IDENTITY AND STAYING: WHAT IS IT ABOUT TEACHERS WHO STAY IN DISADVANTAGED LONDON PRIMARY SCHOOLS?

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Background

Teacher retention is a critical matter for London schools, particularly schools serving ‘deprived’ communities, as teachers who stay who make a measurable difference to the success of children (Freedman and Appleman, 2009). Yet evidence suggests that a high proportion of teachers leave the profession within five years of teaching (DfE, 2010). High teacher turnover can impede a school’s capacity to support and extend the learning of children and thus teacher retention is a social justice matter.

A teacher’s identity is a key factor in influencing their motivations, commitment and job satisfaction (Day et al., 2006). This paper works with existing research on teacher identity to probe in more depth how identity features in teachers’ reasons for persisting in teaching.

Research methods/focus of enquiry

This paper draws from qualitative data taken from semi-structured interviews with 25 teachers (‘stayers’) who have decided to stay teaching in challenging London primary schools. This paper asks, what is it that encourages them to stay; more specifically, what is it about their identity that influences their retention?

The paper will explore three dimensions of teacher identity: First, it will focus on aspects of the stayers’ biography and what first motivated them to teach. Second, it will explore whether the stayers have developed an ‘urban identity’ during their career in their schools that may contribute towards their staying. Third it will examine how the stayers manage their personal and professional identities in the context of their work in challenging schools. Finally it will consider if there is a ‘stayer identity’.

Analytical/theoretical frame

This paper draws on a theoretical framework built from existing work on teacher identity (Nias, 2002; Day, et al., 2006). This paper provides a unique dimension to the understanding of who stayers are, why they do what they do and how this influences what their reasons are for staying in complex and challenging school settings.

Research findings/contribution to knowledge

This study presents an alternative perspective to teacher retention in hard-to-teach primary schools, by looking at the reasons why teachers stay in their schools, rather than why they leave. It takes into consideration the substantial body of literature on teacher identity and uses it as a frame to understand teachers’ reasons for staying in disadvantaged schools.