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‘Should I stay or should I go?’

Resilience and retention of staff in schools – voices from four case studies in Cambridgeshire

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Abstract

This is a dual-purpose paper. It is both a work-in-progress report as well as the expansion of a presentation to be given at the forthcoming Kaleidoscope 2023 conference. It therefore addresses one of the Kaleidoscope 2023 themes, resilience in education. The paper uses qualitative data extracted from my ongoing PhD research project that investigates the relationship between the everyday lives of all school staff, their working conditions, and their wellbeing. The aim of that project is to see if there are policies and design interventions that might improve the working lives of all school workers. The introduction summarises the problem of recruitment and retention, both locally and globally. By reference to recent post-pandemic research and current (April 2023) industrial unrest it suggests the importance of continuing research in this area. The methodologies section details the theories underpinning the mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods that have been used in my PhD research and the way in which I have extracted the ‘voices’ that form the body of this paper. The results are selected quotations from the interviews conducted with 12 members of staff in the 4 schools that were studied. My discussion focusses on the interviewees’ feelings about themselves, and sheds light on sources of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The article concludes with ideas about what these voices tell us about resilience and suggests possible future work based on employee experience design.

Keywords: School staff, Recruitment, Retention, Resilience, Self-image, Employee experience

Introduction

My broad area of research interest is the design of schools and the organisations that they house. My PhD research focusses on the relationship between the everyday lives of all school staff (both teaching and support), their working conditions, and their wellbeing. This focus is based on earlier work by several researchers carried out over many years. I cite below examples of some of the most recent books and articles. The current state of knowledge is thus:

- There is a relationship between school staff working conditions and wellbeing (Ravalier et al., 2021; Sims & Jerrim, 2020).
- There is a relationship between staff wellbeing and pupil attainment. (Brooks, 2014; Glazzard, 2021).
- There are many factors that impact on school staff recruitment and retention (Passy & Ovenden-Hope, 2020; Zuccollo, 2021).

The hope is that my research will inform school improvement policies generally, and specifically as advocated by Kidger et al (2016, p.81) who concluded thus:

Future research should focus on ... the development of potential interventions that help alleviate the stress associated with teaching and that foster an environment that cultivates greater job satisfaction, and support within the workplace.

This paper uses a sub-category of data gathered from interviews with 12 members of 4 secondary school staffs in Cambridgeshire. The data was gathered in the immediate and somewhat unusual post-pandemic years of 2021-22. The 'voices' talk about how the staff view themselves and the way in which self-image contributes to resilience. The quotations also illustrate aspects of the everyday life of school staff that impact on career decisions. Two ideas underpin this paper, both supported by further work in my doctoral research. Firstly, given that some 50% of the adults in secondary schools in England are not teachers (Gov.uk, 2022), current official data is deficient in portraying the true nature of the recruitment and retention crisis. My work attempts to give equal weight to all school workers. Secondly, school staff can usefully be categorised into three groups who have significantly different experiences of school life:

- Classroom teachers – the adults who have daily contact with large groups of pupils.
- Administrative staff – the adults who have little or no direct contact with the pupils.
- Hybrid staff – the adults who have limited contact with pupils, generally in small groups or as individuals, and may also handle a significant level of administrative work

The scale of the recruitment and retention problem

The scale of the problem remains significant, both nationally and globally. A recent United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) publication, issued to celebrate World Teachers Day 2022, (UNESCO, 2022) quotes 2016 UNESCO data as projecting the need for an additional 68.8 million primary and secondary teachers to reach the goal of universal basic education by 2030. The 38 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries have similar problems, as indicated by this quote from a recent publication (OECD, 2020):

On average across OECD countries, 27% of students were enrolled in schools whose principal reported that learning is hindered by a lack of teaching staff, and 33% were enrolled in schools whose principal reported that learning is hindered by a lack of assisting staff.

The UK government carries out an annual School Workforce Survey, the latest being in November 2021 (Gov.uk, 2022). They also produce projections of pupil numbers (Gov.uk, 2022) but interestingly do not, at least publicly, relate the two sets of data. One must look to research organisations such as the Education Policy Institute (EPI) to bring the data together to produce conclusions thus (Sibieta, 2020, p.8):

Schools in England currently face profound recruitment and retention challenges. Overall recruitment targets in secondary schools have been persistently missed over time, and by even more so in subjects such as maths and science. About 1 in 10 secondary school teachers leave the state-sector teaching profession each year. Much of these exit decisions happen early on in teachers' careers with only about 60 per cent of trainees remaining in a teaching post five years after their training, and only about 50 per cent in shortage subjects like maths and physics.

It is important to note that, although the OECD data makes mention of 'assisting staff', no equivalent data is gathered globally by UNESCO.

The effects of the problem

The effects on pupils' learning caused by both insufficient teachers, inadequately trained teachers, and high rates of teacher turnover have been thoroughly researched. In England, the key finding of a recent quantitative study by Gibbons, Scrutinio and Telhaj (2021) has shown 'that students in the final year of their compulsory secondary school score less well in their final assessments if they are exposed to higher rates of teacher entry in the subjects they are studying' (p.11). However, they also point out that 'The magnitudes are modest' when compared to the many other factors that impact on pupil attainment. Data on the effects of insufficient or high turnover support staff is less well researched, although Ronfeldt, Loeb and Wyckoff (2013) using slightly aged but substantial data from US sources, make some broad observations about the detrimental impacts of support staff turnover on school organisation and morale.

The reasons for the problem

The suggestion from UNESCO is that at a global level the shortage of teachers is caused by '*a lack of training, unattractive working conditions and inadequate funding*' (Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO's Director-General in UNESCO, 2022). In the UK the current (April 2023) wave of strikes by teachers accords in some respects with the global picture. A recent newspaper explaining the reasons for striking (Guardian, 20th January, 2023) was headlined '*While all are dedicated to teaching, exhaustion, falling real-terms pay and a sense of social crisis have pushed them to act*' (Skopeliti & Otte, 2023). Following the Covid pandemic, the problem is also that there are many better paid and less stressful jobs on the market (Davis, 2023). It would seem that working in schools is becoming an increasingly unattractive career choice.

Method

Conceptual framework(s) for data collection and analysis

Of the many theories, frameworks and typologies that have been proposed in this area of education research, four sets of ideas have influenced how I have gathered and analysed the data reported on in this paper.

Theories about experience

Dewey (1934) held that '*experience*' and '*an experience*' are two different things, and indeed they are. However, as my interviews demonstrated, in the life of a school worker the two co-exist. There is both '*the prosaic everyday life kind of experience*' (Al-Azzawi, 2014), humdrum and mundane, and the rich sequence of events and activities, bounded in time and space, such as a conversation with a pupil, or teaching a lesson. In schoolwork, experience can be thought of as a continuum of individual experiences.

More helpful in formulating my interview questions and structuring my results are ideas emerging from the user experience (UX) literature of human/computer interface design (HCI). These designers are interested, as I am, in the *quality* of experience. Paraphrasing Alben (1996) (as quoted in Al-Azzawi, 2014), I would define school experience as all the ways the staff use the school: the way it feels to them, how well they understand how it works, how they feel about it when they are using it, how well it serves their purposes. My wide range of survey methods is a response to this idea.

Theories about the everyday

I have taken inspiration from the words of Henri Lefebvre in his essay *'The Everyday and Everydayness'* (1987). Thus, *'The proposition here is to decode the modern world, that bloody riddle, according to the everyday'* (p.9). Lefebvre goes further than simply aiming to *'decode'* by suggesting that through studying the everyday one might *'... reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary'* (p.9). Does this approach also have the potential for school improvement ideas, as suggested by Nathaniel Coleman? *'The everyday holds out the promise of an in-depth understanding of the present while also being the source of its radical re-invention'* (2014, p.36).

Theories about careers

I have loosely used both Lynn's ideas about career 'cycles' (2002) and Huberman's ideas about career 'stages' (1993) in selecting my interviewees and guiding my interview questions. I say loosely because neither Lunn's cycles (pre-service, induction, competency building, enthusiasm and growth, career frustration, career stability, career wind-down, career exit) nor Huberman's stages (beginning years 1-3, early mid years 4-6, late mid years 7-18, and late career 19+ years) fit with the rather more iterative sequence that I have noted in my participants.

Theories of social practice

I have drawn on the work of Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012 (their book's subheading *'Everyday Life and How It Changes'* explains my interest) overlain with recent reading about cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), as summarised in the web site of the Centre for Research on Activity, Development and Learning at the University of Helsinki (CRADLE, 2023). These ideas led to the three-fold structure in my coding of Activities (what staff do), Objects (what staff use), and Meanings (what staff feel and think).

Research design

My doctoral research adopted a mixed-methods approach to four linked case studies of state secondary schools in Cambridgeshire. The main research methods used were visual methodologies (studies of interior photographs and architectural plans of the schools) as advocated by Rose, (2012), on-line surveys of all staff (designed and administered using Qualtrics), on-site time-lapse observations as advocated by Gehl & Svarre, (2013), data gathering from web-based sources (government and multi-academy trust data), and semi-structured face-to-face interviewing with three staff members from each school, conducted using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach as advocated by Smith et al., (2009). Data was analysed and visualised using Qualtrics, NVivo and Excel.

Participants

The 4 case study schools were selected following a web-based scoping survey of the 34 state secondary schools in Cambridgeshire, and on-site visits to 15 of the schools. The 4 schools selected for the case studies were chosen as likely to produce a range of employee experiences, each school representing a different school size,

Ofsted rating, and catchment area. The 12 interviewees were selected from respondents to the on-line survey, again to represent a range of experiences, with the main variables being roles within the school (teaching, administration, and hybrid), a range of ages and career stages, and a balance of female (F) and male (M) staff.

Table 1

The key characteristics of the staff in the interview sample.

	Administration	Hybrid	Teacher
Early career	PA to head (F)	-	PE teacher (M) Physics teacher (M)
Mid career	Data manager (M)	-	English teacher (F)
Late career	-	SENCO (F) Careers Coordinator (F) Librarian (F)	Business studies teacher, and HoD (M) Science teacher, and SMT (M) DT teacher (F) Humanities teacher (F)

Abbreviations: PA=personal assistant; SENCO=special educational needs co-ordinator; PE=physical education; HoD=head of department; SMT=senior management team; DT=design technology.

Interviews

The face-to-face interviews were conducted using protocols adapted from Smith, Flowers and Larkins' writings on IPA (page 60, Box 4.1, '*Some kinds of questions ...*'). Each interviewee chose the location for their interview, which thus took place either in their office or in their classroom – wherever they were most comfortable. An identical brief was read to each participant:

'I want to find out, in as much detail as you're happy to give me, about what your work life is like here at [school] – what is the experience like for you. I have a few topics that I want to touch on but you are the expert in your life so it will be for you to take the conversation wherever you want'.

The interview was loosely structured into three parts:

1. Context and background – talking about the participant's background and what stage they were at in their career.
2. Establishing their 'lived experience – talking about their experiences at work, how they felt about their work, and how they related to the idea of wellbeing at work.
3. Views on specific facilities and benefits – talking about their use of, and views on, specific welfare facilities and benefits, as well as gathering their ideas for future interventions.

I already had a certain amount of information about each participant from their answers to the on-line survey, in particular their scores in the wellbeing survey that had formed part of the survey. The interviews were recorded on a small digital recorder, transcribed, and corrected using Otter, saved, and reformatted as Word documents, and finally imported into NVivo for coding.

Analysis

Each transcript was read through twice to gain a general understanding of the participants' answers. This first read-through also confirmed the relevance of the categories of experience that I was proposing to use in coding, as discussed in 2.1.4 above. Thus, the first pass of coding of the interview transcripts used the three 'parent' codes of Objects, Activities, and Meanings, together with a small number of 'child' codes derived from the initial read-through. During that first pass, additional 'child' codes were added as new topics emerged from the transcripts. A second pass of coding was then carried out, adding in the two 'parents' of Wellbeing and Change, as neither was adequately identified in the three initial 'parents'. Several additional 'child' codes were also added to reference further fine detail. Wellbeing was added as a 'parent' code to record specific mentions of their school's wellbeing management policies, the participant's ideas for wellbeing improvement, and the issue of pay. Change was added as a 'parent' code as it was felt important in the post-pandemic year to identify changes resulting specifically from the pandemic. For the purposes of this paper, a third pass was carried out manually on a printout to extract references that might give a clue to the staffs' feelings and experiences of recruitment, retention, and turnover.

3 Results

Data relating to recruitment, retention and turnover emerged almost entirely in the 'parent' code of Meaning. The interviewees talked about why they had taken up careers in school (whether as teachers or support workers), the experiences that were keeping them in schoolwork, and why they might be thinking of leaving.

Table 2

The frequency of 'child' references within the 'meanings' parent.

Codes (all are 'child' codes except for Meanings)	Coding rubric	Total number of references	Frequency of child to parent references
MEANINGS (parent code)	The intangible elements of everyday life - feelings, relationships, opinions, and images (including self-image)	614	
self-image	Statements about how the interviewees see themselves. Their assessment of their own personalities, abilities, and skills	166	1 in 3.7 references were about self-image
staff relationships	Feelings about relationships with other members of staff, including opinions about the staff and leadership in the school	112	1 in 5.5
bad feelings	Statements about feeling unhappy, stressed etc.	109	1 in 5.5
good feelings	Statements about feeling good, happy, relaxed etc.	86	1 in 7.1
pupil relationships	Feelings and observations about relationships with pupils	57	1 in 11.1

Reasons for taking up schoolwork

Some interviewees had always thought of themselves as teachers and had always seen themselves working in schools. One could hardly say it was a career choice for them. It was a lifelong ambition; it was who they are. Thus:

I always wanted to be a teacher; but life got in the way. So I went back to school after I'd had my children. (late-career teacher)

..it comes naturally to me... it's one of those things, you know. I walk in, you know, because some people will walk in and say it's a scary place and, and yet it feels like a home to me. So it's yeah, it's funny isn't it. (late-career hybrid)

I always wanted to be a PE teacher. (early-career teacher)

I've always been in education. I've been in education in many countries. And I've been in all different branches of education. So I've done education, like here in this school, but I've also been an educator for mentally disabled adults, for children with mental difficulties as well. (late-career hybrid)

For others it was a completely different feeling, often almost a reluctant choice that they had to be persuaded to consider. They'd never seriously thought of working in a school because their self-image at the time didn't fit with what they felt and thought about themselves and school.

[A friend said, I think you'd be a good teacher]. I said, you have got to be joking. Look, I know what I was like to my teachers, there's no way I would want to put my head in the firing line like that' (late-career teacher)

But teaching as a profession was always something I'd discounted because I didn't think I had the patience; did that [temporary teaching] job, realised that actually, I did, rethought things and, yeah, been teaching ever since. (late-career teacher)

Finally, there are the specific attractions of working in a school, particularly for staff who have previously worked in a commercial environment.

I knew at that point that I wanted a bit more structure in my life. So I was looking for a Monday to Friday position. Well, I mean, I think education is a nice environment. You know, you're here to support, although I don't see the students very often. We're all kind of cogs in a much bigger machine. So it is nice that what you're doing is, you know, for the benefit of the students. Yeah, it's a nice environment. (early-career admin)

A job has to have meaning for me. And when I, you know, in the corporate environment, you're really just a cog in the wheel. And it gets to the point where you sort of think, what am I doing? And there isn't often a lot of meaning in that. And so I just thought, you know, for me, the only job that has meaning is teaching. (mid-career teacher)

I'm a people person, I like to talk, and people didn't want to talk in there [a previous job], you know, you could go a whole afternoon, and nobody would say anything [or even] lift their head up. (late-career teacher)

Reasons for staying in schoolwork – administration and hybrid staff

I have separated out these responses from those of the teachers as they seem to have rather different reasons for staying in school.

I take pride in my job. And what I do is, you know, I really like it when students come in, and you know, when they're successful, and they want to share that with you, and it's, and it's quite rewarding. (late-career hybrid)

I like children, and I like the teenagers, so when they're kicking off, and when they're having a play. Yeah. In fact, sometimes I get in the car and I leave the school. And I feel bereft. Yeah. Not I mean, it goes, doesn't last very long. But there's that feeling that somehow I've left them. (late-career hybrid)

I mean, I, you know, if I have to produce a spreadsheet for SLT, I want to do a good job, right. And I want it to look nice. I want it to show all the right numbers, but I'm very conscious that there's such, to me, maybe not to everybody, but I think to most people, there's such a difference between producing a nice spreadsheet for ourselves, and making sure that a child who is entitled to free food in the holidays, gets it. (mid-career admin)

I think I thrive in those [busy] situations. I quite enjoy being busy. It makes the day go quicker. (early-career admin)

Reasons for staying in schoolwork – teachers

The teachers' satisfaction comes in large part from the pleasure of teaching and the achievements of their pupils. Seeing pupils progress appeared to be the main reason for staying in teaching. Interestingly, it was the source of some envy on the part of the administrative staff who felt that the teachers had far more visible indicators of their success than they did.

And I really enjoyed the classroom interaction, the light coming on, the kids understanding it. And to me, the teaching took place when they said, I don't understand what you've just said. And that to me was when teaching took over, because you then had to think of another way to explain it. And because of my background, I was able to use life experiences. That worked quite well. (late-career teacher)

But you give me students, for example, like my BTech students who are coming in with a C grade at GCSE and I throw them out with a B grade equivalent, or even an A grade equivalent, a few of them. That to me is the reward and seeing them blossom ... (late-career teacher)

As well as the satisfaction from teaching, a high level of satisfaction appeared to derive from the teachers' pastoral role, particularly conversations with the children.

[DB - But then you'd be a grandpa figure?]. Yeah, absolutely. And that's something that I've found over the years is that kids are happy to talk to me, whereas maybe a younger member of staff, they're not. (late-career teacher)

I'm a very mumsy figure apparently, so, [laughs] And I can't get rid of the kids. They talk to me forever and outside of school and inside of school, so that's nice. Sometimes I feel like the pied piper. But it works for me, I will listen, they will listen, I'm a bit more grounded than some teachers, because I've done more than teach. (late-career teacher)

... if I go there [my classroom] in the morning, there are students who will find me. And I have students that come in at tea break. And I have students that will come in at lunch. And I have students that will come in at three o'clock. So a lot of that is my own fault a lot of kids will say Miss I need to come to talk to you ... (mid-career teacher)

Strategies that allow the staff to cope with working in a school

Although in the examples below I have separated the support staff from the teaching staff, there appears to be little difference in terms of their psychology between the staff that teach and the staff that support. I have highlighted those phrases that particularly refer to self-image as these seem to reveal the source of the person's resilience and gives a clue to how they stay in schoolwork. These self-image phrases generally start with 'I am ...'.

But I think I am, I, I think I'm sufficiently self, whatever, self aware or self motivated in some respects. Mostly I will feel, you know, when I walk out of here, I can leave the place behind. (mid-career admin)

Yeah, I have a good outlook on life, I'd say.... But, yeah, you just, I think you just have to work around it, I'd say, yeah. Like I say, just keep keep your positive outlook on, where you possibly can. And just do what you can at the end of the day. (early-career admin)

... I mean, luckily, I'm, whether it's to do with the fact that I'm an old boot, and I've been around the block, Or, or just my generation and you know, our generation just, it's very much just suck it up and get on with it. D'you know what I mean? Which is not particularly healthy. But I think that's what we were brought up on. We, we do it in our daily life. (late-career hybrid)

But there again, I see those [problems] as opportunities. That's the key thing from it. I am a glass half full person. ... people say to me, Oh, how did you get on here? How are you dealing with, dealing with five part timers [in his department] and everything else? I said, Well it's a challenge, isn't it? It's an opportunity. (late-career teacher)

Most of the time it's get through one day and start thinking about the next. So I don't tend to, don't tend to think too much about the successes. Things that go wrong, or major issues, obviously reflect on and either put right because then they're immediately fixed or logged down for next time we run this, we're not doing it that way. (late-career teacher, also a member of SMT)

I work Sunday nights, that's normal but I've never had those sort of Sunday night dread going back to work, or even going back to work after the holiday. My wife gets it. [DB - What does she teach?] She is a Media and Film Studies teacher. So yeah, she gets it. I've never had it. I have a brief sort of, especially in the holidays. That was nice, right then, get on with it. But aside from that, yeah, no, I don't get the dread. Thankfully. (late-career teacher)

I'm incredibly adaptable. I mean the fact I've taught in so many different schools, I think actually gives me a whole set of skills. I adapt to new systems very, very fast. I'm just, Okay, this is what, what you want us to do in this way. And I'll just go with it. (late-career teacher)

I'm one of these people, I don't like to drag things out. If it goes wrong, it goes wrong. We'll try and salvage next lesson, different thing, different thing. Same with the kids if they prat around, play up. Okay, fine. We'll come back and start again. (late-career teacher)

Reasons for thinking of leaving schoolwork

Participants were invited to talk about what made a good day and what made a bad day. This often led to them talking about the things that made them unhappy with their work lives.

And I quite care about my job and about how it's done and the impact it has. And it's become so big now that I don't think it is possible anymore. And I have mentioned this to management and to my manager, line manager, several times. But I am, I've come to the point when I see I'm going to have to leave because the job is too big to be done properly. I want to do my job properly. ... I am now at the end of my tether. I've told them for the last year that I was at the end of my tether. I've told them for the last years that my workload is not manageable. I've told them that I arrive at

7:30. I'm not supposed to be here until eight. But I'm here at 7:30. And very often, I'd leave at five or 6pm. ... And I'm supposed to finish at four. (late-career hybrid)

Another later career member of hybrid staff, but this time the manager of the student support department. In the interview she referred particularly to the fact that her department was now providing support to whole families because of the lack of support from the local authority's social services department.

So where am I? I'm finding I'm becoming more cynical. And I also feel like I'm standing on a rock that is being eroded very, very quickly, far more in the fact that we have to spend an awful lot of our time delivering services ... (late-career hybrid)

A mid-career member of the administrative staff, with experience of working in other sectors, made a more general comment.

I'd love the HR culture here to be more about looking after people ... I don't mean that in a horrendously critical way, but there are failures of leadership. Failures is too strong a word, shortcomings. Leadership is here I never see anything below average. I just want it to be better than average. Because everybody makes mistakes and running a school is really, really, really hard. (mid-career admin)

For a mid-career teacher the feelings were about the impact on their life outside of school.

And so I'm a total waste of space on Friday night. Yeah. Saturday. I don't want to go anywhere. I don't want to do anything. And I've generally got marking to do. Yeah. So that's my Saturday. And so, and then Sunday is doing the shopping and cooking for the kids and whatever the case is, and all that type of thing. So that's the, the work life balance is particularly difficult. (mid-career teacher)

Turnover and the quality of colleagues can also make for dissatisfaction.

Yeah. We've had a bad run of [subject] teachers come through here. Haven't been great. And that hasn't made the department work well. It makes it very, it's made the progression and the fun go out of it, which is one of the reasons why I was thinking about retiring earlier than I was going to because if I don't enjoy it, they're not gonna enjoy it, because it's very obvious when I'm not happy. (late-career teacher)

New management initiatives can have a wearying effect on late career teachers, and in some respects are an effect of turnover and churn. One late career teacher talked of how they experienced new management:

I don't know whether it's cynicism. It is weariness, because you just tend to think well, please stick with one because we know this works. It's worked before. Just because you're new, it's not new to a lot of us. A lot of common sense goes out the window sometimes I think, when they're talking about how children learn and what we should do and what's the new flavour of the month to teach them. (late-career teacher)

One late career teacher recalled a past redundancy and how badly it was handled. Perhaps a downbeat quotation to end on.

That was it. No thanks for your 24 years of service and all you've done and the things you've started and the Saturdays you worked and everything else. And I closed the door (late-career teacher)

4 Discussion

Given an open invitation to talk about *'what your worklife is like here – what is the experience like for you'*, interviewees talked about themselves in ways that were both frank and self-aware. Assurances of complete anonymity clearly helped. Asking them to describe a good day and a bad day was also effective in encouraging reflections about their everyday lives.

The importance of self-image

Perhaps the most interesting insight emerging from the interviews was the importance of the interviewee's self-image in guiding their career decisions and establishing their resilience. By self-image I mean how they talked about, thought about and visualised themselves. Phrases that began with 'I am ...' were particularly telling. That is not to say that other feelings weren't also important, and the relative frequency with which these other feelings were mentioned is illustrated in Table 2 above.

Resilience, particularly amongst the mid and late career staff, seemed to stem from phrases such as 'I'm an old boot', 'I am a glass half full person', 'I'm incredibly adaptable'. Self-image descriptions such as 'I'm a very mumsy figure apparently', 'Sometimes I feel like the pied piper' and 'I am the one-eyed man in the kingdom of the blind' were particularly evocative. It is these comments that lead me to think that it is their self-awareness and their self-image, their strong sense of self, that helps them cope with the stresses and strains of working in a school.

This idea resonates with a quote from Huberman summarising Gould (Gould, 1978). *'...this mysterious, indelible 'me' becomes the core around which we construct the rest of our lives'* (1993, p.16).

The three communities

One of the ideas on which my work is based is that the school workforce is made up of three quite distinct adult communities - the teachers, the administrators, and the hybrids. My results support that idea.

That is not to say that there aren't similarities between the groups. For all of them, the idea that they are helping children is important. Their work is meaningful because of that. Similarly, their resilience and the reason they have been able to survive and thrive in school work is their positive and strong self-image – as one hybrid put it, 'I'm a tough old boot'. I think they all thought of themselves to a lesser or greater degree as tough old boots.

Sources of job satisfaction

Job satisfaction was experienced and spoken about in different ways amongst the three groups. They appear to derive different kinds of pleasure from working in school. For teachers, it appears that the relationships with the pupils gives them the greatest satisfaction, both in their teaching and their pastoral roles, particularly engaging in conversations with the children. I would venture to suggest that their everyday experiences with the pupils, both in the classroom and outside of it, reinforces how they think about themselves and that fits with a self-image that gives them pleasure. For administrators it's about doing a good job within a meaningful setting, but one that does not dominate their lives to the same extent as the teachers. The hybrids are a more complicated group, in some respects almost unrecognised as a distinct group. Many have been classroom teachers but have stepped back from those pressures to take on more specialised roles with smaller groups of children, sometimes with individuals, and sometimes with their parents as well. Their roles can also involve a significant amount of paperwork and administration. Thus, the 'voices' would suggest that satisfaction can derive from both, or either, area of their work, either from child-focussed tasks or administration tasks.

Sources of dissatisfaction

Talking about bad days brought out varying degrees of dissatisfaction, with some interviewees being mildly irritated to some feeling deeply angry. Many of these feeling related to some aspect of how they were managed rather than challenges resulting from the pupils or the facilities. This was a surprise given the oft-quoted problems about behaviour management or the poor standard of school buildings.

The unhappy feelings of the teachers, the hybrids and the administrative staff were different in a number of significant ways. For the administrative staff and the hybrids, the dissatisfaction was largely about how they were managed, although work pressure also figured heavily. For the teachers, dissatisfaction centred far more on the pressure of the work and their work/life balance, although poor management also accounted for several negative comments. Unhappiness centred on the hours they were having to put in, and it was that factor that was being experienced as extreme pressure. High turnover of colleagues and the quality of those new or temporary colleagues can also make for dissatisfaction. New management initiatives can have a wearying effect, particularly on late career teachers, and is a further unfortunate side effects of high turnover.

Conclusion and further work

An individual's decision 'to stay or to go' is clearly multi-factorial, although it is important to distinguish between moving school and leaving schoolwork altogether. What the 'voices' here have suggested is that a school move, whether as teacher, hybrid, or admin, is generally taken for primarily practical reasons – better location, better pay, better working conditions and so on. One suspects that these may also be factors in decisions to leave schooling altogether. However, the decision to stay in schoolwork, (which is all my data can report on - after all, I was not interviewing those who have left teaching) seems to be to do with their view of themselves. They have a self-image as resilient individuals who can cope with the stresses and strains of life in school, and who find meaning in working with children. This is important for retention strategies, suggesting that both initial teaching training and in-school training should seek to recognise and reinforce such an image.

Of the theories that I have explored both in this paper and in my larger study, it is the approaches of Employee Experience Designers, touched upon in 2.1.1 above, that I feel will be worth taking further in my search for potential interventions. Their commitment to 'deeply understand people and their needs', and to 'embrace expansive and holistic thinking' (Plaskoff, 2017) seems to me to be wholly appropriate. Some of their specific techniques such as the development of personas, based on the typology explored in this paper, could be a starting point, and would build on the work already undertaken by Tran and Smith (2020; 2021). With backgrounds in HR, these education academics have recently reported both in published papers and via video (2022) on the application of EEX in hard-to staff schools and as a way of improving teacher-school relations. The redesign of key moments ('touch points' in EEX jargon) in school staffs' worklife might, in combination with other improvements to working conditions, lead ultimately to what could be truly described as 'staff-friendly' schools.

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