Walking with teachers: A study to explore the importance of teacher wellbeing and their careers.

Teacher turnover and retention is a global challenge. It appears that in times of teacher shortages, policymakers often focus on recruitment. Yet, it could be argued that focusing on retaining experienced teachers is a better policy. The aim of this interpretive case study was to investigate the views of experienced primary school teachers. Twelve teachers, who had taught in English primary schools for more than five years, participated in walking interviews. The research looked at the areas where teachers want to feel supported by the culture of the school, created by the leadership team.

Keywords: word; teachers, leadership, walking, wellbeing, sustainability

Introduction

‘Anticipation

Memories, forgotten, back

Now focussed forward’

Carl

The research described in this article, aimed to let the experienced primary classroom teacher’s voice be heard. Often, their voice is unheard, their workload is unseen and when policy decisions are made, these teachers are frequently unasked. We set out to examine a

small group of experienced teacher's professional lives, to understand more about their day-to-day experiences, and perhaps what leaders might consider in order to help this particular group of staff thrive. The study is based on a sample composed primarily of women, as only two of the twelve participants were men, though this ratio does reflect most English primary education systems (Gasior, 2013).

Research from Canada (Cherkowski and Walker, 2018) that was framed within findings from positive organizational research, suggests that positive human capacities are essential and vital to thriving for individuals and groups in organizations. This article will take a positive approach to thriving, and to understanding those aspects of day-to-day teachers lives that are often unspoken and discussed.

The teachers we need to keep

In 1993, Brown and McIntyre referred to the term 'craft knowledge of teaching' to describe the professional knowledge teachers acquire through classroom experience (1993:17). Hargreaves (2005a) considers the wisdom and expertise that experienced teachers can provide to the teaching profession should not undervalued. He argues that this knowledge cannot be taught preservice or in career professional development but is acquired only by experience and as a result is often invaluable to the effectiveness of the teacher. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) add that this professional capital often means that experienced teachers are perceived as committed and capable by other school stakeholders. In Podolsky et al. (2019) research, which focused on high level critical thinking skills, they demonstrated that experienced teachers were the common factor among 156 California school districts where *all* students, were scoring higher than expected on tests that measure

higher-level critical thinking skills. They argued that providing students with qualified, fully prepared teachers is a critical component for raising student achievement across the entire school system. Yet, many countries continue to experience great difficulty in retaining a core of experienced teachers, especially in disadvantaged areas. It appears that in times of teacher shortages, policymakers often focus on how to get more teachers into teaching, rather than reducing turnover. We argue that it is as equally, if not more, important to focus on how to keep effective teachers, who are already in the workforce, teaching (Sutcher et al., 2019b), and one way of doing this is to make their voices heard. Hargreaves (2017:161) argues that schools in England will not improve just by 'tightening the ship', or by replacing people; instead, there needs to be a genuine emphasis on transforming teaching and learning within the school. Experienced teachers may be the key. This challenge cannot be answered by one piece of research yet some of the issues raised may have the potential to inform the teacher retention strategy at school level, and therefore could prove valuable to various educational stakeholders. We choose to focus on a small set to begin to tease out areas for further research. Much in the same way that Carrillo and Flores (2018) research on experienced teachers' identity, hoped to generate knowledge contributing to preventing teachers from leaving the profession before retirement age, the research reported here had a similar objective, by helping to voice ways in which those who remain in teaching 'thrive professionally' and as a result enjoy a sustainable career.

Research approach

This study was influenced by the background of one of the authors, who grew up on an outdoor education centre, near the Scottish border and began her teaching career in inner city schools first in the UK then in the US. She experienced first-hand leaders who were supportive and those who were not and was curious to why some teachers would stay in this profession and why others left. Berg and Smith (1985) conclude that findings are powerfully influenced by the relationship between the researcher and the researched, and so, acceptance and acknowledgment of one's own subjectivity is critical. Context and phenomena cannot be separated (working in urban schools and having been an experienced teacher) but Green et al. (2012) argue that there is a need for researchers to bracket their own point of view, for setting aside the researcher's own perspective and expectations enables them to explore an insider's point of view. However, if researchers themselves are an important part of the research process (Flick, 2018), the author's own experiences can enable the asking of appropriate questions and engaging with the participants on a level that a naïve observer would not. As Fayard and Van Maanen (2015) note, the boundaries are unavoidably blurred and indistinct and to make hard boundaries is detrimental to the research. We put the experienced teacher at the heart of this project and focused on being 'pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people' (Marshall and Rossman, 2006:2).

The aim of this interpretive study was to investigate the desired supports of experienced primary school teachers in one urban area, Newtown. It was important that the research participants were not all disgruntled with the education system, which is why the teachers chosen for the interviews still had to be actively working in a primary school. In

identifying potential participants, a range of urban primary schools were chosen, within a ten-mile radius of Newtown city centre. Having identified schools that fitted the specifications, they were contacted by telephone and letter inviting them to participate in the study. The letter was addressed to the head teacher as the gate keeper to the teachers. It needs to be noted here that by seeking the head teacher's approval the results of the study could be affected, as all the participants would be teachers whose head teacher had agreed to be involved in the research. Therefore, the head teachers' characteristics (e.g. confidence or openness) might have indirectly affected the nature of the data collected, and as a result, teachers with low level of school trust or poor school culture may be under-represented. To mitigate this, teachers were recruited in other ways, including word of mouth and presenting at a County SENCO meeting - the snowball or network technique (Opie and Brown, 2019). Once a teacher had self-nominated to be a participant in the research, they also selected a pseudonym to protect their identity (Grinyer, 2009). We arranged a convenient time for the interview and a location at the teacher's place of choice. The interviews lasted on average 40 minutes to 1 and a half hours. Determining the place for conducting the interview was important as the teacher had to feel comfortable and safe (Creswell and Creswell, 2017), especially as they were being asked to participate in a walking interview (Castrodale, 2018). The rationale for this follows.

A collage of collaboration

Interviews are recognised as one of the main tools for social science research. Frequently described as 'conversations with a purpose' interviews enable an exchange between the researcher and participant to take place (Barbour, 2018). They can allow the researcher to

get to know the interviewee better and enhance the learning about an individual's experiences and perspectives on an issue, whilst semi-structured interviews allow for the sequencing of questions to be fluid and responsive to the participant, follow-up questions or probes can then be formulated during the conversation to encourage depth or exploration of a topic (Roulston, 2018). As we investigated traditional settings for interviews, we were drawn to walking interviews because they allow for fresher, less controlled conditions and are more dynamic than stationary interviews. There is a small but growing body of published work on the merits of the walking interview. Finlay and Bowman (2017) consider five strengths of a mobile interview: the production of place-specific data; access to complex meanings of place; collaborative conversations with participants; ability to build rapport and adjust participant-researcher power dynamic; finally, its ability to produce rich qualitative data. The last three are significant to this study. Walking and talking produces not a conventional interrogative encounter, but a 'collage of collaboration' (Anderson, 2004) where interviewees tended to talk more spontaneously. Conversely, Macpherson (2016) does warn us that it is important for the researcher to be aware that a 'pleasurable walk' alongside the 'mood lifting' that Miller and Krizan (2016) mentioned, may inject a certain positivity and the increased social contact may lead to an enhanced sense of wellbeing and so the qualitative data collected may be skewed as the participants have the potential to give an upbeat account of their situation. However, it can also release them to talk more freely, which was what we found. We used the guide method (Kinney, 2017) which is a participant-led walking interview through broad sites of interest, where the participant is regarded as the expert guide who

escorts the researcher, the novice, to and around specific areas in their lives that are significant to them (Chang, 2017).

Recently, mobile interviews have gained popularity amongst researchers (Veselkova et al., 2017). Moles (2008) sees the walking interview as a response to social science's stereotypically sedentary approach to interviews, and the interdisciplinary 'mobilities paradigm' has grown (Cook and Butz, 2018). Rhys-Taylor and Bates (2017:11) argue that throughout history, walking has been described as central to the production of philosophical knowledge, as the mere act of walking provides access to rational and meaningful thought - 'the elements acting as both a form of cleansing and an elicitation device, blowing away the cobwebs of everyday concerns and prompting refection on deeper truths'. Our justification of this method is not that traditional interviews have failed but walking interviews may produce richer data in this situation.

Walking interviews have become a mode of inquiry to examine more than just urban landscapes, accessibility issues or the significance of place to become 'vibrant, sensory, material, and transitory intensities beyond the logics of representation' (Springgay and Truman, 2017). Pink et al. (2010:3) argue that walking is significant because 'we cannot but learn and come to know in new ways as we walk' emphasizing that moving can generate knowledge production. The anthropologists, Ingold and Vergunst (2008) offer three positive outcomes on walking with interviewees: walking as an action establishes connectivity with the environment; the routes selected allows for a mobile and dynamic understanding of places; and finally walking with others creates a distinctive sociability.

This final benefit of creating sociability or rapport may benefit the collection of quality qualitative data.

Not all methods of research are appropriate for all studies and participants, and with walking interviews issues such as accessibility, weather, equipment and recording need to be considered. Walking methodological literature often cites the weather as a challenge – rain, wind, heat, cold, snow, and ice. Carpiano (2009:269) states, 'these factors are undoubtedly some of the biggest 'cons' to a method that is otherwise rich in 'pro's'. Vannini and Vannini (2017:6) counters that weather is not a limitation of the functionality of the walk-along method, they offer that weather is just 'part-and-parcel' of it. The importance of place is demonstrated in many studies (Riley and Holton, 2016). In this research study, the intension was to remove the participant from their place, in this case the teacher's classroom and school. Unlike in the work of Thomas et al. (2018) where place was central to the narratives gleaned, the location of the walking interview was not significant, it was the removal of place that was important.

Findings and discussion

The walking interviews were highly individualised and both old and new experiences were explored. It was anticipated that specific themes (drawn from the literature) would surface such as: leadership; professional development; and school culture. Additional themes such as trust, workload, policy, and the emotions of being an experienced teacher emerged. The central theme, which all participants discussed, was the significant impact or power that school leaders had on an experienced teacher's professional experience both positively and

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negatively. Every subsequent theme was discussed in the light of this. For example, the importance of appropriate, career specific, professional development for experienced teachers was hugely important yet, if the leader of the school did not value, support or provide the opportunity, teachers are unable to access it.

These themes are explored in more detail below.

Leadership

Studies have consistently established the critical role of school leadership (Day et al., 2010, Ingersoll et al., 2018, Leithwood et al., 2008) and what makes a successful school leader (Leithwood et al., 2020).

All twelve participants acknowledged that leadership has an enormous influence on their professional experience, especially in relation to supports they are receiving or not receiving. We know from research by Levin and Bradley (2019) and Riley (2017) that leadership can impact a teacher's ability to do their job effectively and has a powerful influence on a teacher's overall wellbeing. The decisions that leaders make from resource allocation to the style in with which they lead, often dictate whether a teacher feels supported or not. We also know that leaders play a major role in retaining teachers. Sutcher et al. (2019a) list competent and supportive leadership as major influences on a teacher's decision to stay in or leave a school. This clearly demonstrates a need for school leaders to comprehend the importance of supporting teachers in their professional roles Podolsky et al. (2016) and action support in practice.

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All but one participant had experience of working for different head teachers during their own careers. These experiences enabled the participants to compare leaders and pinpoint occasions when they felt support or not. Participants talked about many styles of leadership from authoritarian style Carl experienced, '*the first head teacher I had, he was very military, like a sergeant major.... he literally opened the door and threw me in and said, you know, they [the students] will teach you how to teach lad off you go*!' to Barbara's head teacher who leads from his heart, '[he] *was at the school entrance every morning, greeting each teachers, not judging but assessing – for example does a teacher need an extra teaching assistant today or their playground duty covered*?' Cathi summed up the importance of leadership support with the following statement, '*our senior leaders are very open, I know that if I ever needed anything, in any way shape or form, I could just knock on their door'*. However, not all participants felt supported in this way. In contrast, Victoria described the effect that her head teacher's closed-door policy, with the use of 'do not disturb' sign along with the recent instalment of locks on his door have made her and her colleagues feel like he doesn't trust them, '*that is because we all can't be trusted since GDPR he might have something sensitive on his desk, that people shouldn't see. And I said you don't trust your own staff, interesting. But that is the sort of atmosphere he creates and the sort of thing he does*.'

Donna attributes her success in education to the school's supportive environment, '*I'm one of the few people who you will interview who has an amazing deputy head and head teacher above me, who really get it, they get my workload…I get loads of support from both of them. I know how fortunate I am, because I know that lots of people in my role are*

constantly fighting against leadership.... '. Barbara summed it up when she said, *'ultimately, it is all about feeling valued and supported!'*

This data clearly reflects what we know already from research into leadership in primary schools. Leaders have a huge influence over experienced teachers' professional lives and whether they feel supported or not. Leaders are all individuals; hence they have different leadership styles and competencies. Many head teachers straddle two or more 'labels' depending on the day/the situation/ and the teacher who the interaction is with. Different styles result in leaders approaching situations within a school environment uniquely, often with unexpected consequences on whether a teacher feels supported or not. What can be seen clearly in these extracts is the impact that leaders have on teachers who want to be valued, respected, and supported in their professional lives by their leaders and the leadership team throughout their careers. These 'leader' supports can take many forms, access to appropriate professional development being a key one for many of the teachers interviewed.

Professional Development

van Driel et al. (2012) define professional development as the procedures and activities designed to consolidate teacher professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes to further improve student learning. This can take many forms including observing other teachers, mentoring and being mentored, attending conferences, courses and workshops. However, for professional development to be effective, it must be relevant to the needs of that individual teacher, there must be opportunities for active learning, collaboration, feedback and reflection and there must be sustained pedagogical support both in the short and long

term. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Teachers need regular opportunities to learn, discuss and reflect; Falecki and Mann (2020) use the acronym HERO to highlight four areas of consideration: hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism. They argue that without access to high quality learning opportunities that responds to teacher stress and develops teacher wellbeing, the challenge of teacher turnover will not be addressed.

Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that each teacher's experience of professional development was unique, even if they taught in the same school. Many of the participants alluded to the fact that professional development could be seen as a perk. In Karen's opinion, '*it depends on who you speak to and it also depends on your strength of character as to whether you get it*'. Not surprisingly, all participants would have liked professional development on topics they had selected. A commonly voiced opinion was the huge benefit of observing best practises in a classroom setting. Cathi stated, '*what I think makes a difference is seeing really good quality teachers teaching in a school that is similar to yours'.* Frequently, the only professional development the teachers in this study received, were mandated by the school e.g. safeguarding, assessment or test related. Due to budgetary restrictions, most teachers had very little outside training. Kate did receive additional CPD but that was because her school's SATs results in English were poor and so as a year 6 teacher, she was encouraged to attend an external training course. The school did pay for the course but only because they asked her to attend. This frustration reflects the work of Ashdown (2002) where she argued that compulsory professional development may have an unintended negative impact on teachers. What does become clear is that the teachers who are receiving opportunities appear to be doing so because their leaders are making the decision to provide and support appropriate and individualised professional

development. This was evidenced by Barbara, ‘*Another way [to feel supported] is just putting professional opportunity your way when they listen to whether you want to do X, Y, Z, and letting you be part of the school and part of the school’s development*.’ This school is very proactive as they consider the teachers as individuals in conjunction with the school’s needs. They have embraced an approach called Thrive. By embedding this approach into their school ethos all the teachers, children and stakeholders are educated on the Thrive approach. As teachers are constantly promoting health and well-being with their students, their own stress and anxiety becomes more manageable, she concluded her interview stating that the Thrive approach builds resilience throughout the whole staff and attribute to the positive culture of the school.

Culture

Ingersoll (2001) argues that the characteristics of an educational environment can determine who enters a teaching role and ultimately who remains in teaching. When participants were asked to describe their school, every participant’s experience was different and often elicited passionate responses. The themes of culture and colleagues featured often in the interviews. One extreme example was a school that recently received a poor Ofsted report. The report highlighted the leadership, not the teaching quality, as ‘needs improving’. In response, the senior leadership team froze the teacher’s salaries. Rebecca who is in her 5th year of teaching stated, ‘*we have a lovely staff, colleagues and teachers that only ever do their best and a senior leadership team full of hubris – that’s the culture of my school’*. In contrast, several participants described their schools as

collaborative where everyone looks out for each other. Carolyn describes her school culture as fabulous, *'the teachers really look out for one another, they are to help one another regardless'* and *'it is very collaborative…it very much is that there is no 'I' in team – we just work so well together'.* John attributed the culture of the school to the head teacher, *'it is a busy place to work, it is very intense, and she is quite intense. I often think this when I see the children and they can be quite enthusiastic. I think that's because the head teacher is a whirlwind, for she will be doing things endlessly to try and improve and make sure that it is moving in the right direction, sometimes when I reflect upon it, she is the one that creates the atmosphere and you can definitely tell that - so I think it does come from the top on this occasion*', and Carolyn echoes this with '*I think that's probably why [school name] is in such a good place because we are consistent in many ways but then every class is different, every teacher is different, it works here. Ever since I've worked at [school name], it is [head teacher's name]. First he was deputy head and now he is head teacher and people say the good culture just happened since he arrived'.* There is a clear connection between a positive school culture and a trusting relationship between the study's participants, their colleagues, and the school leaders.

Trust

Some researchers view trust between teachers and their leaders as the cornerstone of school success (Tarter and Hoy, 1988, Tschannen-Moran, 2014) and this appears to be reflected in this research. Barbara highlighted this with when talking about her current head teacher; *[he] has a high level of professional trust. The teachers have the freedom, and confidence, to assess, reflect and adapt…not just sticking to a lesson plan'.* An

additional example of trust was how the head teacher allocated and supervised planning, preparation, and assessment time (PPA). For example, Karen said that *'where I am based each teacher is allowed that time off, and off site, and is fully trusted to do what you see fit'*. Many of the participants equated trust with good relationships and talked about open communication channels between teachers and the senior leadership team. Being a good listening, problem solver, having an open office door policy, and allowing PPA time to be taken off the school site, were all highlighted as being important in building trusting relationships. Equally, when leaders harm a relationship, it appears to be hard to rebuild trust. During a mock Ofsted, Victoria described a situation where this occurred. *'In the staff meeting [the head teacher] went around the room and named and shamed every teacher, I was so upset because for me the whole school had been built on relationships and it was the relationship between the children and the staff, and the relationships between the staff and the leadership, and that day he destroyed that'*. For Karen, her trust was broken when her head teacher asked her to report on her colleagues' capabilities, she said she would never trust him again. These statements highlight the importance of leaders building trust within their school community - when teachers feel like there is no trust, it would appear to make them feel vulnerable and unsupported.

Accountability and policy implications

Each participant's exposure to policy implication was different. This often depended on how the head teacher and leadership team handled the dissemination of the policy throughout the school. Some were positive as their leadership team and governors were on top of all the government initiatives, they deciphered it and interpreted the implications for

the school and staff. Others doubted their own ability to teach because of the changes. When Ofsted was mentioned during the walking interviews, 100% of the responses were negative, not one teacher brightened at the word. Donna stated, *'…nobody likes the O word, it brings that fear of God into everybody!'* Carl talked about their best teacher being 'broken' by Ofsted. *'I have seen during an OFSTED inspection, better teachers than me, one woman who was my mentor, went to pieces and had a breakdown. When you could bet your mortgage on her…how can that be getting the best out of a teacher?'* Sadly, Victoria describes the following, '*in 2015 the head teacher in a neighbouring school had a really bad Ofsted and he then committed suicide on the back of his Ofsted.'* Others mentioned a loss of confidence and increased workload with extra box ticking exercises. Clearly, how leaders and their leadership teams disseminate the government requirements has a huge impact on teachers.

Emotions associated with being the experienced teacher

One of the themes that emerged from the data was centred on emotions. We know from research (Hargreaves, 2000) that emotions play a significant role in a teachers' professional lives. Hargreaves talks of teaching as having a set of specific emotional expectations. In later research (Hargreaves, 2005b) he looked at age-based responses to educational change and noted that older more experienced teachers became more questioning outside the classroom. We noticed that more experienced teachers experience different and additional emotions just *because* they have been teaching for several years, thus adding complexity to the emotional context. Oplatka and Arar (2018:138) agree with Hargreaves arguing emotion is central to the processes of teaching and learning, but also

suggest that “during the last two decades…research on emotions in organizations began to deal with the question of why and how employees may display or manage particular emotions”. Elsewhere, Oplatka (2009) argues that many factors influence emotional management in teaching e.g. the school culture, gender, seniority and the role of the leader. This can be seen in our data, and there is more work to be done on understanding the spaces in schools for experienced teachers’ emotions to be handled in ways that benefit both the individual and the organisation. This can be seen in the teachers’ comments. For some it was fear that they would lose their job at the next round of budget cuts because they were more expensive than newly hired teachers. Barbara stated, *‘experienced teachers sometimes feel trapped because they can’t move sideways and because they are expensive – new job opening are usually looking for a deal – cheaper NQTs – so you might have to go on the SLT – experienced teachers have nowhere to go or might be seen as not achieving if they just stay in the classroom’.* For others, it was frustration and resentment. Frustration at the number of school changes they encounter over their careers, alongside, resentment at being the experienced teacher and always have to mentor the new teachers, take on the harder classes and assume management responsibilities on top of their classroom responsibilities, just because they were experienced. Le Nguyen and Fredrickson (2017) research suggest that positive emotions serve a diverse range of essential human needs and increased an individual’s overall wellbeing. They note that positive emotions encourage prosocial behaviours and build long-term personal resources, both psychological and biological. In contrast, the teachers in this study focused on negative emotions and this is an area that leaders may want to build on refocussing. Research on why and how leaders affect teachers’ emotions, is part of the field of

educational leadership (Berkovich and Eyal, 2015, Crawford, 2018), and clearly it does impact a teacher's professional life. It therefore appears plausible that emotions teachers experience influence wellbeing and as a result career sustainability.

All the teachers concerned with this project stated that they were serious about improving the lives of their students, and clearly, these teachers cared a great deal about the children they worked with. They all had a strong sense of loyalty towards the children. What is noteworthy is that their loyalty did not always stretch to the schools within which they worked, especially if they perceived their leaders or leadership team to be unsupportive.

Conclusion

The main finding from the teachers' voices in this research is that leadership and the way leaders proactively influence working conditions plays a significant role in whether a teacher *feels* supported or not. These supports can be in the form of appropriate professional development, trusting relationships, the culture of the school or the teaching assignments leaders assign to their teachers. All these actions can have a long-term impact of a teacher's perceptions, their over wellbeing and in many cases, their retention rate in the profession. This reflects the work of Shirley et al. (2020:10). They concluded that educators' wellbeing is likely to prosper in positive environments where they have control over roles, can collaborate professionally and are able to respond confidently to their students' needs. They argue that teachers can have a sustainable career 'when teachers are given the supports that enable them to be inspiring and effective teachers for all their students'. Ultimately, every perceived support provided, or not, is a consequence of a leader's decisions and actions. Leader support is fundamental to the professional life of any teacher; and in this research we heard the voices of experienced primary school ones.

This in turn has ramifications for leaders and how they themselves are supported, which is a separate but extremely important focus of research into leadership.

Future researchers may wish to investigate how widespread feelings, such as, frustration, fear and resentment are amongst experienced teachers, alongside ways that these feelings can be acknowledged and potentially mitigated both by the teachers themselves and those in leadership positions. The development of practice should be a researcher's goal and not just the production of knowledge (Townsend, 2014). Spillane (2015:290) also suggests that 'if research is to be useful and usable for policymakers and practitioners it had to speak more directly to practice'. We argue that new knowledge around emotional support, and most importantly developing ways of listening to experienced teacher voice, could lead to an increase in sustainable careers for experienced teachers perhaps resulting in a reduction of teacher turnover.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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