

Sustainable School Leadership

Series 1 - Episode 3

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

School leadership, sustainability, instructional leadership, special educational needs, inclusion, well-being, mental health, community hubs, emotional demands, parental anger, Northern Ireland, ethical leadership, care ethic, policy implications, teacher support.

SPEAKERS

Tony Gallagher, Mike Collins, Carolyn Roberts, 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 how school leadership today reflects on ethic of education and care. With me today is Professor Toby Greany, from the research team, and our guests are Professor Tony Gallagher from Queen's University Belfast.

Tony Gallagher 01:15

Somebody was quoted in the report as saying that everything rolls downhill to schools. Is school exclusion, mental health, there's concerns about well being, all sorts of issues that are suddenly landed on our lap all at the same time.

Mike Collins 01:27

Carolyn Roberts, former head teacher, who recently retired after 23 years of headship and is currently the Co-Director of the PTI, and also, she's Secretary of the Ethical Leadership Alliance.

Carolyn Roberts 01:39

The pressures of dealing with children who are hungry, children who are badly treated, children who haven't got anywhere to sleep, parents who are angry there's not much left to absorb.

Mike Collins 01:51

So, let's start with the research, in the research, we state that leaders are often working beyond their education remit. Toby, can you take us through that a bit and explain what we found in the research and why you think it's important.

Toby Greany 02:04

Yes, so over the course of 40-50 years, lots of research has built up to show that successful school leaders focus a lot of their time and energy on what's called instructional leadership. So, the leadership of improving the quality of teaching and learning, making sure that children are making progress. What we saw in the study was that whilst this was still hugely important, obviously, for leaders, actually what they were spending a lot more time on was things like special educational needs and disabilities, inclusion, wellbeing, behaviour, pastoral issues within school, as well as sometimes areas beyond what we might traditionally think of as education, things like running a food bank or getting involved in health and welfare support for children and families. So, we think this is a big shift. Previous studies haven't identified this, and yet it seems that increasingly leadership is about education and care together in schools today.

Toby Greany 02:53

Great thanks Toby. Tony, what are your thoughts about why this is happening? Why this shift?

Tony Gallagher 02:59

Well, one thing comes through very strongly in the report is this idea of a rising number of expectations or demands on schools beyond the purely educational, and covid seems to be a point which has sort of been captured at a lot of this the terms used in the report is the polity crisis. There's lots and lots of things coming to schools simultaneously. Somebody was quoted in the report as saying that everything rolls downhill to schools, and I thought they've actually captured it very well, where there's lots and lots of things happening in schools that they're trying to pick up, and it's partly because other services aren't picking them up. There's a little thing yet as well, which I think encapsulated well and showed the frustration of schools, talking about an event where school leaders are being told to start running activity helping kids clean their teeth, and the expressed exasperation at this because they didn't have a school nurse, and this was yet another thing that schools were going to be asked to do. That struck me in particular, because remember during covid, reading about the experience in US Public Schools during the Spanish Flu back in 1917, one of the immediate responses to that was to

establish free lunches and to put a school in our in every US public school. I'm not sure we had responded in the same general way to covid, to the multiple crises that schools are trying to address with. Schools will be asked to do an awful lot more without resource or the support or the body and network to do things. That came true to me, very, very strongly, and it is creating an increasing crisis for schools themselves. We have to think about, rethink about what school leadership means in this different, new context.

Mike Collins 04:36

Okay, thank you. Carolyn, from your perspective, I think you were ahead all the way through covid, for example, and beyond. So how do you see it playing out in practice, in schools?

Carolyn Roberts 04:45

One of the interesting points is that covid exposed schools a bit. So for many years, schools have been expected to pick up all kinds of issues in society which affect attendance and behaviour and children's learning. But it was during covid that this sort of hit the national understanding, really. I mean, just to pick up Tony's point about ancient history and school nurses, one of the things that parents kept saying to me during covid is, well, what's the school nurse doing? Well, the school nurse was contracted to us for a set number of days per term, about four or five days a term, and that was almost all taken up with particular children's emergencies, or, you know, things like injections. People felt that there was a sort of set of services surrounding a school that schools couldn't easily draw on, whereas actually it was just as hard for schools to be able to do that as it was for anyone else. A sort of list of the ways that everything rolling downhill to schools affects schools, we're talking about attendance, we're talking about behaviour, there aren't enough of education welfare officers. There's not the reasonable amount of support and advisory staff that there were 20 years ago in local authority to talk about behaviour. There's a whole issue about SEN parents seeking SEN diagnoses but finding themselves enmeshed in a system that was designed for many, many fewer children. And then there's a sort of emergency daily basics. So, schools find themselves involved with food banks, many involved with that beforehand. But if the school building is the only local building that people can get to, that people can identify as an arm and state, as it were, food banks and schools distributing food became really important during covid and the state so. And then there's the the other stuff, which is less well known. Many schools, for example, are part of projects which try and finance or issue beds and bedding to families who don't have them. So many children suffer from disturbed sleep, partly to do with screen addiction, but also in very basic ways to do with living in households where, you know, where there isn't much furniture and there aren't any beds. So, it's those sort of basic things that schools have been dealing with for a long time, but it became more urgent during covid became better known. On top of all that, is the big issue that head teachers are facing at the moment, which is to do with parental anger. And this parental anger is often directed at the school, it's often to do with what a parent perceives as unmet needs. But actually, to my mind, it's an anger at the situation that

so many parents who are struggling financially find themselves and the school is the easily accessible arm of the state. So in the same way that a school might run a food bank, the school is also the place where blame can be laid at the door of the state. And that makes it much harder for leaders to deal with parents in a way that they haven't had to do before.

Mike Collins 08:29

Wow, thank you, Carolyn, that's really mapped it out and picked up on some of the bigger points that Tony was raising. This is something you also referred to Tony, this idea that maybe we need to rethink or think about leadership in schools differently then. So, Toby, I was going to invite you then, if the research is saying we need to think about leadership differently, need to take in an ethic and idea of education and care, what does that mean? Then, in practice,

Toby Greany 08:53

so it was a conundrum for us as a research team. Everything Tony and Carolyn have described was very clear in our data to the fact that leaders are spending a lot of time and energy, often a lot of emotional energy, on these issues, which could feel quite fraught in many circumstances. We make an argument in the research report that leadership is not sustainable for many leaders, and worrying proportion of leaders are saying that they're sinking. In some ways it seems counterintuitive to say, well, let's broaden the role of leadership and so it's not just about instructional improvement. It's also now about care. Nevertheless, it seems to us that we have to think of it in these ways. We have to kind of reconceptualise leadership to be about both an ethic of education and care together, which is not to downgrade the educational role of schools, schools are absolutely centres of, you know, education and learning first and foremost. But it seems to us that if the child hasn't had breakfast, hasn't had a good night's sleep, is dysregulated, then they can't learn. And it is the case that schools are already dealing with these issues, and it seems that it would be helpful if actually, they were trained and supported and recognised as playing this wider set of roles, rather than pretending that actually they're focusing on instructional issues, and everything else is stuff that they should be delegating elsewhere. It was quite interesting, in the qualitative research, there were some leaders who were saying, I'm not going to let myself become a social worker, I'm going to focus on instructional improvement, and they seemed to be able to keep that focus in their heads. There were others who were embracing this care role much more actively, often using things like restorative practice, trauma informed practice, nurture, to articulate how they saw them coming together. And then I think there was a big group in the middle who just felt pulled in all directions, worried that they weren't prioritizing instructional improvement, but also felt that they couldn't not attend to these issues that were in front of them.

Toby Greany 09:39

Tony, I could see you wanted to come in there?

Tony Gallagher 10:25

Yeah I mean, at that point about schools as civic institutions, I think is really quite an important one. In your report, somebody talked about schools becoming community hubs, and one of the reasons why this ethic of care had become more important was because of a perfectly natural human reaction on the part of schools and school leaders to the challenges that we're faced within in schools. Can't expect teachers to take on the skill and expertise of a whole range of other occupational groups, but some of those services could be located in schools. I know there's been examples of this type of thing in the US and other places, but that's the sort of conversation we need to have given them, some of these pressures are actually there.

Mike Collins 11:21

Thank you. There's a point that Toby made there that leaders were talking about using trauma informed approaches and restorative and nurturing approaches. I wondered if you had any reflections on that, and whether you think that from your experience, that's helpful.

Carolyn Roberts 11:36

I think it's helpful if that's the kind of thing that you do, and that's the kind of thing that you understand. And so that group of schools to which you alluded that already look at trauma informed practice and restorative practices, already have a lot of outreaches with parents, already have open lines of communication with parents. Find the encroachment of the community's needs, as it were, into school life easier to content with because everybody will expect the lines to be a bit blurred from the persons hitting at the reception desk, to tell the SENCO, the deputy head, you know, they'll expect that there will be some blurring of lines. If you haven't given it much thought before, and you have noted that you don't have much cash, and Ofsted and the government appear to be entirely focused on easily measurable outcomes. Well, then finding yourself in a position where you've got to do some fairly blurry and amorphous work, the outcome of which can't be easily measured or turned into exams and results. It's really stressful if you haven't given that much thought before. The other group that you mentioned, people who see themselves entirely as instructional leaders, entirely focused on teaching quality and outcomes are likely to be able to largely ignore the crisis that's swirling around outside school. The thing that really interests me is, how do school leaders conceptualise what do they do? So, if you believe, and in England, it's perfectly reasonable to believe that you are there entirely for instructional purposes. Well, then all of this other stuff is really annoying because, because it's so hard to do, it's so hard to fix. And if your school motto is something like, you know excellence through achievement, or achievement through success. You know, that kind of thing, and that's how you picture the school, that's how you picture it with the drawbridge up, as it were, it's going to take a big shift with you and your trustees or your governors and your staff, to say actually the drawbridge is down, and we need to fix all of this stuff first. It's really interesting that if you look at some of the detail of the 1944 Education Act, this stuff isn't new. There're illusions in there to the need to, you know, feed

hungry children and wash dirty children, to give milk, to give a nutritious meal, because if you don't meet those needs well, then they won't be able to respond to learning. But we've moved so far away from that, certainly in England in the last 20 years, certainly for younger leaders, they've had to sort of try to picture a whole new way of being a school. If you had some experience, for example, of the Leicestershire community colleges, all those kinds of things, I had some memory of child centered approaches from from the 80s and 90s. Well, then it's not too hard to think, well, this is what education is about because education is about making sure that the young person can grow into a whole and useful citizen. And we need to meet their needs now. But if all you see is what their possible outcomes are and what their possible economic use is in the future, it's really hard, it's really hard to get your head around what you need to do now.

Mike Collins 15:19

Yeah, and you said a couple of things there. I'd quite like to bounce over to you Tony, just this point that Carolyn made about engagement. But just in the research, it seemed that Northern Ireland leaders did see themselves as pastoral leaders. We heard that phrase a lot, and there being a strong engagement with community.

Tony Gallagher 15:36

Yeah, I was intrigued when I saw that in the report, because that theme comes through very quickly in the conversations with school leaders from Northern Ireland, I wasn't a terribly surprised on one level, because a lot of schools in Northern Ireland are very local in focus. It's, ironically, one of the consequences of our divided school system that the link between schools and their local communities can be quite strong and play a very important part in its wider society. That has pluses and minuses. I mean, one of the pluses is that there's very strong levels of support for schools with very high regard for teachers and teaching as an as an occupation. The downside of that, as it says in the report, is that level of visibility can make the screen very constrained by community expectations. Then the bigger issue in the context of Northern Ireland is that's all evidence is very strong as social capital binding social capital within the communities of which schools are an important part, but it highlights the relative absence of what may be thought of as bridging social capital between different communities. And there's been a big debate about the role of schools in our dividing society, and the role that we should be playing to try to meet some of the challenges of that divided society, which in itself is adding a whole set of other issues.

Mike Collins 16:49

Yeah, thanks Tony, that's really fascinating. Toby, I know you want to say something, and Carolyn in a minute as well. So perhaps Toby, if you want to go first.

Toby Greany 16:56

Well, I want to come back to the point Tony mentioned from the report about how can we help leaders to draw the line, which is never going to be a hard and fast line. And the whole point is that this would be done through a collective conversation. This isn't arbitrarily drawing a line. In the report we draw on a framework developed by Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher, and it's has five aspects to it, but one of them is about caring with, and we make the point that schools are not solely responsible for children's care. Families, carers, parents are also responsible, there are other stakeholders involved in this, but the question is, how do we do this together? How do we care with? So, I think it goes back to the point you were making Carolyn in about parental complaints and kind of, how do we help leaders to help create a culture in which this becomes a shared endeavour rather than an adversarial one.

Carolyn Roberts 17:41

Yeah, one of the things that struck me about the Northern Irish findings is, of course, the prevalence, for good or for ill of the church in schools, and if a school is very attached to a local church, well, then there will be things which are community based, as we've said. But it also makes it much easier for school leaders to conceptualise a wider view. So, I was a church school head for a short time, and our school motto was, you know, John 1010, which almost all Church of England schools have, which is, I came to bring them life, life in all its wholeness. Now, if you believe, that you are serving life in all its fullness on a much broader scale, well then it's easier to conceptualize yourself as a as a broader kind of leader, that you're not purely about instruction. And so that's an interesting thought about the Northern Irish context, and I wonder, and I fear, whether or not this will survive if the Northern Irish system goes along the lines of the English system. So, the curriculum reforms in Northern Ireland are being driven in a very similar way to the curriculum reforms in England were. And what, you know, what might that do? Might that squeeze out some of the pastoral stuff in the way that it has in England? It will be interesting to see if the character of Northern Irish schools is affected in the way that the character of many English schools have been. And the other thing I would say is that into 2018 we put together this thing called the framework for Ethical Leadership in Education, and it was fairly straight forward stuff, but it was, it was put together for secondary heads largely, although many, many primary schools have adopted it. And what we did was to remind people of the principles for public life, so the northern principles of selflessness, accountability, honesty and all of that. But we also wanted people to question their own motivations and question their own approach. So we put in seven virtues, seven personal virtues such as trust, wisdom, kindness, service, justice, optimism and courage with the hopes that school leaders would step back from this entirely instructional focus and think about what they actually wanted for their young people and for the moral communities that they lead. And I think that one of the most helpful things that we can say about the requirement for the ethic of care, or the requirement to respond to the whole poly crisis, is to say to school leaders, have a long think about what you really believe that you're for. Have long discussions with your staff, with your governors and

trustees, and then work together to frame a way of responding as best you can to the needs of the children in the community around you.

Mike Collins 20:47

Wow. Yeah, thank you. So, we've talked about that expanded role of schools and of leaders. Are there any other areas where we might want to think about that?

Tony Gallagher 20:56

Yeah, I think one of the issues which has emerged post covid is an increase in the level of absenteeism and issues around school exclusion. And this is a global phenomenon. It's not just the UK, because obviously, if a child isn't in the school, that doesn't matter how much caring environment provides, they're not going to get educated. But it goes back to this point that if your people stop coming to school, it has ceased to appear to be important to them. What's wrong? What's going wrong? What are we doing wrong? What do we need to do to try to address that? And it's been addressed in places all over the world, but it's part of the new environment that we're in, where there's increase in issues around mental health, there's concerns about wellbeing issues, all sorts of issues that are suddenly landed on our lap all at the same time. Schools have potentially very important role to play. We can solve and release a crisis. It's good for everyone.

Carolyn Roberts 21:44

Yeah, good for everyone in that we need to do something to prevent school leaders into despair. There's a whole thing about the physical presence of the child in the building that's so fundamental to teachers self-worth and school leaders self-worth. So, if a child isn't coming to school, whose fault, is it? Is it in the home, or is it something that the schools doing wrongly? If a child is in school but isn't going to lessons, you know, internal truancy is a huge issue in English schools. What is can be done about that? What kind of support systems can, on the one hand, reinforce the primacy of being in lessons, while on the other hand supporting church children who find that really hard, and have found it hard since co covid. And how it is that school leaders then what with the difficulties with head hand and the difficulties with internal truancy. Then find themselves suspending or excluding the same children because of the need to maintain an orderly and safe home immunity. We had some really quite unhelpful guidance from the Department for Education a couple of weeks ago, which was about the use of internal suspension, which was poorly explained, but I think what it was driving at was the idea that many parent groups are concerned that schools are using seclusion rooms or separate provision for children who can't behave well enough to be in in classes. But you know, it came down from the centre with we need to study this. We need to audit this, people have to fill forms, and they'll have to justify it. And it seemed to me that didn't touch the despair at the heart of that school about children who aren't there, children who aren't in lessons, children who don't behave well enough, and all of these have been exacerbated since covid sort of

broke the social contract between school and home. So there needs to be understanding and support and a clear understanding of the things that principal school leaders do try to hurt hard, but might still fail, and I'm trying to make sure that head teachers don't fall into despair.

Mike Collins 24:09

And despair is quite a big word, isn't it? It's making me think also of related issues which we heard a lot of, which was concerns, both if you like, the mental health and well-being of staff, but also of children and young people. And that seemed to be a big demand on schools as well. And I don't know if you've got any reflections on that.

Toby Greany 24:27

One thing that struck us in the research was that, you know, so far in the conversation, we've talked a lot about welfare and buying mattresses or food banks and so on. You know, which 20 years ago, if you'd done a study of schools in challenging circumstances in the most kind of deprived urban areas, you would have seen very similar things going on. One of the things that struck us in this research was how all schools are feeling overwhelmed by the care needs that they're facing. In a leafy, rural context, or kind of suburb it may still include, running a food bank, but often it's about some of the issues we're talking about here. Exponential rising applications for children wanting additional support with special needs, mental health, wellbeing, wellbeing of staff, all of these issues. So, I think that's an important point to kind of get across is how universal this feels. I think then it is about these services around schools. So, in the case of mental health, often we heard that child and adolescent mental health services not feeling they're there when needed, when it's special needs, feeling that struggling to get the support needed to provide for children. So, there's a big policy questions there, certainly in England, there's money and very, very strong focus on SEND about to come out with a white paper as we record this, all of which seems helpful. I think our view is it's important to keep the bigger picture of the care picture, kind of not see this just as a SEND issue. One of the things I think we'll see more and more of is about resource provision, or what's in Northern Ireland called SPIM, so Specialist Provision in Mainstream, and we were quite worried sometimes that a primary school taking on six SPIMs in Northern Ireland, not because it was the right thing to do, but sometimes it seemed because it was a way to balance the budget, and actually creating a whole new set of challenges around what kind of specialist expertise do we need? How do we make this work in practice? And what feeling as if it was helping to make leadership more sustainable. So, I think it's learning the lessons as we go about, how we do this stuff successfully.

Tony Gallagher 26:30

And one of the things which struck me in the report, and I think it's maybe important to emphasize is, whenever the teachers or school leaders are asked in all three jurisdictions, what was the key driver? What was it kept you going? What was it made you motivated to be a

leader? Every single one was saying because the engaging young people and children, they seeing them grow. The mad conversations in the corridor, I think somebody said yes. So, what that speaks to is an ethos of commitment among teachers that is a source of energy that we can draw with if you can create a context where they can actually realize the full potential of that. So, I think it's maybe important just to draw that really positive point out of the thing that our teachers are really, really committed, virtually all of them are committed to doing a really good job. Let's do what we can to try and help.

Carolyn Roberts 27:15

One of the things that we're very reluctant to do is to talk about what we believe schools are for, and if we could have a sensible national discussion about what schools are for, well, then it might be easier both for school leaders to understand their role and how well they're succeeding in it, but also for proper funding decisions to be made. I'm always interested in whether people's vision matches the moment. To me, it seems that the jurisdictions know that schools feel overwhelmed by the level of need that they're dealing with, and therefore, in an ideal world, one things that would be really useful would be to put some, you know, short term funding in five year funding in to try and sort out some of these needs, to put serious counselling and therapeutic support in schools, see if this is a long term issue, or see if it's a post covid issue, and then work out what the next stage ought to be for schools. But we don't have the vision for that because we don't have an understanding of what we're trying to do.

Mike Collins 28:24

Okay, I think I've moved the conversation on a bit, and you've referred earlier on, Carolyn, to how emotionally challenging and potentially difficult it can be confronting a different role for school, if that's not the way you've seen yourself. And I think we highlight in the report as well that this aspect of education, ethic of care, is emotionally demanding and seems to be making for some people, sustaining leadership more challenging or not possible. So, what next? And you've begun to point the way there for some people I think Carolyn, what else might we need to think about in terms of looking forward and making leadership more sustainable, given this changing nature of the role.

Carolyn Roberts 29:06

I think it's really important for school leads to be supported by high quality teams, and how to make sure that on the leadership team that there are people whose job and whose passion is dealing with these really tricky, tricky issues, and there are people like that all over school. So many teachers entered education because they wanted to help and to affect the whole child. But if you've got your leadership carved up, just in terms of, you know, key stage 3 outcomes, key stage 4 outcomes, key stage 5 outcomes, you've got a real difficulty there. So, head teachers and principals and CEOs need to be willing to carve out pressures of an expensive leadership time, to gladly deal with these kinds of issues. And if you do that, there are also

hidden costs, you know, there are the obvious costs that if you're going to do a lot of home liaison, if you're going to do a lot of emotional support, if you're going to do practical things, well, then you will need staff who can who can cope with that. And you will have to make a decision about what you're going to fund and more and what you can afford. But you also need to keep an eye both on the emotional and the well-being aspects for yourself and for the team that you have. One of the things that we suggested as part of the ethical leadership permission was that there should be a much broader use of an investigation of non-managerial supervision for school leaders, because school leaders are just expected to absorb everything that comes at them, and a huge amount of emotional impact in England is sort of clogged up by being terrified of what Ofsted will say next time. So, the pressures of dealing with children who are hungry, children who are badly treated, children who haven't got anywhere to sleep, parents who are angry, there's not much left to absorb all of that. And certainly, I found that the use of non-managerial supervision for some key members of staff was really helpful. Everything I say is it's meant to be a way of helping people cope. But in education, time is money. There's no money, and so the ability to do the things which I'm talking about, is really hard, if you know, if you can't, if you got free senior members of staff to do these things, if you can't give full tutors, for example, time to spend talking to their tutees. And if it's hard, I'm talking about ideal circumstances, really

Mike Collins 31:43

Tony, I know you wanted to respond there.

Tony Gallagher 31:45

I just wanted to reinforce a point that Carolyn alluded to you. I mean, there's an emotional cost to school leaders trying to deal with this new suggestion and these new demands and new pressures. There's also an emotional cost to teachers because they're having to deal with the impact on themselves, but also try to work with the teachers to support them in this sort of process as well. And the idea of using teams, clearly, is a good one. I think the idea of broader network across schools and local communities working together, I think is a good way of trying to address some of these issues. But in the end, it actually does come down to a clear articulation and recognition of the values that we embed in our education system and our schools, and have an enormous conversation and have a clear sense of the expectations we can have of schools, so everyone is aware where the line is, where schools at this point, are able to address things and where they're not. So that rather than having this constant barrage of expectations going on schools. This is partly about the nature of leadership. It's also partly about the nature and role of our schools, and we need to talk about that much more openly and honestly.

Toby Greany 32:53

It firstly, agree completely. One of the things we say in the report is that I think there's a need for school systems, for policymakers, for trusts, local authorities to be more careful, and the pun is deliberate, in terms of how they support school leaders, so provision being a very good example. Networks, you know, recognising the things that leaders need in order to thrive. I think equally, we have to not assume that leaders can solve this on their own. I think there are some really interesting models that we see in the research. I mean, you mentioned Tony, the kind of community hub school that we saw in Scotland city as one model of that where there is an active local authority approach to providing the resources to have financial inclusion officers, family welfare officers and so on, based in the school, but connecting up other services. And I think it does have to become a more actively multi agency approach to how we build networks around schools that can kind of work productively to provide the more holistic support for children and families. Equally, I was in Leeds last week, there's some fantastic work that Leeds Learning Alliance, born in Bradford initiative, some work that the child of the North study has recently published, which shows how this is possible, even in England's quite fragmented system and with very tight budgets. So I think this is a whole system question, not simply a school leaders question, but it's important to start with that reconceptualization and recognise this broader role that schools are playing, and think through the consequences of that.

Carolyn Roberts 34:18

And we can deal with some policy input, can't we, essentially, I mean, I'm a head teacher who was around at the time of Michael Gove's very influential ad lib, which was that talking about context was part of the soft bigotry of low expectations. But that's become hardwired into the English system that you that you can't say my children are really suffering, and therefore we need to fix that first, rather than focusing entirely on how to answer a 12-mark question at GCSE. But there's a hard way of viewing the English system that to do that. Is to want to hallowed in the in the underachievement of children from the most difficult backgrounds.

Mike Collins 35:08

That's a big challenge. So, I think with coming to a conclusion, but I wondered if you had to pick one striking thought out or something that surprised you, particularly related to this idea of education and ethical care. What would that be?

Tony Gallagher 35:23

Well, I think removing the veil from a problem which is which is always been there but has suddenly accelerated and grown in the last number of years, particularly because of covid. Covid exposed a lot of these challenges and problems, and this report could open up that conversation, to get people talking about the context the schools are in, the challenges that they're facing, the cost of the stake on teachers and school leaders, and sit down to try and say, okay, we're in this context, what can we do about it? We cannot just simply expect the

schools to respond to an increase in self-demanding. The Special Needs issue is a good example where the numbers just keep going up, quite apart from the financial consequences, it's a real challenge all around to how he addresses this. One of the things there's a potential worry is that one possible way of dealing with some of these challenges is to ship out the problematic kids somewhere else and let them deal with it. Now, I'm not sure the extent to which that happens. It's not a way for a school system to deal with the issue. Again, it's a natural response to some people to say, look, I can't deal with this, let somebody else deal with it and cancel the child out that would be disastrous, because it's simply trying to put the deal back on the problem, that's not going to work, it's just going to make things worse. So there's an opportunity here, I think this report has just laid bare a set of issues that really ought to be the focus of core strategic discussion on where we go next.

Carolyn Roberts 36:43

One things that I was interested in, which is, which is one remove, almost from, from what we're talking about. But you know, bear with me. School leaders being promoted in into headship, perhaps early, because of there being not enough people who are showing to become heads. And the younger they become heads, the more likely they are to leave. Now there's an issue here, which I've been worrying about for a while, which is the way that the system allows people to learn to be school leaders and allows them to make mistakes. Now, if you're if you're a young school leader, and you are focused entirely on outcomes, you will be overwhelmed by the other needs of the community and the children in school, and you'll feel that you're doing a really bad job. It's really important, I think, that we give younger leaders enough support so that they can get to grips with the entire width and breadth of the job and not collude in a system which would measure them harshly and quickly, because that's what makes people go. So, when we put together the framework for ethical leadership and education, one of the things that we wanted to focus on was the importance of wisdom and experience. But you don't get those straight away, you've got to be you've got to be around and about for a while. And so, one of my thoughts was, one of my hopes, is that we might find a way of keeping people longer so that they can develop the wisdom and experience to cope better and happier.

Mike Collins 38:27

Thanks. Toby, you get the last word.

Toby Greany 38:30

I want to just pick up the point Tony was just making actually, we haven't talked as much about some of the consequences of not getting this right, you know. And we see that certainly in England, suspensions, exclusions, ghost children, things like mental health and anxiety. We haven't talked as much about perhaps, but all of this comes under this manner of care. And, you know, in kind of articulating this is about being an ethic of education and care, we thought

long and hard about it as a team. We wanted to try and deliberately put a language around it that brought together a number of different strands of activity and thinking and work and recognise that these are all joined together. I think sometimes, particularly in England, where there is much more of a kind of forensic focus on school improvement and outcomes, there's a tendency to kind of give, you know, somebody responsibility for the pupil premium, somebody responsibility for SEND, somebody responsible for behaviour and so on. Whereas we were deliberately trying to recognise all of this connects, and it's not downgrading the important role of education in schools. Absolutely, that has to remain the heart. But I do think it's trying to kind of see it as stylistic enterprise, just really important that this study, I mean, it surprised me setting out on this study that nobody has ever studied school leadership across the UK nations before, and I think we do feel there is a huge amount of learning across these systems. There's a much stronger emphasis on values in the headship preparation in Scotland, for example, than there is in the equivalent in England. There's lots of learning across the systems that I think we should be more proactive about, trying to make sure we capitalise on.

Mike Collins 39:59

And one last one for you, Toby, if you've got any reflections on what you've heard from Tony and Carolyn today.

Toby Greany 40:06

Oh, far too many to go into. I think it exemplifies the point about system learning, you know, Northern Ireland, England, the context feeling quite different, and yet the challenge is feeling quite common, but the experience of leading in this system is feeling quite different. And I think you've just brought it together really nicely in your different exemplifications of that.

Mike Collins 40:27

Thanks everyone that's been brilliant, really interesting and thoughtful conversation. We've really explored the big shifts in what schools across UK are dealing with, I think. Carolyn really highlighted for us how emotionally challenging that can be for leaders. And both Tony and Carolyn were emphasising that there's a wider conversation there about what role we want schools to play. 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.