# Sustainable School Leadership

## Series 1 - Episode 4

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**
Sustainable school leadership, child poverty, workforce data, locality case studies, vexatious complaints, racism, transphobia, online issues, austerity, mental health, budget cuts, accountability, recruitment challenges, diversity, flexible working.

**SPEAKERS**
Mike Collins, Alison Mitchell, Mary Bousted, James Bowen, Toby Greany

**Mike Collins** 00:04
Hello and welcome to the Sustainable School Leadership podcast from the universities of Nottingham and Warwick and Research Podcasts. I'm Dr Mike Collins, and in this series, we explore what it means to lead schools in the UK today, as demands and pressures on schools are shifting and at a time when the needs of children and young people are rising. This series of podcasts bring together researchers, policymakers and school leaders from across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, to reflect on the findings of a three-year study into the sustainability of school leadership. This was a big study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and had three main strands. We looked at workforce data in all three countries, we did a survey with over 1600 respondents, and we did seven locality case studies talking to over 130 leaders. In this episode, we'll be unpacking what can be done to make school leadership more sustainable. Myself and professor Toby Greany are here from the research team. Our guests are Baroness Mary Bousted, currently chair of the teaching commission and also formerly joint General Secretary of the National Education Union.

**Mary Bousted** 01:17
For other people, it's a number but the reality of child poverty isn't something that leaders and teachers and support staff can escape. That is, in itself, a massive pressure on you. It's a daily distress.

**Mike Collins** 01:27
James Bowen, Assistant General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers and a former primary Head Teacher.

**James Bowen** 01:34

What we've seen is an increase in sort of vexatious complaints, or people using the complaint system to settle scores against school leaders and with obviously, the birth of AI and the ability to send off 24 page complaints full of legal references. That's got worse, and that's a huge pressure.

**Mike Collins** 01:49
Alison Mitchell, Professional Learning and Policy Officer for School Leaders Scotland, and a former secondary Head Teacher.

**Alison Mitchell** 01:55
We're seeing an increase in racism, transphobia, misogyny and online issues, and they're kind of embedded in the daily work of school leaders.

**Mike Collins** 02:06
Perhaps we could start with you, Mary, to what extent do you recognise the picture that the research is painting of school leadership?

**Mary Bousted** 02:13
Yeah, I think there are clear parallels, the fact that austerity deprived local authorities. I mean, the central government grant fell, it was cut by 40% to local authorities, and that resulted in the complete shoring away of the support that schools used to be able to get, and you can particularly see that in terms of what happened to CAMHS and the never-ending waiting lists for children and young people with mental health problems. But you can also see that in all the support services that local authorities used to provide to schools or the professional personnel, speech and language therapists, family liaison officers, attendance officers, you know, just the whole range of support was gone. And that was compounded by a massive rise in child poverty during that period. We know that 40% of the attainment gap is created before children start school, and the key reason for that gap is poverty, and that's where you see that explosion of schools running breakfast clubs and running food banks, and doing everything they could to try and alleviate the pressures of poverty from parents and children, and that was a huge extra pressure, which actually was never acknowledged. And at the same time that was happening, real budgets in schools were cut. So, you're trying to do more where you've got less to spend on the actual essentials of schooling, on teachers and on the curriculum and on, you know, school buildings, and you've got leaders trying to manage all of that and then trying to deal with the everyday need which they can't escape. And I think one of the things that politicians and people who have never taught and never led schools forget is that the reality of child poverty isn't something that leaders and teachers and support staff can escape. For other people, it's a number, or they see the figures rising, or they see the number of children who are homeless, or they see the number of children who are coming to school hungry. And you know, they can theoretically think that's terrible. Oh, what's a terrible thing,

but if you're working in a school at whatever position and you see that, then that is, in itself, a massive, massive pressure on you. It's a daily distress to see that. And I think it's interesting that schools with the most deprived pupil intake see the fastest turnover of leaders and teachers, and I think a lot of that is to do with the accountability regime but am awful lot also to do with the daily distress of what they have to deal with.

**Mike Collins** 04:52
Well, thanks for that response, Mary, that's going to give us lots to get our teeth into as we continue talking. James, what does it look like from your point of view in a Leadership Association In England at the moment.

**James Bowen** 05:01
So, I think of there being almost sort of three levels to this. I think firstly, you've got a range of factors that have been present for some time, frankly, probably for many decades, that have always made school leadership a challenging role, the kind of normal pressures you would have in any leadership role, staffing pressures, managing staff, all of that, and also within that, I would add sort of budgetary pressures. I think they've probably become more acute in recent years, but even when I was leading a school almost 10 years ago now, you know, making the numbers add up has always been a challenge, and that kind of pressure on leaders to make the budget work and deliver for pupils has always been there. So, there's that kind of first layer, I think, of these kinds of ongoing challenges that will always be there, probably in school leadership. But then I think the second layer, I think what you've then got is a confluence of factors that have got worse post covid. And I think the research speaks to that really well, where school leaders are talking about that hinge point, things, things changing somewhat around the kind of covid period. One of those is what Mary has just spoken about, the fact that leaders are increasingly having to step in where other services have been stripped back due to austerity. And I think in the research, we talk about leaders taking on this kind of caring role. So suddenly leaders are effectively now social workers, because you make a referral to social care and there's no one there, or the bar to access it is so high that you can't get that support. Who deals with it, there's nobody else, other than the schools, and that there's a huge pressure on school leaders, and it takes a huge personal toll. The kind of things you are dealing with in that space are emotionally draining and really difficult. And I think that's something that certainly got worse, also within that. And again, this comes through the research is the rise in parental complaints, and sadly, the weaponisation of the complaints process. Of course, there are always legitimate complaints, but what we've seen at NHT, I think, in recent years, is an increase in sort of vexatious complaints, or people using the complaint system to settle scores against school leaders. So, a common one we get is school leaders made a referral to social care, and parents use complaints process to get back at them. And with, obviously, the birth of AI and the ability to send off 24-page complaints full of legal references, that's got worse, and that's a huge pressure. And then I think that also

speaks to the third part of that, which is probably best described, societal fracture, and the challenges we're seeing around sort of social cohesion in some parts of the country. All of those things land on a school leader's door. And then very quickly, the third layer, if you like, for me, is the immediate here and now in England. So, you've got this range of factors that school leaders are dealing with, but we also, as we sit here today, you've got school leaders thinking about a white paper which is likely to contain pretty significant send reform, which can have a real impact on the leadership of their school. They've got a new curriculum they've got to think about designing and implementing, which is no small feat. You've got government talking about schools suddenly being responsible and accountable for enrichment. So, I think there's the things that are just on the horizon as well. So, I think you've put all those factors together, and I think they all sort of paint a picture of a job which is highly stressful and highly pressured at the moment.

**Mike Collins** 08:18
Thanks, James and so Alison, it'd be great to get your perspective, perhaps, if you recognize some of those things. But also, how does that look in Scotland?

**Alison Mitchell** 08:25
Great, no thank you. I very much recognise the key themes in the research in relation to the Scottish context. And I would talk about the narrative around school leadership is not positive, and you see those that might aspire to school leadership, seeing what head teachers are dealing with on a day-to-day basis. There's been a real intensification, as colleagues spoke about of the leadership role, schools now held responsible for many aspects which wouldn't have been the remit of the education leader or school in areas such as reducing poverty, student and community welfare, mental health, attendance and the real challenges that we're seeing of global instability, complex challenges that are surfacing in school communities across Scotland. We're seeing an increase in racism, transphobia, misogyny and kind of online issues, and they're kind of embedded in the daily work of school leaders and others in their communities, and the others will look to school leaders to have solutions for these problems. And what our leaders are telling us is that support nationally, government guidance isn't helpful. For example, guidance around education about transgender young people, it talks to schools mainly about making the decision about what is age appropriate, which is unhelpful, and it's very much left to the schools to have these local solutions. So, the narrative isn't attractive. The global, the recruitment and retention challenges that you talk about, that paradox of thinking and thriving that you cover in detail in your report, is evident. And our concern in Scotland is that those who might aspire to senior leadership are witnessing the emotional labour of head teachers, the burnout and in terms of sustainability, this is impacting both the supply of future heads but also the sustenance of the present head teachers and the needs that we have of school leaders in Scotland.

**Mike Collins** 10:20
Okay, thanks, Alison. And actually, you've begun to raise a few issues around the next theme that we wanted to talk about, which was around how the different UK nations are identifying and recruiting, perhaps particularly relevant to the issues you just raised preparing people for headship and supporting them when they're in it. Toby, could you just give us a flavour of what's in the research about that?

**Toby Greany** 10:40
Yes, sure. The first thing I'd say is, we've talked so far about the pressures on leaders and how the context of leadership in schools has shifted over the last 10-15, years, and how difficult that is, and I mentioned, you know, the proportions that are sinking. There's lots in the research as well about thriving, and what does it look like when leaders are thriving, and extent to which being with children, seeing children grow and develop, making a difference, working with colleagues, having a strong team, all of these factors are kind of really strongly associated with leaders being fulfilled by their roles and feeling valued in their roles. So, I think there's lots we can talk about, how do we help people to thrive? When we turn to kind of developing leaders and so on. We have different models, Scotland, for example, has a mandatory pre headship qualification into headship, which is run by the universities. In England, we have a non-mandatory program, the national professional qualification for headship, much more content heavy and quite technical. Northern Ireland hasn't really had a program for 10 years or so. So, there's these interesting differences in both how leaders are developed and supported, the nature of that support, if you like. What struck us across all three nations was that serving heads would say, yes, the development was helpful, but nothing really prepares you for the realities of headship. However, within that, there's this interesting difference between the end of the spectrum, I would say, between the leaders who've kind of crashed through and tried to get into headship as quickly as possible, or possibly, you've got there by accident. There's a high proportion who actually say, I never really intended to become a head it just happened. Because perhaps, you know, they were the deputy head and the head went off sick or something. So that group who don't feel well prepared, versus a group who have taken time to curate their career to make sure that they've got the breadth of experience, teaching and learning, pastoral behaviour, inclusion, and so that by the time they apply, they feel that you know that they're a credible candidate. So, I think there's an interesting question about kind of could we do more to help people to develop that breadth of experience and to make sure that people are supported in role. Two other things I'd say about the findings, we went into the research thinking that we would see a real crisis and that schools wouldn't be able to recruit heads. Ultimately, we decided it's not acrisis, most schools are managing to recruit. There are some particular types of school and kind of areas that we worry about more, small rural schools often difficult, sometimes high performing schools are difficult, sometimes faith schools, but it's not a crisis as such. But nevertheless, if we don't tackle some of these sustainability issues, it feels like it could become one. The other thing I want to pull out is about

diversity, we look at the workforce data across all three nations, and we see really clearly that the head teacher population in particular is not diverse, particularly in terms of ethnicity, it's not representative of the teaching workforce, let alone of the communities that schools are serving. In all of our many interviews, we felt nobody was really taking ownership of this. You know that diversity is and seems to be, an issue that no one really owns, and so we feel that there needs to be kind of action on that front right.

**Mike Collins** 13:44
Great, thanks Toby. And Alison, perhaps we could come back to you as you'd started referring a bit to the looming challenge of recruiting leaders, but I know you've got a lot of experience of developing leaders in Scotland, perhaps you can give us some idea of what you think works well there. But also, if there's anything in the research that particularly struck you or that was surprising,

**Alison Mitchell** 14:04
I love the four petals conceptual framework from the research, particularly when you look at designing headship programs, recognising the intersections between place and identity and ethics of care, that wholly resonated with leadership preparation in the Scottish context. I do think that leadership preparation has to recognise the deeply contextual nature of headship. It should be rooted in practice and responsive to the changing needs of the profession in the times that we are living in. It should also have a very much a theoretical approach to support leaders understanding of their identity and how that is shaped by context or influenced by the place and the circumstances in which they lead. The internship program kind of very much focuses on the intersection between research and practice, and I suppose what surprised me a little bit with the comments around the masters level component and the academic rigor of the internship program and the fact that that would deter applicants. I understand that, you know, the workload is significant, but responses, and I think you acknowledged in your report that at the end of the program, people did say that it had been worthwhile, but it's maybe something we need to look at in terms of what we are asking of deputes or senior leaders in school when they're doing a program and also doing full time senior leadership roles in their schools. The theory, I think, has been really important in the program, and what our students and graduates tell us is that that's what underpins the kind of credible and ethical responses to the challenges that they're facing in schools. Some of the challenges I spoke about that are surfacing in schools and communities. So, the program, for example, if you're looking at theories of ethical leadership, does justice trump care? What decisions do we make and who benefits? Who do our policies serve? If we explore all that in detail and relate it to the practice in schools of our participants, then they are going to be more confident and more courageous in terms of making decisions that are right for their community. If you look at critical race theory and the significant rise of some of the racist incidents in Scotland, if we don't understand, if school leaders don't understand how power and oppression works, how racism is embedded and

reinforced in our policy and systems, and I'm talking about the education system in Scotland, one that I went through, I think we're in danger of stigmatising individuals and communities for acting in extreme ways, or privilege some knowledge and experience over others. So, I think that real understanding of theories how power, how oppression works, but also looking at how that plays out within school communities and in schools, can really support school leaders to kind of act in ways that are ethical and to be confident and courageous in doing that. And I think we also, you know, in terms of preparation, we have to fully prepare people for the kind of not just the ethical implications of the role, you know, you're responsible for children and young people's lives, but also, we are responsible for staff and their careers. And if you want a thriving school, then we need to look after the staff, but we also need to look after the head teachers, so their own well being, I think, and their understanding of self, how they approach work, how they take care of themselves, is a vital component.

**Mike Collins** 17:21
Great, there's a lot there. And before you touched on the narrative around headship at the moment, and the fact that perhaps that meant that some people were not aspiring to headship because of the slightly negative tone around it, we've spoken already of the pressures. And James, I was wondering if from your perspective, if you've got any ideas or any reflections on that, from your experience with heads and people aspiring to headship, and how that relates to the idea that, you know, perhaps we should worry for the future about enough people wanting to come through.

**James Bowen** 17:50
Sure, and I want to pick up on a couple of points that Toby made to answer that, if I may. So that point about in the research, there were some people who talked about thriving, and I don't want us to lose sight of that. There's a kind of a danger that this becomes a bit of a moan fest, and it would by me laying out all the challenges you think, why on earth would anybody even think about doing that job and and I don't want that to happen, because it is uniquely rewarding. Yeah, I've, I've never done another job that came close to being as rewarding as that kind of school leadership role. At the moment, there are so many of those factors we talked about, that seem to make it impossibly hard for some people. So, things about trying to remove those factors, because we can do all the best kind of courses in the world. We can do the best campaigns and the best PR, but they're not daft. They watch their head teacher, they look at the work they're doing, they look at the stress they're under, and they think, is that something I want to do, is that a risk I want to take? And only last week, I was speaking to a personal friend of mine who's a deputy head, and she said, I really want to be ahead, but I not sure I want to be ahead at the moment, looking at what my head does, and I think that's all we've got to kind of untangle. I think there are loads of people out there who, deep down, want to be heads, but the risks are too high, the workload being able to balance that with being a parent. So, I think we've got those are things we've got to tackle, all that kind of the

unnecessary workload. If we can tackle that, I think the pipeline sort of takes care of itself. And the second thing I wanted to pick up on that Toby mentioned is this thing about people in the research saying nothing in the kind of training prepares you for headship. Controversially, I'm going to say I think that'll always be the case. I don't think there is a training package or program under the sun that will ever properly prepare you for the reality of leading a school. I remember I always talk about the example, when I was a deputy head, I'd been a deputy head for a week, the head went out for a day and there was a stabbing at the end of the road. Nothing on MPQH, nothing on any training course had ever prepared me for that. And I think there's an inevitability about that. We can't expect someone to design the course that can prepare you for the challenges of running a community like that. So we have to say those people need access to support when they're dealing with those challenging moments that you can't possibly anticipate, and whether that's the kind of local networks that we've seen some people talk about in the research, whether that's something more formal, whether that's even something like professional supervision when you're dealing with really emotionally taxing stuff, I think all of those things matter as well, but I think we probably have to put to bed the notion that there is this world in which you can be properly prepared for headship, because I think good luck with that would be my answer.

**Mike Collins** 20:28
No, that's great. Alison, I know you perhaps add something to that.

**Alison Mitchell** 20:31
Yeah, I would agree that nothing prepares you fully for the role. However, I do think in the Scottish context, we could have done better nationally in terms of the contextual specificities of the role. So for example, the university I worked in was very much dealing with an urban group of deputy head teachers, and I don't think we even touched the idea of leading in a rural, or an island or a coastal context, and the very different role that might have been and some of the real joys and challenges of the position of the head teacher as part of that community. So if we want to recruit, for example, into more rural or Island context, then why are we not, and I'm talking specifically about Scotland here. Why are we not ensuring that there is kind of training and focus on some of that within the programs across the whole of Scotland?

**Mike Collins** 21:18
Okay, thanks. Mary, could I come to you about a related theme, but one that Toby mentioned in his initial overview of this bit of the research, which was around diversity, and that finding of it being a problem that doesn't seem to be owned anywhere.

**Mary Bousted** 21:33
Yeah, I think the problems of diversity in leadership are a reflection of the problems of diversity in teaching. When I started the commission and we did the report shaping the future of

teaching, I hadn't considered the issues for black and global majority heritage teachers. I'd read about those issues; I didn't think that that was going to come through as a really big theme. Luckily, we had black and global majority heritage teachers on as commissioners. And they very clearly and very quickly said, well, you can't consider teaching without also considering what happens to black and global majority heritage teachers. The figures I've just got them up here, the figures are really quite startling. So, 37.4% of primary and 36.6% of secondary school pupils are from ethnic minority backgrounds, yet only 10% of teachers identify as being from Black, Asian or mixed heritage backgrounds. And when you look at the rates of recruitment of black and global majority heritage teachers, they're far more likely not to get on the training course, they're far more likely to leave early in their careers. They're far more likely to not get promotion in the profession, and therefore, the supply line to leadership is cut off for black and global majority heritage teachers. So it's not surprising that they are significantly underrepresented at leadership level, because you're not going to get on the course and you're not going to get promoted, then you're not going to get to leadership. And when we ran focus groups with black and global majority teachers, they were very clear that in their working days, they experienced constant microaggressions, which undermined them, both professionally, in front of the children and amongst their colleagues. Some of the testimonies were really very distressing. And the second thing I say about that is I'm very aware of Anna McShane's work. For you know, she does a New Britain think tank, and she did the report Missing Mothers, looking at women in their 30s in England, 9000 of them left the profession in 2024 now that's not the biggest leaving rate proportionately, but because women in their 30s are the biggest group in the profession, when 9000 leave, that's a really big slot leaving. And she gave witness evidence to the commission, and we talked to teachers, and we had two focus groups, and one of them is especially school's advisory trust. There was a group of 10 young teachers in their late 20s, early 30s, who are on the leadership pathway in their schools, and not one of them said that they were continuing work full time if they had a child, not one, they all considered the pressures of teaching, and therefore the idea that you moved to leadership was remote to them, because they all accepted, also, if you went part time, that in effect meant giving up your leadership ambition. You know, the reasons for this weakened workforce are many, but certainly the very slow pace at which the profession has taken on any of the ideas about flexible working when that's moved so clearly elsewhere. And we all know that flexible working in teaching, both for teaching and leadership, will not mean the same as somebody working at home three days a week, we know that. So, working out what flexibility would mean in the profession is really important. And there's a really good piece of work done for the commission by a key group, and they looked at the records of 30,000 teachers who take maternity leave over a particular period of time, and found that those which were offered part time working on their return were significantly more likely to stay, particularly in secondary, and then move on to taking on more and more hours as their children grew up. So, it just seems to me that in a profession which is over 75% female, we've been remarkably slow about thinking about, how do we diversify the profession? How do we enable women to remain in the

profession as teachers? And we've really got to look at those stats around black and global majority heritage teachers, we need those stats every year.

**Mike Collins** 25:52
Yeah, great. Thanks, Mary, that's really powerful. Toby, do you want to come back in there?

**Toby Greany** 25:57
Yes I mean, just one thing I thought was interesting on everything you said about women and teaching and leadership is that over the course of 13 years across all three systems, it's certainly the case that you have a predominantly female, you know, teaching workforce, but you know, far lower proportions in headship in all three nations. Interestingly, though, part time working, so one in five assistant heads in primary is now working part time, and there has been this slow, incremental change. It's not yet fed through, really into headship to the same extent. There's been an increase, but not the same. But it's interesting to see how those kinds of shifts are gradually occurring, might play out over time.

**Mary Bousted** 26:36
I think that's right, and I think there is a change. I went to a focus group of women mat leaders, who said the idea that it's too expensive to think about flexible working and part time working, when you place that against the cost of recruiting new teachers and also the cost of losing those teachers. Most teachers, if they do five or six years, they become different teachers because they've got enough experience to start putting lots of different things together, and they might well, if they stay in the same area, in the same school, really have a good handle on how we do things around here. This is this community; this is how we behave. That makes things a lot easier for the leader, because they've got a group of informed professionals who know more about their practice, but more about the context and the culture of their school.

**Mike Collins** 27:24
Brilliant. Perhaps we could stand back a bit, we have covered a lot of ground I think there, and particularly that thinking about how to diversify and prepare and support the workforce. Perhaps we could move on to thinking about what changes would make leadership more sustainable across the UK. I was going to invite you to continue to the flow a bit there, Mary, and perhaps address what some of the big areas to concentrate on might be and what changes might make things more sustainable.

**Mary Bousted** 27:51
So I mean, in a perfect world, you would see a well funded education system where leaders weren't constantly having to worry about juggling the budget hidden costs rising in schools when teachers get a pay rise that was properly funded so it wasn't having to come out of school, non existent school budgets. And you know when you talk to head teachers, we did

quite a few focus groups with school leaders, and you have to let them talk about funding for 25 minutes before you can get them to talk about anything else, you just have to sit there and listen to that quite rightly, they get deficit budget, etc, you get into a lot of trouble, you know, they need the resources to do that well. But given that funding constraints are going to remain with us, whilst we don't have the prosperity or growth that's needed to invest what is needed in public services and given that health will always have the first call, education always comes a poor second to health in terms of public service provision and funding. I think that what we have to start trying to do is rebuild a concept of trust in the profession and a measure of trust between government, which quite rightly has aspirations, policies, outcomes that it wants, and the profession in leaders and teachers that there is a better sense of professional dialog, better sharing of professional expertise and a more ready acceptance that leaders will have good ideas, they will have very good knowledge rooted in the particularity of their school, but things which are generalisable, and actually government, you can work a bit less hard if you allow the profession to work more effectively. And that really then leads to the big issue, which is at the heart of all that, which is accountability, because we have an accountability system which is based on virtually no trust, whose outcomes are absolutely salient and highly important for leaders. Now that would be okay, I think if I had more confidence that that accountability system was valid and reliable, I'd have more confidence if the accountability system Ofsted really could evidence that it raised standards of education. If two inspection teams walked into a school, would they come up with the same grade? And in the absence of evidence about those two things, I feel that is a very important question, which just isn't answered. And that leads to a surveillance system in schools, leaders feel that they have to exercise surveillance on their staff. And I'll just finish with you know, the TALIS evidence from 2018 showed that school leaders in England, where the most likely in the OECD offer 38 countries to say that their job was to monitor their staff, whereas in other high performing countries, leaders were most likely to say, my job is to work with my staff to work on the curriculum assessment. So, we have this sort of panopticon system of looking down, leaders feel this huge pressure on them, and then that filters down.

**Mike Collins** 31:08
Yeah, and James, I know you want to come back in on that. Before we do that could I just ask Alison if some of those from the Scotland perspective, given that Mary's observed the TALIS evidence doesn't applied to Scotland, but perhaps, if you recognise any of those issues and that sort of response to, well, what changes might help in Scotland?

**Alison Mitchell** 31:26
We've just finished a kind of a whole engagement project around our manifesto in advance of the Scottish government elections, and our leaders feel that their day-to-day role is not understood. We've come out of several significant consultations in Scotland, eight at the last count over the last few years, and its basically consultation fatigue. And what heads are telling

us is that they need to be trusted to lead, they know what they need to do for their contexts. They need to be trusted to do that in the way that best serves the needs of the young people that they have responsibility for. The perception of school leaders' roles, I think there's a real responsibility on all those with influence and with a voice to talk up the profession. We've had a number of summits and in addition to the consultations that have been quite damaging in terms of the narrative and how schools are defined. For example, emergency summit on unacceptable violence in schools. Yes, there is a rise in unacceptable behaviour and violent incidents, but head teachers would tell us the majority of the young people and children are learning, are happy, are engaging and are thriving across our school community. So, we have a responsibility, collectively with the influence that we have in our professional associations, as do governments, in terms of looking at the successes and what's happening and what's working well across the education system, and where there are tariffs or measures that don't support that, then are we using the wrong tariffs or measures? And I suppose that's a big conversation that we're having in Scotland at the moment as we go through a curriculum and a qualifications reform. So, there's about listening, I mean, I think there's research, and I think heads will feel seen and heard, absolutely speaks to the experiences and voices of head teachers and all of the three nations. And if we can kind of privilege and amplify the real experience and voices, but the successes and the wonderful job that head teachers do every day, then that would make the profession more attractive, more sustainable, and it would make head teachers feel more valued, I think. So, it aligns with much of what you were saying, but very relevant to the Scottish context.

**Mike Collins** 33:38
Yeah, great, thanks. Alison. And James, I know you had a few points you wanted to pick up on there.

**James Bowen** 33:43
Yeah. Thank you. So I think I'm going to vehemently agree with both Alison and Mary. School leaders accept that the job of school leadership will always be hard, and, to an extent, will always be stressful. No one's naive about that, no one's coming into headship thinking this is going to be a walk in the park and it's gonna give me an easy life. People accept the challenges. There's that whole old thing, isn't there about healthy stress and unhealthy stress? All too often it tips into the unhealthy stress, it's the kind of stress that has a negative impact on your physical well-being, which means you can't be the leader they need you to be, which means you might end up off sick, and that's what we have to tackle. We're not talking about making this an easy making this an easy job, we're talking about tackling that extreme, unhealthy stress. I think that point that Mary made about I think when we speak to school leaders, they really talk about wanting to be trusted again. And I think we noticed during covid, government got a little bit obsessed with pumping out guidance, and it suddenly went, oh, if we put out a bit of guidance on a Friday night, school leaders will pick up run with it on a Monday

morning. But I think the trouble is, its kind of almost woke the government up and think, oh, we could do quite a lot of controlling from the centre and my view is they've never quite let go of that. So now we get guidance, non-statutory guidance, constantly about all sorts of things where you think, like, hang on, does the job of a school leader, they don't need the government telling them how to do that. Government doesn't pump out guidance to surgeons on a weekly basis telling them how to do their job, I suspect the surgeon's going to be listening to say they do. But what I mean is that's like, we've got these professionals who know what they're doing, and then we try and micromanage them. So, I think tackling that's part of it, and you wouldn't be surprised, I have to agree on the accountability point as well. I feel like what we've done in this country is run a 35-year experiment in high stakes accountability, which has got us so far. And I certainly don't argue against accountability, I don't argue against school inspection. What I argue against is the name and shame, the zero-sum approach to accountability, where we're league tables, where you're compared to the people down the road. If you're above the national average, someone must be below the national average. I think that's what we need to change. And I get the impression this government are trying to move to a more supportive system, not as quickly as I'd like them to. And I think there's always that nervousness around something that is actually more supportive, looking like the whole kind of classic soft on standard, sorry, a long answer to a complicated question.

**Mike Collins** 36:05
Yes, but thank you. I know you want to speak as well, Toby, but we noticed you nodding particularly, Mary there at a couple of places and smiling, and if there was any final points you wanted to come back on.

**Mary Bousted** 36:16
Yeah, I agree with everything that James said, but I don't think the problem is you're Ofsted, I think we have a problem with regulators. And I think it's incumbent upon any regulatory authority to be able to demonstrate that it does its job of regulation well. That is the fundamental question we have to ask of regulators, not just ofqual, ofwat, but certainly Ofsted. Okay, what's your evidence that you are an effective regulator, and the answer that 80% of schools are now good or better is no answer at all, because that is within Ofsted gift. I absolutely do believe that schools are operating to much higher standards now, but any regulator which simply will not engage with any evaluation of its competence when it's insisting that everybody else engages with its evaluation of their competence, I think is in a weak position. I've gone through a lot of angst for saying that for 20 years. Was even a Twitter spat with your a senior HMI, which went viral, and it wasn't me that started it. But I think that position now is much more accepted than it was, and I think Ofsted has been through a really difficult time, and he's trying to get out of that, but I'm certainly not convinced that the new inspection framework will improve reliability or validity.

**Mike Collins** 37:34
Thanks, Mary. And Toby, I think we're drawing to a close.

**Toby Greany** 37:37
Well, a few reflections on everything that colleagues have said from the research. I mean, accountability was really interesting. I mean, Ruth Perry, her death by suicide occurred just after we started the project. So, it was very much there throughout the research in England, but also across the UK, as a issue that people were raising and talking about in the interviews. If I'm honest, I went into the study assuming that England would feel the least sustainable of the UK nations, because Ofsted works differently to the inspectorates in Scotland and Northern Ireland. When we go through all of the data, it's definitely an issue. People talk about the Ofsted Twitch, not being able to relax, because the phone might go they don't know when Ofsted, you know the lack of notice, the ways in which inspections occur. In Scotland, leaders talk about inspections being stressful and difficult, taking up their lives for the six weeks or so that they're preparing for it. So, I don't want to say inspection isn't an issue. It didn't stand out for us as the thing that makes leadership unsustainable in England, or that England is significantly worse than Scotland or Northern Ireland. Equally in Northern Ireland, where essentially, they haven't had inspections for pretty much 10 years because they've had long running industrial action short of strike, which has meant they haven't really kind of had inspections going. The absence of having any way of judging how my school's doing and validating the work that we're doing and telling us whether we're on track or not, was also difficult in a different way for school leaders there. So, I think there's definitely inspection and accountability are part of the picture, but I feel there's a lot more to it. I wanted to just say something about the importance of place, and we've got another podcast just looking at place, and we did these place-based case studies. But you know, what stands out across all three nations is just how different leadership is in different places. And that's more than just urban, rural, high poverty, low poverty, even two village schools down the road from each other can feel completely different in terms of the challenges that leaders are facing. So, where that takes me in terms of policy implications from our study, I think, is that we've had a tendency, over 30 years, to move to a much more centralised national approach to education. National solutions and a weakening, as you started with Mary around you know, weakening of local authorities in England, still strong in Scotland, centralisation in Northern Ireland. They got rid of the Regional Library and training boards and moved to the Education Authority. I think, we need to have succession planning for school leadership much more centrally on the agenda of policymakers at national level, but that we need a local solutions approach to that which recognises that the groups that we're most worried about are new heads, often young and inexperienced, new heads in small, rural primary schools who have very little support. And actually, whilst all the challenges, quite rightly, have been on urban context with high poverty over the last 20 years or so, actually, I think today, the real challenges are in dispersed rural

communities, where succession planning for leadership might look quite different, but resources need to be there to help that to happen in a way that can't happen from the centre.

**Mike Collins** 40:43
Well, thank you to all our guests, we've really had a great conversation. We've talked about all the pressures presenting a challenge to sustaining school leadership, and preparing and supporting school leaders in their roles, and some of the possibilities for sustaining leadership in the future. If you want to read more about what the research says and about those issues, then go to our website, sustainableschoolleadership.uk we'd really love to hear your views. So, if you want to get in touch, you can get in touch with us through the website. This episode was presented by myself, Dr Mike Collins. The producer was Alex Canner, and this has been a Research Podcasts production.