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Teacher retention in challenging schools: please don't say goodbye!

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ABSTRACT

This research study investigated the factors that encourage teachers to remain working in challenging schools. It focuses on nine school case studies: one secondary and two primaries in three different areas of deprivation: an inner city; 'pockets of poverty' within a shire county and a coastal town in England. Drawing on one-to-one interviews with the headteacher, and focus groups with long-serving staff, the data revealed the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for staff. School leadership—an extrinsic factor—provided recognition of teachers' efforts (intrinsic). Relationships with pupils (intrinsic) had an impact on pupil behaviour (extrinsic). Collegial relationships (extrinsic) supported teachers' resilience (intrinsic). Accountability in terms of inspection and external tests (extrinsic) had an adverse effect on teachers' autonomy (intrinsic). The factors which were particularly salient in encouraging teacher retention in high-need schools were: making a difference to pupils, the wider community and society; creating positive relationships with pupils; supportive colleagues and feeling valued by school leaders. The article concludes by recommending that the leaders of challenging schools create a nurturing environment which values teachers, recognises the gruelling nature of high-need schools, fosters relationships between pupils and teachers and encourages staff friendships leading to collegial support.

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Teacher retention; turnover; attrition; challenging schools; intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

Introduction

Teacher retention is an ongoing concern for England's Department for Education (Department for Education DfE, 2019) and the highest turnover of teachers is in schools serving 'areas of disadvantage' (Department for Education DfE, 2019, p. 11). For the children in high-need schools, teacher retention and continuity have a beneficial impact (Duke, 2014; Gurr et al., 2014; Medina et al., 2014), whereas high teacher turnover causes disruption that damages pupil attainment (Atteberry et al., 2016) and this has a disproportionate effect on disadvantaged pupils (Allen et al., 2018).

While there is evidence that some teachers commit to staying in high-need schools (Lynch et al., 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2012), extant research has tended to focus on why

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teachers leave such schools (for example, K. Smith & Ulvik, 2017; Sims & Allen, 2018; Towers & Maguire, 2017; Worth et al., 2015). This research study provides a richer understanding of why teachers remain working in schools located in areas of deprivation, using the theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000) to analyse the findings.

Teacher retention: review of the literature

Teacher retention has been defined as the ‘need to prevent good teachers from leaving the job for the wrong reasons’ (Kelchtermans, 2017, p. 965). On the positive side, teachers might leave for promotion, a broader experience or a school which better fits their values (Kelchtermans, 2017). The negative or ‘wrong’ reasons may drive teachers out prematurely, for example, stress, workload or pupil behaviour (Towers & Maguire, 2017; Williams, 2018). Kelchtermans’ (2017) definition does not, however, reflect the multiple reasons why an individual teacher might decide to leave their post and it focuses on teachers leaving rather than staying. For the purposes of this article, teacher retention is defined as keeping teachers in post and reducing teacher turnover. This review of the literature covers what causes high turnover in schools and what is currently known about why teachers stay.

Reasons for high turnover

Stress and workload are undoubtedly factors in teacher attrition. Whereas most professionals experience occasional crises, teachers face ‘regular and cumulative difficulties’ (Clarà, 2017, p. 83). This is particularly the case in socio-economically disadvantaged schools, where teachers are more likely to experience ‘unstable, fluctuated, personal, situational and professional scenarios’ (Gu & Day, 2013, p. 29). Teachers work intensively during term-time which increases stress and reduces work-life balance (Worth and Van Den Brande, 2019). In England, the DfE’s (2019) *Recruitment and Retention Strategy* noted that workload is the primary reason for teachers resigning. Workload and work-life balance were also the top two reasons for leaving in a survey of graduates ($n = 1200$) from the Institute of Education Initial Teacher Education course (Perryman & Calvert, 2020).

Poor pupil behaviour—often associated with disadvantaged backgrounds (S. Smith & Granja, 2017) - has been highlighted as another key factor in teacher attrition. A recent survey of state secondary school teachers in England ($n = 743$) identified the ‘damaging impact of dealing with low-level persistent disruption on a regular basis’ (Williams, 2018, p. 32). Sixty three per cent of Williams’ (Williams, 2018) respondents had considered leaving the teaching profession because of poor pupil behaviour and 72% of the respondents knew teachers who had left for this reason.

Low-income schools, because of recruitment difficulties, tend to employ more inexperienced teachers who then leave to develop their careers (Allen et al., 2012). Allen and Sims (2018, pp. 445–446) found that, in secondary schools in England, ‘the odds of pupils in the most deprived quintile getting a novice teacher are 32% higher than those in the least deprived quintile’. A vicious cycle may develop in some schools where poor working

conditions lead to poor retention, undermining support networks and resulting in further turnover (Holme et al., 2017).

What encourages teachers to stay?

The limited literature on why teachers stay in post has not focused on high-need schools, so this section provides a general overview of what helps teachers remain. Enjoyment of teaching, for example, the variety of the job, intellectual stimulation, opportunity to engage with and inspire children and young people, be creative and have fun, was a key factor (Perryman & Calvert, 2020). Supportive leadership, relationships with the pupils and colleagues, resilience, recognition and autonomy also appear to be important (Kelchtermans, 2017; Lynch et al., 2016; Menzies et al., 2015; Perryman & Calvert, 2020). Feeling confident about teaching (Firestone, 2014; Menzies et al., 2015) and, perhaps linked to this, effective CPD are two other key factors for retention (Firestone, 2014; Kraft et al., 2016).

Kraft et al.'s (2016, p. 1439) research into teacher turnover in New York middle schools found that, as part of a strong organisational context, headteachers' leadership skills were 'particularly salient' for teachers' decisions to remain in their schools. Key leadership skills included a clear vision, open communication, support, collaboration, feedback and effective management (Kraft et al., 2016). Many teachers find their relationships with young people in the classroom to be positive and rewarding (Kelchtermans, 2017) and a reason for remaining (Perrachione et al., 2008).

Teacher resilience, defined as teachers' ability to 'adapt positively to an adverse situation' (Clarà, 2017, p. 82), has also been identified as contributing to retention (Clarà, 2017; Gu & Day, 2013). Resilience is underpinned by support from colleagues, which is particularly important in high-need schools (Gu & Day, 2013). In addition to helping resilience, collegial support also encourages teachers to stay in post (Thomas et al., 2019).

Teacher autonomy is another significant retention factor (Queyrel et al., 2019). Defined as having control over one's own decisions and actions (Deci & Ryan, 2008), teacher autonomy is 'strongly correlated with job satisfaction, perceptions of workload manageability and intention to stay in the profession' (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020, p. 3). Menzies et al.'s (Menzies et al., 2015) survey of teachers in all school phases in England ($n = 926$) found that teacher autonomy was important for retention, because it enabled teachers to have a sense of personal impact. There are, of course, degrees of autonomy: few schools would allow teachers to teach whatever they liked, irrespective of the National Curriculum and external assessments. Nevertheless, teachers' autonomy has been diminished by successive governments in England (Gu & Day, 2013; Ball, 2003). Meanwhile, accountability has increased (Perryman & Calvert, 2020; Towers & Maguire, 2017) through Ofsted inspections, school league tables and measurements of pupil progress and teacher performance. Perryman and Calvert (2020, p. 16) found that a reason for teachers leaving was 'the accountability agenda that deprived teachers of the creativity and variety for which some had joined the profession'.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation

The theories of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are pertinent to teacher retention, since there is a correlation between motivation and intention to stay in post (Perrachione et al., 2008). Intrinsic motivation refers to the inherent interest or enjoyment which leads to engagement in activities, such as pleasure in teaching children. Having a sense of agency (or autonomy) and empowerment is important for intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Altruistic reasons for entering the teaching profession, such as making a difference to pupils' lives, are strongly connected to intrinsic motivation (Chiong et al., 2017). Extrinsic motivation is focused on achieving a particular outcome or reward, for example, salary and holidays (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Rewards and punishments are aspects of 'controlled' motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008), which is essentially extrinsic.

A question for educators is whether intrinsic motivation, which is essentially innate, can be developed and extended in schools. Previous research indicates that it is malleable and has the potential to increase over time (Kunter & Holzberger, 2014). In addition to autonomy, intrinsic motivation also depends on competence (Menzies et al., 2015; Tang et al., 2016), so providing professional development to help teachers improve their skills can augment their intrinsic motivation (Firestone, 2014).

Extrinsic motivation, too, can be increased, for example, by offering rewards. There is a danger, however, that this undermines teachers' inherent interest in teaching by encouraging them to focus on external targets to gain the reward (Firestone, 2014).

There may be some overlap between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, for example, teachers' inbuilt pleasure in teaching may be related to the way in which it is valued and rewarded. Deci and Ryan's (Deci & Ryan, 2008) concept of 'autonomous' motivation comprised both intrinsic and some elements of extrinsic motivation—where individuals have internalised external influences which resonate with their identity. This implies that a 'pure' version of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation may not exist (Kunter & Holzberger, 2014).

Two research studies (Chiong et al., 2017; Perrachione et al., 2008) have applied the concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to teacher retention. Perrachione et al.'s (Perrachione et al., 2008) survey of elementary school teachers in Missouri ($n = 201$) found that a combination of motivation factors that were intrinsic (effective teaching, working with students) and extrinsic (holidays, their school) influenced teachers' decisions to stay in post, whereas those who were planning to leave were motivated only by extrinsic factors (low salary, workload).

A more recent study in England (Chiong et al., 2017) used survey data and teacher interviews in all school phases to investigate the reasons why 'veterans' (teachers with more than 10 years' experience) had stayed in the profession. They found that the two most important factors were altruism (making a difference) and 'perceived professional mastery' – teachers' confidence in their teaching skills. Both could be described as intrinsic motivations; extrinsic motivations such as pay and holidays were considered less significant retention factors by Chiong et al.'s (Chiong et al., 2017) respondents.

Chiong et al.'s (Chiong et al., 2017) study provided an overview of longstanding teachers' motivations to stay in post, but their focus was on comparing teachers with different lengths of service (10–19, 20–29 and 30+ years) and their analysis did not

include any contextual information about the schools in which the teachers worked. Likewise, Perrachione et al.'s (Perrachione et al., 2008) survey did not consider the school context and their research was restricted to elementary school teachers. Our study offers additional depth and nuance to extant research by drilling down into the nature of teacher retention in the particular context of high-need primary and secondary schools.

Methodology

Nine case-study schools, one secondary and two primaries, were identified in each of three different geographical locations in England: an inner-city, where there are large areas of deprivation; a shire county, where there are pockets of poverty in otherwise relatively well-off areas, and a coastal town, where the environment has particular challenges for schools because of transient populations and predominantly low-wage jobs. Schools with above average levels of pupils eligible for free school meals in the last 6 years (a standard indicator of poverty) in the three locations were emailed with information about the research and invited to express interest. Only a small number of schools from all three locations expressed a willingness to participate, possibly because the demands on leaders of challenging schools reduces the time available to take part in research. 'Snowballing' (inviting existing participants to suggest schools we could approach) and 'convenience sampling' (the researchers' own contacts) were used to encourage other headteachers to participate, in order to ensure the requisite number of case study schools. The interviews took place over the course of 12 months from June 2019 to June 2020. The final 3 interviews took place during the national lockdown and were carried out on Zoom.

Group and individual interviews were held with long-serving staff (defined as those who had worked for at least 3 years at the school). The group interviews provided an efficient means of gathering data, revealing individual and group opinions (Cyr, 2016). While similar to focus groups, in group interviews the researchers act as investigators, asking questions and seeking answers, rather than facilitators, stimulating discussion within the group (Bloor et al., 2001; Parker & Tritter, 2006). By intervening, the researchers are able to prevent some of the problems of focus groups, such as some individuals dominating or some remaining silent (Bloor et al., 2001). But, as in focus groups, participants in group interviews may still be influenced by others' views and may not wish to voice their opinions if different from the rest of the group. It is possible, however, to capture the opinions of the majority of participants (Parker & Tritter, 2006).

In accordance with the ethical governance of the research, teachers who had completed 3 or more years of service were contacted by the school administrator, rather than the headteacher, in order to ensure there was no pressure to participate. The questions covered the factors that had encouraged retention, personal values and school ethos, expectations, induction, workload and professional development. The interviews were carefully facilitated by the researchers to maintain focus on the research questions and ensure that no individuals dominated the discussion.

Twenty five teachers (20 women and 5 men) in total participated in the group interviews. The numbers in each varied from one to four teachers and the interviews lasted

between 45 minutes and an hour. In the case of a single participant (which happened at two of the schools, despite additional requests by the administrators) the interview was similar to a semi-structured interview, using the same questions as for the group interviews. The participants had completed from 3 to over 30 years of service. The secondary school teachers taught a broad range of subjects, including English, mathematics, humanities, science and technology.

Semi-structured interviews with each of the headteachers (7 women and 2 men), lasting an hour, focused on leadership perceptions of teacher retention, school culture, headteacher ethos and their strategies to encourage staff to stay.

Ethical approval for the research was given by the Oxford Brookes University Research Ethics Committee and strict ethical standards were upheld throughout the research. All the participants signed consent forms agreeing to the use of the interview data in publications. The participants and their schools have been anonymised in this article and, to prevent individual schools from being identified, background information is provided about the schools generally rather than specifically.

The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. Each headteacher was sent a transcript of their interview for the purpose of respondent validation. None of them made any revisions to the transcript. Ethical considerations prevented the sharing of group interview transcripts with participants because of a concern that the transcript might be seen by others and the participants identified. To support trustworthiness, the researchers employed critical reflexivity (Betz, 2015), through the process of (i) joint reflections after each interview, and (ii) joint and separate analysis of the data, in both cases, scrutinising each other's perceptions and assumptions. The data were carefully read by both researchers, with key themes identified by each researcher separately. The final themes were decided after lengthy discussion between the researchers. The data were then input into Nvivo, using the agreed themes and identifying sub-categories through a more finely grained analysis at this stage. In addition to the themes which emerged across all the individual and group interviews, we examined the data in relation to the three locations, to check whether there were any differences between the responses from schools in the inner city, coastal and shire county areas. We also compared each headteacher's views with those of their staff to identify any differences between these perspectives.

As the research was small-scale, the findings are not generalisable, but the outcomes may be 'transferable' (Cohen et al., 2018) to other schools in similar circumstances.

Findings

The findings start with an overview of the different contexts of the case-study schools before outlining in more detail the way in which intrinsic motivations (pupils, values, resilience, recognition, enjoyment) interplayed with extrinsic motivations (leadership, colleagues, continuing professional development, accountability, pupil behaviour, workload) to influence teachers' decisions to stay working at a high-need school.

Table 1. Participant coding.

Participant	Coding
Inner city secondary headteacher	H-S
Shire County secondary headteacher	H-S
Coastal secondary headteacher	H-S
Inner city primary headteacher	H-ICP
Inner city secondary teacher	T-ICS
Inner city primary teacher	T-ICP
Shire County primary headteacher	H-SCP
Shire County secondary teacher	T-SCS
Shire County primary teacher	T-SCP
Coastal primary headteacher	H-CLP
Coastal secondary teacher	T-CLS
Coastal primary teacher	T-CLP

High-need contexts

The schools have been given the initials IC (Inner-city), SC (Shire County) or CL (Coastal) followed by P for Primary or S for secondary. H denotes a headteacher and T indicates a teacher participant. In order to ensure anonymity, H-S is used for all three secondary head teachers. [Table 1](#) below summarises this coding.

Of the nine schools, two were judged by Ofsted to be ‘Outstanding’, five were ‘Good’ and two were ‘Requires Improvement’. The secondary schools were all of average size (just under 1000 pupils) while the primary schools varied from the smallest, at just over 100, to the largest, with more than 700 pupils. All the schools were mixed-gender; they represented a range of different school types: one academy converter; five sponsored academies (in Multi-Academy Trusts); two community schools and one voluntary controlled school. Two of the primary schools were faith-based schools.

All of the case study schools had above average levels of poverty, based on pupils eligible for free school meals over the last 6 years, ranging from 28% to 67% (the national average is 23%). This did not necessarily reflect the full extent of deprivation, however, because universal free school meals in Key Stage 1 mean that some families do not apply for support, and in high-cost areas (such as the Shire County), families with both parents working in low-income jobs face similar levels of poverty to families claiming state benefits.

Five of the schools were located in areas which were in the bottom 10% of deprivation nationally, based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). Such challenging circumstances mean high rates of poverty, poor housing, unemployment, migrancy and crime (Levin, 2006; P. Smith & Bell, 2011). The impact was similar across all the case study schools and included dealing with a ‘high number of families in crisis and vulnerable children’ (H-ICP), ‘a high proportion of our community on social benefits and social housing’ (H-S), ‘knife crime, ... drugs, ... the whole gamut of antisocial behaviour’ (T-ICP), challenging pupil behaviour such as ‘a minority of children who are really really hard to reach’ (H-S), a level of mental health issues ‘that’s skyrocketed over the last two years’ (H-S), and parents who are ‘completely disenfranchised, not working, on the edges of society’ (H-S).

The case-study schools included four with a dominance of white, working class pupils, three of which had a majority of boys, ‘one of the hardest to reach groups’ (H-S). Five had above average numbers of pupils whose first language was not English and of these, two had relatively high proportions of EAL pupils (48% and 32%).

Participants recognised that, although some teachers ‘kind of fall in love with working in a place like this’ (H-S) others did not thrive in a challenging context. Headteachers spoke about some staff who needed to leave: ‘You have to be on top of your game—mediocre doesn’t cut it here, that’s the problem’ (H-S). Retention means preventing ‘good’ teachers leaving (Kelchtermans, 2017). It is not about retaining ineffective teachers at all costs.

Accounts in the literature about teacher retention in challenging schools differ, with some indications that turnover in such schools is high (Department for Education DfE, 2019) alongside evidence that the level of pupil poverty does not lead to more teachers leaving (Lynch et al., 2016; Ronfeldt et al., 2012; Sims & Allen, 2018). Our case-study schools reflected this difference: three of the headteachers expressed concern about the rate of teacher turnover (for example, one small primary school had lost 11 teachers in one year). Conversely, three (all located in the inner city) had high levels of retention. The remaining three schools had faced periods of high teacher turnover in the past but currently had stable staffing. In relation to the proportion of less experienced teachers, one of the schools (a Shire County primary) reported regularly replacing teachers who were leaving with NQTs (‘and not necessarily the best NQTs’) while the Shire County secondary had promoted teachers who were not ready into middle leadership positions. In both cases this was due to recruitment problems.

Our case-study schools were deliberately located in different regions. Participants reported regional differences relating to recruitment, with schools in the Shire County facing difficulties because of the high cost of living, while the Coastal schools had a more limited availability of potential staff because, as one headteacher put it, half the commutable area around the school was in the sea. The Shire County and Coastal schools were reasonably close to London and participants from both regions talked about the ‘pull of London’, particularly because housing costs were similar to London but teachers did not receive London weighting in the regions. In terms of retention, the Shire County participants talked about the need for staff to become invested in the local area and said that the local town was a ‘hard sell’ for those not already living there. The high cost of living meant that teachers were tempted to move to cheaper counties nearby. The schools in the Coastal region were in a unitary authority and the surrounding County schools had less deprived intakes which attracted some teachers away. In every region, however, working at a school serving a disadvantaged community seemed to be the driving motivation for the teachers and it did not appear to make any difference to them whether the school was located in an inner city, on the coast or in a shire county. When discussing the school context they described similar levels of poverty, pupil need and challenge in every region and their motivations to remain were also similar.

Differences between teacher and headteacher participants’ accounts were also surprisingly small. The headteachers focused more on recruitment (although this was mentioned by several teachers, too) and strategies to support retention while the teachers gave more personal accounts about what made them want to stay. The headteachers’ views

Table 2. Links between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic	Extrinsic
Teacher values	Workload
Enjoyment and recognition	School leadership
Relationships with pupils	Pupil behaviour
Resilience	Collegial relationships
Perceived professional mastery	Professional development
Autonomy	Accountability

about what helps to retain teachers reflected those of the teachers, perhaps because they, too, had remained teaching in high-need schools so understood the teachers' perspective.

Our research indicates that a key element of the factors influencing teacher retention in challenging schools is the interaction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Past research into the interplay between these motivational orientations has been limited (Kunter & Holzberger, 2014). In the complex environment of a school, different aspects of a teacher's working life are interrelated. Extrinsic factors may support or hamper intrinsic motivations: they are, in most cases, intertwined rather than separate. Our findings are discussed in relation to the following, linked motivations (Table 2):

While we argue that school leadership makes an important difference to teachers' values and recognition we acknowledge that school leadership also affects many other aspects of the school, including workload, accountability and professional development. We also recognise that these factors have multiple impacts, not just between the pairs identified above. In relation to the data and the literature, however, these appeared to be the most salient interactions.

Teacher values and workload

Making a difference' has been identified as an intrinsic motivation for teachers who stay in any school (Chiong et al., 2017; Perryman & Calvert, 2020). In high-need schools, there is an even greater potential to improve the life chances of the students. All the research participants spoke about the significant impact they could make on their pupils, enjoying the 'buzz' when a child made progress. For example, a primary school teacher described the children's reaction when he brought in second-hand books to add to the class library: 'They all rush up, "I want to read this", [...] they run off, delighted with themselves, and they do little book reviews, that kind of thing, they love it, they absolutely love it. That's for me the most important thing' (T-ICP).

The high level of pupils' needs drew teachers in, for example, 'They don't need somebody who's going to go out the door in two weeks, they don't need a cover teacher, they need me' (T-CLS). Some teachers talked about how their relationship with the pupils made it hard to leave; as one teacher said about leaving her previous, high-need school, 'It broke my heart' (T-CLP).

In some cases, the teachers and headteachers had come from a similar background to the pupils, which had influenced their decision to remain working in a high-need school, for example,

I grew up on a council estate. I'm from a very rough family, I was a looked-after child for a while. [...] I need to be with inner city kids who I can understand because I have lived in very similar circumstances and had very similar things happen to me in my own childhood, and that's why I've stayed here for so long (T-ICS).

Perhaps linked to their understanding of pupils' needs, some of the teachers and heads interviewed expressed concern about societal inequalities. Headteachers spoke of the need for teachers to have 'a moral imperative and purpose' (H-CLS) and a 'really strong moral compass' (H-CLP). There was an acute awareness of the deprivation experienced by the pupil populations in their charge. Some teacher participants spoke about wanting to make a contribution to society, for example, 'there are certain pockets in our country where children are disadvantaged, just by where they're born or the situation that they are born into, and I'm keen to be a part of helping to change that' (T-SCP). In terms of altruism, which is an intrinsic motivator, Chiong et al. (2017) found that making a difference to pupils was a more important retention factor for their veteran respondents than making a difference to society. Conversely, both were considered to be crucial in our data. It seems likely that the nature of challenging schools compared to other school contexts made altruism a greater motivation to stay for teachers in high-need schools.

Altruistic motivations may also have offset, to some extent, the impact of workload on the teachers, despite a general acknowledgement from all teacher and headteacher participants that workload was a major burden. As one headteacher said, 'It's the kind of job that you just have to work until the job's done, you can't work to rule, because children's needs don't work like that' (H-SCP). There were reports of working weeks exceeding 55 hours, habitual working at weekends during term-time and struggling to balance family/social lives with working commitments. Participants appeared to have accepted that their professional lives comprised intense bursts of work during the school calendar. Several teachers spoke about the difficulty in containing their workload—it followed them home: 'one of the big things I've grappled with my whole career, is it's never done, you can't finish it' (T-CLS). Contrary to existing studies (Worth and Van Den Brande, 2019; Department for Education (DfE), 2019, however, the participants did not identify excessive workload as a reason for leaving, despite expressing concerns about their work-life balance. Several of the teachers said that their own perfectionism was partly responsible for their excessive workload. It appeared that, for some of the teacher participants, the intrinsic motivation of altruism contributed to a heavy workload while also enabling them to gain satisfaction from it, for example, 'it helps when things are hard . . . to think of the difference it could make' (T-ICS).

The case-study schools had adopted a number of strategies to reduce staff workloads, for example, not setting homework, doing whole-class feedback rather than individual book marking, marking one assessment a term, only providing live marking or live feedback during a lesson, increasing the number of INSET days, reducing report-writing and the number of parents evenings. Efforts to reduce marking were particularly appreciated by teachers in the focus groups, for example 'the new marking policy has definitely improved work/life balance' (T-SCS). These strategies are an indication of school leaders encouraging retention by addressing extrinsic factors which could damage teacher motivation to stay.

Workload is an extrinsic factor inasmuch as it is externally imposed by the demands of school leaders, government policies and Ofsted inspections. Teachers in this study felt overworked and welcomed strategies that reduced their workload, but it did not seem to be a deciding factor in retention. Rather, many of them blamed their own dedication for work overload: an interesting by-product of altruistic motivation.

Enjoyment, recognition and school leadership

Perhaps the most important intrinsic factor for retention is finding enjoyment in work (Kunter & Holzberger, 2014; Perryman & Calvert, 2020). Teachers in the focus groups described their positive feelings: ‘It is hard, but I enjoy that challenge’ (T-SCP). The teachers found their work interesting: ‘It’s definitely not a job that you’re clockwatching’ (T-CLP). Being passionate about your subject was also a motivation to stay, as was personal enjoyment: ‘if it’s no fun then you shouldn’t be here doing it’ (T-SCS). Middle leaders found satisfaction in the progress of their department, for example, ‘I’ve got a great sense of pride in what’s achieved in my department, and I’d ... I’d struggle to leave that behind’ (T-SCS). Teachers’ pleasure in, and commitment to their work seemed like a vocation – ‘I stay in teaching because I love teaching’ (T-SCP). One headteacher suggested that this sense of vocation was particularly important in a challenging school: ‘I think this profession can be a job, but I don’t think in a school like this it can be a job, because it would be a very very thankless job on most days’ (H-CLS). In these high-need schools it appeared that professional pleasure and pride helped to offset the challenges facing the teachers, consistent with previous research that enjoyment as an intrinsic motivation acts as a ‘buffer against occupational stressors’ (Kunter & Holzberger, 2014, p. 89). Furthermore, for at least half the research participants, the challenges were themselves a source of enjoyment, providing interest, satisfaction and a motivation to remain.

Recognition, as a source of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008), contributed to teachers’ enjoyment of work and was an important reason for teachers in our study to remain in post. Relatively small gestures were appreciated by the staff:

It’s a really hard job, but when you come in and find a little thank you card in your pigeonhole or a bottle of wine on your desk or just an e-mail that says ‘that was really good’, and you think you don’t have to keep thanking me, but actually it really does help (T-ICS).

Although recognition is an intrinsic motivator, it has to be provided externally: teachers’ work needs to be recognised by others. All the headteachers spoke about their strategies to value staff, which included ‘pizza break times,’ when the senior leadership team took on break duties to allow the teachers to relax and eat pizza. There were also ‘doughnut days’, a staff buffet at the end of each term, time off to attend family events and a ‘duvet day’ every term: ‘It’s an acknowledgement that it’s tough here, and an acknowledgement that sometimes you just need to be able to go and do something lovely with your family’ (H-S). One secondary school had invested in its own nursery, with a substantial staff discount: ‘that has helped, in particular, with retention of that kind of middle leadership staff’ (H-S). These actions to recognise and value teachers were described favourably in the teacher focus groups as supporting their intention to stay.

There is disagreement in the literature about the role of school leaders in supporting teacher retention. Kraft et al. (2016) found that headteachers had a strong impact on teachers’ wish to remain, while in Chiong et al.’s (Chiong et al., 2017) study of veteran teachers, the quality of school leadership was not considered to be very important. Our study supports Kraft et al. (2016): school leadership was one of the most important extrinsic factors in encouraging retention for the teacher participants. The teachers in our

case-study schools talked of the significant role school leaders played in supporting, nurturing and developing staff, for example:

Nobody's left floundering. It's like some schools, someone starts floundering, it's a bit like blood in the water and the sharks attack to get them out. Here it's a case of, members of staff are having difficulty, how can we help? (T-ICP).

Leadership support was reported to have been forthcoming for a variety of personal as well as professional challenges. In the larger schools, support from middle-leaders, as well as head teachers, was described as important and this had influenced some teachers' decisions to stay, for example, in one school the department was 'a big motivator' (T-SCS) and in another it represented 'cohesive staff relationships' (T-ICS). At one school, two part-time members of staff felt that the leader's positive attitude towards part-timers had kept them at the school—they had been promoted to middle-leadership positions and were paid to attend CPD.

There are, of course, other important aspects of school leadership, but in these challenging schools, leaders played a key role in valuing teachers' work. By creating a nurturing environment which recognised and addressed the strains teachers experienced in a high-need school (by reducing their workload, offering time off, encouraging social time) while valuing their contribution to the school (through praise, cards, small presents, promotions), school leaders allowed teachers' intrinsic motivations to flourish.

Resilience and support from colleagues

Consistent with Clarà (2017) and Gu and Day (2013), participants in this research felt that resilience—or 'inner grit' (T-SCS) - was important in high-need school contexts, particularly during their first year in post. The teachers talked of the need to keep professional challenges in perspective, for example, 'When they're having a go at you, it's not you personally, it's things that are going on in their life that they just need to sound off on you' (T-CLP). For some, developing a 'thick skin' (T-SCS) helped, and focusing on what the pupils 'do, not what they think' (T-SCS). Some headteachers looked for resilience when recruiting staff; others described resilience as essential for retention: teachers needed 'to have an intrinsic resilience and desire to want to work in schools like this . . . and not feel defeated by the challenge, because the challenge is high' (H-S). Since resilience means adapting positively to challenge, it is not surprising that it is considered to be essential in a high-need school. The emphasis on understanding the pupils' backgrounds as a means of building resilience is, perhaps, more a feature of challenging schools than other types of school.

Teacher participants' resilience (an intrinsic motivator) was bolstered by the support of their colleagues (extrinsic). Collegial encouragement helped, in addition, to affirm the teachers' values, build their skills and encourage teachers' continued retention, for example, 'if you feel supported on a day-to-day, you feel you can put up with anything' (T-CLS); and having, 'on a day-to-day basis, people you trust, you can rely on, you like, makes it far easier to want to stay' (T-SCS). Some of those interviewed talked of professional support being particularly important in challenging school contexts:

I think because the type of school that it is and the hard days that you have, you create very deep and strong bonds with other members of staff . . . and it's the one thing that does make me fear going anywhere else (T-ICS).

While collegial support has been identified in the literature as important for retention (for example, Thomas et al., 2019), its impact in high-need schools seemed almost visceral. In two-thirds of the case-study schools, teachers described their relationship with colleagues as being like a family, for example, 'It's my extra family' (T-ICP); 'It's a work family' (T-SCS). Having trusted colleagues who would give support in difficult times made all the difference. These tight bonds reinforced teachers' resilience and made them want to stay, demonstrating again how an extrinsic motivator has a direct influence on intrinsic motivation.

Relationships with pupils and pupil behaviour

Whereas a key reason for teachers to leave challenging schools is pupil behaviour (Williams, 2018), our study found that for those who stay, a positive relationship with the children was an important intrinsic factor (consistent with Kelchtermans, 2017; Perrachione et al., 2008). As one headteacher suggested, 'it is a double-edged sword, because it's what makes the job the hardest, but it also is probably what makes it most rewarding' (H-CLP). All the teachers in the focus groups spoke warmly about their pupils, for example: 'They're demanding, challenging, they're hard work, but you see a light bulb moment, it is brilliant' (T-ICS).

Having good relationships with the pupils was seen as key – 'that's the only way that you will be successful' (T-CLS). For some, spending time as a form teacher contributed to building relationships and meant that secondary teachers starting with a Y7 (year seven—age 11) tutor group were more inclined to stay to see their class through the next five years. One teacher, for example, had decided not to go for a job interview because of 'my Year 10s, and they will be Year 11 next year, and I will have taught them every year since Year 7, and I was not actually, when push came to shove, willing to give them up' (T-SCS).

There was a consensus across the case-study schools that pupils could be very demanding, but pupil behaviour was not identified as a reason for teachers to leave. Behaviour management is part of the school system which represents an extrinsic motivator. Consistency of behaviour management was seen by the teachers and headteachers in this study to be crucial, and consistency is, of course, aided by staff retention. Interestingly, because pupil behaviour made life particularly difficult for new teachers, for some this was an inducement to stay: 'I've seen new staff start and I remember how bloody hard it is starting somewhere new, like it was hard here, and I think it's put me off starting somewhere new again' (T-SCS). The longer that teachers stayed in a school, the more they benefited from relationships not just with current students, but also with other members of the student's family whom they had taught: 'They do see children of children, families have come through and suchlike . . . our longest serving member is now doing grandchildren' (H-ICP). Enjoying working with children and young people and developing positive relationships with pupils create an intrinsic motivation to stay in post. Good relationships with the pupils were seen by some as essential to behaviour

management. In this way an intrinsic motivator (pupil relationships) prevents an extrinsic motivator (pupil behaviour) from driving teachers out.

Perceived professional mastery and professional development

In contrast to Chiong et al. (2017) and Firestone (2014), who argued that teacher competence or professional mastery was a key reason for teachers to remain in post, this was not mentioned by our participants. This may have been due to the nature of the group interviews, in which participants could have been reluctant to boast of their professional prowess in front of colleagues, but the teachers in every focus group talked instead about the difficulties they had experienced, for example, 'Teaching is the first thing that I have really failed at and failed at and failed at and failed at . . . that's broken me numerous times, but rather than making me want to quit it's made me want to kind of keep going with it' (T-CLS). The teachers recognised that, in challenging schools (even those deemed to be outstanding), all teachers have difficult days, for example, 'on the days when it's hard, don't think that you're the only one finding it hard' (T-SCP). What they thought was vital was to be able to share problems with trusted colleagues and leaders who would be able to offer support. The headteachers, too, acknowledged that 'It's going to be bumpy' (H-SCP) and everyone experienced difficulties: 'All of us have cried at some point' (H-CLP). In these challenging schools, a teacher's sense of professional efficacy could be regularly undermined by difficult pupils and needed to be bolstered by other adults. Contrary to Firestone (2014), experiencing problems at work was not immediately assumed to be due to a lack of skills or competence which could be remedied by training and development.

The focus group participants had had mixed experiences of continuing professional development (CPD): while some were positive about courses and coaching they had undertaken, others (particularly those in Multi-Academy Trusts) felt that training had been imposed on them and was not directly relevant to their work. CPD was considered to be available at every school so was not a reason for teachers to stay at their current school. The headteachers were committed to CPD to ensure that teachers were at the 'top of their game' (H-S), which was essential in a challenging school. Retention was seen as a useful by-product of CPD rather than the main reason for doing it.

Professional development is linked to another important strategy for retention at the case-study schools, 'growing your own': 'There are members of my leadership team now that started here as NQTs' (H-S). The headteachers identified a number of benefits of promoting their own staff to middle and senior leadership positions. One was that it ensured the retention of good staff, which was confirmed by one teacher: 'Every time I've thought about leaving I got promoted!' (T-CLS). Another was that the teachers knew the school already and vice versa, which led to greater consistency in culture and ethos. Growing your own teachers from teaching assistants (TAs), interns and even, at one secondary school, pupil alumni after they had graduated from university, helped to ensure a steady stream of newly qualified teachers already familiar with the school's pupil demographic, culture and ethos.

Professional development could be seen as a 'negative satisfier', the absence of which reduces motivation, in Nias' (Nias, 1981) terms, whereas its presence is not necessarily motivating. It was not always the answer to the difficulties experienced by these teachers in high-need schools (although of course, had the teacher participants lacked basic skills

effective CPD would probably have helped them). Their sense of professional efficacy seemed to depend on the recognition that there would be daily challenges but they could rise above them with the sympathy and support of their colleagues and leaders. Opportunities for career development appeared to be a more important motivation for some than CPD.

Autonomy and accountability

Teacher autonomy is seen as an important intrinsic motivator (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). Being able to make decisions about their teaching was highlighted by several teachers as a factor that encouraged them to stay in post: ‘you want to have your own autonomy, you want to be able to put some of your own vision into different areas’ (T-SCP). One secondary school teacher said that autonomy was, ‘the most important thing’ (T-SCS). Two primary school teachers talked positively about the collaborative approaches of their leadership team, which led to a sense of teacher ownership and autonomy (T-ICP; T-SCP). Yet the pressure in high-need schools to achieve results can mean a more target-driven approach and a reduction in autonomy in terms of teachers making their own decisions about what and how to teach. For example, one teacher described ‘schools who are struggling with their data’ as ‘very reactionary . . . on top of the teachers . . . got to do this, got to do this . . .’ (T-ICP) while another talked about a headteacher whose style was ‘very much to scrutinise and put pressure’ (T-SCP).

The flip side of the autonomy coin is accountability: the need to hold schools and teachers to account for pupil progress, through Ofsted inspections and national test results. Arguably, holding teachers accountable in a high-stakes, target-driven culture may diminish their sense of autonomy. Disadvantaged pupils are likely to perform less well in external assessments (Sharp et al., 2015) and schools with a higher proportion of pupils living in poor neighbourhoods are more likely to be ‘stuck’ below good Ofsted grades (Munoz-Chereau et al., 2022) so it might be expected that teachers in high-need schools would face stronger accountability measures. In our case-study schools, the difference between success and failure was described as a ‘knife-edge’ (H-S), with Ofsted creating an ‘enormous amount of pressure’ (H-CLP) on leaders and teachers. This appeared to be the case whichever Ofsted category the school was in. At an outstanding school, one teacher spoke about sleepless nights: ‘I’m accountable for the . . . results and sometimes that pressure keeps me awake at night’ (T-ICS). Some teacher respondents spoke about the way in which accountability undermined their enjoyment of work and autonomy through the stress of internal scrutiny and external judgements, for example, ‘I think the thing that makes me want to leave is the accountability’ (T-ICS).

Accountability was an extrinsic factor which seemed likely to undermine retention by causing teachers in this study stress and distress. For some, it led to activity for the sake of inspection, rather than because it was worthwhile (as one teacher put it, ‘who are you doing it for?’ (T-SCP)), and a sense of failure if targets—likely to be more challenging in high-need schools—were not met. It damaged teachers’ autonomy and increased their anxiety. As such, accountability seemed likely to undermine teachers’ intrinsic motivations and potentially lead to their departure from the school.

Conclusion

In previous research into intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for teacher retention (Chiong et al., 2017; Perrachione et al., 2008) these two motivational orientations have been viewed separately in order to determine whether intrinsic or extrinsic motivations are more likely to encourage teachers to stay in post. This study investigates in more detail the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations.

In the high-need schools we investigated, some intrinsic motivations (teacher values, enjoyment, relationships with pupils) offset potential negative extrinsic motivational factors (workload, pupil behaviour). The extrinsic motivations of school leadership and collegial relationships helped to support the intrinsic factors of recognition and resilience. On the other hand the extrinsic factor of accountability appeared to have a negative impact on teacher's autonomy (intrinsic).

In order to strengthen retention in these high-need schools, headteachers created a nurturing environment, acknowledging the pressures under which staff were working, and this allowed teachers' intrinsic motivation to flourish. By recognising their skills and hard work through rewards and promotions the leaders endorsed the teachers' values (affirming that they were making a difference) and validated their professional skills. They also helped to mitigate the extrinsic factors which might make teachers leave, such as workload and accountability.

Professional mastery did not arise as a key motivational factor: in challenging schools, even experienced teachers were, perhaps, too likely to suffer set-backs. Colleagues strengthened teachers' resilience and supported their development, thus also encouraging intrinsic motivation.

The nurturing environment needed to encourage retention does not fit existing concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; instead it supports the idea that pure versions of these motivations do not exist (Kunter & Holzberger, 2014). While Deci and Ryan's (Deci & Ryan, 2008) concept of autonomous motivation accounts for the way in which school values enhance teachers' own commitment to making a difference to society, it fails to take into account the nature of the support provided by leaders and colleagues and the importance of relationships (essentially extrinsic factors) in encouraging motivation.

In order to improve retention, drawing on our research findings and the need to enhance intrinsic motivation, we recommend that high-need school leaders develop a nurturing school, which:

- Aims to address social inequalities as part of its overall values, recruiting teachers who share that goal
- Provides non-judgemental support to effective staff who experience difficulties
- Recognises teachers' efforts through small 'thank you' gestures
- Fosters the relationship between pupils and teachers
- Encourages staff friendships through social activities as well as teamwork in school.

A small scale study such as this, while providing a rich picture of teachers' motivations to stay in post in challenging schools, cannot be generalised across all schools. Further research could include a large-scale survey to assess how far these findings extend to teachers in high-need schools nationally. In particular it would be useful to know what

headteachers regard as a 'good' level of turnover. Having an unchanging staff group for many years creates a danger of 'lock-in' of favoured ideas and stifles promotion opportunities, so some movement of staff may be seen as beneficial.

Most of the teacher participants in this study had chosen to work in disadvantaged areas; several had worked in more than one high-need school. It would be interesting to investigate the way in which teacher career paths operate in different types of school. Is there a particular career trajectory in high-need schools which supports teacher retention?

The only striking difference between the three regions we investigated was that the inner city schools in this study all had excellent teacher retention. The data we gathered did not provide a clear reason for this, apart from the strength of staff relationships (although there were also strong collegial relationships in other schools where retention was more of a problem). The inner city schools were in different Ofsted categories, were different sizes and had different levels of EAL. It would be useful to look more closely at high-need schools where there are very low levels of turnover to uncover what had helped retention.

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