Sustainable School Leadership

Series 1 - Episode 2

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Sustainable school leadership, place impact, rural isolation, recruitment challenges, retention issues, local context, teacher professional learning, curriculum development, urban poverty, rural poverty, policy blind spots, local solutions, workforce diversity, leadership development, post-covid changes.

SPEAKERS
Laurence Findlay, Brigid Heron, Pat Thomson, Mike Collins

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 place shapes school leadership and what that means for sustainable school leadership. With me today is Professor Pat Thomson from the research team, and our guests are Brigid Heron, the principal of Sperrin Integrated College in Magherafelt, Northern Ireland.

Brigid Heron 01:17
Society has definitely changed the place and time that we are in is having a very significant impact on head teachers.

Mike Collins 01:25
And Laurence Findlay, Director of Education and Social Services in Aberdeenshire in the north of Scotland. And he's also the current President of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland.

Laurence Findlay 01:36
Rural head teachers are more isolated as leaders. You may be head teacher, the class teacher, the special needs teacher, the janitor. So that requires an approach to leadership, which is quite unique.

Mike Collins 01:50
So when we talk about place in education, we mean more than geography. So, turn it to you Pat, can you just help us understand why place was important in the research? What were some of the key things that struck you about the significance of place in the research that we did?

Pat Thomson 02:06
Well, if I start by asking you to imagine two different schools. One of them is in a county, it's an ex-mining village, there's no work, there's been no work for a very long time. It's a kind of isolated village, it's hard to get teachers to come there. The head teacher has been there for a long time, everybody knows the head teacher, but it's a pretty hard job, and it's actually a pretty thankless task, trying to work with, you know, the test results that have to be got. Now, compare that to another school, not that far away, in an area where there's a very concentrated Asian population, they all belong to particular mosques, the community is very ambitious, and the school is very large compared to the village school, which is very small. Now I don't want to go into any more details there, but I think you can understand in that sketch that there are differences attached to individual schools related to the place in which they're based. Now in the research, we didn't particularly want to just look at the differences attached to individual schools. We wanted to work at a larger scale. So, we wanted to look at a kind of geographical area that made sense to people. So, it might be part of a local authority or part of a county or part of a city. What we wanted to capture was something not only about the geography, but we also wanted to understand the relationships between schools and the relationships that people with the community had with each other, the kind of social, cultural, religious, sort of composition of the area, and how there were differences within that geographical area, but also the differences between that geographical area and others. So, place immediately becomes very complex. We're starting to deal really with the question of what's common to all of these schools, regardless of where they are and what they are, and who goes to them. And what's unique and different about them, and what's unique and different at the individual school, but also at a level just above the individual school as well. And this is a kind of level of, I suppose, understanding that doesn't always appear in research. In fact, I think we thought when we were starting the research that this was missing in a lot of the discussions about the recruitment and retention of school leaders, in particular, that most of the data that we saw was at the level of the country, and occasionally there were looks at particular types of schools. So, it was hard to get schools, urban schools that served communities that weren't doing very well economically, or it was hard to get people to go to

faith based primary schools in England, for example, we wanted to have a different kind of analysis.

Mike Collins 05:06
Thanks, Pat. I'm going to ask Lawrence and Brigid in a second just how that looks from their particular perspectives. But just give us a couple of headlines, perhaps, having gone into the research with that point of view, a couple of things that that really struck you.

Pat Thomson 05:21
Well, if I just talk about a couple of English examples, if we think about an area which is close to a major city where there is a lot of urban poverty, the schools in that area did have, in fact, very acute demands for the provision of care services. Now they're not the only schools that have acute demands for the provision of care services. It wasn't the case that, because they were close to a city that they had lots of services available. They had some services, so that placed particular pressures on the school leaders, who were having to cope with a range of care demands in their schools, some of which were supported and some of which weren't. And if I compare that, for example, to a kind of rural area, then you know, it's almost impossible in some rural areas in England for people to actually access services at all. Everything falls to the lot of the village school and the collection of village schools, and they are also often highly inclusive. They have to take whoever wants to come to them, because people can't necessarily go, you know, a long way to another school. And so, the job in those two different locations are both about care, but they're differently inflected. One of them gets some services, they have difficulty getting staff, it may be that schools in village locations, for example, can get staff, but the demands for inclusion are significantly greater, and the teachers have to have very significant amounts of specialist expertise, really, as kind of generalist classroom teachers, and that places pressure on those head teachers in terms of actually recruiting staff and but it's a different kind of recruitment pressure. In one place, it's let me get someone who's warm, up right and standing and is going to have a good relationship with the kids, where in another location it might be, yes, I've got people who want to be here, but what I really need is people who've got a range of expertise so that they can deal with the range of students who are actually coming.

Mike Collins 07:34
Great, thanks, Pat. That's given us a really good sketch of both the idea of place and why it was important to the research, but also some of the things that came out. So, I'm going to ask Laurence and Brigid now perhaps, start with you, Laurence, what does place mean to you then, in your role, in your context?

Laurence Findlay 08:02

For me, place is all about diversity, given that no two places are alike, and it means having a unique understanding of the local context, local environment at a physical, social and historical level, and it's about how we interact, how we engage with young people, their families and our communities. Personally, for me, place is all about identity, connection, belonging, community and history. When I look at my Aberdeenshire context, we have a strap line, which is Aberdeenshire from mountain to sea, the best of Scotland, and I think that's really important, because we do have that diversity of coastal towns, coastal villages, and then really rural and remote locations with schools ranging from perhaps 11 children and young people in them, up to more than 1200 children. So that makes every single setting really unique, some shared challenges and similar challenges, however, how they need to be approached and addressed at the school leadership level will look really different, but there are huge opportunities for curriculum making, because that local context should really drive what the curriculum in a school looks Like. I was really struck by Pat's comments about access to services, because that's something that I think we could unpack in more detail later on in the discussion round about how it looks very different, both in an urban setting, compared to a rural or remote setting. From a leadership perspective, though, I think rural head teachers are more isolated as leaders, and again, going back to Pat's comments about inclusion, particularly in a rural context, sometimes we expect head teachers to be all things to all people. If you're in a large urban school, you will have a team of depute head teachers, principal teachers, middle leaders and so on. You will not have that in a rural school, you may be the head teacher, the class teacher, the special needs teacher, the janitor. You'll be doing all kinds of things within your day-to-day work, because very often you are one of very few people in that building. So that requires a different skill set and a level of creativity. And then an approach to leadership, which is, for me, quite, quite unique. Yeah.

Brigid Heron 10:10
Well, Mike, as you know, I'm from Northern Ireland in the heart of Mid Ulster, and whilst we would be described as a very small place, the level of complexity in the education system in Northern Ireland is quite something. In the town that I live in and work in, we have nine post primary schools, all different, all organised differently. We have a special educational needs school. But I am sure you are very aware, within the Northern Ireland context, our place is very much about the historical legacy that we have from the troubles here. Our school system is very, very divided. So, place is very important because it's very much based on the demographics within the community. So, in my time, we have nine post primary schools within about a maybe 10-mile parameter. But every single school is very different, and every single school is run differently. Now, like Lawrence, the head teachers within that context all have similar demands around inclusion, funding issues and so forth. But we also then have an awful lot of issues regarding competition of schools and looking at different aspects of the financial constraints that we have, because in Northern Ireland, the budget is definitely stretched. Here in Northern Ireland, so place is very, very important. I also think place and time is really

important at present, post covid and I noticed from the report, there was definitely reference to before covid and after covid. I think that is very important for head teachers at present. I was a head teacher during covid, so I do have an understanding of what it was like before and after, and I know the report has referenced, for example, that some of these financial issues, inclusion issues that Pat has referenced were prevalent before covid. I'm not quite sure what has happened, but society has definitely changed, and the place and time that we are in is having a very significant impact on head teachers. There is no doubt about that. Speaking with colleagues doesn't matter whether it's urban rural, there does seem to be a different attitude towards schools, to teachers, to what teachers can offer, what schools can offer in terms of inclusion, before covid and after covid. In Northern Ireland, we are coming out of a prolonged period of action, short of strike. There was an issue around workload. And again, we are in a place, I think, where our teachers professional learning has stagnated very significantly, and we're only beginning to get back into that space where we're actually beginning to talk about teaching and learning, inclusion and so on. It was almost as if we were in the dark for quite a number of years, and all of these issues then have resurfaced, and head teachers have lots and lots of difficulties beginning to get the culture back into schools, culture of learning, the culture of training, around inclusion and so on. It's very complex. But particularly in Northern Ireland, place is obviously very important.

Brigid Heron 10:51
Brilliant. Thank you. And Brigid, how about you talk to us about place in your particular context?

Mike Collins 13:46
Yeah, and you've introduced all sorts of fascinating ideas. I hope we're going to pick up on those, particularly that you've mentioned time. I suppose history is one way of putting that, what has happened and what unfolds, obviously, then looks very different in different places as well. But the history, and you mentioned history as well I think Laurence is really important. So perhaps move on to that because you mentioned, I think Laurence the physical context, like rural, coastal and urban and how those shape challenges and opportunities. I was going to come back to you Brigid, because you mentioned earlier, when we were talking about recruitment and retention challenges, pressures, and how they look different in different places?

Brigid Heron 14:22
Well, I don't know what has happened in terms of system level recruitment, but what I do know from head teacher perspective is that certainly in Northern Ireland, we are having an acute issue around recruitment and retention of physics, science, biology, chemistry teachers. There's also design and technology, HE teachers. Within Northern Ireland, there just simply isn't enough in the system, and I think this is largely to do with the perception of workload. We

have an awful lot of young teachers that are leaving our place and going to different countries. They're going to Australia, they're going to the Middle East, largely to do with finances, I think, because we were very much underfunded. But this is causing a very particular problem within some schools within Northern Ireland, particularly rural schools, they can't recruit teachers in particular curriculum areas, and then that pressure is on the head teacher. They have to augment the curriculum, or perhaps offer less subjects at A Level. And then what is happening is that other students who maybe want those subjects, they are then transferring and going to other schools that do offer those subjects, particularly at A Level. So, what we have is a system in Northern Ireland where there's some schools that had once been thriving and were offering quite a large portfolio of curricular subjects, now can't offer that because of recruitment and retention rates. And I think that this is particularly prevalent in small rural schools, post primaries in particular. Teachers just don't want to travel to those schools. There might be one Head Teacher, one Vice Principal, a very small number of senior teachers. There's no real prospect for them to move up the ladder in terms of promotion, and therefore the teachers tend not to stay in those schools, and they move. This is causing, I would suggest, quite a significant issue. Within our area, we have tried to address that through area learning communities, but we do have children traveling to my school, for example, they might be traveling 10 miles or so just to access chemistry A Level. So, we've tried in the rural communities to address the issue, but the pressure is really very acute on the head teacher, because the schools within the smaller communities are perceived to be not fulfilling their curriculum demands, and then that's having an effect. A parent looking at a school that maybe doesn't have the full composite of A Levels. Are thinking, well, I might as well send my child to the nearest school or to another school that has more A Levels, and then the numbers are dropping. So that's happening quite a bit throughout the province,

Mike Collins 17:35
Right, thanks Brigid, and that's really kind of mapped out how those pressures across Northern Ireland play out a bit differently in different communities. Pat you were going to come in there.

Pat Thomson 17:44
I think viability is an issue for a lot of people in a lot of places, but it manifests itself differently. So, if we think about the English situation, for example, in an urban setting where you might have a number of schools in quite close proximity, but very vicious, steep competition with one another a lot of the time for pupils, particularly if there's a declining population, this can go into a kind of pretty vicious death spiral for some schools. And so while both sets of head teachers are going to be concerned about viability, it just looks really different, and the work that's involved in trying to shore up the school's enrolment and its resources and its life, etc, is very different, although in both instances, I think the head teachers will experience that as a kind of personal responsibility and as something that keeps them awake at night, and it'll be something in our research that we would see the kind of concern about viability as a real drain

and something which potentially affects people's morale in relation to their own work, but also the wider system.

Mike Collins 18:55
Yeah, thanks. Pat. Yeah, brilliant. Laurence, do you want to pick up on some of that?

Laurence Findlay 18:59
Yeah, thank you. And we don't have the same competitive element in Scotland that Brigid referred to in Northern Ireland, or indeed the English context. So, the majority of young people in Scotland go to their local schools. Parents can submit placing requests, but they are quite few in number on an annual basis. However, we have similar challenges in relation to recruitment and retention, and the same subjects that Bridget mentioned are affected, particularly STEM, home economics and technical education, so on and so forth. So that has led to certain secondary school head teachers taking the really difficult decision to remove some areas from the curriculum, and that's been really challenging obviously for parents to understand. We've looked at digital opportunities, and there is some pushback from trade unions in terms of the use of digital, but we are doing some work collaboratively with other local authority as well, and what those opportunities may be, again, particularly more rural schools affected. The issues of recruitment in Scotland across. Interesting and complex in that there are probably the right number of teachers in Scotland, but they're not all in the right places, and we have a huge number of a teachers on fixed term contracts in the central belt of Scotland that I've referred to earlier, in Edinburgh, Glasgow and that kind of central strip. And the trade unions and the teachers themselves are really concerned that they're on fixed term working contracts. My argument is there are plenty jobs, but you have to move to get those jobs. Those jobs are in the north and the Northeast and the islands communities and so on. And people, particularly since covid, are less willing to move for a range of reasons, cost of living, wanting to be close to family. So, there are some real issues about how we change that narrative and ensure that our schools in rural contexts can be more sustainable. In primary schools, we have recruitment and retention pressures nowhere nearly as acute as in the secondary sector, but we do have challenges recruiting primary school leaders so Primary School head teachers, and that's often because of the salary differential between a large school deputy head and a small school primary head teacher. So people don't see it's worth the move for pretty much the same salary, sometimes even a drop in salary. So why would you take on the extra hassle of being a head teacher, given how under the microscope you can be in small communities, being all things to all people. So, you know, we've looked at a range of measures, such as the executive head teacher model. So, a head teacher managing more than one school often get community resistance to that and parental resistance. They see it as the first step towards closing a school or as cost saving, it actually doesn't save anything. Actually, costs more because you're required to have leadership capacity in each school, so you have to have a deputy head or a principal teacher falling in. So, there's no saving, but it

does make schools more sustainable in the longer term, but that's a hard sell to some of these communities with their historical expectations of what a school head teacher is, and that there should be one in every single village school. What I would say, though, is that sometimes in the communities where we have lots of small rural schools, there are real opportunities for greater collegiate working so we put all our head teachers into school improvement partnerships of three or four, and that's resulted in us developing more of a self-improving system where the head teachers travel around each other's schools, observing an area of practice, supporting, challenging asking those difficult questions, sharing, developing resources, so there's less reinvention of the wheel. So, I do see some real opportunities within the rural context that we have, but I do think it's still fair to say the larger schools do have much more flexibility in terms of how they use their budget. In a small school with maybe one or two teachers, once they pay the cost of the staff, there's very little left, so that really requires more creative leadership from those head teachers to look at how they can pool resources with fellow head teachers in order to improve outcomes for their young people.

Mike Collins 23:11
Yeah, just been struck by both of you, and Pat has also alluded to it is where there are difficulties with recruitment and retention. There's a sort of reluctance of people to move to go to jobs. So there seems to be a similar challenge there. There may be different reasons. Pat, do you just want to come back in on that.

Pat Thomson 23:30
I did want to say we know from years of research that mobility is a bigger issue for women than it is for men. Questions around being able to pick yourself and your family up, or if you're a two-career family, or if you've got a mortgage, or, in fact, if you live in a rural area and you become deeply embedded in the community, questions around mobility can be quite tricky I think. One of the things I think we've seen in the research is that equity is everybody's problem, but also nobody's problem ensuring that there's diversity in the workforce and in the school leader workforce, is very difficult. It collides with the needs of schools in particular areas and individual careers and how they progress, but it's clearly an issue for every one of the places that we've looked at is the diversity of the school leadership.

Mike Collins 24:17
Yeah, Brigid say something there.

Brigid Heron 24:25
Yeah. I think that is really interesting. Whilst Northern Ireland is very small, we have really noticed post covid, an almost Belfast centric approach. We have a portal, it's called NI Subs and people are very explicitly stating, will not travel more than 15 miles, you know, things like that. They're sick in jobs, but people want it to be bespoke to their family needs, what Pat has

said. And because we're a female dominated profession, the cost of living in Northern Ireland is so acute. People are A not prepared to travel very far, or they also want part time. I'm not sure whether or not Laurence that's the same in Scotland, but in the course of my tenure as principal, I have never had so many requests for part time work. I think that has to do with place and time. Post covid, people want a work life balance. They want to collect their children, as Pat has said, from school. They want to be able to have a day off. Very many of my teachers in order to sustain themselves, because the very heavy coursework-based subjects need a Friday or a Wednesday to do the marking that they have to do. So, there's lots and lots of issues around recruitment, and I think those are more profound now post covid, lots and lots of complex issues around work, life, balance, mental health issues. So, travel is certainly one, one aspect of that.

Mike Collins 26:08
I'm thinking that might resonate with you as well. Laurence and I also wanted to ask you about place and being outside the central belt in Scotland, and how that plays with this bigger issue of people moving.

Laurence Findlay 26:21
Yeah, so we have in Scotland, a teacher induction scheme, and it's existed for the past 21 or 22 years, where every graduate teacher is entitled to a placement for a year. And you can choose your top five local authorities that you want to be placed in, or you can tick a box, which is called a preference waiver, and you can be sent anywhere in Scotland. 20 years ago, that really benefited rural areas like mine. And because lots of people fancied an adventure upon graduation, they ticked the box and they'd get sent to Aberdeenshire, to Highland, to Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles, you name it. And in return for that, you get a cash payment. It's about £7000, it's quite significant as a young graduate We hardly have any people now going down that route, they all want their first or second choice of local authority for the induction year. And that's been a big shift post covid. So that's been quite fascinating, like Brigid said of the requests for part time work is significant. Also, the number of head teachers specifically looking to reduce their days. Now I see that as a positive opportunity to build in some succession planning and give people a taste of leadership, and also people who are choosing to withdraw their pension earlier. So, all real challenges, some of these challenges are not only post covid. We've had some recruitment challenges for the past decade or so. And I remember saying once to a government minister, the Scottish Government only pricks their ears up and listens to when there's a problem in Edinburgh. And I remember talking about recruitment challenges about 2015 or 2016 and talking to government regularly about it. And then there was a maths teacher shortage in a secondary school in a particularly leafy suburb in Edinburgh, and it hit the front page of the Scotsman. And after that happened, the government started looking at ways to address it. So, I do think to your second question there, Mike, about some of the policy discourse. I do think national policy often assumes

uniformity, but those differences between urban and rural contexts mean variability in local needs, and I think rural poverty, access to services and school scale create unique leadership conditions, and these look very different in rural Aberdeenshire than they use in urban Glasgow or Edinburgh or Dunbar, for that matter.

Mike Collins 28:43
That moves us on quite nicely to the last thing we wanted to focus on, which was this point that policy, national level is often aimed for consistency. But as we've been exploring places very widely. So we just wanted to explore what the research is telling us about why a one size policy really doesn't fit all, and you've really begun to spell that out for us there. It's about the limits of standardisation and local solutions. And I guess, crucially, what it means for sustainability of leadership, to talk us through a bit more about the need for local solution and localities.

Laurence Findlay 29:18
Sure, and I think that there are some real policy blind spots in Scotland, specifically around about rurality. I think the government is working hard to understand rurality better, but I still think those policy blind spots are very much there. One example I would give would be the Scottish attainment challenge, which has seen huge investment over the past decade, and then SIMD, which is the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation is used to try and target resources where there are pockets of poverty. My argument is that the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation works in urban areas where you have significant concentrations of population who are absolutely living in poverty, sometimes in abject poverty. In a rural context, poverty looks very different, Brigid mentioned that earlier, rural poverty is often very hidden, and the poverty related attainment gap that young people have needs to be addressed very differently. And I often think about poverty not just in terms of the money in people's pockets, or not in their pockets. But it's about access to services as well. So, if you are poor and living in poverty in one of the large cities in Scotland, you will have services on your doorstep, and you will be able to buy things in the local supermarket at a decent price. If you are poor or living in poverty in a rural, a remote or an island context that will look very different. You'll pay two or three times the price for a loaf of bread or a pint of milk that you would pay in the in a large city, and you will need to travel significant distances to get to services. Indeed, there are very often no services. And I think that's quite challenging sometimes for government when they're developing policy at a national level, but it's really, really hard, it's really tough. And I do think that the there are significant risks in ignoring that local nuance in leadership, because I do think that leading rurally is very different to leading in an urban setting, in so many different respects and for me, that means that thinking about place and thinking about local solutions are critical if we're going to sustain leadership in rural communities. So, we need to celebrate the diversity of place. Look at how we grow our own leaders and have that real local empowerment for local authorities. So just some initial thoughts from me their Mike.

Mike Collins 31:47
Yeah, thank you, Brigid, I saw you nodding there a bit.

Brigid Heron 31:50
Well, in our context, within Northern Ireland, we didn't have any national policies. Now I know that that might seem extremely bizarre to educationalists, but due to our political situation where we had no government in stall it, and you know that education has devolved, we have only recently been given a new strategy for improvement called Transform Ed. Very, very politically motivated in that sense, so not everybody agrees with the core content. We still have the 11 plus and the transfer question, which is totally absent from Transform Ed. And the minister actually declared that, because not everybody was going to agree about selection at 11, then it was completely ignored in the Transform Ed strategy. But what is included, and I do think that this is correct, is a strategy around teacher professional learning. We have an absence at the minute of no professional headship qualification. So that is now included in the new Transform Ed policy that that hopefully is going to come. And also there should be a focus around curriculum development and curriculum modification, but there are already real issues around the curriculum that we currently have. I do not know how that national policy is going to be able to be ruled out. It's a very, very ambitious policy, and given the strains that we already have, we are not funded terribly well, and it doesn't actually address some of the issues that Laurence has outlined, the inequalities that we have. Our system is complex, not only because of the issues regarding our divided and contentious past, and then we have lots and lots of different school types, which then causes lots and lots of issues around funding, because you have to fund all of those school types, you have the 11 plus and the transfer issue. So, we have grammar and all ability as well. The financial difficulties are compounded by the historical differences, the complexity around school system, plus the 11 plus. Then we have Transform Ed that addresses school improvement. The minister has said that head teachers have autonomy to spend, for example, in my school, I got quite a substantial amount of money, £27,000 per year for the next three years, to spend on school improvement around teacher professional learning. So how am I going to organise that if I don't have a teacher of X, Y and Z. So I think that in Northern Ireland, I do welcome it, but it actually doesn't address any of the systemic issues that we actually have here. Some of the issues are far too hard to actually address. Does that make sense?

Mike Collins 35:18
It does. Yeah, thank you. And Pat, I saw you itching to get in there.

Pat Thomson 35:21
Well, I really wanted to talk about, kind of growing your own, which I think Laurence started to talk about. And I think you can see, particularly in the English context, if you have, for example,

three multi-Academy trusts in an area, all of which are growing their own, there's a kind of question really about whether they should work together. Since they're all serving the same geographical area, perhaps there's a question there, rather than competing with each other, about growing their own they ought to work together. There are questions of transferability. I think there are questions in Northern Irish system too, about how much you can transfer from one type of school to another. So, transferability is another question, but the Grow Your Own, I think, has a lot of advantages, but it does raise some questions, particularly around systemic equity and how it is. For example, we ensure that what's not going on is a kind of cloning. There are also issues at a systemic level about people doing similar jobs, getting similar remuneration for them, having access to the same opportunities. I think we know that in the English context, for example, the provision of opportunities for school leadership is patchy, and so some places grow their own and provide a terrific set of opportunities, and others don't. So, at a systemic level, how do you actually ensure that all of the workforce actually has a kind of equal go at what is actually a fairly complex pathway from, you know, classroom teacher to principal, because it does depend on having access to a lot of different kinds of opportunities.

Mike Collins 37:10
Great. Thanks Pat. Laurence, we've gone around that importance of a very local and nuanced look at a particular place, and Pat's talk there a bit about leadership development off the back of your reference to growing your own. Brigid you too, where I think we're referring to the importance of teacher professional and leader professional development as well. Perhaps that's something just to think about just as we finish.

Laurence Findlay 37:36
Yeah, thanks, Mike. And for me, I think it's about ensuring that place sensitive policy has to be critical, I think, to success and sustaining education and educational leadership at a local level. That is about the importance of localism and local governments, local governance, I would say that I work for local government and not about overt centralisation or regionalisation. And sometimes centralization and regionalization are seen as a panacea, that they can cure all ills, that they are cheaper and more efficient, and they can reduce variability, apparently. But what they do is they miss that nuance of localism and the importance of taking a national direction or policy and implementing it locally. And I also think there needs to be better metrics to understand poverty and to understand rurality. I completely agree with Pat in terms of leadership. We do a lot of growing our own because we know we have to, but it is great now and again when you get applicants from other parts of the country or other parts of the world, because you do need to keep getting those new ideas coming in sometimes to hold that mirror up to us and what we've always done in our local area. So, it is important to get that balance right I think.

Mike Collins 38:48

Great. Thanks, everybody. So having looked at the research report, and lots of these ideas obviously have come out of that, perhaps one thing that struck you or surprised you coming out of the research around some of these things.

Brigid Heron 39:01
I thought the report was completely accurate. One of the things that really struck me was the human aspect. Now that shouldn't surprise me, because I do try to develop my people around care, welfare that we're dealing with children, we're dealing with families, we're dealing with emotions. And I thought that that was really interesting. It takes a huge emotional drain on people. And I wondered whether or not the welfare aspect of sustainability needs to really come into play, there may be some mileage in looking at the care of head teachers. How do you get a work life balance? Because it's something that I know that I pay less attention to myself than I do to the children and the staff in my school. I it really struck me, really in the report, particularly the commentary, that we're very, very emotionally charged. Regardless of where the head teacher was placed, we need skills to be able to look after ourselves.

Mike Collins 40:16
Thank you, Brigid that's brilliant. Same, same question for you Laurence, so one thing that struck you or surprised you.

Laurence Findlay 40:23
I would start by saying, I concur with Brigid points there, and because I also have that strategic responsibility for children's services. However, the one thing that jumped out for me was that that point that place sensitive policy really strengthens leadership, and so adaptive policy approaches that reflecting local realities, metrics, staffing models, governance and so on, do enable leaders to deliver change that fits their own unique context. And the point that I was making as well came out in the report clearly that variability often seen by national politicians and those seeking elected office as a negative is not inherently negative at all. Variation often reflects that healthy adaptation to local needs. So those are the key messages that I've taken away from the report Mike.

Mike Collins 41:11
Brilliant, thank you Laurence. Pat you get the last word.

Pat Thomson 41:15
Oh, okay, I continue to mull over how it is that school leadership and you know, to put on the table, I too, was once a school head teacher for quite a long time. How people describe it as the best job in the world and also the most challenging. And it does strike me that a focus on place actually helps you think about how national policy might support more of the best things about the job, which are always about the children here in this place at this time, as opposed to

a number of other kinds of issues which provide all sorts of drains. And we know from the research, and we know from other research as well, some of it's called outside of government policy altogether, but we know that government policy can do more to make it possible for school leaders to focus on place and the here and now, and what really is the best that we can do in schooling.

Mike Collins 42:18
Thanks everyone. That's been a brilliant and really interesting conversation. We've really explored how important places to understand in school leadership. Laurence made it really clear how different Scotland is to England, and Northern Ireland in terms of how schools are organised, even while they're facing similar challenges like recruitment and retention of staff. And I was really struck by how Brigid really brought out for us how complex the school system is in Northern Ireland, but also what a difference recent history has made, with big shifts since the pandemic in how fast staff want to travel. We've also really talked about how important it is for national policies to be able to take account of all the differences in local areas and different places. 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.