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Title Page

Title: Why do headteachers stay in disadvantaged primary schools in London?

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Why do headteachers stay in disadvantaged primary schools in London?

This paper explores and charts the reasons why some primary school headteachers in “disadvantaged” London schools remain in post at a time of rising rates of attrition of school leaders and headteachers. Instead of exploring the reasons why headteachers are quitting their posts in urban schools, this study examines the retention issue from an alternative perspective by understanding what factors encourage headteachers to stay. Findings suggest that the London headteachers are fuelled by their commitment to principles of social justice and demonstrate this by providing stability and security for the children and staff in their schools.

Keywords: Headteachers; retention; disadvantaged primary schools

Introduction

Teacher retention in England has reached a crisis point in recent years as figures show that teachers are leaving the profession in England in higher numbers than ever before (DfE, 2018; Foster, 2018; Worth et al., 2018). Much of the current recruitment and retention policy focus rests on ameliorating classroom teacher shortages in both primary and secondary schools. However, there have also been warnings about an approaching “leadership crisis” for some time (Rhodes and Brundrett, 2006; Bristow et al., 2007) with schools struggling to fill headteacher posts. Although there is evidence to show that it is increasingly difficult to recruit headteachers (James et al., 2018; Weale, 2016), much less attention is currently being paid to the retention of

headteachers. Pressures on headteacher supply are set to worsen as school student numbers continue to rise over the next decade while headteacher retention rates have been steadily declining since 2011 (DfE, 2018). It has been projected that by 2022 both primary and secondary schools in the UK are likely to be impacted by serious shortages of headteachers (Future Leaders Trust, 2016). This same report estimates that this shortage will be “most severe in schools serving England’s most disadvantaged children” (Future Leaders Trust, 2016, p.3).

Despite a looming crisis, there remains a paucity of research investigating the decline in headteacher retention in schools in England. A report from the National Foundation of Educational Research (NFER) in 2017 began to address this gap by conducting an analysis of headteacher retention (Lynch and Worth, 2017). Drawing from school workforce census statistics between 2011 and 2015 (DfE, 2016), the report showed that even though more than 90% of headteachers stay in their posts from year to year, retention rates have fallen since 2012 and continue to fall. The authors found that secondary schools are less likely to retain headteachers than primary schools. However, retention rates tend to be more problematic in schools that serve disadvantaged intakes with lower levels of attainment. A number of studies including those from teaching unions and the media, as well as some small-scale studies on headteacher retention, detail the reasons heads cite for leaving their posts (NAHT, 2017; Busby, 2019; Lynch and Worth, 2017). Some key factors include: a burdensome workload exacerbated by a rigid and punitive accountability system; stress and pressure brought on by school funding cuts resulting in limiting provision and resources for staff and students; lack of adequate support while in post; and lack of professional development for school leaders. There is, however, limited research that explores the reasons why some headteachers *stay* in post, despite the sorts of pressures that prompt other heads to quit.

This paper uses data collected from in-depth interviews with primary school headteachers of disadvantaged London primary schools to examine the reasons why headteachers stay in their jobs. As most research into teacher and headteacher retention focuses on reasons for leaving, the originality of this study lies in considering what factors encourage primary school heads to stay thereby providing material to inform educators and schools responsible for setting up mechanisms to retain headteachers.

The paper begins by outlining the policy context in England and details how the disadvantaged primary school is positioned in this landscape before outlining a scholarly discussion on motivation as a lens to explore headteacher retention. The methodology of the study is explained before turning to the analysis of 6 in-depth semi-structured interviews with primary headteachers of disadvantaged schools in London. The paper concludes by considering key policy recommendations to support headteacher retention in the future both in urban schools and schools more widely.

The policy context

For over three decades, state schools in England have been the site of ongoing educational reform. A plethora of new managerial practices and accountability measures have been introduced including: target setting, school league tables constructed by test scores, Ofsted¹ inspections, performance management and performance related pay (Ball, 2017). The pace of change has been unrelenting, most notably since the election of the Coalition Government in 2010, when the then Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove spoke of “a fierce urgency to our plans for reform” (DfE, 2010, p.7). Since then, reforms have been introduced to all school

¹ The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) is a non-ministerial department of the UK government that is responsible for inspecting a range of educational institutions.

phases in England that include significant changes to assessment processes and the school curriculum. In the case of primary schools, changes to all aspects of the curriculum were introduced and made more “rigorous and demanding” (DfE, 2010, p.16). Headteachers are responsible for responding to changes in the education policy agenda and are held to account if educational standards are not consistently met (Steward, 2014). Thus at the forefront of the primary school headteacher’s concerns are the pressures placed on them by the accountability and performance demands (Keddie, 2017).

Alongside the changes to the curriculum and assessment systems in primary schools, models of school leadership have also been changing (Steward, 2014). The Academies Act in 2010 has resulted in a significant transformation of the schooling system in England. As an increasing number of primary schools have converted to ‘academy’ status² and/or have become a part of a group of schools known as multi-academy trusts (MATs) (DfE, 2016), so there has been a creation of the ‘executive’ headteacher who is responsible for leading more than one school. However, this system of governance has attracted much criticism (Keddie, 2016), not least amongst primary headteachers themselves, who argue that academisation of primary schools undermines the autonomy and character of their individual schools (Keddie, 2019).

In recent years, following the introduction of austerity measures by the Coalition Conservative Government in 2010, extensive funding cuts to schools in England mean that many schools are experiencing challenges with their finances because their budgets cannot keep pace with rising costs, such as staff salary and insurance costs (Roberts and Bolton, 2017). In a context of wide-spread cuts in funding, schools are still required to continue to meet the challenges in changes in assessment and curriculum accountability demands (Maguire et al.,

² Academy schools are state-funded schools in England which are directly funded by the Department for Education and independent of local authority control.

2019). For all schools, funding pressures have meant that headteachers need to make reductions in resourcing and staffing including reducing numbers of teaching staff and support staff; reducing support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); and delaying or reducing spending on school maintenance (NAHT, 2019). Headteachers in some primary schools have also reduced school hours as a result of the funding crisis (NAHT, 2019, Richardson, 2017). These finance and resource challenges are particularly severe for “disadvantaged” schools serving the most deprived communities. These disadvantaged schools tend to be characterised by higher than average levels of children in receipt of pupil premium funding (a measure for publicly funded schools in England to raise the attainment of disadvantaged pupils and to close the gaps between them and their more advantaged peers); lower levels of attendance; a higher than average proportion of children who experience emotional and behavioural difficulties as well as learning difficulties; and a higher than average turnover of staff (Pratt-Adams, Burn, and Maguire, 2010). In early 2019, a survey by the Sutton Trust reported that headteachers of the most disadvantaged schools are twice as likely to use pupil premium funds to address gaps in their budgets than headteachers of the least disadvantaged schools (Sutton Trust, 2019). At a time of significant cuts to school budgets, the pressure on disadvantaged schools to achieve and maintain high standards has become even more desperate as headteachers are often reliant on extra resources to ensure that students compete favourably with other schools in more privileged contexts (Lupton and Thrupp, 2011).

Motivations for ‘stayer’ headteachers – a multi-faceted picture

Exploring the scholarly literature on teacher motivations can serve as a useful analytic tool to illuminate the reasons why a group of London headteachers decide to stay in their schools.

Indeed, rising teacher shortages in many OECD countries have led to an increase in research by academics as well as policy makers on the motivations of those choosing to teach and choosing to leave the profession (Watt and Richardson, 2008). Many studies exploring teacher motivation, highlight a variety of different factors under three main categories of reasons: altruistic, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Heinz, 2015; Kyriacou and Coulthard, 2000; Purcell et al., 2005). Because researchers employ these categories of motivations variously and in different ways, there are different perspectives on how such categories are interpreted. As Watt et al. (2012) suggest:

... various operationalisations of intrinsic, extrinsic, and altruistic motivations have resulted in a lack of definitional precision and overlapping categorisations from one study to another (p.792).

Indeed, there is a distinct blurring between these forms of motivations, in particular between altruistic and intrinsic motivations. Although such categories are not necessarily exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, they act as a valuable starting point and useful theoretical frame when examining my participants' motivations for staying in their schools.

Although there is limited research on the reasons why headteachers remain in post in disadvantaged schools (Day, 2005a), over the years research on headteachers' lives point to some key factors that sustain heads' commitments to their work. These include a mix of altruistic, intrinsic and extrinsic reasons: a headteachers' desire to make a difference to children's lives (Earley et al., 2011; Ylimaki et al., 2007); the value of having friendly and collegial colleagues and a supportive team to work with (Revell, 1996; McNulty, 2005); professional support from a mentor such as another headteacher (Lynch and Worth, 2017); opportunities for

furthering professional development including being inspired by new challenges (Maguire et al., 2006); and a decent salary commensurate with the challenges a headteacher's post affords (Hodgson, 2014). Headteachers also strongly identify with their roles as lead professionals in their schools (Hayes, 1996). In the case of long-serving headteachers of disadvantaged schools, their identities are shaped by their moral purpose, core values and belief that they can make a difference for the children in their care by also providing them with a sense of stability, security and continuity (Day, 2005a; Towers, 2017).

The study – headteacher “stayers” in disadvantaged London primary schools

The data reported here are taken from a larger study that explored teacher retention in disadvantaged London primary schools (Towers, 2017) from a different perspective than is common in the expanding literature in this area. Rather than concentrating on teachers' decisions to leave the profession, much may be learned about why teachers leave from the perspectives of those who remain in post. Nearly all of the participants in the larger study refer to their headteacher as a significant reason for remaining in their challenging schools. This is in part because the headteacher plays a crucial and very visible role in the life of a primary school (Crawford, 2009; Eslinger, 2012). As one teacher in the larger study told me, “the head dictates the ethos of the school”. Therefore, a study on primary school stayers would be incomplete without the inclusion of the perspectives of stayer headteachers in challenging London primary schools. At a time when it has become increasingly difficult to recruit and retain headteachers in these sorts of schools (Future Leaders Trust, 2016; Howson, 2013), I was keen to discover why my headteacher participants chose to stay and what they did in their schools to encourage teacher retention.

In the larger study, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 participants comprising primary school teachers and headteachers. My sample comprised mainly class teachers, but also consisted of 5 current serving headteachers. In addition, my sample comprised a small group of former stayers, including one retired headteacher, in order to gain a retrospective perspective on staying.

In this paper, I use the terms “challenging”, “disadvantaged” and “urban” interchangeably to describe the London schools that “reflect higher levels of social deprivation, poverty and disadvantage” (Maguire et al., 2006, p.17). I chose to focus on disadvantaged schools in London because statistics show that rates of teacher turnover are highest in schools with high rates of deprivation and among those, schools in London experience a greater churn in teaching staff (DfE, 2016). The headteachers’ primary schools, state-maintained local authority schools located in three London boroughs, were selected as they serve communities that have significant levels of socio-economic disadvantage. Accessed through my professional contacts, these schools and their long-serving headteachers or “stayers” were in the profession “for the long haul” (Freedman and Appleman, 2009, p.323) and had to contend with particularly acute challenges related to the level of disadvantage of the communities that their schools served.

A purposive sampling approach was taken to recruit the participants who were “included in the sample on the basis of their judgement of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 156). The “stayers”, in the sample had to fulfil two criteria: they needed to have taught or been in post for five or more years, and they needed to have stayed for that length of time in the same disadvantaged school. The schools where the teachers worked also needed to fulfil certain criteria to fit the urban “disadvantaged” description. These characteristics included schools which had: high numbers of

children requiring Free School Meals – a proxy for low-income families in the UK; significant numbers of children on the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) register; and higher than average levels of children speaking English as an additional language as well in receipt of pupil premium funding.

As I have highlighted, the study focuses on disadvantaged schools in London: these schools differ in specific ways to those outside London. This is because in London's disadvantaged schools, there is a greater diversity of children; disadvantaged children in London are more likely to live in “deprived neighbourhoods” than disadvantaged children outside of London (Blanden, 2015, p.22). In many of London's disadvantaged schools, the transient population (of asylum seekers and newly arrived immigrants) is reflected in those schools located in more deprived communities, of which many have a high mobility of pupils. Furthermore, more children in London live in poverty than elsewhere in the UK (End Child Poverty, 2016). Due to the high costs of housing, poorer children (who attend London's more disadvantaged schools) are more likely to live in temporary housing thus contributing to some children's sense of instability and insecurity. Thus one argument presented in this paper is that headteachers who *stay* can contribute to a greater sense of continuity and security for children in those schools (Canrinus and Fokkens-Bruinsma, 2011). It is of significance, therefore, to consider the specific challenges heads of disadvantaged schools face and examine the factors why they stay.

As the larger study explored teacher retention from the perspective of those who remained in the profession, questions in the semi-structured interviews focused identifying the factors that prompted the headteachers to remain in their schools and the role they played in encouraging their teaching staff to remain in the profession. The transcripts of the interviews

underwent a process of axial coding, an inductive process where open codes were grouped into categories (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Unsurprisingly, a number of themes which were identified from the participants' voices related to the literature examined and the questions which had been asked. For example, the value which the participants placed on their relationships with the children as a reason to remain in their schools featured prominently. This echoes a wide range of studies on teacher motivation (for example: Frankenberg, Taylor, & Merseth, 2010; Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2000; Stanford, 2001). Similarly, the importance of a collegial atmosphere in the participants' schools was a key reason many gave for staying in their posts. The study received institutional ethical approval. All participants and institutions have been given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

[Table near here]

Findings

Why do these headteachers stay?

The findings are organised around four key motivations that encouraged the headteachers to remain in their urban primary schools. These include: 'making a difference' to the lives of disadvantaged children; the heads' relationships with colleagues and the ways in which they create supportive and collegial school environments; inspiring challenges, including how they addressed the social inequalities experienced by the children and families of the school; and their salary.

'Making a difference' to disadvantaged children

All of heads highlighted this key altruistic motivation for staying - they wanted to 'make a difference' to the lives of underprivileged children. Indeed, a theme which ran through all of the interviews was that of the children: "the main drive is about the children in the school" (John) and "everything I did was about the children and *their* learning and *their* wellbeing" (Josephine). Other comments centred on the headteachers' feelings about their relationships to and with the children in their schools, such as Graham, "I care about the kids" and Peter who said the job was all about "the smiles, the laughter of the kids". David said: "I just *love* the kids, I *really* love the kids".

The heads' commitment and attachment to the children in their schools is reflected in many studies on headteachers (Bristow et al., 2007; Earley et al., 2011; Revell, 1996; Ylimaki et al., 2007). However, for the urban headteachers in my study, there was an added dimension to their commitment to the children in their schools. The headteachers were clear that working with children from *disadvantaged* backgrounds was especially rewarding and a significant motivating factor for remaining in their schools. Eva explained that a major motivation for her as a headteacher is to "really really improve the quality of teaching that goes on here, so that [the children's] life chances are evened out and that disadvantage and poverty [won't] be a predictor of what they achieve later on". Eva's commitment to social justice is reflected in Maguire et al.'s (2006) study on urban headteachers who expressed "passion and commitment to making a difference for their children and families who already faced a number of disadvantages" (p.70). Peter's motivations for remaining in post were very similar to Eva's, he explained: "I just want them to have the best first-hand experiences possible – I don't care about costs. If the parents don't have money, we will find them money. I don't want any of my children to miss out

because of financial reasons”. David, the longest serving headteacher in the sample, spoke about how the school supports their pupils even after they have left: “A lot of them aren’t given affection, so we have a reputation as a school that will hug our children - all that nonsense about not hugging. Even when the kids have gone to secondary [school], then have got excluded, know they can come back – we do our best for those excluded children”.

What emerged in all the interviews was that the heads were only too aware of the difficulties the children in their schools faced. The heads believe that they and their schools were responsible for making up for what the children lacked in their own homes and for providing stability for those children with turbulent family lives. All the headteachers wanted their schools to be places which felt like “home” to the children and their families. Although the headteachers were acutely aware of the difficult and often troublesome backgrounds of their children and families in their schools, they did not consider their schools or their children as “victims” of their circumstances. Ylimaki et al. (2007) highlight this point in their review of a large international study which examined successful headteachers of challenging schools:

... while all of the principals recognized and had empathy for the barriers to learning that poverty can produce, none allowed these conditions to be used as excuses for poor performance (Ylimaki et al., 2007, p.378).

Eva firmly believes that schools like hers should “strive for excellence [...] we don’t make excuses for not achieving well”. She is clear that being in a disadvantaged school means that,

“you’ve *got* to believe that all children can succeed, because unless you believe that ... those children are not going to get there”. Peter talked about having high expectations and belief in the children, “Yes! You *can* do it with these children”. He said that when he took the headship of the school, “there was this perception of ‘what do you expect from children at Gainsborough?’”

Peter answered this emphatically, “actually I expect an awful lot”.

What characterises these urban London heads is that their commitment to principles of social justice are enacted on the “frontline” of London schools. As Day (2005b) argues, for urban heads such as those in my study, the principles of “equity and social justice” are integral to their practices rather than “‘value-added’ components of service” (p.577). The headteachers in my study carry out their urban commitment each day in their schools, making often difficult decisions about children’s lives and futures. As Graham has pointed out,

I think there’s a whole area of social justice – what the [kids] deserve, why these kids deserve just as much as kids from advantaged backgrounds [...] I always said [to my staff], ‘good’ has to be the minimum standard for us because our children, being the way they are, won’t make progress with anything less.

However, all the headteachers spoke about the challenge of reconciling their beliefs and values with the external accountability pressures placed on them and their schools. Graham explained, “we are under constant pressure for results, constant pressure with new initiatives”. He argued that it is much harder for disadvantaged schools because, “you’re dealing with context pressure [as well] that you’re not necessarily dealing with elsewhere”. Eva suggested that the intense scrutiny schools receive can be “demoralising”. She said:

I just think we're working in a system that is all stick and no carrot.

I get frustrated by Ofsted and how it's always changing and how they're always moving the goalposts. It's very difficult for schools like this to get an 'outstanding'³ ... I think that sometimes they make it very difficult for people to stay in disadvantaged settings like this.

Peter was aware that his school is compared to other schools in the borough as well as with his previous results year on year. He put it bluntly, "I mean I'm one year's set of data from 'bye bye, you're off'. Peter's comment echoes Earley et al's (2011) finding that the new heads in their study were aware that "without increasing or maintaining standards, their jobs were on the line" (p.23). The pressure to achieve and maintain high standards can be particularly acute in disadvantaged settings as the heads in my study attest to. For the headteachers in my study, this was an ongoing balancing act. As Graham said, 'you have to align your personal vision, your personal morality with what it looks like to do the job well'.

Colleagues and creating a positive school culture

Schools with collegial and friendly colleagues and supportive cultures can influence teachers' decisions to remain working in a particular school (Dinham and Sawyer, 2004; Jarzabkowski, 2009). Indeed, this is intrinsic to the nature of the job as a teacher and headteacher. As Nias (1989) argues, 'work itself includes [the teachers'] involvement in the school as a social system, and thus their interactions with their colleagues as well as with their pupils' (p.236). For the

³ Ofsted inspectors use a 4 point grading scale to make judgements during inspections: 1 Outstanding; 2 Good; 3 Requires Improvement; 4 Inadequate.

urban teacher, good relationships with colleagues are a key intrinsic reason in teachers' decisions for staying (Eslinger, 2012; McIntyre, 2010, Maguire et al, 2017). Having supportive colleagues also strengthens a teacher's capacity for resilience, particularly in urban contexts (Frankenberg et al., 2010). It is, however, equally important for headteachers to form positive relationships in their schools as they are instrumental in creating a positive school culture (Bristow et al., 2007; Earley and Bubb, 2013). Creating a positive ethos and culture of belonging is hugely important in challenging contexts (Day, 2005a), a point made by my London headteachers. Research shows that schools which foster a culture of collegiality impact on teachers' capacities to remain resilient (Gu and Day, 2013; Mansfield et al., 2012). Similarly research on headteachers shows that they too have a greater capacity for resilience if there is a collegial ethos in their school (Bristow et al., 2007; Earley et al., 2011). This in turn leads to greater stability and continuity for everyone, the heads, the teachers and the school, its children and their families. It also promotes "staying".

All the heads reported that they enjoyed working with their colleagues in the school. Three of the headteachers (including retired Josephine) talked specifically about their leadership teams. David said, "I love the people I work with [...] I enjoy meeting them every day, I enjoy working with them". Similarly, Graham said, "I've got a great leadership team [...] they've been there for me". Although Peter also reported that he had good relationships with his staff, he talked more specifically about another set of colleagues in his school whom he referred to as his "core group" of friends who supported him. He explained:

They're very good and actually none of them are teachers –
they are the business manager ...she's my rock, and two of

the TAs [Teaching Assistants] ... they're my tight group,
they're my eyes and ears.

Bristow et al. (2007) found that nearly half of their headteacher participants relied on their administrative and support staff who “acted as an important filter, reducing the pressures on the head by dealing with visitors, parents and administrative demands” (p.53). In disadvantaged London schools where staff turnover is characteristically high, the staff who tend to remain are the support staff and teaching assistants (who are often parents of children who attend or have attended the school). These members of staff are generally rooted in the local community as are the headteachers too.

Developing and maintaining positive school cultures is instrumental in sustaining the headteachers' commitments as well as those of the teachers. The headteachers actively sought to improve their school ethos to engender trust and collaboration between all staff members. For the heads I interviewed, this was important to achieve if they were to also to ensure their staff benefited from quality professional development and improved their practice. For example, the heads all referred to the importance of maintaining high expectations of their teaching staff. As John explained: I want to see that you're [the teacher] planning effectively by the quality of your teaching, and the quality of the work that's being produced and the progress that the children make. At the same time, they were aware that it was important to remain supportive and attend to teachers' feelings, as John went on to say:

It's knowing the staff and making sure people feel valued and genuinely
talking about difficulties or successes. People who do you a favour if

they do an extra lesson observation for you, thank them and write them a card – small gestures can mean a lot.

Similarly, Graham spoke about “engaging people on an emotional level”, and explained:

A big piece of what I’ve done with staff is around the [borough] context. Why are we in it? Why is it that we do this job? We did a whole thing around - What’s your moral purpose? Commonly used words, but what is it to engage in it? I’m quite emotionally intelligent when I have fierce conversations with people. I try to think carefully about what’s going on with people – how am I going to give this feedback?

The heads had all arrived in post at a time when their schools needed to be developed and they spoke specifically about changing the cultures of their schools, as Eva said:

I do absolutely believe I contribute to creating a positive environment. I think that’s one of the most significant ways I’ve made a difference to the school. Because it was quite a toxic environment in many ways. Lots of people not getting on with each other, and not supporting one another. I think I have [developed] an optimistic school. By that I mean, people who relate well to one another, treat each other with respect. Put our children first, that we support one another because we’re only as strong as our weakest link.

The headteachers claimed that there is a symbiotic relationship between the Head and the staff which is an integral part of the school experience for everyone (Day and Gu, 2010). As Graham explained:

The biggest thing I think the [staff] have done for me is that I've realized that I can be the leader that I think I want to be. When I've had a moment of thinking, what more can I do there? They've found a solution I haven't seen ... they've continually given me the courage to be the leader that I think I can be. I think because of the culture of feedback I've created, I therefore had to be willing to be fed back to - it's been a very reciprocal relationship.

Developing and building inclusive leadership teams was vital for the headteachers too. They all spoke about the challenges they encountered in developing a leadership team they felt was effective and aligned with their vision for their school.

I've got a great leadership team, but they've also become a great team because of the culture I've shaped. So I think the smartest thing I did when I became a Head is that I completely flat-lined the leadership team.
(Graham)

I've got a great management team, I've got total trust in them – it started with me running the school, to being part of a team. And that's just developed. (David)

My participants all believed that heads like themselves who stay the course, despite the challenges they face, is crucial if the teachers and other staff are to stay too. As Graham explained, headteachers in schools like his need to stay and shape the culture and be a role model to others. In doing this, the heads themselves are more likely to want to stay in their schools as well as their staff. Graham compared headteachers who stay, with those who do not. “I know Heads who have gone into schools and transformed schools - they put in lots of systems, results go up, they’ve left and then the school falls apart”. My headteacher participants appear to be committed to ensuring their schools do not “fall apart” if and when they eventually decide to leave. Indeed, it is as though staying is part of their professional responsibility. They recognise the power of staying for teachers in urban schools as well as the need for legacy planning for the future, particularly in hard-to-recruit settings.

Inspiring challenges – addressing social inequalities

Another key reason the heads gave for remaining in their schools, concerns the level of challenge that they embrace in their jobs. All the headteachers reported that they enjoyed their jobs and coming into work. They revealed that they did not stay *despite* the challenges they faced in their schools, they stayed *because* of them. Indeed they even sought out further challenges to sustain their sense of purpose and commitment for the job. The heads’ experiences reflect Woods’ (2002) suggestion that “experienced motivated people who have things to offer feel they need new challenges” (p.6). Graham, Eva and Peter said that they had not quite finished what they had set out to achieve in their schools and still had a lot of work ahead of them to reach their goals. Peter talked about the fact that he was “thrown in at the deep end” when he took his post, but that

he enjoyed the challenge of “changing practice that was poor and building a team”. Although Eva did concede that in schools, “you’ve never cracked it [...] the minute you’re complacent [...] you should go”. The sheer variety of the job keeps the heads challenged and motivated in their roles. Eva talked about the fact that being a head meant that she had to learn to do many things she had never done before. She explained:

I’ve got to be an accountant, I’ve got to be a project manager, I’ve got to understand HR procedures and risk procedures [...] and I suppose in a sense it’s given me more confidence in myself that I can do things if I put my mind to it – I can learn [...] and I’m proud of what I’ve achieved.

Peter discussed managing the major building work which was taking place on the school grounds when I interviewed him. He said, “this year I’ve got a two-million pound budget but I’m not an accountant and I’ve got a massive building project – I know nothing about buildings!” With his investment of time and energy into this project, it may be that Peter’s commitment to his school is further strengthened as he feels an increasing emotional attachment to the place as well as the people within it.

David, 25 years a headteacher in the same school, looks for external challenges to keep him stimulated. He explained, “I have to have enough challenge ... the day-to-day challenges are fine, but I need big challenges. If you don’t have a challenge, you fossilize”. David has chosen to engage in other roles outside of the school, such as in the local authority where he is involved in key decision-making regarding the distribution of funds to schools in the London borough where

his school is located. Woods (2002) asks whether a headteacher's change of focus means that he or she is more likely to leave the development of the school to others. David hinted at this when he explained, "the curriculum is not my challenge, that's my management team, they deal with all that". But he also suggested that he "finds the money" to put new initiatives in place. He is able to do this because of the level of seniority he has in the local authority. So while David actively sought out other external challenges, he continued to have the best interests of his own school at heart in doing so.

Day's (2005b) study on heads of challenging schools found that one of the main factors for motivating heads to remain in their schools was having a "sense of moral purpose and social justice" (p.575). In particular, he found that "moral purposes, emotional and intellectual commitment and ethical and social bonds were far more powerful levers of leadership than extrinsic agendas" (p.575). Having a sense of moral purpose is reflected in other literature on headteachers' work and motivation (for example: Bristow et al., 2007; Webb et al., 2012; Ylimaki et al., 2007). Graham explained how important it is as a headteacher to "vocalise your moral purpose", said that, "my leadership is around culture, emotions and moral purpose". What emerged from the interviews was that the heads' desire for inspiring challenges not only contributed to their professional fulfilment, but was linked with their "mission" for their disadvantaged schools and children. In the case of the heads in my study, their moral purpose was actualised in the ways in which they addressed the social inequalities facing the children and families of their schools. Their aim was to develop a supportive school environment and improve the quality of teaching, so pupils had the best possible start to their lives. Another aspect of their moral purpose involved extending the school into the community to support the families.

The headteachers placed a great importance on fostering close ties and community projects with the families. In London where parent bodies are culturally, socially and economically diverse, a headteacher needs to be adept at relating to and working alongside *all* the parents for the good of their children. As Eva pointed out, “if a parent has got problems we have to help them resolve those problems in order for their children to flourish”. The headteachers reported difficulties in engaging parents and placating more challenging parents. Many of the parents in their schools have to raise their children in often very chaotic and unstable situations, and the headteachers gave examples of how parents sometimes responded to them with abuse and violence.

They all worked hard to integrate parents into the life of the school and believed that the children’s parents and families were key to the success of each child. The heads utilized the diversity of their parents as a powerful resource to help build a sense of community and belonging in the school. For example, David said: “I have worked hard to get every ethnic community in this school involved so there’s no hiding in corners. We are all together”. In particular David, Eva, Peter and Josephine emphasised the community nature of their schools. Josephine had a special space built in the school for the children’s families. She explained:

We did a lot of family learning during the week and weekend [and] we had a ‘Community House’ built [where] I could create something that was like home. I wanted to welcome the parents in and say “Come on, you’re part of this”.

David explained that it is more than simply nurturing the families:

I've really learnt to respect the parents here – I think I've learnt that they need ambition and run loads of activities for parents. But they've changed me ... I'm now someone who comes in and I look after the local people, to try raise their aspirations and make them a success. It's not a matter of just nurturing, it's a matter of driving them forward.

The heads' firm belief in creating partnerships with the parents echo McNulty's (2005) view that "parents must be treated as partners in the enterprise of giving their children an education" (p.87). While all headteachers would subscribe to this philosophy, realising inclusion in complex settings of diversity is harder to achieve. Undoubtedly, the active involvement of the parents in the life of the school strengthens the school community and engenders a sense of belonging, not just for the parents and children but for all the staff too. The heads in my study demonstrate that by nurturing and challenging the parents in helping create a close school community also appeals to the teachers in their schools. The teacher stayers interviewed for the larger study value the sense of community and 'family' which their schools offer. Many of them point to the fact that this is particularly important given that some of the schools are located in somewhat marginalised neighbourhoods and/or where the wider community life is rather more fragmented than cohesive.

The salary issue

The headteachers also raised a more extrinsic factor for staying: their salaries. As Pratt-Adams and Maguire (2009) found in their study on urban heads, perhaps my headteacher participants

found “that there was something less “acceptable” about discussing financial rewards in a public sector occupation” (p.123). This point was highlighted by Graham’s comment about his salary. He explained, “I’m at the bottom of the pay rate, so I asked for 5-7% pay rise. And I had to pluck up a lot of courage to ask for that”.

When asked, 4 out of the 5 current serving headteachers reported that they were not doing the job for financial rewards. Eva was quite clear she was not motivated by the salary or the status of the job, saying, “that’s really not my bag”. Similarly, Peter was not motivated by money and said, “you can’t do [this job] for the money”, although he did admit that he feels he is not paid enough and explained why. “Tomorrow a parent could trigger a no notice inspection⁴ and I could [lose my job]”. John was not motivated by the salary although he did suggest that heads are probably not paid enough, “for the amount of pressure, the demands, the public falls that you may have ...” Graham felt he was paid enough, having received a recent pay rise, although he indicated that he was not paid enough compared to some other heads. “I also look at other heads who are on a lot more money than I am and think, hmmm ...” Graham’s comment reflects the views of headteachers surveyed for a report by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) (2008) which found that it was important for the “salary [to match] the size of the challenge” (p.3). Graham did admit that, “Money is a little bit of a motivation – had I not had that pay rise, it would have affected me”. It would appear that although the salary is not a key motivator, dissatisfaction can result from its absence. However, the award of a raise in salary (which has to be approved by the school governors) also indicates esteem, status and effectiveness; the emotional gains may be just as important as any financial benefits. The only

⁴ Ofsted can inspect any school without notice where judged appropriate. In such cases, the lead inspector will normally phone the school about 15 minutes before arriving.

headteacher who felt he could not leave his job because of the salary was David who is just a few years off retirement. He explained:

I'm on a high salary, so for another school to take me on board, they have to be able to afford me [...] I am paid very well, but I'm an expensive resource and the governors know it. They need to pay their heads well.

The issue of salary is not a clear-cut one and how important it is depends on individual circumstances. My participants generally agreed that headteachers are not paid enough. David is the exception and is the only one who admitted he was paid very well, in fact too well to leave his school. When asked about other headteachers, David felt that there are too many "bad headteachers" who are paid too well and therefore may become "stayers" for the wrong reasons. Smithers and Robinson (2003) found that salary was not so much a "push" factor for teachers, but it did remain a "pull" factor (p.52). In the context of my headteachers, for most of them it appeared that they would not necessarily leave their jobs on account of their salary, but a decent salary can act as an inducement to stay.

Certainly the issue of salary did not feature strongly in the heads' decisions to remain in their schools, but it is an issue which should not be overlooked. Peter told me his thoughts on the subject, saying: "there's a reason why people in the City [financial district] get paid masses of money, because they could be gone tomorrow, it's so cut throat. But actually it's getting like that for heads". The extent to which a headteacher's salary features in their motivations for remaining in post is not straightforward. Recent reports and media articles have highlighted the

controversies surrounding a significant pay disparity between a small percentage of headteachers who are paid high salaries and the average primary or secondary school head (Coughlan, 2018; Staufenberg, 2019). Indeed in times of high stakes accountability where performance related pay has been implemented in schools, the headteachers' salary has become more of a "hot topic" particularly for heads in challenging contexts (Hodgson, 2014).

Discussion

My intention in interviewing these primary school headteachers was to explore what it is that encourages some headteachers to remain in challenging school contexts while others do not stay the course. As part of my larger study examining staying teachers, it was crucial to interview headteachers given that, as Gu and Day (2013) argue, "school leadership matters in sustaining a sense of resilience, commitment and effectiveness among the staff" (p.38). It is clear, therefore, that having an effective and committed headteacher is central in maintaining the stability and security of a school, particularly those schools serving disadvantaged contexts.

The motivations for staying which my headteacher participants gave are broadly similar to those given by the teachers in the larger study, although the importance given for these motivations are weighted somewhat differently for the headteachers. In their responses the headteachers may have (either consciously or unconsciously) employed a discourse familiar to most primary school teachers and heads which centres on an ethic of care for the children they teach and their commitment to work in their schools (Vogt, 2002). It may be unsurprising, therefore, that altruistic reasons for staying feature prominently in headteachers' decisions to stay. Certainly such altruistic motivations are borne out in extant research (e.g. Frankenberg et al., 2010; Freedman and Appleman, 2009). The stayers' altruistic motivations are underpinned by their values and beliefs for making a difference to society and to the lives of underprivileged

children. Altruistic motivations for staying in challenging London schools should therefore not be underplayed. I argue that more attention needs to be paid on developing and nurturing headteachers' and teachers' altruistic motivations to encourage them to stay in their schools. more attention needs to be paid on developing and nurturing headteachers' and teachers' altruistic motivations to encourage them to stay in their schools.

Despite the challenges faced in leading their schools, none of the headteachers considered leaving their posts. Indeed, despite the difficulties and, at times, violent encounters that most of the headteachers experienced with some of the more challenging parents, they showed compassion towards the families and the conditions in which many had to live and raise their children. The headteachers spoke candidly about their strengths and vulnerabilities thus revealing their humanity. It is this humanity which no doubt attracted them to lead disadvantaged London schools and which, in turn, prompts them to stay. In their interviews, my participants highlighted the importance of demonstrating effective leadership which includes ensuring that good teachers are hired, nurtured and encouraged. It also involves paying close attention to the professional and emotional needs of their teachers, as well as understanding how their teachers can develop and grow professionally. In the case of my headteacher participants, they all had experience of being class teachers in similar London schools, and so they have a professional and personal understanding of what it is to be an urban primary school teacher. Emotionally intelligent headteachers, such as those in my study, who offer strong leadership and build effective and inclusive senior leadership teams in their schools are themselves more likely to stay in their schools, and in turn nurture the stability and continuity which challenging London schools most need.

However, at a time when it has become increasingly difficult to recruit and retain headteachers in all schools, but particularly those in disadvantaged contexts with lower levels of attainment (Future Leaders Trust, 2016; Howson, 2013), it is worthwhile to consider key areas for policy action in supporting headteacher retention. The analysis of my headteacher interviews highlights three such areas.

The first policy area to consider is ensuring that headteachers' salaries represent recognition and respect for the job that they do (Margolis and Deuel, 2009). Pay levels for all school staff and headteachers in England need to be fair and transparent. Teaching unions have called for an end to "fat cat" pay gaps where the headteachers of a small and select number of schools (usually CEO's of academy chain schools⁵) are paid significantly higher salaries than most (Coughlan, 2018). This is particularly pertinent at a time when budget pressures are forcing many schools to make cuts to staffing to keep costs down. While living costs in all urban areas are generally higher than living elsewhere, there are key differences between London and other urban areas in the UK which mean that living and working in London is substantially more expensive for individuals and families (Trust for London, 2015). London primary school heads and teachers working in disadvantaged schools not only need to receive a commensurate salary to afford the higher costs of living in London, but they also need to have adequate and affordable housing in adequate travelling distance to their school. This means that the housing crisis needs to be urgently addressed if London is to retain more of its key workers, including teachers, in the capital (Mayor of London, 2016).

The second policy area to address is in strengthening support structures for heads, particularly those new to the role, and provide them with sufficient and appropriate professional development opportunities. Over a decade ago Southworth (2008:424) noted:

⁵ An academy chain is academy trust that operates more than one academy school.

Headteachers ... need better support and more of it. At the same time, we need to be clear what the distinctive features of headship today and into the future are, and what new and additional skills they are likely to need.

The role of the headteacher can be lonely and isolating (Earley and Bubb, 2013; Thomson, 2009; Webb et al., 2012). It is important that all heads, and particularly new headteachers can access practical and emotional support and mentoring (Worth et al., 2018). The fact that the heads in my study are rooted in the London context, having been teachers in similar or the same challenging London schools, is instrumental in how they shape the culture of their schools and support their teachers. For the heads in my study, they were clear about how to go about creating supportive school cultures that also stimulate professional development among staff. I argue that a more emotionally intelligent approach needs to be taken to prepare and sustain individuals for headships in urban schools. At a time when teacher wellbeing is declining and anxiety among school staff and children is on the rise (Education Support, 2019), this aspect of a headteacher's professional development training is not given enough attention. As my headteachers' accounts demonstrate, a much greater emphasis needs to be placed on developing more emotionally intelligent school cultures that will then be better placed to retain teachers.

The final and perhaps most pressing policy area to attend to is the wider policy context in which schools and heads are operating. As James Bowen, the director of the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT), the biggest union for primary school leaders, said, "When the system is causing this many leaders to walk away, something needs to change" (Turner, 2018). If heads are to sustain their commitment to their roles, particularly in disadvantaged

schools and in schools with low levels of attainment, current punitive accountability structures need to be addressed. As Lynch and Worth (2017) suggest, those that hold headteachers to account need to act in less castigatory ways for underperformance and need to “evaluate whether a leader who is not performing can be supported to improve rather than be replaced” (p.2). This was reflected in my heads’ interviews, where Peter summed up the risks of working in such a high stakes accountability culture: “I’m one year’s set of data from ‘bye bye, you’re off’”.

Conclusion

The headteachers gave many reasons for staying, but it is not hard to imagine that there are probably moments when they feel they cannot continue. It may be the case that on a day to day basis, the heads know there are many people in their school who rely on them to show up; to be there to make a range of different daily decisions, both large and small; and to offer guidance, support and most importantly leadership. Undoubtedly these are key factors in why the heads “keep going” in their jobs. Significantly, theirs is a high stakes job; the heads are ultimately responsible for many people’s education, livelihoods, wellbeing and careers. The heads all appear to be acutely aware of this and of the fact that leaving their posts prematurely would cause significant instability and uncertainty in their schools. This is perhaps the ultimate challenge for the urban headteacher. As Eva said, “I don’t buy into the Super Hero type of head who thinks they can come into a school like this and quickly sort it out”. Heads who stay can foster a greater sense of stability and security for the children in their schools (Canrinus and Fokkens-Bruinsma, 2011). My headteacher participants held an ongoing emotional commitment to the children, staff and families they worked with. As articulated in some of the accounts presented in

this paper, staying is part of their professional responsibility. This research is significant, as it highlights the important role that altruistic motivations play in sustaining headteachers' commitments. Policymakers would do well to harness headteachers' commitments and enthusiasm for working in these types of schools so the heads experience, over time, that although the challenges are great, so too are the rewards. This is invaluable as the good 'staying' urban headteacher is well placed to nurture and foster this dedication and commitment among his or her teaching staff too (Day, 2005a). What characterises these headteachers is that they are in it for the long haul; they are in it to help improve the lives of children and of their families over time who depend on their primary school headteacher to champion them. They are stayers.

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Table 1. Headteacher participants

Name (pseudonyms)	Age	School	Leadership career in school
David	55 - 65	Beaumont Primary	Acting Headteacher for 1 term. Headteacher for 25 years
Graham	35 - 45	Ridgeway Primary	Deputy Headteacher for 3 years Acting Headteacher for 2 terms. Headteacher for 5 years
Eva	35 - 45	Canbury Primary	Deputy Headteacher for 3 years Headteacher for 5 years
John	35 - 45	Parkland Primary	Phase Leader (senior leader) for 2 years Deputy Head for 2 years Headteacher for 6 years
Peter	35 - 45	Gainsborough Primary	Headteacher for 6 years
Josephine (retired)	65 +	Gateshill Primary Maple Primary	Headteacher for 16 years Headteacher for 11 years