief in a layered ontology and epistemological relativity (Hardy 2019). In addition, because discourse shapes but does not control or determine human actions (Foucault and Rabinow 1997), we could argue that the discourses of power reside at the level of the actual where the apparatus of power may or may not be actualised in any given situation.

Ultimately, research is a worthwhile activity. Although we are constrained by the discourse within which we operate (and which even determine our objects of study), discourses have an internal coherence that can be uncovered, however imperfectly, by the processes of archeology and genealogy so that we may create a new present. Constraint is obvious in Foucault's descriptions but agency is equally clear (Al-Amoudi 2007, Hardy 2019). Crucially for this research, both critical realists and Foucault outline a relationship between the material world and the deeper reality of culture or discourse which provides the milieu for social interaction and the practices of power (Hardy 2019).

Conclusion

Critical realists and Foucault share a vision of social life that is comprised of intricately related mechanisms so that subjects are free to adopt, adapt and respond to the components of these mechanisms and in doing so reproduce or transform them. The layered and irreducible nature of social ontology means that subjects do not act in conditions of our own creation. Shaped as they are and affecting as they do the material and cultural conditions of their activity they are simultaneously constrained and enabled to act. For Foucault, the omnipresence of power in all social interaction, and its relationship to knowledge, means that we act, and are created within, a social dynamic of power relations. Powerful interests coalesce around technologies and strategies to shape meaning and control resource and even define who we are and our purposes. In our current epoch the State plays a significant role in this dynamic. Both meta-theories imply retroduction, the identification or problematisation of specific social phenomena particularly those where power is used to further the interests of some at the expense of others. The practices of research or geneology and archeology can unearth and reveal the conditions that give rise to the strategies, technologies and tactics of power, the relationships between them and our part in them so that we can exercise our agency in the influence of our circumstances and the creation of a new present.

The following chapter, chapter four, will outline which tools were chosen for the collection and analysis of data, how they were used, and their congruence with the aims of the research and the philosophical position outlined above.

4

Chapter four: Research Design

Introduction

Chapter Two described neoliberalism as the current social and cultural backdrop for English schools. It has defined the purpose of education as the preparation of young people for the workplace (Sellar and Zipin 2018) and adopts the narratives and market technologies of the commercial sector that it serves. Underpinning neoliberal approaches is a belief in the individual as a competitive, self-improving entrepreneur (Ball and Youdell 2007). For Woods (2007), the logical trajectory of neoliberalism is increased marketisation and privatisation, and in the education sector the Academies Policy is an example of this development. This policy has contributed to the growing number of schools that have been taken away from democratically elected bodies, like local authority councils, and given to interest groups. This shift sees the delivery of public goods transferred to the private sector.

Chapter Two also argues that the ongoing impact of neoliberalism on schools can be interrupted and undermined where democratic and dialogical approaches to improvement build relationships that model more just social arrangements in the present and 'prefigure' fairer relationships in the future (Fielding and Moss 2011: 147).

Chapter Three outlines the contribution to research that critical realism makes as a philosophical under-labourer and what this mean for research design. In this chapter, I will outline the aims of the research and the tools employed for the collection and analysis of data.

The research aims

The title of this research is:

To what extent can a Multi Academy Trust support its senior leaders to use practices to improve their schools that contribute to social justice agendas?

The research intends to reflect critical and realist positions. To do this, the aims of this project will uncover the mechanisms that lead to, and reproduce, instrumentalist school improvement practices, and identify sites for potential interruption of these practices. The research itself will serve as one such site of interruption by engaging participants in knowledge creation. The project argues that instrumentalist school improvement and the education purposes it serves are presented as normative. Therefore, the aims of the research have been constructed in such a way as to demonstrate that there are alternatives to instrumentalist approaches. Finally, the research intends to explore the constraints and enabling forces that affect the potential of these alternatives by collecting the experiences of a group of senior leaders.

The aims of the research are to:

1. Identify the educational purposes of the senior leaders[6] of the Goodall Schools Trust
2. Examine the extent to which these educational purposes might address social justice agendas
3. Explore the extent to which the Goodall Schools Trust senior leaders' practices for improving their schools reflect their educational purposes
4. Consider the influences on these improvement practices and the extent to which they enable or constrain the enactment of their purposes

Approach to research design

Research design should align the tools chosen to collect, analyse and report on data with the methodology and research aims. Before outlining the specific methods used in the project, I will outline the general approach to the design that reflects this methodology and the aims.

4.1.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research approaches reflect the philosophical assumptions on which this research project is built, as they are outlined in Chapter Three. Realist epistemologies argue that while every theory and conclusion is our own construction, shaped and

[6] Senior leaders are defined as the collective body to whom the Goodall Schools Trust Board has delegated responsibility for the strategic direction of the Trust and comprises the Chief Executive Officer, the Education Team, Executive Heads, Heads and Heads of school.

mediated within cultural and social contexts, there is an emergent reality that *can* be known. Qualitative research shares these assumptions in seeking a better and fuller understanding our of worlds (Cohen et al 2002, Maxwell 2012b). For some qualitative researchers, subjectivity is not just unavoidable but, when handled reflexively, is the means by which the researcher enters and develops an understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Hogan et al 2009). Objectivity in any scientific sense is not possible in social research and not desirable. It creates a barrier between the researcher and the data she wishes to collect and interpret. She looks to reduce the distance between herself and the participants for the benefit of increased understandings (Lincoln and Guba 2011). Such understandings remain partial and representative of multiple realities and cannot offer positivist causal relationships. However, they do offer opportunities to propose possible relationships between concepts and practices. Here explanations are based on how some situations and events affect others and therefore, offer potential possibilities for the future (Drauker et al 2007, Maxwell 2012b, Creswell et al 2016). Or they reveal affective mechanisms normally hidden from view and offer alternative ways of seeing that give rise to alternative practices (Biesta 2007).

4.1.2 Interactive research design

The interaction described by Critical Realists between layers of reality, concepts and practices, and any increased understanding that seeks plausible connection between them, is indicative of a wider set of interactions that produce, refine and change meaning. These include the self and context, the self and others and, in the research context, the interaction between me and the participants. The research site itself constitutes an interactive context where the research and researched are affected by, and in turn affect, the research process. This approach also applies to the structure and design of the research process. I intend to structure this thesis in the linear and chronological fashion that conforms to the internationally recognised expectations of a thesis so that it may be judged and compared for rigour and contribution to the field. However, it is an interactive approach to the research design itself that most accurately reflects this philosophical standpoint and most authentically represents how the research has been constructed and conducted. The research title, its aims, questions used in data collection, methods, philosophical concepts and ideas have been developed in interaction, each in dialogue with the other. Just as I entered into dialogue with the academic community, the participants and my supervisors, the ideas in this thesis emerged over a serious of

interactions and iterations between the elements and components of the research process and research site (Maxwell 2012b). The tools for collection and analysis of data have been chosen to reflect and acknowledge this interaction. A good design is one where the components work in harmony to fulfil the intentions of the study and are not prescribed and sequential but inductive and flexible reflecting the process of knowledge creation (Maxwell 2012b).

4.1.3 Research for social justice

The literature review in chapter 2 described social justice as a contested concept and, therefore, definitions of injustice and how it might be addressed are also subject to debate. The struggle over these definitions is the struggle for the type of society we want and represents our beliefs about what it is to be the best versions of ourselves and how these selves come into being (Griffiths 1998). Qualitative researchers do not agree about whether qualitative research has the potential, or should have the potential, to contribute to these debates. For example, Hammersley (1992) believes that the validity of ethnography comes from an inductive process that can only be successful if value free: the researcher should leave her bias and values at the door of the research site and record what she observes from the perspective of the participants. This research however adopts the position that research can and does contribute to debates about social injustice and solutions to address it because research is laden with values. Denzin and Giardina (2009) have comprehensively described the history of the paradigm wars in research and evidenced the link between positivist approaches that argue for objectivity and value neutrality and, neoliberalism. This conflict has culminated in the current preference of policy makers for evidence-based practice, a non-critical, evaluative approach that seeks to find and share successful practices that can be replicated within the framework of current neoliberal thinking (Biesta 2007). Explorations of the structural causes of social activity are disregarded and discouraged in this approach to research so that in the education context the locus for success becomes the individual student, teacher and leader. Current funding favours these approaches so that the combination of dominant narratives and funded opportunities has reduced critical approaches to a point hitherto unknown (Denzin and Giardina 2009).

Critical qualitative research seeks to further understandings of the interactive processes that maintain and alter relationships and the phenomena that affect them (Maxwell

2012b). This inherently critical approach to social conditions, therefore, gives qualitative research the potential to promote social transformation. Research design and research tools can be chosen to foster the emancipation, collaboration and critical reflectiveness that support such social transformation in the research site itself (Griffiths 1998). It is not sufficient to use research to uncover unfair structures and listen to a more pluralist set of perspectives. Critical research must be linked to action if it is to be educational research for social justice and, in the first instance, acknowledge the presence of power in every context (Griffiths 1998, Lennon 2014, Apple 2020). The process of research itself should be examined as a site of power relations, used to expose the taken for granted and explore the social and cultural arrangements that create unjust social conditions. In research design this includes developing a critical approach to the very act of deciding what needs to be examined, applying this to questions, and the research topic itself (Bacchi 2012). The purpose of critical research is not just to interpret the world but change it, find ways to disclose, resist and subvert, disrupt, empower and transform (Griffiths 1998, Denzin and Giradina 2009, Lennon 2014). Lennon (2014) argues that critical perspectives have lost a link to the transformational and they spend their energy on uncovering social and cultural domination without describing instances of resistance. The purpose of this social inquiry is to reveal potential sites for transformation and explore examples of resistance.

Education has the potential to be such a site where we can learn to live good lives, lives that enable us, individually and together, to survive and flourish (Fielding and Moss 2011). We can use schools, a reflection of the wider social order, to address questions of being and becoming, power and decision making, direction and purpose. As a reflection of society, they can be sites to challenge and transform social relations (Counts 1932, Fay 1987, McMurray 2004, Wright 2010, Fielding and Moss 2011, Lennon 2014, Hargreaves 2019, Apple 2020). Schools are not just microcosms of society. The very relationships that mean they are affected by wider social relations also mean they have the potential to affect society in turn, so that in transforming social relations in schools, we affect change in society (Griffiths 1998).

The research process itself also has the potential to be such a site. It can promote or inhibit self-determination and critical reflection. It can foster or repress democratic participation. It can mediate existing social and cultural relations, seeking solutions to

social justice problems within that context, or it can open up notions of democratic participation, descriptions of social justice and the very questions we should ask of the research site, to contestation (Griffiths 1998, Bacchi 2012, Lennon 2014). It can serve to influence the subjective processes by which neoliberal narratives are turning students and teachers into self-improving entrepreneurs (Spohrer et al 2018).

Ethical considerations in research design

A concern for the safety and well-being of research necessitates ongoing ethical consideration (Lincoln and Guba 2011). The interactive approach outlined above contributes to a mitigation of the power inequalities inherent in the participant/researcher relationship due to the privileged position of the researcher. This power inequality is exacerbated in my case by my role as co-founder of the participating Trust and so I used this interactive approach to include participants in discussion about the methods as well as the content and direction of the research. However, this approach leads to an emergent research environment which is more difficult to control and impossible to anticipate. For this reason, I used reflexivity to review any ethical considerations in an ongoing way at every point during the research (Hill and Dao 2020).

Because the participants are known to me, I have tried to balance the generation of new knowledge with the preservation of the confidentiality of the participants and care for their well-being. I have undertaken extensive participant checking and reflexivity at every stage of the research from design, through to data collection, analysis and write up. Given the need to mitigate my position as the co-founder of the Trust and my concern to protect the confidentiality of the participants, I have taken additional ethical measures during the research process which are addressed below in the section on reflexivity. I also applied for, and received, ethical approval from Manchester Metropolitan University (appendix five). It is also possible that participants would recognise each other from the data given that they come from a small group of senior leaders and I outline below in the section on connected communities.

Reflexivity in research design

Reflexivity as a method to navigate and explore positionality needs to be included at each stage of the research process (Hamdan 2009). It can create the space needed for the researcher to confront her own power, position, privilege and biases (Stoudt, Fox and

Fine 2012). It is the place where the researcher engages with the complexities of research by revealing and investigating her motivations for research, and her experiences and actions within the research process (Plummer 2001). Furthermore, it is a useful strategy for dealing with the complicated and varied, multiple identities of the researcher (Lincoln and Guba 2005).

Definitions of what is meant by the insider and the outsider in research vary: the outsider has no familiarity with the setting and participants in the research site (Hellawell 2006); the insider shares a degree of common experience with participants (Gair 2012). However, Hill and Dao (2020) state 'insider-ness and outsider-ness are not binary, fixed or static positions…[they] are fluid and can shift depending on the context of the social situation'. While the advantages and disadvantages of both are well documented, Hill and Dao (2020) argue that all researchers benefit from exploring how they are both insider, where an insider identity emerges as familiarity with the research site develops, and invariably outsider, because of the power relations that accompany the research role. For them, all research benefits from an exploration of the symbiotic relationship of these positions. What is more, additional identities, positions and experiences can complicate the research site further, and the partipants' perceptions of the researcher should also be considered (Hill and Dao 2020). While providing additional objectivity, the outside position can distance the researcher too far from the site to gain meaningful evidence (Hellawell 2006) but risks also accompany the insider position. Its greater potential for rapport and empathy (Cui 2015) also carries with it ethical implications where 'what may occur is a permeation of the researcher's beliefs in the research process, causing an inability to negotiate the inherent power that accompanies their research status' (Hill and Dao 2020: 525). Furthermore, there might be practical implications for the effectiveness of the research where over-familiarity might blind the researcher to key data (Taylor 2011).

Where qualitative research is used for emancipatory or social justice purposes, the researcher herself is the first and predominant research tool (Maxwell 2012, Lennon 2014, Creswell et al 2016). Therefore, research design should be influenced both by the research questions and the motivations and goals of the researcher. Where these motivations are not articulated so that they can be considered as a lens for the data analysis, they can become a threat to the validity of the research. Reflexivity is used by

researchers to mitigate their position of power in relation to the participants in qualitative research. This requirement is intensified in contexts where the researcher has relationships with the participant that precede the research and, at its most necessary, where that previous relationship itself represented an unequal power relation. The researcher in this case is the co-founder of the academy Trust who has been responsible for the recruitment, deployment and management of the leadership of the Trust, some of whom took part in the research. Others had been recruited and managed by the subsequent Chief Executive Officer but the researcher's influence has to be acknowledged.

The purpose of reflexivity in research is to be honest, not perfect. The researcher cannot listen to, or reflect, every perspective, but that does not mean she should attend to none. Clarity about her own experience, values and point of view allows the reader to consider these in the reading of the research design and analysis. Because neoliberalism is preoccupied with the individual as the locus for all agency, personal biography can be used for self-justification. Thus, it is important for the researcher to describe her own experiences in the field, to declare her interests, and not in order to give credence to her research (Griffiths 1998). Reflexivity in the context of socially just research invites a commitment to improving practice, whatever the values and standpoint of the researcher (Blatchford 1997). By definition, this also requires an openness to the revision of standpoint by the researcher. Again reflexivity is not a process whereby the researcher defends her position by being honest about it, rather she uses it to improve her practice (Griffiths 1998, Blatchford 1997). In the final instance, reflexivity is about action. It is about an authentic attention to biography, the researchers and the researched, so that it results in conscious actions taken as part of the research process at every stage (Griffiths 1998).

Small-connected communities

Quigley (2006) and Ellis (2007) describe the challenge of working with small-sized communities that are geographically bound so that participants risk recognising each other's contributions. These risks give rise to specific ethical concerns around anonymity not necessarily covered in research ethics discussions (Damianakis and Woodford 2012). Damianakis and Woodford (2012) argue that the very things that make qualitative research so valuable for collecting thicker descriptions of participant experiences also

make it more vulnerable to a breach in confidentiality. Descriptions of participant characteristics and the representation of the detail in interviews, for example, add richness to research but also increase the risk of disclosure of identity and threaten anonymity. This risk is heightened with participants who are under-represented or vulnerable to unequal power relations. Where such research is vital to include their voices, it also creates a particular ethical tension because the consequences of a breach in confidentiality can have particular consequences (Damianakis and Woodford 2012).

Damianakis and Woodford (2012) use and extend the concept of small-sized communities to describe 'small connected communities' (Damianakis and Woodford 2012: 342) where participants may be geographically spread but share a demographic, professional network or social concerns in such a manner that participants know each other's work sufficiently to identify the content, themes or style in ways that might reveal participant identity. Beyond the commitment to do no harm, confidentiality is particularly relevant where the revelation of participants' data could potentially pose professional risks. All participants in this study regularly interface with, and are subject to, the authority of government policy actors in a heavily performative context (Damianakis and Woodford 2012).

My insider status as the researcher includes having prior relationships with the participants and I wish to maintain relationships after the research is over. Researchers work hard to build trust in qualitative and naturalistic research, knowing its value in data collection (Damianakis and Woodford 2012). Previous joint working between me and participants, in a range of educational contexts, has already built trust. This trust might lead to the sharing of information in confidence that is potentially revealing for participants. These revelations might contribute to me meeting my obligations to tell better truths (Sandelowski 2002) and to create the space to hear participants' experiences so that they are better represented through the research. However, they also risk breaching confidentiality. Even a perceived construction of a participant narrative can positively or negatively affect personal relationships. I wish to balance the creation of rich descriptions which might provide useful material to answer the research questions with my current and future relationship with participants (Damianakis and Woodford 2012).

This section has outlined the approach to the research design and included additional ethical considerations that flow from the research site. The next section describes the research context where I make clear how I recruited the participants and my own motivations for the research.

The research context

The aims of the research include the use of the experiences of the senior leadership of the Goodall Schools Trust to critically examine the extent to which the MAT can support them to use school improvement approaches that contribute to social justice agendas. Therefore, it follows that the participant group for the research is purposively sampled, that is, participants will be taken from the leadership of the Trust (Lincoln and Guba 2011).

4.1.4 Recruiting the participants

I held a 90 minute recruitment session at the annual Trust leaders' residential meeting to outline the project and give potential participants the opportunity to ask questions and join the research project. The inclusion of this item on the agenda, drawn up by the Board, the CEO and the Executive Team, gave the project status and demonstrated MAT commitment to the research. Being given time at the event also avoided the practical complication of calling a meeting, identifying a venue, and the difficulties of asking for participants to give up their time before the project began. It also allowed me to outline the project in person.

The purposes of the session were to:

1. Outline the initial area for research and seek feedback
2. Foreground the researcher's power relationship to potential participants and discuss mitigations
3. Explore ways of working together on the project and give participants a feeling of control
4. Invite participants to join or opt out without any fear of recrimination

Having outlined the general direction of the project, I acknowledged my own position as co-founder of the Trust, shared some perspectives on power in research, and gave potential participants the opportunity for discussion and feedback on this, and ways of

working together. In this discussion, participants made a number of suggestions that were subsequently fed into the research design. They requested:

- Group work alongside interviews so that participants could discuss and develop their thinking as well as represent their own views
- Group work activity before feeding back so that one member could represent the views of the group and offer the opportunity for anonymity in case participants might want it
- Access to pre-reading to support thinking over a longer period
- Distribution of questions and activities beforehand to avoid undeveloped thinking and prevent anxiety
- Activities to support discussions which might prompt further thinking, be more fun and help participants avoid feelings of awkwardness or embarrassment in expressing personal views.

When inviting participants to join the research, I made clear that the research was optional and that no-one should feel under pressure to participate. I explained that I thought it could be fun and that I would discuss the direction and method of the research at various points throughout the research. I also explained that participants could withdraw at any point without explanation and that all findings would be shared before publication.

I asked for two volunteers to run an anonymous ballot. I explained that to protect the anonymity of the responses, the two volunteers would collect the anonymous ballots and count them in my absence. They would work out what constituted 80% of the number of anonymous ballots (approximately) and randomly select that number of participants for the project and pass those names to me. In this way, I would never know who had agreed to participate and who had opted out. The exception to this process would be if, for any reason, every potential participant decided to join. In the event, every eligible potential participant chose to join the project. Nineteen of 21 Trust senior leaders participated. The 20th leader was on short-term sabbatical to the Trust and would leave before the project began. The 21st senior leader was my co-founder and it would not have been appropriate to include her.

All participants were given a description of the project and asked to sign a consent form that gave me permission to record the focus groups and semi-structured interviews (appendix six).

4.1.5 Participant profile

Qualitative research benefits from the thick descriptions and holistic accounts that accompany the collection of raw data in naturalistic settings but these benefits are vulnerable to ethical concerns where the participants are known to each other and the researcher (Damianakis and Woodford 2012). This research focuses on the collective story the participants tell of their experiences in order to balance the requirement that the research contribute to new knowledge with the need to protect participants from any potential harm stemming from familiarity. It also addresses what critical perspectives this brings to bear on the current education landscape, and how leaders are supported to enact more dialogical and democratic school improvement practices. To explore these elements the study investigated the participants' approach to leading and improving their schools. For these reasons, the following descriptions of the participants (see table 4.1 below) focus on the characteristics relevant to role of leader rather than their characteristics as individuals in those roles. In this way the reader can see those characteristics of the whole group that might have bearing on the perspectives represented.

Table 4.1 Summary of participants

Number of participants for focus groups	19
Number of participants for semi-structured interviews	16
Participants currently in Headship	15
Participants with more than 5 years' experience in the MAT	10
Participants with previous Headship experience	2
Participants with previous Headship experience in a MAT	2
Primary phase leadership experience before joining the MAT	14
Secondary phase leadership experience before joining the MAT	9
Cross phase leadership experience before joining the MAT	5
Experience in more than one phase	7
More than 5 years in Headship	4
Fewer than 2 years in Headship	4
Previous experience in a school improvement role	10

4.1.6 Ethical concerns in recruiting and representing participants

Participants self-identified because of the research topic. Descriptions of the participants focus on their shared status as senior leaders in a Multi Academy Trust and avoid specific

detail that might reveal their identities. In the presented data, any references or names that could identify colleagues have been removed. Furthermore, any data where participants describe specific experiences or perceptions that could reveal either their own identity, or the identity of others, has been omitted from the writing up stage. In an attempt to protect anonymity, and because two of the nineteen participants are male, pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant and female gender pronouns used throughout.

4.1.7 Ethical concerns in analysis of participant data

The reporting of multiple subjectivities and intersecting diversities can be potentially useful for the qualitative researcher because it gives access to broad and thick representations of experience and highlights tensions and sites for critical examination. However, greater specificity with regard to analysis of participant data leads to greater risk of disclosure. To this end, the focus in the analysis is on the events the participants experience in their role in the context of the Goodall Schools Trust not on individual lived experience. This means that a range of useful but specific analyses are lost to the research, for example a comparison of data by length of time in the Trust or in Headship, a comparison of participants who have had more than one senior role in the Trust to those who have had one, a comparison of the perspectives of those very new to the Trust compared to longer standing staff. What is gained is a view of broad commonalities and divergencies in a way that can inform Trust policy via a generalised understanding of experiences of working in the Trust rather than an essentialised viewpoint of different individuals (Van Manen 1997) and therefore, the research can also make a wider contribution to the field.

Data collection

Data for the research project was collected in two phases over an 18-month period. Phase one comprised three focus groups carried out several weeks apart. Their purpose was to engage participants in the direction and methods of the research and identify specific areas of interest that could be used for discussion in the semi-structured interviews to address the research aims. Phase two comprised single semi-structured interviews with each participant using a set list of questions to shape the interview that resulted from the focus groups.

Using focus groups

Focus groups were chosen as a data collection tool because they link some of the research purposes directly to the choice of tools for data collection methods (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999, Barbour 2007, Stewart and Shamdansi 2015), namely the requirement to explore participant understandings and perspectives in a non-threatening environment and to give participants the opportunity to identify areas for discussion in the semi-structured interviews. So far, this chapter has expressed a preference for approaches to research design that demonstrate a commitment to constructivist, critical research for social justice and acknowledge the part co-construction plays in the creation of new knowledge and interpretation. Focus groups reflect this philosophical standpoint and therefore, have implicit methodological benefits for the research (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013). The research also requires that research methods are chosen to mitigate the unequal balance of power between the researcher and participants particularly given their prior professional relationships.

Focus groups are a method with which the participants were familiar because of their own experience as teachers and trainers. They had also participated in numerous training and development sessions with which they had previously expressed high levels of satisfaction. Colucci (2007: 1428) describes 'projective techniques' for use in focus groups that help the researcher gather information on difficult topics by providing activities that distract participants' attention so as to reduce inhibition or constraint. Focus group one included such an activity where participants initially chose an object as a metaphor to discuss rather than directly discuss the thing it represents, to help to mediate any possible conflicts or tensions the might arise if participants wanted to say things they thought I might disagree with. I had never had a comprehensive discussion with Trust leaders about individual and collective purposes or the challenges they faced so had no idea what kinds of responses the discussion would illicit. Furthermore, my own role to that point had included many training sessions where I explicated the Trust vision and our foundations and I had not taken the opportunity to listen carefully to colleagues about their own perspectives. I wanted them to speak as freely as possible. I also hoped that including a question about challenges might give them the opportunity to talk about pressures from the Trust leadership.

Group work, in general, is particularly suitable for qualitative social research that seeks to explore human activity in a natural setting (Carpini and Williams 2013, Walden 2013, Kamberelis and Dimitiadis 2013, 2018), reflecting as it does part of the common human condition where opinions are formed and decisions made in context with other people (Carpini 2013, Stewart and Shamdasani 2015, Carey and Asbury 2016). In addition, focus groups include collective activity that allows the exploration of a specific set of issues to generate data relevant to the research aims (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999, Bloor 2001, Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013). Implicit in their purpose and use, and explicit in their successful adoption by qualitative researchers, is the assumption that meaning is made in interaction with others in relationship or community (Stewart and Shamdasani 2015). Perspectives shift and identities are negotiated, change and develop in the process of human interaction at a conscious and unconscious level (Myers and Macnaghten 1999, Waterton and Wynne 1999, Barbour and Kitzinger 2007). Waterton and Wynne (1999) describe how stances and attitudes are defined and developed interactively through the conflicts, co-constructions and ambivalences demonstrated where participants finish each other's sentences or interrupt in the group. Furthermore, Kitzinger and Farquhar's (1999) analysis of how to use sensitive moments in the focus group for data collection describe instances of co-creation of meaning and argument in reinforcement, jokes and story-telling.

Focus groups help meet the aims and intentions of the project. The research intended to discover participant beliefs about their purposes as education leaders and perceptions of what this means for their practice whilst simultaneously providing opportunities for the participants, including the researcher as participant, to think critically and to develop their practice. Focus groups are effective in eliciting things that are flexible, fluid and uncertain like personal perspectives or attitudes because it is within groups that opinions are formed and expressed. Waterton and Wynne (1999: 136) state, 'Interactions are not just a neutral medium through which intrinsic preferences and values are expressed, but are themselves a substantive part of their formation of values and attitudes'. Furthermore, whilst the inter-active formation of attitudes demonstrates the relational nature of value and belief construction, it also provides the foundation for agency and change. It is as part of community, in its broadest sense, that both meaning and the understanding of and motivation for change take place (Waterton and Wynne 1999).

From a constructivist perspective, focus groups can help to address the power imbalance between the researcher and the participants because the researcher is a co-constructor in the production of data, and then an interpreter of the evidence (Waterton and Wynne 1999). Kitzinger and Farquhar (1999) are amongst those who argue that the focus group offers a dynamic that can offer protection to the individual in expressing views that might feel more risky in a one-to-one interview situation with a researcher. The very fact that the researcher is in the minority in the group can shift the balance of power, particularly if the participants are permitted to uncover their own values and attitudes, express their own concerns and priorities, and influence the direction of the research (Morgan 1997, Fern 2001). The co-creation of meaning also has the potential to generate change and make a shift in the usual hierarchical power relations associated with research and so the focus group is an effective tool for applied research with emancipatory or transformative objectives (Baker and Hinton 1999, Barbour 2007, Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013, 2018). Baker and Hinton (1999) argue that the focus group in research can become a political entity in its own right, not just influencing the direction of study or the design shape, but impacting on policy and practice. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2013, 2018) describe three specific (often overlapping) areas of focus group application: research, pedagogical and political. They demonstrate the potential for the critical enquiry activity of the focus group to contribute to the democratic process in itself. The joint activity of focus groups reflects realist as well as constructivist stand-points (Kambereleis and Dimitraidis 2013) by giving the researcher access to the contradictions and tensions in participant narratives and descriptions that reveal the underlying properties and structures that might affect practice and perspectives. This joint activity also has the potential to deliver for an emancipatory agenda (Baker and Hinton 1999) where critical reflection is prompted or shaped by questions or activities. Their construction and operation also has much to offer in mitigating the power of the researcher and this is doubly significant in the case of this particular research where the group leader has a prior, professional relationship with the group (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999, Baker and Hinton 1999, Barbour and Kitzinger 2007, Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013). Finally, providing tasks preceding discussion in focus groups can allow participants to think and prepare so that the researcher gains access to thoughts and feelings they might not otherwise (Colucci 2007).

4.1.8 Conducting the focus groups

Phase one of the data collection comprised three 90 minute focus group discussions over a 10 month period. The purposes of conducting the groups were to:

1. Explore participant understandings of the purposes of education
2. Explore participant definitions of social justice and the place of education in addressing issues of injustice
3. Explore participant understandings of what comprises school improvement
4. Explore participant recognition or description of any link between education purpose and practices adopted to improve schools
5. Give participants a voice in shaping the methods of data collection and subsequent direction of the semi-structured interviews within the parameters of the research topic

These purposes address all four aims of the research project and help to mitigate the position of the researcher.

4.1.8.1 Focus group 1

In the first focus group, participants undertook a task to facilitate a discussion about how they saw the purposes of education and what they considered to be the major challenges to these purposes. I chose this activity in response to requests from participants in the recruitment session that I include activities alongside discussion to allow them to work together in enjoyable ways. I designed an activity where participants were invited to choose one of two objects as a metaphor for their own thoughts about education and consider the questions below. I hoped that using a metaphor to discuss issues that I had not raised with participants before might help us all to access experiences and perspectives that might not come with a less oblique approach. One object was a piece of string and the other object was a glass of water. Following small group discussion, a whole group discussion took place around participant thoughts in response to the questions. The questions were:

1. What is the purpose of education for you and how should we do it?
2. If you were to choose one of these objects as a metaphor to answer this question, which one would it be and why?

3. What are the current challenges to this purpose and how we should do it?

4.1.8.2 Focus group 2

In focus group two I wanted to explore further some of the issues that had come out as areas of interest in focus group one, to give the participants an opportunity to exercise some control over what they had said by allowing an opportunity for clarification and amendment of their own contributions, and to identify topics for further discussion in focus group three. To this end, I returned typed scripts to each individual participant, and arranged small group discussion around three questions:

1. Is there anything you would like to add or amend from your own contribution in the scripts?
2. What do you find particularly interesting or noticeable about the discussion in the group?
3. Can we identify three common areas of interest as a group that we can pursue in focus group three at the Trust's upcoming residential training?

At the conclusion of the small group discussions, I invited feedback. Participants were amused by some of their own contributions and by seeing them recorded and re-presented to them. No participant requested any changes or amendments. One participant then volunteered to collect ideas for further exploration on a flip-chart. The feedback areas were turned into three questions for me to use to plan the third focus-group. The questions agreed were:

1. Who makes decisions about our curriculum and what happens in our schools and is that fair?
2. How do we manage the conflicts between our own values and those of other stakeholders?
3. What else can we do about happiness and enjoyment in our schools and how does it link to justice?

4.1.8.3 Focus group 3

As with the activity in focus group one, the content of focus group three came in direct response to requests made by participants during the participant recruitment session.

Having considered the scripts from focus group one and two again, and reflected on the areas participants expressed interest in pursuing, I identified stimulus articles that reflected their areas of interest and held the potential to raise areas of relevance to the research title. I was interested in further exploring what participants thought about social justice in education and how they thought this impacted on their practice as well as giving to participants an opportunity to develop their critical perspectives. Participants were sent one of three identified articles for pre-reading material for focus group three:

1. "Can critical democracy last? Porto Allegre and the struggle over 'thick' democracy in education." Luis Armando and Michael Apple 2012, Journal of Education Policy, 2012, Taylor and Francis
2. "Why joy in education is an issue for socially just priorities." Morwenna Griffiths 2012, Journal of Education Policy, 2012, Taylor and Francis
3. "Education as if people matter: John Macmurray, community and the struggle for democracy." Michael Fielding 2012, Oxford Review of Education, 2012, Taylor and Francis

The articles were chosen because they critically address some of the issues discussed in the preceding focus groups and because they raised questions that linked to the aims of the research. Article one raises questions about curriculum, power and the role of stakeholders. Article two raises questions about the narrowing of educational purpose and the place of joy and the affective in education. Article three raises questions about the narrowing of educational purpose and the place of democratic engagement in education. All three articles adopt a critical stance and encourage consideration of the purposes of education and the place of social justice agendas.

I used my annotations on the scripts from focus groups one and two to identify which article to send to which participant. I sent each participant the article that best matched a subject in which they had already expressed some interest. Subsequently, I was also able to create three discussion groups for focus group three. Participants were given the link to all three articles and given the opportunity to read a different article and change groups if they wished. In the event, no participant requested this change but it was clear a number of participants read all three articles. Participants were also sent a set of questions to guide pre-focus group thinking along with the article:

1. What does the article suggest about how we might approach curriculum and provision?
2. What does the article suggest about school leadership and our role in education?
3. Does the article suggest anything for how a Multi Academy Trust might be led by its school leaders?
4. Does the article suggest anything about how we might approach school improvement?

During the focus group session, each discussion group spent time discussing their reading, thoughts about the questions and working on a single presentation back to the whole group. A spokesperson was identified in each group to do this feedback. The feedback was then used to identify the areas for follow-up exploration in the semi-structured interviews.

The analysis of the data outlined in section 4.6 summarises the themes arising from the focus groups and how they addressed the research aims. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore those elements of the research aims not sufficiently addressed by the data from the focus groups. I designed the questions for the semi-structured interviews based on these elements.

Using semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews are a useful tool for qualitative research and this project, reflecting its philosophical standpoint and serving its aims, because they offer a fluid, interactive opportunity to explore the social reality of participants within the parameters of the research topic. They give the researcher direct access to experiences, feelings, values and points of view (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). When interview questions position the researcher and participant in relation to narratives, precedents, resources and orientations, the discussion can draw out participant experiences in ways that relate directly to the research topic (Smith and Elger 2014). Nevertheless, the purpose is not to dictate interpretations, rather the interview site gives the researcher and participant the opportunity to work together to review and expand these points of view and co-create both knowledge and interpretations (Holstein and Gubrium 1997). In this way, interviews afford participants a degree of control not always present in other research methods. It is

they who decide what is said and what is not and they influence the facts and details of evidence as it is collected and interpreted (Smith and Elger 2012).

For the Critical Realist, the interview, also valued as a tool for evidence collection, extends beyond these purposes. The real cannot be accessed simply via the empirical experiences of the participants because it has pre-existing causal powers that are separate from each subject and not always evidenced in the empirical and the actual of participant descriptions. An exploration of these emergent properties is central to on-going critical research analysis (Bhaskar 2013). The patterns that can emerge in interviews alongside participant preoccupations and interpretations of their actions and reasons give a window onto the social contexts and restraints within which they act and the resources they use to navigate these contexts. Furthermore, the interplay of a layered ontology results in contradictions and uncertainties, tensions and transformations as well as disjunctures in participant narratives. All of these offer some access to the real, to the contexts of and causes for empirical experiences (Smith and Elger 2014, Pawson and Tilley 1997).

While participants do not create the social conditions that precede them, they *do* always reproduce or transform them so that direct access to participant experience and motivation can reveal participant agency. What is more, the interview itself can become a context for transformation. Archer's (2007) description of reflexivity includes the belief that we can all consider ourselves in relation to social context and consider social contexts in relation to ourselves. This reflexivity, however partial, has the power to be causally efficacious for ourselves and our contexts. In bringing critical theories for consideration, challenging, probing and offering alternatives, the researcher can open up these opportunities (Archer 2007, 2012).

The semi-structured interview gives the social researcher access to the direct experiences and interpretations of the participants and in addition access to some of the real mechanisms that act as context for and causes of these experiences via the patterns, preoccupations, contradictions and tensions apparent in the interviews. For the Critical Realist, critical analysis is applied to participant accounts, which are always partial. It is also applied to analysis where investigation of the relationship between underlying causes and participant understandings of them suggest reasons for the resulting

outcomes, both intended and unintended (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This analysis has broader application for the Critical Realist than for the constructivist who sees participant narratives as bound and therefore, locally useful. The development of fuller explanations of social activity can include hypothesis about wider causes and consequences in the field of research.

I have included a description of how I used the focus group and semi-structured interviews together in 4.10.2.

4.1.9 Conducting semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted over an 18 month period, with 16 of the participants who took part in the focus groups. Three participants had left the Trust to take jobs elsewhere by the time the semi-structured interviews began. Participants were invited to identify the venue of their choice and indicate a time for the interview. At their request, I sent options for dates for each interview. Each participant requested an interview in their main place of work. Interviews took between 40 and 60 minutes each and were recorded on a tape recorder. I provided each participant with the questions for a few minutes before the interview, while we were making small talk and I was setting up. I did this to reassure them and so that they could see the main areas for discussion. The interview questions were:

1. Who is on your matrix (appendix seven), what do they do/what are their roles, and how was this decided?

2. Think about leadership in the school, at all or any levels, how would you describe your leadership culture? What will I see that shows me this?

3. How do you build leadership culture? What do you do or say to make it?

4. What's next with this culture? What do you want to do next? Are there any obstacles?

5. In what ways does your leadership group act or behave as a team? What gets in the way of them being a team?

6. How do you exercise/show your authority as the Head?

7. If you didn't use your matrix for six weeks, what difference would it make?

These questions addressed those aims of the research that were not sufficiently covered in the focus group data. An example of the semi-structured script is found in appendix eight.

4.1.10 Using focus groups and semi-structured interviews together

In Chapter Three I argued that the critical realist epistemology is relative and constructivist (Bhaskar 2013). Qualitative research in general, and semi-structured interviews and focus groups in particular, advance and materialise opportunities for the co-creation of knowledge that is central to a constructivist epistemology (Mojtahed et al 2014). The maintenance of social negotiation is vital in this task to ensure that research is not reduced to an interpretation of the participants' descriptions by the researcher. The combination of semi-structured interviews with a second data collection tool can provide an opportunity for this negotiation as well as the validation of the researcher's initial understandings and interpretations, serving as a feedback mechanism (Mojtahed et al 2014). In addition, combined tools can provide more comprehensive understandings of phenomena, enhancing data richness and depth of inquiry (Lambert and Loiselle 2008). They can also enhance the trustworthiness of findings when the findings from each are compared for convergence and divergence. Although more work is needed to explore the potential advantages and disadvantages of using them together, Lambert and Loiselle (2008) argue that the compatibility of their purposes and epistemological presumptions make focus groups and semi-structured interviews an effective combination for collecting rich data. In chapter four, I argued that an interactive approach to the project most authentically reflects how qualitative research is conducted. Lambert and Loiselle (2008) describe how focus groups and semi-structured interviews can be used together in an iterative and interactive process. An initial model of phenomena formed after focus groups can then be enriched by semi-structured interviews which in turn develop the interpretation of the phenomena.

Analysing the data using thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is a way of organising, identifying and reporting themes and patterns within data that acknowledges the areas of interest and theoretical assumptions of the researcher as well as providing a process for the inductive discovery of new knowledge (Clarke and Braun 2018). For this reason, it has been chosen over a rigid adherence to purely constructionist theories like grounded theory or discourse analysis, notwithstanding that some of the practices of thematic analysis and constructionist approaches necessarily overlap (Braun and Clarke 2006, Clarke and Braun 2018).

Arguing for it as a demarcated analytical method, both Attride-Stirling (2001), Braun and Clarke (2006) and Clarke and Braun (2018) outline a comparable six phase process from coding to interpretation and then reporting of the themes in the research material. They describe the phases slightly differently and their own reasons for using thematic analysis in research give rise to different considerations, pitfalls and arguments for its value. I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps because of their usefulness to me as a novice researcher, their relevance to my research purposes and because of the flexibility of their approach. Of specific interest to me was the potential of thematic analysis to reflect both realist and constructionist perspectives. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe two camps of qualitative analysis. On the one hand, we see researchers with a commitment to a specific theoretical approach to qualitative analysis like grounded theory or discourse analysis. A rigid commitment to these inductive approaches sees meaning or theory uncovered and then built from the data and overlooks the theoretical biases of the researcher and her role in the interpretation of meaning and co-construction of new knowledge. What is more, these approaches variously adopt the tools of thematic analysis but claim them as generic qualitative skills (Boyatzis 1998). Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is compatible with many different ontological and epistemological perspectives because it is not linked to any 'pre-existing theoretical framework, and therefore, it can be used within different theoretical frameworks' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 81). For this reason it is a good match for a methodological commitment to critical realism, combining a realist commitment to using research to uncover obvious layers of reality as well as those that need more complex interpretation. Furthermore, their description of a theoretical flexibility, with a clear articulation of the 'how' of thematic analysis, supports the argument that only when we articulate both our research purposes and our methods do we allow our research to be evaluated and compared for validity.

Thematic analysis specifically serves a realist position because it allows analysis of data that reflects the 'empirical 'and 'actual' layers of reality as well as processes that attempt to unpick those elements that are not immediately obvious at the level of the 'real' (Archer 2013). Its lack of adherence to one theoretical position also allows it to argue for the validity of constructed realities (Braun and Clarke 2006, Wheeldon and Faubert 2009) and it can, therefore, be used where the value of the researcher's contribution to the creation of knowledge in the conscious and unconscious selection, interpretation and presentation of data collected from others is required (Braun and Clarke 2006). This theoretic flexibility means it is also useful where an equal purpose of the research is to collect evidence and data from grounded experience for analysis and interpretation that generate new knowledge (Nowell et al 2017). Furthermore, the inclusion of a theoretical perspective allows thematic analysis to go further than the organisation and description of a data set to the interpretation of data and in this way thematic analysis can be used successfully for critical purposes in research (Boyatzis 1998).

This approach of combining a clear, demarcated method with a flexibility that accommodates alternative theoretical approaches gives thematic analysis protection against criticisms that it lacks rigour as a method. It also provides a framework for reflective disclosure because it clearly presents the researcher's choices and decisions. This disclosure contributes to validating the contribution of the researcher by explicating the assumptions on which she has analysed her data (Atridde-Stirling 2001, Braun and Clarke 2006). It is in recording, organising and clearly communicating our methods of analysis of research data that we address issues of reliability and respond to challenges of bias in qualitative research (Wheeldon and Faubert 2009, Nowell et al 2017). The articulation of the analysis process using the six phases of thematic research allows the data analysis to be evaluated for validity and efficacy and compared to other research and so meets Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Furthermore, the research design of this project has specified the use of focus groups to inform the content of the semi-structured interviews. This intensifies the demand for the clear audit trail outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in their description of confirmability, where the researcher must demonstrate that the findings and conclusions follow from the evidence, so that the analysis of the focus group data demonstrates which newly generated data have been fed into the second stage of

the research. Table 4.2 below summarises the six stages of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.

Table 4.2 The six stages of thematic analysis - Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006)

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data:	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	On-going analysis to refine the aspects of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating the analysis back to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

4.1.11 Prevalence

I have already argued that reflexivity and transparency about research processes are useful tools to mitigate the powerful position of the researcher and to address potential researcher bias. These enable readers to make their own assessments about the validity of the codes and themes chosen as part of the evidence analysis (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Braun and Clarke 2014). Also helpful, therefore, is transparency about what the researcher herself considers to be 'comprehensive 'coverage in the scripts and to do this I have used Braun and Clarke's (2006) notion of prevalence. All qualitative research has to pass the trustworthiness test, where co-researchers and readers must be able to recognise that the researcher's findings are clearly derived from the data and can make judgements about how the researcher's methodological assumptions affect the creation of themes and subsequent findings (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Willig 1999, Braun and Clarke 2006, Starks and Trinidad 2007). Given my involvement in creating and developing the Goodall Schools Trust, its school improvement model, and prior professional relationship with those who use it in schools, I am outlining this process at this point in the spirit of necessary reflexivity (Nowell et al 2017, Tobin and Begley 2004).

Prevalence should not be linked directly to the number of times that an idea recurs in the evidence and the researcher should remain flexible in this regard (Braun and Clarke 2006). This does not mean that the researcher should ignore the amount of coverage ideas receive, rather that they need to exercise their judgement (Braun and Clarke 2006). It is vital that the researcher is open about the decision process and that she returns to the scripts repeatedly to ensure precise, consistent and exhaustive consideration of evidence against codes, categories or themes. In this way she ensures research can be evaluated and compared and that themes reflect the participant voice within the context of the research topic (Nowell et al 2017). With these considerations in mind, most central to decisions about what constitutes a prevalent idea or theme is its relationship to the research topic or questions used to address the research aims (Braun and Clarke 2006, Nowell et al 2017). Again this raises issues for coverage within the evidence because an idea may be grounded in more limited data but contain a significance to the research topic that justifies its inclusion (Braun and Clarke 2006, Nowell et al 2017). Again, clear, honest revelation of decision-making is the best way to open the research to scrutiny and ensure trustworthiness (Boyatzis 1998, Roulston 2010, Attride-Stirling 2001, Cote and

Turgeon 2005, Braun and Clarke 2006, 2014, Ryan, Coughlan and Cronin 2007, Starks and Trinidad 2007, Nowell et al 2017).

4.1.12 Conducting thematic analysis - the Focus Groups (phase one)

In phase one I used Braun and Clarke's description (2006: 79) which argues for a 'familiarisation' with the material to grasp its "breadth and content" to identify initial patterns and meaning, and to build a foundation for later work on the data. I approached the three focus groups as a single data set and developed an approach to the material that ensured I secured a disjuncture between the questions and activities and the participants' responses. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that the worst examples of thematic analysis result from work that uses questions posed to participants along with their responses, to identify themes or codes. "In such instances, no analysis has really been done at all" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 86). They argue that whilst there is an on-going interplay between the research topic, research questions, and questions asked to elicit data from participants, the questions that guide the coding and analysis of the data are best kept separate, at least in the first instance. I believed that the approach I took would help to prevent my initial reading and re-reading from becoming a fixed perspective of response to questions that I might then be unable to see beyond. An example of how I sorted the codes into themes can be found in appendix nine.

In phase two, I identified 17 codes to reapply to the data to look for additional evidence or the need for additional codes. These are represented in column two of table 4.3. In phase three, potential connections were identified to allow a reduction to four main themes represented in column three.

Table 4.3 Codes from focus groups

Column 1	**Column 2**	**Column 3**
	codes	**themes**

1	Dealing with narrow views of what education is for and multiple stakeholders' perceptions	**1. The purposes of education**
2	Expectations that we will prepare students for university or the workforce	
3	The importance of opportunities for students in the future	
4	The importance of experiences for students in the present	
5	Social inequality and how this is reflected in education	
6	Education as a solution to social inequality	
7	The importance of preparing students for a good life, definitions and measurements of this	
8	Enjoyment in learning and school	
9	Challenges from stakeholders, who to involve in the business of education and how	**2. Our working context**
10	Austerity measures and cut funding	
11	Our leadership practice and what this means for school improvement	**3. Leadership and school improvement practice**
12	Questions about decision making power, who has it and how it is used	
13	What being a part of the Goodall Schools Trust gives us	

14	Challenges to our beliefs and commitments when they translate into practice	
15	What do we teach and who decides what we teach	**4. Curriculum issues**
16	Curriculum changes	
17	What are we expected to measure	

In phase four, the themes were used to re-visit the data to review whether they worked across the set and to identify further evidence that might extend or explicate the themes. The extracts from each theme were presented on a thematic map to aid further reflection and prompt connections. In phase five, I reviewed the themes to decide which would be the best to translate into questions for the semi-structured interviews to meet the research aims. Themes one, two and three were selected for their potential to address the research topic and aims. Theme four was considered less useful and dropped from consideration for analysis.

Below is a summary of the generic areas of discussion taken from the data set.

4.11.2.1 Theme 1 – The purposes of education

This theme included participant descriptions of their values, motivations for becoming teachers and school leaders and the part they thought school could have in addressing inequality. Inequality was described as unfairness of opportunity, both in the present and the future as well as a set of forces that worked against the success of certain groups of students. Participants were hopeful about the difference schooling could make to the lives of students and were proud of the Goodall School Trust approach to provision.

4.11.2.2 Theme 2 – Our working context

This theme included descriptions of the challenges participants felt they faced when trying to be true to their purposes. These challenges came from governments and policy, families, staff new to the Trust and the children themselves. They talked about the

difficulty of inducting new staff and building sustainable capacity when there was so much external pressure to deliver a knowledge curriculum in preparation for exams and university. They also raised questions about who decides what education is and what it is for.

4.11.2.3. Theme 3 – Leadership and school improvement practice

This theme included participant reflections on their own practices and motivations, and what and how they had learned and changed as leaders. It includes some attempts to define what school improvement practice is and how leaders might work together.

4.11.2.4. Theme 4 – Curriculum issues[7]

This theme included participants' concerns about the direction of curriculum development, who makes curriculum decisions and why. They described their own disempowerment in relation to curriculum and asked whether being part of a MAT might give them the strength in numbers to reclaim some control. They shared examples of how they were already doing this. They saw curriculum as a key locus of power struggle with other stakeholders and also explored how students could be more involved in curriculum decisions.

4.11.3. Conducting the analysis - Moving from focus groups to semi-structured interviews

As described earlier in this chapter, focus groups were used to elicit ideas, as they pertained to the research title and questions, for further exploration in the semi-structured interviews. The 17 codes identified with thematic analysis in the focus groups were reduced to four main themes. Three of these themes most usefully addressed elements of the research title.

- Theme one, purposes of education, began to describe the extent to which the participants could articulate their educational purposes, the extent to which they considered these as linking to social justice agendas and their understanding of what social justice agendas might comprise. This theme, therefore, contributes to

[7] *The content of the theme, curriculum issues, has been picked up in a separate three year curriculum project at the Goodall Schools Trust. However, I revisited this theme once I had completed the semi-structured interviews as part of analysing the data as a single set. I discovered that some of the data in this theme could be usefully analysed to add description to participant perceptions of external accountabilities and issues of power. Some references have therefore, been incorporated into the final analysis in Chapter Five.

understanding whether improvement practice might contribute to social justice agendas.

- Theme two, our working context, began to describe the challenges that the participants saw to their own purposes. While participants saw most of these challenges as originating outside of the Trust, they also made reference to those within the Trust, as well as the potential for change that being part of a wider network of schools offers. This theme therefore, contributes to understanding the extent to which senior leaders felt supported, or not, to use practices that contribute to social justice agendas.
- The third theme, leadership and school improvement practice, began to raise questions about what constitutes school improvement practice and described concerns about measurement and external accountability. Therefore, this theme began to address whether there might be certain practices that better contribute to social justice agendas. However, this area was the most under-developed of the themes and so I decided to devise questions for the semi-structured interviews that might draw out further perceptions, beliefs and activity relating to school improvement practice. When considering the content of the questions, I also took into account that I have adopted critical realism as my methodological approach and included questions to draw out further information about the cultures that might give rise to or hinder participant practice. These questions also offered opportunities for participants to talk about their own agency as well as power relations and how they are expressed and managed. Table 4.4 charts the connection between the research title (column one), which themes where relevant to which aspect of the research title (column two) and how these themes then fed through to the questions devised for the semi-structured interviews (column three).

Table 4.4 How focus group themes relate to semi-structured interview questions

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
The research title	**How themes from the focus groups addressed the research title**	**How themes from the focus groups shaped questions for the semi-structured interview**

To what extent can a Multi-Academy Trust support its senior leaders	Theme 2 – Our working context Theme 4 – Curriculum issues	Questions about how participants build cultures
To use practices to improve their schools	Theme 3 – Leadership and school improvement practice	Questions about how participants use an aspect of the Goodall Schools Trust improvement model
That contribute to social justice agendas	Theme 1 - Our educational purpose	Questions about how participants build and use teams Questions about how participants manage their own authority

4.11.4. Conducting thematic analysis - semi-structured interviews (phase two)

In line with the approach in phase one, thematic analysis was used to explore the data collected in the semi-structured interviews. Once I had become familiar with the scripts and annotated them with initial observations, I identified a number of codes. These 31 initial codes are represented in column two of Table 4.5. As with phase one, I identified codes that cut across all the questions rather than linking them directly to answers to specific questions posed in the interview. Analysis showed that participants grouped or linked some of their thoughts in their answers. I used some of these links to influence the shaping of the broader themes from the codes. I sorted the 31 codes into eight themes and returned to the scripts to review the themes and to collect additional data. The eight themes are represented in column five of Table 4.5.

I kept an approximate tally of the number of times each code was referenced. This tally is not exact because sometimes participants referenced more than one code at a time and sometimes the codes were approximate and I exercised my own interpretation.

In Table 4.5, I have summarised information from my tally in table form. In column 2 we see the approximate number of times the codes under each theme were mentioned across the semi-structured interview scripts. In column 3 the number of Heads who mentioned each specific code at some point in their script. This gives some sense of prevalence. This should be interpreted in line with the definition of prevalence given above where pertinence to the research title might foreground a particular code or theme even where other ideas appear more regularly in the data.

Table 4.5 Codes from semi-structured interviews

Column 1	**Column 2**	**Column 3**	**Column 4**	**Column 5**
	Codes	**Approximate number of references of the code across all scripts**	**Number of participants who referenced the code (out of 15 participants)**	**Themes**
1	Linking leadership to the Trust and/or school vision	**More than 50**	**13**	**1. planning**
2	Strategising and joining up thinking			
3	Prioritising			
4	Simplifying the agenda			
5	Developing the strategic authority of the Head			
6	Embracing change	**More than 20**	**9**	**2. leverage**
7	Setting pace			
8	Using expertise in a team	**More than 60**	**15**	**3. job descriptions and roles**

9	Identifying and developing talent			
10	Building capacity and sustainability			
11	Flexibility and fluidity of role			
12	Building honesty	**More than 30**	**7**	**4. professional relationships**
13	Raising standards of line-management			
14	The role of 1-1s for team members			
15	Building transparency and trust			
16	Linking work streams	**More than 50**	**12**	**5. team work**
17	Building teams within teams			
18	Communicating clearly			
19	Making joint decisions			
20	Challenging hierarchy within leadership teams	**More than 30**	**8**	**6. leadership culture**
21	Using positional power			
22	Leading and following in teams			
23	Struggling for power and building empires			

24	Developing strategic understanding	**More than 40**	**13**	**7. developing the team**
25	Using meetings for strategy and development			
26	Balancing school, team and personal development			
27	Challenging for new leaders			
28	Monitoring and types of accountability	**More than 30**	**11**	**8. accountability**
29	Linking action and evaluation			
30	Self-evaluating			
31	Responding to external accountabilities			

Below is a summary of the generic areas covered in the semi-structured interviews by participants within the codes underneath each theme.

4.11.4.1. Theme 1 – Planning

This theme included participant descriptions of planning, differentiating the strategic from the operational and how they used the matrix as a tool for these purposes. They made links between the Trust vision and their own school visions and school improvement and how their own understandings of the role of leadership as strategist had developed over time.

4.11.4.2. Theme 2 – Leverage

This theme included participant descriptions of how to speed up the improvement agenda and how they used a leadership matrix in this context. They also described the forces of change, how to deal with these, the difficulties they posed and how to embrace changes they agreed with.

4.11.4.3. Theme 3 – Job descriptions and roles

This theme included participant descriptions of using the expertise of others as well as their perspectives of their roles as team leader. It included descriptions of fluid and responsive role setting as well as more traditional, hierarchical job descriptions.

4.11.4.4.Theme 4 – Professional relationships

This theme included leadership cultures and how they were built. It included descriptions of honesty, communication and transparency. It also included comments about line management.

4.11.4.5. Theme 5 – Team-work

This theme included participant descriptions of decision-making and team participation as well as how leaders organised activity to place priorities above individual ambitions and agendas. It also covered a range of incidents of power brokering between team members. Participants described how they used the matrix to support this work and the difficulties they found in doing this.

4.11.4.6. Theme 6 – Leadership culture

This theme included participant descriptions of how they saw their own roles and the role of leadership generally. It included descriptions of how they exercise power as well as types of leadership activity they disapprove of. Many participants made direct reference to hierarchy and what this meant to them.

4.11.4.7. Theme 7 – Developing the team

This theme included participant descriptions of how they identified new colleagues for leadership and developed them.

4.11.4.8. Theme 8 – Accountability

This theme covered a range of participant understandings of accountability and included descriptions of repossess to and anxiety about external bodies, hierarchical, managerial accountability, accountability to a shared agenda and the team as well as some reference to mutual accountability.

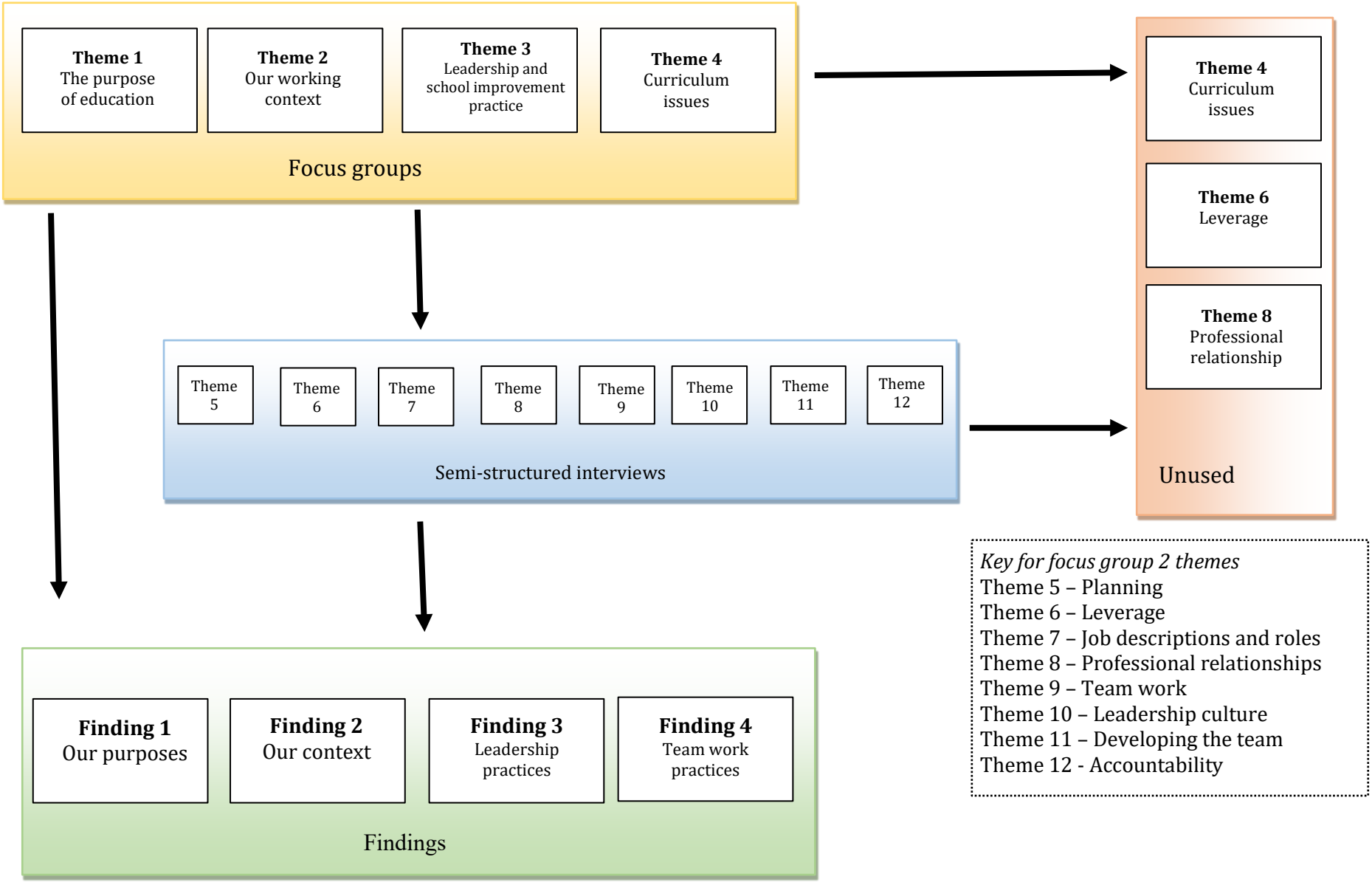
Fielding and Moss (2011) and Fielding (1997) argue that socially just approaches to education and its improvement must be predicated on activity that is successful in achieving better material outcomes for children and young people. Two of the themes from the data cover specific aspects of how educational improvement at the Goodall Schools Trust contributes to or hinders the achievement of these outcomes and might therefore, be considered relevant to the research title. These were theme two, leverage, and theme four, professional relationships. However, I decided that these themes are not intrinsically relevant to social justice agendas and so I have not reported on them.

The themes that are directly relevant to social justice agendas are theme one - planning; theme three – job descriptions and roles; theme five – teamwork; theme six – leadership culture; theme seven - developing the team; and theme eight – accountability. These five themes were taken forward for analysis and added to the three themes from the focus groups that were used to shape the questions for the semi-structured interviews. I described above how these three themes pertain to the research title.

In the final analysis I treated the themes taken forward from the focus groups and the themes identified as relevant to the research aims from the semi-structured interviews as one data set. In this way data from both collection methods has been presented in the following chapter, chapter five.

To report on the data, I grouped these themes into four findings to manage the volume of data in a way that clearly address the research question. Therefore, chapter five is divided into four sections that report on the findings already described. These are: section one – educational purpose; section two – our working context; section three – leadership practice; section four – teamwork. Table 4.6 illustrates the relationship between the focus groups, the semi-structured interviews and the four findings.

Table 4.6 Relationship between themes from focus groups and semi-structured interviews, and findings



Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the tools chosen for the collection and analysis of data and their relevance to the realist assumptions of ontology and the constructivist assumptions of epistemology outlined in Chapter Three – methodology. It has detailed why these are best served by an interactive, qualitative research design. The design has also considered issues of social justice and reflexivity to meet the research aims and to mitigate the position of the researcher who is also a co-founder of the MAT that is the research site. The underpinning constructivist assumptions outlined in both Chapter Three – methodology, and above in this chapter, have been extended to an engagement of the participants in qualifying and shaping the research direction and the data collected at each stage of the research.

Finally, this chapter has demonstrated how the focus groups and semi-structured interviews worked together to collect data and summarised the key themes identified from the thematic analysis of the three focus group sessions and semi-structured interviews which were treated as one data set. The resulting eight themes have been analysed in four sections in the following chapter, Chapter Five and are presented as four key findings.

5

Chapter five: Findings

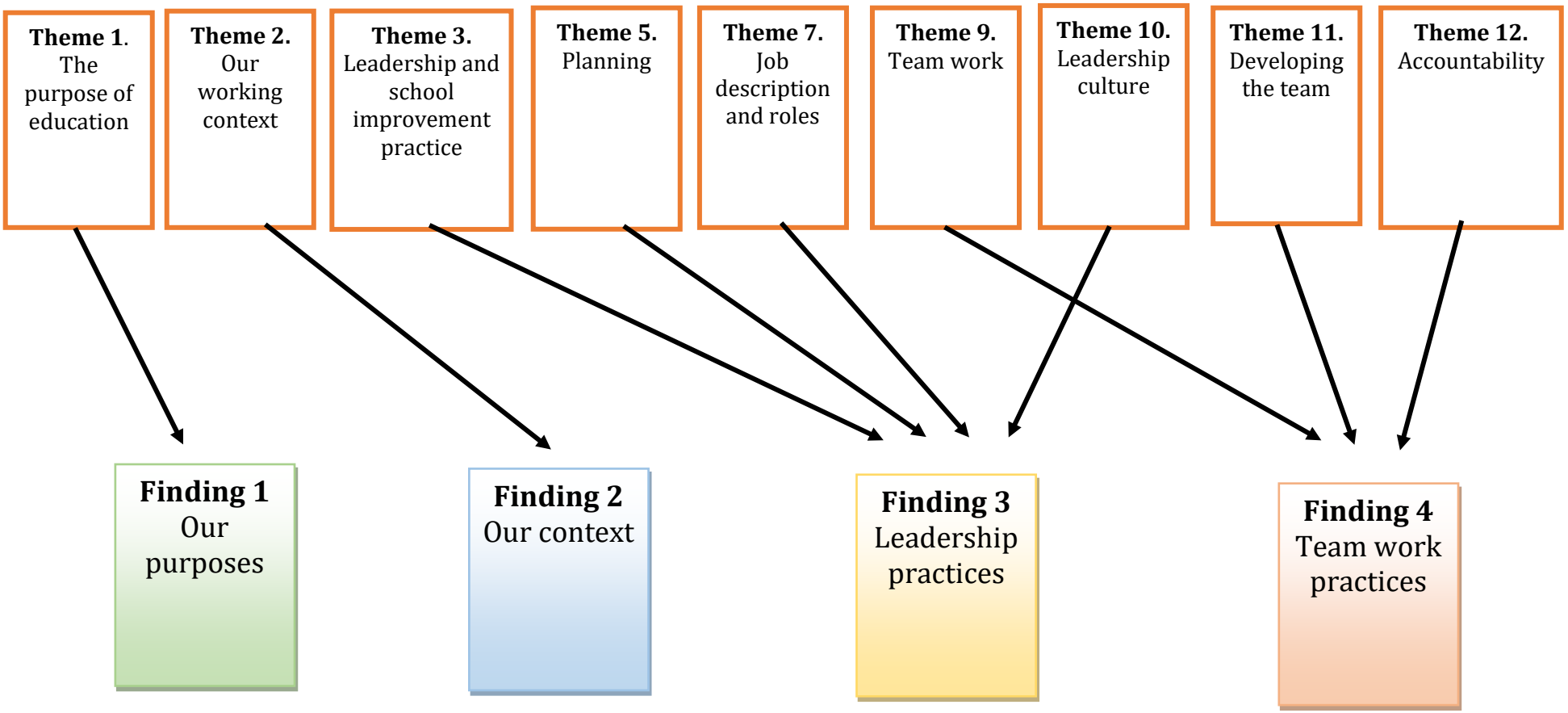
Chapter four, concluded with a summary of the ten themes identified from the focus group analysis and the semi-structured interview analysis that relate to the research aims. These ten themes are analysed in the following chapter. Some of the themes logically connect and for this reason have been presented together. This has resulted in a reduction of the 10 themes to four key findings. The relationship between these 10 themes and the four key findings is illustrated in diagram 5.1 (below).

5.1 Finding one - The purpose of education

Neoliberalism, the dominant discourse of our time, views schools as the places where staff and students work together to develop the skills and knowledge that young people can later exchange in the work place (Apple 2015). This research is premised on an alternative view of education, one that believes that schools should be places where young people, and their teachers, flourish. Furthermore, this flourishing can only be authentic in the context of the common good (Lumby 2019).

This key finding, the purpose of education, explores three main ideas: the conflict between participant and stakeholder purposes for education; the part social justice agendas play in participant purposes; and the questions that these two areas raise for participants about the content and processes of measurement.

Table 5.1 Themes from focus groups and semi-structured interviews and relationship with four key findings



5.1.1 Participant vs stakeholder expectations of education

The first idea in this finding explores participants' identified educational purposes. Overwhelmingly participants repeatedly described their own motivations and purposes for education as in conflict with those of a range of stakeholders. One area of tension concerns what part education plays in preparing young people for life after school:

> It's two different things isn't it? It's what we want…in individuals, ready for the world. And it's what we are fighting against. The challenge is we are being asked to produce things for the workforce. I go back to my vision…this big, long corridor, with lots of doors…always making sure we are providing lots of things behind these doors and the children can go into this corridor and choose which door they want to go into. Konstanze (Focus Group One - FG1)

Konstanze thinks her own vision for education is at odds with external ideas of what education is for, although she doesn't specify the origin of these expectations: 'It's two different things isn't it?...It's what we want…and what we are fighting against'. She believes that schools are asked to produce 'things for the workforce' but her own vision is an alternative and is about broadening individual choice by providing a wide set of experiences at school. We see her belief that one of the functions of school is to prepare children and young people for life after school but she wants children to decide what their future will be and sees her role as providing them the opportunities now to enable these choices later. Hindmoor (2018) describes how the purpose of education has been reduced to a neoliberal requirement to prepare young people for the workforce. This pressure is affirmed here as this participant names it and tries to resist it. Her use of 'we ' possibly suggests that Konstanze believes that those in the focus group share a common purpose, one that sits in opposition to the view of some external stakeholders.

There is also a contrasting idea emerging, namely the way that the participants are affected by the concepts and narratives of neoliberal purposes even as they try to navigate them. Konstanze says that, 'It's what we want…in individuals ready for the world'. While Konstanze tries to extend the purpose of education beyond preparation for work to preparation for 'the world, 'it is not clear what this might encompass and

whether it extends beyond choice of profession. While 'the world 'hints at some notion of the collective it is not clear whether it relates to a concept of the common good. Furthermore, this excerpt raises questions about how Konstanze addresses the issues of social inequality that she sees. She possibly believes that education is an investment in the individual and that the opportunities that she provides them at school might broaden their choices once they leave. For Fraser (2005), affirmative measures to address social inequality, namely those that leave systemic injustice unchallenged, are characterised by attempts to correct the inequitable outcomes of social arrangements. In English education policy, these find expression in the narratives of catch up and closing the gaps (Reay 2020). They also locate responsibility for success with the individual student, teacher and school leader, simultaneously refuting and discrediting any systemic explanation for social inequality (Lumby and Coleman 2016). It is unclear from this excerpt whether Konstanze has unquestioningly adopted these narratives or whether she sees agrees with Lumby and Coleman (2016) that in the material and temporal reality of neoliberalism both affirmative and transformative approaches are practically necessary but it hints at a tension.

This tension between preparing young people for the world of work and preparing them for a broader future is represented in an exchange between Morwenna and Diane. Most of the focus group participants had previously been part of a reflective leadership discussion facilitated by a commissioned academic. She had used the 1927 Fritz Lang film, 'Metropolis 'as a metaphor to prompt discussion about the links between society, education and the neoliberal context:

> It comes back to the purpose of education, what we think fundamentally, why we want to, and do, educate children. And again we are going back to what you were saying about politics and people wanting to educate children so they can become the engine of the economy…And that's a real tension isn't it… (Morwenna,FG1)
>
> Metropolis isn't that it…Diane (FG1)

Expressing agreement with what Jacky had said earlier, Morwenna highlights the conflict between what external stakeholders require of schools and what the participants themselves see as their motivations. As with Konstanze, her use of the word 'we 'might

suggest that she perceives a coherence of perspective between the participants. Diane infers the same conflict between what she is trying to achieve and what is expected from her when she says, 'Metropolis isn't that it…' It is likely that the other participants would have recognised this reference as short hand for the instrumentalisation of current English education where its purposes have been narrowed to what Fielding (2000) calls 'schooling', a system within which students are readied to take their place in the economy and where public services are organised in ways that reflect business models (Hammersley-Fletcher 2009).

This disagreement between participants and stakeholders extends to a second area of tension about what each inherently values in education. This exchange between Erika and Sharon demonstrates this conflict:

> Education, I enjoy it intrinsically, and so in that sense it is something I go to with no barriers, let's find out, let's make mistakes … then there's another level where I think of the concept, that it's a good thing, education is a 'good thing', so it's being involved in it and again makes one feel that … you're in a place which is seen as or is positive … Erika (FG1)

> But what is the purpose of education and is it driven by moral imperative? We want it to be but is it actually? Or is it something else rather than education? Do we just convince ourselves…so that we read, write our own understanding of things, do we bring some kind of moral purpose that actually doesn't exist for others? Sharon (FG 1)

Sharon challenges her colleague's argument. She associates her own perspective with Erika's, 'We want it to be', but raises a question about whether others agree. Again, who 'others 'are is not clarified, but we can infer at the very least that it is those outside of the participant group. Hammersley-Fletcher (2015) describes the tensions that professionals experience when what they value intrinsically in their area of profession is at odds with wider stakeholder perceptions about what is important. She argues that these ethical tensions create a particular difficulty for professionals who have to either put aside their own values or find ways of balancing or navigating conflicting values. The belief that

education is valuable in its own right rather than just a means to an end might create such a conflict for participants. Diane also makes reference to this potential conflict.

> Well we are teachers aren't we, so we probably have a very coloured view of why we think there should be education. We want to enrich minds and offer experiences and all of those amazing things that others just described. I was trying to think of somebody outside education and what they might think the purpose is…so it does have different purposes. Diane (FG1)

The reference to 'somebody outside education' does not make clear whether the participant is calling to mind specific stakeholders, but suggests there is some coherence within the profession that is at odds with those who are not in it.

The sense that this conflict between those inside and outside of the profession is widely held amongst participants is reinforced by Yvonne. Having reflected on the script from focus group one, she volunteers her thoughts in feedback to other participants.

> I can see we feel that fundamental tension between the ideology of education and the reality…seeing it written down made it feel more raw…I can just hear people's desire to…make education matter and be impactful, you look at so many voices…that it's something precious but we then come into contact with the daily realities as Heads…recruitment, staffing, that sort of thing…and politicians who want to use education as a political football. Yvonne (FG2)

Yvonne juxtaposes the positions of her colleagues and the policy makers. She states the former value education as 'something precious' that has impact and makes a difference, and the latter use it as a political football. Given that policy makers also view education as vital to a nation's success, we can infer that she is contrasting their motivations. Her colleagues want to use education for changes that she values and policy makers want to use it for ends of which she disapproves. She does not specify what these are but we can infer she views them as cynical and self-serving.

This juxtaposition of values does not represent a simple dichotomy between the participants and other stakeholders. We saw in the excerpt from Konstanze that critical

and neoliberal understandings and perspectives can sit alongside each other. This description shows that the same is possible with values.

> I did this course, Future Leaders, and it was all about everyone getting to university and as a Head that should be your ambition. I'm not saying that shouldn't be your ambition but I've really, I don't know, changed my mind over time…I just think there's this expectation that if you don't reach it then you feel a failure. With all the tuition fees now and that I think if I was going to university now, would I actually go, I don't know if I would…You can have a fantastic, enjoyable, rich life and career with something that starts as an apprenticeship. I take those apprenticeships…being for if you're not very clever, yeah and that really annoys me…I hate the thought of Grammar School, it's just wrong, wrong, wrong. In comprehensive school you get setting and that's gonna allow those who are behind to get to the bar too…where they should be. But I do think…by year 9, some children should start apprenticeships…it's going to keep them happy and get them a career, and by year 9 you know the children who just don't want to do Shakespeare. It's not about… putting them in a box, it's about... (Denise,FG1)

This is an interesting description that demonstrates how participants can simultaneously express views that seem coherent with a critical understanding of education policy at the same time as expressing views that seem to reflect more neoliberal perspectives. Denise challenges the predominant policy view that all students should enter the workplace as graduates but does not seem ready to reject it altogether. This could be because she suspects the other participants, most of whom are her Head colleagues, have been influenced by this thinking and will not want to offend them. This conflict creates tensions for the professional educator. Brown etal (2013) argue that education is a cornerstone of the kind of happy life that does not expect us all to rise socially while Reay (2016) states that education is a democratic right for all of us. Denise reflects on how her own attitude has changed so that she now believes that apprenticeships can also lead to a happy future. However, whilst she bemoans the reduction of apprenticeships to something that less academic students should follow, she simultaneously expresses the view that students who want to follow apprenticeships will not want to study Shakespeare, implying either that there are pathways for the less academic or that Shakespeare is only ever accessible to the academically able (a view that would have been roundly rejected

by the masses that attended his theatre in the 16th and 17th centuries). We see a second contradiction in that Denise seems to reject the way that the Grammar School system separates students based on supposed academic ability but differentiates this from in-school separation that occurs with setting. The fact that she is unable to finish her thoughts at the end of the excerpt suggests that these are areas of thinking she is still working out for herself.

The description from Denise prompts Linda to directly articulate this contradiction between what she is expected do and what she considers right as a Head. She reflects on the script from the first focus group discussion and makes specific reference to Denise:

> I picked up on the moral purpose of education. Somebody else did actually specifically say that already, but reading through the script you find that everywhere from what a lot of people said and what do we value. It comes back to what Denise was saying… do all children have to go to university…you know that's what we tend to value and… she was…vocal on this…it's not just about that…and that links to the value of education and why, why do we do it. Linda (FG2)

This idea clearly resonates for her and she compares what is important to what possibly should be. Her question both confirms and queries the homogeneity that all students are expected to go to university post-school and locates her own ambivalence firmly within this context.

The tension between external expectations and purposes and those of the research participants extends to how they describe their educational provision beyond the formal curriculum and the opportunities and experiences they try to create for students.

In her semi-structured interview, Thecla differentiates her own provision and its purpose from those schools that have narrowed it:

> What we do for children in a day here is so different to what happens in my friends' schools. They ask how we can afford for all of our children learn an instrument …ballroom dancing, forest school, the list goes on and on. We want to help our students think about who they are what they want to be when they leave

> us. And that's for them to choose and decide, not their families, or policy makers or industry leaders…and the more challenging your background the more we want to help you to choose for yourself…and when I say for yourself…we ask students all the time, what do you want to be for yourself and for the world. Because they are connected…we are connected…Thecla (SSI)

This excerpt from Thecla describes the conditions, as she sees them, for students to make decisions in the future that benefit them and the world. She values the broad provision that comes as part of the Trust's commitment to a wide variety of excellent free clubs and activities (appendix three). She links this to identity formation, 'We want our students to think about who they are and what they want to be'. This provision goes hand-in-hand with a rejection of the expectations of other stakeholders, whether these be family members or industry. Like other participants she uses the idea of 'we' but given that she also differentiates what happens in her school from what happens in the schools of her friends, it is likely that 'we' refers to her staff as Trust staff rather than others in the profession. Sellar and Zipin (2018) argue that neoliberal education encourages students to reach their full potential to maximise individual productivity so that the main purpose of school is to develop the human capital that serves international knowledge economies. Schools become the main site of the creation of our very identity in this pursuit and school provision is shaped in this service (Spohrer et al 2018). Reay (2016) argues that schools can provide a challenge to this set of processes where collective advancement is valued over individual success. Thecla is rejecting this purpose and identity formation. Her use of 'for the world' and her insistence that there is a link between this and student choices about who they will be and what they will do for themselves suggest a notion of the common good. She appears to be arguing that her staff encourage individual student choice that is free from the restrictions of neoliberal expectations and eschews individualism in favour of a personal success that is linked to collective advancement.

This idea of the good life and its relationship to provision is expanded by Morwenna. She feeds back to the other participants following the group discussion activity on page 79 of Chapter Four.

> We honed in on…Aristotle and the good life…obviously what the good life is and how education contributes to it and how we use our values and curriculum and

> provision at Goodall Schools Trust to be integral to that rather than sort of an add on. So do we do it in an Aristotelian way in terms of vices and virtues, or do we do it as a reward system to lever up outcomes?…What is a good life and what does success look like…if your education leads to what you want it to, does that mean you are successful or does it not mean you are successful…what metrics are you using all the time?...How do we define success…when we come from a system which is quite outcomes heavy? We had a debate and…didn't know what the good life was but…how do you measure an…individual's good life, saying that they have had a good life (mutters of agreement)?... We had that age old debate about what we measure and how we measure it and should we be measuring it… Morwenna. (FG3)

Morwenna's group focuses on the idea of the good life and how this might be measured. Like Thecla, there is a sense of trying to use the Goodall Schools Trust approach to provision to navigate tensions as the group discusses how to use it to answer the question of what constitutes the good life. It is interesting that the participant presents her feedback as a series of questions suggesting that the debate was open-ended and exploratory, avoiding what Fielding and Moss (2011: 83) call 'closure', the inclination to close down debate and discussion rather than use it to further exploration and increase epistemological agency. However, we can also see how the participants struggle to come to any conclusions about what the good life comprises and how it might be measured. Morwenna draws attention to how she and they are constrained by a system that uses student exam outcomes as the clear measure of their readiness to enter the workforce. Biesta (2019) describes how critical approaches are subverted by neoliberal agendas and we can see Morwenna grapple with how to protect those agendas that Fielding and Moss (2011: 54) might call 'personal', having human value in themselves, like a focus on an exploration of what is right or good. It is possible that participants view the Goodall Schools Trust approach to curriculum and provision as a way to bridge the gap between their students and their more advantaged counterparts but also as a way to navigate the tensions they feel between what is expected of them from external stakeholders and what they value themselves as educators. This provision extends to the affective sphere. Cantillon and Lynch (2017) argue that it is important and often overlooked as a site of social inequality.

Becky links the affective realm and Goodall Schools Trust provision and curriculum as a way of navigating difficulties:

> Are we providing the right curriculum? And we talked about joy and happiness…and you said something that sounded like a wedding vow didn't you [to a member of her discussion group], which was lovely [laughter from the focus group] about joy and happiness and whether those outcomes align with our beliefs and policies at Goodall Schools Trust…but this just sort of led to a heart-wrenching…where are we and where should be with no real answers to anything…other than we talked about our Goodall Schools Trust curriculum and provision as being something…that we all believe in, in a very deep way. Becky. (FG3)

Becky feeds back after her group discuss the Griffith's article as part of the activity outlined in Chapter Four. She gives the impression that the affective realm is important to the group. There is a sense of collective commitment or shared values in the reference to 'our beliefs and policies'. Previously we heard how Goodall Schools Trust provision and curriculum are important to participants in helping them to address issues of inequality for students from challenged communities. Here Thecla suggests that they help address affective issues although we are also left with the sense that the group struggles to really answer the question of how to bring joy and happiness to their contexts.

Morwenna invites others in her group to add to her feedback and another member of her discussion group, Sarah, adds:

> One thing I thought about…as a leader, is that we need to bridge all of the gaps for all of our children and what are we doing to find hope, love, rejoicing and joy within our curriculum and how do we make that explicit? Sarah (FG3)

Sellar and Zipin (2018) and De Lissovoy (2014) describe how neoliberal agendas shape our very identities and appropriate our moral purposes in pursuit of market goals. Sarah challenges this narrative when she invites others to view the affective realm as important and to include it as part of a social justice agenda. Nevertheless, we also see the rhetoric of closing the gaps once more, an affirmative approach which implies that if staff and

students work hard enough they can ensure equality of educational outcomes (Sellar and Zipin 2018). This demonstrates that critical challenge can sit alongside neoliberal narratives in the minds of participants. For the critical realist, this conflict results when individuals are asked to make decisions without an underlying framework so that neoliberal forces at the level of the real affect the individual's ability to reproduce or transform existing practice at the level of the actual (Parra 2018).

These data demonstrate how participants reject the idea that their job is to prepare young people for the work force and in this way stand in opposition to policy makers, reflecting the conflict of purpose that Apple (2015) describes. Nevertheless, we also see how this conflict is accompanied by the internal contradiction that Hammerlsey-Fletcher (2015) describes, where critical discourse can sit side-by-side with neoliberal or affirmative measures to counter injustice in participant descriptions. These conflicts create difficulties and anxieties for the education profession , when it comes to making decisions about practice they sometimes put aside their own values.

The desire to correct the inequitable results of certain social arrangements lies at the heart of the capabilities approach to social inequality (Nussbaum 2002) and constitutes what Fraser would term an affirmative approach (Fraser 1985). It is difficult to see whether participants are trying to challenge the very notions of what constitutes success (Reay 2012b), or desire to address the inequalities of access that make it difficult for students from particular backgrounds to compete in the world of work and beyond.

5.1.2 The place of school in addressing inequality

The second finding from this analysis is what participants say about the place of social justice agendas in their educational purposes. Participants believe that schools have a part to play in addressing social inequality and we hear them grappling to articulate the origins of unfairness and the difference schools might make.

Some participants seem to acknowledge systemic inequality and we hear this in the ways they describe how they deal with it at school:

> But then that’s back to budgets isn’t it and finance because one person 32 children and a set of worksheets that you’ve done all black and white on the

> printer is the standard of education that we are prepared to invest in and I'm sure you're all sitting here thinking right, how do I re-surface my playground so that my children don't have nasty cuts or am I going to invest in new computers? I'm tired of living in a society that is absolutely, on the one hand, focused on, you know, cutting costs…this whole agenda that we've been living under for so long, this whole austerity, and watching flagrant… wanton spending on irrelevancies elsewhere. Yvonne (FG1)

For Yvonne the idea of austerity is an ideology that leads to specific decisions about funding and she evidences this by comparing the way that schools are underfunded while other (unspecified) areas that she considers less important, are funded without reservation. When participants were invited to reflect on the group script from focus group 1, and share their thoughts about what themes they could identify for later exploration, one participant offers the following reflection that reinforces this idea:

> I think everything that has been said in the first focus group discussion is valid. I think the politics [is an] issue for us, and being anti-austerity. Unless politics changes, nothing else is going to change … The focus group has talked a lot about social equity … about money, resources …Raewyn (FG1)

Raewyn reflects the content and tone from the earlier discussion, that participants believe that material conditions affect education and that austerity is a political approach not the only response to an economic situation. She also picks up on participants 'sense of helplessness, that until policy changes things will be difficult in schools.

Sharon makes specific reference to social class when asked to consider the main challenges to her educational purpose:

> The true sadness is that not many people would acknowledge those class-based systems and limitations that affect us in education, at least not enough to change them. Sharon (FG1)

Gewirtz (1998) argues that neoliberal policy narratives no longer contain any mention of structural inequality when they talk about student outcomes, and this has served to

remove it all together from the debate about class-based differences. This move sits within a broader depoliticization of education where neoliberalism has disavowed the political nature of schools and reframed political issues in economic terms (Gunter and McGinty 2020) or as problems that require technical solutions (Clarke 2012). Morwenna reflects this sense when she describes 'class-based systems' as posing a challenge and argues that it is unpopular to acknowledge it as a contributor.

Linda highlights social background as an important factor to structural inequality when she summarises which themes she sees in the script of the first focus group discussion:

> Social background, moral purpose…privilege…closing the gap…how do we deal with that privilege…how do we get our children there? Linda (FG2)

Linda acknowledges social inequality in her use of the term 'social background' and this is clearly a value-laden area for her, as she refers to 'privilege'. Nevertheless, her question about solutions, 'How do we get our children there?' and her reference to 'closing the gaps', suggest a belief that she should provide the opportunities for her students that help them to catch up, in some way, to their more advantaged counterparts. Again, this raises the question of the extent to which schools should adopt what Fraser (1989) calls 'affirmative measures' rather than the transformative practices that result from critical analysis. De Lissovoy (2018) argues that while these approaches are necessary in the short term, a fuller critical understanding of structural inequality is necessary if neoliberalism is to be undermined.

Some participants comment on schools themselves as a locus of social inequality. Sharon describes how the school system is set up to reinforce class differences so that some can gain at the expense of others:

> You think about people who are looking after places like Oxbridge and they are making sure certain people are going there, they are funding Oxbridge ... there's a lot out there that is against fairness, the way it's designed … I think that people can rise up and I definitely do believe in that, but I believe that these crony systems, where who you know and who can push you forward, do limit the

> achievement of others … I wonder whether there do have to be losers so others can succeed? Sharon (FG1)

Apple (2011) describes an education system that is able to contribute to social justice agendas but he also argues that logically the obverse is also true: schools have the potential, and often do, to reflect and reproduce neoliberal hegemony. Sharon describes divided educational opportunities where social inequality is reflected in the design of the system. She identifies high performing universities as places not accessible to everyone and not based on ability. They are protected by 'crony systems 'and what is more, the success of some is based on the failure of others. She makes reference to the social associations described by Griffiths (2012) that are made in some types of educational settings and how they benefit those with access to them, who already bring privilege to their education experience.

Denise describes how she is trying to navigate the way schools can simultaneously reflect social inequality while trying to provide solutions to it.

> If you go back to the first question, the purpose of education, I had two very different thoughts. I thought, for me, one purpose of education is it opens life choices and life chances for a certain section of society, it's a passport out of poverty, it's a basic human right, it's a safe place, a tool for certain children, and I thought the other extreme is, it's also a rite of passage, go to private school or go to school, go to university become a barrister or a judge or be on the stock exchange. Denise (FG1)

Denise describes the dichotomy between education for the less affluent, who need it as a passport out of poverty by giving them different choices and chances, and those who come to it with prior advantage and use it as a rite of passage to a high status, high salaried role in society. Again, we see the social connections described by Griffiths (2012), available to those who use their existing privilege to access educational experiences and settings that can further extend their privilege through networks. Furthermore, when Denise describes education as a 'safe place' and a 'basic human right', she also reflects the idea that education is valuable because of what it provides for the more

disadvantaged in the present as well as how it provides them for a future, 'a passport out of poverty'.

Apple (2015) argues that schools not only reflect society but have the potential to experiment with and prefigure better social arrangements that demonstrate alternative models of relationship to young people. In focus group two Erika includes this comment in feedback from her group's discussion:

> In our group we were talking about the politics of education. What's its purpose and how does it reflect society? How do schools either mirror or get to change society…We were speaking about…the fact that this article[8] was…aimed at social change so there was a real concept of education as a force to change something in the world. That doesn't feel like an aim in education at the moment, probably more so at the Goodall Schools Trust, but not in education generally. Erika (FG3)

Erika reflects on the extent to which the idea of education for social change holds sway in current education thinking and decides that it is not prevalent. Further on in the feedback, Erika outlines what this means for the Goodall Schools Trust:

> We talked about how we do have quite a lot of political bits of learning going on in the schools…studying Brexit in year 6…is that something that should then go across the entire Trust, how do you decide on that as Heads…We did start to…think about how we could see that working practically in the realm of politics particularly, but it could be in other realms like…equality…very much like the Goodall Arts Festival works. Erika (FG3)

For Ball (2017), more just learning communities equip young people with the tools to critically analyse their contexts. It is not clear from this excerpt from Erika whether 'political bits of learning' relates to curriculum content or giving students the skills to analyse their environments. Neither is it clear whether the work might be future focused or concerned with how to build new models of relationship in the present.

8 Gandin, L. and Apple M. (2012) Can critical democracy last? Porto Alegre and the struggle over 'thick' democracy in education. Journal of Education Policy. Taylor & Francis, London.

The place of school in addressing social inequality is explored by Sharon and Diane when they discuss the Gandin and Apple article (2012) as part of the activity outlined in Section 4.9:

> I was interested in the types of knowledge in this article…It talks about being a good citizen and making change so it's back to what we were talking about earlier, are we creating pupils that go off and change the world for the better…these different types of knowledge suggest that the whole of hierarchy in society, the private schools and all of that actually doesn't really matter anymore if we are talking about being good humans and, and making change for the right purpose. In private school they walk around like that, looking down on society…because they were privileged enough to go to private school. They know all that knowledge, capital cities and stuff, but do they actually have the emotional and community knowledge that is necessary to be a decent human being? Sharon (FG3)

> So playing devil's advocate…does it matter because yes they might not know how to be a decent human being but are the children who go to private schools in a better position to create change in the world. You've got children who are not in that position becoming amazing human beings who would do it in the right way and in a meaningful way and then you've got people like [names a high profile politician] who's a career politician and doesn't in my opinion do anything for his own values or belief system but only to advance his career. So he had the opportunity to go to that school or mix in those circles…it doesn't matter to him and his cronies if he's a good person. Diane. (FG3)

Sharon's and Diane's exchange reinforces the idea that participants are grappling with the idea of what difference school can make to social inequality. Their exchange takes place in the spirit of exploration so that Sharon raises questions and Diane plays 'devil's advocate' to further the discussion. Sharon asks whether it is possible to ignore social hierarchy and the way this is reproduced by Independent schools if she prepares her own students to challenge inequality. She also equates the idea of challenging inequality with being a 'decent human being' and implies that those who are privileged enough to go to independent schools are unlikely to achieve this status. This suggests a moral distinction

between those who have power and privilege and those who don't which raises questions about what would result if approaches to social justice were to distribute power and privilege more evenly. Diane thinks that only those in a position of privilege hold the power to make changes to social arrangements. Apple (2011) argues that social arrangements can only be changed when the forces that keep them in place are uncovered. Diane uncovers one such set of forces. However, she also seems to see power as a limited commodity so that it can only reside where the privileged exercise it for their own ends. She also sees it as binary so that if those who exercise it on their own behalf to reinforce current arrangements then it cannot also be exercised by those who wish to exercise it on behalf of others in ways that build alternatives.

While debate has raged for decades over whether schools reproduce or have the potential to transform social arrangements, they are viewed as powerful in young people's lives which is why debates about their purpose are so vehemently contested (Apple 2015). This research is premised on the belief that they can be places where adults and young people can build relationships and social arrangements that provide a challenge to neoliberalism in the present and prefigure more just relationships for the future. Participants acknowledge the challenges of their contexts and can articulate the power arrangements that underpin them, but they remain largely optimistic that schools can and do make a difference in young people's lives and in doing so help to reduce inequality. Nevertheless, when they describe how they make this contribution their descriptions are largely confined to the broad Trust provision and individual opportunity for students.

5.1.3 Issues of measurement

The third idea in this first key finding links a number of the ideas raised by participants so far to issues of measurement. [Measurement as it specifically links to performativity agendas is detailed in section two of this chapter – working context]. This excerpt from Morwenna reinforces the difference between what participants and other stakeholders value:

> I think we are challenged in the way that we are measured and what other people think is important and I think that's really difficult at times when you have a real moral purpose [general agreement], without being arrogant and thinking 'I think

> this is the right thing', …society at large doesn't necessarily agree. Morwenna (FG3)

Morwenna describes the difficulty she has navigating stakeholder expectations and perceptions of her work as presented in the issue of what 'others 'want to measure. We see the use of 'we 'again suggesting that she perceives a coherent perspective amongst the participant group. Issues of measurement seem particularly pertinent to Morwenna, as she returns to it several months later. After reading an article in section 4.3 as part of the activity outlined in section 4.9, she feeds back on behalf of her group:

> What is improvement and what is the improvement journey? The way we try to use the three pillars [appendix two] in school improvement, that is certainly a measure, a way towards that in terms of what we've been trying to achieve but does that truly capture all of what we are trying to achieve? We are all at different stages as well so it makes it very difficult. And how do we say 'that's successful ' and know which is the bit that has led to it? Because actually it's very holistic isn't it? You're never quite sure which elements are making the difference. Then we had the argument about measuring things, and whether it's worth it and how much time do you put into measuring and evaluating which is really important as opposed to actually getting the thing done which is just as important, when we are on that journey where we are constantly having to move forward. We had all of those and came to no conclusion, I'm afraid. [Laughter]…Morwenna (FG3)

In the preceding section, participants described the importance of the Goodall Schools Trust approach to curriculum and provision in helping them to address issues of social inequality. Morwenna refers to how the Trust uses its three pillars (appendix two) as one way of broadening what is measured. These pillars argue for the importance of balancing a set of free, broad educational experiences and a strong pastoral system that understands and supports students with high achievement in a broader than usual range of areas to provide all students with a chance to feel success. Morwenna does not specify how these pillars are measured but does draw attention to the difficulty of applying measurements fairly when schools are at different points on the improvement trajectory. In addition, Morwenna also refers to more generic difficulties with the measurement of improvement. Gewirtz (1998) warns against making simplistic claims about how

improvement activity can lead to better student outcomes and Sayer (1992) about claiming causal relationships in complex social situations. Thrupp (2001) describes how this has been extended to measurement in the school context where what can be easily measured becomes the focus of activity and in turn drives strategies to improve schools. The discussion in this group reflects this move and the difficulties it poses for professionals. Morwenna is honest about the way the group grapples with these issues and presumably continues to make decisions about practice and priorities without a clear resolution to this conflict. This suggests that the participants lead and practise in a context of uncertainty and ambiguity.

Erika also raises questions about what is measured by school improvement:

> What is the focus of school improvement? We look at lots of foci when we are doing it, we refer to the 'great indicators' and the different pillars [appendix two] but does there need to be a focus change, does this change over time, who decides that, where are the checks for that as well, to make sure it's done well? And how do we celebrate successes and understand barriers as well? Erika (FG3)

Erika presents the feedback from her discussion group where questions have been asked about who decides what the focus for improvement is. This raises interesting questions about how the leaders in the central education team relate to the leaders in schools. The three pillars and the Trust vision were written by the co-founders before any schools joined the Trust. The 'great indicators', on the other hand, were co-written by Trust leaders in an attempt to describe what a Goodall Schools Trust school might look and feel like for students and staff. They were created to provide an alternative to the Ofsted framework which was considered insufficient. This description suggests that this co-creation is not systematic or regular and that as conditions have changed, more opportunities to consider what is measured should be created. Fielding (1997) describes the importance of involving professionals in policy making if we are to develop democratic practice and strengthen professional agency and we see this group's desire to be involved. Like Morwenna, Erika presents the feedback as a series of questions suggesting that group discussion has been open ended and has drawn attention to areas for exploration rather than leading to definitive decisions or opinions.

A number of the preceding excerpts exemplify participant attempts to broaden the sense of what education is for and these attempts are repeatedly linked to issues of measurement in participants' minds. In focus group three Becky says:

> We believe that the sort of … education that we provide, actually inspires children to have that intrinsic motivation to want to achieve … to want to succeed in life, whatever that success looks like or however we measure it, which may not be in the way that … society measures it normally. Becky (FG3)

Becky raises questions about how we define success but she also sees the difficulty in finding ways to measure successes that vary from the norm. She seems to want students to define their own path and what they define as success.

Finally, Helen raises questions about how we measure those things that might be considered linked to the affective realm:

> I'd like to share this quote with you… 'The only way in the end to answer questions to do with success or otherwise of a school system is by watching the effect that education has on the children and by judging its results not in terms of cleverness of knowledge but in terms of character'. [Agreements.]… We do what we do in education because we measure it, therefore, we fit a system to measure something...We talked a little about…trying to bring in that element of teaching character and emotion and valuing it…balanced against what we effectively would say are specification requirements…what we are forced…into teaching, knowledge-based systems. The three pillars really help us to match…the whole child and the emotional and character development. Helen(FG3)

Helen describes a balancing act. On the one hand she deals with the external expectations of curricula specifications and what she refers to as 'knowledge-based systems'. These are reminiscent of the pre-prepared packages of learning that Ball (2013) argues reflect a specific epistemology and pedagogy that can reduce authentic learning to instrumentalist 'schooling'. On the other hand, there is the desire to deal with the affective realm and reference to the Trust's three pillars of Proud Traditions, Wide Horizons and High Achievement, which attempt to balance student experiences in the

present with preparation for later life. Helen introduces an additional issue around measurement. She seems to be suggesting that what we measure shapes the learning agenda. This echoes the descriptions in chapter two of how instrumentalist preoccupations shape the education agenda (Lupton and Thrupp 2013). This backdrop creates pressures for the education professional as they attempt to pursue those things that they value (Hammersley-Fletcher 2015).

5.1.4 Summary

In the data presented in this section, there are no attempts to refute structural explanations for social injustice as is the case with neoliberal descriptions of social inequality (Lumby and Coleman 2016) but rather attempts to articulate the structural causes of unfairness. These origins are predominantly material or economic in nature, with the references to social inequality relating to material disadvantage or social class. What is more, the affirmative rhetoric of closing the gaps (Fraser 1995) sits side by side with frustrations with structural conditions that affect schooling and affect life chances in the future. What isn't clear is how to deconstruct and reconstruct practices and policies to address these issues (Fraser 1995) and we are left with a sense that participants believe that they carry responsibility as individuals and as a group of leaders to find solutions to issues they did not create. They see themselves as the locus and agents of educational change (Spohrer et al 2018). Participants try to articulate structural causes of injustice and certainly make reference to them but the lack of clarity or coherence in these descriptions leaves the hierarchical structures that reinforce economic and social inequality unchallenged and unchanged (Reay 2012a, Sellar and Zipin 2018). While both neoliberal and critical approaches acknowledge the presence of social inequality and see a central role for education in addressing social justice agendas (Reay 2012a), only critical analysis invites questions about the structural causes of and systemic solutions to unfairness.

We see a complex story emerging. We see participants repeatedly resisting the pessimism that Apple (2020) argues represents a loss of hope in the ability of schools to make a difference in children's lives and that undermines attempts at real social justice. Participants seem in agreement in arguing for an unwavering, optimistic insistence that schools can make a contribution to relieving social inequality (Apple 2020). We see school as the provider of choice, chance and opportunity for disadvantaged students.

Nevertheless, the rhetoric of closing gaps suggests affirmative measures, actions that address differences in access and distribution to broad provision and good education (Reay 2020) and while these are necessary given the neoliberal context (Lumby and Coleman 2016) they are not enough on their own (Reay 2020).

Even an acknowledgement that the affective is a site of social inequality, and therefore,, a potential site for potential transformation, does not address the causes of social inequality and, therefore, the part schools play in this (Sellar and Zipin 2018).

The context for these understandings is also complicated. Thrupp (2013) describes how policy makers resist articulating the differences in school contexts for fear that social deprivation will be used by professionals to excuse poor student performance. These participants seem aware of the social inequality that is their context and determined to use their resources at school to give students the best chances to succeed against the odds. This raises the question of how much more effective they might be if given the opportunity to compare contexts and learn lessons from each other. What is also clear is that the participants are clear that education happens in a specific social context and is affected by it (Braun et al 2011) and that they have a desire to do everything necessary to help students to overcome their circumstances.

All of these areas have ramifications for the measurement of both students and staff in school and exacerbate the tensions existent between what the participants value and what stakeholders see as the purposes of education. Although participants do not overtly problematise issues of what quality means when they measure improvement in school, their questions about how to measure the elements of Goodall Schools Trust provision that they value can be seen to pose a challenge to narrower understandings of educational purpose.

We also see questions raised and ambivalence about the extent to which schools can change society and model more fair relationships. Clarke (2012) and Gunter (2018) chart and exemplify the depoliticisation of English education up to the current day and it is helpful to see how this context may make it challenging to consider the political ramifications and potential power of education.

In summary, what these findings add is that, in the context of a MAT, neither have educational professionals been taken over by neoliberal discourse that suggest their purpose is to prepare young people for the work place, not have they been dissuaded from considering structural organisation as part of the reason for social inequality. Rather they take comfort from the Vision of the Trust and defend the contribution that the Trust's commitment to broad provision makes to the lives of students. However, the conflict between neoliberal discourse on the one hand and the purposes of the participants on the other leads to a conflict and contradiction in participant descriptions so that while they name inequality as structural they struggle to articulate solutions to inequality that are also structural.

5.2 Finding two - A context of performativity and privatization

Technologies of performativity underpin the neoliberal agenda for education, where the prime purpose of education is to give young people the skills and knowledge they need to take their place in the economy (Ball 2012). These technologies include the forms and process of judgement which measure the successful adoption of pre-determined packages of knowledge (Fielding and Moss 2011), the externally set targets and comparisons that serve them (Ball 2012), and the audit, monitoring and surveillance cultures in which they successfully operate (Hammersley-Fletcher 2015).

This key finding, our working context, explores four main ideas: how participants resist technologies of measurement and comparison; how participants navigate cultures of risk; how participants manage the tension between the rhetoric of autonomy; and the reality of control.

5.2.1.Resisting technologies of measurement and comparison

Some of the data demonstrate how participants try to manage and navigate measurement technologies that underpin performativity agendas. Morwenna describes the way she tries to manage the effect of repeated Ofsted visits on her teachers:

> You know as a teacher, there are things that you do but actually you start to lose your confidence and you start to become tick box and ‘Have I done my assessment for learning?’… OFSTED didn’t help at all, coming in all the time, especially when they started doing the, 'Oh I’d been through there for three

> minutes and there's been no progress' type lesson observations, so there was too much tick box… You just need to be strong [as a leader] and say to staff, 'It's wrong, don't worry, I'll back you up, it's wrong. I'm not going to walk into your classroom for you to suddenly stop and do a mini plenary'. But they'd lost their confidence, they'd really lost confidence in their ability because they were trying to squeeze themselves into the same package and it just didn't work. So actually, we had to take away anything with the 'm 'word, the monitoring word, we said, 'We're taking it all away, you are capable of doing it, go back to being a music teacher...you need to get back to what you wanted to do and why you're doing it' … It was taking away a lot of that fear and getting them working together as a staff…and as a community. Morwenna (SSI)

Morwenna describes how repeated Ofsted visits, aimed at improving school quality, can affect what teachers do in the lesson. However, rather than lead to an increase in student outcomes, as they intend, they make teachers preoccupied with proving that their teaching is good enough to external regulators. We see this in Morwenna's reference to 'a mini-plenary'. Her description suggests the purpose of Ofsted is to check 'what' is being done rather than the impact of teaching and this is reinforced by the idea that her staff are trying to 'squeeze themselves into the same package.' Ball (2013) reminds us how tick box activities reduce professional self-belief and Morwenna reflects this when she says that the Ofsted insistence on conformity has eroded the confidence of her staff. Morwenna manages the conflict these visits create for her staff and the way their confidence has been eroded by encouraging them to believe in their own teaching abilities and motivations which she believes are the foundation for improvement but she also sees the place of collaboration in improving teaching. She seeks to replace monitoring with teacher self-belief and in referring to the 'm' word, references a GST joke. The Trust school improvement approach (appendix four) refers to evaluation and self-evaluation as processes for improvement and describes monitoring as a low-level activity. It argues that the purpose of monitoring is to check that school improvement activity has been carried out rather than assess impact and learn lessons. Because the idea of monitoring activity had become so disapproved of at the Trust, a member of staff referred to it as the 'm' word and the phrase became used regularly as a way of GST staff identifying with each other and demonstrating their attitude to monitoring activity.

Thecla, a previous Head and now a member of the Executive Team, describes the effect of the audit and measurement culture on the central Trust team:

> …audit, regulation and measurement are constants, daily constants that cost the Trust, and therefore,, the tax payer, thousands of pounds a year…I don't mean annual audit of accounts which is a more straightforward process. When we started the Trust, this came as a real shock. I am used to working in regulated environments, Local Authorities, central government, and it's right…this isn't our money, we are stewards of the tax-payers... but…this is unprecedented. And it's not even the amount of regulation, it's the purpose that is alarming…and there is no collaboration, no sharing, no learning from errors and mistakes after measurement… All audit is a way of controlling what happens or what we do… The Department use a phrase 'the Daily Mail test'. They ask all the time, 'What would the average Daily Mail reader think about this decision?' …we are encouraged to avoid anything that could be seen as contentious. We have been questioned for running arts festivals, purchasing second hand furniture that is cheaper than school catalogue furniture and delights students, spending money on musical instruments, replacing behaviour policies with community or relationship cultures, domesticating learning spaces… Ironically it is our actual auditors that have been the most helpful in supporting us to navigate this, they don't seem to have a political agenda…we have to work hard to manage this…so that it doesn't overwhelm our schools. There are some months where I think it will overwhelm us…and take all of the joy out of our job…. If you don't fit in and play the game, if you keep pushing the boundary as we do, you get a name for yourselves….and ultimately you can't invite other schools to join you. Thecla (SSI)

This description represents the contradictory narratives of autonomy and accountability that Greaney and Higham (2018) describe as the context for Academies. Thecla describes how the Department for Education uses public perception, symbolised by 'the Daily Mail test', to reinforce their control over what MATs do and how they do it. Where GST has used its autonomy to broaden provision and refresh its learning environments, the DfE have suggested that these decisions are contentious because they deviate from the norm. Apple (2015) describes the way audit serves as a reinforcing technology creating cultures of fear and risk and Thecla describes how audit, regulation and measurement work

together to distract the Trust from what they see as their main purposes so that some months she thinks 'It will overwhelm us…and take all the joy our of our jobs'. It is interesting that Thecla perceives the DfE as having ultimate control over the Trust, able to decide whether other schools join them. This contradicts the narratives of MAT autonomy and questions the notion that local governing bodies vote to convert schools to Academy status. Thecla's description also reinforces data in the first Finding that outlines the conflicts of purpose between participants and policy makers. However, here it has material consequences which can be avoided if you 'play the game,' in a move that she believes would compromise the Trust's direction and vision, and so it seems she is resigned to 'keep pushing the boundary.'

5.2.2. Navigating cultures of risk

The audit and measurement cultures that underpin the neoliberal agenda are accompanied by an increased awareness of and fear of risk (Apple 2006) and specifically the fear of the consequences of not meeting external targets. The narratives that maintain them become part of the common sense solutions to education issues and are increasingly unchallenged (Apple 2006). Spohrer et al (2018) argue that both individuals and organisations internalise these narratives, absorbing a need to improve and get things right, and this is represented in the constant drive to improve. Sellar (2018) describes how these narratives underpin the move to locate all change in the teacher, student and leader so that the individual becomes the single locus for improvement (Sellar 2018):

> We have chances [at the Goodall Schools Trust] to learn through lots of support, 1-1s, having watched other people do it, making mistakes. But not on some things… this is the problem, there aren't many places where the Executive Team can try things out because it has too many ripples across the whole Trust. There are some things where we could say, 'That's maybe low risk' but there's not a lot of low risk. I think we support this …by weaving things in and out of the big things to give support, so that it's interlinked…for example being part of a risky thing to do but not the whole thing, being given individual tasks out of the whole…being part of something without being wholly responsible…I think there is a real anomaly… because every detail matters and there's not a lot of room for people to have an off day or to make a mistake. And yet there is a lot of room here for

> people to grow and learn. I don't want to put a cap on things but it's hard not to cap things sometimes when the high pressure is there because it can shut people down because they are all trying to do a perfect job…There's a never ending barrage of what's got to be done and that's not the vision for the Trust, we want to be forward thinking…living the vision and that's quite hard because there are 13 schools and there's always something happening that we have to support…an Ofsted visit, financial audit, a Regional Schools' Commissioner visit, an angry parent, an anonymous complaint. Margaret (SSI)

Margaret, who was a Head and now works as part of the Trust central team, describes how a sense of risk and constant demands from external regulators and stakeholders constrain her activity. Her sense of risk threatens what she values, the development of staff and the pursuit of the Trust vision. She tries to protect these values whilst accommodating the requirements, and her wish, to support schools with externally prescribed activity. She submits to some of the pressure from outside, by identifying areas of work where the consequences aren't too great if things go wrong. Then she protects her desire to develop others by allocating smaller parts of a key area of work to them, supporting the work and the colleague by linking it to the work of others. Her attempts at managing this conflict aren't coherent so that she oscillates between protecting her own values and acting in ways that submit to the external demands. She says, 'There's not a lot of room for people to have an off day or make a mistake and yet there's a lot of room here for people to grow and learn'. She says that she doesn't want to cap others but has to limit what they can try because 'the pressure is there'. The origin of this pressure is explicated at the end of the excerpt where Margaret describes the external demands on 13 schools, Ofsted visits, financial audit, complaints etc. We get a sense of immediacy and volume from her list which makes it difficult for her to look forward and live the vision. Hammersley-Fletcher (2015: 202) notes how school leaders, understandably focused on 'immediate, pressing and localised issues', have reduced time to think through the tensions they face and how they might manage these tensions. Ultimately, the environment constrains Margaret's work. She caps the activity of others, even though she doesn't want to, because she understands that the consequences of getting things wrong are high. Margaret's description is redolent of how ethical tensions create anxiety for the professional and translate into material conflict where they are not effectively managed (Hammersley-Fletcher 2013). These conflicts are accompanied by the

internalisation of her sense of responsibility and fear of risk which extend to her colleagues who are 'all trying to do a perfect job'.

Thecla advises on how to manage the risk agendas that affect the Trust's agenda:

> Risk is a big thing that I'd never really thought about before (I joined the central team). I think an understanding of risk is second nature to a good school leader. We consider it all the time. Will this work, will it cause any problems, how do I get people on side, do I have enough time and money to do it, will it bring benefits for children or students? But I think that risk in the Academy policy is part of the whole thing of trying to narrow and reduce what we do and what schools are for. And everyone seems obsessed with getting into trouble. So risk is about risk registers. Have you done them, have you got them? If you have, it doesn't actually matter what goes wrong. You covered your own back, you followed a process, you used your own policy. The best way around it is to do the…registers and use them to have useful conversations about the culture of risk…more importantly, to make sure you have done good groundwork to make brave and creative decisions that make a positive difference to young people. Otherwise, we are all just stuck doing safe stuff that doesn't necessarily work. Thecla (SSI).

Thecla differentiates between a culture of risk, which she sees as useful for preparing for changes or the introduction of new ideas, and the approach to risk encouraged in the Academies Policy where there is a concern with anticipating blame for when things go wrong. Thus, culture finds expression in a preoccupation with processes for their own sake, in this case the completion of risk registers. Reflecting Strain's (2009) argument that audit and risk are used as technologies of control and serve to narrow the education agenda, Thecla says that the purpose of this culture of audit, particularly in the context of the Academy policy, is politically motivated, namely to 'reduce what we do and what schools are for.' Equally, it is suggestive of the prevalence of risk in the risk cultures that Apple (2006a) describes. This culture is not concerned with safety but making sure you have 'covered your own back.' This cynical use of risk, which can be managed if you can prove that you have policies and have followed them, suggests that external regulators also feel pressured. Nevertheless, they pass this pressure on to schools.

Thecla has found a way of managing the requirement to have risk registers to be compliant, by then 'using them to have useful conversations about the culture of risk'. Thecla has taken a neoliberal technology and subverted it for better purposes whilst simultaneously meeting regulatory requirements. She argues that this approach mitigates against the unintended consequences of risk processes that reduce school activity to 'safe stuff'. Nevertheless, Thecla's description, which juxtaposes the approach to risk that asks will this 'bring benefits for children or students', against approaches where officials ask 'have you covered your own back', leaves the question of how to resist the narrowing effects of this latter approach, unanswered.

Hammersley-Fletcher (2013) describes how, when faced with impossible and contradictory choices, professionals sometimes put aside their own values and motivations under pressure. The following description from Denise, where she describes how her leadership team works together, suggests one such example in the data:

> We're in a very different position now we've had Ofsted. I couldn't take risks because we had to get good and we had to get the results up, and I truly believe the results are where they need to be now. So I can take a lot more risks with my leadership team. Before there was very little movement because I knew what we had to do…I can allow them more freedom. And you know like people learn through mistakes, don't they, best really, so you've got to measure the level of the mistake they make, I think there needs to be more freedom. I'm going to have to, they've got to step up, some are coming to me all the time for advice and decisions. Denise (SSI)

This description shows how successful technologies of performativity can be internalised so that they express themselves as self-monitoring (Ball 2013). Denise says that she believes that people learn from mistakes, but she has prioritised the avoidance of risk until Ofsted agendas have been satisfied, subverting her own values to those of external regulators (Ball 2013). It is also interesting that she associates risk with flexibility and freedom so that she does not use these approaches in ways that could progress her agenda. The final line reveals what Denise means by 'more freedoms', when she equates it with decision-making.

Denise's concern for risk sits alongside her attitude to her team. We can infer from 'people learn from their mistakes', and the fact that she hasn't shared decision-making authority, that she sees herself as competent in a way her colleagues aren't. She needs them to 'step up', a phrase that suggests under-performance and she does not see how retaining decision-making authority out of fear has created this situation. When she says that she needs to give more freedom to the team so that her colleagues don't come to her 'all the time for advice and decisions', she reveals an unintended consequence of her own decision, namely an over-dependence on her as the team leader.

She expands this consequence, and her approach to the team, in a later comment:

> I think we are a team in many, many aspects…but I think the balance of the work has got to be spread out more equally because I've nearly killed myself doing this and it hasn't been equal. It's got to be because it's unsustainable. Denise. (SSI)

The use of the passive construction, 'work has got to be spread out', distances her from the decisions that have led to this point but the over-dependence that she has observed has had serious personal consequences for her so that she has 'nearly killed' herself. It is impossible to make a causal link between the way Denise approaches risk and the way she sees her colleagues because it is more likely that they work in interaction so that we see a dual set of conflicts that create a complicated context. On the one hand, we see that Denise is affected by the discourses of risk and fear that come with the Ofsted agenda. We see the 'weighing up' that Hammersley-Fletcher (2015: 202) describes when Denise measures the 'level of mistake' that team members might make so that she can avoid the negative consequences of the wrong decisions. This is overlaid with the inconsistency between what she says she wants from her team, more freedom to make decisions, and the way she has approached them so far, resulting in a complex and complicated context fraught with difficulty and contradiction.

5.2.3. Managing the conflict between autonomy and control

Wilkins (2021) has described how technologies of performativity have been overlaid with popular commercial sector narratives so that the twin concept of autonomy and accountability has become a central tenet in the way the current government approaches school improvement. Glatter (2021) argues that this narrative comes in the context of the

largest centralisation of education since 1930 so that MATs are expected to use any actual autonomy. These now comprise both the definition of student success in the form of a narrow set of outcomes and the competitive means by which these should be secured. Hyper-accountability underscores these narratives.

These reflections from Erika following the activity outlined in section 4.9, raise interesting questions about the consequences of public accountability agendas:

> This article [Gandin and Apple 2012] is… about engaging community, and children, other stakeholders, I mean, how big a group would you want to engage with? There were lots of stakeholders involved in this… including families…parents who felt disempowered to make decisions on what should be taught, they were saying, 'I don't know, what do I know?' kind of thing. And so that would then make us think about, if we were taking this very, very democratic view, what checks and balances would we put in place to ensure the right stuff was taught? What is the right stuff, who is deciding, what's fair for the children, how's that reflecting what we think… who decides what knowledge is going to be put into the curriculum for the children to learn…Erika (FG3)

Erika demonstrates a discomfort or ambivalence about the engagement of others in decisions about what happens in schools when she says, 'I mean, how big a group would you want to engage with?' This is reinforced with her question at the end of the extract, 'who decides?' Erika sees an extension of decision making as a threat to her authority. Glatter (2021) argues that school accountability to families contributes to the general climate of fear in which educational professionals work and affects the direction of their work. This climate of fear makes it difficult for Erika to answer the very question she raises, 'who decides what knowledge is'. Yet this question needs to be answered if educational professionals are to reveal the ways covert power works to exclude them from the key debates in education and mobilise other stakeholders in contestation about purpose.

Furthermore, this ambivalence about stakeholder involvement is reinforced by Erika's view of the nature of power. Her description suggests that it is a limited and binary commodity so that relationships constitute the controlled and the controlling. In this

context, it is difficult to see how stakeholders can work together to decide education purpose and direction. The excerpt also raises questions about the definition of democracy that Erika applies to her understanding. She describes the 'very democratic view' of the article as decision-making by consensus and this worries her. This definition precludes a relationship of co-operation and consent where families and educational professionals work together in the interests of students or where school leaders can enable families and stakeholders to make a relevant and appropriate contribution to debate but where school professionals retain their authority.

This excerpt from Erika describes the impact that reduced autonomy has on her own attitudes. It raises the question of whether there are any spaces where school leaders can demonstrate autonomy. The following data from Yvonne suggests that pressures from policy-makers make this difficult:

> It's right back to where it has been for all the time ever since I've been in teaching which is to the government of the day. They want to have control and they have a view of education that for so much of my career runs counter to everything that teachers hold dear and value…I can remember being young and in dispute and it's never changed…it's the political football …I think it's iniquitous that in an intelligent society we allow our government to control so much of what we do…no, they will all have their grey socks and shorts and their caps and think that everybody should have the same… Yvonne (FG1)

Yvonne, in a description redolent of Finding 1, reveals her frustration, and despair, at working in a public service where government does not share her own values of what education is for. She seems to feel powerless as Erika does, because it is exercised and defined as control and binary positions compete for the privilege of setting the agenda. Yvonne's experience of always being in dispute with government is suggestive of Foucault's and Rabinow's (1997) 'state as expert', where governments and policy makers define what education is for and how it is done. By self-defining as expert, it uses its knowledge to control and dictate. Initially the participant does not explain how her own purposes and those of policy makers are in conflict but at the end of the excerpt she says, 'They will all have their grey socks and shorts and their caps and think that everybody should have the same'. This comment is suggestive of the ways the state subjugates

knowledges that do not concur with policy (Ball 2003, 2017). Furthermore, there is a class-based element to the comment. 'Grey socks and shorts and their caps' is a likely code for Independent School uniform revealing that Yvonne links the privilege of power with social class.

In contrast to Yvonne's feelings of distress. Helen demonstrates hope that resistance to these high levels of control are possible. After completing the activity in section 4.9 she feeds back to the whole group:

> We started talking about the political state of feeling done to, so…we spent a long time discussing…how we manage the people who give us the external pressures and how as leaders we never want our heads of subject or our people below us…saying to their people 'we are doing this 'cus SLT tell us to'. You don't want your teachers saying to children we are doing this because it's on the curriculum, because it's on the spec for the exam…We know we've got external pressures, we should train our people to manage them so they don't become our external pressures, we minimise them as much as possible and I think it really goes back to the thing about choice about curriculum. I think that's where people kind of circle back to, we should dictate that, because actually the parameters are wider than most of us say, we are all good at moaning, but the parameters are quite wide…Let's try something different…the power of the collective, of us, is that perhaps we could trial something you know...without the collective we might not try it … Helen (FG3)

Helen describes the external, political expectations of how she should fulfil her role and although these are not specified, we can infer they conflict with her own purposes because she describes being 'done to' and expresses them as pressures that need managing. She focuses on how she tries to navigate these when they cause conflict for her and invites other participants to do the same. This navigation comprises a struggle to name the pressures and how they operate so that they can be subverted. We can infer the role of the state in Helen's experience of the external pressures, but equally we see her belief that these pressures, while omnipresent are not omniscient (Foucault and Rabinow 1997). She argues for their management and for an exercise of choice about what is taught. She also calls on the power of the collective, reflecting the ability of

collaboration to provide alternatives to neoliberal agendas because they give confidence by providing strength in numbers. What is more, collaboration can model alternatives to competition and in doing so undermine the myth that competition improves schools (Flatter 2021).

Helen does not, however, reject the notion of power as domination. Rather we see echoes of power as a binary relation where only one party has it and that is competed for. We see this in her own language of hierarchy, where staff are 'below us', and owned as 'your teachers'. While she calls for a challenge to barriers she simultaneously invites the other participants to 'dictate' these challenges to others. Power is a limited commodity in this description used to dominate and control. Within this framework, perhaps, Helen is arguing the task is to replace the control of the state with the control of school leadership teams.

Finding One described the tensions for participants that result from the conflict between their own educational purposes and those of stakeholders with particular focus on policy makers. These external conflicts are accompanied by an internal conflict where participants simultaneously reject and absorb neoliberal narratives so that their own descriptions of attitudes and practice are sometimes contradictory or inconsistent.

The data presented in Finding Two suggest that these tensions are overlaid with the difficulties that participants face when they try to manage and navigate some of the technologies that policy-makers have devised to bring about neoliberal purposes.
We see how other stakeholders are associated with neoliberal agendas and create a level of ambivalence for school staff. Previous collaborators, like families, are recast as accountable bodies and become problematic for leaders.

From participant attempts to manage these technologies, we can infer definitions of power, agency and democracy that raise questions about how easy it will be for them to resist and how possible it will be for them to develop practices to improve schools that build relationships that subvert and replace neoliberal contracts of exchange. Power seems to be understood as a binary concept, a limited commodity that is secured in competition and democracy and is associated with a consensus that undermines what little authority and autonomy school leaders feel they have.

Despite this context, that engenders frustration, anxiety and resentment, we can also detect hope. Participants try to subvert instrumentalist agendas and the technologies that support them to retain some sense of their own purposes. Some examples demonstrate that participants can pursue activity that they value whilst simultaneously meeting regulatory requirements (Greaney and Higham 2018).

Finally, Archer's (2003) morphogenesis makes sense of why some participants in some cases are able to retain their purposes and practices and why others, in other cases, seem unable to. Sometimes countervailing forces are too powerful for the individual to transform practice as they instantiate it. At other time, cultures and conditions work in their favour, so that they can transform practice or subvert it for their own ends. For a fuller understanding of what form these constraints and enablers take in the neoliberal context, it is necessary to explore what the data say about participant practices. It is from practice, and the conflicts and inconsistencies we see there, that we can infer the emergent properties that either overwhelm or facilitate the possibility of challenge and change.

What these findings add to the field is that it is possible for educational professionals in the MAT environment to meet external agendas and satisfy external regulators via purposes and approaches that challenge neoliberal purposes and approaches. We can infer definitions of power and democracy that operate as countervailing forces.

5.3 Finding three - Leadership practices

The next two findings analyse the extent to which participant improvement approaches and practices can be described as contributing to social justice agendas. As argued in 1.5 the scope of the analysis has been limited to approaches and practices that might be considered more democratic. For simplicity these improvement approaches and practices have been divided into those that might relate more closely to leadership and those that might relate more closely to teamwork. This is an analytical division only.

This key finding, leadership practices, explores four main ideas: the place of strategy in leadership; preferred approaches to leadership; understandings of democracy; assigning leadership work.

5.3.1. The place of strategy in leadership

Apple (2006b) argues that the ability to make strategy and vision are important in the democratic project because they can afford educational professionals epistemic agency. This is vital if school leaders are to have any hope of buffering their own and colleagues' purposes from neoliberal preoccupations. Such planning must centre around opportunities to constantly revisit and articulate educational purpose in the context of the common good.

Concepts of strategy, prioritisation and visioning, apparently used interchangeably by participants, are prevalent across the data. They appear in all three focus groups and are referenced by the majority of the participants in the semi-structured interviews. These ideas are often used to contrast with the day-to-day management of the school. Becky says:

> My role is becoming increasingly more strategic…teaching and learning…the design and impact of curriculum and so on. I've always had that but it's more strategic now… and less organisational, it's more about the impact…the creating. The Deputy Head is now having more of the organisational stuff. Becky (SSI)

Becky had recently been made Head of School by the Executive Head and sees her own role changing in response to this promotion. She describes her new work as similar in content but different in approach, possibly more creative and focused on impact. She contrasts the new role with running the organisation, something now carried out by the Deputy Head. This raises questions about whether strategic work is reserved for certain roles within the hierarchy within her school. It is interesting to compare this description to that of another participant, Linda, who had recently been made an Executive Head of a school and had then appointed a Head of School to work with her.

> My role is very much strategic now….it's thinking about how we can make ourselves even better…it's about building the future, building capacity. X is the Head of School, her role is the operational side of mine, she delivers the vision if you like, makes it a reality. Linda (SSI)

It is interesting to note that, in contrast with Becky, Linda locates strategic work with the role of Executive Head not Head of School, whose job she describes as 'delivering' the vision. Both participants seem to be claiming a type of agency for themselves linked to the ability to shape strategy, but their contrasting descriptions suggests that there is an inconsistent view across the schools about who is responsible for strategic direction within a Goodall Schools Trust school hierarchy. This raises questions about who is included in the identification of priorities and the creation of strategy and the processes for doing this. Nevertheless, significantly for both participants, these descriptions also imply that school leaders have a key role in strategic work.

The excerpt from Linda also raises a question about the role of improvement activity. Spohrer et al (2018) argue that neoliberalism has shaped professional identities so that teachers and leaders have internalised the obligation to improve outcomes for students and see themselves as largely responsible for their success or failure. Gunter (2011) argues that narratives of improvement underpin these formations. Some of the data in Section one – Our purposes, raised questions about the extent to which the participants had absorbed these obligations. We saw that although they believed in the existence of systemic inequality, they grappled with naming its origins and articulating ways to address its effects beyond what they felt they could control. Improvement and strategy are clearly linked for Linda. When she says, 'We can make ourselves even better' it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which this connection reflects the internalisation of obligations to constantly improve. It could reflect beliefs that the eradication of education equality is the responsibility of the education professional but equally be indicative of an optimism that things can be better and that schools have a part to play in this.

Although these two excerpts offer an inconsistent picture of the rationale behind who is involved in strategy, there are many examples of how participants try to include others. Konstanze offers the following description:

> After our development planning…we (the leadership team) all went through my skeleton copy (of the plan) in a main strategic meeting at the beginning of the year, to see if there was anything we had missed, if anything else needed to be picked up by us. Konstanze (SSI)

Konstanze drafts areas for the plan and then invites additions. Planning is cited as the beginning of this process but there is no further information in this description about what this comprises. We hear echoes again of the obligation to improve, when Konstanze describes how the team look for anything they might have missed. Nevertheless she extends planning to others. This extract is reflective of work that, although not egalitarian, involves others in activity of significance to them. Diane describes engagement that suggests that others are included as joint authors where they contribute to the agenda before planning takes place. In her interview she describes how she constructed her matrix:

> We did an activity where we looked at…what did we think were going to be our main areas of focus for the school development plan. We rated them on to different pieces of paper and then I went away…wrote the plan, brought it back to them, 'Is this what we think it looks like? 'Diane (SSI)

Diane consciously plans an activity to draw out the team's thoughts. She summarises the ideas and then seeks feedback on her summary and in doing so acts more as a co-ordinator of the team's creation of strategic direction. She facilitates and enables others to contribute.

There are indications in these extracts from Konstanze and Diane that some participants try to give team members opportunities to contribute to the creation of priorities or strategy. Nevertheless, these data also highlight a number of issues. A planning process is referenced but not explicated. This could be because participants don't see it as relevant. Equally, an absence of any detail might reflect a 'taken for granted' sense of what it might constitute. This raises questions about whether educational purpose is problematised as part of the planning process. Furthermore, the very notion of improvement seems to be normative in these descriptions and although it could be argued that making things as good as we can is important, particularly for students most in need of the differences education can make to their life chances, it is not clear from these data what is being improved in a Goodall Schools Trust school. These excerpts do not tell us whether the notion of quality is explicated in ways that draw out the difference between transformative and affirmative ideas about improvement so that both can be planned for.

Other participants provide more information about what strategy and priorities comprise. Responding to a question about how she arranges her leadership work at the beginning of the year, Carol answers:

> We look at our key priorities…teaching and learning…the coaching model…curriculum…priorities across the school…wide horizons, our provision passport, arts mark, mental health…making sure we have a main priority. Carol (SSI)

Carol lists a range of key areas of development activity for the school. These include areas central to the exam focused agenda that dominates current discourse like teaching and learning, and curriculum. They also include areas linked to the sorts of broader provision that provide experiences and opportunities for those who most need and most benefit most from them. 'Wide Horizons '(appendix three) refers to the expectation within the Goodall Schools Trust that schools will provide a range of free clubs and activities for students outside of the classroom and the 'provision passport' is a published description of what each student can expect to experience inside and outside the classroom during their time at each particular Goodall Schools Trust school. Sarah links planning and priorities even more overtly to the Goodall Schools Trust Vision:

> In our planning…we are focused on the priorities…we have the Goodall Schools Trust three pillars of Proud Traditions, Wide Horizons and High Achievement which are aligned with our three celebrations Goodall Arts Festival, Goodall Science Festival, Goodall Science Symposium and three key ideas for the year…What does it mean to say we are going for 'Goodall Great?' It's about being more fine-tuned and forensic about what it will look like for our school… Sarah (SSI)

These pillars structure the vision as well as the three annual cross Trust student celebrations organised to celebrate and promote the arts, sport and science and give students a wide range of unusual school experiences. These descriptions from Carol and Sarah suggest a sense of common purpose linked to a wider understanding what schools should be about for students, as reflected in daily provision. This wider purpose has the

potential to link professional practice to a broader understanding of democracy because it gives students and staff opportunities to build different ways of being together. These different ways can be alternatives to the contract that defines them both in relation to their part in preparing young people to exchange their skills and knowledge in the job market.

Thecla, a member of the central Executive Team, recounts an interview experience that reinforces this sense of common purpose and further explicates the Goodall Schools Trust priorities. She references the response of one candidate in particular who at the point of interview had already been a senior leader in a Trust school for 18 months:

> I remember interviewing…twice…male colleagues for promotions. I don't know why I say male, maybe because of what I'm going to say next. We ask similar questions in interview, for internal and external candidates, and there was always one about the Goodall Schools Trust vision…It's interesting how few candidates do their homework on the Trust... I'm not sure why. Maybe we all expect everything to be the same everywhere these days…teaching and learning, teaching and learning and teaching and learning. I remember these two candidates…for different jobs at different times…they were senior roles…because they both cried when they began to describe what the Goodall Schools Trust vision meant to them. One said he had lost faith that he would ever be able to write a plan that would offer children what had brought him into education in the first place. He said he'd never imagined he would be a Head and would be allowed to prioritise the things that matter so much to children, art opportunities, music and instruments, creativity, celebration, relationship, critical thinking. Thecla (SSI)

We can infer from what the candidate says about planning for Trust provision where he lists art, music and critical thinking that the Vision includes a range of educational opportunities and possibilities not normally associated with schooling in England. We can also infer something about the culture in which these activities take place because Thecla recalls how the candidate also referenced 'creativity', 'celebration' and 'relationship'. The strength of his emotion in that he cried (as did a second candidate in interview) testifies to how compromised some professionals feel in their purposes as does the idea that 'he had lost faith'. This sense of how the Goodall Schools Trust vision sits in contrast with

current educational priorities is reflected by the participant herself when she says, 'Maybe we all expect everything to be the same everywhere these days'. There is a negative connotation to 'same' in this reference and we see this in how she follows it with 'teaching and learning, teaching and learning, teaching and learning'. This repetition in the example suggests she is unhappy that the education agenda (and the improvement agenda) has been reduced to the quality of teaching (teaching and learning is a phrase associated in many people's minds with the National Strategies of the 1990s). What is also interesting is that the group of three is redolent of Tony Blair's famous mantra, 'education, education, education', when he came to power as leader of the Labour Party in 1997. At the time, many critical academics were filled with hope by the promise that education might be prioritised and that these priorities might reflect a progressive agenda. This optimism was soon replaced with concern at the gap between progressive rhetoric and the reality of instrumentalist school improvement practices (Gewirtz 2001).

This idea that a common or broader education purpose might sit at the heart of participants' planning is overlaid with the concern some of them have for external agendas and we see that these also influence priorities. Denise suggests this influence in her description of how she uses her leadership matrix, appendix seven, to manage strategy.

> If we didn't use our leadership matrix for 6 weeks we wouldn't have a clue…it's what's driving us to Outstanding and I know we're not just for Outstanding but ultimately that's the pressing thing at the moment. If we didn't use that for six weeks, everything would just go off the boil…It gives us pace, it gives us determination as well I think and that motivation that people know they're going to be asked about it. It's the driver, it's the challenge, it's the celebration, it's everything, six weeks, six days is too long! Denise (SSI)

Finding two raised the issues of how participants navigate and manage the technologies of performativity that reflect educational purposes they consider too narrow. In another example of the conflict this creates for the participants, Denise describes how she uses her leadership matrix, to prepare the school for an Ofsted agenda. It is interesting that a process that was designed to free staff from focusing on compliance with external agendas has been appropriated in their service. Denise calls the matrix the 'driver' of the

agenda where the metaphor of school as machine is supported by narratives of leadership that place 'driving' at the heart of improvement activity. The use of this metaphor is associated with approaches that see the school as a series of interlocking components that can be made more effective via technical improvements. This notion is linked to a 'calling to account' so that 'people know they are going to be asked about it', suggesting that colleagues complete tasks because these tasks will be checked. In a complex picture, this idea is also presented alongside language that might suggest alternative metaphors like 'celebration' and so we see the tensions of earlier data where participants inhabit instrumentalist narratives while simultaneously trying to build discourses that undermine them. Any idea of systemic unfairness is absent from such motifs. In contrast we hear how Thecla encourages others to use Ofsted as a means to an

> Ofsted is a metric not a way to make our schools better for students. It's so big in people's minds that we overlook this…And it's a very narrow measurement even when the framework changes from time to time to include more arts provision or whatever the most recent government thinks will bring exam improvements. This is the first thing to try to get leaders to see…The second is to persuade them that if they focus on the Vision and the Descriptors in their planning and leadership matrix then they will meet any agenda that Ofsted sets… But it takes courage, and faith, to believe this and buy into it and most staff are still learning to understand how to do this. And to remember why we do things…the arts is a good example. All of our leaders know why we do art, it's there in the GAF stuff…art for art's sake. [Laughs.] Thecla (SSI)

Thecla sees Ofsted as a system of measurement not a way to improve a school. When she says, 'Ofsted is a metric not a way to make our schools better for students', she seems to recognise that some educational professionals conflate characteristics of success with the means for achieving them. Although she does not explicate the process of how this has happened, she argues that this is the case because of the significance that Ofsted has taken on for the profession. It has become 'so big in people's minds', that it constrains them and prevents them from seeing that what we measure and how we get there are two processes. She also seems to think that the Ofsted agenda expands to include creative provision if the government of the day can see its value in bringing about better exam outcomes. This idea is reinforced when she references the Goodall Arts Festival, an

annual celebration of the arts across GST schools. She says ‘art for art’s sake’ , possibly a reference to the rationale behind the arts festival that specifies that the intention of art in Goodall Schools Trust schools is to help students to appreciate different art forms, explore contentious issues and express their creativity. Thecla argues that the content and purpose of external agendas like Ofsted can be accommodated in ways that further the Goodall Schools Trust vision, but she also acknowledges that this is an important but difficult task for the Trust and its leaders.

Collier and Estaban (2000) argue that practice more indicative of democratic cultures will ensure that all staff regularly have opportunities to contest educational purposes in the context of the common good and translate this debate into meaningful activity that improves education for students. The data presented in this section demonstrate that the participants are involved in the strategic direction of their schools and that they value this work. The descriptions from Becky and Linda raise questions about who else is included in this work and although Konstanze and Diane describe planning activity that includes others, we are left wondering whether the Trust has a clear approach to ensuring the involvement of the widest range of staff in ways that would be indicative of more democratic practice (Fielding and Moss 2011). The data gives a strong sense of a range of school provision that extends in content and purpose beyond instrumentalist motivations and although overall direction is set by the Trust Board, and, therefore, potentially challenges notions of the autonomy of leaders, participants seem to agree with and welcome the Vision. Nevertheless, the descriptions from Denise and Thecla reflect the way that external agendas are constraining for some educational professionals even as they try to navigate or subvert them and so suggest that the tensions explicated in descriptions of participant educational purpose in finding 1 might extend to their leadership and improvement practices.

5.3.2. Preferred approaches to leadership

The second idea within this finding analyses what participants say about their own approaches to leadership. Descriptions relate predominantly to the sharing of leadership, authority and power. Although we hear different understandings of what this means in practice, every participant made reference to it. Linda says:

> You wouldn't necessarily identify me as the Head, except that I'm probably the oldest…and so perhaps I fit that stereotype. [Laughs.] Everybody has got their own talents…we really do work as a team….The first thing I say to people is do not check in with me every five minutes, I don't want that. You go and you do, within the remit of your job, whatever you need to…we're all working as an absolute team with the knowledge that the Head bears the ultimate responsibility. At times the power of veto has to be used, but very, very, very rarely, and more often than not they know a lot more about something than I do. Linda (SSI)

Linda describes a style of leadership that suggests partnership and co-operation, 'We really do work as a team', and this attitude seems to stem from the genuine respect she has for the abilities of others, 'everybody has got their own talents'. It also includes a sense of autonomy and she trusts her colleagues to make decisions for themselves. These decisions come within the framework of expectations that she feels she has communicated to them. Linda has built trust by using her team's talents and not assuming that she has all the answers. She has not relinquished her authority to make a final decision when this is required but she does not see this as incompatible with sharing leadership and decision making.Diane's description represents a similar balance:

> I think I naturally can be quite an assertive person but not like aggressively so. I've just got a quiet sense of assertiveness and so with the team, if we can't seem to come to some conclusion, that's where I see my authority as to be the one to say, 'Right guys, we're going to stop now because we're not getting anywhere. I want you to go away and think about that and then I want you to come back together'. Diane (SSI)

We can infer attitudes to perceptions of leadership from the ways that the participants exercise their authority. Diane sees her own role as team leader as being a kind of arbitrator when decisions can't be reached. Although it is not clear what happens in the time when the team disperses to think or what happens if they return and there still isn't consensus, she is clear that her role is to give the team more time to reflect, not to make the final decision. This excerpt reflects her earlier description in 5.3.1 of how she involved others in planning where she saw herself as a co-ordinator and facilitator of the ideas of

others. The following excerpt from Becky shows that she also seems keen to avoid holding all authority for her own role:

> We are all leaders of teaching and learning…starting with the children...they're all leaders of their own learning and if they want to have a position of leadership within the school, we're creating lots of opportunities so there's never a child who thinks, 'I quite fancy that' and they're told no...We've got pupil parliament all the way from year 6 right down to reception because we really want to have that leadership voice of all the children…And with staff too…it's really about asking people what they want to do and if they've got a skill or a talent. Becky (SSI)

This dense description of leadership combines a number of ideas. On the one hand we see a broad model of leadership taking in the formal roles expressed as 'a position within the school' with more diffuse and inclusive ideas expressed as, 'It's pretty much that everyone is a leader'. It is easy to see that both types of leadership are valuable in progressing a narrow teaching and learning agenda in Becky's thinking, 'We are all leaders of teaching and learning…starting with the children'. Nevertheless, there is also the sense of the value of leadership opportunities in their own right. She gives formal opportunities to anyone who 'has a skill or talent', and is keen to extend the idea of leadership as voice throughout the school. Konstanze links the exercise of her formal authority to the different requirements of context. She says:

> Different situations need…different types of leadership. There's your time when you need to be bang, that's your decision and that's the end of it – finance, staffing, whatever and then there's other times when you want to bring your leaders on, when I feel like I'm coaching more. The one to ones have really developed this. Sometimes I say, 'This is what I need to do, this is what I'm going to propose, this is going to be the action at the end of it', you know and half the time now I'm saying, 'Well, you've just told me the solution, you can see the pitfalls, go do it' kind of thing, so the leadership would be more about coaching...Konstanze (SSI)

Konstanze explains that it is context that dictates whether she needs to exercise her own formal authority or allow others to be involved in decision making. She is comfortable

that the exercise of her ultimate authority is compatible with the shifting and flexible authority associated with more shared or collaborative forms of leadership, 'There's your time when you need to be bang…other times when you want to bring your leaders on'. It is interesting that she includes others as part of their development suggesting that she is willing to compromise the quality of some improvement activity to allow space for this development. Equally interesting though is the suggestion that certain decisions, those relating to the allocation of money or staffing, are sometimes reserved for the Head. Gronn (2002) argues that democratic practice comprises shared decision-making about both the agenda and resource so that decisions central to the transformation of opportunities for students are taken by more than one person. This extract from Denise also suggests that certain types or leadership activity might be reserved for the Head. Here she describes how she would support a member of staff with the potential for senior leadership.

> Give her additional time off teaching...get her involved in teaching and learning in other years…maybe team teaching with…someone in key stage 2…shadowing me…to see other aspects of leadership that not many of them see…HR, asset, finance, all of the out of the way stuff that doesn't necessarily happen on a day to day basis…that doesn't involve anybody else…to get a whole understanding. Denise (SSI)

Denise suggests that those roles that instantiate the Head's power namely money, buildings, and staffing, are usually unseen by other senior colleagues and when she describes it as activity that 'doesn't involve anybody else', she suggests that she does them in isolation.

Given the pressures of performativity on school leaders and the punitive consequences of failure in Multi Academy Trusts described by Greaney and Higham (2018), it is not surprising that some participants might be ambivalent about the sharing of key decisions as they relate to resource. This does, however, raise questions about the potential for the shared leadership that participants are describing to be representative of the democratic practice already outlined here. It also raises questions about whether the participants consider how their school could or does be the locus for practices that challenge and subvert the unequal relationships they criticize in society more broadly. Furthermore, the

fact that Ruth is describing a former school (and we don't know to what extent she will replicate these assumptions in her own team) suggests that this attitude to assigning resource and the associated power of doing so is not confined to participants' schools but rather is a more generic attitude across the sector.

Finally, the following contrasting descriptions from Konstanze and Debra address the issue of when exactly leadership or authority might be shared. Harris (2013a) describes how different leaders emerge at different times and argues that approaches to collaborative leadership reflect this understanding. Konstanze says:

> When I first started there was the feeling of having to do everything yourself. The first year has been getting everything up and running, getting curriculum sorted, getting assessment sorted, getting on-line learning sorted…then slowly I've started to give the projects out and watched to see who it is that would relish that challenge, who enjoys being part of leadership. Konstanze (SSI)

When Konstanze was recruited by the Goodall Schools Trust, the school to which she was recruited was already Ofsted 'good'. Nevertheless she felt she needed to get things 'sorted' before she could share work and the work she did share she describes as 'projects', more suggestive of manageable, lower risk, task and finish activity rather than the sharing of generic leadership. This was not Konstanze's first Headship and so we cannot assume that she lacked confidence in including others. It is possible, given that she says that she has 'watched to see who it is that would relish that challenge', that she started with a deficit assumption of her team. This has interesting implications for new staff in new roles whatever their experience, particularly given how more democratic practices require leaders to adopt approaches to improvement activity that are at odds with predominant policy discourse. Konstanze's description directly contrasts with Debra's approach to her team, who is also describing her approach when she first started work at a Goodall Schools Trust school. Her school had also recently been judged by Ofsted as Good:

> When I came in here I had the attitude that I'm going to need your help here. I'm brand new, I know nobody, I'm not from this area so I have no contacts, I need you. I need to be able to come to you because you know so much more than I do

> on many subjects…It was very much a case of me asking them for help and we started looking at the vision and they were very much involved in drawing that up too. It made them think about things. There were quite a few who were used to walking into the Heads office and saying, 'Oh by the way, we've got a problem with such and such and I'll leave that one with you', or whatever. They soon came to realise that if you came to me with a problem you also came with a solution…everybody can do that as long as you sort of coach them…Previously to be fair to them, that's the way it worked, because the Head is 'all seeing, all knowing, all doing' type thing and, 'We've got the problem, the Head will solve it'. Debra (SSI)

Debra seemed to value the contributions of others from the beginning of her time in the school. She depended on them for what they knew of the area and respected the contributions they had to make. Interestingly, she contrasts her own approach with that of the previous Head who she describes as inviting dependency by presenting herself as 'all-seeing, all-knowing, all-doing'. She is clear that this unwillingness to include senior team members in decision making results in them being unable or unwilling to share leadership responsibility so that their attitude to her as the team leader at the beginning was, 'We've got a problem…I'll leave that one with you'. She has coupled sharing out responsibility with support for team members when they need help. This is underpinned by belief in team members, and that everyone is capable if 'you sort of coach them'.

It is difficult to infer the reasons for this difference in approach. Both colleagues are successful and experienced Heads and have built collaborative cultures. Debra's approach seems to view team capacity as necessary for the school improvement agenda and starts from the perspective that everyone has something to contribute. Konstanze seems more cautious or careful and inclined to make a judgement about team members' capacity once they have proved to her what they can do. At the very least, this difference in approach raises questions about how Goodall Schools Trust leaders identify leadership potential in others and when they use the capacity of others in decision-making and shared leadership. These questions have implications for developing democratic approaches to improvement.

In their review of transformational leadership that has the most potential to improve the widest range of student outcomes Hallinger and Heck (1996) argue that leadership that builds team co-operation is key to success. Harris (2013a) argues that team leaders can build more democratic cultures where they respect and encourage the contributions of others and authentically share power and authority in ways that enable them to make real differences for young people. The data in this section demonstrate a broad commitment to sharing leadership across the senior team and in some cases, as in the description from Becky, even more widely across the school. Harris (2013a) argues that team leaders should not relinquish final decision making powers but retain their authority so that they can protect the overall agenda. The descriptions from Linda and Becky balance the contributions of others with the need to sometimes make a final decision and Diane uses her ultimate authority in an even more enabling and facilitating way. Despite this desire to include others, the descriptions from Konstanze, Denise and Ruth also raise questions about what is shared and whether there is an implicit assumption that decisions relating to the allocation of resource, which arguably underpin the Heads' formal authority and power, are reserved for the Head. Finally, the comparison between Konstanze's and Debra's descriptions of how they initially used team work to improve their schools raises questions about how and when team members are included in the improvement agenda. Harris (2013a) argues that more democratic cultures are built when we are open to the emergence of leadership and the data raise questions about how participants might identify and use this potential.

5.3.3. Understandings of democracy in leadership roles

Three participants made specific reference to the concept of democracy and the third idea within this Finding analyses these references. Although this data represents too small a sample to make general assumptions, I have treated it as prevalent, as defined in 4.3 because of its direct relevance to the research aims and am therefore, considering it separately from other data where additional definitions of democracy might reasonably be inferred.

In part of her description about her leadership culture, Morwenna refers to democracy when she describes how she makes decisions. She says:

> At the end of the day, it's not a democracy…sometimes…somebody's got to make the decisions and I think it's getting to the point where the team respect that you're going to make a decision that they may not agree with but you know and they know it's for the right reason, they might not quite understand at the time but they know you're making it for the right reason because they don't always have the fullest picture. It's treating them like intelligent people, there's research here, let's talk about this…there are always opportunities to talk…meetings, staff time, department time …You can't run your school by constant consensus because you'd never get anywhere, you've got to make…decisions but…you've got to have the respect of your staff…I'll never set myself up to knowing more than I do…but also if you make a mistake just say, 'I made a mistake', and people don't beat you up for it, nobody cares, they just want to see some humanity. Morwenna (SSI)

Morwenna's definition of democracy appears to be procedural or deliberative and based on an idea of consensus. Therefore,, by her own definition, her own leadership culture cannot be described as democratic because 'sometimes…somebody has got to make the decisions' and 'you can't run your school by constant consensus'. Hopkins (1990), Biesta (2007) and Fielding (2012a) argue that a broader, 'thicker' or more radical understanding of democracy that extends beyond a deliberative notion lies at the heart of more socially just educational practice because it has the potential of reconnecting school communities to a less narrow understanding of the purposes and processes of education. In these definitions leaders provide regular opportunities for staff to talk about and influence decisions about the things that matter to them. It is interesting that Morwenna proceeds to describe this very practice when she lists all the ways staff are encouraged to talk and share ideas, in meetings and Department time, although she does not define it as democratic. Morwenna also describes the culture that she has built that gives rise to her own confidence in making decisions that her staff might not agree with, 'il's getting to the point where the team respect that you're going to make a decision that they may not agree with but you know and they know it's for the right reason'. She also describes a culture where it is acceptable if she makes a mistake suggesting a notion of leadership where the Head doesn't have to be all-knowing to carry responsibility for ultimate decision-making. Later in the interview Morwenna reflects on her time when she first became a Head and it is clear that these opportunities to contribute, were not formal and unusual but regular and often diffuse:

> I did talk to people, I used to talk to people all the time, I would talk to them in the corridors, I'd talk to them in the loo…I could tell you what they had for lunch. It's really important to know the staff because they're all motivated by different things so it was really important to know all the staff and feel that they've all had a bite at the cherry…We would talk as a staff, at times, we would talk and throw out questions and they would contribute and they also had their own forums where they would contribute. Morwenna (SSI).

The formal and regular opportunities to contribute that she provides are accompanied by a pervasive sense of communication between the school leader and the staff suggested by the range of places that she talked, 'the corridors…the loo'. It's not unreasonable, given these examples, to infer that anywhere she met staff was an opportunity for exchange. For Collier and Estaban (2000) this free flow of information and communication is a key sign of collaborative working. For Hartley (2007) regular communication and collaboration can be indicative of a more democratic learning culture but they also argue that it should be extended, as a right, to every member of the learning community. Morwenna lists twin purposes for this communication. Firstly to know what motivates staff and her recognition that staff are 'all motivated by different things', gives us a sense that she sees them as individuals with their own drives, not just an amorphous body. Whatever the reasons for wanting to understand staff, and they are not explicated here, she also says, 'It was really important to know all the staff and feel that they've all had a bite at the cherry'. This phrase implies a right to contribute and again, although her own motivations are not explicated, we get a sense of broad and inclusive exchange.

In her interview, Linda also references democracy and it is interesting that she, too, argues that her own culture is not democratic. She says:

> All the senior team are in no doubt that it's not a true democracy…I'm explicit about it…If it's a democracy we'd have a vote on something and the biggest vote wins. But we can't do that because when Ofsted comes in to see me and he says, 'This curriculum is a bit naff, isn't it?' and I say, 'Well I agree with you actually, but you know we had a vote on it and I lost'. I'm the one that carries the can for good

> and bad…I have the accountability… it's a very flat structure, we're all working as an absolute team with the knowledge that the Head bears the ultimate responsibility…we talk about things, talk them over, come back to them, try them out…talk about them again… At times power of veto has to be used, but very, very, very rarely. Linda (SSI)

Linda is clear that 'true democracy' is specifically representative and entails one person and one vote. Like Morwenna, she seems comfortable with the need to make some decisions in the final instance and describes these as being made 'very, very, very rarely'. From this we can infer that usually her team members have the right to make autonomous decisions. Like Morwenna, she describes a culture of open exchange, 'We talk about things, talk them over, come back to them, try them out…talk about them again'. There is a sense of iteration and review so that team members have opportunities to affect changes in the first and subsequent instances of activity. This description also raises questions about hierarchy and how it might be challenged as Linda claims that her team is 'a very flat structure', which is not the case if she also 'bears the ultimate responsibility'. Given the importance of flexible approaches to staff structures outlined by Fielding and Moss (2011) in their description of more democratic cultures, questions about whether it is possible to retain hierarchy within the team whilst simultaneously subverting it is explored in more detail in the following section.

In the third reference to democracy presented in this section, Margaret demonstrates a very different definition. In her interview she says,

> We have a very dynamic fast-moving, fast-paced organisation and what we do is and it's a high risk…so I'd like to say there are elements of democratic leadership where people have a say and people have a share in what the overall shape of leadership is, but ultimately we are making big decisions…If somebody's got an example of something that they're leading and they're supported to do it, then I believe that they should absolutely flourish and fly with it because I believe that if you see somebody's talent and you support them and they're leading something and they have enough freedom and at the same time, enough constraints and safety around them, then I know that leaders can achieve phenomenal things. I would always want to foster that ethos so that leaders can lead and absolutely fly

> with agendas. But I keep coming back to the fact that we are the accountable body…for our 13 schools and that we are the ones that drive the vision but we're also there to protect our schools as well, so it's not a democratic, 'What shall we all do? Let's just go and do it'. It's about the vision and protecting it. Margaret (SSI)

Margaret's understanding of democracy is much more in line with the participative approaches described by Bush (2012) where team or staff members should have the opportunity to influence the agenda. She believes that 'democratic leadership' is 'where people have a say and people have a share in what the overall shape of leadership is', although whether this means the shape of the agenda or team is unclear. When she says she wishes her colleagues to 'flourish and fly', we get the impression of generous support for others to grow in their roles and when she argues that 'leaders can achieve phenomenal things' it suggests a genuine appreciation of both the contributions and potential of others. Nevertheless, this approach is constrained by risk. We see Margaret trying to hold a number of things in tension: her instincts to give leaders autonomy because she believes that this is how they flourish if they are supported appropriately; the need and desire to protect the vision of the Goodall Schools Trust; the obligation to external bodies when the Trust is accountable for the schools in the Multi-Academy Trust. While she does not explicate any understanding of how or the extent to which external accountabilities constrain her practice , she describes the work as 'high risk,' we get a sense of her movement between what she values and her sense of this. She does not specify the risks but there is a sense of threat and tension in her description. We see this in how she describes needing to 'protect our schools', her sense of being accountable for them and her desire to protect the Vision. There is a suggestion that these things are in conflict rather than part of common purpose or single agenda. De Lissovoy (2018) argues that neoliberal agendas and those who promote them encourage educational professionals to take a particular approach to democratic engagement that limits its exercise to activity that furthers instrumentalist schooling. Here we see Margaret curbs her own preferences in response to accountability agendas while still protecting practices she values. At the end of the extract Margaret reveals another aspect of her understanding of democracy when she says, 'So it's not a democratic, "What shall we all do? Let's just go and do it" '. Her definition of democracy seems to also entail agreement about the agenda that comes in answer to 'What shall we all do?' as well as a sense of

agency in that once the agenda is established action might follow. There is also a sense of common purpose in this question and subsequent action reiterated by the use of 'we' and 'us' rather than anything that might suggest individual rights and action.

Although the data are limited, the issues raised here have particular relevance to the research topic and although we cannot draw general themes or ideas, these issues raise questions about how the participants understand democracy and how this understanding might contribute to socially just improvement practices. De Groot et al (2014) argue that thicker understandings of democracy, including participative approaches, are not necessary for thicker models to actually exist in schools and the data in this section are clear evidence of this. Morwenna, Linda and Margaret describe elements of practice that Collier and Esteban (2000) consider indicative of more democratic cultures where others are included. Although Linda's description only references senior team members and their opportunities to talk together, and raises additional questions about how hierarchy is managed as part of more democratic practice, Morwenna's and Margaret's descriptions take in a broad sweep of colleagues and give a generous sense of how others are supported to contribute. Margaret highlights the context of risk in which participants work reinforcing the descriptions in finding 2 and giving us more evidence of the constraints participants feel they need to navigate, particularly where work conflicts with the requirements or expectations of external accountable bodies.

Hammersley-Fletcher et al (2018et al) argue that broader understandings are indeed necessary if professionals are to develop a critical awareness of how notions of democracy have been appropriated by the neoliberal agenda and narrowed in tandem with our understanding of education purposes. They invite educational professionals to consider alternative understandings that might promote different conceptions of personhood and allow the creation and maintenance of identities more in keeping with human flourishing and the common good. Fielding (1997) also argues that broader understandings of democracy will have a direct impact on our practices for improving schools. Hammersley-Fletcher et al (2018) argues that the idea of conflict is valued in agonistic understandings of democracy and suggests structured opportunities for disagreement in team activity. These opportunities offer the potential to redefine the place and purpose of consensus in team discussion, replacing it with consent. Furthermore, they contribute to the resistance of homogenising tendencies and avoid the

replacement of one hegemony with another (Sant et al 2020). Both Morwenna and Linda understand democracy as consensus and it is interesting to consider how alternative understandings might affect practice given the need to encourage the broadest participation that will likely, therefore, entail disagreement.

Participants in section two of this finding demonstrated that they were able to share power without relinquishing final control if necessary. In the data presented here in this section, this notion is reinforced as all three participants retain ultimate decision making authority and avoid the mistake of confusing wider engagement with relinquishing their own formal authority. Collier and Estaban (2000) argue that this is necessary if the team leader is to protect the participatory agenda and Harris (2014) reminds us how collaborative approaches are undermined if leaders naively overlook the formal requirements of their role. Later findings further explicate the relationship between formal authority and the desire to include others and the requirement to use the former to bring about the latter in more democratic practice.

5.3.4. Assigning leadership work

Maxwell (2012b) reminds us of the value of asking questions in research interviews that allow participants to access specific events and actions rather than more generalised abstractions or opinions. While these latter are important in understanding the values and perceptions of participants, they are sometimes at odds with actual practices. Episodic memory, a distinct neurocognitive memory system where participants organise information in time and space, rather than semantically, is better accessed via episodic questioning in interviewing where the researcher asks participants to recall specific events from the past (Maxwell 2012b). This questioning has the added benefit of revealing practices that by definition are not available for observation or inference by the researcher because they have already happened. I asked participants how they had assigned work or roles within their leadership teams therefore, so that what they said could be compared to their more generic descriptions of leadership approaches. Therefore, the fourth idea within this finding, assigning work to team members, can be compared to section two, where participants identified collaborative or shared approaches to leadership as significant to them.

The key tension for participants in assigning leadership work is whether they use rigid role or job descriptions or a more flexible understanding of leadership activity to allocate tasks, projects or areas of responsibility. Carol's description suggests that she uses job descriptions, that are more fixed and predetermined. In her interview she describes who is on her leadership matrix:,

> I have myself, the Executive Head, my AHTs and a second tier underneath which includes my TLR people…I have X who covers the curriculum…she oversees all the subject leaders…she also does the Wide Horizons agenda…My other AHT is early years which is a mammoth job…but as a school project she did mental health across the school. It's trying to make sure that nobody is just in one area. Carol

Carol itemises traditional roles from a school hierarchy first of all, 'myself, the Executive Head, my AHTs'. This notion of 'my 'is suggestive of an agenda and team owned by the Head rather than a team working around a shared purpose with shared ownership. The idea of a hierarchy is reinforced by the reference to 'a second team underneath'. Nevertheless, Carol's description also extends beyond a recognisably instrumental leadership areas like 'curriculum 'and the line management of 'subject leaders, 'to the Wide Horizons agenda which will typically include a range of free unusual provision for students, and issues of mental health. Job descriptions are usually a more rigid and well-defined way of identifying work responsibilities and result in upwards accountability because it is believed that individuals can easily be held to account for their work. Although it is argued that job descriptions remove anxiety for team members because their role is clear and understood by others, they also tend to create furrowed working, where team members are unlikely to do work that overlaps with anyone else. This makes the collaboration and partnership required by more democratic practice difficult to establish and maintain. In an interesting comparison, Sharon describes her own experience, as a member of the Executive Team* of supporting Carol to construct her matrix:

> I helped Carol to think about how she would organise her leadership resource on her matrix and she is still a bit job descriptiony. As long as someone is covering each area then she is fine with it and thinks the school will be fine but she wants things to be safer rather than taking risks on people. I'm encouraging her to give

> teaching and learning to someone dynamic, with ideas, someone who might potentially make the wrong choice but who will actually learn much more. But I'm finding that a barrier at the moment. It's fundamentally a lack of understanding that is making her make decisions that are about job descriptions rather than areas of leadership. Sharon (SSI)

In their description of practices indicative of a more democratic school, Fielding and Moss (2011) describe how role fluidity and flexibility are consistent with the sharing of leadership because they provide a constant challenge to formal hierarchy. They do not advocate for the removal of formal leadership or the place of the team leader, rather they encourage a restlessness with it as an unproblematic form of team organisation which they argue is provided by constantly exploring new ways of sharing. For them, the team leader plays a key part in this quest. Sharon argues that rigid job descriptions are preoccupied with covering the leadership tasks on a predetermined agenda, and that Carol believes that as long as 'each area is covered' then everything will be ok. Sharon sees the potential of giving different colleagues newer areas of responsibility, even if this involves more risk, because this risk-taking can introduce a dynamism that brings 'ideas', and give staff opportunities to 'learn much more'. Sharon concludes by saying that it is Carol's misunderstanding about the potential power of replacing job descriptions with a more generic approach to leadership that gets in the way. Given that she has also described Sharon's worry about risk, the contrasting views of these two participants raises an interesting question about the extent to which collaborative approaches are problematised by the Trust. We can also ask whether such problematisation has the potential to support the participants in embracing practices that could be described as more democratic. Morwenna is very aware of the constraints of job descriptions and she further explicates the value of more flexible approaches. In her interview she says:

> Before I became Head here, we were just a disparate group of people, who didn't intersect. It was a traditional, you know, here's your pastoral Deputy Head...Then you're responsible for that or that. It was really boring because I know myself, I'd get really bored if I was stuck in a job for three years and whatever and there was just no energy or creativity around. So then we moved to a fluidity because of our priorities. We were wanting to improve quickly. We made regular changes so that people congregated around the same thing for six weeks to move it on faster

> rather than doing lots of little separate things that were only making tiny bits of difference. I think one of the problems is people only thought about job roles and it isn't about job roles. So I stripped these out and instead of saying 'We've got to sort our rewards, we've got to do this, we've got to do that', we'd look and say 'This is what we need to do over the next four to six weeks to make the next big leap' and everyone's priorities would be aligned to that in a different way. It got people focusing on one thing as a team, so they would come together and we would talk about it but they also had their own work streams but we were all more fluid and worked towards the same priorities. But it also made them realise that whatever your work stream is, the most important thing was what was most important for the school at the time. We'd sit down and reflect and think regularly, where are we and what do we need to do next…we all needed to get on board and made sure that became our top priority rather than trying to muscle ahead with what we felt we needed to do. Morwenna (SSI)

For Morwenna, job descriptions with separate areas of responsibility lead to disconnection between team members, 'We were just a disparate group of people'. For her, flexibility has value for staff as it can mitigate against the boredom of repeating the same work, add energy and lead to creativity. It also has value for the agenda though, adding speed by mobilising capacity around priorities on the improvement agenda. Morwenna is confident making changes to work streams as the agenda develops. Collier and Estaban (2000) argue that unfettered autonomy in the leader or team member is not a sign of a participatory culture but expressive of an individualism that reflects the philosophical assumptions underpinning neoliberalism. They argue that autonomy should be placed within the context of the team and team agenda. Morwenna's allocation of leadership capacity on the matrix appears to address this directly as she actively engages team members to locate their own work in relation to the school priorities, which by definition become the team priorities, 'It…made them realise that whatever your work stream is, the most important thing was what was most important for the school at the time'. We also see an understanding of a team as more than an aggregate sum of its parts.

Collier and Esteban (2000) also warn that this more collaborative approach can provoke hostility for those who do not share the values of shared authority or who feel threatened

by more collaborative approaches. Erika describes an instance of this hostility, when she describes her attempts to create what she calls a 'very horizontal structure':

> Initially I was looking at a very horizontal structure and trying to share out certain areas of responsibility. It's become apparent that it wasn't having the desired effect. The concept I wanted was more of a collegiate view of teaching and learning for example so that more people were working on it and talking about it but power came into things. Some people on the team wanted sole ownership, they wanted to call the shots and they didn't want to share…there were fractures. I could see the frustration with two members of staff in particular who both wanted to get that area of responsibility. With one of the it was, 'I'm your heir apparent' kind of thing and with the other it was a 'tell me what to do' kind of thing. There wasn't any development of her leadership and her approach, it was very, 'I'm in charge, I expect you to do what I say'. It pissed everyone off and then the culture was broken. Everyone was bypassing her immediately to get to me to complain. The relationship was broken…to the point that when she left one day I asked her not to come back. Erika (SSI)

Erika's description highlights the difficulty of trying to establish a more shared, less hierarchical or rigid approach to work areas when some team members see working with others as a threat to their own perceived power. Where Morwenna manages to place the school priorities at the heart of the team's agenda, Erika struggles where two colleagues see the sharing of work as a dilution of authority. Something is revealed about the relative attitudes of the two team members to leadership in Erika's characterisation. 'With one of them it was, 'I'm your heir apparent' kind of thing and with the other it was a 'tell me what to do' kind of thing…Her approach, it was very, 'I'm in charge, I expect you to do what I say'. 'Heir apparent' suggests a stratified understanding of the team and 'I'm in charge, I expect you to do what I say' is a command and control approach to leadership. Both of these are at odds with Erika's approach who describes wanting 'a very horizontal structure trying to share out certain areas of responsibility, and wanting 'more of a collegiate view'. There is neither mediation nor a sense of whether the collaborative approach was possible long term but it is clear that the situation deteriorated and was only partially resolved with the removal of a member of staff. This conflict raises useful questions about how more shared approaches are managed. Following their extensive

review of research, Halinger and Heck (1996) argue that the most successful shared leadership is built on good relationship, communication and co-operation. While these elements might characterise more democratic practice, Misfud (2017) argues that participatory approaches are not normative and need discussing by the team. What is more, power which sits at the heart of the team dynamic needs to be problematised to anticipate some of the risks of coordinating the team work of professionals who hold contrasting values. Diane describes a more successful attempt to manage a colleague who is uncomfortable with looser boundaries between work streams:

> With X I say, 'How does your work connect to other people's? How will you work with Y for example?' That's better than me saying 'Why are you trying to be a lone ranger? Why don't you let other people into your areas of responsibility?' Other pairs work together and see how their areas connect. For our last moderation A and B said 'Right let's get organised, what do we each need to do for this? 'and X had one of her 'I'll look up at the ceiling, it's nothing to do with me' moments. So I said to her, 'Look at your areas of responsibility, don't you think your view, your eyes on that would be really useful from that perspective?' Diane (SSI)

We can infer from the conversation that Diane recounts, that she is committed to areas of work responsibility rather that rigid job descriptions and that she views these areas of work as best carried out in discussion and with connection. Here she describes a colleague who wishes to pursue her work more individually. Woods and Gronn (2009) argue that more democratic approaches to leadership openly interrogate our practices and values. Diane pursues a conversation about X's contribution to a shared agenda and in this way depersonalises any critique of the way X approaches her work. This sense of flexibility is reinforced at the end of Diane's semi-structured interview, where I asked each participant if there was anything they would like to add to our conversation. Diane says:

> I guess I want to say a bit about shape shifting. I remember how I felt when I was an Assistant Head and then a Deputy. And I look at how an Executive Head in the Trust has become the CEO, how a Head has become part of the central team, how you were the CEO and now you are part of the central team but not CEO and here asking me questions as part of your PhD. Then I go to another Head and review

> her work and then she goes somewhere else to do the same…we are always looking at the same situation from lots of different angles and I'm always thinking 'Right, what's my role in this situation? How am I coming at it and how do I feel when I'm in a different role? How does it feel for others around the table?' Diane (SSI)

Diane describes how she and others inhabit roles in a flexible and fluid way. Sometimes roles within the Trust seem to cut across hierarchy, as when she visits a peer to review the work in the school and then that peer subsequently takes on the reviewer role for others. She also makes reference to the role of the researcher who was formerly the CEO and now inhabits a role on a team managed by a new CEO. This constant fluidity is underpinned by her own reflexivity, which results in a learning and an empathy for other roles. For Fielding and Moss (2011) more democratic leadership finds expression in a constant discomfort with hierarchy. It does not seek to remove formal structure, as all networks and teams need leadership, but it will offer constant and consistent challenge to ordered or stratified thinking so that the usual role boundaries of a traditionally organised leadership team are transcended and unsettled by fluidity and flexibility giving team members opportunities to relate to each other and the work in new and fairer ways.

Section two demonstrated how participants favoured sharing and collaboration as an approach to leadership but also how this sharing was sometimes constrained by a desire to retain some decision-making, particularly around the allocation of resource, for the Head. Sharing and collaboration are key to democratic practice for Gronn (2002) who argues that it is best expressed in roles that are more fluid and flexible. This flexibility provides an opportunity for a new way of working in teams that unsettles the usual patterns and dispositions of school hierarchies and transcends boundaries and in this way has the potential to contribute to democratic practice. The data presented in this section demonstrates how the participants grapple with attempts to embrace more fluid working.

Some participants embrace the idea of flexibility because it has benefits for the individual. Morwenna argues that it gives team members more opportunities for engagement and creativity. It also benefits the school agenda. Morwenna believes that it places school

priorities at the heart of activity and Diane describes the way that it connects work. We can infer from this that it supports the improvement agenda. Furthermore, it supports practices that can contribute to more socially just practices. It can do this by mobilising activity and capacity around a common purpose and locating individual work in the context of the wider agenda.

We also see how participants grapple with this fluidity. Sharon struggles to shift Carol's thinking away from more rigid roles because of the risks Carol perceives and Erika tries to manage colleagues who are not comfortable with less furrowed working because they see it as a challenge to their authority. Furthermore, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the themes of risk and control, explored in the second finding, and the tensions these create for participants, might also affect their willingness or ability to take a less traditional approach to assigning work. Finally, the data presented here do not link school improvement practice to the issues of unfairness that the participants described in earlier findings or suggest that roles and how they are assigned can model alternatives to the relationships that underpin unfairness.

In summary, this third finding explores the leadership practices the participants use to develop and improve their schools and considers the extent to which these can be said to contribute to practices that are more socially just. To this end, analysis focuses specifically on practices that might be considered more democratic. Finding one tells a story of conflict and tension for participants, between what they see as the purposes of education and the values that stakeholders hold. In finding two we see how these purposes bring participants into direct conflict with the technologies of performativity intended to support and underpin neoliberal agendas. In this third finding we see how participants grapple with developing practices that enable them to meet external agendas while protecting their own values and priorities. Some of these practices and the attitudes and perspectives that underpin them successfully create more participative or democratic cultures so that we see examples of partnership working around a common agenda that extends beyond instrumental understandings of the purpose of schooling. Some participants demonstrate an ability to share power and authority with others while retaining a clear sense of their own formal obligations as the team leader. There is also some evidence that this sharing finds expression in the way that leadership activity is assigned to team members where more fluid and flexible approaches bring benefits for

team members and the school agenda. What is more they show the potential to contribute to more democratic practice by replacing individualistic notions of autonomy with team commitment to a common purpose.

Nevertheless, the data also raise a number of issues. Those which reinforce questions raised by the data so far relate to the tensions the participants experience when they try to meet external agendas while developing practices they might value and the ways these external agendas, including feelings of risk, might be influencing and shaping participant decisions about what and when they share. In addition, there is also a question about the extent to which the individualistic philosophies that underpin neoliberalism and neoliberal education policy might be at work in some of the notions of autonomy and approaches to improvement in the data.

5.4. Finding four - Team practices

5.4.1. Introduction

This key finding, team practices, explores three main ideas: team working; constructing the matrix; understandings of accountability.

5.4.2. Team Working

The most prevalent idea in this section relates to team talk and decision-making with every participant making repeated reference to team talking and decision-making in their semi-structured interviews. The data shows a range of understandings and applications of what these entail. The following analysis has focused on the ways in which participants attempt to create the conditions and develop practice that can be described as indicative of dialogical practice. Dialogical practice has the potential to contribute to increased democratic engagement because of the opportunities is offers team members for both collaboration and autonomy (Collier and Estaban 2000).

Jacky, a member of the Goodall Schools Trust Executive Team, contributes to specific projects on location in Goodall Schools Trust schools and is often temporarily part of school leadership teams in an advisory capacity. However, her main work is co-ordinated at bi-weekly Executive Team meetings. When asked about how she would describe leadership culture in the team she chooses to describe what happens in these meetings:

> I think the leadership culture is one of…open discussion at senior team. You would expect that that would be completely open and everyone can feel free to say whatever they want to. Outside of that there are then graduations, so depending on what the focus is, if it's Human Resources it may well include the relevant colleague... Our senior team has a collegiate working atmosphere…There are times when it's inappropriate to be inclusive, but when the time is right, then inclusivity, I would say, is the general way. Jacky (SSI)

Jacky links leadership culture with team activity and particularly open discussion at senior team meetings. This is suggestive of a pervasive sense of leadership that extends beyond the formal leadership role of a team leader. She describes an honest exchange and we can infer trust amongst team members from the way 'everyone can feel free to say whatever they want to'. There is also the sense, from her decision to describe this particular activity at the meetings, that discussion is the norm rather than confined to isolated occasions. Nevertheless, the description also raises an issue about who is included in discussions. It is unclear whether the requirement for confidentiality in matters of Human Resources might have appropriately limited the inclusion of others in the example cited here. It is also unclear about what is meant by 'when the time is right'. She uses the phrase 'outside of that', and it is unclear whether this means literally outside of the Executive Team meetings or has some figurative meaning for Jacky, but it suggests a measured approach to including others in the work of the Executive Team. Some of the data in finding 3 demonstrated that what participants shared with others and when subverted attempts to create more democratic practices. This extract from Jacky reinforces this idea by raising a question about who decides who is involved in debate and whether the open discussion of the leadership culture extends beyond the Executive Team.

For Hopkins (1990) genuine dialogical activity includes moving from regular discussion to action: without it, debate is meaningless. Misfud (2017) argues that while discussion is potentially a democratic activity in itself because it encourages epistemic agency, ultimately it should link to issues of concern where thing that matter to people get done. Diane extends the idea of joint talk to team decision making:

> With our leadership culture it's not so much about, 'Right, let's make a decision, right is this what we're going with? This is what we've talked about, right, this is what's going to happen'. It's not so much about that, it's about us having the discussion, making, forming some sort of decision and then going back to the people that we can trust and the people that have proven they're worth talking to about whatever it is and then bringing that feedback back. Diane (SSI)

Diane links the idea of discussion and decision making so that team-work comprises more than expressing opinions. However, this activity is confined to the school leadership group, and the idea that some colleagues are 'worth talking to' suggest an implicit process of selection, even if informal and raises a question about the rationale for who is included and who excluded.

It is conceivable that both these participants interpreted the questions in the interviews, given the wording, as being predominantly about the operation of their own senior team. However, these data could suggest something about the limits of who is included in discussion and decision-making.

Thecla makes the same link between talk and action but also directly addresses the issue of who in the team should be included in this activity. In her interview she says:

> It's not just about talking, we do that, all the time…everything…but it's about deciding things together, as a team, a whole team, where everyone has a say, whatever your formal role is, Deputy, Assistant, whatever…because it's all leadership. Just because you are less experienced or in a more junior role or whatever doesn't mean you don't have experience, opinions, a right to have a say. So it's 'What about this? Who has an idea about that? Is this relevant to our vision or our journey right now? What should we leave out or add in? Thecla (SSI)

Harris (2014) encourages gatekeepers or team leaders, as the holders of formal power, to reflect on how those with less status or experience are given the opportunity to contribute to discussion and decision-making. For them, this contribution is a right that does not need to be earned. Thecla makes the point that all team members are encouraged to contribute, regardless of hierarchical role, a comment reminiscent of the

role fluidity in section 1 of finding 3. She is almost dismissive of formal title, 'whatever', and argues, 'It's all leadership'. Jacky describes her colleagues as having a 'right to have a say', based on the belief that everyone has experience and points of view. Ball (2016) invites a more conscious connection between school purpose and school development or improvement work, where purpose includes a broader understanding of what school provides for students and why. Jacky links team talk and decision-making to the school vision. If the school vision links to the Trust vision as required (appendix two) it is conceivable that it will promote a wider agenda than those promoted by instrumentalist purposes.

Genuine collaborative practice requires the team leaders to resist the temptations to use their authority to direct discussion towards pre-determined or pre-decided outcomes (Harris 2014). Reflexivity can be used to counteract the inclination to use power to homogenise the agenda. Some participants seem to struggle with how this might translate into practice. Denise describes how she changed her mind after feedback from staff:

> I had a system in place for target-setting and I knew the teachers didn't like it and thought it was a bit laborious. So I said to them, 'Right, shall we get rid of it?' And they were like, yes, yes. I said, 'Fine', because it wasn't that important to me to keep. So I hope they see that right, X has gone to visit another local school, he's fed back to us, which is good practice, and as a result we'll change our practice. That's just one example but it does happen a lot actually. Denise (SSI)

Denise describes a decision she made after discussion with staff where they disliked the school's target setting system. She demonstrates honourable intentions, of sharing practice and making the staff feel that she listens to them and that they have influence over decisions. However, the way it is expressed here might belie an unwillingness to be genuinely open to new suggestions or that at the very least she feels she cannot be honest about her own motivations with colleagues.

Ruth describes conversations she had with her staff when she was new to the role of Head:

> To get to know the staff I've done a series of interviews, one to ones with all my curriculum leaders and I sat with them, I said, 'Look, I've got no agenda, figurative or real here with you, let's see where this conversation goes 'and I just talked to them about the school, what their priorities are, what they like about their subjects, what their passions are and so on. In that, I've slipped in, I said I didn't have an agenda but maybe figuratively, I did, I slipped in building and teaching your passions, don't be afraid, don't ask for permission all the time, go for things that you like doing. When you look at your schemes of work, put something, if your favourite part of your degree was this, stick that into your scheme of work, you know? So that's part of the way I'm trying to change culture, that's subtly through one to ones, through having the conversations, through dropping little hints in here and there. Ruth (SSI)

Ruth has taken the time to talk to each member of staff about their teaching. The intentions appear positive, to free staff to include their own interests in their teaching but rather than introduce this overtly Ruth chooses to say that she doesn't 'have an agenda. ' This statement coupled with the language of slipping in ideas, doing things 'subtly', and introducing things into the conversation that she wanted them to think about 'through dropping little hints in here and there' suggest a discomfort with transparency. These two extracts raise questions about what some participants feel it is appropriate to share with their staff .

Dialogical activity offers opportunities for staff to return to decisions and to amend them. (Fielding and Moss 2011). In her description of how her team works together Becky says:

> As a team, something will be put on the table and then we discuss, we think, 'What about this?' 'How do we think this will work?' 'What do we think we're going to do?' and then tasks are shared out and then people go away and do things and then we come back and look at what we've done or we send an email or whatever and that conversation goes backwards and forwards and is quite constant...Becky (SSI)

Becky uses questions to elicit opinions to feed into changes. This and her description of an iterative process where, 'conversation goes backwards and forwards and is quite constant', suggest she is open to the shape of the end result. Later in the interview, when she describes how she has built her leadership culture, she includes her motivations for returning regularly to discussion:

> I think relationships are key to helping things move forward…it's keeping revisiting, it's keeping people on board, asking people for their opinions, 'What do you think? How's this working?,' 'Let's try it, come back, if it's not …' One of the things that has always been a strength here and it keeps being built on every year, is people's honesty, if people don't think it's going to work, they'll say so. And it's using those reluctant people to inform your next steps, there's always one that will say, 'I don't think it's going to work'. It's using their feedback. It's keeping revisiting and asking people, that evaluation of it. Becky (SSI)

Becky describes how staff are able to make meaning together. For Vuori (2019) this is because of her own openness to the contributions of others, including those who might be reluctant about change. She seems able to relinquish control over the final outcome and uses critical feedback to inform the next steps. She also seems to extend the discussion beyond her team and into the staff body more generally.

These excerpts give some sense of the extent to which team talk and decision-making, that is so prevalent in the participant data, comprise what Hopkins (1990), Fielding and Moss (2011), and Fielding (2012) consider to be dialogical practice. The descriptions suggest that they value discussion and provide their team members with repeated and regular opportunities. The connection of discussion to decision-making suggests an understanding of the importance of getting things done even as team members grapple to understand the best ways to approach issues. Nevertheless, the descriptions from Denise and Ruth demonstrate how participants are sometimes less transparent with their staff than they might be. Becky's openness to the contributions of others leads to a process of co-creation, but Denise and Ruth are more cautious in their approach. In Finding 3 we saw that Collier and Estaban (2000) argue that collaborative approaches, as central as they are to promoting more democratic practice in schools, can create tensions

and conflict that could be better anticipated if these approaches were problematised. If dialogical practice in particular is central to collaborative approaches more generally then this argument can be logically extended to team talk when it is presented as normative. None of the data presented in this section problematises the issue of team talk, rather it is presented as normative. In Finding 3 we saw how some participants successfully accommodated the contributions of others whilst retaining their own authority. This section highlights the challenges this might pose once this sharing is extended to joint decision making where a problematisation of dialogical practice might be useful.

A further difficulty in managing it in the team is described by Marianne:

> I had two members of the SLT team who…would stab you in the back. They would come into a meeting and sit there and not say anything and agree with everything you'd said then go to another room and just slate you and shout about things and say I don't want to do that. I'd say, 'Why didn't you say that in the meeting? That was your opportunity to say'. One of the Assistant Heads was very upset by this…I had to say, 'You need to stop listening to them and just do your own thing'. This year those staff are gone and the teamwork…has been so much better…decisions have been made quicker…and you can have those discussions around the table, and yes, you will disagree with each other but everyone is participating and sharing their opinion, so we are able to thrash things out without feeling that somebody is going to go to another room afterwards and totally disagree with everything that has just been decided, that we literally make compromises together. Sometimes it's me that makes the compromise, sometimes it's them that makes the compromise. Marianne (SSI)

Marianne's description demonstrates the difficulties that can result from collaborative discussion and decision-making. Here the challenges posed by two team members create discomfort for a third. The two team members who would 'stab you in the back', do not seem to ascribe authority to the team discussion, because they subsequently go into 'another room…and shout about things and say I don't want to do that'. Marianne decides to help the unhappy member of staff cope by directing her to 'stop listening to them and do your own thing'. Her approach to the team members who undermine the shared discussion and decision making seems to be to question them rather than direct

them to stop and we do not hear what they answered to her questions. The resolution of the conflict in the team relies on these members of staff leaving. Although the current state of affairs allows a collaborative approach where Marianne is able to use the contributions of others so that 'sometimes it's me that makes the compromise, sometimes it's them', there is no sense of what will happen next time a team member tries to challenge the authority of the team and the team leader.

Fielding (2012) argues that while it is not always possible or desirable, dialogical activity should also provide opportunities for teams and members to make autonomous decisions. The contrasting descriptions that follow, from Sarah and Konstanze, illustrate that contextual factors can influence the provision of these opportunities.

Sarah is a new Executive Head, promoted by the Trust early in her career, as a result of recruitment issues to her school and local area. She was encouraged to take the role because of her the resilience and commitment to the Trust vision she had demonstrated in her role as a Head over a short period of time. In her description of how her team works together she says:

> I am still very much the leader of the team and the next element is about getting a bit more proactivity from the whole team to bring things and say, 'Let's do this and let's do that'. A lot of focus and work has been on discussion, we discuss…our thoughts, feelings, instincts…and then what we've done and how it's gone…But it actually takes quite a lot of bravery…to make decisions…and actually do something, not just talk about it. Sarah (SSI)

Sarah describes the culture of discussion she has created and the need to translate this into action. She does not reflect on how she has created the conditions for this discussion and how she might now create the conditions for this fuller team participation. The same recruitment issues that find her as Executive Head have also meant that she has had to build a new senior team from colleagues who also had relatively little leadership experience. It is possible that Sarah's talent but inexperience could be a factor in her management of team decision-making. In the following excerpt, Konstanze, a very experienced Head, offers a very different experience:

> At Monday night's meeting it was, 'Because X will be missing from the team for a while, I'm picking this up, she's picking that up, we've met this afternoon and sorted it out'. I didn't even have to meet with them, they all met after school in the afternoon in their planning time, 'A is picking this up, this is what's going to happen with that, he knows it'. and I just sat here and listened. I didn't have to panic and think who's going to pick up what. It's been sorted between them. Konstanze (SSI)

Here team members are also very experienced. The team in Konstanze's school met without her being present and shared out work from a colleague who was taking a planned absence. They appear to be confident to both discuss and act autonomously within the boundaries of their shared work. Later in her semi-structured interview she describes her leadership culture:

> I've made it clear that it's not all about me. We are responsible together, as a team...when we stand up there in front of the staff, we are all one team…They started a What's App group about 12 months ago, so that's about two years after I started…emails are great, lovely, but you need that little bit more and you can see the communication between them, it's not always work, 'You're decorating this weekend, have you tried this or that' but it's that, I wouldn't say bond either…but I think you'd see working partnerships, definitely and yeah, warm is probably the word to use, warm working partnerships so there's that level of, I wouldn't say friendship, that's not the word but there's the banter, there's camaraderie, team spirit but at the same time there's that level if there needed to be, people would know there's a boundary, there's a line. I think you would see relationships between staff and the leaders as well… I would never ask anyone to do something that I don't do. Sweep the floor, clean the tables at the end of lunchtime, which I do most days, put displays up like I did Friday night, lead a class which I did last week…because I think it's important that if I'm asking them to do something, I'm doing it because I know I would do it myself. Konstanze (SSI)

Konstanze seems to have built a team by sharing responsibility and creating a sense that there is a connection between her as the team leader and them as members, 'We are all one team'. This is underpinned by relationships that extend beyond those needed to

carry out work which she describes as 'warm working relationships'. Fielding and Moss (2011) describe the part played by the affective in more democratic practice. It should extend to the personal relationships that are necessary for dialogical practice. Here, relationships serve to bring about useful outcomes that make a positive difference for students but they also allow colleagues see each other as people beyond their roles and demonstrate genuine care. In their description of how the affective realm should be considered when addressing issues of social justice in schools Mills et al (2015) argue that genuine care plays a part in school relationships. These are not the primary relationships of private life, as we see when Konstanze says, 'I wouldn't say friendship, that's not the word', but the relationships of the work place where solidarity and care are built. She ascribes part of this warmth to the fact that she role models so that, 'I would never ask anyone to do something I wouldn't do'. Finally, in Finding 3 we saw attempts to locate autonomy within the framework of a common purpose so that it did not reflect the unfettered individualism of neoliberal narratives. It is evident that the relationships in Konstanze's description, and the autonomous activity that they support ,are similar in tone.

Collier and Esteban (2000) have argued for the centrality of dialogical practice in professional cultures that wish to claim to be more democratic. For Fielding and Moss (2011) dialogical practice provides opportunities for regular, repeated, embedded and inclusive debate that links to meaningful decision making. It is characterised by an open-endedness and open-mindedness that acknowledge the constructionism of genuine meaning making. It builds the epistemic agency needed to challenge usual or normative patterns and relationships in schools and so has the potential to translate into a subversion of unfair or unequal social arrangements (Hopkins 1990, Fielding and Moss 2011, Fielding 2012). It allows disagreement and avoids the temptation to close down debate or manage difference to ensure that discussion does not result in the reinforcement of already established views or practices. The prevalence of team discussion in the data provides evidence that participants value talking together and joint decision making above any other characteristics of team working. The data presented here demonstrates that, in part, every aspect of dialogical practice is represented somewhere in what the participants describe. Jacky and Diane describe practice that is regular, avoiding what Fielding and Moss (2011) call the exoticism of one off structured conversations, although their extracts raise questions about who is considered suitable to

be part of joint discussion and decision making. Although Thecla addresses this question directly, arguing that everyone has a right to have a say, she does not describe this right beyond her own team. Becky's description of iteration and feedback describes dialogical practice as a process that seems to include the openness needed for genuine meaning making with a broader range of colleagues and students. The descriptions from Denise, Ruth and Marianne raise some questions about how Goodall Schools Trust colleagues have been supported or trained to manage discussion within their teams and when these are coupled with the issues raised by Sarah and Konstanze, who have different levels of experience managing teams, we can see that much might be gained from problematising dialogical practice as a team approach. In Finding Two we saw participant descriptions of democracy that raised questions about consensus and the extent to which the participants might be comfortable including structured opportunities for disagreement in their work. These questions are equally relevant here when we consider some of the challenges facing the participants when managing the practice they value so highly. These practices are also an opportunity to explore notions of affirmative and transformative practice and consider which types of teamwork reinforce instrumentalist schooling and prefigure and model relationships that offer alternatives.

5.4.3. Constructing the matrix

At the beginning of Section three, Finding three, I outlined Maxwell's (2013) argument for the inclusion of questions in research interviews that allow participants to access specific events and actions alongside more generalised abstractions or opinions. This approach allowed a consideration of the extent to which participant ideas of shared leadership translated into an allocation of leadership work that could be considered a challenge to hierarchy. In this way school leadership approaches could be seen to build more democratic practice and subsequently contribute to social justice agendas. Maxwell's (2013) argument is equally applicable to the team practices under consideration in this finding. The first section above demonstrated that participants value joint talk and decision making as part of team work. Recall of specific practices, in this case of how participants constructed their team matrix, allows a consideration of the extent to which theoretical ideas of dialogical practice translate into shared decision making about school improvement priorities and resource. Furthermore, implicit in this consideration is potential for further explication of shared leadership.

Participants were asked to describe their matrix, with specific reference to how it had been designed or decided.

Raewyn and Carol described experiences of how they did this with colleagues who have seniority. Raewyn says:

> This matrix was constructed between my Executive Head and me as Head of School following matrix Continuing Professional Development …We constructed the matrix together and then I presented it to the senior leadership team. In the meeting we talked through the premise of the information that X had given me about how it was constructed and why people were there and how it should triangulate. We explained what the key focuses were and what the strategic direction was for the next six or seven weeks, why those key focuses are there and why people would then make what was the key strategic direction for this six, seven weeks. After we spoke about it, I made notes which was really handy! So we talked about there being clear sub-team links, about the matrix itself, securing that accountability, talked about the top box priorities and then how that feeds into different teams and how it will then triangulate and pull in different people to shared priority areas. We talked about the proportion of time that's allocated to each senior colleague and talked about the clear roles that should be identified. Raewyn (SSI)

Raewyn's description suggests that the matrix design is a new experience for her because she does this with her own line manager following some training the manager had attended. She felt the need to make notes during the discussion which seemed to comprise an attempt to understand how it should work and what its purpose is. She lists some of the things that are shared as part of the training session, the importance of priorities in the top box of the matrix, and how the work triangulates, for example. However, there is no sense that Raewyn yet understands the purpose of these actions, so there is no description of how the top box priorities are intended to put the school agenda at the heart of team activity or that triad working[9] aims to give colleagues opportunities to work in unusual combinations. Once the matrix has been constructed,

[9] Triad working refers to the requirement for team members to work on areas of responsibility together in smaller groups where one member, regardless of formal role, will lead and the other follow. This arrangement includes the team leader.

Raewyn then 'presented it to the senior leadership team'. Later in her semi-structured interview she describes her culture and how she builds it. She says:

> We talk a lot about vision, a lot about strategic priorities and try to keep everybody involved in all of the priorities across the school by telling them what is going on. Raewyn (SSI)

These phrases, each referencing talk, suggests that it is used to communicate already made decisions rather than to encourage participation.

Carol's description includes discussion of her matrix with her line manager and her staff:

> When I constructed my matrix I had discussions with my Lead[10] and got her to have a look at my matrix to see if she felt I needed to review things based on our OFSTED, so we had a discussion about that. But, I always talk through everything with the staff, even right down to doing a Summary Self Evaluation form; I never submit it unless they've seen it and everything feeds in from them. Because, to develop them, they need to see how it all fits together. Carol (SSI)

It is not clear from Carol's description whether the process begins with a discussion with the Lead or with the senior team but it is clear that she values the contribution of both to her decision-making. She sees the sharing of the matrix as developmental for her staff, particularly 'how it fits together 'which could refer to how priorities are connected or how colleagues are expected to work together, or both. Nevertheless, like Raewyn, Carol seems to share a pre-designed matrix with others, 'I always talk through everything with the staff', so that we aren't sure about the extent to which she engages them in authentic discussion and decision.

In the predominance of participant data there is a sense of co-construction as most participants described some element of co-design design with their senior team. Konstanze describes her process of design:

[10] The most senior colleague in each school is assigned a Trust Lead. This person acts as a sounding board and support for the senior colleague as well as helping to keep the school agenda focused on the Trust vision as well as managing their performance. The most senior colleagues in each school may act in the role of Lead for another senior colleague in another school. This is not a peer model as the Lead role, whoever inhabits it, has more authority in the Trust leadership structure.

> I did a skeleton copy, we've had a Senior Leadership Team…strategic meeting…where we've all looked through each other's to see what each other's responsibility is…see if there's anything that's been missed off… Now we're in the process of finalising…a middle matrix, once the team have finished their plan…It's not one person doing it, might be one person typing it all up and writing it all up and then it's a discussion of what needs to go in there. Konstanze (SSI)

For Konstanze, the process of designing the matrix starts with the Head but extends out to others for discussion. Unlike Raewyn and Carol, Konstanze refers to the carrying out of specific tasks, 'not one person doing it, might be one person typing it'. She has also organised for her middle leaders to use their own priorities from their Development Plan to shape a matrix to shape their resource. However, there is still a remnant of the process lacking authentic engagement and sharing given that the process began with 'a skeleton copy 'drawn up by Konstanze and that the team's contribution did not seem to extend beyond cross referencing the matrix with a predetermined set of priorities by seeing 'if there's anything that's been missed off'.

Marianne describes a greater sense of team involvement in the creation of the matrix. In her semi-structured interview she says:

> We do the School Development Plan first, so we look at the priorities for the whole year…I start with taking out the priorities that I want them to work on to start with, which obviously goes on the top part (of the matrix). Then…we have a discussion about all the other bits that they've been doing…that's at the start of the year. So they talk about what they do and where it fits in with their matrix, and which bits can overlap with different members of the Senior Leadership Team so they can work together. As the year progresses then we change the matrix so things move… we do it more as a team, so we look at our top boxes and say which things have already been done there, what can be moved out of there and what has become the new priority to go into that top box. We do it…in Senior Leadership Team meetings which we have once a week, and sometimes we have those ad hoc meetings as well when we need to discuss things. And then I talk

about it in 1-1s[11] as well as to where they are with their priorities and…then the matrix can be moved around. Marianne (SSI)

Marianne makes decisions about the priorities for the year based on the development plan which she says 'we do'. It is unclear what this means but suggests a sense of collegiality. She specifically includes other team members in talking about 'what they do ' and 'where it fits in' as well as 'which bits can overlap…so they can work together'. The work and how team members combine around priorities is discussed. Then as the year progresses, the matrix is reviewed by the team.

The descriptions from Raewyn, Carol, Constanze and Marianne plot an increasing sense of involvement from members of the senior leadership team but although they might engender a sense of involvement it is within narrow confines so that we see less evidence of the dialogical practice valued by participants and more evidence of their descriptions of sharing leadership that suggested some tasks, particularly those around the allocation of resource, are reserved for the Head.

In contrast, Diane and Sharon describe the creation of their matrix as a collaborative activity that can develop leadership understanding. Diane describes her own process of construction:

> We did this activity where we looked at our current school development plan. What did we think were going to be our targets or main areas of focus for the next one? We rated them all out on to different pieces of paper. I went away, wrote the school development plan, brought it back to them, 'Is this what we think it looks like? What do we think some of the milestones might be?'…Once we were happy with it, I took the main areas from the development plan…put them all on to different pieces and then we all sat down together and had a conversation of, 'What do we think? Where does each bit go?' I made a matrix on the table with people's names and then we were debating them. It was really interesting

[11] Work on the leadership matrix is supported by regular one to one meetings between each team member and the person who line manages them. These meetings address operational and strategic issues as well as supporting development and taking feedback on school issues. The senior member of the team varies whom she line manages so that it cuts across hierarchy. So for example, a Head might line manage a Deputy Head and an Assistant Head for a cycle then move to line managing a second Deputy Head and a different Assistant Head.

> actually because really big areas like teaching and learning, a whole conversation came around that where two colleagues understood the power behind having that on your matrix... Of course, we're looking for the triangulation so that different people feed into each priority but someone will lead, and we will all lead and we will all follow somewhere on the matrix…It was really interesting to see how the team were using the language from the leadership training we had done together...' Oh you're really operational... so I think you should have that.' Then I'd throw in a spanner of, 'But then who needs to develop that area of their leadership? So, should we move it?' We had conversations around why I think it's too risky to move some areas of responsibility between people at this point because the priority is not truly embedded yet…We spoke about whether there have been any surprises and whether there was something on the matrix that you really wanted that wasn't in your box...it revealed a lot about how each of us sees the school and the direction it's moving in…Matrix is a way of thinking. You don't just stop matrix thinking when you walk out the door because you're not in a senior leadership team meeting anymore...it's always there. When we're looking at a piece of review work we don't divide it into, 'Right, so Year 1 and Year 2 need to do a book look because they're next door to each other and they're in Key Stage 1'. We look thematically at our priorities on the matrix and ask who should be involved in the review. It's a more creative, collaborative way of working I think. Diane (SSI)

The first word in Diane's description is 'we', and this is typical of her whole description as is the fact that she immediately uses open questioning to elicit genuine participation, 'What did we think were going to be our…main areas?' Diane outlines a set of activities that she has designed to include the team in the discussion about what the agenda is and how they should be deployed to it. She begins right at the start of the planning process with a discussion of the priorities that will become the agenda for the year. She casts herself as co-ordinator of the team's contributions, 'I went away, wrote the school development plan, brought it back to them'. Once the agenda is agreed she opens up discussion about who will lead which piece of development work in the team forum and how activity might connect. She acknowledges the play of power where two colleagues see the value of leading teaching and learning and addresses this by referring to one of

the criteria of matrix design namely that each key area must have a single leader. Equally she seems to balance this with the need for team members to work in collaborations not furrows. She makes reference to the fact that the matrix requires every team member to lead and follow across the activity regardless of their formal role. It is clear that that Diane had prepared the team for this discussion with previous training, specifically around differences between operational and strategic working. Diane sees how useful it is to give colleagues new streams of work to support their development, who needs to develop that area of their leadership. 'Again she uses questions to engage the team in the thinking rather than making statements about what she thinks should happen and in doing this demonstrates the comfort with uncertainty needed for joint meaning making. She addresses the issue of risk, looking to balance the development needs of staff with the development needs of the school, making clear that some elements of the school improvement agenda are too important. Interestingly she does not cite any external driver, factor or regulator in her assessment of risk. Rather it relates to how far developed the activity stream is. Diane demonstrates her own reflexivity when she reflects on what she and the other team members have learned from the whole discussion. Although it's not possible to establish a causal link between the published intentions of using a matrix and what Diane describes as the 'matrix working' that continues beyond the construction of the matrix, she does equate it with 'a more creative, collaborative way of working'.

Finally Sharon describes a comprehensive engagement with the intentions and uses of the leadership matrix.:

> When I constructed my matrix I remember very clearly not wanting to make all the decisions and give people job descriptions because that's not what the matrix is about. I wanted the senior leadership team to do some more thinking around what they are interested in, struggling with, talented with, so I left the senior team to it…I met with them and then they went and had their own meeting around it and then I made some very small tweaks but not huge things because obviously, that undermines what I was trying to do, if I then go and say, 'This is what you're actually going to do'. We had done a lot of work around who we are as leaders, as a group. We had done training and we talked a lot about strengths and areas that each other wanted to develop but then also areas that we really just didn't want anything to do with. Sharon (SSI)

Sharon's description has many ideas in common with Diane's including a pervasive sense of dialogue that translates into relevant action. Sharon opens the description by saying that she didn't want to 'make all the decisions', displaying an ease with sharing decisions about how this key resource, leadership capacity, was assigned. In section two of Finding three we saw Sharon struggle to support Carol to move away from rigid job descriptions and here Sharon reinforces her view that these are not the best way to assign activity. Sharon gives the team an opportunity to self-determine, in the broader context of what they knew about each other's strengths and areas of interest, by leaving them to discuss and decide who would have which area of leadership responsibility on the matrix. Furthermore, leadership activity which progresses the school agenda is clearly linked to leadership development in Sharon's mind. Sharon's trust in the team to make fair and relevant decisions about how leadership capacity is arranged finds ultimate expression in a comment she makes at the end of this description:

> I wasn't sure what they'd give me to do…they knew I was happy whatever, I was left with money and buildings because I think they found that boring. [Laughs.] Sharon (SSI)

This comment gives the impression that Sharon is willing to give her team the autonomy, within relevant limits, to assign the potentially most powerful resource of all in the team, the time and capacity of the Head. Sharon then continues in a different vein:

> Two Deputy Head colleagues wanted to lead key stage 2… I thought it was going to be interesting to see where that fell. I spoke to them both about it in one to ones. A knew where she was going to be most impactful so she said she would lead Year 5 and 6 but I know that B was looking forward to that because of the power that that brings, the upper school. In previous one to one meetings B came to me with all these plans and ideas as to where people could be allocated on the matrix…She was trying to manipulate the situation so that I would agree that she would be best suited to 4, 5 and 6 and then her Deputy Head colleague would have years 1, 2 and 3. When I spoke to B about it I teased out that she and A had had a conversation where A had argued that B had too many other commitments to carry the burden of upper school. I had known that about A long before…she will think about things and not necessarily go straight to the punch but get there through a series of questions and reasoning…so there was bartering, from my

> understanding of it, there was bartering around, 'If you want to be in control of the timetable then I'll be in control of teaching and learning'. Sharon (SSI)

In citing Weiss in his argument for the use of episodic questioning to access information that better reveals participant practices, Maxwell (2013) also reminds us that generalised memories or opinions allow the participant to minimise the sharing of information about which they feel embarrassed or uncomfortable in a way that specific recall does not. Here we have a description from Sharon that seems to contradict some of the approach described by her in the preceding excerpt. The initial impression is that two cultures seem to exist side by side. In the first excerpt we see the team leader arranging a process to design the matrix that seems to support genuine dialogue and collaborative working. Sharon is clear that she does not want to prejudge the outcomes of the design discussion and that she has prepared the team to think about how to balance their own interests and strengths with the needs of the school agenda. The second excerpt (which follows immediately in the interview script) raises a question about what happens when there is competition for areas of school work that are associated with power, in this case the leadership of students in the older age range. She describes how her team member B 'tries to manipulate the situation', suggesting B's less than transparent approach to negotiating her own tasks on the matrix. Then she describes how team member A had influenced team member B in another conversation outside of the team meeting and used questions to shift team member A's perspective. These descriptions suggest that the idea earlier in the extract that the Head left team members to make decisions is only partially true. Further negotiation about areas of responsibility on the matrix also took place one to one with the Head, replacing the dynamic of dialogical team with the hierarchical relationship of Head and team member. Furthermore, the idea of 'control 'of teaching and learning and timetable suggest an approach to leadership workstreams that is more furrowed than the cooperation and collaboration suggested in the earlier description. In this excerpt Sharon describes how she navigates a power struggle without consciously addressing the issue with the team. Collier and Estaban (2000) argue that dialogical activity acknowledges that power struggles are a natural part of a team dynamic and, therefore, team leaders should consider providing opportunities for constructive conflict that allow mutual bargaining and influencing. In a dialogical culture these take place in a spirit of transparency to generate learning. This excerpt reveals

something about how Sharon views power and raises a question about the extent to which the Goodall Schools Trust supports her to manage it.

Given that the Executive Team leads on training others on the purposes of the matrix and how to design it, an exploration of how this team design their own matrix is helpful. There are three responses that relate directly to this. Jacky describes the creation in this way:

> The matrix for the central team starts with our priorities for the following three cycles, and then beyond that we allocate resource to schools where the support is needed... Sometimes we would need to make some changes in the year, it depends on external factors and whether we have other pressures that we need to take account of, that possibly weren't at the fore when we set the original matrix… taking account of the Trust development plan, school development plans, where we may need to change approach or strategy for some reason. In that case it would be talked about at a team meeting extensively, it would be talked about with individuals whom it would apply to mostly, and it would be agreed that way, and then the Chief Executive Officer would revise the matrix accordingly. Jacky (SSI)

In common with many of the other descriptions of matrix design, Jacky describes a process that starts with priorities but includes activity that relates to the support of schools at this early stage. She mentions the way that changes in the year have to be accommodated and there is reference to 'external factors' and 'other pressures' that might influence how resource is assigned. There is no specific detail of the construction but we know that changes within the year are agreed before the CEO makes amendments. There is a strong sense of sharing the construction but in the absence of detail it is difficult to ascertain what elements of the construction are considered normative by Jacky and are, therefore, not described. The following second description comes from Thecla:

> We meet and talk about our priorities for the year. These come from where we are on with our Vision and our journey to Goodall Great and any external drivers we need to consider like an increased interest in safeguarding for example. Then, once we've discussed these with Board and schools, and taken feedback, we make

> our own matrix. Some of it is done though one to ones, some of it in the Executive team, some staff have more of a say over what goes where because of their experience. Thecla (SSI)

Thecla and Jacky concur about where matrix creation begins, with 'our priorities' but Jacky locates the origins of these priorities. They seem partly internal, 'where we are on our journey to Goodall Great', and partly external, 'drivers we need to consider like an increased interest in safeguarding'. She describes an iterative process that includes a range of stakeholders. We see here a reiteration of earlier suggestions that the Trust agenda is fundamentally influenced by external concerns. Thecla refers to these as 'drivers', reinforcing the idea of education as a machine that can be somehow improved mechanistically. Nevertheless, we also see the part that the Trust Vision plays in shaping the matrix so that the work of the Executive Team also includes activity that extends beyond an instrumentalist idea of school provision. Finally, Thecla says that the actual construction takes place across a range of fora, so that although it is discussed by the team, the location of its final construction is unclear. Thecla does say that, 'Some staff have more of a say over what goes where because of their experience', making clear that decisions are not shared and that the matrix at Executive Team level is not used for development purposes in the way Marianne describes.

In the third and final description of the matrix, Margaret says:

> The key role is to lead the thirteen schools across the Trust…not managing, not micro-managing, not doing…The roles are decided by the Executive Team, but I guess some of us have an overall say in how those roles are assigned. After a planning meeting …we construct our matrix to make sure that the vision is developed and is in safe hands…we ask, what are our priorities? What are the urgent needs? What were our top box priorities? What's got to be achieved? And then we look at the best people to do it and I suppose because we've got so much skill and talent in our team, it's not necessarily just putting the right person for that role; it is, but it's also about putting somebody into a role that hasn't done it before. They will be supported by somebody who's done it before, so a balance of putting people in roles that can actually do it with their hands tied behind their back but also a balance between if they only ever do the same roles all the time, how will we develop people? Margaret (SSI)

Like Jacky and Thecla, Margaret also acknowledges that the matrix is created in response to planning and she also describes how the team balance 'urgent needs…and…priorities', but there is a greater sense of the challenges that the team need to navigate in her description. She says the team need to, 'lead…not manage…not doing'. There's a sense of risk too because she says she wants the vision to 'be in safe hands'. Finally , she is also keen to balance the needs of the agenda with the development needs of team members.

There is considerable congruence between these three descriptions. Each sees the design process as starting with planning and priorities and each agrees that although team members discuss the work, they do not make an equal contribution to the final decisions. Margaret differs in that she includes a description of how the matrix is used to balance the Trust agenda with the need or desire to train others in new roles.

As with the data in section 1, the data presented here also demonstrate a number of elements of dialogical practice. Much of the design of the matrix contains a degree of co-construction and some of the descriptions can be considered to constitute collaborative or dialogical working in a number of regards. We see activity that appears to be part of a continuing pattern of dialogue and reflection, what Fielding and Moss (2011) call 'permanent provisionality', where activity is planned with regularity, not as a one off event devoid of feedback or the potential for future and ongoing engagement. The team leader describes her own openness to new understandings even as she supports the new understandings of her colleagues with questioning, and gives up her ability to control the final result of the design. This willingness to be surprised, to welcome the unanticipated, characterises genuine dialogue (Hopkins 1990, Fielding and Moss 2011). Nevertheless, the descriptions of the challenges participants face when they describe how they try to manage decision-making in their team are also seen here in data where participants describe an activity that sometime is an opportunity for collaborative working and decision making. Where some participants use the very construction of the matrix to reinforce or exemplify partnership working and to develop the leadership practice and understanding of their colleagues, others retain key decision making for themselves and grapple with issues of power that might be better supported if collaborative working and the challenges it might pose were problematised and overtly explored.

5.4.4. Understandings of accountability

The final idea within this finding explores whether participants are able to meet external, upward facing accountability agendas whilst simultaneously creating narratives and practices more congruent with approaches that might underpin democratic practice.

Wilkins (2021) argues that notions of accountability, where stakeholders share responsibility for commonly held goals, have been overtaken by a new hyper-accountability used as part of the School Self Improving System. Hyper-accountability extends previous trends of accountability to unprecedented levels and centres around the narratives of autonomy and accountability praised by the commercial sector (Wilkins 2021). In reality, the purpose of hyper-accountability is to reinforce a centralised agenda by securing a set of recognisable shared characteristics in the pursuit of increased exam performance. In this way hyper-accountability also serves to provide a semblance of coherence in a fractured and disparate schools system. Hyper-accountability is always upwards, heightens risk and prefers judgement and measurement to be outsourced to external bodies. Ultimately its practice and process have become detached from any authentic improvement activity (Baxter and Floyd 2019). For Fielding and Moss (2011) accountability that connects with participatory democracy must take a different form. It will place concerns for the common good at the centre so that individual accountability exists in the context of the wider agenda and it will be underpinned by a mutual responsibility that cannot be entirely delegated to external bodies. Fielding (1997) argues that, as with policy, this mutual responsibility approaches to accountability will also result in contestation about its purposes and forms so that a range of stakeholders contribute to its creation and subsequently carry it out.

In appendix seven, the Trust describes the part the leadership matrix plays in securing accountability. Interestingly, this very phrase is at odds with what the document proceeds to describe. ‘Securing accountability’ has the sense of calling to account that characterises approaches to improvement that imply that one colleague in a hierarchy oversees the work of another. It implies the kind of upward accountability key to more instrumentalist approaches. In contrast, the document then describes the role of the matrix in placing vision and priorities at the heart of leadership work. This contrast that suggests a contradiction between different understandings of accountability is subsequently reflected in participants’ own descriptions.

Sarah recently agreed to take on the role of Executive Head in an area where it is relatively difficult to recruit senior leaders. She is relatively inexperienced. She recounts the difference her leadership matrix makes to her work and she describes how her understanding has changed following recent training.

> After I completed the training I saw that at school X using the matrix…was about making team members more aware of their role and where they needed to be and their accountability to help the Head of School. Initially the matrix wasn't very impactful, probably because there wasn't enough experience…now it's a lot more impactful alongside the one to ones. Everyone sees the one to one notes which we weren't doing before and I think that for me was a really transformational thought, that I hadn't thought of before. Sarah (SSI)

The Trust runs monthly training and development sessions for leaders that include elements of the Trust's own school improvement processes. Sarah had recently attended one of these sessions where another school leader shared her own leadership matrix. It is interesting that what she took from the training was the idea that accountability comprises the team members' obligation to support the Head of School. This idea reduces the definition of accountability to the type of upward accountability from team members to their line manager and her agenda. The Trust's own description of the matrix (appendix seven) prioritises accountability to the school vision. She also describes how the matrix has not had much impact in her team so far because 'there wasn't enough experience'. This use of the passive construction reveals an element of disconnection, the origin of which is not clear from this description. However, there is some suggestion of the Executive Head's own inexperience and learning journey: she describes how she now shares everyone's one to one notes, as suggested by the Trust, that she had not thought of this before and that this had been transformational. The sharing of one to one notes promotes an open atmosphere and encourages team members to see their own contribution in the context of the whole school leadership agenda. Sarah's description offers an interesting contrast to how the Trust itself sees the role of the matrix in reinforcing accountability to the vision and anticipates that colleagues will understand and use it. In this way it raises the question about which contextual issues affect the participants' ability to engage with new improvement processes and suggests a less simple relationship between intention and practice. What is more, it challenges the way

the Trust supports colleagues to put aside ideas of accountability more associated with instrumentalist agendas and adopt alternative approaches.

The picture is further complicated because there isn't a simple contingent relationship between participant education purposes and how they view and exercise accountability. In finding one earlier we saw Becky's commitment to being a music school and her praise of the type of provision welcomed in a GST school. We also saw her offer a range of opportunities for formal and informal leadership. Her description of accountability reveals another approach to leadership:

> Things have evolved a lot over this year and I think it's people understanding their accountability as well within leadership so that if they have a leadership position or they're leading on something, who or what they're accountable for, what the deadlines are, what they need to be doing and that can be done through coaching sessions, through one to one's, through those informal and more formal meetings and deadlines and 'I need this 'or 'I need that'. Our next step is…to secure that middle leadership accountability, to make sure that communication is spot on consistently, to make sure that if you're asked to do something, it's done and if it can't be done by the time you've said it's going to be done, that the conversations have happened beforehand and more proactively rather than SLT chasing for it…I think that's the next step, to make sure that they have got the same understanding of accountability. We've started to think about it, about using the matrix really strategically in one to ones and more strategically than I think we were…making sure that the one to ones really drive progression and challenge in the right way, and that the questioning that we as leaders ask really promotes and provokes the right responses or the responses that might be needed but that people maybe don't want, just to have those, well it's not done so why not and what are you going to do about it? Becky (SSI)

Becky's description focuses on the importance of accountability in bringing about change with an emphasis on where staff are positioned within a hierarchy. She relates it to specific work streams when she says, 'If..they're leading on something 'and 'what they are accountable for', and 'what the deadlines are'. She reinforces this idea when she describes the next steps with middle leaders because when she lists the way accountability needs to improve she includes doing what needs to be done and doing it

by the agreed time. This suggests a top down model of leadership and leadership activity supported by an upwar accountability. We see an interesting corollary of this approach when she mentions that she'd like middle leaders to finish their work without being chased. It is possible that the hierarchical approach has increased a sense of reliance on the line manager who has to work hard to ensure colleagues are doing their jobs.

We see that it is not easy for Becky to fully embrace the Goodall Schools Trust Improvement processes even when her educational purposes extend far beyond instrumentalist preoccupations. It is these comparisons that reveal that the translation of ideals into practice is complex and that narratives of engagement and participation can sit side by side with concerns for externally set agendas (even where they are at odds with the participants own purposes) and preferred ways of measuring them.

The following description from Konstanze extends the idea that participants work with definitions that combine ideas of more upward and collaborative forms of accountability:

> I've built a leadership culture by sharing the responsibility, it's not just me standing up there in meetings, I've made them take ownership of things and accountability for things. They know they're doing the one to ones, they're being held to account and staff have seen that as well and they see they've been given voices to do things and actually, have seen them succeed… …They're seeing the leadership as a whole impacting on school and learning and results… And if they need help or support they know where to come. Konstanze (SSI)

A number of ideas about accountability seem contingent in Konstanze's mind. Team members are expected to contribute to activity that is staff facing so that staff see that they are responsible for elements of the agenda. 'Ownership' has positive connotations around engagement and this is reinforced by the idea of voice so that she says, 'They have been given voice to do things'. This is suggestive of the power or authority that can accompany responsibility. These combine in her idea of accountability which is coupled with support so that team members know that Konstanze will help them with their work if they struggle. She is not describing a culture where accountability comes without help. This combination of accountability, responsibility, support and authority results in benefits for the school so that impact is visible. We can infer an element of benefit for the team members because this visibility means they are seen positively by their staff colleagues as the instigators of improvements. She also makes refence to an element of

mutual accountability where 'they know they are doing the one to ones'. (At a later point in the interview she remarks that the notes of these meeting are shared across the team so that team members can see what each other are doing). This suggests that visibility about each other's work streams reinforces accountability as presumably each can see what the other has achieved. This might suggest an element of informal rivalry that seems to contribute to overall impact of leadership work rather than detract from it. Nevertheless, she also says, 'They're being held to account', which is redolent of notions of accountability that relate to roles within a hierarchy.

There are also examples of participants attempting to grapple with notions of accountability that could be described as having more democratic characteristics. In her semi-structured interview Diane says:

> There's a teacher who's…leaving. I've asked him…'What do you think about the way we work here, that you work in triads and that sometimes you lead on the matrix and sometimes you follow?' He hasn't said it but I think he can't bear the fact that he has to go to different people about his work; he wants a line manager. People who love line management get stuck in thinking in terms of matrix working and people who don't like the matrix, I believe, are the same people who like to hide and not be held to account. If I get a really good relationship with you and you line manage me, I know I can get away with stuff I want to get away with because we've got a good relationship and I know what to hide. I know what you look for...Matrix working doesn't allow anybody to hide. Diane (SSI)

Diane describes how leaders on a matrix work together on school priorities. Once work streams are shared out, smaller groups (called triads even though small group number smight exceed three) meet to design strategy before it is discussed by the full senior team Everyone on the matrix, regardless of hierarchical role, leads on some work streams and follows on others. Although the Head retains ultimate formal authority, she also leads and follows (appendix seven). From what Diane says about her colleague's view of this approach, we can infer that it support sa more collaborative approach to accountability.

Diane contrasts the upward accountability, which she implies is the usual type of line-management in schools, with the type of accountability she sees in matrix working. In the latter, leadership work is discussed with all team members at meetings once smaller

groups of colleagues have worked together to prepare the work. The usual relationship of each colleague reporting to a single line manager is replaced with a set of accountabilities to each team member and to the agenda. It is interesting that she associates hierarchical line management with a lack of rigour as it is precisely this argument that often justifies upward accountability. Later in her interview this idea of the agenda is strengthened. She has described how she has tried to establish a culture where risk and creativity are welcomed:

> We are more creative now but first we've had to prove ourselves. People can start to throw caution to the wind and throw away their exercise books…we've had to make sure people know we're not…messing around. We've had to develop this intellectual aspect to training, to conversation and that serves two purposes: to skill people up, to open their minds, get them exposed to new ideas but also, to show them we're not playing, we're not messing around going, 'Oh what can we do next?' This is informed and is purposeful and so you have to prove that to people. It also means that sometimes we have to say to people, 'Why are you doing that? What's this all about? Why are your kids running about? Show me your books'. So, getting that kind of balance has been something that we've needed to do and we need to hold each other to account more. Someone needs to say to me, 'Whoah reign it back in', or, 'Come on, let's get this moving a little bit quicker', so holding each other to account. Diane (SSI)

Creativity does not preclude accountability for Diane. She talks about staff proving themselves before she allowed more creativity and although she does not explicate how or why, she seems to suggest that certain forms of creativity are not compatible with the serious task of student learning. The images of throwing away your exercise books and letting your students run around suggest that she is aware that some staff might confuse a more creative approach with the relinquishing of responsibility. She says, 'Getting that kind of balance has been something that we've needed to do and we need to hold each other to account more', suggesting that what she is aiming for is responsible, research informed, creativity. There is also a sense of mutual accountability in the extract. Not only does she repeatedly refer to 'we', suggesting she sees herself and the leadership team as synonymous, and conversely, school leadership and Headship as synonymous, but she says, 'Someone needs to say to me, 'Whoah reign it back in', or 'Come on, let's get this moving a little bit quicker', suggesting that when she expects the team 'to hold each

other to hold each other to account more', she includes herself in that mutuality. Finally, underpinning this developing approach to accountability is the sense of openness to newness and difference that Collier and Estaban (2000) argue are vital to dialogical activity. She says she uses training 'to open their minds, get them exposed to new ideas but also, to show them we're not playing, we're not messing around going, 'Oh what can we do next?' Furthermore, this openness is directly linked in her mind to purposeful activity.

These ideas of accountability to the team and accountability to the agenda is also described by Morwenna. She says,:

> The matrix changes accountability…Leaders all have their own work streams…and work towards the priorities for the cycle. But it also made them realise that whatever your work stream is, the most important thing was what was most important for the school at the time…If I was on the matrix, I'd be thinking, 'You want me to do that' and I would bulldoze …it. What we needed…was to think, 'I can put my thing aside for a while, nobody's going to come and bollock me and say you've not done XYZ, I know you've been working on…that person's workstream which is more important because it's in the top box'. Although that person is in charge of that priority on the matrix, we are all responsible in some way and we contribute to it... So we've all got our responsibilities, we're accountable for certain things on the matrix but actually, the important thing was the top priority, rather than trying to muscle ahead with what we felt we needed to do from our lines. Morwenna (SSI)

Morwenna suggests that the way work is organised on a matrix changes the way accountability works. The top box on a matrix includes the priority improvement activity at any given point so that whatever individual responsibilities are within their role, the school priorities take precedence. What is more, she contrasts this approach where the school priorities take precedence with the more usual sense of being called to account, 'You've not done X, Y, Z'. The school agenda, rather than the specific responsibilities of each team member, become the focus. Everyone is responsible in some way for those priorities regardless of whether you are the leader of the activity and this is because the work is organised so that everyone contributes to the priorities in some way. The idea

that team members usually 'muscle ahead 'suggests that priorities compete when they reside in a specific role because individuals compete, but that the matrix has allowed her to put the key foci at the centre.

Participant attempts to create forms of accountability that are underpinned by mutual team accountability to a common purpose could be said to underpin practices that are viewed as more democratic. Like the data presented in the previous section and findings, the challenges and difficulties the participants face in doing this reinforce the notion that there is not a contingent link between broader educational purposes and how these translate into practices for improving schools. What is additionally clear in this particular section is that the Trust's own improvement processes, exemplified here in the leadership matrix, might be reflective of this tension, leading to contradictions that might undermine the desire to subvert neoliberal purposes and the practices that support and reflect them.

In summary, what this finding adds is that most forms of dialogical practice exist within the Trust to various degrees across leadership teams and we see this in the descriptions of all the participants included here. Nevertheless, we also see the challenges that might arise when dialogical practice is presented as normative and not problematised. Hostility can arise which is better managed if the approach is problematised. Denise and Ruth use their position as team leader or gatekeeper to steer discussions in pre-determined directions and Marianne grapples with how to use her authority to manage a situation where colleagues are either threatened by the prospect of more collaborative working or refuse to contribute fairly.

With both the dialogical practices in teams and the attempts to redefine accountability practices we see similar challenges to those elsewhere in the findings. These challenges are encompassed in the question of how to translate educational purposes that extend beyond narrow neoliberal definitions into practices that subvert and challenge them whilst offering alternatives that might be considered more democratic. These challenges arise from the same neoliberal context that affects and influences the participants and shapes their professional identities so that they define and measure themselves by the very notions they reject as unethical. This results in a complex dynamic where tension and contradiction dovetail with rupture and resistance to create benefits for students and conflict for professionals.

5.5 Conclusion to Findings

The Findings presented here suggest that the participants feel besieged and conflicted in their places of work. They fundamentally disagree that their purpose is to prepare young people for an economy that benefits from the aggregated hard work and success of students. Nevertheless, the story is complex. The participants talk about preparing young people for a future where it is they themselves who make decisions about their lives. However, participants grapple and admit they struggle to describe what an alternative future might look like for their students beyond widening their choices. We see how this conflict between policy makers and the participants is mirrored by internal conflicts within the participants themselves. While they consciously reject the narratives of neo-liberal education, they unconsciously adopt some of the discourse of instrumentalist schooling like catching up and closing gaps. These conflicts extend to how participants describe social inequality and the school's place in addressing it. While the participants believe that social injustice is systemic in nature, it is unclear whether the solutions they describe provide a challenge to this system or subvert it in any way. The participants describe the importance they place on the broad and unusual provision that they are encouraged to offer by the Goodall Schools Trust. More exploration would be needed to discover the extent to which this provision models relationships that offer an alternative to the contractual culture of neoliberalism. The participants' descriptions of their purposes and their exploration of the place school has in addressing social inequality make it difficult to see whether their approaches and attitudes are affirmative or transformative in nature. We are left wondering about the extent to which their practice reinforces ideas that social inequality is a matter of compensating some students so that they can catch up with their more fortunate counterparts. It is difficult to judge whether participants see what they do as a subversion of systemic unfairness and believe that they are building alternatives.

When participants describe their leadership and team practices, we see a range of school improvement activity that seems to span the range from affirmative to transformative. De Groot et al (2019) remind us that practitioners do not need to be able to articulate thick definitions of democracy that offer challenge and alternatives to narrow, representative descriptions, to enact them. The same could be said for school improvement practice. It is understandable that the participants describe conflicted and

contradictory practices to improve their schools. Practices that reflect and reinforce competitive and autonomous approaches and that are reinforced by upward accountability and concern for external targets operate simultaneously with attempts to develop roles and relationships that offer an alternative and subvert the relations of contract that underpin and reflect instrumentalist agendas.

The following chapter, 'Discussion, recommendations and personal reflection', addresses the research question and makes suggestions for how the research findings can be applied in the school context.

6

Chapter 6: Discussion, recommendations, personal reflection and conclusion

"Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language - this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable."
(Adrienne Rich, from Lies, Secrets and Silence)

6.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters have explored and analysed the attitudes, perspectives and improvement practices of a group of senior leaders from the Goodall Schools Trust. The purpose of this research is to explore the extent to which a Multi-Academy Trust can provide the space for its senior leaders to develop practices that contribute to social justice agendas. In Chapter One, I outlined how the project would have a particular focus on practices that might be considered to be democratic and the way that dialogical practice could contribute to this. In the first part of this chapter I will use the conclusions I have drawn from the data to answer the research question and outline what my findings contribute to the field. In the second part of this chapter I will outline the implications from the findings for schools and school systems and present them as recommendations for future practice.

The research title is: **To what extent might a Multi Academy Trust support its senior leaders to use practices to improve their schools that contribute to social justice agendas.**

In order to answer the research question I will take each of the four project aims in turn and consider what the data demonstrates. In doing so, I will outline my original contribution.The aims of the project are to:

1. Identify the educational purposes of the senior leaders of the Goodall Schools Trust
2. Examine the extent to which these educational purposes might address social justice agendas
3. Explore the extent to which the Goodall Schools Trust senior leaders' practices for improving their schools reflect their educational purposes
4. Consider the influences on these improvement practices and the extent to which they enable or constrain the enactment of their purposes

6.2 Aim 1. Identify the educational purposes of the senior leaders of the Goodall Schools Trust

It is of key importance to establish what the participants saw as their education purposes because purpose affects school improvement practice (Glatter 2021). I wanted to investigate whether the leaders of the Goodall Schools Trust agreed with neoliberal purposes of education of whether they held views about the purpose of education that might translate into socially just school improvement practice.

Unlike previous research, the findings reveal that the participants of a MAT do not have to share the education purposes promoted by neoliberal policies. The data show how the participants see themselves in conflict with families and policy-makers. We see this in participants' use of language when they describe where their own purposes sit in relation to others. Becky, Morwenna and Yvonne talk about 'tension' between their purposes and those of stakeholders, and Konstanze talks about 'fighting against' preparing young people for the workforce. Although participants agree with families and policy-makers that a key role of school is to prepare young people for their time after school, they disagree about the form of this future. They overtly disagree with the idea that their main role as educators is to prepare young people for the job market and, in turn, contribute to economic development. That is not to say they don't see education as key in preparing young people for the world of work but they argue that this preparation is to broaden young people's choices and chances and to allow them to define for themselves how they measure happiness and success.

While the views of some participants add to current research in the filed that demonstrate how professionals internalise neoliberal narratives, some of the participant

descriptions deviate from this research and describe educational purpose that are more in keeping with what Freire (1968: 14) describes as the 'fundamental human journey'. In contrast to policy-makers who value the contribution that education makes to our individual and collective futures via the economy, the participants value its contribution to the creation of identity and questions of personhood. This appreciation of the intrinsic value of education relates to two other key purposes for the participants that deviate from previous research on Academy staff.

The first participant purpose is to value the importance of school to children and young people in the present. Reay (2016) argues that an over-concern with the future has narrowed curriculum to make space for a concentration on exam preparation and Reay (2020) argues that this has been exacerbated by initiatives that support students to catch up if they are perceived as being behind. This has led to a neglect of the quality and importance of provision day-to-day. This neglect worst affects those who might most benefit from these opportunities because they depend on school to provide them (Reay 2020). These students also tend to be the very students who are also involved in catch up activities. Unlike previous research on Academies, the data shows that participants recognise this narrowing of curriculum, disagree with its trajectory and work hard to counteract it. The data include participant descriptions that range from the importance of school in providing a daily safe place from difficult home circumstances (Denise) to an appreciation of the wide range of free clubs and activities that Goodall Schools Trust schools provide as part of their 'proud traditions, wide horizons, high achievement ' framework (Thecla, Marianne, Helen). This finding is significant. The prior attainment of most of the students that attend the participants' schools is well below the national average and so they are eligible for the types of catch up programmes that might reduce curriculum time for interesting provision. This low prior attainment has neither led participants to narrow their curriculum provision nor has it affected the progress of their students against nationally recognised measures (appendix one). The research strongly suggests that a broadening of the curriculum, rather than a narrowing, increases student outcomes, as they are measured by external regulators.

The second participant purpose relates to the importance of the affective realm so that the data shows that more common student agendas of wellbeing and mental health are accompanied by a consideration of what participants do to make their schools places of

joy for both children and adults. Mills et al (2015) argue that the realm of the affective is overlooked as a place of potential injustice in schools and so ignored as an arena where social inequality might be addressed and this area is valued by the participants. The data suggest that this is not the case for participants. They identified it as an area for exploration in the third focus group, described how GST provision positively impacts affective issues and clearly articulate it as an area for consideration when discussing social equality. This demonstrates that they have prioritised and found the time and place to consider affective issues and demonstrates that this priority is possible for educational professionals in the current neoliberal context.

Unlike previous research on the Academy sector, the findings in this project demonstrate a repeated sense of a shared educational mission that extends beyond a narrow instrumentalist definition of school. Participants relate this mission to the Vision and provision of the Goodall Schools Trust. Often participants used the word 'we'. At times this is to differentiate them from other stakeholders. When describing her purpose Konstanze says, 'It's what we want'. At other times it is to differentiate them from others in the profession. Thecla says, 'What we do for children in a day here is so different to what happens in my friends 'schools'. Sometimes it sounds like a rallying cry: in Focus Group One Diane asks the other participants what they intend to do about the challenges they face to their purposes and in Focus Group Three Helen asks the participants to image how much they could achieve together as a group. It also includes a number of references to the wide student provision at the Trust: the participants appreciate this provision and the vision on which it is predicated. The data demonstrate that a MAT can be the context for the building of this common purpose. Therefore, they suggests that professional agency and optimism are possible in the Academy context and to this end, the findings deviate from the current research on the effect of Academies on the school system.

In summary, the data in the findings demonstrate that participants' purposes of education extend beyond narrow neoliberal purposes that see school as little more than student preparation for work. Participant purposes, which include attention to the day-to-day school experience for students, and a concern for their affective life, extend into areas that are ignored in current English policy except as they relate to the neoliberal agenda so are seen as improving exam outcomes. The findings also demonstrate that a MAT can be a place where leaders can develop a sense of common purpose.

6.3. Aim 2. Examine the extent to which these educational purposes might address social justice agendas

Ball (2017) argues that years of ignoring and rejecting structural explanations for social inequality in policy have resulted in a wholesale denial that it impacts educational outcomes. Thrupp et al (2013) argue that this has resulted in solutions to educational inequality that ignore the context of the school and students. The data in this study show that this is not the view of the participants and that they reject the idea that social inequality is politically neutral. They believe that its origins and ongoing maintenance are structural. Although largely confined to Fraser's (1995) material distribution, the data suggest systemic inequality is underpinned by unequal social arrangements. We see this in Diane's reference to 'crony systems', Linda's description of the challenge of 'social background', Sharon's reference to 'class based systems', and Raewyn's reference to 'social equity'. These beliefs extend to the part the school system plays in contributing to inequality. Some participants describe how independent schools, and the privilege and power they reproduce and protect, are components of a system that disadvantages their students in the present and after they leave school.

Fielding and Moss (2011) argue for the centrality of optimism in socially just school practice. They say that the educational professional must remain positive in the face of a narrowing education agenda if they are to challenge it. They also argue that this optimism should translate into meaningful activity that makes a positive difference for students. The data present a strong sense of this optimism so that the participants believe the education they provide has a part to play in reducing inequality. They describe it as central in improving the life chances of their students. Konstanze talks about providing experiences that give young people choice in the future, Morwenna believes her purposes links to 'doors that open' for her students, and Thecla describes how wide provision links to questions of personhood. Despite the many challenges they enumerate: family attitudes, poverty, policy, participants consistently returned to this belief. These data also suggest the participants view the broad curricula, and extra-curricula provision in Trust schools, as a key way to address unfairness by broadening opportunity and choice.

The findings reveal that the approaches participants use in school to address social inequality might be seen as predominantly affirmative in nature (Fraser 1995). An important example of this is the unique experiences and provision that GST gives students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Lupton and Hayes (2021) argue that broad provision is important in enriching young people's experience of school, giving them wider opportunity in the future and challenging neoliberal purposes of education. Lumby and Coleman (2016) argue that it is necessary to adopt such affirmative measures in the present alongside transformational approaches in acknowledgement of the reality of neoliberalism as the working context. Wright (2010) says, given the countervailing forces of neoliberalism, we must build the conditions today for transformation tomorrow. The participants see this provision as central in providing future opportunities and chances to their students. Further benefit would be gained from considering how these affirmative approaches which provide a challenge to neoliberal purposes could the foundation for practices that also subvert neoliberal practices.

Unlike any previous research on MATs, the data show that some participants have a view of education that is more in keeping with human becoming and given their repeated references to broad provision and how it links to student opportunity, choice and agency, it is easy to interpret this as a commitment to human flourishing in the face of neoliberal agendas. These approaches are more transformative in nature, providing challenge to the predominant view of the purpose of education. The data also demonstrate a strong sense of participant joint purpose. However, whilst the data link this common purpose to student flourishing, so that the participants feel that they are doing something good and different for students in the face of instrumentalist expectations, it is not clear that this flourishing comes in the context of the common good. Thecla is alone in directly linking GST provision with student choice in the context of the common good, 'What do you want to be for yourself and for the world. Because they are connected…we are connected'. Other examples that might suggest an idea of the common good and so challenge an individualist perception are unclear. They refer to opportunities that extend beyond choice about work as when Konstanze describes preparing students so that they are 'ready for the world'. Further benefit would be gained from considering what is meant by the common good so that educational professionals can develop a language that counteracts the predominant discourse of individualism.

In summary, the data demonstrate that the participants believe in structural inequality and are committed to the unusual provision at GST that directly challenges neoliberal purposes of education. The reason for exploring educational purposes and the part social justice plays in these purposes is because purpose links to school improvement practice. The research title seeks to explore whether the participants can build more socially just approaches to school improvement and their purposes will affect these.

6.4. Aim 3. Explore the extent to which the Goodall Schools Trust senior leaders ' practices for improving their schools reflect their educational purposes

Gunter et al (2013) argues that the collaborative, distributed or shared approaches and process to team leadership that have been used to improve schools have been appropriated by neoliberal agendas. Further she argues that the Academy policy is an expression of this neoliberal agenda.

De Groot et al (2014) argues that professionals do not need to understand thick definitions of democracy to enact them. I believe that this is equally true for dialogical practice that contributes to democratic team cultures. In contrast to research in the field, the data in this research show that there is evidence of a full range of dialogical practice across the schools in the Academy Trust. This range is underpinned by relationships that are more reflective of the cultures of commitment that Strain (2009) describes. Participants often talked about how important it is to them to share leadership and the power, authority and responsibility that comes with it. For Linda this means giving team members autonomy and confidence, 'I say…do not check in with me every five minutes'. For Diane it's a view of authority that enables others to make decisions, 'I see my authority as to be the one to say we're not getting anywhere…think about it… and come back'. Becky describes a range of formal leadership opportunities and informal chances to contribute at every level of her community. Vuori (2019) argues that democratic leadership does not require the removal of formal leadership, as this is needed to protect participatory practice. Rather, it represents a constant unease with hierarchy and seeks to include others in new and meaningful ways of working (Fielding and Moss 2011). In some descriptions, this translates into the role fluidity or role jumbling that Unger (1998) describes. Here, professional roles are more exploratory and less rigid. We see this exploration when Sharon argues that giving a new team member a different area of responsibility might bring dynamism and 'new ideas'. She goes on to say that this person

might make the wrong choices for being inexperienced but will learn more for it. For Morwenna, this fluidity finds expression in her matrix. She replaces job descriptions with areas of leadership to keep staff motivated and so that team momentum and resource can be mobilised around the key school priorities. Gronn (2002) argues that Archer's morphogenesis renders the notion of the fixed leader and follower redundant as it inaccurately describes reality. Rather leadership flows from the activity of a group of interconnected people and the team leader creates the conditions for the reproduction or transformation of practice. Diane uses her matrix to adopt a more democratic approach to accountability. Team members become responsible to each other for different elements of the school plan in a way that cuts across formal hierachy. Konstanze describes how she uses her matrix to ensure that everyone in the team has a chance to lead and follow, subverting the traditional hierarchy of line management that stratifies Head, Deputies and Assistants. She also describes its value in giving team members opportunities to work in unexpected combinations.

When dialogical concepts are applied to team practices, the data show that team leaders include their team members in planning, prioritising, discussion, debate, decision making and autonomous activity in regular and embedded ways that ensure the practice is not one off or occasional (Fielding and Moss 2011). Some examples show genuine meaning making where the team leader balances a willingness to relinquish final decision making with an ability to retain the authority needed to protect participative practice. In one strong example of dialogical practice, Diane describes how she co-constructs her matrix with her team, working with them to assign the leadership resource, including the time of the Head, across agreed improvement priorities. She prepares them by training them in leadership approaches, sharing the strengths and areas of development of each team member and being clear about how they manage the risks involved in new team members taking on new areas of responsibility. During the process she reflects on the process with them, using it as a development opportunity to challenge and develop their thinking as well as her own. In examples from Morwenna and Sharon, Jacky and Margaret, we see that a shared agenda that flows from the GST vision, lies at the heart of this activity so that their work constitutes the meaningful activity that Fielding and Moss (2011) argue must be the result of dialogical work.

Fielding and Moss (2011) argue that democratic approaches to accountability should be more in keeping with participative notions of democracy. Where this is the case, accountability processes will result from stakeholder contestation and then be used by them to build the conditions for a common purpose. The data show examples of accountability where team members can see their work in relation to each other and the whole agenda. Morwenna says, 'The matrix changes accountability, it made them realise that whatever your workstream is, the most important thing was what was most important for the school. So you don't bulldoze or focus on your own agenda'. Diane uses her matrix for accountability in a similar way and describes the disadvantage of more traditional upward accountability, 'if I get a really good relationship with you and you line manage me, I know I can get away with stuff…I know what you look for. '

In keeping with research in the field it is clear from the data that some participants experience tension which results in inconsistent in practices and that these tensions result from the conflict of participant values with those of families and policy-makers. Further benefit would be gained from a sharing of dialogical and democratic practices and approaches. Francis et al (2017) and Apple (2015) argue that educational professionals infrequently proffer preferred practices for fear of criticism. In contrast, the data in this project demonstrate that the Trust promotes a range of democratic and dialogical approaches and has designed unique school improvement processes to build the cultures that make these approaches possible

6.5. Aim 4. Consider the influences on these improvement practices and the extent to which they enable or constrain the enactment of their purposes.

We can infer a range of influences on participant practices from the contradictions and inconsistencies that the data reveal. A number of these inconsistencies result from the neoliberal context in which the participants work; however, a number result from the support that the MAT itself provides for participant purpose and practice. This presents a number of new findings.

The data demonstrate that the participants value the GST Vision and approach to provision. They talk about it with admiration and pride. Thecla describes interviewing a colleague who was moved by the GST curriculum. He was delighted that he would be supported to provide the things for his students 'he'd never imagined...he would be

allowed to prioritise...art...music...critical thinking'. We can infer from this data that the Board and founders have used their authority to establish a vision that speaks to things that matter to the educational professional.

Some of the questions in the semi-structured interviews related to one particular aspect of Trust school improvement processes, the leadership matrix. The data describing how participants design and use the matrix reveal approaches that both build and undermine dialogical practice. On the one hand the matrix promotes and supports collaborative working, unusual staff combinations, shared accountability, and opportunities for team members to lead and follow in areas of responsibility in ways that cut across traditional hierarchies and is co-designed. On the other hand it supports participants to use the language and practices of instrumentalist school improvement so that team members are called to account or clear about their roles, or it is used to communicate pre-formed decisions or to give the impression of collaboration that at best constitutes a form of consultation.

The matrix itself reflects this ambiguity. It deploys the National Standards for Headteachers (DFE 2004) to arrange leadership activity in a novel way but retains the language and activity of 'securing accountability'. In this way the matrix combines apparently contradictory approaches to accountability. On the one hand its staff are expected to arrange the clear hierarchical line management of subject staff. On the other, the arrangement of leadership activity across the matrix is supposed to engender a shared senior leadership accountability for school priorities. The hierarchical is reinforced by the retained language from the standards of 'securing accountability', suggestive of upward directed and externally focused accountability and reflected in some participant references where it has been made clear to team members that the purpose of the matrix is to make them account for their work or meet deadlines. It is conceivable that these different approaches, if managed appropriately, could work together to strengthen dialogical practice. This is a significant finding from the research and suggests that the Trust would benefit from a full review of its school improvement processes to benchmark them against a typology of dialogical or democratic practices.

The data also reveals a second area where participants might benefit from additional MAT support. Collier and Estaban (2000) warn that dialogical practice can invoke hostility

in some staff because it challenges their sense of their own authority; therefore, it should not be presented as normative. Misfud (2017) argues that although shared team work practices are an alternative to the charismatic hero Head, they should be problematised if they are to be successful in their intentions. The Trust has presented its school improvement processes as normative and the data describe examples of the consequences of this. Erika describes the power struggle between two members over leadership responsibilities and Marianne describes what happens when two team members try to subvert dialogical activity. Both of these instances are resolved by the departure of staff. It is possible that participants could have been supported by an exploration of team leader authority in the context of problematising the dialogical. This is a significant finding. It is not clear to what extent Trust training might problematise approaches that are unusual, uncommon and will bring participants into direct conflict with instrumentalist school improvement practices and other colleagues who are influenced by them. The Trust would benefit from a review of its training and development schedule to include opportunities to problematise its approaches and develop strategies for managing their introduction.

If school improvement approaches are presented as normative, so are underpinning definitions of democracy. The data reveal that participant understandings and applications of democracy affect practice. At times definitions limit dialogical opportunities so that although participants are comfortable engaging others in debate and decision making this engagement is not a right but has to be earned. Fielding and Moss (2011) argue that when dialogical practice is predicated on participative notions of democracy it engages widely and specifically targets those with the least formal power. Hammersley-Fletcher et al (2018) argue that definitions of agonistic democracy provide opportunities for structured disagreement that build cultures of consent. Some of the data suggest that participants equate democracy with consensus which precludes debate and describe examples of where participants' approach to disagreement suggests that consent is expected. This is a significant finding and the groups of schools would benefit from arranging structured opportunities for staff to disagree and arranging training for staff to learn how to provide these opportunities for others.

Gronn (2002) argues that leadership is the activity that creates the conditions for the reproduction or transformation of practice where understandings and applications of

power act as enabling or countervailing forces. Competing understandings are present in the data and impact practice. In some cases, power is viewed as a binary, limited commodity over which different individuals and groups compete. Sharon describes the competition for a certain area of leadership responsibility within her team and references manipulation and getting your own way. Helen describes the conflict over purposes and calls for a replacement of policy maker purposes with those of the participants. Yvonne understands how power can be used by governments to direct activity and create resentment. Other data from Margaret, Thecla, Morwenna and Diane describe dialogical practice that implies that power is an unlimited quality emerging from the combined efforts of colleagues around a common purpose. These understandings are important. Views of power, where it is a fixed and limited quality, would make it difficult for participants to reassure team members that their own authority would not be diminished if they shared responsibility for areas of work. It would also make it more difficult for participants to relinquish their own control over resource. A view that saw power as a diffuse and limitless commodity that is used either to enable or control would enable greater collaboration whilst supporting the analysis of covert power arrangements.

The way understandings of power and democracy come together to affect practice is clear in Erika's response to the group reading activity outlined in section 4.9. Having read an article on community democracy in Brazil she expresses anxiety about including families in decisions about curriculum and questions whether this would lead to a loss of authority. This is not surprising given the public accountability agendas that apply such pressures to professional practice and create anxiety for the school leader (Greaney and Higham 2018). However, a different definition of democracy might mitigate this anxiety. It would include all stakeholders, including those usually excluded, in discussion and structured opportunities for disagreement so that consensus could be achieved without full consent. A different understanding of power could enable the leader to create the conditions for this debate in the full knowledge that her own authority would be unaffected. This understanding could be used to remind the leader that challenge and disagreement are likely so that she is prepared ahead of time. Locating this debate in the context of affirmative and transformative measures would develop a language and framework for professionals to use when planning their work and training their colleagues.

6.6. Key contributions and recommendations

The key contributions of this research come within three areas.

1. The study demonstrates that it is possible for educational professionals in the current neoliberal context to develop a sense of common purpose centred around an alternative view of education.

2. The study demonstrates that school improvement practice can, in itself, be used to build social arrangements that provide a challenge and alternative to the social arrangements that reflect and underpin instrumentalist schooling.

3. The study demonstrates that a Multi-Academy-Trust can be a site for the development of alternative views of education and the building of social arrangements that provide a challenge and alternative to the social arrangements that reflect and underpin instrumentalist schooling.

Moreover, the participatory approach of data collection is unusual where I designed a number of activities to collect data in response to the requests and suggestions of the participants to help mitigate my position as co-founder of the Trust.

The school improvement process explored as part of the research was co-designed by the Trust and is therefore unique.

The study highlights the potential for schools and school systems to develop purposes and processes that provide a direct challenge to neoliberal purposes. It demonstrates how approaches to school improvement can build social arrangements that experiment with and prefigure different understandings of democratic living.

Recommendation 1**. S**chools and school systems should design a theoretical framework for the process of transformation of school improvement practice

The analysis of the data has resulted in one overarching recommendation under which the other recommendations are nested. Schools, groups of schools or a school system that wish to transform their school improvement practices so that they are predicated on

social arrangements that build a democratic alternate to neoliberal social arrangements, should design a theoretical framework to support the process of transformation.

The data have shown that school improvement practice can reflect and reinforce education for human flourishing in a context of the common good by adopting democratic and dialogical ideas. When it does this, it contributes to the building of more just relationships in the present and models new ones for the wider community and for the future. The remaining recommendations from the research are presented in a suggested framework that provides a structure for a tactical analysis of the current working context for school improvement (Apple 2020), a consideration of sites for interruption and subversion of this context (Olin-Wright 2010), support for the educational professional in managing the conflicts between the current and a transformed context so that they can move from the former to the latter (Hammersley-Fletcher 2013), and the identification of socially just school improvement practice (Fielding and Moss 2011). The remaining recommendations will suggest how each of these might be done.

There are a number of reasons for this recommendation:

A critical analysis of the current education landscape suggests four alternatives to the educational professional whose purposes do not cohere with instrumentalist purposes of schooling. 1. Opt out of the school system, ore parts of it, and wait for the conditions that make change possible 2. Accept that education cannot be done differently because of countervailing forces 3. Balance competing views of education and the school improvement practices that reflect and reinforce these purposes. Try to develop dialogical and democratic practice whilst meeting instrumentalist agendas and managing the competition and accountability technologies that reinforce them 4. Identify sites of interruption and develop school improvement practices that build more socially just practice in the present and indicate fairer social arrangements in the future.

The data presented in this project tell a story of resistance, subversion and navigation on the one hand and conflict, incoherence and tension on the other and suggest that the participants are currently trying to balance competing views of education and the school improvement practices that reflect and reinforce these purposes.

A theoretical framework for the process of transformation would help education professionals who are currently balancing these contradictions identify sites of interruption and develop democratic practices that model and indicate fairer social arrangements. The tensions of conflicting practices are overlaid with ethical conflict when the educational professional has to balance competing purposes that represent different values (Hammersley-Fletcher 2013). A framework for the process of the transformation of practice will not remove all conflict for the professional but will make clear where they occur and offer opportunities for developing ways of managing them.

Francis et al (2017) argue that those critical of the purposes and methods of instrumentalist schooling resist suggesting preferred practices for school improvement because of fear that they will become appropriated by instrumentalist agendas. Poulshock (2011) argues that this appropriation can happen when agents are unaware of how their actions at the level of the actual are informed by properties at the level of the real. Apple (2020) argues that this has left a gap in practice that neoliberal approaches have filled. The existence of a theoretical framework supports the reconnection of theory to practice so that proponents of alternatives can defend against the appropriation of their practices.

Neoliberal approaches are presented as politically neutral, common sense solutions to public service crises (Ball 2013). The 'self-effacement' of capitalism that persuaded the public that there is no 'viable' alternative to the market as the chief organising force of social life, has become the belief that there is no 'imaginable' alternative as neoliberalist agendas have developed (Fisher 2016: 125). Data presented here that reflect how participants use instrumental and dialogical practices simultaneously is evidence that participants have, at least in part, adopted instrumental discourses as normative. The existence of a theoretical framework for the process of transformation of practice will problematise neoliberal approaches, expose their political nature and reveal that there are alternatives.

In the discussion I made the point that issues arise when preferred approaches are presented as normative rather than considered and debated. The data presented here show instances where participants have been unsuccessful in introducing role fluidity or

shared or mutual accountability. The notion of a theoretical framework for the process of transformation of practice suggests a starting point and an alternative. I have already argued that it can problematise instrumentalist practices so that they no longer exist as the only option. This framework can also problematise alternative practices illuminating potential areas of difficulty so that professionals can be prepared to deal with them and better manage the process of movement from instrumentalist to dialogical or democratic approaches.

Democracy is not only a system of representation but is a way of living together, a more just way of organising our relationships and the world in which we live (Dewey 1939). It is founded on the belief that to enact democracy, communities and society need to develop shared solutions to common problems so that at times the needs and desires of one individual are subsumed by the greater needs of another rather than set in constant competition (Fielding and Moss 2011). This development of shared solutions and the building of the conditions in which they can successfully occur are a constant process, not a series of one-off events. This definition of democracy, predicated on a constructivist epistemology and critical realist notion of human agency, is daily and sits behind every decision an individual makes (Wright 2010). The data do not indicate any strong, conscious sense of how schools can strategically build these conditions or practise this form of democracy even though dialogical improvement practice is present across schools. A theoretical framework for the process of transformation of school improvement practice can serve as a reminder that social justice is not a destination or fixed point. New injustices, historically enacted, are uncovered and addressed in a process of contestation so that the social arrangements and forces of power that underpin them are exposed, challenged and changed. Therefore, social justice and socially just practices are a constant process or a journey (Fielding 1997). A school's organisation, curriculum and pedagogy can contribute to this process but so can leadership practice to improve the school. Finally, the an exploration of the difference between affirmative and transformative activity to address social inequality could ensure that solutions and practice do not slip into being instrumentalist or technical solutions to systemic and cultural problems.

I will now present the remaining recommendations in the context of a framework for transformation.

Recommendation 2. Schools and school systems should analyse the origins of instrumentalist school improvement agendas

2.1 Schools and school systems should build collaboration and partnerships with the academic community, education community and beyond to engage with critical, counter-hegemonic concepts to uncover unequal social arrangements as they are historically revealed and enacted.

2.2 Schools and school systems should provide embedded, inclusive opportunities for all staff, students and stakeholders to contest educational purpose where human flourishing comes in the context of the common good. System and school leaders should be supported to facilitate this contestation with all parts of the system or school wider community in ways that protect their autonomy and authority to translate ideas into vision. In this way schools and the wider community in which each school sits can be reconnected to participative democracy and describe a common purpose linked to the common good.

2.3 Schools and school systems should give young people the tools to critically analyse their worlds so that they can explore alternative social arrangements.

2.4 Schools and school systems should review their own improvement polices and practices to examine the ways they reproduce neoliberal social arrangements or build democratic practice.

Recommendation 3. Schools and school systems should identify the means of social reproduction of instrumentalist school improvement approaches and identify sites for interruption and subversion of these agendas

3.1 Shools and school systems should re-define the purpose of Boards, governing bodies and local councils so that they consider their role as directors and guardians of democratic practice.

3.2 Schools and school systems should problematise approaches to leadership and team work so that school improvers can see the conflicts between current and new practice and are prepared to deal with issues that arise when democratic practices come into conflict with instrumentalist practices.

Recommendation 4. Schools and school systems should prepare for Democratic School Improvement

4. 1. Schools and school systems should develop school improvement practices and approaches that support educational professionals to meet external agendas whilst prioritising human flourishing in the context of the common good.

4.2 Schools and school systems should design and provide structured opportunities for contestation and disagreement.

Recommendation 5. Schools and school systems should create a repository of dialogical and democratic practices and partnerships that can comprise Democratic School Improvement

5.1 Schools and school systems should give their staff opportunities to collaborate to make policy, to design their own measurements and develop accountability processes that prioritise mutual responsibility for a shared agenda

5. 2. Schools and school systems should review and benchmark their school improvement practices against a range of existing formal typologies and frameworks for dialogical and democratic practice

5.3. Schools and school systems should include a detailed consideration of school context when formulating vision, strategy and priorities to better inform solutions

5.4 Schools and school systems should identify the dialogical and democratic practice already present in their setting, provide opportunities to share it and identify the conditions that support it

6.6.1. Recommendations for further research

The field would benefit from research that seeks to identify where schools or groups of schools are on a trajectory towards Democratic School Improvement and how they might move forward.

The project has focused on the experiences of senior leaders within a MAT in the neoliberal context. Some of the data have made reference to the difficulties the Trust has in pursuing its vision within the MAT context. The field would benefit from research into the experiences of MAT senior executives to who try to pursue a socially just vision or use socially just approaches within the MAT policy.

The Goodall Schools Trust has experimented with approaches to school organisation and school environment to demonstrate to students that they are valued. Some of the data demonstrate how this poses challenges for the Trust. The field would benefit from further research into the affective experiences of school life for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The project has limited its scope to questions of democratic school improvement practice. A full consideration of the way school improvement contributes to social justice agendas would entail an exploration of the material, political and cultural conditions of the work.

The success of democratic approaches to school improvement are contingent on research and policy outside the scope of this study and the further research implications.

The notion of school improvement asks questions about what is being improved and what an improved school will look like. Beyond education and beyond England, a debate is taking place about how the neoliberal expectation of constant growth impacts the quality of life and well-being of humanity and the unequal distribution and the dangerous depletion of natural resources. If we believe that there are not limitless places for profit, and that to do so has serious unintended consequences. This has implications for our education purposes and how we do school improvement. Ever increasing outcomes and notions of constant improvement in their service are illogical and are creating a wide range of unintended outcomes that range from difficulties with recruitment to student

well-being. When these are unachievable ever more draconian technologies are developed and outcomes redefined. In this context Democratic School Improvement would be informed by a debate about what constitutes 'good enough' for a school and school system and how this can be achieved.

6.7. Personal reflection

"When I write I do it above all else to change myself and not to think the same thing as before."

"If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think you would have the courage to say it?"

(From Technologies of the Self - A seminar with Michael Foucault).

My PhD journey has affected me profoundly. My reading, discussions with supervisors and then the privilege of listening to my colleagues has shone a light on what I thought I was doing and why, and illuminated the differences between my conscious purposes and how others have received them in the form of a Trust, a vision and an approach to school improvement. I have learned that I, too, am ambiguous and ambivalent and my language and practice are filled with tension, conflict and inconsistency. I remember the first time I read the script of an interview that an academic had done with me as part of her research and being shocked that I scarcely recognised myself. I realised then, that it's not enough to say, 'Well that isn't what I meant'. If I said it, I probably did mean it, at some level, even though I also didn't mean it, at some level. Layered ontology in common parlance. And whether I mean it or not, it's what others hear and think I mean. The PhD journey has been that experience multiplied.

But my PhD journey has also helped me to cope with a complex and unpleasant policy context. The research of other academics has helped me to locate myself historically and I am eternally grateful for that.

The final word has to be in acknowledgement of the participants of this research. In the most difficult context I have ever know, they continue to challenge inequality and build alternatives to instrumental schooling. At the beginning of my PhD journey I was tired of the Academies policy and thought I would never do anything like this again. My PhD journey has led me to a different place. The endeavour and courage I have seen in my colleagues has led me to wish that I had done it differently. I wish I had trusted ALL of my colleagues, not just our senior leaders. Because our profession comprises hundreds of thousands of brilliant, talented people who did not come into teaching to narrow education in the pursuit of profit but because they love young people and believe in their potential. If we gave them voice, and connected them, the great sleeping mass, they could rise up and change the why and way of education as a model for all public services. And then, why not, the world.

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8 Appendices

Appendix one – Ofsted and Exam information on schools at the time of the research

school	School Ofsted grade at conversion	School Ofsted grade at time of research	National tests compared to national at time of research (average, at above below)
1	Inadequate	Good	above
2	Inadequate	Good	above
3	Inadequate	Good	above
4	Good	Good	at
5	Inadequate	Good	above
6	Requires Improvement	Good	at
7	Inadequate	Good	above
8	Inadequate	Good	above
9	Inadequate	Good	above
10	Inadequate	Outstanding	above
11	Inadequate	Good	above
12	Inadequate	Requires Improvement	below
13	Inadequate	Oustanding	above

GST Vision

The Trust is building a family of schools, firmly rooted in their local communities, that provides access to the very highest quality education, often associated with the selective or independent sector, for all pupils, but particularly for those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

Each member of the family will keep in balance those three dimensions of school life, as expressed in the Trust motto, always associated with the very best maintained and independent schools: a strong pastoral system which ensures each child is known and understood, the broadest provision that widens minds and opportunities and the highest standards of achievement both inside and outside of the classroom.

Proud traditions

A GST school will be characterised by the development of independence of thought and learning in the pursuit of excellence. Students will develop their individual strengths and skills and build the integrity, self-discipline, decision-making and resilience necessary to develop their own success and that of others.

They will develop an understanding of their social responsibility and the scope they have to make a difference in their local communities and as world citizens. Students will be able to express their opinions and passions articulately and confidently with due consideration for others.

Students will enjoy school, their varied friends and be proud to be a part of the school community, the Trust family and the opportunities these afford them.

Relationships will be characterised by mutual respect, the joint creation of meaning and a commitment to continual learning.

Wide horizons

Students will have free access to an extensive range of curriculum enrichment and extra curriculum activities, including residentials, which broaden their experiences and horizons.

High achievement

Students will follow a curriculum that both gives them a firm foundation in the disciplines that support all learning, including exceptional English and mathematics provision, and that will allow them success at the highest levels. Students will achieve academic outcomes well above the national norms and will earn accreditation for their musical, sporting or creative skills through a strong co-curricular programme.

Appendix three – examples of GST Wide Horizons extra curriculum provision

[redacted] artsfestival

ART + PEOPLE

POWER

2018

Illustration by [redacted]

25th June - 6th July 2018

[redacted]


gSS
[redacted]
Welcome to
young scientists
everywhere!
Monday 26th March 2018
[redacted]
Protest:
Our voices in
the world
[redacted]

1. Select Academic Year	2021-2022	Cycle	Autumn	Count of Submissions	10
2. Select Academic Year	2021-2022	Cycle	Spring	Count of Submissions	10
3. Select Academic Year	2021-2022	Cycle	Summer	Count of Submissions	10

	Choice 1: Autumn		Choice 2: Spring		Choice 3: Summer	
Outstanding	58	37%	63	42%	63	41%
Good	89	57%	80	53%	83	54%
Requires Improvement	9	6%	8	5%	6	4%
Inadequate	0	0%	0	0%	1	1%

Choice 1: Autumn	N	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total (R-6)
Roll	167	473	480	484	559	577	549	545	3667
Number of classes	14	18	18	18	20	20	20	21	135
% Places taken		88%	89%	90%	93%	96%	92%	87%	91%
% Vacant		12%	11%	10%	7%	4%	9%	13%	9%
Available Places		67	60	56	41	23	51	85	383
Participation		298	415	432	479	500	456	483	3063
% Participation		63%	86%	89%	86%	87%	83%	89%	84%
Activities Offered		41	67	72	112	116	121	125	654

Pupils below expectation	140	97	105	132	117	100	82	773
Pupils at expectation	70%	80%	78%	76%	80%	82%	85%	79%
-- Reading							88%	
-- Writing							87%	
-- Maths							90%	
Pupils fixed term excluded	1	1	0	2	1	2	4	11
Days missed	1	4	0	8	1.5	2.5	11.5	28.5

The GST Guide to School Improvement

September 2016 V3.3

Contents

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Proud traditions

A GST school will be characterised by the development of independence of thought and learning in the pursuit of excellence. Students will develop their individual strengths and skills and build the integrity, self-discipline, decision-making and resilience necessary to develop their own success and that of others.

They will develop an understanding of their social responsibility and the scope they have to make a difference in their local communities and as world citizens. Students will be able to express their opinions and passions articulately and confidently with due consideration for others.

Students will enjoy school, their varied friends and be proud to be a part of the school community, the Trust family and the opportunities these afford them.

Relationships will be characterised by mutual respect, the joint creation of meaning and a commitment to continual learning.

Wide horizons

Students will have free access to an extensive range of curriculum enrichment and extra curriculum activities, including residentials, which broaden their experiences and horizons.

High achievement

Students will follow a curriculum that both gives them a firm foundation in the disciplines that support all learning, including exceptional English and mathematics provision, and that will allow them success at the highest levels. Students will achieve academic outcomes well above the national norms and will earn accreditation for their musical, sporting or creative skills through a strong co-curricular programme.

Moving to a good GST school (Within 5 terms of conversion)	**The school will**
Proud Traditions	• • Have a vibrant learning environment. • • Encourage pupil voice alongside encouraging pupils to make choices.

	• • Make improvements in response to pupil voice. • • Introduce pupils to different environments. • • Have a clear set of values shared with the whole school community and demonstrate those values in the life of the school.
Wide Horizons	• • Offer opportunities for pupils to participate in free clubs and activities. • • Encourage wide ranging take-up of opportunities. • • Target and evaluate pupil engagement.

High Achievement • Be judged 'Good' by Ofsted.

• Achieve national norms for age related progress

and attainment.

Moving to a great GST school (Within 2 years of good)	**The school will**
Proud Traditions	• • Demonstrate its own vision in every aspect of school life. • • Demonstrate the Trust motto in every aspect of school life. • • Be a happy place for pupils and staff. • • Offer opportunities for pupils to exercise leadership inside and outside of school. • • Make a difference in its local community/nationally. • • Be proud to be a GST school. • • Know its pupils well. • • Understand the impact of the Proud Traditions

	agenda.
Wide Horizons	• • Offer extra-curricular activities and broad provision regularly to all pupils free of charge and understand their impact. • • Be ambitious and aspirational for its pupils.
High Achievement	• • Ensure all pupils achieve the national achievement norms in Reading, Writing and Maths – progress and attainment. • • Support the pursuit of excellence generally and specifically. • • Ensure that all groups of pupils are achieving at the level of the whole cohort.

1 Introduction

1.3 GST Delivery Model

The GST delivery model reflects the culture GST is building amongst schools. It is not top down or prescriptive but based on the sharing of good practice and an organic understanding of meaning and improvement.

The model is three fold:
Each school will be assigned a **Lead** with the role of:

- • supporting the school to understand the SI processes
- • driving the SI processes
- • contributing to their development across the Trust
- • sharing of good practice within and across schools
- • validating judgements
- • acting as a single point of contact between HQ and the school
- • acting as the commissioner for additional improvement, development input and services required
- • supporting the school in assessing the impact of commissioned services.

The Trust will support the schools to share good practice in a structured and co-ordinated way with the capacity necessary to facilitate it. This sharing is known as '**give and get**,' because it acknowledges that within any given school there will be excellent practice and

need for improvement wherever that school as a whole is on the improvement trajectory. At appropriate points schools will be supported to trade with each other.

The Trust will build mutually beneficial partnerships with other providers from both inside and outside the education world and a **family of outstanding friends** to support its pursuit of proud traditions, wide horizons and high achievement.

This model will be reflected not only in GSTs school improvement processes but in the provision of all GST elements referred to in the corporate charge document.

The main purpose of this Guide is to outline the school improvement strategy and in particular, the purpose and role of the GST Lead.

None of the processes outlined in this Guide can replace the necessity for the skills and attributes associated with school Leadership as located in all aspects of GST Leadership: the Head and school leadership team, the Lead, local and Trust governors.

GST uses methodology drawn from conceptual frameworks which give Leads and schools more scope to think and create, not less. These concepts are outlined in, ‘Our approach to school improvement,’ on page 6.

The key requirement is to be consistent and to use the same concepts, terminology, forms and formats with all audiences so that schools can share very easily, and any GST staff member can work with any school with minimal transition and so that a joint GST culture is built.

The cycle of school improvement will then become part of the bloodstream for school leadership teams, LGBs and for all at GST HQ.

It is very important to present our approach as a set of concepts and tools not systems, so that good Heads feel liberated and weaker ones can't hide in a cloud of conformity: 'I've done what you told me.'

The matrix is a complex tool and the single most transformative, so all GST staff need to develop and deepen their understanding of it and ensure that it becomes the engine of the whole SLT, underpinned by good quality 1-1s.

The GST model rests on mutual accountability for the impact we have had in our various roles, so AIN reports are central to the work of the Lead in setting the agenda for our work with the school, modelling to the Head and to the LGB the power of measuring impact and using that to inform next steps.

The Guide will record our culture, concepts, processes and procedures. Together we will review the Guide so that it continually delivers the Trust's vision.

Colleagues will work alongside each other in schools on the components of the processes so that our practices as well as our perceptions of our practices are aligned.

In regular training times and meetings we will explore, discuss, decide, rehearse and celebrate work and progress.

1 Introduction

1.5 GST approach to School Improvement

The GST School Improvement approach is based on two basic assumptions:

- the quality of Leadership is the most significant contributor to sustained school performance in challenging school contexts
- the prime objective of the Leader is to improve the school in a sustained and on-going way.

And it has clearly defined building blocks. It:

- begins with *culture*
- which determines *concept*
- that is underpinned by *process*
- and finds shape in *procedure.*

Culture drives procedure and process, NEVER the other way round.

Our culture

- Places validated self-evaluation and at its heart.

- Looks outwards for inspiration not upwards.
- Focuses on the building of capacity not just expert delivery.
- Builds unity not uniformity.
- Believes we are more effective when we use everyone's contributions.
- Has the highest expectations.
- Promotes leadership over the Leader.

and uses the lenses of:

- the individual, the team and the organisation
- the school for itself, in its community and in the Trust
- leadership and management, culture and climate, teaching and learning.

to build a shared strategically shaped discourse for improvement.

Memo

To: Ange Tyler

From: Prof Ricardo Nemirovsky

Date: 05/03/2018

Subject: Ethics Application Ref. ED-1718-25

Title: How might senior leaders in one large multi academy trust be supported to balance the performativity agendas they face with more socially just approaches to education?

Thank you for your application for ethical approval.

The Faculty Research Ethics and Governance Committee review process has recommended approval of your ethics application. This approval is granted until 31/07/2020. Extensions to the approval period can be requested.

If your research changes you might need to seek ethical approval for the amendments. Please request an amendment form.

We wish you every success with your project. Prof Ricardo Nemirovsky

Head of Ethics
Faculty Research Ethics and Governance Committee

Appendix six – participant consent

Ange Tyler
Faculty of Education
Manchester Metropolitan University
Tel: 07528 734 397
Email: ange.tyler@stu.mmu.ac.uk

RE: Recording interviews/focus groups

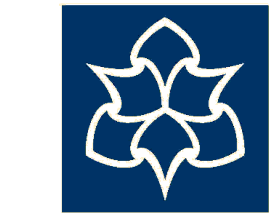
Dear Participant,

Many thanks for allowing me to conduct interviews and focus groups with you. It is normal practice to record interviews and focus groups to help ensure the accuracy of the researcher's understanding of information given. As a result, I would like you to sign this letter giving permission to record and use the recorded material for analysis and report writing purposes. I wish to stress that none of the information provided will be used in a way that can be attributed to yourself or the school from which you come. At the risk of sounding over formal but for your information I have copied the code of ethics covering this research below.

Individual schools and school staff will not be identified without their explicit written consent. Debriefing will be conducted through presenting participants with summary notes from their interviews/focus groups for comment. Data pertaining to any individual will be available only to that individual and the researchers involved but will otherwise remain strictly confidential. Data will be stored electronically and password protected, basic data being available to the researchers only. All interviewees will have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without prejudice should they wish to do so. Publications from the research will be available to all involved. There is a policy of keeping data collected during research for re-analysis or inspection by the commissioning body (subject to confidentiality restrictions) for a period of five years post completion of the project after which all data will be destroyed. In addition all research staff are committed to the

professional codes of conduct (notably the Code of Practice of the British Educational Research Association) and relevant legislation (e.g. the Data Protection Act). Moreover, ethical approval has been sought from Manchester Metropolitan University Ethics Committee. If you have any questions please feel free to contact my Director of Studies, Dr Linda Hammersley-Fletcher (mailto:l.hammersley-fletcher@mmu.ac.uk) Also, if there are issues that you would prefer to talk through with someone independent of this research please discuss these with the Head of Ethics in the Faculty of Education.

Ange Tyler



Manchester Metropolitan University

Date

Name

Course

Department

Building

Manchester Metropolitan University

Tel:

Title of project:

Name of Researcher:

Participant Identification Code for this project:

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet dated …. for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the interview procedure. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason to the named researcher. ☐

3. I understand that my responses will be sound recorded and used for analysis for this research project. ☐

4. I give/do not give permission for my interview recording to be archived as part of this research project, making it available to future researchers. ☐

5. I understand that my responses will remain anonymous. ☐

6. I agree to take part in the above research project. ☐

7. I understand that at my request a transcript of my interview can be made available to me. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature

To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Once this has been signed, you will receive a copy of your signed and dated consent form and information sheet by post.

Appendix seven – constructing the matrix and an example

A GST school leadership matrix sits in the middle of the GST SI model. Its intention is to arrange leadership team activity in a way that speeds and levers improvement while simultaneously building a specific leadership culture. It is designed to deliver the priorities of the school development plan (SDP) which are based on the Trust vision and the 'features of a great GST school' and to develop team practice

The intended culture is implicit in the instructions given on how to design a matrix, summarised below, which invite Heads and other school leaders to match the capacity of the leadership team to the current school priorities and to present these on a pre-designed matrix structure of no more than a single side of A4. Down the left hand side of the matrix is a set of standards for headship based on the 2006 standards for headship from the national college of school leadership. Across the top are the names of the leadership team colleagues on the team. The percentage of available full time equivalent capacity that is deployed to the whole school agenda is listed next to each name (i.e non-teaching time). Training is provided regularly, but not systematically, on how to create a matrix which focuses on both the technical aspects of creating a matrix and how the matrix supports specific team practices (I will need to find the most appropriate example for attachment). It is not within the scope of this research to investigate the effectiveness of this training but it will have implications for how the participants construct the matrix and how they understand its purpose and practice. Descriptions include advice to:

1. Place the current priority activity streams that are linked to the vision and team plan in the top boxes. Change these as each priority becomes established. These top box priorities fall further down in the matrix but are not removed until they are embedded.
2. Ensure everyone has something in every box so that every team member is developing the full skill set associated with school and team leadership
3. Use previous impact and expertise to decide who might lead on each activity stream but balance this with individual development needs and interests
4. Discuss potential overlap of activity streams to identify sub-group working

5. Use regular sub-group meetings to discuss overlapping streams
6. Ensure that every member, regardless of formal role, leads others in at least one stream and follows others in at least one stream so that each team member has the experience of leading and following
7. Ensure every element of the team's activity and responsibility is covered by the matrix so that the agenda, and how streams link, can be seen in one place
8. Share the matrix with colleagues within school and across schools for transparency and joint working

The matrix is underpinned by regular one to one meetings (sometimes referred to as 1-1s) with a line manager. The purpose of these 1-1s is professional development and rehearsal, the discussion of sub-group work, the consideration of impact and agreement of next steps, and mutual feedback to and from the line manager and line managed. They are also the identified place for the Head to exercise her formal authority in the discussion of activity streams.

Key components of Trust Leadership	Banana (Team Leader) 1.0	Damson (Alphabetical) .25	Grape .25	Strawberry .75
Shaping the future		•	•	•
Leading, learning & teaching		•	•	•
Developing self & working with others		•	•	•
Managing the organisation		•	•	•
Securing accountability		•	•	•
Strengthening Community		•	•	•

Appendix eight – page from an example script from the semi-structured interviews

Interviewer 1.38
Yeah,

Participant 1.39
So I've got myself on the matrix, my two Deputies, erm, my three Assistant Heads, and then I've got my SENCO as well. She's not on the leadership scale, my SENCO, erm, but she's got quite a big role to, that feeds into a lot of things that we are all doing, so that's why I've put her on the matrix, as well, I don't know if she should be on there, but I felt that she needed to be so that I can hold her to account as well,

Int 2.10
Ok,

Part 2.11
in the role she's doing, erm.

Int 2.12
So how, so how did you construct this so how did you decide who would do what?

Part 2.16
Erm,

Part 2.17
Or how was it decided, did you do it, did a group of you do it?

Int 2.20
We do it, we do the SDP first, so we look at the priorities for the whole year, and then we kind of take out, or I start with taking out the priorities that I want them to work on to start with, which obviously goes on the top part erm and then we have a discussion about all the other bits that they've been doing, erm, that's at the start of the, so they talk about what they do and where it fits in with their matrix, and which bits can overlap with different members of the SLT so they can work together and then as the year progresses

then we change the matrix so things move we do it more as a team so we look at our top boxes and say which things have already been done there, what can be moved out of there and what has become the new priority to go into that top box.

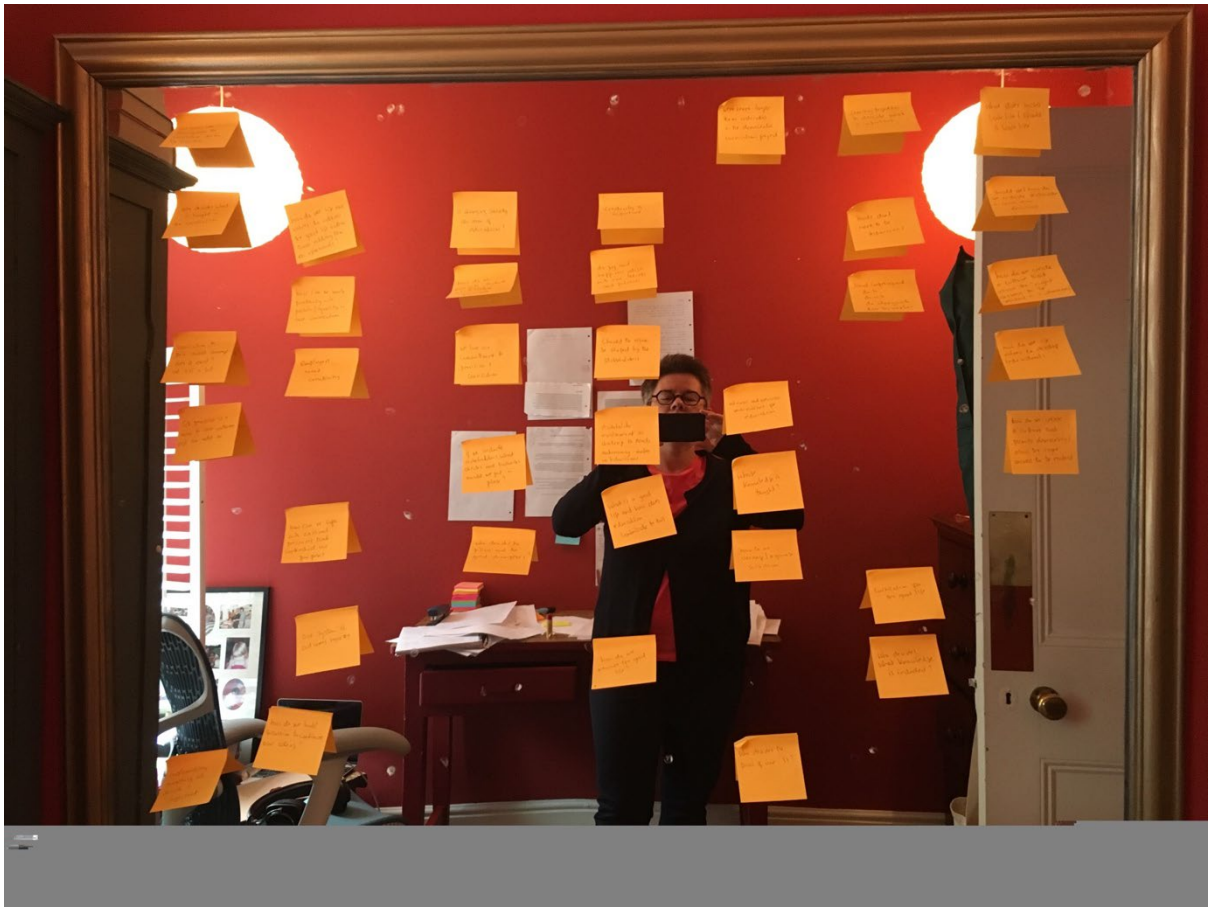
Part 3.10

And do you do that in, er, so what's the forum where you'd have those conversations, would it just be a meeting or do you do it as specific meetings, is it an informal conversation?

Int 3.20

Well I do it in several ways, we do it in kind of SLT meetings which we have once a week, and sometimes we have those ad hoc meetings as well when we need to discuss things

Appendix nine – example of sorting codes



I wondered if taking pictures of myself might constitute reflexivity (that's a joke obviously).

Appendix ten – ‘the great descriptors’

The features of a great GST school

The single most important mission of the Goodall Schools Trust (GST) is to provide the conditions in which children discover who they are and then go on confidently to take their places in society, making a contribution to it through the use of their talents. We teach our children to recognise structural injustice and to challenge it. We will never prepare children to know their places.

A defining feature of our Trust is a clear vision for ‘Great' schools which share certain features and qualities beyond the highest category in any Ofsted framework. This vision is our guiding inspiration as we work to ensure that every child in GST attends a Great school.

Proud Traditions

The founding family of schools brought their histories to GST and together we turned them into traditions which underpin the Trust’s mission and values whilst preserving each school’s individuality.

We also built GST traditions so that children in every school feel part of the same family with a shared love of the arts, sports and the exploration of ideas.

Our festivals coalesce around a single annual theme, celebrating our collective identity from a different perspective in the context of a global issue. In Autumn the focus of the Goodall Sports Festival (established 2016) is on competition and personal best. In the Spring Term, Founders Day (established 2016) centres on community and the Goodall Science Symposium (established 2017) on scientific enquiry. The summer term brings the Goodall Arts Festival (established 2014) and a celebration of creativity.

Traditions are part of the fabric of a school community and give a sense of belonging. A great GST school will have nothing institutional about it.

Great GST schools:

- • emphasise good hospitality
- • cultivate open and positive relationships based on equality and diversity

- • welcome all visitors and arrange talks from speakers/artists/performers/ scientists/explorers/sports people/campaigners for a range of causes
- • grow and maintain a vibrant environment, with active staff and student involvement
- • develop their estate and deploy all resources to reinforce culture and realise vision
- • provide good quality food enjoyed communally by children and staff in comfortable and companionable surroundings
- • are recognisable as GST schools in branding and standards of presentation, whilst having a strong individual identity within the family
- • create their own customs and traditions which bind the community and strengthen the sense of belonging
- • work supportively with other schools and partners within and beyond GST.

The features of a great GST school

Wide Horizons

Recent decades have narrowed the scope of many schools' provision. GST believes that breadth encourages engagement and is an essential foundation for excellence. Our schools build community, with teams of committed staff providing all students with the best and broadest educational experience. In this way adults and children are engaged in something bigger than the delivery and receipt of a curriculum and are enabled to make informed decisions within and for the community rather than simply obeying its rules.

Great GST schools:

- • emphasise leadership and service
- • use the learning from remote teaching and learning to expand horizons

  further

- • encourage trips, projects, independent and outside learning and virtual links

  of discovery, so that children explore beyond the familiar and the local

- • encourage all staff and students to build networks in the spirit of Give and Get
- • demonstrate their commitment to equality and diversity in their staff profile

  and structure, their curriculum and extra-curricular provision

- • recruit interesting and inspiring people as well as outstanding practitioners
- • build self-driven CPD with every adult a learner and a teacher engaged in

  high-quality school-school improvement/development, within and beyond

  the Trust

- • support staff in further study and research, such as GST's Masters

  Programme

- • look outwards, nationally and internationally for ideas and partnerships.

High Achievement

A good education promotes and values achievement as well as attainment. Growing a school culture where this is an explicit reality means being driven by multiple and connected sources of energy (proud traditions, wide horizons and high achievement) so that all who learn and work there are motivated and engaged.

Great GST schools:

- • nurture and 'teach' achievement beyond the timetabled curriculum
- • explicitly link GST festivals with the curriculum
- • regularly celebrate adult and student achievement
- • set appropriate value on achievements, neither overpraising nor overlooking
- • know all children individually, their talents, strengths and specific needs

- • give frequent opportunities for children to perform and demonstrate their skills and talents
- • set the bar high and cast the net wide for ideas, artistic and musical works from wider world cultures
- • attract staff who have achieved themselves beyond their teaching area of expertise and support them to continue their achievements
- • spend minimal resource on intervention programmes aimed at meeting national benchmarks because they are 100% cultures